

ABSENCE OF CURRICULUM AND TESTING PROCEDURES IN THE TEACHING OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES IN MALI: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Résumé :

Ce projet de recherche aborde deux aspects qui font que l'enseignement des langues nationales dans les écoles publiques maliennes ne réussit pas. Les données recueillies grâce à l'approche de recherche qualitative ont révélé que le manque d'expérience et de formation pour l'enseignement des langues nationales et l'absence d'un programme d'études et d'une approche d'évaluation bien structurés pour les élèves sont deux défis majeurs auxquels sont confrontés les enseignants et les élèves dans le domaine des langues nationales au Mali. Ces défis sont exacerbés par le fait que l'administration scolaire ne montre pas beaucoup d'intérêt pour la réussite de l'utilisation des langues maternelles des élèves comme moyen d'instruction dans le processus de leur éducation dans un cadre formel. Ce document examine l'importance de la formation des enseignants, la nécessité de programmes bien structurés et de mesures d'évaluation dans l'éducation formelle, en particulier lorsqu'il s'agit de l'enseignement des langues nationales. Enfin, il attire l'attention sur le fait que l'avenir de l'enseignement des langues nationales est menacé et que de nombreux enseignants cherchent à abandonner le domaine si rien n'est fait pour les motiver. Des suggestions susceptibles d'améliorer la situation sont faites vers la fin pour assurer l'efficacité et la pérennité de l'enseignement des langues nationales dans les écoles publiques maliennes.

Mots-clés : *Langues nationales, curriculum, tests, défis,*

Abstract:

This research project addresses two aspects that make the teaching of national languages in Malian public schools unsuccessful. The data collected through the qualitative research approach revealed that the lack of background and training for teaching national languages and the lack of a

well-structured curriculum and assessment for students are two major challenges facing national language teachers and students in Mali. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that the school administration does not show much interest in the success of the use of students' mother tongues in the process of their education in formal settings as a medium of instruction. This paper discusses the importance of teacher training, the need for well-structured curricula and assessment measures in formal education, especially when it comes to the teaching of national languages. Finally, it draws attention to the fact that the future of national language teaching is under threat, and that many teachers are looking to abandon the field if nothing is done to motivate them. Suggestions for improving the situation are made at the end, to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of national language teaching in Malian public schools.

Keywords: *National languages, curriculum, testing, challenges,*

Introduction

Research has extensively demonstrated the effectiveness of using students' native language in the process of formal education. Students perform much better when they are taught in school in the language they speak and understand as part of their everyday conversation. It has been linguistically proven that no language is superior or inferior to another, as each language is an effective means of communication for its speakers, as stated by D. M. Gollnick and P. C. Chinn (2009). Considering the enormous benefits of using students' mother tongue in the context of their schooling, the Malian government decided to use the national languages as the language of instruction in public primary schools and a subject called "national language" in secondary schools. This followed the observation that Malian students were often not very proficient in the foreign languages used for instruction, as is the case with French in most Malian public schools.

Several approaches have been tried by the Malian government since the country's independence in the 1960s, including 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-present.) M. Minta (2020) found that all these approaches failed for many reasons including but not limited to a lack of strong and constant political will and the negative attitudes of school officials and that of the teachers of other disciplines towards the teachers of national languages.

This study focuses on two additional issues that we have identified in the teaching of national languages and that contribute to the failure of the teaching in and of national languages in Malian public schools, especially at the secondary level although teachers at the primary level experience pretty much the same situations. These two issues are the absence of background and training for the teaching of national languages and the absence of a well-structured curriculum and assessment for students. We believe that if these two aspects are properly addressed, the teaching in and of national languages will improve significantly. The goal of this paper is to explore the reason why the teaching of national languages in Mali was never truly successful and to make proposals as to how the situation can be improved.

1. A glimpse of national language teaching in the public schools of Mali

There are 13 officially recognized languages in Mali, including: Bambara, Soninke, Hasanya Arabia, Bomu, Tamasheq, Songhay, Fulfulde, Bozo, Maninkakan, Dogon, Syenara, Mamara, and Xasongaxango. Bambara or Bamanankan is usually the lingua franca or language of communication spoken by most Malians. The languages that have the status of national languages are used as the languages of instruction in the bilingual curriculum from 1st through 6th grade. These

languages are used as media of instruction in public elementary school at various degrees despite the fact that bilingual curriculum is supposed to be used nationwide. However, the lack of training, the lack of documentation, the lack of motivation and the lack of financial and human resources are among other factors which are an obstacle to the proper implementation of the bilingual curriculum in Mali as stated by M. Minta and A. Kodio (2023, p. 203). The different types of curricula implemented since independence in which national languages were more or less used as languages of instruction never went beyond the 9th grade.

As mentioned above, although national languages are not used as a medium of instruction in classical high schools, they are taught as a subject called “Langue Nationale or LN”. The national languages generally reappear in secondary school or high school (10th -12th grade), where transcription is taught along with basic grammar, function and vocabulary by teachers who have graduated from ENSUP (Ecole Normale Supérieure), a teacher training institution for high school teachers in Mali. According to M. Minta (2020), national languages are also taught at the university level in Mali, particularly at the FLSL (Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences du Langage) and the ENSUP (Ecole Normale Supérieure), the latter even offering a Master’s degree in Bamanankan.

Several issues may explain the failure of the teaching of national languages in Malian high schools. The two issues addressed in this paper, i.e. the lack of background and training for the teaching of national languages and the lack of a well-structured curriculum and assessment for students, deserve special attention, because addressing them can contribute significantly to solving the overall problem. The ever-evolving field of modern education requires ongoing teacher training, the use of an appropriate and adapted curriculum and assessment tools and approaches.

A direct correlation between teacher effectiveness and student achievement is drawn by L. Darling-Hammond (2007, p. 300), who points out that when teachers are well prepared, they are more likely to use a variety of instructional approaches to accommodate various learning styles. In addition, with the increasing integration of technology in school settings, there is a need for teachers to adapt in order to become proficient in the use of new resources and tools. According to L. Johnson et al. (2019, p. 245), there is a need for teachers to stay abreast of the new innovations in the field of education in order to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of their teaching practices. On the other hand, a well-structured curriculum is critical in schools because it provides a roadmap for learning, and an effective assessment approach allows for measuring student understanding and guides the teacher in making the right decision at different stages of the student's learning process.

In light of the preceding, we can see the importance of well-structured curricula and assessment procedures, as well as initial and ongoing training in the field of education. In the Findings and Discussion section below, we will see how these components are lacking in Mali in the area of national language teaching in public schools, and the impact this situation has on the performance of teachers and students.

2. Methodology:

For the purpose of this study we decided to use the qualitative approach. The reason for choosing the qualitative approach is that quantitative research which, according to H. Miyerkules (2011), is a systematic investigation of different social circumstances and phenomena through mathematical, computational, and statistical methods and whose main purpose of use is to construct theories, hypotheses and models related to the social phenomena being observed or researched is more

suitable for the purpose of this research paper. The qualitative approach has many advantages in applied linguistics; it enables us as researchers, as stated by J. W. 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.

2.1. Target population:

This research project focuses on the challenges faced by teachers in the process of teaching national languages in Mali due to the absence of background and training for the teaching of national languages and the absence of a well-structured curriculum and assessment for students. The target population was mainly teachers Bamanankan, which is the most widely spoken language in Mali, with roughly 80 percent of the population peaking it as their L1, L2 or L3. Bamanankan is also the most documented language taught in public schools. Teachers targeted were mostly from public high schools and elementary schools since private schools rarely teach national languages in Mali.

2.2. Procedures:

For the purpose of data collection at the level of high school teachers, the following steps were taken: personal and direct interviews, phone interviews, and focus group discussions. It is worth mentioning that the national language teachers interviewed were from most southern regions of Mali including the district of Bamako. They were from various public schools in Bougouni (Sikasso), Koulikoro, Koro (Mopti), Bafoulabe (Kayes), Kéniéba, Kayes, Kita (Kayes), San (Segou), Niéna (Sikasso), Kati (Koulikoro) and the district of Bamako.

As stated previously all teachers who were interviewed within the framework of this research project are Bamanankan

teachers. During our investigations, we discovered that national language teachers of other languages were more or less in the same situation in terms of challenges as Bamanankan teachers.

3. Findings and discussion:

We can say that the goal we set at the beginning of this research project has been achieved. We wanted to obtain comprehensive data on the impact of the lack of training and the absence of a well-structured assessment approach on the teaching of national languages in Malian public high schools. The lack of training, both initial and continuous, as well as the absence of a well-structured curriculum when it comes to teaching national languages were two challenges that all national language teachers systematically reported when to were asked about their situation. It seems that the government recruited them based on their background in linguistics that they got at university. However, they had not received any deep formal training to enable them to speak the languages they were recruited to teach.

3.1. Training and background issue

There is an assumption by the government that with their background in linguistics, NL teachers will be able to teach their mother tongue since they are university graduates. And there was no initial or continuing training organized by the government to help them become more efficient in teaching national languages. The most important challenge highlighted by every single teacher of national language interviewed withing the framework of this research project is the training issue. That problem is both at the level of initial training and professional development training. Nearly all high school national language teachers who were interviewed confessed that they had not received any initial or professional development training on the teaching of national languages in the course of their career.

None of the national language teachers interviewed had any background either in teaching a national language at the time of the interview. They were graduates from ENSUP (Ecole Normale Supérieure) 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 Mali, Algeria, or Senegal. For instance, Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 respectively from LKFB and LDDK both graduated from FLASH (Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences du Langage) in Educational Sciences, but also had a degree in Semantics from Dakar.

Interviewee 3 from LAGK in Koro was a graduate from ENSUP and had a Master's Degree in German. But Interviewee 4 from Lycée de Kéniéba, Interviewee 5 from Lycée Public de Kita, Interviewee 6 from Lycée Massa Makan Diabaté, Interviewee 7 from Lycée Public de Niena, Interviewee 8 from Lycée Famolo Coulibaly de Kolokani and Interviewee 9 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 in-service training on teaching national languages. Yet, they were full-time national language teachers in their respective towns.

It seems that those who were recruited to teach national languages in 2014 and 2016 were recruited with the assumption that they were natives of the national languages for which they were recruited and that they would be able to teach those languages given the fact that they were university graduates, probably because no one else was qualified to do the task better than they did at that time.

However, it seems also that those national language teachers did not benefit from any type of support in terms of training and documentation in order to do their work properly.

Consequently, the teaching of national languages is a real mess in most places according to the national language teachers themselves, and they clearly acknowledge that they are not able to do their job properly because of the issue of background and training.

When I asked the question to know what kind of support they were benefiting from the Government or their leadership in their field, Interviewee 9 answered as follows (translation mine):

With regards to the support aspect, to tell the truth we were left behind. We seriously need training and capacity building support. The major problem that I have personally is the curriculum. But we, Bamanankan teachers are doing well enough [compared to teachers of other national languages]. My colleague who teaches *dɔgɔsɔ* over there [in Koro] has so many problems! His name is Guirou. The teachers of the other national languages are told to refer to the Bamanankan model. But sometimes it is extremely difficult to adapt their courses to the Bamanankan model, and it is the same thing with other languages such as Fulfulde and so on.

Among the teachers interviewed within the framework of this research project, only Interviewee 12 from the Lycée Public de Kita and Interviewee 13 from Lycée Massa Makan Diabaté said that they have no issues with the curriculum, even though they were using different approaches. Interviewee 12 stated that he was actually adapting the content of the English Curriculum to his national language courses. As highlighted above, he is a Bamanankan teacher who graduated from the English Department of ENSup. During his interview he stressed that he was not having problems with the curriculum because he is “*very creative and does a lot of brainstorming*” when he prepares his lessons.

As far as Interviewee 13 is concerned, although she is feeling comfortable teaching Bamanankan, her teaching approach is different from that of Interviewee 12. She confessed that she was not teaching the national language curriculum provided for high school classes. Below is an extract of her explanation (translation mine):

With regards to the curriculum, when I was in Kayes, there was a national language teacher who used to work at the Academy who advised us not to use the curriculum provided. He gave me another program. It was a booklet titled “Karamokɔ Dɛmɛnan, Fɔlɔ” [Teacher’s Guide, Volume 1], there are two additional volumes. Thanks to that booklet, I had no problems. It is very easy. I’m sure you will have no issues teaching Bamanankan with this booklet.

When asked if the booklet she was referring to would cover the content of the national language curriculum, Interviewee 13 answered “yes”. However, the other teachers had never heard about that booklet and it was different from “*Saria Sun*”, the most widely used textbook in the teaching of Bamanankan in Malian high schools according to national language teachers. Interviewee 13 added that it was not available on the market and that she knows people who tried to buy it on the market but couldn’t find it. She then added the circumstances in which she got the booklet in these terms (translation mine):

The gentleman who gave me the books was very nice to me because I gave him all my overtime classes when I was serving in Kayes since I was not living permanently there. I never spent a full month in Kayes since I was assigned to my position there. So, I would leave with him all my overtime classes. In return he opened his heart to me and helped me very much. With the booklet that I am talking about, you can easily select all your exam subjects without the assistance of somebody else.

As stated above, the other teachers were not aware of the existence of the booklet that Interviewee 13 was referring to. In addition to that, an important aspect which emerges from her testimony is that sometimes, some circumstances come into the picture when it comes to having access to documentation in national languages. In the case of Interviewee 13 for instance, it was because she had a good relationship with the gentleman who used to serve at DNFLA (Direction Nationale de l'Alphabétisation Fonctionnelle [National Directorate of Functional Literacy]) in the past and to whom she gave her overtime classes (for him to make extra money) that she was able to get her hands on Volume 1 of a booklet titled *Karaməkə demenan fələ*, a book which was very helpful to her in the planning and teaching of her lessons.

Another important aspect which emerges from her testimony is that she would have had many issues in the selection of the exam subjects for her students had she not had the booklet *Karaməkə demenan fələ*. Other national language teachers such as Interviewee 10 and Interviewee 8 reported that they had issues even in the selection of their exam subjects because they did not know very much what to ask their students. One can image how messy and confusing the courses might be when we take into account the fact that some national language teachers don't know what exam subject they should give to their students. It goes without saying that those students are learning very little, if they are learning anything at all, partly due to the absence of a well-structured assessment approach, when we consider the importance of the latter one as stated previously.

Although Interviewee 13 was praising the booklet *Karaməkə demenan fələ* that she uses for her classes, Interviewee 7 stated that the book that he knows, and which matches the description of the booklet that Interviewee 13 was referring to, was a textbook used in elementary school. He also added that there is a non-government organization which developed a similar

textbook, without mentioning the name of the NGO in question. Interviewee 12 added in his turn that he “received a similar textbook from DNAFLA”, but he had forgotten the title of the textbook. Interviewee 9 said that he is using a textbook titled *JE PARLE BIEN BAMANANKAN*. According to him that is “*a good textbook that can be adapted to the classes too and the author is Demba Konare*”. Therefore, we can understand from their respective statements that they are not using the same textbooks for the same classes in high school and that they have different approaches.

3.2. Absence of a well-structured assessment of students

Another major issue with national languages is the absence of a well-structured assessment of students. Currently, there is no structured assessment approach of national languages at the level of high schools, i.e. there is no standard or specific way of assessment, and every national language teacher has his or her own way of assessing students. When the question was asked to know whether students were assessed in national languages on the same basis as the other subjects during the interview, Interviewee 7 replied that (translation mine): “*unfortunately, there is no real assessment of students in national languages because it is considered to be part of Applied Linguistics and all students of TLL (final year class where students major in literature and foreign languages) do it*”. Interviewee 7 added that students are assessed in national languages “*only if national language classes were taught before the exams. Otherwise, the subject is not taken into account*”.

National language exam results are lightly weighed, they are multiplied by 1 only, according to Interviewee 20. That is one of the reasons why national language teachers are marginalized, because school officials do not take their subject seriously as pointed out in my previous article on the attitudes towards

national language teachers in Mali. It is also worth mentioning that there are many public schools where national languages are not taught at all due to a lack of teachers.

We discovered that there are other places where they are taught only partly, meaning that some students may receive national language courses and others may not. This kind of situation occurs usually in schools where there is not enough money to cover overtime payment for national language courses. Since national languages do not weight much compared to the other subjects, some high school principals decide sometimes to allocate funds to the payment of overtime for other subjects which are considered to be “more important”. Thus, some 10th grade classes may receive national language courses while other 10th grade classes would not in the same school setting.

To describe the experience she had with that issue, Interviewee 15, a Bamanankan teacher serving at Lycée Askia Mohamed stated the following (translation mine):

Currently I am teaching national language courses only in 11th and 12th grade classes. There are fifteen 10th grade classes in my school and none of them are receiving national language courses currently. The deputy principal asked me to teach national language courses in five 10th grade classes and leave the other ten classes because there was not enough money to pay for overtime. But I refused because that would have been some kind of discrimination in my opinion.

If Interviewee 15 had accepted to give national languages courses in some 10th grade classes and leave the others, she would have been asked to evaluate for the exam only students who received Bamanankan courses. In this case, there would have been some 10th graders who would have grades in national language while others would not, but they would still find themselves in the same 11th grade classes with some students having a higher level in the national language subject than the

others. Interviewee 15 refused that because it would not have been fair in her opinion.

As far as the issue of assessment is concerned, Interviewee 7 stated that (translation mine):

The issue of assessment is very serious. In Mali we know that the only motivation students have is to pass to the next grade. If we do not set serious assessment criteria, I think that students will never take national language courses seriously. So, I think that we should absolutely consider an extension of the teaching time or duration of national language courses. In the current situation we are not able to implement even a quarter of the curriculum that we are given in a school year. Therefore, it is imperative to increase the teaching time. But to do that, it's up to us to develop a detailed curriculum to convince whomever we need to convince in order to improve the situation.

Indeed, given the fact that national languages do not weigh much in exams, their teaching time is only one hour per week in classes of 10th and 11th grades, according to Interviewee 13 who stated that it is impossible to teach the courses of national languages even in 2 hours per week if we really want to do the courses properly.

Interviewee 9 added that the teaching time of national languages is 2 hours in 12th grades, as opposed to 1 hour in 10th and 11th grades. Interviewee 13 then said that it is only in final year literature classes that the teaching time of national languages is 2 hours. But students in final year social science classes don't even have enough time to deal with the national language subjects in 1 hour during the exams.

As a suggestion, Interviewee 7 added that (translation mine):

With regards to exams, and the baccalaureate... since we are not talking only about classes of 10th and 11th grade, we need to struggle to make the national language subject part of the baccalaureate too. Indeed, that would be a

source of motivation for students to take national languages more seriously.

Interviewee 13 described the experience she had with the issue of limited teaching time of national languages, and her statement was in line with that of Interviewee 15 even though they were not interviewed together. She stated that (translation mine):

When I was in Kayes, I was told that final year economic science classes and final year experimental science classes did not do Bamanankan courses. But when I came to Bamako, the principal of Lycée Massa Makan told me that all final year classes did Bamanankan courses. But I did not agree because I had completed my hours in 10th grade classes. I have the impression that there are no provisions for overtime in Bamako, while it is compulsory to do overtime in the regions. So, I stop the courses when I complete the mandatory teaching hours that I am supposed to complete as a teacher, even if the other classes had no course because I asked him [the principal] if he was planning to give overtime courses; he answered “no”.

Then I told him that I would stop the courses.

As explained above, there are indeed schools where some students would take national language courses while others would not in the same grades. But, Interviewee 13 explained that behind that situation is the desire of some school principals to embezzle the money provided for overtime courses. According to her, *“the truth is that there are indeed provisions for overtime money, but when the money comes, they pocket it! Otherwise, it is impossible to be the only national language teacher of a school and have no overtime, that’s impossible”*.

The above statement from Interviewee 13 related to the embezzlement of overtime money is another important dimension to take into account when addressing the issue of national languages in high schools. Indeed, it may have a

significant impact on the quality and regularity of the courses in so far as the resources would be used for something other than their initial purpose. But that issue goes beyond the scope of this research project.

Conclusion:

The benefits of using students' mother tongue as the language of instruction are obvious and were clearly demonstrated in several studies. That motivated to Malian government to foster the use of national languages in public schools. However, that motivation was not followed by support measures such as the training of trainers, the development of a strong and proper curriculum, the development of textbooks for both teachers and students, and the lack of well-structured assessment approaches when it comes to national languages. Indeed, during their interview, the teachers of national languages clearly acknowledged they are unable to do what is really expected from them in class.

Some of them confessed that they do in their classrooms whatever they want or can and there is very little if any control from the school authorities. The factors highlighted in this paper in addition to the adverse attitudes that teachers of national languages are experiencing are jeopardizing the future of the teaching of national languages in Mali. Indeed, many teachers are more and more demotivated and some of them are considering abandoning the teaching of National languages to teach foreign languages they majored in at university. The Malian government needs to take urgent action to provide in-service training to all teachers of national languages and organize reflection workshops in order to revise de current curriculum of national languages since nearly all teachers agree that it is not appropriate due to its length and messy structure. It is also necessary to develop more appropriate textbooks and

standardize their use for both teachers and students. Finally, a well-structured assessment approach also needs to be developed and standardized among national language teachers to make sure students are all assessed based on the same criteria so that the right measures can be taken whenever necessary. Further studies are needed to make concrete proposals as to the types of curriculum and assessment measures that can be used to improve the teaching of national languages in Malian public schools.

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