TEACHING STRATEGIES USED IN FRENCH LANGUAGE CLASSES IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study was interested in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language in Kenya. The study sought to identify the teaching strategies used in class by teachers of French in Kenya. Data for this descriptive study was collected through non-participatory class observation, questionnaires and documentary data. 18 teachers from the 24 schools offering French as a foreign language in Kakamega County were observed in form 1 and 2 classes. Statistical and content analysis of the data collected was then done. The study found out that the teachers used various strategies, both cognitive and socio-affective in class. The study recommends stepping up of the use of motivational strategies in order to motivate the learners of this foreign language. This would reduce the dropout rate of learners of French across the years. The results of this study will be important for teacher trainers, teachers of French as a foreign language and the ministry of education in the conception of learning material, teacher's guides and teaching projects in order to improve on their programs and teachers classroom practices.

KEY WORDS: *French as a foreign language, teaching strategy, techniques, style, method, and mode.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For several years now, foreign language teaching/learning has been the subject of many studies, majority of which have focused on learner's difficulties and teaching/learning strategies. Most of these studies have emphasized on learning and the learner and not on the teacher and the teaching process. Learners of French as a foreign language in Kenya depict a high level of demotivation, which leads to poor grades and a progressive drop in student numbers as from the second year of study. This leads to the use of strategies that are inappropriate to the needs of the learners, their expectations, status, level as well as the content. First year students reporting for studies at university level have a very low mastery of the language, hence the interest in language teaching strategies used by the teachers at high school level.

Cuq & Gruca, (2003), define teaching as an attempt at organized mediation between the object of learning and the learner. They acknowledge the presence of two important parties in a teaching/learning situation: the teaching party and the learning party. The teacher plays the role of guide while the learner is the guided. Teaching is therefore some form of guidance. According to Bressoux and Dessus, (2003), teaching is a « set of operations and planned resources chosen by the teacher, aimed at attaining an objective, while taking into account a situation where only some of the parameters is known ».

Cuq, (2008), in his "Dictionnaire de Didactique du Français Langue Étrangère et Seconde'', defines a teaching strategy as the adaptation of teaching to the needs and styles of the learners through variation of proposed activities. The teacher must vary the learning activities depending

on the characteristics of the group he is working with. As for De Certeau, (1990), for a strategy to exist, there must be a strategic intention, which is the choice between several possibilities, including calculation. The teacher knows where he is coming from and where he is going, since he has a program to follow. He may have his own working styles, but has to find immediate solutions and invent to be able to respond to the needs of his learners, who also have their own different learning styles. Other researchers, Germain et Netten, (2004), et Hird et al, (2000), consider a teaching strategy to be any action or selective intervention by the teacher aimed at enabling learning. It is this perception of a teaching strategy that we adopted in this research since it has a clear relationship with the role of the teacher in class, in relation to the learner and the content. This definition is also not different from that of Circurel, (2011), who defines the teacher's actions as a series of verbal and non-verbal actions, which are intentional, coordinated and at times simultaneous, aimed at achieving a goal.

This study focuses on foreign language teaching strategies. It is concerned with the classroom actions of teachers of French as a foreign language in Kenya and takes into account related concepts such as technique, mode, method and style. The study is based on the socio-constructivist or Socio-cognitive theory based on the social model of learning, (Bandura, 1986), and developed by the social psychologists and the psychologists of social development. This is a theory developed by Vygotsky, (1985), which postulates that multiple social interactions are important for the construction of knowledge. According to this theory, learning is the product of socio-cognitive activities related to teacher/learner and learner/learner exchange. Learning is centered on the learner. Acquisition of knowledge takes place through interactions between the learner, the learning situation and the actors of the situation, (Girault, 2007). Circurel, (2011), states that the teaching a foreign language is made up of alternate speaking turns of the actors in a language class. The teacher guides the exchange while the learner takes part in the polylogue. The former, who plays the role of mediator, must ensure a conducive environment for learning through his choice of situations, activities and the way he organizes his work. He must find ways of creating an environment that can accommodate and support learning. According to Maarfia, (2015), in an interactive situation between an expert and a novice, several strategies are used to ensure comprehension between the two and to help the novice to express himself as well. It is the inter-comprehension between the two that makes possible the continuity of the interaction, and therefore knowledge acquisition.

The socio-constructivist theory postulates that learning is centered on the learner, who becomes an active person in the construction of his knowledge. However, he/she requires support and guidance at every step of the process. The teacher, who is in a superior position compared to the learner, and therefore naturally in the position of guide, gives direction, regulates the speaking turns, announces the theme, guides the learning process and evaluates the work, (Circurel, 2011). Tardif, (1992), and Basco, (2010), agree that the role of the teacher is very important since he is the decision maker, the thinker, the motivator, mediator and trainer.

Several studies have been carried out in Kenya on teaching strategies and technics as well as problems affecting the learners, in English (Kanyi, 2015 ; Dhillon and Wanjiru, 2013 ; Mutai, 2012 ; Nyakundi, 2009), and in Kiswahili (Murunga, 2016; Wasike, 2016 ; Mogere, 2013 ; Matere, 2012 ; Kangahi, 2012, Momanyi, 2012). Very little research has been done in the area of French language teaching strategies.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study were to identify teaching strategies used in class by teachers of French as a foreign language in Kenya, establish the most frequently used strategies and the instances in which they are used.

3. METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study combined class observations, documentary research and questionnaires for teachers and students. The descriptive approach seemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection given that the study was interested in the teacher/learner interaction and most of the indicators in this research are expressed in terms of behavior. Circurel, (2011), declares that research based on interaction have transformed the classroom into a field of research, no longer just a place of work but a place of discovery of professional gestures and discourse. She further states that the interaction that takes place in a language class occurs through identifiable modes of interaction. According to Bissonnette, (2007), results presented following an observation have a higher degree of reliability compared to those of studies carried out without direct class observations. For this study, class observations were recorded then transcribed using Hyper-transcribe software.

4. SAMPLING DESIGN

The population of the study was situated in 24 schools in Kakamega County where French is offered. In most the schools, there is only one teacher of French. Currently there are about 400 teachers of French in the country. The total population of the study was 23 teachers and approximately 2400 students. The researcher opted for stratified non-proportional sampling since the few schools offering French belong to different categories: county schools, extra-county schools, national and private schools. The population of this study was therefore divided into homogeneous strata according to the different categories of schools: private, national, county and extra-county schools. According to Martin, (2017), the non-proportional

stratified sampling method is applied when the number of subjects in each strata is not proportional to the importance of the group, in relation to the total population. The study was carried out in eight county schools, seven extra county schools, two national schools and one private school. Muchielli, (1971), and Mugenda & Mugenda, (2003), agree that 10% of the population concerned is sufficient in terms of generalization and in a descriptive study. The choice of 18 schools was way above this percentage and therefore sufficient. The researcher was interested in strategies used at the beginners level, hence the form one and two classes.

5. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The researcher opted for a descriptive analysis of the data collected by questionnaires and observation. Tremblay and Perrier (2006), point out that carrying out a descriptive analysis is painting a portrait of the situation as it is, after compiling and classifying the qualitative and quantitative data obtained. Ngaira and Walingo, (2008), state that a descriptive study gives precise characteristics of an individual, a situation or a group. These researchers further state that this kind of study comprises of data collection in order to describe precisely the behavior of a subject.

Video recordings of classes observed were transcribed. Due to the hectic nature of transcription, the researcher opted to use transcriptions of twelve of the lessons observed. Data analysis was carried out through descriptive statistics. Analyzed data was then presented through frequency tables, graphs, pie charts and in prose. Answers to closed questions were analyzed using traditional/ manual content analysis.

Muchielli, (1971), affirms that an opinion is significant when it exceeds 10% of the sampled population. The researchers therefore only took into account cases that scored more than this percentage.

6. GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

This study was carried out in Kakamega County in western Kenya. This county has a good number of schools offering French in the country. Kenya, which has a total area of 582,646 km2, is situated in East Africa. This Anglophone country borders non-francophone countries: Ethiopia to the north, Sudan in the northeast, Uganda and Lake Victoria in the west, Tanzania in the south and Somalia in the north-west. It is also an important tourist destination and Nairobi, its capital host the UNEP, hence the necessity for learning of foreign languages. Teaching of French as a foreign language starts at secondary school level. Kakamega County has 250 schools out of which only 23 offer French as a foreign language. Learners at this point already speak two or three languages: English, Kiswahili and their mother tongue. Some primary schools offer the subject to their pupils. However, the subject is not examinable at the end of the eight years of study at primary school level. Evaluation of the subject at secondary level is based on four competencies: oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral expression and written expression, (Auma, 2012). Teachers of French in Kenya are mostly Kenyans who have learnt the language in Kenya.

7. RESULTS

The first objective of the study was to identify teaching strategies used in class by teachers of French as a foreign language. The study identified 14 teaching strategies used in class as indicated in the table (See table 1 in section 11). These are question/answer, repetition, rewards, gestures, code switching, encouragement, demonstration, reformulation, transformation exercises, guided dialogue, and correction by peers, role-play, borrowed words and group work. These findings also indicate that some strategies were used more than others were. The most commonly used strategies are question / answer, in 100% of the classes, repetition, gestures, and rewards all at 100%. 92 % of the teachers observed used code switching, 75% encouragement and 58% demonstration. The strategies observed in class were classified into two categories, as per the classifications done by Rançon, (2009), and Guillemette, (2007): cognitive and socio-affective strategies.

The cognitive strategies observed were question and answer, in 100%of the classes; repetition, (100%), code switching, (92%), role-play, (25%), demonstration, (58%), brain-storming, (16%), transformation exercises, (33%), guided dialogue, (33%), correction by peers, (25%) and dramatization, (8%). These strategies enabled the teachers to verify comprehension and acquisition of competencies in the subject, soliciting weak students and facilitate learning. They also helped in ensuring continuity of classroom interaction. The question/answer strategy, one of the most frequently used, helped in running the class.

Guillemette, (2007), identified repetition as one of the most used strategies in class in her study on French language teaching strategies for immigrants in Canada. The findings are not different from ours. Repetition helps in correcting pronunciation, fixing it, helping students read, soliciting answers from them while giving them time to think before answering questions and finally validating their answers. Repetition of the same question while using different words but trying as much as possible to retain the same meaning is known as reformulation. This strategy is acceptable up to a certain limit beyond which the meaning of the original phrase and the new one becomes different. It is one of the strategies used by the teachers in the classes observed, to give learners access to meaning, explain, clarify or correct.

Teachers used code switching to give instructions, explain difficult words and to facilitate comprehension where learners could not understand something in the target language. The present study

found out that code switching reduces as the level of mastery of the foreign language increases. These results are not any different from those posted by Ngugi, (1998), following a study on the use of code switching as a teaching strategy in French classes in Kenya. Researchers, (Causa, 2005; Castellotti, 2001; Kramsch, 1991), agree that the use of the first language is inevitable in a foreign language class. However, this study also found out that too much use of this strategy interferes with the mastery of the foreign language, as the students get comfortable with its use in class and do not make any effort to communicate in the target language. In classes where teachers used code switching frequently, students had a lot more difficulties responding to questions in the target language. Questioning is an interactive and corrective strategy, (Guillemette, 2007). This strategy was used to make the learners talk, respond to questions, guide them towards the answers, get information from them and to verify what had been learnt. Gestures accompanied Verbal communication in the classes observed. According to Calbris and Porcher, (1998), all teachers gesture throughout in their classes. This affirmation is no different from the findings of this study. Gestures helped demystify new words by giving meaning.

The socio-affective strategies observed in class were rewards, the non-verbal, encouragement, group work and correction by peers. Socio-affective strategies helped in reassuring students, encouraging them and involving them in the learning process. These strategies contribute towards learner's motivation to learn the subject. Boubakeur, (2015), states that these strategies help in fighting against inhibition, linguistic insecurity and timidity. They enable the teacher to create a warm friendly environment in class necessary for learning to take place. According to Defays, (2003), a motivated student learns something more easily than a demotivated one. Viau, (1997), attests to the fact that motivation in a school context is a dynamic state that has its origin in the perception that a student has of himself, of his environment, which pushes him to choose an activity, take part in it, and persevere in order to achieve a goal. The same researcher asserts that social factors and those related to the environment play an important role in motivation at school. The more the students are demotivated the more difficult it is for teachers to make them learn and like the subject. These strategies help the teacher

in integrating the affective dimension in their teaching, which in turn leads to motivation of the learners.

8. SUGGESTIONS

Given the results of this study on French language teaching strategies, the researchers suggest that teachers incorporate other teaching strategies that exist but that were not observed in class in their teaching. These include strategies such as discussion, debates and recitation. It is also important that the teachers control the use of code switching so that the learners do not become over dependent on it as this interferes with the acquisition of the target language. Teachers should also discourage the use of strategies that are demotivating to learners such as dramatization and insist on the use of the motivational strategies. This might make the learners more interested in learning French as a foreign language.

9. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that:
- Teachers use various strategies to teach French as a foreign language. These include both cognitive and socio-affective strategies.
- The strategies used in class are question/answer, role-play, demonstration, group work, the non-verbal, brainstorming, rewards, encouragement, transformation exercises, guided dialogue, correction by peers and dramatization are the strategies used by teachers of French.
- The most used strategies are question/answer, repetition, encouragement, rewards and code switching.
- Code switching reduces as the learners' mastery of language increases.
- Socio-affective strategies are important in that they increase the learners' motivation to learn the subject.

10. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To improve on the teaching/learning of French as a foreign language in Kenya, other studies could be carried out on the initial and continued training of teachers of French, a study on the impact of students attitude towards the subject and the teacher on performance as well as teachers choice off teaching strategies on learners performance.

APPENDIX
11.1 Table 1: Strategies observed in class

Teaching strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Question/answer	12	100%
Repetition	12	100%
Rewards	12	100%
Gestures	12	100%
Code switching	11	91.67%
Encouragement	9	75.00%
Demonstration	7	58.33%
Reformulation	6	50%
Transformation exercises	4	33.33%
Guided dialogue	4	33.33%
Correction by peers	3	25.00%
Role play	3	25.00%
Group work	3	25.00%
Emprunts	2	16.66%

Source: Class observations

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