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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING SPOKEN FRENCH IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NIGER

Akimou Tchagnaou[1], Aissata Diaby[2] and Mahamane Sani Ibrahim Moussa[3]

1. Andre Salifou University / Laboratory of Literature, Education and Communication (LaboLEC), Niger.
2. Felix Houphouet-Boigny University / Laboratory for the Dynamics of Languages and Discourse.
3. Andre Salifou University/Laboratory of Letters, Education and Communication (LaboLEC), Niger.

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of oral communication is an essential component of proficiency in French, the official language and language of instruction in Niger. However, in many lower secondary schools, students struggle to develop oral communication skills because of pedagogical, linguistic and sociocultural constraints. This study examines the challenges associated with teaching and learning spoken French among students at CEG Raouda in Maradi, with a view to identifying the main explanatory factors and suggesting avenues for improvement. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews from a sample of 210 respondents, comprising 200 students in quatrième and troisième (Grades 8 and 9) and 10 French teachers. Quantitative data were processed using Excel and Sphinx Plus²-V5, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis.The findings indicate that the difficulties identified are primarily associated with insufficient teacher training in oral language pedagogy, the predominance of writing-focused practices, inadequate teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, first-language interference, students' limited vocabulary and the scarcity of authentic opportunities to communicate in French outside school. The study recommends strengthening teacher education, diversifying oral activities, improving teaching resources and creating environments conducive to regular practice of spoken French.

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Introduction:-

French language teaching holds a strategic position in the education systems of French-speaking African countries. In Niger, French is the official language, the language of administration and the main medium of instruction in schools. From primary school onwards, students are expected to develop the skills needed to understand, express themselves and interact effectively in French. Oral expression is central to these skills, as it supports communication, participation in learning, academic achievement, and social and professional integration. Oral

Corresponding Author:-Akimou Tchagnaou
Address:-Andre Salifou University / Laboratory of Literature, Education and Communication (LaboLEC), Niger.

communication is now recognised as a subject of instruction in its own right. Whereas traditional perspectives regarded it as a naturally acquired skill, research in language education shows that it requires instructional planning, specific activities and appropriate assessment procedures (Nonnon, 2001; Halté, 2005; Dolz&Schneuwly, 1998). According to Cuq and Gruca (2017), oral proficiency is a key driver of the development of other language skills, particularly reading and writing. From a communicative perspective, language learning extends beyond the acquisition of grammatical rules to encompass the development of communicative competence, enabling learners to use the language in a range of situations (Hymes, 1972; Conseil de l'Europe, 2020).

Despite this institutional recognition, teaching and learning oral communication remains one of the most complex dimensions of French language education. Several researchers note that classroom practices continue to focus largely on reading, grammar and writing, while oral activities remain infrequent or insufficiently structured (Nonnon, 2001; Dolz&Schneuwly, 1998; Halté, 2005). In many African classrooms, overcrowding, limited teaching resources, inadequate professional training for teachers and learners' limited exposure to French outside school substantially constrain the development of oral proficiency.

These difficulties are particularly acute in multilingual settings where French is used primarily as a language of schooling. In Niger, most students live in environments dominated by national languages, including Hausa, Zarma-Songhay, Fulfulde, Kanuri and Tamasheq. French is rarely used in family or community interactions, which greatly reduces opportunities for oral practice. This situation contributes to linguistic interference, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties and a fear of speaking in class.

Research conducted in West Africa reports similar findings. Diallo (2017) and Kaboré (2019) show that learners have limited vocabulary because of their low exposure to French. Mariko emphasises that classroom activities remain predominantly oriented towards writing, at the expense of oral communication. Other studies conducted in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon also identify inadequate teaching equipment, the absence of language laboratories, limited teacher specialisation and language policies as major barriers to the development of oral proficiency.

At CEG Raouda in Maradi, these difficulties appear particularly pronounced. Observations at the school indicate that many students struggle to express themselves spontaneously in French, construct sentences correctly, use appropriate vocabulary or participate in classroom exchanges. Teachers, for their part, report overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, a lack of specific training in oral language pedagogy and insufficient time devoted to communication activities.

These observations raise questions about the factors underlying the difficulties encountered in teaching and learning oral communication in lower secondary education. Identifying these factors is essential to proposing teaching strategies suited to the Nigerien context and contributing to improved learning quality.

The general objective of this study is therefore to analyse the difficulties associated with teaching and learning spoken French among students at CEG Raouda in Maradi. More specifically, it seeks to identify pedagogical and subject-specific instructional difficulties, linguistic constraints and sociocultural factors that may influence the development of learners' oral skills.

This study has both scholarly and practical relevance. Academically, it contributes to research on oral language pedagogy in French-speaking African settings, an area that remains relatively underexplored in Niger. In practical terms, it provides policymakers, educational leaders and teachers with insights that may help improve spoken French instruction, teacher education and teaching arrangements in Nigerien lower secondary schools.

Methodology:-

Research type and approach:-

This empirical study examines the difficulties associated with teaching and learning spoken French in lower secondary education. It adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This choice reflects the complementary nature of the two approaches: the former measures the extent of the phenomena observed, while the latter supports an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of those involved (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study employs a descriptive design with an analytical purpose. It seeks to identify the main pedagogical, linguistic and sociocultural factors that may explain students' difficulties in learning spoken French.

Study setting:-
The research was conducted at Collège d'EnseignementGénéral (CEG) Raouda in Maradi, in the Maradi region of south-central Niger. This public school enrols several thousand students across the four years of lower secondary education, from sixième to troisième (Grades 6–9), and is one of the city's main lower secondary schools. The site was selected because of its large enrolment, the diversity of learners' sociolinguistic backgrounds and the difficulties frequently observed in spoken French instruction.

Population and sample:-
The target population comprised students in quatrième and troisième (Grades 8 and 9) and the French teachers teaching these grades. These grades were selected because students already have sufficient experience of learning French and regularly engage in oral communication activities.

The sample comprised 210 participants, distributed as follows:-
- 200 students in Grades 8 and 9;
- 10 French teachers working at the school.

Students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure balanced representation of the two grades. The teachers selected were those actually teaching French in the classes concerned.

Data collection techniques and instruments:-
Three complementary techniques were used:-
A literature review examined scholarly books, journal articles, dissertations, theses and institutional reports on oral language pedagogy, the teaching of French as a second language and learning difficulties in African contexts. This stage informed the study's theoretical framework.
A questionnaire survey was the main instrument for collecting quantitative data from students. The questionnaire included closed-ended, partially open-ended and multiple-choice questions addressing teaching practices, linguistic difficulties, sociocultural factors and the conditions under which oral language learning takes place.
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their perceptions of the obstacles to oral language teaching, the teaching strategies they used and possible solutions for improving learning.

Survey procedure:-
Data collection took place after the necessary administrative authorisations had been obtained from the education authorities and the management of CEG Raouda.A preliminary survey was first conducted to test the validity, clarity and relevance of the data collection instruments. The necessary adjustments were then made before the questionnaires were administered in their final form. The main survey was conducted in the classrooms. Given the difficulties some students experienced in understanding French, certain instructions were rephrased or explained in Hausa to improve the quality of the responses collected. Teachers were interviewed individually in an atmosphere conducive to open expression.

Data analysis:-
Quantitative data were coded and processed using Microsoft Excel and Sphinx Plus²-V5. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate frequencies and percentages and to produce the tables required to interpret the findings. Qualitative interview data were subjected to thematic analysis. Teachers' accounts were grouped into categories corresponding to the main dimensions of the research: pedagogical and subject-specific instructional difficulties, linguistic difficulties, sociocultural factors and suggestions for improvement. This methodological triangulation strengthened the credibility and validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations:-
Respondents participated voluntarily after being informed of the research objectives. Respondent anonymity and the confidentiality of the data collected were guaranteed throughout the study. The information collected was used exclusively for scholarly purposes, in accordance with ethical principles governing educational research.

Results:-

Respondent characteristics:-
The study involved 210 participants: 200 students in Grades 8 and 9 and 10 French teachers at CEG Raouda in Maradi. Describing respondent characteristics helps contextualise the interpretation of the findings.

Table 1: Distribution of students by sex and grade

Grade	Girls	Boys	Total
Grade 8	50	50	100
Grade 9	50	50	100
Total	**100**	**100**	**200**

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The student sample was evenly distributed by sex and grade. Girls and boys each accounted for 50% of respondents. This balanced distribution helps limit sex-related bias and ensures better representation of learners' perceptions of the teaching and learning of spoken French.Grades 8 and 9 were selected because these students have already studied French for several years and regularly engage in the oral communication activities prescribed by the curriculum.

Table 2: Teachers' employment status

Employment status	Number	Percentage (%)
Contract teacher	10	100.0
Total	**10**	**100.0**

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The data show that all the French teachers surveyed were employed on a contract basis. This situation may affect teaching quality, particularly in terms of employment stability, access to continuing professional development and the development of specialised teaching skills. Several studies show that insecure employment can sometimes influence teachers' commitment to teaching and their opportunities for professional development.

Table 3: Teachers' initial academic backgrounds

Academic background	Number	Percentage (%)
Administration	1	10.0
Master's in communication	1	10.0
Teacher training college (ENI) / Geography	1	10.0
Computer science	1	10.0
Bachelor's in communication	1	10.0
Bachelor's in history	1	10.0
Literature, arts and communication	1	10.0
Management, marketing and communication	1	10.0
Sociology and anthropology	2	20.0
Total	**10**	**100.0**

Source: Field data, December 2025.

Teachers' academic backgrounds were highly diverse. Only one teacher had a background directly related to literary studies, while the others came from a range of disciplines, including sociology, communication, administration, history and computer science. This heterogeneity indicates that several teachers entered the profession without in-depth specialisation in French language pedagogy. This situation may explain some of the difficulties observed in implementing activities specific to oral language teaching, particularly designing communication tasks, facilitating interactions and assessing oral performance.

Table 4: Teachers' qualifications

Qualification	Number	Percentage (%)
Bachelor's degree	8	**80**
Master's degree	1	**10**
Not reported	1	**10**
Total	**10**	**100**

Source: Field data, December 2025.

Analysis of qualification levels shows that most teachers held a bachelor's degree (80%), while only one held a master's degree. This level of qualification remains relatively modest in relation to current requirements for the professionalisation of French language teaching, particularly in a context where communicative approaches and oral language pedagogy require specific skills.

Table 5: Teachers' specialisations

Specialisation	Number	Percentage (%)
French	4	50.0
Communication	2	25.0
Administration	1	12.5
Marketing and communication	1	12.5
Not reported	2	—

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The data indicate that only half of the teachers specialised in French. The others taught the subject despite having received their initial training in other fields. This situation may influence the quality of teaching practices, particularly when teaching complex skills such as oral expression. Overall, the respondent profile reveals a setting characterised by teachers with highly diverse academic backgrounds and a large student population. These characteristics are essential to understanding the pedagogical, linguistic and sociocultural difficulties examined in the following sections.

Pedagogical and instructional difficulties in teaching and learning oral communication:-

Data collected from students and teachers indicate that pedagogical difficulties are the main obstacle to the acquisition of oral skills in French. These difficulties primarily concern teaching practices, instructional methods, learning conditions and available resources.

Table 6: Frequency of oral activities organised in class

Classroom activities	Observed frequency
Expressive reading	Frequent
Question-and-answer exchanges	Frequent
Oral presentation	Infrequent
Role plays	Rare
Debate	Rare
Simulation	Rare
Group work with oral reporting	Infrequent

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The data show that teachers mainly favour traditional activities, particularly expressive reading and question-and-answer exchanges. By contrast, activities that promote spontaneous communication, such as debates, role plays, simulations and presentations, are very limited. This predominance of knowledge-transmission approaches reduces students' opportunities to develop confidence and ease in speaking. These observations are consistent with field findings indicating that oral activities remain limited despite their importance in the French curriculum. Teachers themselves acknowledge devoting more time to writing than to oral expression.

Table 7: Severity of the main pedagogical difficulties encountered by teachers

Difficulties	Severity
Insufficient time for oral activities	Very high
Overcrowded classrooms	Very high
Lack of audiovisual materials	High
Insufficient training in oral language pedagogy	Very high
Writing-focused assessment	High
Traditional teaching practices	High

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The analysis identifies several structural constraints that directly affect the quality of oral language teaching. Teachers consider the time allocated to oral activities insufficient because of particularly demanding curricula. This situation leads them to prioritise learning assessed in examinations, which focus primarily on written skills. Very

large classes are also a major obstacle. Where classes contain large numbers of students, it becomes difficult to provide sufficient speaking time for everyone. Teacher's report being unable either to observe students' oral performance individually or to provide personalised feedback. The data also reveal a substantial shortage of teaching resources. Audiovisual resources, although essential for oral language teaching (audio materials, videos, language laboratories and digital platforms), are virtually absent from the school. This situation severely limits the range of activities offered.

Table 8: Training profiles of French teachers

Profiles of teachers surveyed	Percentage
Teachers specialising in French	50 %
Teachers from other disciplines	50 %

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The study reveals that only half of the teachers had received specific training in French. The others taught the subject despite initial training in other disciplines, such as communication, sociology, administration or marketing.
This situation directly influences the teaching practices observed. The interviews indicate that several teachers reported never having received specific training in oral language pedagogy. They acknowledged difficulties in designing interactive activities, facilitating exchanges among students and assessing oral performance.

Linguistic difficulties in learning spoken French:-

The data show that linguistic difficulties constitute the second group of factors influencing students' oral proficiency. They primarily concern vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, articulation and fluency in interaction. Students' responses and teacher interviews reveal shortcomings that substantially limit oral interaction in class.

Table 9: Main linguistic difficulties encountered by students

Linguistic difficulties	Severity
Difficulty constructing sentences correctly	Very high
Limited vocabulary	Very high
Pronunciation and articulation difficulties	High
Hesitation when speaking	High
Lack of fluency in interaction	High
First-language influence	Very high

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The data indicate that sentence construction is one of the most frequently encountered difficulties. Many students struggle to organise their ideas and produce grammatically correct sentences. Teachers emphasise that these errors particularly concern word order, grammatical agreement, the use of verb tenses and the structuring of utterances.
Vocabulary is also a major obstacle. Students have a relatively limited lexical repertoire, which reduces their ability to express ideas clearly. This limitation leads to repetition, hesitation and, in some cases, withdrawal from speaking.
Pronunciation and articulation difficulties also recur. Some French phonemes are difficult to produce because of differences between the phonological system of French and those of the national languages spoken by students. These difficulties affect speech intelligibility and undermine learners' confidence when speaking in front of their peers.

Table 10: Linguistic factors underlying difficulties in oral communication

Factors identified	Influence on learning
First-language interference	Very strong
Limited exposure to spoken French	Strong
Limited vocabulary	Very strong
Influence of written language on speech	Moderate to strong
Limited practice of French outside class	Very strong

Source: Field data, December 2025.

The data show that first-language interference is the most significant linguistic factor. Students report thinking first in Hausa before translating their ideas into French. This process slows communication and contributes to lexical, syntactic and phonetic errors. Furthermore, limited exposure to spoken French outside school considerably reduces

opportunities to consolidate learning. Everyday interactions take place mainly in national languages, limiting the development of the automatic language processing needed for fluent communication. Teachers also note that several students reproduce structures characteristic of written language in their speech. Their oral production consequently becomes unnatural, rigid and poorly suited to spontaneous communication.

Discussion:-

This study aimed to analyse the difficulties associated with teaching and learning spoken French at CEG Raouda in Maradi. The findings show that students' difficulties arise from the interaction of pedagogical, linguistic and sociocultural factors. This interaction confirms the multidimensional nature of oral language learning highlighted in contemporary research on language education. The first major finding concerns pedagogical and subject-specific instructional difficulties. The study shows that teachers devote little time to activities specifically geared towards oral expression. The practices observed prioritise reading, grammar, verb conjugation and writing, while debates, role plays, simulations and presentations remain infrequent. These findings are consistent with Dolz and Schneuwly (1998), who show that oral communication remains insufficiently taught despite its importance in school curricula. These authors regard oral communication as a subject of instruction requiring explicit instructional planning, structured progression and appropriate assessment criteria.

The findings also support Nonnon's (2001) analysis that oral communication is often regarded as a spontaneous skill requiring no specific instruction. This perception leads many teachers to prioritise written learning, particularly when certification examinations place considerable emphasis on written production. In the setting studied, this orientation is reinforced by institutional constraints, including demanding curricula and limited time for oral activities. The study further reveals that teachers face significant professional constraints. All the teachers surveyed were employed on a contract basis, and only some had specialised training in French. This situation limits their command of the modern pedagogical approaches required for oral language teaching. These findings are consistent with Tardif (2012), who shows that learning quality depends largely on teachers' professional knowledge, initial education and opportunities for continuing professional development. Similarly, Perrenoud (2008) emphasises that the professionalisation of teaching rests on teachers' capacity to draw on diverse pedagogical skills suited to particular learning situations.

The linguistic difficulties identified in this study also corroborate observations from several French-speaking African contexts. Students demonstrate limited vocabulary, difficulties with sentence construction, pronunciation errors and limited fluency when speaking. These findings are consistent with Cuq and Gruca (2017), who emphasise that second-language acquisition requires regular interaction to support the progressive development of vocabulary, syntax and discourse skills. The influence of the first language is another important finding. Interviews indicate that many students formulate their responses in their first language before translating them into French. This process produces lexical, grammatical and phonetic interference that slows communication. This observation is consistent with Cummins (2000), who argues that languages present in a multilingual setting constantly interact within learners' cognitive processes. In the Nigerien context, where Hausa is widely used in everyday interactions, such interference appears particularly pronounced.

The findings also highlight the importance of sociocultural factors. French remains primarily a language of schooling and is seldom used in families and communities. Students therefore have very few opportunities to practise speaking outside class. This situation is comparable to that described by Diallo (2017) in Senegal and Kaboré (2019) in Burkina Faso, where limited exposure to French is a major barrier to the development of communicative skills. In these contexts, school is virtually the only setting in which spoken French is practised.
Students also express a strong fear of speaking in front of their peers. This communication anxiety reduces their participation in oral activities and limits their learning opportunities. These observations are consistent with Bandura's (1997) analysis, according to which self-efficacy directly influences learners' engagement in learning situations. The more students doubt their language abilities, the less willing they are to participate in classroom exchanges.

The findings also support Vygotski's (1978) socioconstructivist theory, which holds that language development occurs primarily through social interaction. Yet the observations reported in this study indicate that opportunities for interaction remain limited because of overcrowded classrooms, the predominance of lecture-based methods and the limited variety of classroom activities. Under these conditions, students have few opportunities to develop their oral skills progressively through exchanges with peers and teachers.

The overall analysis thus reveals continuing interaction between pedagogical, linguistic and sociocultural factors. Difficulties in oral communication cannot be attributed exclusively to students' individual characteristics. Rather, they arise from a learning environment that combines inadequate teacher training, limited teaching resources, writing-focused instruction, limited exposure to French and a multilingual sociolinguistic context. This explanatory model is consistent with that proposed in the study's conceptual framework, according to which oral proficiency is simultaneously influenced by teaching practices, language skills and the sociocultural environment.

In practical terms, these findings indicate that improving oral language teaching requires a comprehensive approach. Action should simultaneously address initial and continuing teacher education, the systematic integration of oral activities into classroom practice, the provision of appropriate teaching resources and the creation of environments that encourage regular use of French. Reading clubs, public speaking competitions, school theatre and educational radio could, in particular, provide students with more authentic communication opportunities. Finally, this study contributes to knowledge of oral language pedagogy in Nigerien lower secondary schools, an area that remains underexplored. It highlights the need for further research on actual French language teaching practices and on instructional arrangements capable of producing sustained improvements in learners' oral skills.

Conclusion:-

Teaching and learning spoken French is now a major issue in improving the quality of education in Niger. In a context where French is both the official language and the language of instruction, oral communication proficiency is a major determinant of academic achievement, access to other subjects and learners' social integration. However, the findings of this study show that this skill remains insufficiently developed among students at CEG Raouda in Maradi.The objective of this research was to analyse the difficulties associated with teaching and learning spoken French, identify the main explanatory factors and suggest avenues for improvement. The mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires administered to 200 students with interviews involving 10 French teachers, provided a clearer understanding of the pedagogical realities experienced at the school.

The findings show that the difficulties observed arise from an interaction among three main categories of factors. Pedagogical factors include the limited place accorded to oral activities, insufficient teacher training in oral language pedagogy, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of teaching resources and the predominance of writing-focused assessment. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, difficulties with sentence construction, pronunciation problems and extensive interference between national languages and French. Sociocultural factors relate to the limited use of French outside school, the scarcity of authentic communication situations and students' anxiety when speaking in class.

These findings support the main theoretical models drawn on in this research. In particular, they corroborate Dolz and Schneuwly's work on the need for explicit oral language instruction, Vygotski's work on the role of social interaction in learning, and Cuq and Gruca's analyses of French language acquisition in multilingual contexts. They also show that the difficulties observed do not stem solely from students' individual characteristics but are embedded in a pedagogical, institutional and sociolinguistic environment that strongly influences learning.

In practical terms, this study highlights the need to strengthen the professionalisation of French teachers through initial and continuing education with a stronger focus on oral language pedagogy. It also underscores the importance of regularly integrating interactive activities, such as debates, role plays, simulations, presentations and oral expression workshops, into classroom practice. Improving teaching equipment, reducing class sizes and establishing French clubs or communication spaces in schools are further avenues that could support the development of students' oral skills.

Nevertheless, this research has certain limitations. It was conducted in a single school, which limits the generalisability of the findings to all Nigerien lower secondary schools. In addition, the data are based primarily on students' and teachers' self-reports. Future research could incorporate direct observations of classroom practices, standardised assessments of oral proficiency and comparisons between urban and rural schools or across different regions of Niger.Ultimately, this study contributes to knowledge of oral language pedagogy in the Nigerien context. It highlights the urgent need to rethink teaching practices so that oral expression becomes an effective driver of academic achievement and the development of communicative skills. Improving oral language teaching requires coordinated engagement by teachers, educational leaders, education policymakers and teacher education institutions to create a learning environment more conducive to the acquisition of spoken French.

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