

## UNSATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE IN THE JCE FRENCH: THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE ASSESSMENT TOOLS

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### **Abstract**

*Learners' academic performance is always defined in terms of examination performance, or rather, it is solely gauged through examination results, yet examination is rarely taken into consideration when seeking to identify obstacles impeding good performance of learners. Given the significant role of examinations in assessing learners' academic achievement, the reliability and validity of examining tools need to be addressed to ensure that examining tools are adapted in assessing learners' ability. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate French Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) assessment tools in order to identify variables of these tools that could potentially affect performance of learners through a thorough analysis of the JC French Syllabus, JCE French Assessment Syllabus and past JC Examination Papers. Based on the observations made, recommendations on measures intended to improve the situation will be provided.*

**Keywords:** academic performance, assessment, examination, French, JCE

### **Introduction**

French as a foreign language has been present in Botswana's education system since as far back as before independence in 1966. Indeed, traces of the French language being offered as a language subject can be found in the Botswana National Commission on Education report of 1977. This first ever Report on education recommended that French should no longer be an alternative to Setswana language in the secondary school curriculum. We can therefore safely assume that, before the release of this report, learners at secondary schools could choose to do either Setswana or French given that the Botswana government maintained the status quo on education at independence. But it was not until 2000 that the then Ministry of Education gave a much-needed impetus to the learning and teaching of French when a pilot project was introduced in fifteen Junior Secondary Schools (from now on JSS). Seven years later, the pilot project ended, and French was expanded to more JSS and introduced to Senior

Secondary Schools. Currently, there would be more than forty public schools offering French as a foreign language to more than four thousand learners. If these numbers are anything to go by, we can rightly assume that there is a growing interest in French in Botswana.

Introducing French into Botswana's education system has been a giant leap in preparing learners to be competitive in this world where economies are becoming increasingly international and where proficiency in international languages has been observed to be one of the most invaluable skills that learners need to possess in order to increase their chances of success at both academic and professional levels. However, the learning and teaching of French as a foreign language in JSS is currently facing numerous challenges that impact negatively on learners' performance and experience. Unsatisfactory performance in Junior Secondary National Examination entitled Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) appears to have become a recurring phenomenon in the country over the years and yet, the circumstances leading to this poor performance have not been studied mainly because, generally, it is widely concluded that it is teachers and/or learners that are to blame, even though research has shown that performance of learners is never influenced by a single cause but an accumulation of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Interestingly though, learners' academic performance is always defined in terms of examination performance, or rather say is solely gauged through examination results, yet examination is rarely taken into consideration when seeking to identify obstacles impeding good performance of learners. Examination as an appropriate objective measure of educational achievement has long held a strong influence on educational practice in order to ensure that educational programmes were achieving intended goal. It is an important instrument to reflect learners' achievement. Given the significant role of examinations in assessing learners' academic achievement, the reliability and validity of examining tools need to be addressed to ensure that examining tools are adapted in assessing learners' ability. Notably, the Botswana National Commission on Education acknowledged the inherent benefits of examination analysis in improving educational quality as reflected in the 1977 *Kagisano ka Thuto*, Education for Kagisano. The Commission recommended that Botswana should develop a capacity to analyse examination results [and examination papers (our addition)] both as a contribution to curriculum reform and improving teaching and as a means of improving examinations themselves. This recommendation was never implemented.

The qualitative analysis of the JCE results in French (released by Curriculum Development and Evaluation -French), which takes into considerations the number of learners who obtained Grade C or better only, indicates that in 2013 and 2014, out of the 35 schools offering French, none of them achieved a qualitative score of more than 40%. In 2015, only 2 out of 37 schools achieved that score. In 2016, only 1 school managed to score above 40%. In 2017, only 1 school achieved more than 40%, scoring a qualitative score of 50%. In 2018, four schools out of 38 scored above 40%, with 1 school achieving a score of 50%. These unsatisfactory results as well as the findings of the research done by Kewagamang (2011, 2018) have led us to ask the following question: Do assessment tools play a role in the poor performance of learners who sit the JCE? From the main question above, the following research questions emanate: Is the JCE valid, reliable and fair? Does the JCE assess the correct level of proficiency? Does JCE assess the expected outcomes as indicated in the French teaching syllabus? Are the examination components aligned to the current frameworks in foreign language assessment? To respond to these questions, this study will investigate French JCE assessment tools in order to identify variables of these tools that could potentially affect performance of learners through a thorough analysis of the JC French Syllabus, JC French Assessment Syllabus and past JC Examination Papers. Based on the

observations made, recommendations on measures intended to improve the situation will be provided.

### **Overview of the Junior Secondary Teaching Syllabus**

The teaching syllabus is a text that guides stakeholders and especially teachers and examiners on what the programme entails, its aims and objectives, the methodology to be used, the competences that the learner should have acquired at the end of the learning programme as well as the assessment procedures among other things. The current JC French syllabus was last revised in 2008 and implemented in 2010, albeit with little or no significant changes. The syllabus is designed by the Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation through a panel comprising of teachers and experts of French as a foreign language.

### **Teaching approach**

The teaching approach prescribed by the syllabus is the Communicative Approach (CA). According to Richards and Rogers (1986) the CA to language is best regarded as an approach and not as a method. They explain that methods are teaching systems with prescribed techniques and practices, whereas approaches have to do with language teaching philosophies that can be implemented in the classroom in different styles. Widdowson (1990) further states that the CA to language focuses more on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds. It proposes a functional approach focusing more on meaning that can be expressed by language and its function in various linguistic situations. The approach is, in this regard based on Austin's theory of Speech acts (Austin 1962).

Preparing learners for meaningful communication is one of the major aims of the CA and errors are tolerated as part of the learning process. Communicative competence then becomes the major preoccupation of the CA in second language teaching and learning. The term communicative competence is largely attributed to Hymes (1972) who pointed out the importance not only of language structures but also, of norms and appropriateness in a given social context. This means that, both implicit knowledge of a language and the ability to use it efficiently define communicative competence. Canale & Swain (1980) propose four components of communicative competence, based on various communicative competence theories. These are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence.

Grammatical competence or linguistic competence refer to knowledge related to the structure of the language, that is, phonology, orthography, morphology and syntax. Grammatical competence "focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances," (Canale 1983:7). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use language and respond appropriately to a given sociolinguistic context, the learner's ability to comprehend the intent of an utterance in a particular situation and not only its literal meaning. Discourse competence is related to the learner's aptitude in comprehending and producing texts in the form of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It relates to the production of coherent and cohesive texts. Strategic competence refers to the different strategies used by the learner to compensate for difficulties in grammatical, sociolinguistic or discourse competence through strategies like paraphrasing, requesting for repetition or clarification or using gap fillers.

It is important to understand that the main goal of the CA is to attain communicative competence: that is, making sure that the learner is able to function or perform in the target

language. This approach is less concerned with the structure of the target language but its communicative function (Li 1998). It then follows that one should understand communicative competence before understanding CA. Taylor (1988) proposed that the term competence be replaced by communicative proficiency to avoid confusion. Today the term language proficiency is more largely used. In the CA, this proficiency is measured by taking into account four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. A CA based syllabus is structured according to notional and functional categories and not according to the language structures. Some communicative based syllabi can be skills-based or functional (Richards 2006). A skills-based syllabus focuses on the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Each of these skills can in turn be broken down into micro skills. Some examples of the listening skill as outlined by Richard (*ibid.*) can include the following:

- recognising key words in a conversation;
- recognising the topic of the conversation;
- recognising time reference, etc.

These skills are, however, best taught in an integrated approach and not in isolation as they are more often solicited at the same time in communicative interaction. A functional based communicative teaching syllabus is structured according to the functions that the learner has to carry out in the target language such as introducing oneself or someone, making a request, apologising, ordering a meal, making a booking, asking for or giving directions, just to name but a few. The lexicon and the grammar that the learner learns is chosen according to the function that they are learning.

### **Profile of candidates**

The Botswana JC syllabus states that the level attained at the end of the three years of learning and instruction would be the *basic* level. A description of what the basic level entails is not provided in the syllabus or elsewhere. It would have been important to outline the characteristics of a basic level learner as this provides a guidance for teachers as well as examiners since this has direct incidence on what should be taught and what should be examined.

### **Structure and progression**

The syllabus is laid out into 9 units. In a year, learners are expected to complete three units, which corresponds to one unit per term. Each unit is divided into sub-units being listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each sub-unit or skill is further divided into sub-topics, general objectives and specific objectives. The time allocated to the program is a minimum of two periods a week, which corresponds to 80 minutes as a period is made up of 40 minutes.

The syllabus proposes the use of functional communicative skills, which implies that it is of a skills-based and functional nature at the same time. Learners are therefore expected to be able to use the four skills for communication purposes in French. On the contrary, a closer study of the syllabus shows big contradictions to this claim. The structure of the syllabus is not very consistent with the CA. First of all, the units have been divided into sub-units, which correspond to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This gives the impression that each skill exists in isolation and implies that it should be taught in isolation because for each skill there are separate sub-topics. Secondly, for some sub-units and skills there are topics and for some sub-units there are sub-topics. It is not clear how the difference comes about.

## **Aims, objectives and competences**

The aims of the Junior Certificate French syllabus (2008: iii) are outlined as follows:

- communicate in French at a basic level, both orally and in writing;
- use functional communicative skills in French;
- understand and respond appropriately to a variety of short texts;
- appreciate basic reading material in French;
- appreciate the culture of the target language;
- appreciate the advantages of learning a foreign language;
- establish a foundation for study of the French language at a higher level;
- appreciate the importance of international interactions in a global economy.

The syllabus (*ibid.*) goes on to outline key competences that a learner should have acquired at the end of this three-year skills-based programme. These are the as follows:

- understand the gist of a statement expressed by a speaker;
- acquire an appreciation of the correct intonation of the French language;
- talk about day to day events/activities in their lives;
- give and carry out basic instructions and directions;
- interpret and link illustrations, pictures and graphs to printed text;
- read aloud or silently from a short text and show understanding;
- construct simple and compound sentences;
- write paragraphs, informal letters and notes;
- pronounce the language correctly;
- use information and communication technology efficiently to enhance teaching of a new language;
- appreciate aspects of the French customs and culture;
- appreciate contemporary national and global issues;
- acquire an appreciation of the concept of a global world.

An analysis of what is termed as the general and specific objectives shows some significant inconsistencies when one compares the said objectives with those of a basic language user. Some examples of general objectives and specific objectives include the following:

1. Use idiomatic expressions to tell time (Unit 1.2.5.3 Speaking (*ibid.*:2))
2. Recognise cardinal numbers up to infinity (Unit 2.1.4.1 Listening (*ibid.*:2))
3. Use specialised form of writing (Unit 5.4.5 Writing (*ibid.*:13))

## **Content**

The content of the syllabus is not always coherent with the level of language proficiency that is targeted. The topics or sub-topics do not reflect a functional or communicative approach to teaching and learning. Examples of topics and sub-topics include: Greetings, Lexical acquisition, Sounds, Numbers, Time, Basic Speech acts, Linguistic structures, to name but a few. These topics do not, except Greeting, reflect any communicative situation or context. For example, the lexicon or vocabulary to be learned should be in regard to the communicative situation being proposed but, in this instance, as is the case for almost all units and topics, the situation is not proposed. The objectives, just like the topics, do not follow the structure of a communicative language-teaching syllabus. Such objectives should be reflective of a general aim to achieve communicative competence. As it is, the syllabus

gives a lot of attention to correct language use and language structure, which, in the end, makes it a traditional grammar-oriented syllabus.

A syllabus is supposed to be a reliable indicator of the quality of teaching and learning that will take place and therefore should indicate how the quality of the teaching and learning will be assessed and evaluated. The Junior Secondary French syllabus does not inform on how the quality of teaching and learning will be assessed, evaluated and graded. It only mentions that “formative assessment of the subject will be carried out throughout the course at classroom level” (*ibid.*: iv). Mention is made of final assessment procedures on page iii as follows: “The final Junior Certificate Examination in French will be based on the assessment of listening, reading and writing skills.” One has to look into the Assessment Syllabus designed by another body for information regarding the final assessment.

### **Overview of the JC French Assessment Syllabus**

The Assessment syllabus is designed by the Botswana Examinations Council (BEC), also through a similar panel method as the teaching syllabus. The assessment syllabus was released in 2013, following the implementation of the revised teaching syllabus in 2010. In its introduction, it is stated that the assessment syllabus is designed to provide a framework for the assessment of candidates who have completed the three-year junior secondary programme. Candidates are assessed on a scale of A-E and failure to meet the minimum requirement for grade E results in the award of a U grade. The assessment syllabus also outlines its general aims (BEC 2013: 7) as follows:

- to ensure proper assessment of all the important skills in the curriculum;
- to enable both teaching and assessment to cater for all ability levels;
- to provide an efficient evaluative mechanism of the curriculum;
- to encourage an investigative approach to learning;
- to provide internationally recognised standards;
- to enable the learners to realise their full potential;
- to foster the development of the communication skills;
- to reinforce the ability to handle and interact meaningfully with given materials;
- to encourage candidates to apply learned skills to manipulate life.

Furthermore, the syllabus outlines two specific assessment objectives grouped under Knowledge and Understanding and Language Use and Communication (*ibid.*: 8). These are as follows:

#### **Assessment Objective 1: Knowledge and Understanding**

Candidates will be assessed on their ability to:

- locate and select relevant information from texts that are heard or read;
- use reference skills and materials for different purposes;
- understand and interpret a wide range of short texts, pictures and conversations that are heard or read.

#### **Assessment Objective 2: Language Use and Communication**

Candidates will be assessed on their ability to:

- handle the mechanics of language;
- organise and present information in various formats, showing a sense of style and

- register, for both oral and written purposes;
- use linguistic forms and grammatical structures effectively;
- express facts, ideas and opinions, or solicit for information, using a wide range of appropriate vocabulary and basic expressions.

A closer look at the two objectives shows that the omission of the vital information on the characteristics of a basic learner has resulted in a content that is sometimes not coherent with the level that is aimed at. A learner who has accumulated approximately 240 hours of instruction in French as a foreign language cannot be expected “*to interpret a wide range of texts, show a sense of style and register when speaking and writing or use a wide range of appropriate vocabulary*” (our emphasis). The problem becomes evident when one analyses the final examination papers and their items.

### **French Junior Certificate Examination Papers**

The syllabus (2008: iv) states that the JCE will be based on the assessment of listening, reading and writing skills. However, “*speaking skills would not be tested because of the unreliability of the scores [sic] and the logistical difficulties in organising such an assessment*”. Therefore, only three language skills are currently assessed: Paper 1 – Listening Comprehension, Paper 2 – Reading Comprehension and Paper 3 – Language Use. The three papers carry different weights in marks and have also been allocated specific durations.

#### **Paper 1 – Listening comprehension**

The JCE listening comprehension paper targets learners’ listening skills and it has a duration of 45 minutes. It is divided into two sections, A and B. Each section corresponds to an oral reading of a written text recorded on a CD. Section A comprises of a short text of 90 words and covers items 1 to 5. It can either be a monologue or a dialogue. Section B text is a bit longer, about 220 words, and can either be a monologue or a dialogue. It covers items 6 to 13. The 13 items account for a total of 15 marks. The paper has the lowest weighting (15%) of all the French examination papers described on the BEC framework.

#### **Instructions**

Each section is preceded by oral instructions which are in English. Written instructions are also in English but the items themselves are written in French. The oral instructions are very clear and inform learners on how the examination will be administered and what they should do during the listening. As for the written instructions, which informs learners on how to answer the questions, only the instructions for items 1, 2, 6 and 7 are clear. Learners have to tick the letter that represents the correct answer. However, for the other items, the instructions are not very clear. Learners are requested to write their answers in the spaces provided. Nonetheless, they are not instructed on whether the answer should be in full sentences or single words. This information is important in that if the expected answer is a word, learners should not waste time trying to structure sentences. On the contrary, if the expected answer should be in sentence form, learners should know that they will lose marks for providing answers as words instead of sentences.

#### **Administration of the examination**

The listening passages are recorded on a CD. Each passage is played twice to the learner and is preceded by instructions in English. Before listening to each passage for the first time, learners are instructed to keep their question papers closed and not to write anything. However, they are not informed of the purpose of the activity nor the nature of the document they are going to listen to. They do not have the permission to read the questions. As a result,

during the first listening, learners listen without any particular outlined objective. After the first listening, they are given 5 minutes to study the questions. They then close the question paper for the second and last listening of the recording. During this second listening, they are allowed to take notes. At the end of the second reading, , learners listen to a 30-second announcement informing them that the reading of the passage is over and inviting them to answer the question. They are then given time to answer the questions. This passive listening, that is far from reflecting real life listening situations, does not give the learners a purpose for listening. The first listening denies the learners the opportunity to use active listening strategies. In fact, one never listens just to listen but rather to achieve an objective that will determine the manner in which they listen (Gremmo & Holec 1990: 4). Furthermore, the instructions at the end of the second listening are more of a distraction than anything else. It will be enough to invite learners to start answering questions than to take 30 important seconds away from them when they could be retrieving some information from their short-term memory.

### **Arrangement of question items**

In order for learners to fully appreciate a listening comprehension activity and for learners with low level of proficiency in the language to be catered for, it is important to start with items that test general understanding of the context. These can then be followed by items that require more specific details. The types of questions, the type of information to look for and the place of this information in the text are determinant of the learner's level of understanding the text. Contrary to what is postulated above, This JCE examination starts with specific questions right away. This disadvantages low-level learners. The items could also be simplified to the learners' level such that they really test oral understanding.

### **Nature of the audio texts**

The recordings are well recorded with no background noise and the nature of the texts corresponds to the expected level of proficiency of learners. Indeed, at A2 level learners are expected to be in a position to understand dialogues, monologues, recorded messages in a range of everyday topics (Council of Europe 2001). However, the themes of the texts could be termed uninteresting as they are not close to the learners' sphere of life in that they are always simulated by one or two adults. This could lead to learners "switching off" especially in section B where the text is longer.

The texts also lack authenticity in that there is no real-life language use task that they are intended to develop. Task Authenticity can be defined as the degree of correspondence between the features of the text proposed to learners and the actual real-life language. It is the "correspondence between language test characteristics and features of target language use" (Bachman & Palmer 1996) or the degree to which the components of a test relate to a real-life situation they are attempting to replicate (Bachman 1990). There are two important aspects of authenticity in language learning and assessment, which are situational authenticity and interactional authenticity. A text is situationally authentic if it represents an activity that candidates are likely to encounter in real life and which is likely to be familiar and relevant to them. Interactional authenticity is achieved if those undertaking the activity understand the objectives of doing the activity, they know the purpose for carrying out that activity and if they possess the necessary linguistic tools to do so. This therefore means that the tasks that we ask our learners to engage in should mirror as much as possible real-life situations and contexts. Authenticity is achieved by creating a match between test tasks and target language use tasks (Bachman 1990). According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) a text is authentic if it contains natural language, makes use of themes that are meaningful and relevant to the

target learners, uses good contextualisation of items and uses tasks that replicate real-world tasks. The text used should reflect the natural usage of language which is heard and spoken in everyday life on the streets, or on the television or can be read in an article or on the internet, newspapers or studied in educational institutions.

This examination uses recorded scripted texts to examine the listening skills of learners. The reader even states in the instruction just before the learners listen to the recording that “*You will now listen to passage 2. Listen carefully as it is read out to you..... Now I will read out passage 2*”. These types of texts are considered less effective for testing comprehension. They are regarded as unrealistic and sound unnatural. One can easily sense the lack of spontaneity associated with scripted texts (Gary 2014). In fact, Gary (*ibid.*) advocates for listening texts to test learners understanding of oral language. In this regard, the use of written texts, limits the achievement of this objective.

### **Time**

When comparing the length of the soundtrack, the questions and the degree of complexity of both the oral text and the questions, we can conclude that the time allocated for this paper is sufficient enough for candidates to complete the examination.

### **Weighting and scoring**

In terms of weighting and scoring, marks are clearly indicated for all the items in each of the papers studied. The weighting and scoring of each section correspond well to the length of the passage proposed. However, the weighting of this paper as compared to the other two is not satisfactory as it accounts for a mere 15% of the total mark. This can lead learners and teachers to consider the listening comprehension as not important as compared to Paper 2 – Reading Comprehension and Paper 3 – Language Use even though research has shown that listening is considered to be the most used communicative skill since, on daily basis, "we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write" (Morley 1991: 82).

### **Appropriateness of items**

For items 3 to 5 and 8 to 13, learners are asked open-ended questions which are not appropriate at this level and for listening comprehension. This is because learners need to have access to the text to answer this type of question. They need to find the part of the text that answers the question, understand the information from the text and use their own words to rewrite the information in another way without losing the meaning. Some questions even need information beyond the text and therefore violate the characteristic of assessment fairness. For example, item 5 of Paper 1 (BEC 2016) asks learners to give reasons why Siphon is anxious. This means learners need to know the meaning of the word anxious and link it to the fact that Siphon is going to a new school. This is impossible for the learners when we consider their level of proficiency in French and the fact that they are denied active listening since they are not allowed to take notes while listening and that they can only look at the questions after the first listening. Furthermore, the last question (13) on all the papers, *De quoi parle-t-on dans le texte ?* (What is the main point of the text?) is not suitable for the learners' level. Asking for the main point of an oral text goes beyond the A2 level, more especially when we consider that learners cannot refer back to the text to look for clues. There is need thus for item writers to adapt the items to the learners' level of proficiency.

### **Appropriateness of the language**

For the JCE listening comprehension, there has been an attempt, especially with the dialogues, to include features of spoken language. They are characterised by full sentences despite the dialogue having characteristics of spoken language (*oh là là, dis-donc*, etc). This rather interesting initiative is however marred by the fact that the texts have distinct linguistic characteristics of written texts. Even though at level A2 learners are expected to understand phrases and expressions related to areas of most immediate priority (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), provided speech is clearly and slowly articulated (Council of Europe 2001: 24), the readers of the JCE listening are very slow to the extent of sounding unnatural. This could be advantageous for learners with lower proficiency levels but those with higher proficiency levels could disconnect. Speakers need thus to speak slowly but naturally. Moreover, the style and level of the language used for items is at times inappropriate and complicated for the learners at A2 level. The following example illustrates this point: *Quelle expression est utilisée pour décrire la météo en France?* (What expression is used to describe the weather in France?) In this example, the task could have been simplified for the learners to read: *En France, il fait (It is \_\_\_\_\_ in France.)* or *Il fait quel temps en France?/Quel temps fait-il en France?* (What is the weather like in France) given that at A2 level learners have already been introduced to subject-verb inversion as one way of formulating a question.

### **Quality of the language**

The readings are well recorded, and the voice is clear. The texts are well articulated. However, phonetical errors that could affect learners understanding of the text have been identified. In the Paper 1 of 2016 for example, the word *anxieuse* [ãksjøz] is pronounced [ãsjøz]. Some grammatical and lexical errors were also identified: for example, in the Paper 1 of 2016, one can hear *la forêt amazon* instead of *la forêt amazonienne*, (The Amazon rainforest) *les arbres vertes* instead of *les arbres verts* (Green trees)

### **Paper 2 – Reading Comprehension**

Paper 2 is a written paper assessing candidates' ability to understand given material and to draw conclusions. The paper is composed of two sections. Section A presents multiple choice and short answer items based on stimulus materials in the form of graphic representation, icons, maps and drawings. Candidates are required to answer questions targeting interpretation of the stimuli. This section is worth 10 marks. Section B: presents short answer questions based on a text of about 420 words. Candidates are assessed on their ability to understand specific information and general details; inferring and deducing meanings of words and phrases from the context; determining the gist of a text as well as drawing conclusions. This section is worth 15 marks. The paper therefore carries a total of 25 marks which account for 20% of the overall weighting. It has a duration of 1 hour.

The structure of the Paper is always the same. Section A is composed of 5 Items. Items 1 to 3 are multiple choice questions. Item 4 is a description activity. Item 5 has three sub-items. Item 5a requires candidates to give the relative location of a place, that is, where a place is located in respect with other locations. In item 5b, candidates are requested to give directions from one place to another. For item 5c, candidates are presented with a text indicating directions from a known place to an unknown place, and they are required to name the destination. Section B is composed of a page-long text followed by different types of questions, most of which are open-answer questions. The texts are usually adapted from fictional books for adolescents.

### **Instructions**

All instructions are clear and put in a simple manner.

### **Nature of text**

The paper uses adapted texts especially written for the JCE. The use of adapted fictional materials poses a number of problems ranging from typing errors, grammatical errors to violation of assessment authenticity characteristics.

### **Time**

In our opinion, and given the length of the texts, the degree of complexity of the questions and the level of proficiency assessed, the time allocated for this paper is sufficient enough for candidates to complete the examination.

### **Weighting and scoring**

In terms of weighting and scoring, marks are clearly indicated for all the items in each of the papers studied. The weighting and scoring of each section correspond well to the length of the passage proposed, except for Item 4 of Section A that requires the learner to write a text.

### **Appropriateness of question items**

Items 1 to 3 are most of the time not Reading Comprehension items but Visual Comprehension as they only require the learner to look at a picture, a photo, etc.; understanding the item question is the only part that assesses the learner's Reading Comprehension skill in French. Indeed, a Reading Comprehension activity entails that there is a text to read, be it in form of letters, words or phrases. However, in most of the images used for these items, there is no text. In fact, candidates are required to observe images and choose the phrase that describes what the image represent. Only 2 images out of 12 from 4 examination papers studied (2013, 2014 2015 and 2018) had text and qualified to be used in the Reading Comprehension activity: items 1 of the 2013 examination paper and item 3 from the 2014 examination paper. Item 4 is also not a Reading Comprehension activity but a Written Production activity in the sense that while candidates are sometimes requested to describe what they see on an image (examinations of 2014 and 2015), at other times they are asked to describe what is happening on the picture as illustrated on figure 1 below (2013 and 2018). This item therefore is not assessing candidates' ability to read and comprehend a text but rather to express their observations in writing. Furthermore, it is not clear on how to answer this item.

Use the picture below to answer question 4.

4. Décrivez ce qui se passe dans l'image ci-dessus.

.....

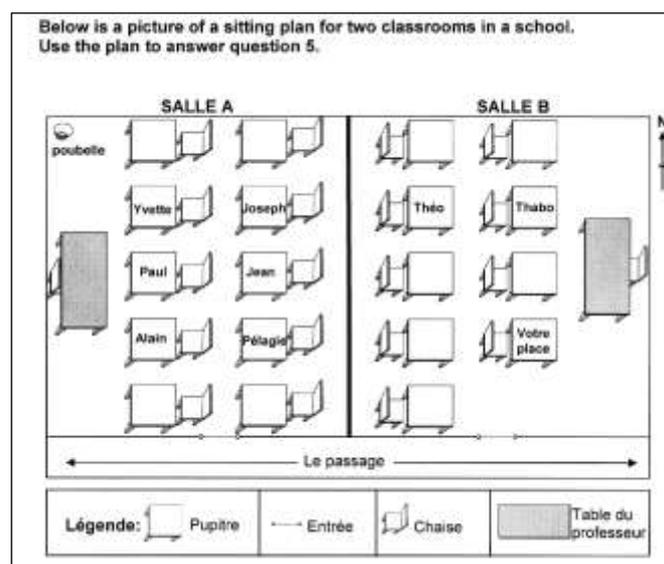
.....

.....

..... (2)

**Figure 1: 2013 Paper 2: French reading Comprehension, Section A, Item 4, page 3**

Item 5 corresponds well to the Reading Comprehension activity, at least when it comes to sub-questions 5a and 5c. Indeed, the image proposed for this question represents a town plan with names of streets and buildings. However, 5b does not qualify as a Reading Comprehension question. Candidates are requested to give directions in writing. Some items proposed are a bit ambiguous and might not be answered properly. In Paper 2 of the year 2013 for example, item 5 requests the candidates to help Pélagie find the rubbish bin by giving her directions from her desk to the bin.



**Figure 2: 2013 Paper 2: French reading Comprehension, Section A, Item 5, p. 4**

The problem is, Pélagie is in one class and the candidate is in the other. It is a bit awkward that the candidate should know Pélagie's classroom better than her. Still on that question, the candidate is being asked to help Pélagie find the rubbish bin. This question therefore is not assessing candidates' ability to read and comprehend a text but rather to give directions in writing. Giving directions to a francophone tourist in Gaborone will constitute a more authentic experience to candidates.

### **Appropriateness of the language**

Section B could be interpreted as a literature examination for candidates studying French as first or second language or learners of French as a foreign language at level B2 and above. The style and level of the language used is most of the times inappropriate and complicated for the learners at A2 level to read and comprehend. Apart from being long, the text is also written using the vocabulary that candidates are unlikely to have been exposed to by the time they sit for the examination. Asking candidates to define words that they see for the first time or to find synonyms of expressions used is way above their level, even more so if they have to construct complete sentences to do so. Proposing multiple choice questions does not really solve this problem. Here are some examples:

2013 –

*Choisissez un mot du premier paragraphe qui veut dire la même chose qu'ordinateur ?*

(Choose a word in the first paragraph that has the same meaning as computer.)

*Que signifie l'expression « Nico a le trac » ? (What does the expression “Nico has stage-fright mean”?)*

2014 –

*Quel mot veut dire la même chose qu'habiter ? (Which word has the same meaning as to live in/at?)*

*Donnez une expression qui est utilisée pour décrire la ville de Paris. (Give the expression used to describe the city of Paris)*

*Que signifie le mot déçue dans le troisième paragraphe ? (What does the word disappointed in the third paragraph mean?)*

*Qu'est-ce qui nous montre que Joséphine et Lucie ne se connaissent pas bien ? (What shows us that Josephine and Lucie do not know each other well?)*

*Donnez la phrase qui porte l'idée principale du quatrième paragraphe. (Give the phrase that carries the main idea of the fourth paragraph.)*

*Comment se sent Lucie quand elle commence à chercher l'appartement ? (How does Lucie feel when she starts searching for the apartment?)*

2018 –

*Donnez un mot du deuxième paragraphe qui veut dire la même chose que muette ? (Which word in the second paragraph has the same meaning as mute)*

*Quand Caroline essaie de faire rire Lili, comment se sent Lili ? (How does Lili feel when Caroline tries to make her laugh?)*

*Selon le texte, pourquoi est-ce que Lili se comporte bizarrement ? (According to the text, why does Lili behave strangely ?)*

*Les parents de Lili, comment se sentent-ils à la remise de prix ? (How do Lili's parents feel at the prize-giving ceremony?)*

*Quelle est l'idée principale du sixième paragraphe ? (What is the main idea of the sixth paragraph?)*

### Quality of the language

A number of lexical, grammatical and syntactic errors were identified in all the papers analysed without exception, but the 2015 paper was the worst of them all. Here are some examples of errors identified with corrections in brackets:

[..] Son petit frère Danny lui (le) rassure [...] Danny est excité et il décide d'aller dire (dire à) Joseph. Deux jours après (plus tard)...Alors il rentre à la maison avec Danny, pendant qu'ils parlent et rient (rient) en route chez eux ( en route vers la maison). Si tu veux te battre, bas-toi (bats-toi) avec moi au moins ... Joseph la ramasse et il va le (la) montrer au directeur...L'arbitre serre la main de Joseph et il le lève (la lève) en l'air [...] il reçoit un grand prix d'argent (en argent).

### Quality of question items

The poor quality of the black and white pictures and photos often jeopardises the chances of the learners to fully comprehend and answer correctly the Section A items. Furthermore, some disturbing errors were observed. For example, in the 2015 examination paper, one of the answers proposed for question 2 is *Elle laboure le sorgho*. The problem is that the verb *labourer* means ploughing, that is, preparing the soil for planting. Therefore, it is an action which cannot be done on a plant.

In the 2014 examination paper, question 1 image presents a mother with her baby on her back (see figure 1 below). The question requests candidates to give the position of the child in respect to the mother. However, among the choices proposed, there is none that positions the child on the mother's back. Instead, the correct answer proposed is *L'enfant est derrière sa mère*, meaning that the child is behind her mother.

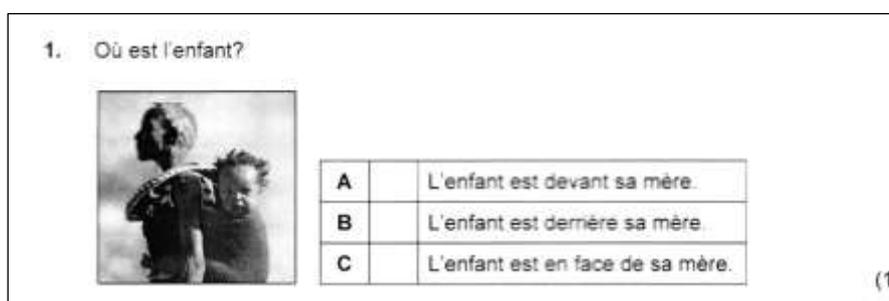


Figure 3: 2014 Paper 2: French reading Comprehension, Section A, Item 1

Consequently, the inaccuracy of some questions can lead to misunderstandings, hesitations and mistakes.

### Paper 3 – Language Use

Paper 3 is a written paper assessing “language use” and written communication skills of the candidates. The paper is composed of two sections. Section A assesses the ability of learners to use grammatical structures and it is marked out of 40. Section B assesses learners’ writing skills. This section is worth 20 marks. The paper therefore carries a total of 60 marks which account for 45% of the overall weighting. It has a duration of 2 hours.

### Section A

This section consists of a series of grammar exercises which assesses the same grammatical items in the same order year in and year out: Items 1 to 5 - possessive determiners and one demonstrative adjective, Items 6 to 9 - imperative mode, Items 10 to 12 - question structures, Items 13 and 14 - interrogative adverbs, Items 15 to 18 - negative responses, Items 19 to 23 -

conjugation in the present tense, Items 24 to 28 - definite and indefinite articles and their contractions as well as prepositions, and Items 29 to 33 - noun-adjective agreement.

## Section B

Section B is made up of two Tasks. Task 1 assesses candidates' ability to write a note, a message or a postcard in less than 40 words. Task 2 requires candidates to write a friendly letter of at least one and a half pages long. In this Section, the designers of the examination tried to implement the communicative approach and asked the learner to write letters and notes in a defined communicative situation. For example, in 2015, in Section A, learners were asked to write a note to their brother to tell them that a cousin has invited them for a birthday party and that they are not going to spend the night at home and explain why they have to spend the night at their cousin's place. In section B of the 2013 paper, learners were asked to write a letter to their parents in defence of a friendship. The scenario was that the parents are working in another country and have left the siblings alone. The brother accuses the learner of keeping company of bad friends. The learners were asked to tell the parents that the accusations are not true, explain why they think their friends are a good company, what they normally do with their friends and how they feel about the accusation.

## Instructions

In items 1 to 5, learners are requested to complete the sentences using the "correct word". However, the nature of the "correct word" is not specified. There are two examples provided. In the first example, the correct word used to complete the sentence is a possessive determiner. In the second example, the correct word is a demonstrative pronoun. Given that it is not specified for which sentences the "correct word" should be a possessive determiner and for which sentences it should be a demonstrative pronoun, and if we "assume" (because we did not have access to the marking schemes) that the correct word should either be a possessive determiner or demonstrative pronoun, there are therefore two possible correct answers for most of the sentences provided. Let us demonstrate this with examples from the 2013 and 2015 papers:

(2013) 5. *Marie a des beaux bijoux. Ses /ces bijoux sont beaux.* (Marie has beautiful jewellery. Her/this jewellery is beautiful)

(2015) 1. *J'ai une tante qui vend des vêtements. Ma/Cette tante vend des vêtements.* (I have an aunt who sells clothes. My/This aunt sells clothes.)

This demonstrates that, with the exception of question 4, both possessive determiners and demonstrative pronouns can fulfil the role of the "correct word" since the correct answer is not based on the meaning of the phrase but rather on the grammatical gender of nouns. However, when we look closely at the structures of the examples and the structures of the sentences provided, we are tempted to believe that only question 4 requires a demonstrative pronoun whereas the rest of the questions should be completed using possessive determiners. This information is not readily accessible to learners who have accumulated a mere 240 hours of instruction of French as a foreign language. This can be interpreted as a trap devised for candidates, which, unfortunately, is not the role of an examination. To avoid such misleading instructions, it would be advisable to indicate the nature of the word that learners should use and to separate questions for which the answer is a possessive determiner from the questions for which the answer is a demonstrative pronoun. For Items 10 to 12, learners are asked to write the statements in question form using two different ways. It is not evident why "using two different ways" is preferred to "using subject-verb inversion and *est-ce que*". The same observation can be made for Items 19 to 23 and Items 29 to 33, where learners are requested

to “fill in spaces using the words in brackets (or appropriate form of words in brackets) or “one appropriate word”. These instructions can be easily reformulated such that they are explicit and unambiguous. Here are some examples:

**Questions 10 to 12:** *Conjugate the verbs in brackets in the present tense so that they agree with the subjects.*

**Questions 24 to 25:** *Complete the sentences using indefinite articles, definite articles or contracted definite article.*

**Questions 29 to 33:** *Transform the adjectives in brackets so that they agree with the nouns.*

In Items 15 to 18, learners are requested to write responses to given statements in the negative form. Firstly, there are no statements provided but questions. Secondly, there are no examples provided. Given that marking schemes were not provided for the purpose of this study, we can assume that learners are expected to transform questions into affirmative statements and then negate the affirmative statements. However, without that information, it is likely that learners might answer no to the question formulated and give the correct imagined answer as can be shown by the examples below:

(2013). *Est-ce que sa mère parle français?* (Does her mother speak French?)  
*Expected answer: Sa mère ne parle pas français.* (Her mother does not speak French.)  
*Possible answer: Non, elle parle anglais.* (No. She speaks English.)

(2015). *Est-ce que sa fille aime le maquillage?* (Does her daughter love makeup?)  
*Expected answer: Sa fille n'aime pas le maquillage.* (Her daughter does not like makeup.)  
*Possible answer: Non, elle déteste le maquillage.* (No. She hates makeup.)

### **Time**

In our opinion, the time allocated for this paper is sufficient enough for candidates to complete the examination.

### **Weighting and scoring**

In terms of weighting and scoring, marks are clearly indicated for all the items in each of the papers studied. However, it is not clear why less emphasis is given to Paper 1 and more emphasis to Paper 3: 15% for Paper 1, 20 % for Paper 2 and 45% for Paper 3. Weighting of Sections of Paper 3 is also observed to be not proportional to the importance of tasks at hand. Section B, which is the more communicative and therefore the most important of the two Sections, carries only one third of the total marks of the paper, whereas Section A, which is more of systematisation exercises than a communicative approach-oriented examination carries two thirds of the total marks. This paper is therefore inclined towards rote learning and target teaching, which does not allow for a deeper understanding of these grammatical structures. Candidates might pass the examination but still not know the difference between the use of a possessive determiner and a demonstrative pronoun when communicating in real life situations.

### **Appropriateness of the items**

In questions 6 to 9, learners are requested to change the sentences provided into the imperative form. In French, imperative form can only be formed for the following active subjects: second-person singular, *tu*, second-person plural, *vous*, and first-person plural, *nous*.

However, in all the examination papers studied, active subjects of some of the sentences provided were third person plural and singular as can be shown by the following examples.

(2013) 8. *Les étudiants vont finir les devoirs demain.* (Students are going to finish their homework tomorrow.)

(2013) 9. *Xavier se cache dans la voiture.* (Xavier is hiding in the car.)

(2015) 7. *Les enfants respectent les adultes.* (Children respect adults.)

Due to the nature of their active subjects, these sentences cannot be changed into the imperative form. Therefore, there are no correct answers for the corresponding statements.

Furthermore, the tasks proposed in Section B are not situationally authentic in that the probability of the candidates writing a letter or a note in French to their parents or siblings who do not speak French is zero. The second task is also not interactionally authentic because candidates do not possess linguistic structures and the vocabulary to write a friendly letter of at least one and a half pages long. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an A2 level learner is expected to write a text of 60 to 80 words. This hardly amounts to a page and a half that is required in the JCE and therefore the task is way beyond the expected performance of an A2 learner. Moreover, the learner is supposed to know vocabulary related to the domains of concern, accusations and keeping good company which are way beyond the expected vocabulary that the learner would have acquired at this level. Furthermore, the task is ambiguous in the sense that it is not clear who the learner's role is as a brother; whether he is the younger or the older of the siblings. learners who sit for their JC examinations generally range between the ages of 15 and 16. If he is the older sibling it is hard to imagine parents leaving him to care for another sibling. If he is the younger sibling, it is also hard to imagine him putting himself into a context where he is taking care of a younger brother. One imagines that his immediate environment is that of school and family. His role in the family is that of a child not of parent, and him taking the role of a parent is not realistic and is not in line with the communicative teaching approach that proposes that activities should correspond to real life situations. This can psychologically affect learners' performances.

### **Appropriateness of the language**

At times, the language used in some papers is inappropriate for the level of proficiency of the candidates. For example, the sentence "*Ma sœur s'engage à faire des jeux traditionnels avec les autres filles du village*", (My sister undertakes/commits to playing traditional games with other girls of the villages) is not only awkward but the expression "*s'engager à faire*" (to undertake/commit to) is too difficult for learners at A2 level. The sentence could have been simplified as "*Ma sœur jouent aux jeux traditionnels avec les autres filles du village*" (My sister plays traditional games with the other girls in the village)

### **Quality of the language**

A lot of errors have been observed in all the papers. In the 2013 examination, the following erroneous phrase was identified: *Elle reproche les enfants de ne plus sortir sans permission* (instead of *reproche aux enfants*) which can be translated in English as "She blames the children to no longer leave the house without permission". It is however not clear whether the message that this phrase was supposed to communicate was that "She blames the children for going out without permission", or that "She instructs the children to no longer leave the house without permission, in which latter case it should be *Elle interdit aux enfants de ne plus sortir sans permission*.

## Conclusions and recommendations

From the main question the paper asked: Do assessment tools play a role in the poor performance of learners who sit the JCE? the research results presented here suggests that the JCE in its current form bears a share of responsibility in the poor performance of learners who sit this examination. The analysis of the assessment tools clearly shows that the JCE is not valid and unreliable. It does not measure what it is intended to, given that the examination is not aligned to the syllabus and is neither aligned to the CA on which it is based nor the current frameworks in foreign language assessment. Furthermore, it does not assess the correct level of proficiency of the learners. A thorough analysis of corrected learners' examination scripts could help identify the level of proficiency expected from them. There is therefore need for a paradigm shift. To achieve this, certain recommendations need to be implemented. They are as follows:

### Recommendation 1: Adoption of the Action-based approach

Today, most, if not all, researchers and professionals in the areas of foreign language teaching and learning recommend a more action or task-based approach to learning. This action-oriented approach is, in reality, an extension of the communicative approach. It is the approach that is adopted by the CEFRL. The CEFRL is the result of close to 30 years of research in the area of foreign language acquisition, teaching and learning. It was first published in 2001 with the main objective of providing a methodology of learning, teaching and assessment, which applies to European languages. Today the framework can also be used for non-European languages. The framework provides a comprehensive basis for the elaboration of syllabus and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching materials and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. The main objectives of the CEFRL are outlined as follows by the Council of Europe on its webpage:

- promoting plurilingualism and **diversification** in the choice of languages in the curriculum
- supporting the development and demonstration of the **plurilingual profile** of individual learners
- developing and reviewing the content of **language curricula** and defining positive 'can do' descriptors adapted to the age, interests and needs of learners
- designing and developing **textbooks** and teaching material
- supporting **teacher education** and cooperation among teachers of different languages
- enhancing **quality** and success in learning, teaching and assessment
- facilitating **transparency in testing** and the comparability of certifications

The action-oriented approach to teaching and learning “views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents,’ i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action,” (Council of Europe 2001). According to the framework, acts of speech occur within language activities that form part of a larger context which gives them full meaning. Tasks correspond to linguistic and non-linguistic acts that the learner is led to perform in order to communicate in the target language. In performing these tasks, they have to use communicative strategies and interactional skills.

The framework distinguishes between two competences; general individual and communicative competences. The general individual competences include knowledge, skills,

existential competence and ability to learn. The communicative competences are laid out as, linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. It also lays out two other principal dimensions to teaching and learning which are language activities and domains. The language activities are outlined as reception (*listening and reading*), production (*speaking and writing*), interaction (*spoken and written*) and mediation (*translation and interpretation*). The domains are the various contexts in which communicative competences can be developed taking into account constraints and conditions. These contexts correspond to social life and can be personal, public, occupational and educational.

The CERFL defines levels of language proficiency according to existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualification. The levels and their global description are outlined in a vertical and horizontal dimension below.

**Table 1: Global scale of levels of proficiency of the CEFRL (2001: 24).**

<b>Proficient Speaker</b>	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
<b>Independent User</b>	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
<b>Basic User</b>	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

The CEFRL therefore provides a common foundation for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, textbooks and examinations as well as providing a comprehensive description of what learners have to learn to communicate effectively. It also allows the elaboration of tests and examinations that are set according to existing standards with the level descriptors serving as a stationary point. It also provides a complete tool for

these areas of curriculum design and teaching and lesson planning. Also, of great importance, it provides for the elaboration of assessments that are valid, reliable and feasible.

### **Recommendation 2: Assessment of speaking production**

Speaking is the second most used communicative skill after listening. However, speaking is not evaluated on the basis that scores obtained from the assessment will be unreliable and that it is logistically difficult to organise such an assessment. This has not only led teachers and learners to pay less attention to speaking skills but also paints a pretty grim picture on the trust that we should have regarding the professionalism of teachers of French as a foreign language. Are we saying that they are not professional enough to assess the oral skills of their learners? Is their language proficiency not satisfactory? Are we afraid that they will be biased? Do we lack confidence in the validity of their assessment?

All language teachers recognise the difficulty of teaching and assessing speaking skills. However, they also recognise the importance of assessing speaking due to the backwash effect, which can be defined as the effect of the assessment on the teaching and learning during the course. Hughes formulate it in this simple way: “if you want to encourage oral ability, then test oral ability” (Hughes 1989:44). If speaking skills are not assessed, the learners speaking proficiency will be very low. Even learners who perform very well in the JCE will not be able to speak French as expected of them at their level. In as far as the organisation of the assessment is concerned, learners can be recorded by their teachers in their respective schools and the recordings sent to the assessment centre and be assessed in the same way as the reading, writing and the listening skills. Evaluation grids with more explicit criteria will be used to reduce to the minimum the problem of consistency between different assessors, as is the normal practice.

### **Recommendation 3: Equal weighing of the four communicative skills**

In-order to become well-rounded communicators, learners need to be proficient in all the communicative skills: writing and speaking, listening and reading. All these skills are equally important and interrelated in that the development of one skill influences the others. Furthermore, the skills compensate each other such that a learner may be weak in reading but strong in listening. The skills should therefore be assessed equally. No emphasis should be put on one paper at the detriment of the others which is also a big disadvantage for some learners. Currently, less emphasis is given to Paper 1 and more emphasis to Paper 3: 15% for Paper 1, 20 % for Paper 2 and 45% for Paper 3. It is not clear where the remaining 15% goes given that the speaking production is not even assessed. By giving all the four skills the same weight, this will encourage teachers to move away from the grammar-oriented teaching methods towards the action-based approach which considers a learner as a well-rounded social actor.

### **Recommendation 4: Grammar should be assessed in context**

Currently, the practice is to treat grammatical items as isolated items of language for language manipulation practice only. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, just because there is a sentence does not mean that there is context. Contextualisation is the meaningful use of language for real communicative purposes and helps use the language items in a meaningful way. It helps learners understand how language users construct language in a given context and help learners remember the language and recall it at a later date. Assessing grammar in context entails that it will be evaluated during speaking and written production. Furthermore, assessing grammar in context will help in moving towards examination papers which are more balanced, and which are able to cover most of the syllabus. Asking candidates to give a

physical and psychological description of a member of their family, a friend or a favourite artist gives them a better chance of using adjectives in a communication situation than the exercise currently proposed in paper 3.

#### **Recommendation 5: Instructions to be written in simple language**

Instructions provide specific direction to the learners and hence they need to be appropriately structured, otherwise there are high chances that learners may misunderstand what is expected of them and not be able to answer the questions properly. Instructions need to be written in a clear, explicit, and unambiguous language. Learners should know exactly what they are expected to do.

#### **Recommendation 6: Instructions to be written in French.**

In all the three papers, the instructions are given in English, which leaves the learner with the difficult task of translating from English to French. Instructions are part of the examination and therefore they should be written in the language of the examination. Understanding instructions is a step towards resolving problems. This will also encourage teachers to give instructions in French in their classrooms which might increase the use of French for classroom communication.

#### **Recommendation 7: Items to be written in simple language**

Item writers should always have the learners' level of proficiency in French in mind when structuring the examination items. The language used to write items should reflect the language that is used in the classroom. It should contain the vocabulary and syntax that is accessible to learners because they (learners) at this level rely mostly on key words in the question itself as a cue when formulating their answers. If the question is *Il fait quel temps en France ?*, (what is the weather like in France), it is relatively easy for learners who understand the question to write *froid*, (Cold) or *Il fait froid*, (It is cold) or *Il fait froid en France* (It is cold in France) (or *il fait quel temps froid en France*, (What is the weather cold in France) which is still a good response despite the syntactic error). However, if the question is *Quelle expression est utilisée pour décrire la météo en France ?* (What is the expression used to describe weather in France) the structure is not only difficult for learners to understand but it does not help them in structuring their answer either.

#### **Recommendation 8: Guided listening comprehension**

Giving learners time to read the questions before they listen provide them with clear context for the listening activity. learners need to be given a purpose for listening to the audio and should be provided with background knowledge in order to prepare them for effective listening. They should know what information to listen for, which is essential to start activating the vocabulary necessary to do the activity. This gives them a greater chance of success in the given task. Candidates should also be allowed to take notes and answer the questions throughout the time they are listening. The listening comprehension activity should not be transformed into a memory test.

#### **Recommendation 9: Use of authentic materials**

The three papers of the JCE should strive to use authentic materials. The listening material used for JCE should represent typical oral language material, and not consist of the oral reading of passages designed to be read. The material should be based on the real life model of spoken language that learners might typically be expected to hear in different spheres of life: extracts of news bulletin, extracts of weather forecasts, announcements in shops, at train or bus stations, at the airport, a phone conversation or message, etc. Basing listening tasks on

authentic materials will naturally vary the activities in terms of speakers' gender, age, dialect, accent, topic, speed, noise level, etc. and will mirror the assessment as close as possible to real life situations. If authentic materials are not available, semi-scripted texts, whereby content is determined in advance but not the words, could be used (Gary 2014). In this way, there will be a fair level of spontaneity hence rendering the text authentic to some extent.

Texts used for reading comprehension should also be based on typical written texts with specific, predictable information that learners might typically be expected to read in different spheres of life such as messages sent via emails, social medias and letters, invitations, advertisements, prospectuses, menus, reference lists and timetables, Yellow Pages, signs and notices etc. in public places, such as streets, restaurants, railway stations, in workplaces, such as directions, instructions, hazard warnings.

For written production, a plausible scenario of producing a written text for an audience from a Francophone country could be imagined. For example, asking candidates to prepare a brochure for Francophone tourists (where they describe their villages/towns and indicate areas of interest) is more interesting than writing to their mother and father or sister. Moreover, a task such as this one will cover a substantial content of the syllabus: weather, cardinal points, names of places in towns/villages, name of activities and a good amount of grammar.

#### **Recommendation 10: Use of short texts**

Given the level of proficiency of learners of French at JC, the texts used either for reading or listening comprehension should be relatively short. Short texts will maintain learners' interest and ensure their active participation for the whole duration of each activity. learners' written production should also be based on short texts of between 60 and 80 words. The use of short texts will also make it possible to use different types of texts in accordance with the syllabus and cover the syllabus as much as possible.

#### **Recommendation 11: Listening comprehension should assess listening skills only**

Listening comprehension activities should be administered to assess the learners' ability to comprehend oral material but not their writing skills. As such, instead of asking learners to write long and complicated sentences from memory to summarise the listening passages, given that they cannot answer the questions while listening, tasks such as filling in the blank spaces, circling or ticking the correct answer, matching information, putting pictures or statements into order, completing simple tables drawing a picture, figure, or design, locating routes of specific points on a map, selecting or identifying a picture of a person, place, or thing from description will be the most appropriate way to answer the JCE listening comprehension questions.

#### **Recommendation 12: Increase the number of activities for the listening comprehension**

It is better to have several short texts that are of interest to learners than to have one long text which is of no interest to them. Theoretically, the more items an assessment has, the more reliable it is. This is because a long test will cover most of the syllabus. As such, it will theoretically cater for all the learners. Consequently, a few wrong answers here and there will not dramatically influence the results, unlike an assessment with few items where failing two or three items can have negative effect on the overall results.

### **Recommendation 13: Content experts to assist in compiling the examinations**

Construct irrelevant variance and construct underrepresentation are two major threats to validity. Construct-irrelevant variances refer to variables unrelated to the construct being measured such as grammatical errors, badly worded sentences and confusing questions and instructions. Poor quality test items introduce construct irrelevant variance to the assessment and therefore potentially decrease student passing rate by increasing the mean item difficulty (Downing 2005; Haladyna & Downing 2004) given that some poorly designed item formats can make it more difficult for some learners to give a correct answer (Bachman 2005). Construct underrepresentation occurs when examination content is not reflective of relevant knowledge. An example of Construct underrepresentation includes maldistribution of examination items. Maldistribution of examination items leads to oversampling of some content areas and under-sampling of others. Examination results and the decisions based on these results are adversely affected by construct irrelevant variance and Construct underrepresentation which is why there is strong need to convene content experts who have subject matter expertise to review, revise and approve the draft items so as to increase the accuracy and clarity of the questions and resolve issues in item content errors or inconsistencies. Creating effective examination items should be seen as the most essential step in gathering the validity evidence of the examination.

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