

Acquiring the Ability to Synthesize: The Case of Burundian Undergraduates Confronted with Literary Reading in French

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300372>

Received: 26 February 2025; Accepted: 03 March 2025; Published: 22 April 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the synthesis skills of undergraduate students at the University of Burundi with a particular focus on literary reading in French. It highlights the challenges students face, including mastering the French language and analyzing complex texts in French. Through an inter-university competition, we assessed their ability to summarize and orally present the synthesis of literary works read. It was found that, on the one hand, they had good writing skills and, on the other, they lacked argumentation and oral communication skills. The study thus highlights the need for an adapted and diversified pedagogical approach focused on developing cross-disciplinary skills and improving oral communication with a view to developing skills in synthesis and argumentation. It therefore activities such as debates and writing workshops to reinforce these skills for Burundian students.

Keywords: Synthesis skills, literary reading, undergraduate students, Burundi, French language

INTRODUCTION

The act of sharing one's reading in French, far from being trivial, proves to be a real challenge for students, particularly in the Burundian context, even though French is a language of teaching and learning. Faced with an environment that is often not conducive to exchange, Burundian students struggle to find spaces dedicated to the oral and written expression of their reading impressions. Yet this practice, far from being futile, is of vital importance to the learning process. Indeed, sharing one's literary favourites not only consolidates one's own understanding of the work, but also enables one to pass on one's passion to others. In so doing, students enrich their vocabulary, hone their oral and written expression skills, and help create a dynamic of sharing around the book.

PROBLEMATIC OF THE STUDY

Reading, as a fundamental activity in any learning process, is a cornerstone of education. Not only does it enable the acquisition of new knowledge, it also develops essential cognitive skills such as comprehension, analysis and critical thinking. At the heart of these skills lies synthesis, the ability to reformulate the main ideas of a text in one's own words. The ability to synthesize a text is thus a sign of in-depth comprehension, and enables a lasting appropriation of knowledge.

In Burundi, reading in French, the language of teaching and learning, represents a particular challenge. Burundian students face a number of obstacles in mastering the language. School curricula are often overloaded, leaving little room for regular reading practice. In addition, the lack of suitable teaching resources and the absence of a reading culture in some families contribute to students' disengagement from this

intellectual and recreational activity. The result is a marked lack of interest in reading, manifested in difficulties in understanding complex texts and extracting the essential information from them.

In this context, our study proposes to explore the ability of undergraduate students at the University of Burundi to master the skill of synthesis. More specifically, we will ask the following questions:

- To what extent are undergraduate students at the University of Burundi capable of producing relevant and coherent summaries of literary texts in French? In other words, are they able to identify the main ideas, prioritize them and reformulate them clearly and concisely?
- What factors influence their ability to go beyond simple comprehension of the text to a more in-depth analysis? In other words, what factors help or hinder the development of more sophisticated synthesis skills, such as interpretation, evaluation and comparison?

This study is of particular importance in the Burundian educational context. Improving students' ability to synthesize would help them to achieve greater academic success, by making it easier to understand lectures, prepare for exams and write assignments. Moreover, the ability to synthesize is a cross-cutting skill that has applications in many professional fields. By developing this skill, students will be better prepared to enter the world of work and meet the demands of an increasingly complex society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Books in Burundi: yesterday and today

The omnipresence of books in the educational landscape is an indisputable fact. It is the ideal vehicle for transmitting knowledge and values. As an institution, the school's vocation is to train enlightened, independent citizens. Reading is the first step towards this goal, insofar as it develops critical thinking, imagination and curiosity. In Burundi, the word "isomero" [class] underlines the symbolic importance of reading in the educational process. The school is seen as a place where people come not only to learn, but also to discover the pleasure of reading.

The adventure of the book in Burundi had tumultuous beginnings. The colonizers and missionaries, far from encouraging access to written culture, long harbored a mistrust of reading. Monseigneur Lavigerie, founder of the Pères Blancs, urged his confreres to avoid placing books in the hands of Africans, fearing that they would regard them as talismans (Rabeyrin:3). This view, shared by the colonial authorities, led to a veritable repression of reading, especially novels, accused of "deforming" Africans and alienating them from their native culture. Book education was seen as a threat to African identity, a tool of acculturation at the service of colonial interests.

This led to an allergy to books that was even cultivated in schools until the 1940s, as illustrated by this instruction from missionary Joseph Marie Jadot (1979:33), at the Groupe Scolaire d'Astrida:

"Read little. Disordered reading numbs the mind, it does not nourish it (...). The reduction should focus on novels and newspapers, which are even more dangerous for you: most novels shake and do not relax; they agitate the mind and disorientate thoughts"

Until 1947, colonial librarians strictly controlled access to books for the natives, only allowing them to consult picture books, while they served Europeans with more latitude, but always with circumspection (Commission d'évaluation des programmes, 1984: 113).

Reading in Burundi: between tradition and modernity

The history of reading in Burundi is marked by some notable developments. After the Second World War, the Belgian administration set up an educational system that encouraged reading through school and university libraries. Books were at the heart of learning, and students were encouraged to read widely. However, this

positive dynamic has slowed down in recent years, with difficulties in accessing documentary resources and less intensive use of libraries.

Today, reading in Burundi faces a number of challenges. Complex administrative procedures and delays in accessing libraries discourage students. What's more, the rise of digital technologies and the omnipresence of the Internet have fostered a culture of rapid, superficial reading, to the detriment of in-depth, critical reading. Students often content themselves with online sources, neglecting the wealth of works available in libraries.

Reading: a passport to the world

Language learning is not just about acquiring communicative skills. Literature plays an essential role in cultural and intellectual enrichment. As Pierre Dumont (1983) points out, literature enables us to develop a critical sense, deepen our understanding of the world and appropriate a culture. Burundi's cultural policy (2007:83) recognizes the importance of literature and encourages the production of national literary works.

Reading has many benefits for the individual. It develops curiosity, broadens horizons, enhances thinking skills and improves understanding of the world. For Burundian students, reading is an invaluable tool for succeeding in their studies, integrating into society and contributing to its development. As underlined by the verb kirundi "gusoma" [to read], reading is a complex activity that goes beyond the simple deciphering of words.

In conclusion, reading is an essential activity for personal and social development. It is therefore urgent to promote reading in Burundi by facilitating access to books, encouraging national literary production and integrating reading into educational programs. As Bernard Kutchy (1970) reminded us, *"a people that cannot read is a threatened people"*. Promoting reading is a major challenge for Burundi's cultural and social development.

METHODOLOGY

Designing an inter-university reading competition: an innovative approach

In order to assess the synthesis skills of Burundian undergraduates confronted with literary reading in French, we opted for an original methodology: the organization of an inter-university reading competition. This enabled us to create a stimulating context for mobilizing the participants' writing and oral communication skills. Indeed, by asking students to summarize a literary work of their choice and present it before a jury, we were able to observe their ability to synthesize, analyze and communicate effectively.

The two phases of the study: written and oral

The study was carried out in two distinct phases. First, the students were asked to write a summary of a literary work of their choice, not exceeding 800 words. This first phase enabled us to assess their ability to summarize in writing and their understanding of narrative mechanisms. In the second phase, the students presented their summaries to a panel of experts made up of university professors specializing in literature. This oral test assessed their oral communication skills, their ability to interact by answering questions and to defend their analyses.

Selection of participants and development of an evaluation grid

Of the 56 students registered, 20 were selected to take part in the final "oral" phase. This selection provided a representative sample of the student population concerned. To evaluate the students' productions, we drew up a detailed evaluation grid taking into account various criteria such as the relevance of the summary, the richness of the vocabulary, the clarity of expression, the ability to go beyond the content of the book and to propose a personal analysis. Observation of non-verbal behavior (gestures, pronunciation) was also taken into account during oral presentations.

A robust and rigorous methodology

Our methodology follows on from the work of Barthes (1953), who analyzed the mechanisms of writing production, in particular linguistic codes and conventions. He proposes a reflection on the nature of language and the relationship between author, text and reader. This approach can be particularly useful for studying students' stylistic choices and discursive strategies in their summaries.

We also drew inspiration from Genette (1972), who explores the different facets of narrative, distinguishing between story (what is told) and narrative (how the story is told). This distinction is fundamental to the analysis of student summaries, as it enables us to distinguish between what is preserved from the original text and what is added or modified by the student. Their work on narratology, semiology and text analysis has provided us with a solid theoretical framework for analyzing written and oral productions.

By combining analysis of written productions and direct observation of behavior, we were able to obtain a precise view of students' synthesis skills. This methodological approach, although specific to the Burundian context, can be adapted to other contexts and serve as a reference for future research on the acquisition of synthesis skills in students.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Our study involved a sample of 20 students, selected from the initial 56 participants. This choice was made on the basis of the quality of the abstracts submitted during the first phase of the study. The 20 students selected demonstrated an ability to synthesize and analyze literary texts. For both phases of the study (written and oral), precise evaluation criteria were established in advance to ensure a rigorous and objective assessment.

Description of respondents' answers

The results of this study are based on a rigorous analysis of three main criteria: the quality of the written text, the relevance of the oral presentation and the quality of the overall presentation. Each of these criteria was broken down into ten sub-criteria, graded on two points, for a total of twenty points

Analysis of oral performance

Evaluation criteria	Indicator	Workforce/20	Note/20	%
1.text quality	1.Style: language register and handling	15	16	80
	2.lexical field according to			
	3.coherence and cohesion	5	14	70
2 Relevance of the presentation	1. Suitability	13	13	65
	2.argumentative quality: arrangement of ideas			
	3 - Illustration of arguments: examples, quotations, adages, etc.	7	12	60
3 Presentation of the speech	1.diction	8	15	75
	2.gestures			
	3. intonation	12	12	60
	4.spontaneity: linguistic fluidity			

This table presents an evaluation of the synthesis skills of competing students, based on various criteria and indicators. Each row corresponds to a specific criterion (quality of text, relevance of presentation, etc.), and

each column indicates the number of students assessed (headcount), the average mark obtained out of 20 and the corresponding percentage.

Analysis of evaluation criteria for oral presentations

The oral presentations were assessed according to three main criteria: the quality of the text, the relevance of the presentation and the presentation of the speech.

Text quality

This first criterion included evaluation of style, language register, lexical richness and overall coherence. Results in this category were positive overall, with averages above 65%. This indicates a satisfactory mastery of the fundamentals of writing by the students.

Relevance of the presentation

The aim of this criterion was to assess the relevance of the comments to the given topic, the quality of the arguments developed and the relevance of the examples and illustrations used.

The results were slightly lower than for the first criterion, suggesting potential difficulties in structuring thought and supporting arguments.

Speech presentation

This last criterion concerned the evaluation of the speakers' diction, gestures, intonation and spontaneity. The results here are more mixed. Diction and intonation are generally well mastered, while gestures and spontaneity seem to pose more of a problem.

Indicators

Students demonstrate a good command of different language registers, using vocabulary adapted to a variety of contexts. The choice of words is relevant to the themes covered, although the lexical field could be enriched for greater precision and nuance.

The structure of the texts is generally sound, but there is room for improvement in terms of argumentative quality and illustration of arguments. It would be beneficial to strengthen the coherence and cohesion of ideas for a more convincing argumentation.

Diction and intonation are relatively well mastered, contributing to a clear and audible oral presentation. However, gestures and spontaneity need further work. Greater ease in these areas would enhance the impact of presentations and enable more fluid, natural communication.

The constant number of 20 students for all the criteria assessed provides a solid basis for direct, objective comparison of results. This uniformity makes it possible to measure individual and collective performance accurately, without the analysis being distorted by variations in the number of students.

The use of percentages makes it much easier to visualize the level of mastery achieved for each criterion. High percentages, above 70%, indicate a good command of the skills assessed. On the other hand, lower percentages, below 65%, highlight areas where students are encountering difficulties and require extra support.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Improving Burundian students' ability to synthesize literary texts

To improve the synthesis skills of Burundian students of French literature, it is crucial to adopt an active and varied pedagogical approach. Drawing on the work of researchers such as Perrenoud (1996) and Titeca (2000),

this approach should encourage students to develop a critical and interactive reading style. Indeed, synthesis is not just about summarizing a text, but requires a genuine understanding of the issues, arguments and nuances of the work. Thus, in the process of developing synthesis competence, our research proposes interconnecting the following aspects:

Developing cross-disciplinary skills

Beyond simple comprehension, it is essential to develop cross-disciplinary skills such as argumentation, hypothesis formulation and the ability to link information. A variety of activities, such as debates, argumentative writing and group work, help to foster these skills. In addition, by drawing on the work of Dolz and Schneuwly (1993) on discourse genres, it is possible to familiarize students with the specificities of different types of texts, thus enriching their toolbox for literary analysis.

Student-centered teaching

Finally, a student-centered pedagogy is essential to foster the acquisition of solid synthesis skills. By proposing diversified activities, encouraging autonomy and valuing exchanges, it is possible to make learning literature more motivating and effective. In short, by combining an active approach to reading in French, the development of cross-disciplinary skills and a student-centered pedagogy, it is possible to significantly improve the synthesis skills of Burundian students of literature.

Implications for teaching

The results of this evaluation highlight the need to strengthen students' skills in constructing sound arguments. Specific pedagogical activities, such as debates, written essays or oral presentations, should be set up to encourage them to develop critical thinking skills and back up their arguments with concrete examples. The use of a variety of documents (press articles, excerpts from literary works, statistical data) would enrich their knowledge and provide them with diversified material for reflection.

Improving oral communication

The results also underline the importance of working on public speaking. Staging exercises, role-playing and debate simulations could help students gain confidence and improve their elocution. It is essential to pay particular attention to gestures, intonation and fluency of oral expression, in order to promote effective and punchy communication.

Importance of collaborative work

Group activities are a powerful lever for developing synthesis and argumentation skills. Working in teams, students are encouraged to exchange ideas, compare points of view and construct collective arguments. These interactions foster the acquisition of critical thinking skills and the ability to adapt to different styles of thinking.

Enriching the lexicon and discovering different writing styles

Last but not least, it is essential to broaden the range of texts offered to students. By exposing them to a variety of literary genres and writing styles, they can enrich their vocabulary, discover new forms of expression and develop their sensitivity to language. Creative writing workshops could also be envisaged to encourage students to express their own voice and develop their creativity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these results underline the need for a diversified pedagogical approach tailored to the specific needs of students. By combining individual and group activities, offering a variety of media and encouraging oral and written expression, it is possible to significantly improve students' synthesis and argumentation skills.

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