



Deficiencies among French Learners in Primary, Secondary, and High Schools in the Analamanga Region - Antananarivo, Madagascar

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Abstract: *The present study highlights French language acquisition in primary, secondary, and public high schools in Antananarivo and its surrounding areas. Classroom observations and surveys were conducted in two public primary schools (EPP 67 ha Nord-Est and EPP Antanimena Est), two General Education Colleges (CEG Betsimitatatra and CEG Antanimena), and three public high schools (Lycée Moderne Ampefiloha, Lycée Analamahitsy, and Lycée Ivato). Field research reveals factors contributing to students' language deficits: lack of exposure, with 60.41% of students using French exclusively in school and during French classes. This leads to language deficiencies stemming from limited practice and vocabulary, observed in 43.13% of students, indicating incomplete mastery of the French language. Consequently, the majority (42.40%) resort to using dictionaries due to this vocabulary gap. Analysis of learning methods shows that most students encounter challenges across all subjects (78%), with a preference for memorization as the primary strategy (63.33%). Additionally, the majority believes that the use of visual aids is the most effective method to address their shortcomings (71.81%). Therefore, this study focuses on observing French language learning methods and aims to enhance them for more satisfactory outcomes.*

Keywords: *French Learning; Failures; Method; Learner; Strategy*

I. Introduction

Learning a foreign language can often be fraught with obstacles, especially when it comes to mastering a language as complex and nuanced as French. Despite the increasing use of English, the French language retains all the characteristics of a global language: it is present on all five continents, taught worldwide, official in 29 countries, and in most international organizations (Marcoux & Wolff, 2019). In 2020, the French-speaking population numbered nearly 470 million individuals, which is close to the number of Spanish speakers (475 million for the same year). According to current demographic estimates, by 2030, the “Francophonie”

(French-speaking countries) is expected to gather approximately 570 million people, with a significant proportion in Africa, while Spanish-speaking and Arabic-speaking populations are expected to range between 510 and 520 million (Gaudiaut, 2023).

The linguistic situation in Madagascar is characterized by a complex diglossia, where there is coexistence between the colonial language (French) and the national language (Malagasy), as well as an older and relatively stable diglossia between the national Malagasy and the vernacular dialects. This configuration leads to a functional distribution of the respective uses of French, Malagasy, and the various Malagasy dialects (Bibaw, 2006). It is worth noting that this diglossia is mainly present in urban areas. Indeed, the rural population, which represents 73% of the country's population according to the ACIDI in 2003, is largely monolingual.

In the Analamanga region, Antananarivo, Madagascar, mastering the French language is of paramount importance for education and economic opportunities. This language is present in everyday life, whether in schools, universities, in the media, on posters, and in all areas of administration. It is notably tested in job interviews and is considered a mark of prestige in major cities, especially in Antananarivo. Despite this reality, Malagasy learners often face linguistic difficulties that hinder their progress and daily use.

This article focuses on identifying linguistic deficiencies among French learners in this specific region by examining the challenges they face in their learning journey. By exploring different errors and gaps, this study aims to provide valuable insights to improve teaching methods and support learners in their quest to master the French language. Mastering this language in the Analamanga region represents a major challenge for local learners. Despite the importance of French for access to education and professional opportunities, many learners face linguistic deficiencies that hinder their progress. This situation raises questions about the factors contributing to these difficulties and the pedagogical approaches that could overcome them.

These deficiencies could result from the quality of instruction, but they could also be attributed to a lack of diligence in students' learning. From this issue arise the following research questions: "*What reasons explain the observed linguistic deficiencies among French learners?*" and "*What aspects of French instruction could be enhanced to better address the needs of learners?*" ». Therefore, the following hypotheses warrant investigation:

- a. The social environment of Malagasy learners leads to linguistic deficiencies.
- b. The linguistic deficiencies observed among these learners are primarily due to a lack of suitable educational resources and outdated teaching methods.

In Madagascar, several studies have already been conducted on various aspects of the French language, including its role, presence, teaching, and learning. However, this article adopts a different approach to address these issues, thus providing a fresh perspective. The fieldwork is localized in Analamanga, specifically in the major high schools of Antananarivo. Additionally, Randrianasolo (2017) focused on the teaching and learning of written French in high schools, particularly concerning text summary exercises. This author notes that "*the lack of written practice, students' linguistic resource gaps, and the inherent constraints of the exercise make text summarization difficult to teach and learn*" (2017).

The issue with acquiring a non-native language that is frequently encountered in daily life is that we apply a pedagogy designed for a foreign language, aimed pragmatically at

assisting a foreigner in need (Rakotomalala, 2016). Furthermore, Razafisololo (2010) addresses in her book "The paradox of the image of the French language in education: students like but do not master it" the preference of Malagasy learners for French and proposes solutions to remedy students' linguistic difficulties.

II. Research Methods

Classroom observations and surveys were conducted in Analamanga to collect and analyze data. A sample of 480 students was gathered, including 120 students from two general education colleges and 360 students from three public high schools. Information regarding their social backgrounds, familiarity with the French language, and their learning of it was collected using a questionnaire. The survey was conducted during the first half of February 2023. The interview guide for learners is organized into three parts: their standard of living, their language practices, and their knowledge and skills in French.

These observations were conducted in two public primary schools (EPP 67 Ha Nord-Est and EPP Antanimena Est), two general education colleges (CEG Betsimitatatra and CEG Antanimena), and three public high schools (Lycée Moderne Ampefiloha, Lycée Analamahitsy, and Lycée Ivato). Lycée Moderne Ampefiloha was selected as the primary location for work due to its significance, while the other institutions were chosen for their accessibility and the availability of learners.

The questionnaire, written in French and explained in Malagasy, consisted of multiple-choice questions (MCQs). The responses to closed-ended questions help assess students' linguistic competence in the French language. The objective is to understand the foundations and shortcomings that prevent learners from mastering this language. It was not possible to survey primary school students, as it is believed they do not yet have the necessary maturity to respond accurately to the questions. In colleges, only 8th and 9th grade students were surveyed, while in high schools, students from all levels participated in the survey.

During this research, two approaches were adopted to analyze pedagogical phenomena related to the teaching of the French language.

- a. Functionalist approach: This approach focuses on the study of pedagogical phenomena that are interdependent and complementary. The objective is to understand every aspect of teaching in order to identify what works well or poorly. By examining the various elements of teaching, it is possible to determine the factors that contribute to the success or failure of learning French.
- b. Jacques Tardif's approach: Based on ideas developed in his book "Pour un enseignement stratégique," this approach considers teaching as an act of communication. Tardif emphasizes that the teacher cannot avoid communicating with the student, whether verbally or non-verbally (Tardif, 1992). This approach emphasizes the importance of communication between the teacher and the student in the learning process.

III. Results and discussion

3.1 Familiarization with the French Language

Even though French is not a vehicular language in Madagascar, a portion of the Malagasy population, particularly families of the affluent class, has always been familiar with

the French language. The graph below illustrates a sample of the target population (generally representing the modest class).

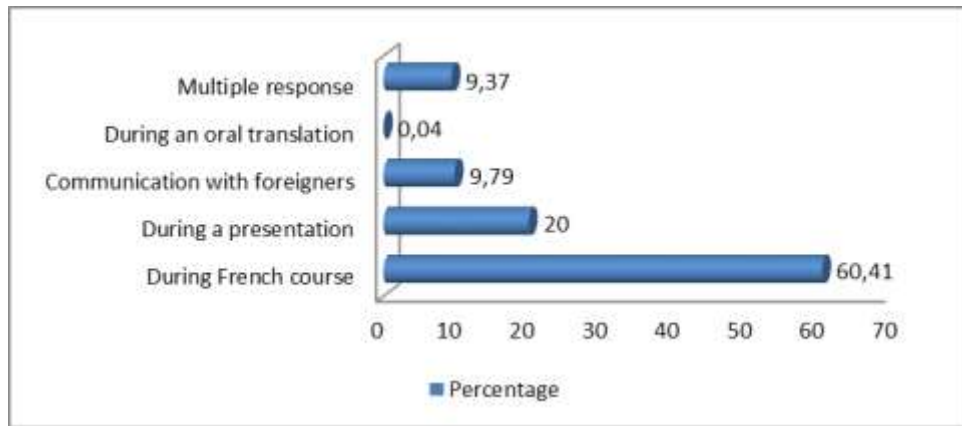


Figure 1. Practicing French Language

This figure indicates that the majority of learners utilize the French language solely within their school environments (60.41%). Twenty percent employ French during presentations, while 9.79% exclusively practice it when communicating with foreigners. Those who use French for oral translation represent a minority, comprising only 0.04%.

3.2 Linguistic Deficiencies in the French Language

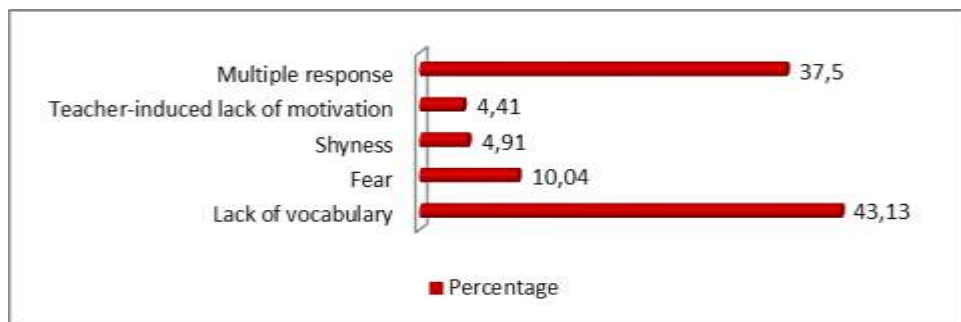


Figure 2. Causes of Difficulties in Expressing and Writing in French

Since some students have stated that they do not encounter difficulties with the French language, this question specifically targets the remaining 85% of learners. The causes of difficulties encountered by learners in oral expression in French are highlighted in this table. Thus, 43.13% of learners attribute their problems to a lack of vocabulary, 10.04% have difficulty expressing themselves due to fear, 4.91% consider themselves shy, and 4.41% lack motivation due to the teacher. Additionally, 37.5% of students selected multiple responses, indicating that they struggle to speak French fluently due to several of these combined factors

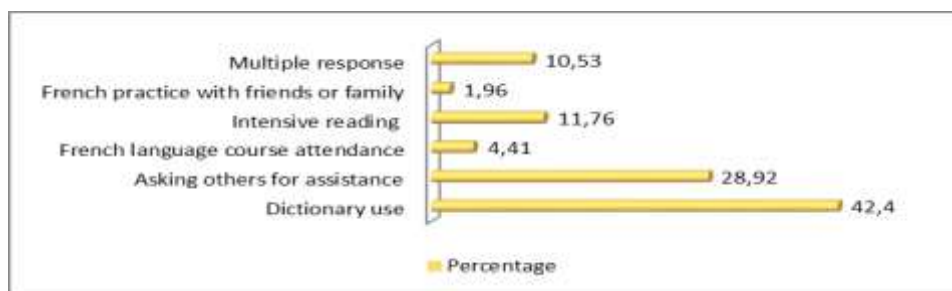


Figure 3. Methods to Overcome Difficulties

When students encounter difficulties, their first step is often to consult a dictionary for assistance (42,4%). Some also seek support from others and practice speaking French with their family and friends. Others choose to take classes outside of school. Some combine these different approaches to overcome their obstacles (10,53%). It can be deduced from this situation that students find all these methods useful. However, their feasibility often depends on their socio-economic context, such as the possibility of taking French classes, which is conditioned by their parents' financial means. The number of students opting for this option is relatively low. Those seeking help from others outnumber those turning to the dictionary. Students who prefer reading are more numerous than those who consider other options essential. Only a few practice French with their friends or family.

3.3 French Language Learning

The instruction and acquisition of a language involve the existence of various parts of speech. The linguistic proficiency or limitations of learners become evident as they engage in practice.

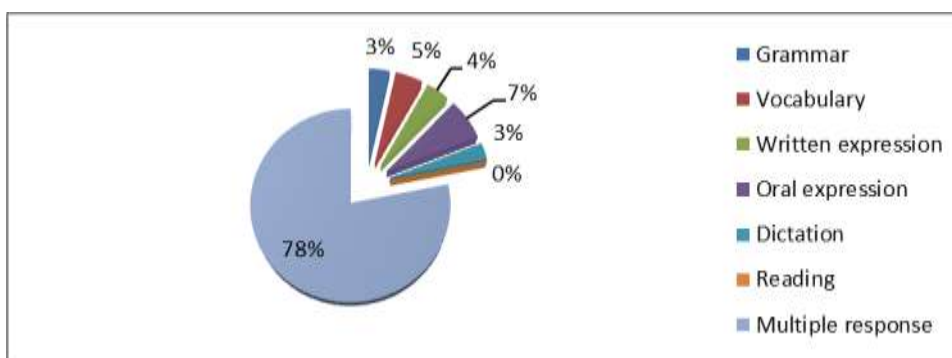


Figure 4. Most Challenging Sub-subjects

Oral expression is identified as the most problematic sub-discipline for students, while difficulties related to reading are less common. However, 70% of students selected multiple responses, suggesting that almost all sub-disciplines pose problems for most students. It is noteworthy that the number of students having vocabulary problems is very close to those having difficulties in oral expression, indicating a strong interdependence between these two aspects. Additionally, there is a correlation between written expression, grammar, and dictation, as similar results were observed for these sub-disciplines, while difficulty in written expression is similar but slightly different.

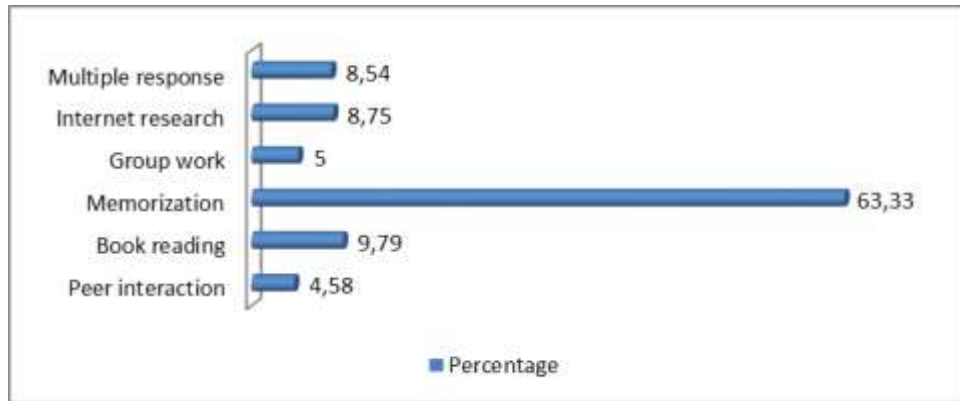


Figure 5. Learning Strategies to Master the French Language

The predominant method observed among students is memorization (63,33%), followed by reading (9,79%) and internet research (8,75%). Nevertheless, some regard all these options as essential (multiple-choice response). Students opting for group work and peer interaction are comparatively fewer.

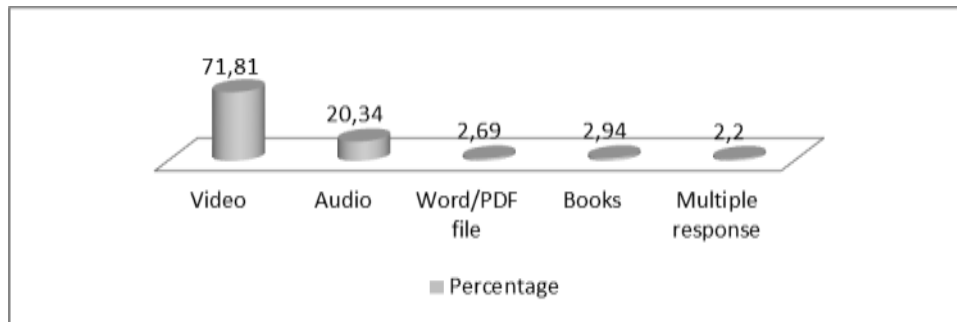


Figure 6. Most Effective Tool for Addressing French Language Problems

Once again, the graph indicates the students' preference for the audio-visual method (71,81%). It also underscores their relatively lower interest in reading (2,69%). Only a small fraction of them believe that all the suggested options are crucial (selecting more than one response). This explains why students are not very proactive in research; they tend to rely on what they see and hear

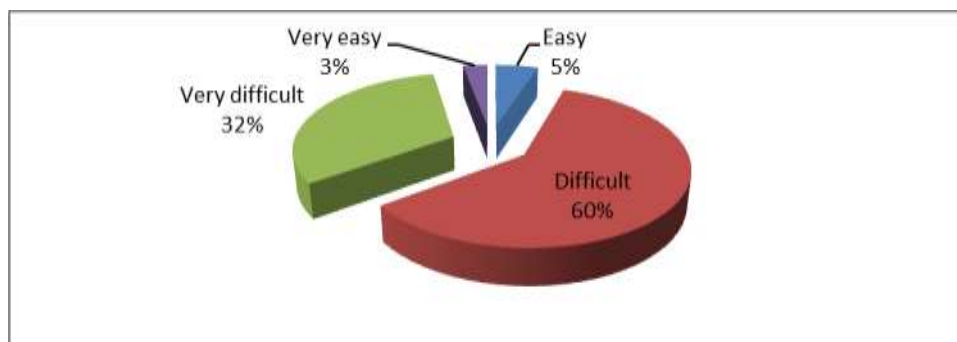


Figure 7. Views on French language learning

32% of learners admit that the French language is very difficult. Just over half find it difficult, while 5% find it easy and 3% find it very easy. In fact, most learners find French enigmatic. These findings suggest that students encounter difficulties, as less than half of them

consider it easy or very easy.

IV. Discussion

This section aims to examine all cases encountered by learners to understand the difficulties they face in learning the French language and to identify appropriate solutions. The lack of mastery of the French language can take various forms. Figure 7 illustrates a fairly high percentage of learners acknowledging that they do not master the French language. Most of them prefer to read books and watch television programs in Malagasy, as they believe they have mastery over that language.

This supports the importance of the native language. It enables learners to build strong knowledge and acquire the necessary skills for proficient use of the foreign language. The native language thus proves to play a significant and particularly important role (Soubre, 2016). The number of those facing difficulties is also very high. This translates into obstacles in the practice of the French language, such as silence in response to teachers' questions, switching between French and Malagasy, or formulating questions and answers in Malagasy. Furthermore, almost all sub-subjects pose difficulties for these learners. From this same result emerge the factors influencing the linguistic failures of the learners, and its analysis will answer the research question.

4.1 Familiarization with the French language

In light of the results (Figure 1), it is clear that learners lack practice, as most only use the French language during French classes. However, the number of hours allocated to teaching this language averages 4 to 6 hours per week, which is considered insufficient to promote both teaching and learning. Indeed, according to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the United States, "*600 to 1350 hours of instruction are needed to achieve a good level of language fluency*" (Sanchez Pérez, 2009). In primary school, vocabulary teaching is scheduled to play a key role in the acquisition of French. This instruction is a pedagogical necessity, the achievement of which, though challenging, is possible (Lingani, 2019).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that two-thirds of the hourly volumes are taught by teachers. However, effective pedagogical practice from the teacher is essential to ensure the learner's optimal assimilation, as the teacher becomes a resource person who diagnoses individual needs, provides suitable materials and exercises, and guides them through a personalized learning journey. In "*teacher-centered pedagogy*," the focus is on captivating or engaging an audience to encourage them to replicate a standardized intellectual behavior (Meirieu, 2020). However, this statement does not correspond to the Malagasy reality, as educational conditions remain inadequate. Therefore, students require another opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired at school.

According to Tirvassen (2010), instruction delivered in a language that teachers do not master and that lacks proper support from schools has significantly detrimental effects on learning effectiveness. In many developing countries, the mother tongue is often overlooked in children's education, with schools failing to acknowledge these primary languages in terms of identity and cognitive development. Recent efforts to integrate mother tongues to improve foundation teaching are also analyzed.

4.2 Linguistic deficiencies in French

Some students admit to psychological issues such as shyness and fear, which create difficulties for them in expressing themselves. It is believed that the drama club is best positioned to address these issues. According to Schmidt (1997), "*theatre can be a means of learning a foreign language; thus, theatrical activities including sketches can help actors express themselves in public and overcome shyness in order to face the adult world that awaits them later in society and be able to behave as open but not frustrated citizens.*" (Razafindrabe, 2009). Psychopractitioner Christiane Moreno also supports in 2020 that "*Participating, outside of school hours, in oral expression activities (singing, theatre, or others) can help them overcome their fear of speaking in public.*"

Furthermore, their lack of vocabulary is one of the reasons for their difficulty in oral and written expression (Figure 4), so the most effective solution remains reading. During the first Republic, for example, novels from French literature such as "*L'enfant noir*" by Camara Laye and "*Germinal*" by Stendhal were studied in schools. The revival of this method is suggested from the sixth grade onward to enhance vocabulary, as literary works offer multiple readings and lend themselves to various interpretations. Literary texts essentially convey ideas while also concealing interpretations. As a result, they permit a diversity of interpretations from a single, unchangeable source of signs, whereas non-literary texts offer only one meaning (Allam-Idou, 2015).

French, despite the lower proficiency levels, is widely used in the country. This situation is closely tied to the dominance of the French language (*diglossia*) and the historical backdrop of French colonization in 1894 (Matthey, 2021). This leads to a functional distribution of French, Malagasy, and various Malagasy dialects in society. However, as few Malagasy people are fully fluent in both Malagasy and French, code-switching often occurs, resulting in the blending and simultaneous use of these two languages in similar contexts (Rafitson, 1992).

4.3 Learning strategies

Learning strategies are methods that aid in completing a learning task. These strategies are typically intentional and goal-oriented, particularly in the early stages of addressing a new language challenge. As a strategy becomes more familiar through repeated practice, it may be applied more automatically, though most learners can still consciously recall the strategy if needed. Learning strategies are crucial in second or foreign language acquisition and teaching for two primary reasons. First, analyzing the strategies used by second/foreign language learners provides insights into the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and emotional processes involved in language learning. Second, less successful language learners can be taught new strategies, which can improve their overall language learning abilities (Chamot, 2005).

However, it is essential for learners to make sense of what they are learning, and for strategies to be tailored to their needs. MacIntyre emphasizes the following points (1994):

- a. The learner must be aware of the appropriate strategy or strategies. The strategy can be used spontaneously or learned, but its use must be intentional.
- b. The learner must have a reason to use the strategy (a problem to solve, strong motivation, opportunity to use it). There should be no reason not to use it (anxiety, sanctions when using it, reasons to believe it is ineffective).
- c. The use of the strategy must be reinforced by positive consequences (reduction of anxiety, better grades, etc.), even if the strategy itself is not useful for learning.

The following statement further supports this idea: A student with good study habits is one who can use the right learning strategies in the right way and at the right time. These strategies encompass cognitive, affective, and metacognitive aspects of learning, as well as study behaviors. It is crucial to consider the challenges learners face before recommending effective strategies. Their fear, shyness, and lack of vocabulary notably hinder their skills in written and oral expression.

Regarding sub-jects, some students overlook the importance of understanding grammar. However, it is crucial to emphasize that "*acquiring grammar is essential for any teaching/learning of a foreign language; it is the starting point for mastering the language*" (Moussa et al., 2023). This branch of linguistics allows for precise communication both orally and in writing in any language one wishes to learn.

The focus of grammar instruction should prioritize fundamental rules and conventions that dictate everyday language usage, aiding learners in enhancing their literacy skills. Analyzing language involves critically evaluating grammar rules that others have adhered to or disregarded, which can be just as confusing for average learners as it is helpful (Rossiter, 2021). Furthermore, mastering norms and rules is essential for expressing oneself correctly. In order to help the learner achieve a fluent command of grammar, it is essential to engage in practicing the application of grammatical rules. This way, a grammatical learning process becomes crucial for understanding a language and effectively expressing oneself in it (Afkhaminia et al., 2022). Once verb conjugation is memorized, it is useful to use it to construct sentences adapted to specific situations. In parallel, it is beneficial to compare the grammatical functioning with that of one's native language or another foreign language, which can facilitate the memorization of the concepts discussed.

Children often face challenges in acquiring vocabulary, first in their spoken expression and later in their writing. At every developmental stage, they encounter new words through their family, radio, television, advertisements in their urban surroundings, and lessons at school. However, despite frequent exposure to these words, especially among rural children, they often do not fully understand them, resulting in misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Nonetheless, mastering vocabulary is vital in language learning, highlighting the important role teachers play in this process. Therefore, it is recommended that the teacher incorporate the following principles:

- a. Begin with a non-literary text adapted to the situation.
- b. Provide children with the necessary tools to use the studied words.
- c. Focus on teaching vocabulary by emphasizing commonly used words.

The translation exercise is a suggestion that can significantly improve learning. Throughout this experience, it has been observed that learners gain confidence when they translate a word or phrase. "*The advantages of this exercise are enormous since it is centered on the learner, as it is indeed the learner who produces their own translation material. In a way, they are both the author and the translator.*" (Rasoafara, 2017). Furthermore, their initial reflex is to consult a dictionary, which reinforces the idea that the translation exercise is optimal for their learning.

Games and playful activities offer a multitude of options in learning the French language. In education, games are examined from multiple perspectives in their relationship with the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. They are considered, in turn, as a tool for acquiring knowledge, as a source full of information itself, and capable, by its nature, of

facilitating its transmission (Sauvé et al., 2007). Besides, games and activities serve as valuable tools for French as a Foreign Language (FLE) teachers in middle school first-year classes, providing a more dynamic and effective approach to teaching grammar. By encouraging student engagement, boosting motivation, and offering practical opportunities for grammar skill development, these activities can assist students in succeeding in their French language learning (Chergui et al., 2023).

The most commonly adopted learning strategy is memorization. In this regard, educational games offer a method to verify if the child has indeed memorized the information. It thus serves as a means of testing the acquired knowledge (Redouane, 2020). Additionally, the lazy character of students is often observed. Educational games are well positioned to stimulate their knowledge. According to Sayn (2021), *"Firstly, play is a natural and essential need for children. They enjoy playing, and it helps them thrive by releasing them from daily tensions. Students need to find meaning in their learning to anchor it in reality. It is therefore essential to involve them in a concrete project where learners are confronted with real-life situations."*

Furthermore, studies have shown that *"practicing using spaced repetition is a good way to memorize new vocabulary."*(Alfotais, 2019). This learning approach is commonly employed, encouraging learners to take active roles in their education. The aim is for them to perform tasks independently and repeatedly, as repetition is essential in language use. Likewise, having students practice repetition is a standard technique in language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

To address this situation, it is proposed to implement solutions that correspond to the reality and interests of the learners. Given the fragility of the economic situation, characterized by the inaccessibility of resources such as libraries and the impossibility of taking courses outside the school, and considering the insufficient linguistic level of students in public institutions, it is often considered that school is the only place where they can deepen their knowledge. This is supported by the ideas of Cuq (2003), who emphasizes that in contexts where French is moderately or weakly used, the classroom becomes the central place where French proficiency develops and is put into practice. This results in a constant integration of activities focused on mastering the French language, leading to a significant density of learning.

Utilizing technology—such as televisions, radios, music videos, the internet, and various social media platforms—greatly influences language learning for students, providing an effective solution (Andrianjary, 2023). Foreign language teaching methodologies are increasingly emphasizing two main advantages of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). First, ICT supports the use of authentic language in the classroom by providing a diverse range of accessible resources. Second, ICT encourages connections and facilitates quick, easy communication, which is crucial for effective language use and a key goal of language teaching and learning (Kromidha, 2015).

V. Conclusion

The language plays a crucial role as the primary means of communication in the learning process, making its mastery essential for its application. However, surveys conducted in primary schools, secondary schools, and high schools have revealed the linguistic

shortcomings of learners and their lack of proficiency in the French language. This research has allowed for the exploration and classification of the difficulties encountered by learners, which have contributed to these linguistic gaps. It has clearly emerged that they lack familiarity with the French language and that their learning strategies were ineffective. Therefore, the proposed solutions to address this situation must be tailored to the needs of the learners. The most recommended solutions include theatrical and playful activities, as well as translation. In conclusion, as mentioned earlier, the school environment is the privileged place where learners can develop their proficiency in the French language. It is therefore recommended to provide tools adapted to the profiles and interests of students, such as new information and communication technologies (ICT), books (comics and educational novels), and educational games in French.

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