

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TEACHING OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES IN MALIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Résumé

Ce projet de recherche porte sur les attitudes que les responsables scolaires, les enseignants d'autres disciplines et les élèves ont envers les langues nationales et ceux qui les enseignent dans les écoles publiques maliennes, particulièrement dans les lycées. Les données recueillies par le biais d'entretiens directs, de discussions de groupe thématiques et d'observations ont montré que les enseignants de langues nationales, en particulier les femmes, sont régulièrement victimes de mauvais traitements, d'abus verbaux, de dédain et de manque de considération. Cette situation est exacerbée par le fait que le gouvernement malien fait très peu pour démontrer une réelle volonté politique de promouvoir l'enseignement des langues nationales. Les enseignants manquent de formation, de confiance en eux, de matériel didactique, etc. et leurs collègues qui enseignent d'autres matières ont tendance à ne pas les considérer comme des enseignants à part entière et ont une attitude à leur égard qui frise parfois le mépris. En conséquence, de nombreux enseignants de langues nationales sont tellement dégoûtés qu'ils envisagent d'abandonner l'enseignement de ces langues. Cet article montre ce qu'ils vivent au quotidien et fait des suggestions sur ce qui peut être fait pour améliorer la situation.

Mots clés : *administration scolaire, attitudes, enseignants, élèves, Langues nationales.*

Abstract

This research project is about the attitudes that school officials, teachers of other disciplines, and students have towards national languages and those who teach them in Malian public high schools. The data collected through direct interviews, focus group discussions and observations showed that national language teachers, especially the female ones, experience regular mistreatment, verbal abuse, disdain, and lack of consideration. That situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Malian Government is doing very little to demonstrate genuine political will to promote the teaching national languages. Teachers lack training, self-confidence, teaching materials, etc. and their colleagues who teach other subjects tend not to treat them as full-fledged teachers and have attitudes towards them that sometimes border on contempt. As a result, many national language teachers are so disgusted that they are considering abandoning the teaching of national languages. This paper shows what they are experiencing and makes suggestions as to what can be done to improve the situation.

Keywords: *attitudes, National languages, school administration, students, teachers.*

Introduction

The use of students' native language in the process of their education is very important for effective learning as evidenced by many studies. Cummings (2001:8) in a study commissioned by UNESCO (2007) supports the use of mother tongue instruction and according to him, the acquisition and consolidation of academic skills in the language that one masters well (the mother tongue), facilitates other tasks of acquisition in the second language in situations of bilingualism. Students can hardly reach their full potential in the process of learning if their mother tongue is not used as a medium of instruction. Linguistically, it was proved that there is no superior or inferior language in so far as every language is an effective means of communication for its speakers (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). In addition, research indicates that no country can develop sustainably without developing its own languages (Couez and Wambach, 1994). Similarly, Traoré (2001:206) also argues in the same vein, "The use of African languages as part of an active pedagogy promotes and strengthens the learning capacity of students. In general, this educational innovation helps improve academic efficiency." In other words, there are many benefits in using students L1 as the language of instruction. One of the most important ones is that it would enable teachers to communicate and explain more efficiently what they mean to students. The latter ones are sometimes not proficient in the foreign languages which are used as languages of instruction, as is the case with French in most Malian schools.

An alarming report from UNESCO published in 2016 shows that at least 40% of the world population does not have access to education in a language they understand. In the case of Mali, the overwhelming majority of students do not understand the French language in which they receive instruction in elementary schools. In fact, the use of French only in education was a major handicap (Naparé, 2009, Kodio, 2018). But there have been several attempts to solve that issue through the use of various approaches since Mali's independence in the 1960s. Among those approaches, we have *L'Ecole Expérimentale de la Première Génération* [The first-generation experimental school] (1979-1987), *La Pédagogie Convergente* [Convergent Pedagogy] (1987-2002), and more recently *Le Curriculum Bilingue* [the bilingual curriculum (2002-now)].

None of those approaches was really successful for many reasons, including but not limited to a lack of strong and constant political will and the attitudes of school officials and that of the teachers of other disciplines towards the teachers of national languages (Minta, 2020).

This study focuses on the issue of the attitudes that the teachers of national languages are faced with in the framework of their profession. It shows to which extent the importance of the use of national languages has not been understood and gives a clear picture of the reasons why the adverse attitudes that national language teachers experience on a daily basis contributed to the failure of the school system in the main.

1. Overview of the teaching of national languages in Malian schools

In Mali, National languages are used as the languages of instruction as part of the bilingual curriculum from 1st through 6th grade of elementary school at various degrees. That practice occurs only in public schools although the bilingual curriculum is supposed to be used nationwide. But the lack of training, lack of documentation, lack of motivation and lack of resources are among other factors which are an obstacle to the proper implementation of the bilingual curriculum in Mali (Minta, 2020). Although different types of bilingual curricula were implemented since independence in which national languages were more or less used as languages of instruction, those bilingual curricula never went beyond 9th grade.

Beyond 9th grade, although national languages are no longer used as language of instruction, they do not disappear completely from the educational system. In middle school classes, i.e., 7th through 9th grades and in vocational and secondary technical schools, national languages are not used as a medium of instruction or subject.

In classical high schools on the other hand, although national languages are not used as a medium of instruction, they are taught as a subject called “*langue nationale*”. Despite their withdrawal as language of instruction after elementary and middle school, national languages reappear in general in secondary school or high school (10th through 12th grades), where transcription along with basic grammar, function and vocabulary lessons are taught by teachers who graduated from ENSUP (*Ecole Normale Supérieure*), a high school teacher-training

institution in Mali. It is important to recall that officially there are 13 languages recognized as national languages in Mali, including: Bambara, Soninke, Hasanya Arabia, Bomu, Tamasheq, Songhay, Fulfulde, Bozo, Maninkakan, Dogon, Syenara, Mamara, and Xasongaxango (Minta, 2020). Bambara or Bamanankan is usually the lingua franca spoken by the overwhelming majority of the Malian population. That is probably why all the national language teachers interviewed within the framework of this study were Bamanankan teachers. They are also the ones from whom data was collected for this study.

National languages are also taught in higher education in Mali, especially at *FLSL (Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences du Langage)* and *ENSUP (Ecole Normale Supérieure)*, the latter having even a master's degree in Bamanankan which is, as mentioned above, the most widely spoken language in Mali. But the issue is that beyond the classical courses in grammar, transcription, etc. those who graduate from those institutions are not trained to serve as national language teachers. None of the national language teachers interviewed as part of this research project had a background in teaching a national language at the time of the interviews. They were graduates from ENSUP and majored in English, German, Educational Sciences, and Literature for the most part, and some of them had a master's degree in Linguistics from Senegal.

2. Methodology

The research methodology which was used for the purpose of this study is the qualitative one. The rationale behind the choice of the qualitative approach is quite simple: quantitative research, according to Myerkules (2011), is a systematic investigation of different social circumstances and phenomena through mathematical, computational, and statistical methods. Its main purpose of use is to construct theories, hypotheses and models relating to the social phenomena being observed or researched and has many advantages in applied linguistics. It enables us as researchers, as stated by Cresswell (2012) to rely on the views of participants; ask broad, general questions; collect data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describe and analyze these words for themes; and conduct the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner. Unlike the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach will enable us, as researchers, to express our

personal views more deeply instead of using mere statistical data. That is particularly important at a time when Malians are getting more and more conscious of the importance of using indigenous languages as media of instruction and a time when there are many debates around using some of the most widely spoken national languages as official languages.

2.1. Target population

This research project is focused on challenges encountered by teachers in the process of teaching national languages in Mali due to the attitudes of the various stakeholders in the field of education; the target population was mainly teachers and school administration. The main population of teachers targeted was the one of public high schools. As stated above, they were graduates from ENSUP and majored in English, German, Educational Sciences, and Literature for the most part, and some of them had a master's degree in Linguistics from Senegal. For instance, Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 3 graduated from FLASH (Faculty of Letter, Languages, Arts, and Humanities) in Educational Sciences, but also had a degree in Semantics from Dakar. Interviewee 4 was a graduate from ENSUP and had a master's degree in German. But Interviewee 5 from Lycée de Kéniéba, Interviewee 6 from Lycée Public de Kita, Interviewee 7 from Lycée Massa Makan Diabaté, Interviewee 8 from Lycée Public de Niena, Interviewee 9 from Lycée Famolo Coulibaly de Kolokani and Interviewee 10 from Lycée Askia Mohamed, all had a master's Degree in English from ENSUP. However, none of those mentioned above had a degree or even a certificate in any Malian national language, and nearly all of them confessed that they had not received any initial or refresher training on teaching national languages. Yet, they were full-time national language teachers in their respective towns.

2.2. Procedures

The following steps were taken for data collection at the level of secondary education teachers: personal or direct interviews, phone interviews, and focus group discussions. The national language teachers who are interviewed were from most southern regions of Mali including the district of Bamako. They were from various public schools in Bougouni, Koulikoro, Koro, Bafoulabe, Kéniéba, Kayes, Kita, San, Niéna, Kati and the district of Bamako.

All teachers who were interviewed within the framework of this research project are Bamanankan teachers. We found in the process of our investigation that national languages were more or less in the same situation in terms of challenges. It is worth mentioning that Bamanankan is the most documented language in Mali, probably because it is the most widely spoken language in the country since it is spoken by roughly 80 percent of the Malian population either as their L1, L2 or L3.

3. Results and discussion:

3.1. Findings

We found that national language teachers, especially female teachers, reported that they experience regular marginalization, discrimination, disrespect, disdain and mistreatment from school officials and their counterparts who teach other subjects and foreign languages. They reported that teachers of other disciplines do not consider them as full-fledged teachers because of the fact that many people still consider that national language courses are not useful or necessary and that you do not need any specific qualification in order to become a national language teacher if you already speak fluently the language you are supposed to teach. That situation is fostered by the failure of the government to put in place solid policies to promote and value national languages. Indeed, as stated previously in the introduction, the absence of a strong and constant political will is one of the main reasons why the various approaches which were implemented for the use of the national languages as languages of instruction failed in Mali.

To complain about the attitudes her colleagues have towards her, Interviewee 3 reported the following :

“I used to argue with the deputy principal of Lycée Massa Makan Diabaté so much so that we were both summoned to the Academy. Indeed, he thought that I was directly recruited from the street to come and teach Bamanankan. He did even not welcome me when I was transferred to his school. Actually, he had no idea of my real field of expertise.”

During their interview, Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 both acknowledged that they were experiencing similar situations in their respective schools. When we were interviewing her, we could feel in Interviewee 3's voice that she was disappointed about the fact that the deputy principal did not have much consideration for her because of her status of national language teacher. That's why she said that the latter one thought that she had been recruited from the street and that he had no idea of her background or field of expertise. She had actually a master's degree in English from ENSUP, a degree which is higher than that of the deputy principal she was furiously referring to, according to her.

She also shared the story of a friend of her, a female Bamankan national language teacher too from Lycée Askia Mohamed, who was experiencing the very same issues in her school. Below is an extract of her statement about her friend's case:

My friend who is teaching at Lycée Askia Mohamed suffered this year very much. I thought I was the only one to whom they were giving hard time at Lycée Massa Makan, but my friend suffered so much that she would call me sometimes in tears!

She would tell me sometimes: "Eh Aminata! this guy [referring to the principal of Lycée Askia Mohamed] really thinks that I was recruited at the marketplace to come and teach Bamanankan! He has no consideration for me. When I am in his office with other teachers, sometimes he would ask me to step out!" That's what she would tell me before bursting into a flood of tears!

After sharing the heartbreaking story of her friend, she lamented that:

During the school year there was a form that was circulating; it was supposed to be filled out by teachers with their last names, first names, and status to indicate whether they were fulltime or part-time teachers, etc. When that form got to Lycée Massa Makan, it's another person who gave me the information and asked me to get the form in

question and fill it out. But when I stepped in his office, the deputy principal clearly told me that I was not concerned and that the form was only for teachers who had a diploma.

Interviewee 3 was really shocked when narrating that story. Indeed, as she said previously and in line with her friend from Lycée Askia Mohamed's statement, we can see that some people wrongly think that you do not need a degree or qualification to be a national language teacher and that those who teach national language courses are not doing anything extraordinary.

Interviewee 3 talked about many other incidents in addition to the above-mentioned ones which occurred simply because she was a national language teacher. She was so upset and frustrated that she was considering stopping teaching Bamanankan.

When she was asked what she would do if she stopped teaching Bamanankan, she replied with the following: "I am going to teach English when I get promoted to the rank of principal teacher. Or I will request to leave teaching. But it is out of the question that I remain in the teaching of Bamanankan!"

She also talked about the case of another Bamanankan teacher who was serving in the Markala district at the time of the interview and who was considering stopping teaching Bamanankan, stating that:

There is also a CT16 [meaning a teacher who was recruited in 2016] who was transferred to Markala and who said the same thing, meaning that he could no longer keep on teaching Bamankan because some people made him so upset! His name is Madani. He said that he is going to send a request to the school principal to ask the latter one to give him English classes to teach instead next year. Believe me, people have no consideration for us!

The case of Interviewee 3 as well as the cases of her colleagues from Markala, Bafoulabe, and San show that the future of the teaching of national languages is uncertain. Indeed, many teachers are seeking to leave the teaching of national languages because of the regular verbal abuses, marginalization, discrimination, disrespect, disdain and

mistreatment from school officials and their counterparts who teach other subjects as indicated in various testimonies.

3.2. Attitudes towards teachers of national languages in urban versus rural areas

According to Interviewee 3, national language teachers receive better treatment and have higher consideration in rural areas and regions than Bamako. She stated the following:

They have no consideration for Bamanankan classes here in Bamako! Sometimes I call Silamakan in tears telling him that I am going to stop teaching Bamanankan! And sometimes when I call Kiabou, he laughs at me and wonders if I am not crazy [laughter]. And with regards to the case of Mamadou Tounkara, they [referring to the school administration] made his life so difficult in San! He suffered so much! He is seeking transfer by any means so that he can leave San!

In her explanation, Interviewee 3 stated that national language teachers were better treated in the regions than in the district of Bamako. She lamented that she was nostalgic of the time when she was serving in Kayes as a Bamanankan teacher in these terms:

I was really in heaven in Kayes, but I don't want to teach anymore since I came to Bamako. I got along so well with my colleagues of Kayes that they would give me money sometimes so that I could come and spend time in Bamako with my husband. They helped me when I sought transfer to Bamako. But I told them later that I regretted my decision to move to Bamako.

As an advice, Interviewee 3 added that she would encourage her national language teaching colleagues not to seek transfer to Bamako because they would hate teaching afterwards.

It was revealed during the interviews that sometimes the situation between national language teachers and school officials becomes so

tense that the leaders of teachers' unions must get involved to calm down the situation. Interviewee 3 stated that:

At the end, I got support from the union. They left me alone thanks to the union. It is the secretary general of SYPESCO who personally went to see him (the deputy principal) to tell him that I have a masters' degree from ENSUP while he had only a bachelor's degree!

However, the union rarely gets involved or takes action in the cases of abuse and marginalization of national language teachers. Interviewee 6 indicated that the leaders of the unions do not take very seriously the challenges and difficulties experienced by national language teachers. He stated that:

I am very active in the SYPESCO union's activities. But unfortunately, the union calls meetings only to discuss very serious issues, such as delays in the payment of salaries, so on and so forth. They rarely address issues related to contents, i.e., they rarely address issues that teachers are faced with (in schools). I had a discussion with the coordinator of the union, but there was no follow up. I told him "Look, I cannot continue to do everything I am doing for you (because I do some typing and other stuff like that for them), while my very status of teacher is questioned! Because people are not considering me as a teacher!" That's what I told him.

From the above statement, we can understand that the frustration experienced by national language teachers is very common and that there is little hope that the leaders of teachers' unions take significant action to put an end to such frustration. Interviewee 4 stated in his turn the following about the lack of commitment of unions' leaders for national language teachers: "If we have to do something, we will need to do it on our own; otherwise, the unions are not willing to help us. We already met with them as I told you."

Interviewee 5 and Interviewee 2 both suggested that national language teachers should create their own union separately so that their voices and concerns could be heard. But Interviewee 7 warned that this would not be realistic. According to him, creating a union for a single subject would not make sense.

3.3. Attitudes of other teachers and students towards national language teachers

3.3.1. Attitudes of other teachers

As stated above, a significant challenge that national language teachers are faced with is the unfriendly attitude of teachers of other disciplines towards them.

To illustrate that fact, Interviewee 3 shared the following testimony during her interview:

After our recruitment in 2016, we got our payslip only in January. There was a gentleman who had no consideration for us; he did even not consider us as teachers. When our payslips arrived in Kayes... because when payslips get there, they are displayed on the table and each teacher would get his or hers, the gentleman was curious to see what was on my payslip! He was so upset [when he saw how much I was earning] and said “that’s impossible! Even those who teach Bamanankan receive a higher pay than I do!” I told him that he hadn’t seen anything yet!

According to Interviewee 3, teachers of scientific disciplines are mainly the ones who view national language teachers as “second-class teachers”. She stated that “*teachers of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics think that they are the owners of the schools*”. Interviewee 1 concurred with her and added that Economics teachers had the same attitude. But Interviewee 3 found that “*Economics teachers had a better attitude than those who teach Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics*” and that she “*avoids them*”.

Interviewee 6 in his turn pointed out that he replies with “*tough words*” those who criticize the teaching of national languages. According to him, there is a need to “*decolonize people’s minds*”.

3.3.2. Attitudes of students

On the other hand, it seems that students have a friendlier attitude towards national languages and national language teachers, especially those who teach Bamanankan both in Bamako and in the regions. Indeed, Bamanankan is the lingua franca in most Malian regions, and some students are eager to learn it even if it is not their mother tongue. That's the case of students of the Lycée Abire Goro de Koro commonly referred to as LAGK. According to Interviewee 5 who describes himself as the only teacher of Bamanankan of LAGK, Bamanankan is a subject that students really love. He said: *“They are enthusiastic and participate very much in the classes. When I start teaching my Bamanankan classes, even the windows of my classroom are full of students [from other classes]. They are really interested.”*

Although students are enthusiastic when it comes to national languages according to teachers, there is a little particularity for Bamanankan. In the case of LAGK for instance, Interviewee 5 indicated that students are more interested in Bamanankan than in Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀ which is their mother tongue, mainly because it is the most widely spoken language in Mali. Indeed, those who graduate from high school in Koro have no other option but going to university in Bamako or Ségou if they want to further their studies, and Bamanankan is the most widely spoken language in those towns. Therefore, students strive to learn Bamanankan to facilitate their integration when they get there. That is why Interviewee 5 stated that *“In the town of Koro, there are more students who learn Bamanankan than Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀ in national language courses, although Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀ is their mother tongue”*.

With regards to the attitudes of students towards national languages and national language teachers, other teachers' statements were in line with Interviewee 5's, be it in Bamako or in other regions. Most national language teachers reported their students' enthusiasm for national language classes. Below is Interviewee 3's statement with regards to the attitude of her students with regards to Bamanankan classes:

My students understand my courses; I have no issues with students with regards to national languages. They like national language courses even more than their main subjects. Students from 10th and 11th grades are eager to see the national language teacher

in class for the courses. There are also many students in final year classes who love national language courses.

The enthusiasm of students for national languages is logical and easy to understand because there is a feeling of security that they have when they learn in their mother tongue. Indeed, they feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue and do not fear making grammar or other types of errors which would make them feel uncomfortable before their teachers and peers.

Conclusion

The benefits of learning using students' mother tongue as their language of instruction have been evidenced by many studies. But in the case of Mali, various testimonies show that the lack of training is a major obstacle for teachers in the performance of their duties, especially in the area of teaching national languages. That probably explains to some extent why national language teachers are not considered by some school officials and many of their colleagues who teach other subjects as full-fledged teachers with due respect and are exposed to negative attitudes. Therefore, it is urgent that the Malian government makes provisions to provide quality training to national language teachers since the latter ones themselves acknowledged during the interviews that they are not equipped with the training and knowledge they need to perform their work properly. The government should also make additional efforts to raise the awareness of all the stakeholders of education regarding the importance of our national languages in the process of schooling. It seems also that gender is playing an important role with regards to the consideration granted to teachers of national languages. Most cases of bullying, verbal abuse and mistreatment experienced by national language teachers were reported by female teachers. On the other hand, very few male national language teachers reported such attitudes from their counterparts. That was probably because even if they did not have much consideration for national languages, school officials and teachers of other disciplines were more likely to attack verbally and disrespect female teachers than their male counterparts. Therefore, there is a need for further research on the attitudes towards national language teachers based on their gender.

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