Training teachers of French in Kenya: Redefining the needs of an increasingly demanding context

Milcah Mudeizi Chokah
Department of Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University

Abstract

A lot has been said in the Kenyan media about "half-baked" graduates and the "raw deal" employers get when they employ graduates from our institutions of higher learning. Surprisingly, not much mention has been made of the kind of training the teachers are receiving and its relevance to the needs on the ground. It is assumed, perhaps, that teachers cannot be "half-baked" or even that anyone can teach! In the 70s and well into the 80s the term "UT" (untrained teacher) was very common in Kenya. Schools often called on school leavers without any professional training whenever there was a shortage of teaching staff. This situation has been slightly modified in the sense that now there are qualified professionals who are ending up teaching because they cannot get the jobs for which they were trained. In the same way, trained teachers are ending up accepting other jobs due to lack of vacancies in teaching! Would one be justified to apply the term "half-baked" to Kenyan-trained teachers? Discussions with teachers of French trained in public universities in Kenya reveal that a lot is left to chance during this important stage of a teacher's professional life. This article will focus on training programmes for the two levels of teachers of French: Diploma in Education and Bachelor of Education as well as the gaps both at the initial and in-service training levels. Several questions are at the center of our reflection: What are the policies in place for foreign language teacher training? What resources are availed for this important exercise? How are the programmes managed? What are the provisions in terms of budgeting, planning and staffing for the training of foreign language teachers in public universities in Kenya? What mechanism has been put in place for follow-up and evaluation of training programmes?

Key words: Teacher education, Teacher training, language policies, public universities, Peer teaching, Teaching practice, In-service training

INTRODUCTION

The Kenya government felt the need to train teachers of French after it became clear that the country would need more teachers to cater for the growing number of schools introducing the language as a teaching subject. It became evident that the country could not continue to rely on the French government to provide teachers. By 1970, Kenyatta University College (then a constituent college of the University of Nairobi) had developed and introduced two programmes: the Diploma

in Education (Dip. Ed)[1]and the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed). The low admission notwithstanding, this initiative received the full support of the French government and all qualifying teachers received scholarships for a "séjour linguistique"[2] in various universities in France upon completion of their study programme at KUC. After nine months of being exposed to the French language in its natural context, the teachers came back well equipped to face the challenges of teaching a foreign language in a system with a very clear linguistic hierarchy. With a manageable number of schools offering the language, it was possible for the Ministry of Education through the Inspectorate (with collaboration from the French government) to put in place a follow-up mechanism, thus ensuring the Kenyan teachers got the assistance they needed. This teamwork resulted in the effective teaching of French leading to an increase in the number of learners in the schools offering it and a further increase in the number of schools wanting to offer it. By 1980 French (although still considered a "special subject") had earned itself an important place in the Kenyan education system.

In the period running up to 1985 when the system of education changed, not more than 50 teachers had been trained to teach French. This was to change significantly with the first intake of candidates from the new system in 1991. Today, the institutions of higher learning together produce more than that number yearly. Kenyatta University alone admits an average of 45 students a year into the Bachelor of Education programme.

The training of teachers of French since 1985

The change of the education system in 1985 reducing the secondary school period from six to four years had an impact on the teaching and learning of French and the quality of teacher education that is still felt today. Public universities, unprepared for the large numbers admitted through the Joint Admissions Board (JAB)[3], had concentrated on revising academic course content in order to cater for the new crop of learners without compromising quality. While this could be done with relatively little effort for the traditional subjects such as History, Geography, English, Christian Education and the Sciences, it was not so for foreign languages such as French which is only introduced at secondary school level in public schools. Kenyatta University found itself admitting into the B.Ed programme learners who only had 300 hours of French (or level A2 of the Common European Framework for Reference), but who were expected to go out and teach after only four years of concurrent academic and professional training. Due to numerous challenges faced by both teachers and learners in secondary school, even those coming into the university with grade

---

[1] The Dip.Ed catered for candidates who did not qualify for university entry and would receive a two year training after which they would teach the then "O Level" classes while their counterparts who had the B.Ed taught the "A Level". This is no longer the case as there is only one four year level in secondary school.

[2] Upon completion of either the Dip.Ed or B.Ed course, the new graduates spent nine months in France perfecting their communication skills and enhancing their sociocultural knowledge.

[3] This is a system through which a body made up of public university vice chancellors oversee the selection of those who qualify for admission to university. The selection criterion is based on the candidates' choices but may also vary in relation to the performance in the particular year.

A had (and still have) difficulty expressing themselves in French since these results are usually a reflection of concerted efforts between the learners and the teacher and do not therefore always reflect the true level of communicative competence of the learner. Once at the university where they are expected to work independently, they often become disillusioned and even lose interest. Furthermore, with the increase in the number of those being selected to train as teachers, the French government can no longer sustain the scholarship system for teachers of French. The scholarships to study in France have now become few and far between with attention turning to the Doctorate level and other fields outside the teaching and training of teachers of French: History, Agriculture, Environmental Studies, to name a few.

It is important to note that by the time of the change in the education system, the Dip.Ed programme had been transferred to Siriba Teachers College so that Kenyatta University College could only cater for the degree level. Many changes were taking place, most important the creation of more public universities to take in the increasing number of secondary school leavers. Kenyatta was given autonomy and became the second public university after the University of Nairobi. Soon after Moi University was established and immediately admitted students into a B.Ed programme at its constituent college: Maseno University College. Focus shifted from the quality of training to the universities' capacity to accommodate more students, overlooking other equally important facts such as availability of resources, both human and material. Overburdened lecturers adopted a "laissez-faire" attitude and concentrated on getting through lectures, assignments, continuous assessment tests (CATs) and marking of examinations. The situation has remained mostly the same, worsened by reduced state funding forcing universities to turn towards income generating interests.

Defining the importance of initial training

The real transformation in a future teacher begins during initial training. Develay (1994 : 121) proposes to look at this whole question through three concepts : the first one is the general training trajectory, the second one is the training process and the third is the modes of training. According to this line of thought, it is during the general trajectory that there is a change in the student regarding his future job. This is also expected by those in charge of the training programme as they take the student through it. The trainer has certain classroom practices that he wants to see put into action by the future teacher. It is at this time that the trainer has a chance to observe and assess trainees and they in turn can assess themselves as future teachers.

For the teacher of French as a foreign language abroad, there is a wide variety of teaching material to choose from. The theoretical part of training needs to sensitize him/her to the multiplicity of manuals, materials and possible practical solutions. According to Brassart and Reuter (1992: 23), initial training therefore needs to accomplish two things:

- It should put emphasis on the relativity of theories and practices, implying that teaching should take diachrony into account.

- On the one hand it should act as a stabilizing element for the entry into professional life as it offers concrete ideas on the work the teacher has to do and on the other a reflexion on this early part of professional life because it is the most important.

According to experts, two things are then possible if this is not achieved: the new teachers may resort to traditional practices of their teachers or on the other hand they may take certain risks if they don't have the experience or know-how to tackle the situation they find themselves in. This is why one of the objectives of the initial training should be to articulate the connection between Initial training, Professional practices and In-service training.

The training process itself consists of different categories of functional activities that the trainer is expected to bring out in the trainees. Taking into consideration the fact that each trainee has his own way of perceiving the content to which he is exposed, it is important to prepare him/her not only for the situation in which he/she is expected to operate but others in which he/she may find himself/herself. It is important to look at him/her as a person, a whole. Develay (ibid) distinguishes six training processes which, according to him, cover the four areas of competence that a future teacher must master:

- training by instruction;

- training by documentation;

- training by observation;

- training by simulation;

- training by experimentation and retroaction

- training for research.

The training of language teachers

Language teachers (for the purposes of this article, foreign language teachers), perform their duty in an area that is demanding at several levels. For those charged with the training, several questions arise. Devitt and Czak (1981: 63) summarize them as follows:

- How can language teachers be made to appreciate the difficulties faced by learners of a foreign language both from the affective and cognitive point of view?

- How can they be made to reflect effectively on the complexity of the learning of a foreign language in an institutional context?

- How can they be made to understand the learning process from within?

- How can they be brought not only to analyze and evaluate the different approaches and language teaching methods but also to feel the difficulties of the means and techniques related to them?

These are questions that trainers need to reflect upon if they want to put in place a relevant training programme. The answers to these questions depend on the provisions put in place by the institution, namely the training programmes and their objectives.

While referring to situations of training of teachers of French in Africa, El Amin (1990: 29), underlines some elements without which training is not complete:

- The balance between theory and practice in training

- The balance between the expectations of the trainees and what the training institutions want and are able to offer

- The absence in the programme of initiation to autonomy, since the teacher is also a learner

- Insufficient data concerning aspects of self-management skills which would facilitate good dialogue and good communication in the class room.

The training of foreign language teachers implies not only the learning/ training relationship but also the adaptation of learning materials to the different learning audiences, the correlations between methodology and teaching. In this respect, Beacco (1992: 44) says that it is:

> "reasonable to deal with the question of the initial training and in-service training of foreign language teachers in terms of the skills and knowledge that should be acquired."

Girard (1995 :134) explains more precisely what this skill entails. According to him:

> "initial training should ensure a good mastery of the language that one expects to teach, a competence that gives security and ease in oral and written comprehension and expression that is comparable to that of a native speaker".

This mastery is not automatic and is even difficult in most cases, since it depends on the conditions in which the training takes place. Other specialists look at the question of mastery from a different point of view. Beacco (Ibid) for instance, proposes to study what "a good mastery of language" signifies, through some questions that need reflexion: What does the teacher need in terms of mastery? Where should the emphasis be laid?

One of the objectives of the training of teachers of French in Kenya is that he/she should be a model of good expression for the learners. Indeed, in most cases the teacher is the only model for his/her learners. He therefore must master the target language so as to respond to the needs of his/her teaching. He/she also needs to have language skills in terms of vocabulary, grammar, elements and the various rules of the functioning of the language he/she is teaching. Communicative

competence comes into play in different situations of communication: daily practices, for example the way of ordering, approving, introducing oneself and asking for information.

In addition to language skills, one must not forget that every language has cultural components; a whole way of being that has to be integrated into the teaching of the said target language if the learner is to achieve communicative competence. In most cases, the foreign language teacher is the only means of transmission of this competence. The training he/she undergoes should provide him/her with the appropriate teaching and evaluation methods that will enable him/her to play the double role of teaching the learner to speak a foreign language while adapting the knowledge acquired to different situations of communication where this language is used.

At the methodological level, Thurler (1988 : 135) underlines the importance of training in evaluation for teachers who need approved, specific and concrete methods to maximize efficiency in their teaching. In this same line of thought Porquier and Wagner (1984: 84) state that the training of language teachers involves not only a good knowledge of the language they teach and the way to make learners acquire it, but also training that raises their awareness on the learning of languages that their personal experience as learners has not given them, and that their academic knowledge in psychology, in linguistics or in teaching methodology is not sufficient to build. It is important to add that the experiences that the teacher goes through while learning a language may help him/her to understand the learner's challenges but are not easily transferable into the teaching. Indeed, they need to be brought into focus so that the future teacher can put them in perspective in order to better appreciate how far they can be applied.

In multilingual African contexts such as Kenya, as we have mentioned elsewhere, the challenges of foreign language learning take a whole different dimension: the heterogeneous nature of the language class can become a main source of difficulty for the teacher. He/she therefore needs to be well prepared and given tools that will be adaptable to the various situations where different languages and cultures will come into contact.

Identifying the gaps in the training programmes

A major concern when it comes to the training of language teachers is born from the rigidity with which most public universities apply policies. One such policy separates academic programmes from the professional ones so that a student training to be a teacher of French will find himself/herself belonging to two independent departments which may choose not to collaborate. In one, he/she will attend classes in communication skills, linguistics and literature while she takes a course in teaching methods from the other. Therein lies the source of the gaps that are so easily discernible in our training programmes.

When future teachers are recruited, they are still learning French. The courses offered in the academic programme are therefore towards achieving this objective. The course in methodology on the other hand is divorced from this in that the student is not linking this experience to what awaits

him in the classroom. Indeed this course is designed in such a way that the student is presumed to be at the application level and not still facing challenges in all communication skills. Discussions with students preparing to go out on teaching practice reveal that there is too much theory and little connection to what they are expected to do with complete beginners in the language.

Of all the processes mentioned in this article, most of the training programmes offered in the public institutions of higher learning lay emphasis on training by instruction and training by documentation where the trainee is largely a consumer. Training through simulation and experimentation is achieved through first "peer-teaching" and then a teaching practice where they go out into schools. Little or no attention is paid to the most important processes: class observation and research.

It is this and other gaps in training that most concern this article. It is inconceivable that a language teacher (leave alone a *foreign language* teacher), does not, during the course of his training have access to the environment in which he will later exercise his functions. Class observation (as indicated elsewhere in this article), is essential in that the trainee has a chance to observe an experienced teacher in the class, to go back and discuss what he has observed and have an informed opinion of what aspects of classroom practices should be covered during training

Any time teacher training is mentioned, what comes to mind is methodological competency centered on training in class room practices. We know that even though communicative competence in the target language is important, there are other factors that come into play for learning to take place. It is important therefore to look at both aspects so as to train an all-round professional. Although all institutions put a lot of emphasis on "peer-teaching" and "Teaching Practice", certain gaps are easily identifiable:

Direct contact with the future subjects in terms of class observation is sadly missing throughout the four years of training. The future teacher first meets his learners when he proceeds on teaching practice during which he also has to contend with a teaching load in two teaching subjects and other duties that may be assigned to him by the administration of the hosting school. Yet, the observation exercise is very important in that the trainee gets to observe a lesson without the stress of him/her being expected to intervene. He/she also gets to know first hand what to expect when he/she eventually finds himself/herself in front of learners.

Until five years ago Kenyatta University had only one teaching practice coming at the end of the training period. Now students have the possibility of going for this exercise at the end of the third year. However, when they come back to complete their studies, they don't go back to their Methodology class. The opportunity therefore remains pointless since there is no feed-back: no immediate follow-up and evaluation of the exercise involving the students. The lack of such an important forum should be of concern to those in charge of the conception of the training programmes and their content.

The other area that has not been given enough attention is that of evaluation of learning content. Whereas we understand the importance of this exercise, we must also be able to define its functions and relevance in our particular context. In a system such as the Kenyan one where emphasis is laid on success in examinations, evaluation is often seen as a way of defining success or failure, a sanction. Rather than informing on the learner's progress and the teacher's achievement of set objectives, it ends up being a way of judging the learner, exposing his weaknesses. For the foreign language learner (as is the case of French), this leads to an end to the learning process. This could be one of the factors explaining the high rate of drop-outs among learners of French in Kenya. While most schools start off with large numbers of students wanting to learn French, very many end up with just a fraction of that number by the time they are taking the national exam four years later.

What most teachers fail to understand (and this can be blamed on the training), is the fact that the process of evaluation covers a wide range of areas starting from general objectives right through to the learning environment, evaluation tools, conditions of administration of exams/tests, evaluation criteria and the conditions of the correction exercise itself. What about the person carrying out the evaluation? In the area of written production, there is what Tagliante (2005: 12-13) refers to as the *"critères parasites de la fidelité"*[4]. Is the marker (who is also the teacher) able to remain objective whatever the conditions? Is he/she as effective at the end of the day as at the beginning? Can he/she avoid stereotyping his/her learners? Can he/she avoid being more tolerant with his/her "favourite" learners? Is there pressure from external forces that can affect the exercise?

In a survey on the performance of French at the national exam, Christan Olivier[5] mentions that the problems that appear at the time of setting of exams could be as a result of "limited training of teachers in matters of evaluation and setting of tests". A look at the various programmes reveals that the actual training in Methodology is limited to one semester (35 hours) and can only give limited attention to matters concerning evaluation. This could explain why students on teaching practice device their own methods of getting out of the difficult situations they find themselves in: lack of time, lack of reference material, large classes. As we have said elsewhere in this article, when faced with such challenges, it is easier to imitate what one's teacher did in similar circumstances.

In the same report, Olivier has noted the search for excellence and social pressure as being an impediment to the evaluation exercise. An analysis of the marking criteria shows that emphasis is put on perfection, mastery. For instance, in order for a student to get the maximum points in the Conversation paper, he should be "outstanding"; his French should be "perfect". Although this survey was on the National examination that comes at the end of the secondary school cycle, the tendency to search for excellence in the daily formative evaluation. This could be the other factor

---

[4] According to Tagliant, there are at least eleven criteria into which one can break the teacher's state of mind during correction of learner's written production. Fatigue, favoritism, stereotyping, contamination, are some of the conditions that can affect the teacher's judgment.

[5] The survey was commissioned by the Language Cooperation Office of the French Embassy in Nairobi in 2009 and carried out by Christian Olivier and was centered on the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE).

leading to the high drop-out rate among learners of French. More unfortunate is the fact that this is done without linking evaluation to clearly outlined objectives. Interaction with teachers who have been in the field for varying lengths of time reveals that there are gaps in this area of definition of objectives. In most cases, there is difficulty in defining operational objectives and in giving instructions for activities/exercises.

The other area that has not been systematically integrated into the teacher training programmes is that of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Although different institutions are aware of the importance of ICT, the methodology courses (better known as Subject Methods) have not laid enough emphasis on this important aspect of learning. While we bemoan the lack of innovation and creativity, we leave our teachers without any guidance on how to make use of material available on the internet and other sources of technology oriented information. Discussions with teachers trained in various Kenyan institutions have revealed that most of them just aim to complete the textbook before the students sit the final examination. Anything outside the set book may "interfere" with what is "officially" accepted.

The importance of ICT in daily life cannot be understated. The internet with "facebook", "twitter" and the email have become a preferred means of communication for all irrespective of age. It is inconceivable that a learner will go through any learning experience that does not involve these social aspects. It is during the initial training that the teacher should be exposed to tools such as specific websites with language learning content and the interactive digital board. Let them know that it is possible to have fun and learn. Learning a foreign language should not be restricted to the classroom with the teacher as the only reference however brilliant he/she may be.

Finally, whereas we know that we are training teachers to teach in secondary schools, we must not forget that the society in which those learners live is dynamic. Since 1998, the Kenya government has been employing teachers according to the need in specific areas. This has meant that after training, a teacher is not automatically posted to a school to teach. The result is that many teachers of French, like their peers in other subjects, have been forced to seek alternative employment. Many of them have found themselves in situations where they need to teach French for specific purposes. In the absence of training, this becomes difficult. In the last five years, teachers in colleges and universities have benefited from in-service training organized by the French government to fill in this gap.

Conclusion

Pécheur (2008), declares that as a student learns by doing, so does a teacher. The importance of the relationship between learning and teaching cannot and must not be understated. One cannot teach a language effectively without knowing how language is learnt. We have tried in the second part of this article, to outline some of the gaps that can easily be identified in the teacher training programmes. We cannot, in this brief communication, make it our objective to offer solutions. Our main objective is to cause interested parties, particularly those charged with policy making and

programme implementation to reflect on this important question. However, we believe that the following issues should be given preferential attention:

- Institutions charged with training of teachers of foreign languages need to redefine the concept in order to adapt it to the needs of the context in which the teachers carry out their duty. They must, for instance, bear in mind the difference between learning a foreign language and learning languages that are widely spoken in the learner's context. You cannot train a French (as a foreign language) teacher the way you train a Kiswahili or English teacher. As we have said elsewhere in this article, apart from the fact that the learner speaks these two languages outside the formal school environment, English is the official language of instruction and administration while Kiswahili is the national language, both of them being compulsory subjects of study from primary to secondary school. Other challenges for the foreign language teacher include the fact that what he has to transmit is not just a collection of finished, predictable information. He therefore cannot limit himself to describing the content he is to teach. In addition to this he is faced with all the challenges that come with the teaching of a foreign language in a multilingual context such as ours.

- How relevant are old methods when the learner now has access to a wider base of knowledge: new sources of learning material but also more flexible access? Learning need no longer be limited to the classroom. And even then, the simple question of organizing the classroom for activities becomes important (Morin, 2009). Whether we like it or not, the learner will have access to the internet and surf different websites for leisure. The teacher could guide him/her towards more useful academic oriented activities. The internet then becomes a tool for the teacher as well as the student and the classroom opens its doors and expands to encompass the virtual space. The teacher is no longer alone with the learners because they are listening and paying attention to other sources of instruction. The relationship between the one *who knows* and those *who do not know* must be modified to enable the latter to achieve autonomy. A teacher who is not adequately trained to manage this concept is likely to feel redundant, which need not be the case.

- Bertocchini and Costanzo (2009) talk about the classroom being an interactional space where a "contract" has been established between two people: the learner and the teacher. According to this "contract", a teacher will be called upon to play certain roles in turn: organizer, facilitator, expert and technician. As an organizer he needs to be able to effectively and efficiently manage language activities in class. As a facilitator he must first and foremost realize that he is a negotiator, a guide, a cultural mediator between the learner and the content. As an expert, he should be able to explain and demonstrate the correct usage of the French language, be able to answer questions and evaluate learning content. As a technician he must be able to effectively use technology (from the DVD to

the interactive digital board) and manipulate online material. The CECRL[6] proposes to look at the teacher as a "mediator". A concept shared by many experts in the area who describe the teacher as a bridge between the learner and the content. He/she can no longer be the dictator and sole dispenser of knowledge while the learner remains the consumer. Anquetil (2009: 19) goes on to describe mediation as "the intercession of a third party between two persons or entities" but in the case of language teaching, cuts across other linguistic skills such as production, comprehension and interaction. The teacher according to this line of thought cannot claim to have all the answers. The learner in the digital 21st Century is no longer an empty vessel to be filled with substance that the teacher chooses to dispense. The training he goes through must prepare him for these eventualities.

- There is the need to identify the consumers of the training programmes and involve them in regular evaluation of the same. This would facilitate the process of needs analysis/assessment for both trainers and trainees. Martin and Savary (2006: 16) invite us to look at any training as "a response to a need and not a simple transmission of information independently from the context". Certain questions would then be considered: What is the profile of future teachers at admission into training? What are their needs according to the context in which they will later exercise their duty? What are the needs of the context in which they will be exercising their duty?

The rate at which the number of schools offering French in Kenya is growing, those responsible for the training of teachers need to reflect on the programmes offered. There has to be a balance between academic and professional training because a "half-baked" teacher will lead to the beginning of a vicious circle: poorly taught learners who themselves later become teachers. Institutions involved in training must work together in collaboration with the schools in order to bring about positive change.

References

ANQUETI M (2009): "La médiation en classe de langue" in FDM N° 361 janvier – février p. 19-20, 2009. CLE International, Paris.

BEACCO J-C (1992) : «Formation et représentations en didactiques des langues ». In FDM Numéro spécial Août-Septembre pp. 44-47. Coordonné par Simone Lieutaud. Paris : EDICEF.

BERTOCCHINI P et COSTANZO E (2009) : « Gérer l'espace en classe de FLE » in FDM N°364 Juillet – aoùt p.24. CLE International, Paris.

---

[6] The Cadre Européan Commun de Référence pour les Langues (The European Common Framework of Reference for Languages) which proposes to look at language learning in terms of competencies to be achieved at each of six levels : A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2.

EL AMIN Y (1990) : « La formation des formateurs et des enseignants de français en Afrique ». Actes du IVe congrès de l'APFA à Lomé – Togo – 2-7 Juillet. Dialogues et cultures.

GALISSON R. et PUREN C. (1999) : La formation en question. Didactique des langues étrangères. Paris : CLE International.

GALLISON R. (1999) : La formation en questions. Paris : CLE International.

MARTIN J-P and SAVARY E. (2006): Intervenir en formation. CAFOC de Nantes. 3e Edition. Chronique Sociale, Lyon.

MORIN I (2009) : « Les professeurs à la conquête de l'espace » in FDM N°364 juillet – aoùt p. 26. CLE International, Paris.

PECHEUR J. (2008) : Manuel de formation pratique pour les professeurs de FLE (Preface p. 3). CLE International, Paris.

PORQUIER R. (1984) : « Etudier les apprentissages pour apprendre à enseigner ». Avec la collaboration de WAGNER E. In FDM N° 185, p. 84. CLE International, Paris.

TAGLIANTE C. (2005) : L'Evaluation et le Cadre Européen Commun. Paris, CLE International