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Teaching French in private schools in Lucknow: The challenges and the solutions

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Abstract

The French language is the most learnt foreign language in India. Many universities, colleges, schools and other institutions impart French lessons across India. Every year thousands of new school going students opt for French as an optional as a part of their curriculum. How much our schools are ready to cater the needs of these students. In this article we have made a survey of teaching of French in a metro city in the north of India. We have discussed the challenges of teaching French with overcrowded classes and ill-equipped or inexistent language labs, the lack of well trained and qualified teachers having expertise in FLE. The lack of information as to how this language be helpful in their career doesn't help in encouraging the students to put more efforts in learning the language of the Moliere. After a survey of the state of Teaching of French in the Private schools in a city, some solutions for the betterment are also put forward by the author.

Keywords: French Teaching in India. French Teaching in Indian Schools. FLE. Methodology of teaching a foreign language. French teaching in private schools. Communicative approach, Grammar Translation method

Introductions

This article is an attempt to understand the state of French language teaching in the private schools in the city of Lucknow, the capital of north Indian province of Uttar Pradesh. This study encompasses the scope, the challenges, the obstacles and potential solutions in the field of French language teaching in schools in Lucknow in particular, and in the schools in India in general.

I have been teaching the French language at school level in India for more than a decade, I have encountered many challenges related to the teaching of French in schools. In this article I will discuss some of the problems that teachers encounter in teaching French in Lucknow. I will also discuss briefly the problems faced by school students while learning French in India. This presentation is an attempt to show the challenges in teaching French as a foreign language (FLE) in schools in Lucknow. This article also incorporates our perceptions and beliefs regarding the teaching and acquisition of a living foreign language.

At the end of the article, we will suggest some solutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning French in schools. Although our research work covers only the French teaching in schools in Lucknow but we believe that the state of French teaching in schools in other parts of India would not be much different. So the solutions proposed in our presentation can be applied elsewhere in India as well.

The main objective of our work is to present the current state of the teaching of French as a foreign language in schools in Lucknow based on the knowledge I acquired from my personal experience as a teacher of French as a foreign language, my observations of the French lessons conducted by my colleagues as well as the reading of the French teaching materials.

With regard to the philosophy of teaching we emphasize the importance of the communicative approach in teaching language in a student-centred classroom. I believe that maximizing meaningful interaction in the target language through real-life activities facilitate the foreign language acquisition.

In the communicative approach, the role of the teacher is to create a classroom environment in which students constantly interact with their teacher, in pairs or in groups using real life situations and contexts.

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According to Lightbown and Spada:

“When learners are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities, they are compelled to negotiate meaning which is to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions, etc., in a way that allows them to achieve mutual understanding. This is especially true when learners work together to achieve a particular goal” Lightbown and Spada”^[1] Lightbown and Spada (1999: 122)^[2].

Therefore, as a teacher, my job is to present a short topic supported by instructions, provide space for students to engage in meaningful interactions regarding the topic, guide conversation by asking questions when needed. In addition, there is a quotation attributed to Benjamin Franklin that I really like and that fits so well with our career as language teachers.

According to this quote:

“Tell me and I'll forget. Teach me and maybe I'll remember. Involve me and I will learn.” -Benjamin Franklin

In order to apply this maxim in my classroom, I need to spend as much class time as possible for my students to engage in meaningful interactions using the target language i.e. French. According to Ballman, Liskin Gasparro and Mandell:

“Language learners who participate in group activities can improve their language knowledge even without explicit intervention from the teacher or any other Target Language expert”^[2] Ballman, Liskin & Mandell (2001)^[1].

Additionally, Ellis (2012)^[8] includes studies in which researchers illustrate the effectiveness of student participation in small group work and how this participation helps develop student proficiency in the Target Language.

According to Ellis

“Small group work increases language production, improves language quality, creates a positive classroom environment and motivates students^[3]” (Ellis, 2008, p. 185)^[8].

In addition, Ohta (2001) has another advantage of having students work in groups. The researcher studied how beginner Japanese learners help each other when working in small groups. Ohta reports that:

“When learners spoke, they committed many errors due to their low proficiency in Target Language; however, their peers were able to pick up on these errors and inform the speaker because they were less stressed than their speaking partners^[4] (Ellis, 2012)^[8].”

Also, students will learn less effectively if I am the only person using Target Language in the classroom in a one-way delivery approach. The language class is where I need to help my students learn the language and not to show off my level of proficiency in the Target Language. Therefore, providing so much class time for students to use the Target Language is the perfect way for them to acquire proficiency in the foreign language. Language teachers know that

learners, especially beginners, will struggle to produce meaningful and consistent language due to their limited knowledge in the target language. However, when teachers implement communicative activities in their classrooms, they allow students to produce and listen to a sufficient amount of TL, which helps them develop and support their language skills.

According to Swain and Lapkin

“When students produce language, they personally experience their weakness in their linguistic knowledge, which in turn prompts them to pay more attention to the input provided by their teachers or their peers^[5]” Swain & Lapkin (2002).

Therefore, the majority of class time should be devoted to the student interaction (student-student and student-teacher interaction) and not a unidirectional teacher's lecture. Additionally, using real-life situations and contexts in the classroom activities help students improve their communication skills in the target language, which refers to their ability to communicate effectively and appropriately using Target Language in contexts of real life and in real time.

Furthermore we demonstrate the role of grammar teaching as one among others, but not the only element of a class of communicative approach to language teaching. Eventually, we illustrate how technology plays an important role in expanding student exposure to the foreign language. We are for the effective use of modern technology in teaching and learning of a foreign language.

As part of our survey we found that in Lucknow schools the predominant method of teaching was the Grammar-Translation method. The Grammar-Translation method requires students to learn grammar rules, memorize vocabulary and translate from the target language to Hindi or English and vice versa, without significant interaction between students. This style of teaching is very teacher-centred. In other words, the teacher talks almost all the time in class with little or no student participation in classroom activities. Another shortcoming of this method is its dependence on printed exercises. This emphasizes the use of translation exercises and drills based on grammar rules and conjugations. Since this method lacks the need of active student-student, or student-teacher interactions the language classes becomes tedious and uninteresting. The students don't have much fun and show little interest and enthusiasm in this kind of classes. A teacher-centric and exercise book based language class tends to create a monotonous and boring ambience resulting in low enthusiasm and low performance on the part of language learners.

As someone who has experienced the Grammar-translation method, first as a student and then as a teacher, we have witnessed its weakness when it comes to learners' ability to use their second language (L2) for effective communications.

According to Shrum and Glisan (2013, p. 218)^[3]

“Learning grammatical structures apart from their use and function is pointless unless one wants to be a linguist or systematically describe a language without becoming a

¹ Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

² Ballman, T., Liskin-Gasparro, J., & Mandell, P. (2001). *The communicative classroom*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

³ Ellis, R. (2008). *Principles of instructed second language acquisition*. CAL Digest. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

⁴ Ellis, R. (2004). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2002). Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 285–304.

communicatively competent user of that language⁶". Shrum and Glisan (2013: 218):

Our suggestions

We are convinced that it would be more effective to change the FLE class from a teacher-centred class to a student-centred class. In other words, we must dedicate more class time to students to produce and interact in FLE. Therefore, instead of facing the teacher for the whole class, students will face each other and engage in meaningful interactions in the target language. I will encourage them to participate in group discussions and collaborative work that will increase their use of French as a foreign language. According to Muldrow (2013 p. 28) ^[4].

"In the student-centred classroom, students share responsibility for their learning and become more engaged in the learning process ^[7]" Muldrow (2013 p. 28) ^[4].

During our observations of the lessons we realized that the lessons are centred on the teacher. In a teacher-centred course, the teacher is the central figure in the class and the only source of knowledge. He or she speaks for the entire duration of the class. There are very few and sometimes no instances of student participation in such a class. Thanks to my experience as a French language teacher I learned that in a foreign language course, learning takes place only when students participate in interactive activities and meaningful negotiations in real-life contexts like role plays, quizzes, songs etc.

So we have to transform French lessons into a course centred on the students. Our observations testify to the inefficiency of the grammar-translation approach. So we recommend that the role of the teacher in a FLE course must be that of a facilitator.

Our observations on the state of teaching of French in schools in Lucknow

We are going to discuss some problems that are very common in almost all French teaching programs in the city. Here are the factors we identified during our survey that affect the teaching of French in schools in Lucknow:

Very small number of schools offers French lessons

We found that out of more than 800 private schools in Lucknow, it is only in about ten schools that French lessons are given.

The lack of qualified and trained French teachers

There are not enough French teachers in Lucknow. Most schools in the city do not offer FLE courses. The lack of trained and qualified French teachers has certainly contributed negatively to the promotion of this language in Lucknow.

Inadequate Teacher and Student ratio

There is an ineffective implementation of teaching and learning French at school due to the lack of teachers. The few schools that offer French teaching recruit only 1 or 2 teachers for all the FLE students in the school while there is a need of two, three or more teachers. This insufficient

recruitment is done normally for economic reasons. More teachers mean more salaries to be paid. Therefore, the teachers who are available to teach the course are normally overworked.

Normally there are 40 to 50 students in a French class in schools in Lucknow. For this reason, they cannot provide quality teaching as they cannot properly assess all students due to their large numbers. For a good functioning of the course under the communicative approach the ratio of teacher and students must not exceed one teacher for 20 students. This fact compromises the quality of teaching and learning, since each student cannot have enough attention from the teacher and there is not enough time to practice the target language and to integrate the rules.

Insufficient frequency and short duration of classes

There is also another problem of inadequate teaching periods allocated to French in school timetables. Most schools offer only one lesson per week. Only a few schools allocate two lessons per week. We also note that in most schools in Lucknow the duration of French lessons is only 35 minutes. However, 35 minutes are not enough to properly apply the communicative approach. The teacher does not have enough time either to elaborate the grammatical points nor the students get sufficient time to do their on the spot exercises to properly integrate what they have just learned. They don't have enough time to practice what they have learned through role plays and other interactive learning activities. In fact, no effective teaching and learning can take place in such situations.

Lack of infrastructure

Lack of necessary infrastructure like a language labs, internet facilities and textual materials are generally not available in the schools in Lucknow. Therefore, the lack of these materials causes a lot of trouble for the students and negatively influence the quality of French teaching.

Different criteria for hiring teachers

Schools in Lucknow have different criteria for hiring teachers. Some schools hire qualified teachers, that is, a teacher with a degree in a basic subject (bachelor's degree or advanced degree). They also prefer experienced teachers. But at the same time there are some schools that hire teachers who have not yet completed their degree and possess no earlier teaching experience. This is done because the teachers without a proper degree and without sufficient experience accept to work for lesser salaries than those with proper degrees. This unhealthy practice may save some expenses of the schools but these low budget teachers cannot provide quality teaching that trained and qualified teachers can.

Learning environment

The linguistic environment in Lucknow for the French language learners is Hindi-speaking and partly English-speaking. This makes it a bit difficult for them to be able to learn the language effectively. The FLE students can't find the people to interact with in French or even an environment conducive to French learning. There is hardly anything around in the environment that may encourage students to learn French. The popular culture promotes English language. French is almost absent from the cultural scene.

⁶ Shrum, & Glisan, E. (2013). *Teacher's Handbook* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle.

⁷ Muldrow, K. (2013). A new approach to language instruction: Flipping the classroom. *The language Educator* 28-31.

Mother tongue interference

We observe also the problem in learning French due to the interference of the mother tongue in the language learning process. The child first thinks in his mother tongue before translating it into the foreign language. He must therefore retranslate his thoughts from the mother tongue or from English into the French language. This adds to the child's inability to learn the language effectively.

The negative attitude of the learners

The lack of interest and enthusiasm towards the learning of a foreign language among the school students is also major setbacks that work against the quality teaching and learning of the French language. The negative attitude is partially due to their ignorance with regards to the benefits of learning French. For many of the students French is just a subject to pass the exam with since the system has imposed this subject on them.

According to Ahukana

“Students who drop out of the study of French do it because they don't know the importance of that language ^[8]”. Ahukana (1975) ^[5].

Professional and practical issues

The teachers are not well trained to teach French as a foreign language. In most of the cases, French teachers are not well trained. Most of the times they are graduates in subjects other than French. They just have some short term proficiency or/ and diploma courses in French. Most of the times these teachers lack teaching aptitude and professional qualities and skills required to teach a foreign language effectively.

Lack of motivation in Teachers

Moreover, it is observed that some teachers cannot motivate their students to learn French, and they themselves are not motivated due to low salaries and poor working conditions. Most of the teachers available are not professionally trained to teach the French language. Since teachers are very important to the implementation of any curriculum, their preparation should be considered essential in the implementation of any meaningful pedagogical strategy.

It is a known fact that teachers in our schools avoid teaching certain sections of the curriculum (e.g. oral exercises) on the pretext that our students have not reached the necessary intellectual levels. Since it is the teacher who interprets the objectives and contents of the study plans and manages the learning situation; their quality, quantity, willingness, personal motivation, interest, commitment and use of the methodology are essential for the success of the program. The teacher interprets the objectives and content of the study plans and manages the learning situations.

Lack of trained FLE teachers

In order to have dedicated, competent and well-trained French teachers for effective teaching, lectures and workshops should also be organized for them.

Communicative language teaching requires teachers to be creative, in that they must develop lesson plans and

activities that promote communication. For example, with the help of technology, teachers can increase their students' exposure to TL by finding supportive resources and creating out-of-class activities that students can do outside of the classroom. To learn how teacher's creativity can be used to promote a student-centred classroom, I read Muldrow (2013) ^[4], who presents a new approach to language teaching called More Time Required: Additionally, he advises to grant:

“Student-student/ student-teacher interactions and more communicative activities are used for the benefit of students to facilitate their task of learning English or any other foreign language ^[9]” Muldrow (2013) ^[4].

The teacher-student ratio should not exceed 20 students per teacher. A class where a French teacher teaches from 45 to 50 students is not good for effective teaching. When classes are large, programs cannot be fully implemented. The lack of material/ infrastructural resources is a major constraint in the implementation of the French curriculum. Lack of proper teaching materials and the hinders effective teaching of the French language. In the language lab, the teacher is able to teach students basic skills using tape recorders, video tapes and radio.

One of my future teaching goals is to transform my classroom into a more student-centred classroom. To achieve this goal, I will have to apply the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT). In this approach, the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, while students are encouraged to participate and interact with the teacher or with other students in a meaningful way. In addition, the role of the teacher is to design activities that incorporate real contexts. Students are required to participate in such activities in order to learn TL and the target culture.

I am confident that my suggestions, if implied properly would go a long way in improving the quality of French teaching in schools. Moving from the traditional methods of teaching towards the modern communicative approaches aided by the effective use of modern technological learning tools will change the French language classes from a tedious, soporific and less productive exercise into a fun filled learning experience with great results.

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