Teaching Reading in Burkina Faso. Improving Reading and Writing Outcomes in the Early Years of Primary School

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Abstract

Sandrine Aeby Daghé and co-authors provide an analysis of the current curricular literature and reading instruction practices in Burkina Faso to identify the adjustments required to bring about a curriculum alignment that will enhance learners’ progress in reading and writing.

Reference


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14. TEACHING READING IN BURKINA FASO

Improving Reading and Writing Outcomes in the Early Years of Primary School

INTRODUCTION

This chapter, devoted to Burkina Faso, is the first of three national case studies presenting the empirical results of the research phase of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) project entitled Improving learning outcomes in early grade reading: integration of curriculum, teaching, learning materials, and assessment, conducted in three sub-Saharan African countries: Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal. It contextualizes the challenges for reading instruction in the framework of the reform process that has been under way in Burkina Faso since the 2000s. These challenges are viewed in relation to two major factors: the choice of language of instruction, and teacher training.

The purpose of this analysis of the curricular literature and reading instruction practices in Burkina Faso is to identify the adjustments required to bring about a curriculum alignment that will enhance learners’ progress in reading and writing. The question of the adjustment or maladjustment of the contents of the education system not only to current literacy instruction models but also to the country’s social and cultural context, is central in the analysis of educational outcomes in Burkina Faso’s primary-school system. This question is not specific to Burkina Faso; however, it is particularly relevant in its case:

The relationship between the education system and its environment, between society and its school, is certainly a frighteningly complex one. It is hardly surprising that, in the long run, misalignments come about, and that readjustments become necessary as a result. Now, when one studies the mechanism by which these readjustments are implemented, one realizes that to modify this enormous entanglement of interactions, still so little explored and still so little known, it is possible, even if it is a sensitive undertaking involving many risks … to achieve a result by manipulating only one variable—knowledge. Of course, one can also turn the formulation around and point out that in seeking to change so much from so little, it is not surprising that new dysfunctions will arise, potentially more serious ones than those being addressed in the first place. (Chevallard, 1982)
In view of the complexity of the issues at stake, as pointed out by the above author, it is important to anticipate challenges when disseminating new tools. In the case of Burkina Faso, the new tools are the ‘toolkit’ and teacher’s guide that have been produced in partnership with education stakeholders and designed to improve reading and writing teaching practices in the first three grades of primary school.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

This chapter follows the main outline of the theoretical framework described in Chapter 13 of this book. However, it is still necessary to refine this framework in relation to the reform process under way in Burkina Faso, since choice of language of instruction is one of the essential criteria for assessing an education system.

Curricular Requirements and Means of Instruction: The Need for Adjustment

In 2013, when the IBE project was launched, the 1989–1990 programmes for Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3, as well as the mass-printed textbooks Livre au Burkina 1ère année (Reading in Burkina, Grade 1), Livre de lecture 2e année (Reading Book, Grade 2), and Livre de lecture 3e année (Reading Book, Grade 3), were still in use in Burkina Faso. These materials focus on the teaching by objectives approach and historically contributed to the reform process of the education system in Burkina Faso. This process, initiated at the end of the 1980s, is intrinsically linked to the country’s ambition to democratize knowledge by educating the masses through schooling and literacy. It was accompanied by the inauguration of a national programme to eradicate illiteracy.

The official programmes and textbooks determine the educational and learning content in all schools throughout the country, regardless of where and when this content is taught, and in keeping with the set educational objectives. These programmes also guide the initial and continuing training of teachers and teacher trainers, the design of refresher courses, and the evaluation of teachers in professional examinations. Their major strength is their availability to all relevant stakeholders.

As far as specific reading and writing knowledge is concerned, the analyses show that the textbooks coincide with these programmes. They also reveal that actual teaching practices in reading and writing are aligned with these programmes and textbooks, as documented during the summer of 2014 (UNESCO IBE, 2017). In the Burkina Faso context, therefore, the problem is not due to a lack of alignment. Rather, it stems essentially from a misalignment, in the sense defined by Chevallard (1982), between what is taught in the education system in relation to the so-called scholarly knowledge (that is, current reading and writing instruction models) on the one hand, and the social environment on the other.

This flaw has been recognized by the actors of the Burkina Faso noosphere. In fact, since the turn of the millennium, the country has made clear its willingness to readjust the curriculum, as set out in the joint national report of June 2004 on the development of education in Burkina Faso, drafted by the Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy (MEBA) and the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESSRS).

In this context, in light of the limits in the Burkinabe context of the competency-based approach to teaching, education officials have refrained from strictly applying such an approach: ‘We cannot teach competencies nor teach through competencies’ (MEN, 2014). From 2007 onwards, the integration of ‘emerging themes’ and ‘local specificities’ becomes a priority. The shortcomings observed in the teaching of French and mathematics reinforced the decision to undertake a comprehensive critical assessment of these programmes (MEN, 2014).

Concurrently, the reform of the programmes shifted towards an ‘eclectic approach, based on a combination of teaching by objectives (PPD), the competency-based approach (APD), and pedagogy (PDT)’ (MEN, 2014). This PPD-APD-PDT approach, referred to as the Integrated Pedagogical Approach, was part of the government’s plan for the strategic development of basic education. With the aim of encouraging ‘interactive social constructivism’, the guidelines set out in the official statements stipulate the need to:

- have learners construct knowledge in interaction with other stakeholders and the environment;
- take into account the specificities of each region and the realities of the child’s environment to the extent that, according to Kinda (2003), ‘our institution is always characterized by its unsuitability to the realities and present needs of Burkinabe society’;
- integrate ‘the practical aspects of teaching (functional content, the link between education and production as per the pedagogy of text approach (PDT)) and open up to ‘new socio-political, economic, cultural, and scientific requirements’ (MEN, 2014), including information and communication technologies, national languages, and emerging themes.

In concrete terms, this approach seeks to found teaching on students’ abilities and on the identification of their errors in order to adjust practices and enhance students’ potential to take ownership of learning.

The Choice of Language of Instruction and How It Affects Learning

In the choice between the national language(s) and official language, what are the consequences for reading instruction? The sociolinguistic context of Burkina Faso is particularly complex. Nikiema and Paré-Kaboré (2010) consider it to be characterized by a ‘moderately complex multilingualism: 59 different national languages in addition to French’ (p. 200). After the ‘absolute monolingualism’ of French during the colonial period, the early days of independence in the 1970s opened the way to instruction in national languages, but only for illiterate
adults. Formal education for children continued to be dispensed in French. An unfavourable assessment of monolingual French education led to the introduction of national languages in schools from the 1990s onwards and to a range of bilingual teaching experiments encouraged by the MEBA (on this subject, see also Ilboudo, 2009).

Linguistic diversity was just one of several factors involved in the ‘respect for others, in particular through equal treatment of genders, but also through the respect of linguistic, religious and cultural diversity’, which is essential in the development of young Burkinabe citizens (Education Orientation Law of 2007, 2007). Article 10 (page 7) states that ‘the languages of instruction are French and national languages, both in pedagogical practice and in assessments. Other languages may act as media of instruction and disciplines in educational establishments in accordance with current legislation’. One of the distinguishing features of the Burkinabe system is that this law was accompanied by a regulatory decree that takes bilingual education into consideration and provides for differing numbers of years of schooling in the classic and bilingual primary schools. Thus, bilingual schooling is defined as a period of five years, one year less than the traditional curriculum, which lasts six years. Among other consequences, the advantage of this shorter curriculum is that it will boost learners’ chances of completing their studies with a level of French equivalent to that obtained in monolingual schools.

Ten national languages are currently taught in the country’s bilingual schools. However, there is a notable lack of coordination between the different bilingual methods (OSEP and ELAN^2). French remains the primary language of instruction.

Nonetheless, if one is to take the MEBA at its word, bilingual education is destined to develop in Burkina Faso in the near future:

Burkina Faso has realized that the successful development of its education system also depends on the use of national languages as a means of instruction/learning, as all experiences in this field show that learners acquire knowledge more effectively in a language they master. (MEBA, 2010, p. 8)

A firmer stance – in line with the recent findings of international research and UNESCO’s declarations on the subject – is in fact being taken with regard to generalizing the use of national languages in the process of achieving universal enrolment (see also Paré-Kaboré, 2012):

Today, the problem faced by the vast majority of African countries ... is that they are striving with patience and tenacity to develop new education systems that provide basic education for the majority of the population. The use of national languages is a step towards achieving this goal. (Sawadogo, 2004, p. 252)

Regarding the specific subject of our study, teaching reading and writing, different approaches are found in bilingual schools where, from the second year of schooling, the lessons build on what the students have achieved in the first year in the national language. Thus, new practices are being recommended (Nikiema and Kaboré-Pare, 2010, p. 235). These practices seek to highlight particular features of the French language by using strategies based on comparing language systems and code-switching to facilitate the comprehension of complex instructions or words. Training on how to develop a more flexible approach to the workings of language and how to diversify materials and activities is required for teachers to apply these creative strategies.

The Challenges of Teacher Training

Initial training of primary school teachers in Burkina Faso is provided by the national primary-education teacher training schools (Écoles nationales des enseignants du primaire, ENEP). The training concerning the teaching of French is identical for all future teachers, whether they go on to teach in a classic or bilingual school. According to Alidou (2008), major efforts are still required to upgrade training programmes:

A relevant, high-quality education is very demanding for all categories of education personnel (teachers, supervisors, administrative staff). It is also demanding in terms of political commitment and financial efforts, which must be sustained over the long term. The elites trained by the existing systems are among the most difficult parties to convince of the need for major changes, especially with regard to the use of national languages in education. Education systems inherently develop strong resistance to change. (p. 113)

In fact, for the education system to evolve, teaching practices must be transformed. This transformation must be supported by, and brought about through, appropriate initial and continuing training.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN THE ANALYSIS OF READING/WRITING PRACTICES

Before the main points of the study are presented, it should be recalled that teaching reading and writing is analysed in a specific context, namely one in which the language of instruction is French and, in the case of bilingual schools, national languages. Furthermore, the purpose of the analysis is to identify ways of improving compatibility between the education system and the environment in Burkina Faso. The idea guiding this analysis is that to read means engaging with writing but also distancing oneself from it; it means organizing a text, extracting information from it, making interpretations, reconstructing one’s thinking, appropriating it, rejecting it or adapting it. If reading consists of deciphering a coded message in order to assign a meaning to it, one may assume that a child can read if he or she understands what he or she is reading.
With this in mind, the review of programmes, textbooks, and practices is organized in relation to three criteria (for a presentation of our model see Chapter 13 of this book): (a) written culture; (b) the graphophonemic code; (c) comprehension.

Written culture. The fundamental importance of this dimension, written culture, for a successful initiation into reading and writing is emphasized by many authors (Bernardin, 1997; Fijalkow, 2003). Familiarization with written culture takes place, from the earliest years, through knowledge of formal oral and written text genres (stories, posters, private or public letters, newspapers), through the discovery of books, or through children's being encouraged to attend school libraries or various places that provide information. Exploring written culture also develops students' interest in writing, enabling them to discover its characteristics (permanence, the linearity of words that transcribe speech) and the conventions that govern it (direction of reading, blanks between words).

The graphophonemic code. The discovery by emergent readers of the fact that sequences of letters and graphemes correspond to sound sequences is an essential step in acquiring the alphabetic principle. To assimilate this principle, students must understand that speech can be segmented into sound units; from there they must grasp the associations that exist between letters/groups of letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes) (the principle of correspondence) and subsequently their coarticulation (phonemic blending). Knowing letters to be able to identify them, recognizing graphemes, converting graphemes into phonemes, and then blending them to identify a word—all these are the challenges involved in learning how to deciper.

Comprehension. Teaching comprehension is essential; and it implies that readers have knowledge about texts. This knowledge, which varies according to the text genre, enables readers to anticipate the purpose and content of texts, as well as to grasp their organization and their internal structure. Several techniques are used to reinforce this knowledge: from Grade 1, the teacher works on oral comprehension and reads aloud small texts in order to familiarize students with the written language; from Grade 2, in reading short texts, the teacher first has the students discover the meaning of what is written and then proceeds with an interactive reading or a read-aloud by the teacher; in Grade 3, the teacher employs exercises on selected texts designed to teach comprehension through specific strategies such as formulating hypotheses and then verifying them through examination of the text, or rephrasing.

The concept of cognitive clarity (Downing, 1986) can be added to the above three criteria. In teaching practice, this concept is critical, as the technical acquisition of reading includes a cognitive phase in which students must be capable of solving this problem: What do they need to know and need be able to do in order to read? Students who have cognitive clarity are aware of what they need to do, and they know the possible ways of reaching their goal. In other words, the concept implies that students are interested in language for its own sake, its textual units, sentences, words, syllables, letters, materiality—both phonetic and graphic—and how these all work.

METHODOLOGY

The main objectives of the theoretical and empirical study were to take stock of existing programmes and schemes and to examine and describe the teaching methods used (see Schneuwly and Dolz, 2009). The empirical part also involved reviewing teacher training practices in the area of reading and writing. The aim was to use the results of the study to highlight ways to adjust curricular alignment—by identifying experiences that could be capitalized upon.

The empirical part of the study is based on an analysis of the 1989–1990 Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 programmes and on the textbooks Livre au Burkina 1ère année (Grade 1), Livre de lecture 2e année (Grade 2), and Livre de lecture 3e année (Grade 3). An analysis of teaching practices was also carried out to understand 'reading and writing instruction in Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 classes'. The classroom practices were documented through video recordings of reading lessons in a limited number of classes in Burkina Faso, selected according to the following criteria:

- school grade (Grades 1, 2, and 3 of primary education);
- school districts (evenly distributed between urban, peri-urban, and rural); and
- language of instruction (choice of so-called 'classic' classes in which French is the language of instruction, and bilingual classes in which both national languages and French are taught).

The seven classes selected in Burkina Faso are distributed as follows: one classic Grade 1 class, and one ELAN bilingual Grade 1 class, two classic Grade 2 classes, two classic Grade 3 classes, and one bilingual Grade 3 class. Table 1 lists information about these classes, including the district, the main languages spoken locally, class types, grades and class sizes, total school enrolment, and the number of classes in each school.

RESULTS OF THE DOCUMENTARY ANALYSES

It was in relation to the criteria described above, in the section Factors to Consider in the Analysis of Reading/Writing Practices, that the programmes, textbooks, and teaching practices observed in the classroom were analysed, giving rise to a report (UNESCO IBE, 2017). This report highlighted the need for curricular alignment and for a review of teacher training: 'Sustainably improving the teaching and learning of French and reading requires a concerted, cohesive, and long-term commitment in favour of a curricular alignment of educational content and training'. With this alignment in mind, the analysis highlights shortcomings in terms of written culture, adjustments that need to be made in terms of the graphophonemic code, and
Table 1. Data on schools and classrooms in which reading lessons were observed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>District/ languages spoken</th>
<th>Type of class</th>
<th>Grade observed/ group size</th>
<th>Total school enrolment</th>
<th>No. of classes in school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Urban/ Mooré</td>
<td>Classic private</td>
<td>Grade 1/30 (students) B (Boys)=18 G (Girls)=12</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Rural/ Mooré</td>
<td>ELAN bilingual</td>
<td>Grade 1/42</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Peri-urban/ Mooré</td>
<td>Classic public/ Bambini experience</td>
<td>Grade 2/ 30 B=13 G=17</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Rural/ Mooré</td>
<td>Classic public</td>
<td>Grade 2/ 50 B=29 G=21</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Peri-urban/ Mooré</td>
<td>Classic public</td>
<td>Grade 3/ 95 B=44 G=51</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Urban/Mooré</td>
<td>Classic public/ interactive pedagogy</td>
<td>Grade 3/50 B=27 G=23</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Peri-urban/ Mooré</td>
<td>Bilingual public</td>
<td>Grade 3/36</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shortcomings in Terms of Written Culture

Shortcomings especially concern written culture. This dimension, which is essential to give meaning to learning, is not mentioned in the programmes, and textbooks are unsuitable for making up this gap, which is caused by a lack of materials other than textbooks. However, the various stakeholders of the system encountered in the course of our study – teachers, trainers, inspectors, and principals – have repeatedly expressed the need to provide teachers, from the earliest grades, with short texts within the scope of the students’ competencies and interests. Such a material and cultural change in turn calls for the development of language activities based on these texts, starting from Grade 1. This requires building bridges between speaking and writing and between local languages and French to give meaning to what young students are learning, as well as to their initiation into written culture.

Adjustments to be Made in Teaching the Graphophonemic Code so as to Promote Cognitive Clarity

The analysis of the curricular documents and textbooks reveals that reading instruction in Grades 1 and 2 concentrates on the graphophonemic code. The recommended method is an analytic-synthetic mixed method. The teaching approach still prescribed to this day in Burkina Faso is systematic and mandatory, based on a succession of segmentation and blending exercises done orally and in writing on the key or basic sentence. The teaching is divided into four phases: (1) Global phase: students acquire the key sentence with the help of an illustration; (2) Analysis phase: students isolate the word key in the sentence, break it down into syllables to extract the sound or letter to be studied; (3) Synthesis phase: with the help of the teacher, the students form syllables from the letter or sound studied and form new words with these syllables (the students read the combinations on the board); (4) Reappraisal phase: a simple and meaningful text is formed with the new words. It is stated that these phases, in particular the segmentation and blending exercises, typical of a graphophonemic approach, must be rigorously respected. The study shows that this is the case; however, the memorization of the key sentence – which students know even before they go to school (through their older siblings) – and the repetitive nature of the method induce learning by heart and repetition, practices that have nothing to do with learning to read (see our analysis of practices) and are deplored by the various actors in the Burkina Faso education system. In this sense, the mandated approach constitutes an obstacle to the construction of knowledge by learners.

The organization of the programme is based first on learning the letter, involving a progression going from vowels (i, u, o, etc.) to consonants (l, t, p, etc.) before tackling digraphs (erroneously referred to as diphthongs) (for example: ou), digraphs with equivalent sounds (for example: an/en), and speech sounds (for example: gr, br, etc.). This progression, which is specific to syllabic methods, does not enable students to construct the concept of grapheme (the letter or letters that make the sound). Nor does it take into account the language and linguistic abilities of Burkina students for whom French is not the first language. For example, the complex distinction between e, ê, é, è in the first weeks of learning is likely to permanently hamper students in the process of establishing a relationship between speech and writing and becoming familiarized with letters. It is certainly difficult to differentiate these sounds orally (not all of them have equivalents in Mooré) and visually (it is in fact the same letter with different diacritics).

It would be advisable to simplify the way students are introduced to elements of the code, so as to quickly establish correspondences between letters (or groups of letters) and sounds easily distinguished by the students. An earlier introduction of some frequent digraphs could also reinforce the comprehension of the alphabetic principle, for instance by drawing examples of letters from students’ first names.

In the current situation, two issues stand out:

- A fluctuation in the use of concepts of ‘letter’, ‘word’, ‘sound’ or ‘letter that makes sound’ that is preventing teachers from explaining the complex relations
between speech and writing to their students. Work on the oral code, through the implementation of activities relating to phonological awareness, and on the written code, through knowledge of the letters of the alphabet, must absolutely be developed through ad hoc exercises to promote their subsequent association. This relationship between oral and written language (the correspondence between the phoneme and the grapheme) requires mastering the concept of grapheme (which students can refer to as the 'letter that makes the sound' or 'letters that make sound').

- The prevalence of a question-and-answer format that leaves no room for unexpected answers of students, even though such answers reflect their ability to make links between a letter or letters that make the same sound ('Clement' or 'Koné') and letters, in fact graphemes, which, according to their position or their association, produce different sounds ('Lucie' or 'Charles').

Developing Comprehension of Various Text Genres

In Grades 1 and 2, because current curricular guidelines regarding oral language instruction focus on pronunciation and vocabulary for non-French-speaking students, the practice of segmenting and blending the key sentence and the absence of written texts makes it difficult to teach comprehension. It is only in Grade 3 that comprehension becomes – theoretically – the central goal of reading instruction, along with the following general objectives:

- improving the acquisition of reading mechanics;
- progressively developing techniques for the fluent and expressive reading of simple texts;
- helping students discover the general meaning of the texts through relevant questions after they have read them;
- interesting the students in the practice of silent reading;
- broadening the students' vocabulary while promoting the acquisition of spelling; and
- fostering an enthusiasm for reading.

The references to the techniques of ‘fluent reading’ and ‘expressive reading’ reinforce, however, the idea that reciting the text aloud is the final purpose of, and the ultimate means of assessment of, learning, and that it makes it possible to correct mistakes when students read aloud. In this sense, one may consider this to be a classic model of reading instruction whereby the text is essentially no more than a pretext to enrich knowledge about language. Yet, it is absolutely essential that students are also given exercises to work on comprehension.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS: INNOVATIVE PRACTICES TO BE CAPITALIZED UPON

Innovations designed to correct shortcomings in practices already exist. Two examples illustrate these issues, one in a bilingual Grade 1 class (ELAN) and one in a Grade 3 class (a programme referred to as PAMEB). In the early years of schooling, ELAN aims to foster bi- or multilingualism. Innovative approaches of this kind have been implemented in some classes in Burkina Faso. In addition, prospective methods for use in Grade 3 have been proposed in the form of PAMEB reading sheets with targeted comprehension activities (Guide de l'enseignant et de l'enseignante pour l'implantation des fiches de lecture, MEBA, 2010). The reading sheets are based on a varied selection of texts from the textbook that have been adapted to the Burkinabe context and that develop themes familiar to the students.

An Active Method in the Grade 1 ELAN Bilingual Class

In a Grade 1 bilingual lesson, the teacher has students work on the following sentence: ‘This is my dog, he likes to play’ (‘ad m baaga, a nonga reem’). The teacher does not read out the sentence beforehand. He tells his students that they will not be able to read everything. Here, the teacher uses a method that leaves room for trial and error, and that requires a partial reading excluding memorization or sentence repetition (see Table 2). The teacher may start by pointing out words and letters the students are supposed to know. In doing this, he can use a specific metalanguage (‘word’, ‘letter’). He also refers to things the students have knowledge of, and to their first names. The study shows that use of the terms ‘letter’ and ‘word’ is rare in practice; instead one commonly observes pointing (the teacher points to the identified components with a stick), and sounding out (the word or letter is said aloud). If the teacher were to use these terms, he would initiate participation in a process of objectifying language: in order for the students to grasp meaning, the teacher would have to explain, and the students would have to understand, the working principles of the written language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher: Listen carefully. Even if you cannot read everything, do you not see words in the text you already know?</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students: Yes. [nodding in approval]</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Who sees something we have seen before?</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Me, me ... [all together while clicking their fingers]</td>
<td>In French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: We must clearly identify them. Idrissa! Come up and show us what you've already seen. You've seen it several times and you recognize it. Show us!</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idrissa: [points to the word dog on the board with the stick]</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Is that what you know? Oh no! Read it then, and I'll see.</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idrissa: Dog ...</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Dog ... Stop there. [signals for silence] Dog ... is a word we know. But we know other words here [pointing to the text]. Isn't that right?</td>
<td>In Mooré</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Storytelling-Based Comprehension Exercises in Grade 3

In a classic Grade 3 class, the teacher, who has completed PAMEB Training, conducts a lesson on the comprehension of a story entitled ‘The Honey Wall’, drawn from the Grade 3 reading book (p. 64). The diversity of the texts used to learn to read is central to the experimental method. Table 3 summarises the filmed sequence in the form of a synopsis – the descriptive and hierarchical summary made by the researchers of the lessons filmed in the classes.

Table 3. The synopsis of the filmed sequence in the Grade 3 class

1. **Contextualization of the story**
   The teacher (hereafter T) asks the students (hereafter stds), who has a grandfather or grandmother at home. Do they like their grandfather or grandmother? What does he/she do? The stds answer: She gives/tells lovely stories, she gives them gifts, she prepares their meals. T goes back to what one std said, asking if we give stories. The stds respond: Tll. Grandfather tells stories. That is also what we do in class. What do we often find in stories? T encourages the stds to answer in complete sentences.
   In stories, we find hyenas. In stories, we find animals.

2. **The teacher reads the story aloud.**
   T says that he will take the place of the grandfather, that he will tell the story, that the stds can sit however they want, that he will read the story, that they can close their eyes. T reads the text.

3. **Work on words: vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.**
   Holding the book, T interrupts his reading and tells the stds that they can open their eyes. Referring to a drawing on the board, he asks the stds what they see. They answer and come up to the board to point to parts of the picture: I see a hyena, honey, I see the bees, I see a wall, I see genies. What do you see on the genie? T names the different figures in the drawing and asks how the wall was built: with honey. T points to the class wall and says it is not the same. T announces to the stds that they will answer questions when he has finished reading.

4. **Comprehension of the text through group questions and fluent reading.**
   T resumes reading expressively, finishing the story: ‘So the hyena was punished for his greediness’. T questions the stds about the actions of the characters in the text (‘What happened to the hyena?’), at one point asking them to translate the word bee into Mooré. T then asks the stds to answer a questionnaire requiring them to search for information in the text but also to work in small groups, using large slates, on the inferential reading of the characters’ actions and motivations.

5. **Fluent reading in groups: reinforcement.**
   T places the stds in small groups outside and in each group has the stds practice fluent reading of the text in turn. He moves from one group to the next, clarifying comprehension questions about the text when they arise.

6. **Conjugation.**
   T does a lesson on conjugation based on the verbs that appear in the text.

7. **Mining of the story by the students.**
   T asks several stds to mime the story in front of the class.

8. **The students tell stories in Mooré and French.**
   T asks the stds if they liked the story and if they know any stories. T asks the stds to tell a story. One std says he cannot do it in French, and T says they will listen in Mooré. Std stands in front of the class and tells the story in Mooré. The stds listen and laugh during the story. Theapplaud. Another std tells a story in French. T says that we listen to stories to tell them to others, and that is what makes a story beautiful. Everyone has to learn to tell stories in French.

9. **Examination of the text and its moral.**
   T asks the stds about the characters: the genies and the hyena. What do they do? They build the honey wall. T asks if anyone has ever built a house with honey walls: the stds say no. The father genie spoke to the hare and the hyena. So the hare and the hyena are ‘friends’ (stds); they are friends but they are talking animals. T asks what we use to build walls. He compares cement walls and bamboo walls. T asks the stds who has ever seen a honey wall. We hear stds say, ‘You’re lying’. T explains that the story talks about things that have never been seen, things that were imagined, things that do not really exist, and that is what stories are. T comes back to the fact that greediness brings great misfortune. He has the stds explain in their own words what the hyena wanted to do. The hyena did not want to share. When you do not want to share, then you can also suffer great misfortune.

10. **Explanation of the moral.**
    T comes back to the fact that greediness causes great misfortune. He has the stds explain in their own words what the hyena wanted to do. The hyena did not want to share and was struck by misfortune.

The methodology is to focus primarily on the comprehension of the text by varying activities before, during, and after reading so that the students acquire the meaning without recourse to memorization. The story seems well adapted to the Burkina context, since it is a traditional oral genre: Storytelling is a familiar genre from village evenings and on radio broadcasts: it is the object of transpositions (Sissao, 2009).

The study of classroom practices thus brings to light the use of a specific text genre, storytelling, as a reading instruction method continued from one grade to the next. In Grade 3, the work on the text is further developed. Before reading, the teacher, with the students’ help and cooperation, explains the functions of the story and its uses in Burkina society; he refers to the text genre – the story – as well as to many of its features – its oral character, its use of talking animals, its entertainment function, as well as its moral, drawing on the students’ familiarity with
stories they have already read. During and after reading, several activities are used to make students aware of certain characteristics of the genre: the characters, their actions, and their motivations. Finally, the teacher invites the students to tell a story they know in Mooré or in French.

From this point of view, the provision of texts is an important milestone in an action plan. Its apparent simplicity should not obscure the importance of training teachers to use these materials and adopt the new ways of managing activities these materials require. Working on a text genre orally from the beginning of Grade 1 would serve as a basis for initiation into writing, and in particular into reading, by making learning meaningful while explicitly relating it to the country’s social context. Another aspect of this methodology to bear in mind is that it is important that the teacher clarify the transition from telling the story to reading it so that the students clearly understand the relevance of telling a story like the grandfather but also that of reading the same story, thus developing awareness of the specificities of oral and written language practices and their interactions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of these analyses of official documents and reading and writing teaching practices in the early years of primary education provided the basis for the development of the Burkina Faso action plan beginning in 2014.

First, the lack of materials available to initiate students into writing, in conjunction with the insufficient number of activities proposed on the basis of these materials, led to the decision to develop and disseminate a ‘toolkit’ and a ‘teacher’s guide for reading/writing instruction in the first three years of primary school’. These tools were developed by a group of designers and validated by specialists and professionals in the field in late 2016. Their purpose was to reinforce and renew practices by providing an updated reading model in terms of the graphophonic code as well as textual comprehension, all the while adapting to the constraints of the Burkina Faso context.

Second, the lack of work on comprehension from the beginning of schooling and the under-exploitation of texts in Grade 3 was brought to light. With this in mind, the teacher’s guide emphasizes the importance of developing the comprehension of both oral and written texts, providing interesting pointers on how to do this in the toolkit, including a selection of ‘useful’ texts of various kinds (poems, stories, recipes, do-it-yourself instructions, informational and expository texts, and so on).

Third, the new materials provided in the toolkit require a conceptual clarification regarding the components of the graphophonic code. This means that the curricular documents and teacher training must address the ability to recognize units of the oral code and of the written code, as well as taking into account the key components of comprehension. The entire education system must adjust accordingly. Greater flexibility is required to adopt teaching practices to students’ learning with the aim of achieving cognitive clarity, and also in terms of exercises. This agenda is supported in the teacher’s guide by suggestions for activities, and specific exercise sheets that complement the activities with which Burkina Faso teachers are already familiar. These adaptations will be brought about through the clarification and explanation of the concepts - oral word, oral syllable, sound, and letter, letter(s) making the sound, written syllable, written word - described in the teacher’s guide that was developed within the framework of the project. To this end, the aim is also to reinforce the use of national languages and comparison with the latter, supported by bi- or multilingual approaches in a teaching and learning model that is no longer based strictly on repetition and memorization.

CONCLUSION

The analyses presented in this chapter, based on documentary research and a review of practices, have revealed discrepancies between the contents of teaching reading and writing, theories of learning and the specifics of the Burkina Faso context. These discrepancies have been interpreted in terms of shortcomings, misalignment, and the need to generalize practices relating to questions of comprehension and cognitive clarity that are only observed beginning in Grade 3.

These are the challenges that the action plan implemented in the framework of the IBE project sought to address. It provided for the dissemination of tools - a teacher’s guide, a toolkit, and an initial teacher training module. The training module remains to be elaborated.

The development, in collaboration with the national actors, of a toolkit that proposes a set of activities and exercises in line with the recommended improvements, as well as the accompanying guide, reinforces the ongoing process of change in the wake of the curriculum reform already under way. The guide includes teaching sheets, and while proposing structured teaching plans, it provides teachers with new ideas and understanding about how to better teach reading and writing. It insists on the necessary link between learning to speak, listen, read, and write, but also on the fact that learning to read depends on the ability to decipher words, on comprehension, and on the production of texts. It also draws attention to the difference between learning to write words and to produce sentences and short texts (distinction between handwriting skills and the production of texts).

The introduction of the toolkit and the teacher’s guide requires, on the one hand, adjustments to the reading/writing model in the basic education curriculum and teacher training and, on the other, changes in the textbooks used to teach reading and writing so as to reset the foundations of curriculum alignment.

Today, the action plan is clearly taking a bottom-up approach, starting with the toolkit and the teacher’s guide for reading/writing instruction in the first three years of primary school. A training course was organized for a first group of expert teachers willing to try out these new tools in the field. Some 20 teachers and several school principals completed the one-week training course in the autumn of 2016 in order to test the new tools, with a view to their fine-tuning, production, and dissemination. A follow-up was also planned.
The purpose of these new tools is to reinforce:

- Burkinabe students’ awareness of written culture, taking into account the development of students’ oral abilities in national languages and in French;
- the importance attributed to work on the comprehension of texts – both oral and written – from the start of schooling;
- use of games based on phonological awareness and on the discovery of letters of the alphabet through words known to the students (their first names, words of their national language or words already learned in French);
- clarification during teacher training of the concepts involved and the use of a metalinguage, including with students – oral syllable, sound, (oral) word-letter, letter making the sound/letters making the sound, (written) word; and
- an approach that continues to mobilize memorization and repetition, but that also leaves room for students’ discoveries and for the objectification of what they have learned.

The process clearly calls for initial and continuing teacher-training guidelines to take certain changes into account. Such changes will inevitably have repercussions in reading programmes and textbooks. These new tools will have an impact, but only if they correspond to the definitions of reading and writing to be employed in initial and continuing teacher training. The tools also, to have an impact, must be integrated into sequences or activities implementing the general guidelines outlined in the programmes and textbooks. This is why the new tools call for a readjustment of teacher training – to focus on linguistic concepts and on methods of teaching reading and writing, but also on curricular requirements. In this sense, they involve an alignment of all partners in the education system, which is most certainly a new challenge.

NOTES

1. The noosphere, a term used by Chevallard (1982), refers to a multitude of people in various institutions – whether political, scientific, professional or community-based – who determine educational issues and decide what must be taught and in what forms. This ‘noosphere’ delimits, redefines and reorganizes knowledge in a given historical, social or cultural context by making certain decisions.

2. Different reasons are put forward to explain these limits: ‘The main reason is that the implementation of such a reform would be very costly given the state of our economy, all the more so given that the countries pioneering this approach in Africa (Tunisia, Senegal, Gabon, Benin, and Mali) do not seem to have achieved great success’ (MEN, 2014, p. 14). Overall, it appears that the strict application of the competency-based approach does not suffice in itself to overcome the shortcomings observed in the implementation of the teaching by objectives approach, which favours the acquisition of theoretical knowledge to the detriment of psychomotor and socio-affective abilities. Moreover, factoring in the specifics of the Burkinabe context remains the main challenge.

3. A partnership between the MEBA and OSEO (Œuvre suisse d’enseignement ouvrière), now known as SOLIDAR Suisse, which has worked in basic formal multilingual education since 2007.

4. The ELAN (Ecole et langues nationales en Afrique) initiative came about following a study (see ELA, 2013) on the languages of schooling in basic education in francophone sub-Saharan Africa (LASCOLAF), jointly initiated by the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), the Intergovernmental Agency of the Francophonie (AIF), the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MAEE), and the French Development Agency (AFD). The ELAN initiative was launched in 2011 with a bilingual/multilingual reading and writing instruction pilot project in eight African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Senegal, with 10 pilot classes in each country.

5. Indeed, ‘even though all laws or regulations advocate the promotion of national languages without discrimination, bilingual education concerns only a very small proportion of schoolchildren’ (Paré-Kaboré and Tibiri, 2016, specifically in reference to the Multilingual Basic Education Curriculum (CEM), promoted by Solidar-Suisse in partnership with MENA). It therefore still remains for Burkinabe decision makers to take the necessary steps to effectively promote bilingual education.

6. The eighth class is a preschool class that is not taken into account in this specific analysis of teaching practices by grades, as this analysis focuses on Grades 1, 2, and 3.

7. Establishing a good relationship between speech and writing is favoured by exercises on phonological awareness and comprehension of the alphabetic principle.

8. The use of a simple but appropriate metalinguage is therefore required from the earliest stages of learning to be able to explain to the pupils that in French there are 26 letters, that these letters are used to form all the words in French, and that these letters correspond to sounds (one or more letters make a sound, but the same letter can also make several sounds).

9. Although from the 18th week of Grade 2, the manual proposes short texts chosen in relation to a theme familiar to the Burkinabe students (school, the human body, family, professions, animals, nature and natural phenomena, or travel). The criterion of textual diversity does not influence the choice of writings. The story is the only genre explicitly represented – seven times in fact. The textbook Liné et Écriture au Burkina Faso, produced by the NGO Bambini nel Deserto (n.d.) proposes simple texts that may be used in a classroom with Grade 1 students.

10. Interceptive pedagogy applied to the teaching of French (DPEBA BLK/PAMEB experiment).

The project was developed between 2005 and 2010. This approach was piloted in the province of Bouillimède (Koudougou), with 40 worksheets created for classes ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 6. The next step in the implementation of the method was to be large-scale teacher training. See the teacher’s guide dated March 2010, which explains the project in detail (MEBA, 2010).

REFERENCES


15. MODULES TO TRAIN TEACHERS TO TEACH READING AND WRITING IN NIGER

From an Analysis of the Current Situation to a Collaborative Production of Tools for Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

This contribution is rooted in the project Improving learning outcomes in early grade reading: integration of curriculum, teaching, learning materials, and assessment of the UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (IBE). We begin by clarifying the underlying objective for this case study: through integration of knowledge stemming from international research, and based on the current situation in Niger, we seek to enable specialists from Niger to develop tools for the training of teachers in reading and writing instruction during the first three school years. The statement of such an objective shows the complexity of the task and the challenges of the approach in this particular context. Admittedly, knowledge on literacy instruction exists, but it is biased in that it is inextricably linked with the cultural context in which it is developed, the languages to which it refers, available resources, goals pursued, and national history, amongst other factors. The educational policy, particularly in regard to language, plays a decisive role, just as does the pedagogical choice that is made.

The starting point of this work was, therefore, the study of the reality in the country. The study, although not exhaustive, was carried out through systematic research designed to produce a strong foundational understanding of the regional context. From a methodological point of view, this study was made up of two components: a study of official documents, and an analysis of teaching practices in classrooms.

The documentary study was focused on the three sources representative of the curriculum of Niger:

- official documents on education and school programmes;
- documents on teacher education;
- textbooks and reading guidelines.

The analysis of the practices in class focused on video recordings of reading lessons in about 10 classes selected for their contrasting characteristics.