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CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE FRENCH CURRICULUM IN GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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ABSTRACT

This article reports a content analysis of the French curriculum for general upper secondary education in the Republic of the Congo. The study aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this curricular document. Document analysis showed that the curriculum complies with the principles of objectives-based pedagogy (PPO), presenting teaching content in terms of objectives, as upper secondary education in the Republic of the Congo continues to follow this approach. Of the four components of French instruction—grammar, literature, the study of literary works, and literary writing exercises—the curriculum provides satisfactory coverage of the study of literary works and literary writing exercises across all three grades: Seconde, Première, and Terminale. However, grammar receives very limited coverage, while literature is entirely absent as a distinct component. In light of these shortcomings, we propose improvements incorporating the grammar and literature concepts considered necessary to address the challenges of upper secondary French instruction and achieve the intended learner profile.

Keywords: Critical Analysis, Curriculum, French, General Upper Secondary Education, Cong

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching requires a range of documents and instructional resources intended to organise, structure, regulate, and harmonise instruction. Foremost among these is the curriculum, the principal educational document containing all the concepts to be taught by subject, educational cycle, and grade. Described as the “teacher’s Bible” and the “internal regulations of any education system” by A. Nadeau (cited in AEFC, 2010, p. 15), the curriculum provides the foundation for organising and harmonising instruction within an education system.

It is therefore considered a major determinant of how an education system operates and the core around which teaching is organised. Teachers draw the concepts they teach from this document. This is why Oliviero Rosane Machado (2017, p. 23) describes it as “the heart of the school, the central space in which teaching lives and develops within an education system”.

The content, intended competencies or objectives, accompanying notes, guidelines, and methodological recommendations must therefore be clearly defined and developed in accordance with the country's educational aims, learners' educational needs, and their psychological, sociocultural, and socioeconomic circumstances. The curriculum should thus promote success for the greatest possible number of learners rather than merely compile concepts to be taught. In this regard, the Syllabus for Primary Teacher Training *in the Congo* (2010, p. 10) states: “The role of a school curriculum is to educate the individual through schooling. In keeping with this educational purpose, the curriculum must set out more concrete intentions for learners, referred to as the learner's exit profile following school learning.”

In sum, the curriculum underpins all pedagogical and subject-specific teaching practices within an education system, as it regulates and governs all such activities.

Rather than examining the full range of curricula within the Congolese education system, this study focuses specifically on the French curriculum for general upper secondary education. This choice arose from observations of teachers' and inspectors' complaints about the quality of its content.

This study examines the strengths and limitations of the upper secondary French curriculum in the Congo and addresses the following main research question: Does the upper secondary French curriculum meet Congolese learners' actual needs, societal expectations, and the aims of French instruction at this level in the Republic of the Congo?

The following subsidiary questions arise from this main question:

- What are the strengths of this curriculum?
- What are its limitations?
- In view of these limitations, what measures could improve the content of this document?

These research questions give rise to the following objectives:

- To examine the relationship between curriculum content, learners' needs, societal expectations, and the aims of upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo;
- To identify the curriculum's strengths;
- To identify the curriculum's limitations;
- To propose measures to improve its content.

Several **studies** have examined curricula in general and those of the Congo in particular. These include Samuel Mawété's 1989 study, entitled “What Content and What Types of Knowledge for African Schools?”. In this article, the author focuses on curriculum analysis in the Congo. He concludes that, in terms of their design, primary and secondary curricula do not make a major contribution to development in Africa generally or in the Congo specifically, because they incorporate only “learning to know”, at the expense of “learning to do”, “learning to live together”, and “learning to be”. He therefore argues that curriculum designers must take account of societal needs, the major challenges facing education, and universally recognised ethical and practical values when developing these documents.

Similarly, the French Ministry of National Education, in its publication entitled “The Common French Curriculum for General and Technological Seconde and Literature in General Première”, shows that the French and literature curricula in Seconde and Première pursue objectives consistent with the broader aims of literary education at upper secondary level:

- acquiring cultural knowledge, fostering personal development, and educating citizens;
- developing and enriching a literary culture open to other fields of knowledge and to society;
- progressively establishing reference points for placing literary works in historical perspective;
- developing aesthetic awareness that enables learners to analyse the emotions evoked by literature and discuss them in writing and orally;
- continuously studying language as a key instrument of thought, a means of expressing feelings and ideas, and a medium for creativity and imagination.

Given that upper secondary instruction uses objectives-based pedagogy (PPO) as its reference approach, this study draws primarily on two approaches: the traditional approach and the participatory approach.

The traditional approach was selected because it uses PPO in curriculum development, setting out clearly defined learning aims and objectives. Although learners are considered the foundation of curriculum design, their learning needs are not taken into account. Nor does this approach involve teachers, inspectors, or other educational stakeholders in the process. It frequently fails because it excludes stakeholders familiar with classroom realities and consequently tends to overlook learners' and teachers' actual needs and societal expectations when selecting teaching content, as K. Sandy (2017, p. 139) confirms.

By contrast, the participatory approach offers a more open model of curriculum design. It considers learners and their learning difficulties in relation to educational cycle, grade, age, study stream, subject, and profile, while also involving various internal and external stakeholders in developing these documents. As UNESCO emphasises, education is everyone's concern. The participatory approach therefore advocates involving teachers, school administrators, supervisory staff, education specialists, academic authorities, educational planners, policymakers responsible for education, parents, consultants, curriculum designers, and funding stakeholders in curriculum development.

In addition to involving these stakeholders, the participatory approach considers the relationships between:

- learners and the subject taught, according to study stream, to align teaching content with learner profiles and the aims of instruction;
- learners, schools, and society, to clarify the type of individual education seeks to develop and respond effectively to societal needs.

This is the strength of the approach, particularly at a time when teaching practices increasingly seek to develop learner competencies through the competency-based approach (APS).

This study is organised around the following main areas:

- The theoretical framework;
- The methodological framework;
- Discussion of the findings and recommendations.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The challenges of upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo

Teaching French at upper secondary level means enabling learners to use the French language effectively, as stated by the Institut National de Recherche et d'Actions Pédagogiques (2014, p. 4):

At upper secondary level, the focus of French instruction shifts. Whereas lower secondary education emphasises language proficiency, upper secondary education places greater emphasis on the functions of language. This explains why the activities recommended in this curriculum differ somewhat from those proposed at lower secondary level, although the general objectives remain largely unchanged. Thus, beyond language proficiency, French is viewed as a tool serving its user.

2.2 The organisation of upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo

Upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo is organised into four components:

- Grammar;
- Literature;
- Reading or the study of prescribed works;
- Literary writing exercises.

These components, assessed primarily through literary writing exercises, operate synergistically and determine the learner's profile at the end of this educational cycle.

2.3 Grammar

Grammar is the discipline that studies and describes the rules governing the French language. Unlike lower secondary education, where grammar is a distinct component alongside conjugation, spelling, and vocabulary, upper secondary grammar encompasses all aspects of language study, including grammar, conjugation, vocabulary, and spelling.

As language is the principal tool of communication, teaching grammar equips learners to speak, express themselves, and communicate appropriately. Its purpose is therefore to provide an effective communication tool that develops linguistic abilities and enables learners to express themselves confidently and freely, orally and in writing, in all the literary writing exercises prescribed by the curriculum.

At upper secondary level, grammar instruction supports and accompanies the teaching of prescribed literary writing exercises. The concepts selected must therefore correspond to the exercises taught. This explains its designation as “implicit or incidental grammar”.

3 LITERATURE

Literature is the component that examines literary production by country or geographical area (French, Congolese, Francophone, and Black African literature, among others), historical period (seventeenth-century French literature and post-independence African literature), and literary movement or school (classicism, naturalism, and Négritude).

Teaching literature therefore helps learners understand how literary works develop across time, space, and authors (I. R. A. Pandi Mabiala, 2023, p. 34). It also introduces them to a broad range of cultural, historical, geographical, and philosophical knowledge. In short, it provides models of texts and books that can refine their expression and develop competencies in various areas of life.

At upper secondary level, this instruction is divided into two areas:

- Black African literature, encompassing Black African literature generally and Congolese literature in particular;
- French literature, given that the Congo is a Francophone country and a former French colony.

Literature lessons provide essential information about literary history, authors, literary movements, and related topics. Teaching literature also stimulates learners' interest in encountering other cultures.

3.1 The study of literary works or reading

The study of complete works involves examining the prescribed literary works in their entirety. Reading or studying literary works develops learners' literary understanding, helps them identify the overall meaning and specific significance of literary texts, and familiarises them with different literary styles. Learners can then produce high-quality spoken or written texts informed by the models and styles of the authors they have read (I. R. A. Pandi Mabiala, 2019, p. 284). The prescribed works studied in this context include:

- *Chroniques congolaises* by Jean Baptiste Tati Loutard and *L'École des femmes* by Molière in Seconde;
- *L'Étranger* by Albert Camus and *L'Anté-peuple* by Sony Labou Tansi in Première;
- *Le Pleurer-Rire* by Henri LOPES and *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais in Terminale.

3.2 Literary writing exercises (written expression techniques)

This component assesses all the competencies acquired in the other components through reasoning-based tasks such as literary essays, structured literary commentaries, text summaries, and related exercises. It is therefore the point of convergence of all the components, because literary writing exercises draw on competencies acquired in grammar, literature, and the study of literary works or reading.

3.3 Relationships between the components

The strength of upper secondary French instruction lies in teaching the concepts associated with each component. Together, these four components shape learners' education. They operate synergistically and complement one another, as shown in the following diagram:

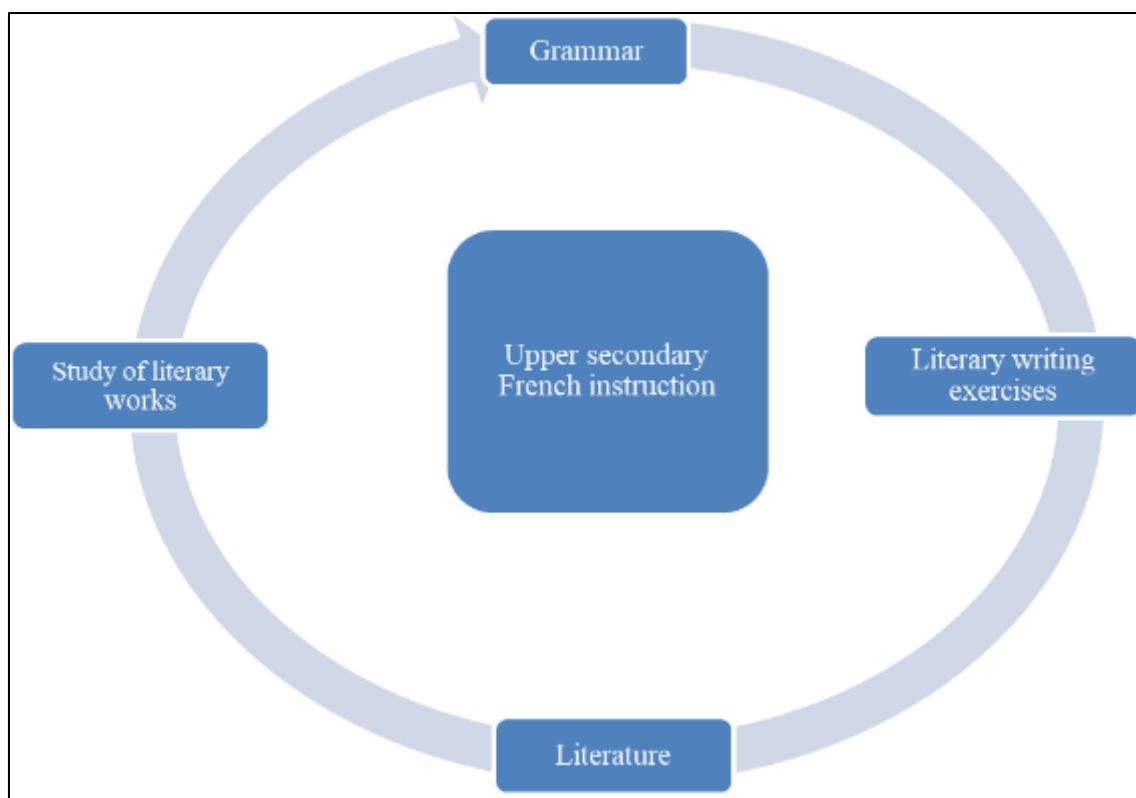


Figure 1: Organisation of upper secondary French instruction

The diagram shows that the components operate in close synergy and interdependence. Failure to teach the concepts associated with any one component therefore disrupts the didactic relationship between the aims of upper secondary French instruction and the learner's educational profile. No component should therefore be excluded.

3.4 Structure of the upper secondary French curriculum in the Congo

Using objectives-based pedagogy (PPO) as its reference model, the upper secondary French curriculum in the Republic of the Congo consists of:

- general objectives;
- specific objectives;
- content or learning objects.

3.4.1 General objectives (GOs)

Jean-Pierre CUQ (2006, p. 180) defines an instructional objective as “the ideal outcome of teaching and learning”. In this sense, it guides the selection of resources, strategies, and methods for achieving that outcome.

Similarly, Renald Legendre (1988, p. 36) views it as “a brief statement of intent indicating the outcomes towards which a process within a curriculum should be directed”. A general objective is therefore formulated to describe the education the student needs to acquire.

The upper secondary French curriculum, from Seconde to Terminale, comprises four (04) general objectives:

- Understanding literary works;
- Expressing oneself orally;
- Expressing oneself in writing;
- Developing acquired technical skills.

Each general objective comprises several specific objectives and is pursued over the long term.

3.4.1.1 General objective 1: Understanding literary works

This general objective develops learners' reading and comprehension skills across written materials, including texts, literary works, and other resources. It provides the rationale for the "study of prescribed works or reading" component.

3.4.1.2 General objective 2: Expressing oneself orally

This objective develops learners' oral communication skills, enabling fluent, spontaneous, and accurate expression.

3.4.1.3 General objective 3: Expressing oneself in writing

This objective develops writing skills by introducing learners to text production in accordance with the methodological principles of each text type. It draws on the linguistic, cultural, and literary competencies acquired through grammar, the study of prescribed works, and literature.

3.4.1.4 General objective 4: Developing acquired technical skills

This objective enables learners to apply previously acquired knowledge to complete a task assigned by the teacher or solve everyday problems.

3.4.2 Specific objectives (SOs)

Specific objectives are subdivisions of general objectives. They comprise conceptual content and guide teachers towards the components corresponding to the concept to be taught. Each specific objective is clarified through the conceptual content that supports its implementation.

3.4.3 Conceptual content

This refers to the concepts to be taught, each of which serves a particular objective.

4 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Methodological framework

This study used document analysis to examine the upper secondary French curriculum. As the same document is used in all schools nationwide, the study sample consisted of a single item: the 2016 edition of the curriculum currently in force. We undertook two tasks:

- To assess the quality of the document's content in relation to the aims of upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo and the intended learner profile;
- To assess the quantity, distribution, and balance of teaching content across the components. We drew on INRAP's curriculum evaluation grid, selecting only the categories relevant to the study.

4.2 Research findings

The findings are presented according to the two tasks outlined above.

4.2.1 Quantity of conceptual content

Quantity was assessed in two ways:

4.2.1.1 Number of specific objectives by general objective

The findings for this category are summarised in the following table:

Table 1: Content of the upper secondary French curriculum

	Specific objectives (SOs)		
General objectives (GOs)	Seconde	Première	Terminale
Understanding literary works	6	6	5
Expressing oneself orally	8	7	6
Expressing oneself in writing	11	6	6

Developing acquired technical skills	9	9	8
Total	34	28	25

Source: Upper Secondary French Curriculum and Teaching Guide, 2016, INRAP

The table indicates that, overall, the curriculum contains a sufficient number of specific objectives for each grade:

- Thirty-four (34) in Seconde;
- Twenty-eight (28) in Première;

Twenty-five (25) in Terminale.

Since each specific objective encompasses more than one item of conceptual content, these figures may be considered satisfactory in quantitative terms.

However, how is conceptual content represented across the components?

4.2.1.2 Representation of conceptual content across the components

The findings on this aspect are presented in the following table:

Table 3: Curriculum content by component

		Number of conceptual content items by grade		
Components		Seconde	Première	Terminale
1	Grammar	9	1	0
2	Literature	0	0	0
3	Study of literary works (reading)	29	31	24
4	Literary writing exercises	36	36	37
T	04	64	68	61

The table shows that, from Seconde to Terminale, upper secondary French instruction in the Republic of the Congo is based primarily on the study of literary works and literary writing exercises, which account for a very high proportion of the content.

4.2.1.2.1 In Seconde

Of the sixty-four (64) conceptual content items reported in the curriculum:

- Literary writing exercises account for the largest number, thirty-six (36), representing 56.25%;
- The study of literary works accounts for twenty-nine (29), representing 43.31%.
- Grammar comprises nine (09) concepts, or 14.06%, while literature includes no concepts, or 0%.

4.2.1.2.2 In Première

The findings again show higher representation for literary writing exercises, with thirty-six content items, or 52.94%, and the study of literary works, with thirty-one (31), or 45.58%.

However, only one (01) grammar concept was identified, representing 1.47%, and none in literature, representing 0%.

4.2.1.2.3 In Terminale

The shortfall is greater than in Seconde and Première. Of the sixty-one concepts in the curriculum, literary writing exercises account for thirty-seven, or 60.65%, and the study of literary works for twenty-four (24), or 39.35%.

Grammar and literature contain no concepts, representing 0% for both components.

These findings reveal a substantial problem in the distribution of conceptual content across components. Grammar is progressively less represented, while literature is virtually absent, in favour of literary writing exercises and the study of literary works, which contain the largest numbers of content items. This imbalance already undermines the achievement of the aims of French instruction in the Congo and the quality of the intended upper secondary learner profile.

4.2.2 Quality of curriculum content

According to the *primary teacher training syllabus* (2005, p. 12), “Curricula in the Congo are developed using the objectives-based approach or pedagogy (PPO)”. This pedagogy requires learners to be placed at the centre of learning so that teaching content is contextualised according to their actual learning circumstances.

Achievement of instructional objectives is assessed through the operational objective, which rests primarily on observing learner behaviour: learners must be able to construct useful knowledge after a lesson. Four requirements support the implementation of this operational objective:

- Describe the instructional intention unambiguously: objectives must be clear to both the teacher and the learner;
- Describe a learner activity identifiable through observable behaviour;
- Specify the conditions under which the desired or expected behaviour should occur;
- Specify the expected performance standards and learning assessment criteria, indicating the level of the learner’s final performance and the criteria used to assess the outcome.

The current French curriculum follows this principle. It was developed in accordance with objectives-based pedagogy (PPO), a reference approach used by many organisations and trainers.

The educational aims are explicitly stated and developed in the curriculum. The general objectives are clearly formulated and aligned with these aims.

However, the specific objectives are formulated with insufficient care and do not adequately reflect teachers’ and learners’ needs or requirements.

5 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings enabled us to identify the place of each component within the French curriculum and to establish its strengths and limitations in relation to learner profiles.

5.1 Strengths of the upper secondary French curriculum in the Republic of the Congo

The findings revealed several strengths. The curriculum’s design meets the requirements of PPO, which calls for curriculum content to be presented in terms of objectives. Indeed, its content is organised according to general and specific objectives.

Since the main aim of upper secondary French instruction is effective language use through language activities, the curriculum meets this aim well in its coverage of literary writing exercises and the study of literary works. The concepts prescribed in these two components can develop learners’ competencies.

However, these strengths are insufficient to meet learners’ needs in French when all the components are not effectively included.

5.2 Limitations of the upper secondary French curriculum in the Republic of the Congo

Although the curriculum has several strengths, its limitations must also be considered in relation to the purpose of French instruction in the Congo and the type of individual it seeks to develop.

The limitations identified include:

- The complete absence of literature at all grades;
- The very limited coverage of grammar.

These are major limitations. Literary writing exercises and the study of literary works, although well represented, can succeed only if learners have first acquired a foundation in grammar and literature. Literature provides literary

knowledge situated in time and space, while grammar supplies the expressive tools needed to engage with a text or essay topic. Unfortunately, the curriculum does not adequately incorporate these two components.

- Curriculum overload. Several concepts listed under literary writing exercises and the study of literary works have never been taught in classrooms. They could potentially be replaced with language and literature concepts to strengthen and balance instruction. Accordingly, when preparing the curriculum implementation plan, inspectors considered it important to include selected grammar and literature concepts in this second document to fill the curricular gap and reinforce instruction.

The curriculum requires revision because the absence of concepts from certain components prevents it from effectively meeting learners' needs, societal expectations, and the aims of instruction.

Recommendations

The curriculum is the backbone of any education system. The strength of an education system depends on the quality of its curriculum and its capacity to respond to learners' and societal needs.

In this regard, I. R. A. Pandi Mabiala (2023, pp. 15–16) notes that “each subject curriculum begins with an introduction indicating what the subject seeks to achieve for the learner's development”.

However, our analysis shows that the document still has several gaps requiring attention. In line with the weaknesses identified, our recommendations are directed primarily at curriculum designers and the ministry responsible for education in the Congo.

5.3 Recommendations for curriculum designers

At upper secondary level, French is regarded as an instrumental subject intended to equip learners with language-use competencies and develop their capacity to reason orally and in writing. Accordingly:

- Aligning and balancing the curriculum with the needs of learners and Congolese society appears to be the best means of improving French instruction in Congolese schools.
- Ideally, conceptual content that is not taught should be removed and replaced with content considered useful for developing Congolese upper secondary students' competencies in French;
- Grammar and literature concepts should be incorporated to balance instruction, fulfil the aims of upper secondary French education, and develop the intended learner attributes. Learners sometimes understand the methods required for literary writing exercises but cannot support their reasoning during assessment because they lack literary and linguistic competencies.

5.4 3.2.2. Recommendations for the ministry responsible for education

Curriculum development in the Congo follows the traditional approach. Although this approach centres on learners, it is limited because it excludes teachers and inspectors, who are more familiar with learners' educational needs. Consequently, the selected content is less likely to meet learners' actual needs and societal expectations effectively.

We therefore propose that the ministry responsible for secondary education in the Congo adopt the participatory approach, which offers better prospects for successful curriculum development. Rather than involving only curriculum designers and consultants, development meetings should include the following stakeholders, as advocated by the participatory approach:

- Teachers, who are best placed to report on classroom realities;
- Inspectors, who supervise educational activities between schools and the inspectorate and also hold relevant field-based information;
- Parents, who represent society and assess schools' social impact through their children's results;
- Consultants, to share experience;
- Political authorities responsible for education, to liaise with senior authorities and make decisions concerning the selected content;
- Curriculum designers, to assemble and finalise the document;
- Funding stakeholders, to assess the cost of the activity and identify ways to mobilise resources.
- All these activities should take account of:
 - the relationship between learners and the subject taught;
 - the relationship between learners, the subject taught, schools, and society;
 - the aims of instruction for learners and society;

- the type of individual to be developed by the end of instruction.

6 CONCLUSION

This study analysed the upper secondary French curriculum in the Republic of the Congo to identify its strengths and weaknesses. In qualitative terms, the document follows the PPO model and meets the curriculum development criteria associated with this pedagogy. It comprises instructional objectives divided into general objectives, specific objectives, and teaching content, placing learners at the centre of learning.

We also found satisfactory coverage of content relating to the study of prescribed works and literary writing exercises at all grades.

These features give the document the characteristics of an upper secondary French curriculum (C. Sirard, <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit//45365> ac see table of contenus, accessed 16 January 2025 at 16:25).

However, the study sought to identify both positive and negative aspects of the curriculum, and its limitations are numerous. Upper secondary French instruction is organised around four main components: literature, grammar, the study of literary works, and literary writing exercises. In practice, however, not all components are represented in the curriculum; only two are clearly included. This is a major obstacle to achieving the objectives of upper secondary French instruction.

Literary writing exercises and the study of literary works, which are well represented in the curriculum, can succeed only if learners have first acquired a foundation in grammar and literature.

Curriculum overload is another factor undermining the quality of the document.

Improving the document therefore requires:

- Redesigning or revising the curriculum through a participatory approach to closely align its content with Congolese learners' actual needs in French, the needs of Congolese society, and the aims of upper secondary French instruction;
- Involving the various educational stakeholders identified above;
- Incorporating concepts from all four components to establish a clear and effective balance in upper secondary French instruction.
- Although grammar is taught incidentally or implicitly, the concepts needed for literary writing exercises must be explicitly stated in the curriculum to structure and harmonise instruction.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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