



Contrastive Analysis of Phonological Segments of Kabiye and French in a Teaching/Learning Perspective

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Abstract

This article offers a contrastive analysis of the phonological segments of Kabiye and French and presents an integrated teaching framework for teaching French in multilingual environments. It identifies critical contrasts, particularly rounded and nasal vowels, uvular consonants, and palatal fricatives. The study guides targeted pedagogical interventions. The framework consists of three components: the involvement of speech organs, the application of verbo-tonal method, and the use of minimal pairs. Through articulation activities, prosodic exercises, and minimal pairs, the educational program aims to strengthen perception and production, reduce recurring errors, and improve the intelligibility of Kabiye-French interlanguage. Multidimensional assessment protocols and multimodal feedback support longitudinal progress monitoring. The outlook highlights the expansion of the framework to other languages in the region and to various professional and educational contexts, while calling for contextual assessment tools and adaptable teaching resources. The article nevertheless proposes a methodological and empirical approach to facilitate the mastery of French word spelling by Kabiye learners and to guide practical implementation in teaching practices.

Subject Areas

Education Administration

Keywords

Kabiye, French, Contrastive Phonology, Teaching/Learning, Multilingualism

1. Introduction

In a multilingual environment, contact between learners' mother tongue and

French in a learning process most often leads to learning difficulties whose major challenge is to reconcile linguistic realities of learners with those of French they discover at school. The first obstacle they encounter is most often that of pronunciation of foreign language sounds they discover. That is why it is necessary to bring sounds of learners' mother tongues closer to those of French, in order to identify possible obstacles and deal with learning difficulties. According to T. Koula, "phonological contrastive analysis makes it possible to identify differences that directly influence the production and perception of sounds in the learner [1]." For the case of Kabiye and French in the Togo school system, the challenge remains the same: to reconcile the linguistic reality of Kabiye with that of French to facilitate teaching/learning from the first classes of primary school. This leads to the following research question: what are the mechanisms of phonetic interference that hinder the effective acquisition of standard French among Kabiye learners? J. Mensah argues that "understanding the points of phonological divergence facilitates the design of more targeted didactic strategies capable of improving pronunciation and listening comprehension" [2]. This hypothesis guides research towards the following objective: Conduct a contrastive analysis of vowel and consonant segments of Kabiye and French, in order to predict articulatory obstacles, then propose effective pedagogical strategies taking into account articulatory phonetics, verb-tonal method, as well as opposition in minimal pairs. The work is organised around five fundamental sections. The first section presents the theoretical and methodological framework. The second one identifies and studies common and divergent sounds between Kabiye and French language. The third section analyses articulatory difficulties that Kabiye learners present during their acquisition of French language. The fourth section proposes pedagogical strategies based on the involvement of phonatory organs. The fifth section is devoted to discussion.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

This section highlights the reference theory and methodological framework.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Phonological contrastive analysis is part of a rich linguistic tradition which aims to establish systematic comparisons between phonological systems of different languages in order to highlight their similarities and differences that may impact foreign language learning. According to R. Lado, "the main hypothesis of contrastive theory is that phonological differences between mother tongue and target language are sources of articulation and pronunciation errors [3]." This theory lays foundations for phonological didactics anticipating learners' difficulties through a mapping of contrasted segments. However, the contrastive analysis of Lado has been criticized for its limited predictive nature, the lack of distinction between linguistic differences and real learning difficulties, as well as for its static approach to languages. These criticisms have led to revisions and alterna-

tive approaches that recognize the influence of mother tongue but replace it in a more complex learning framework [4]. The criticism marked the shift from a behaviourist and structuralist view of learning (HAC) to a more cognitive approach, focusing on the learner's internal mechanisms. In a more modern perspective, J. C. Catford extends this approach by emphasising precise articulatory analysis of sounds: "Each segment must be described according to the phonatory organs involved, the manner and place of articulation, which allows for anticipating not only erroneous production, but also appropriate correction strategies." [5]. This articulatory phonetic framework offers a functional and physiological look at sound production, essential for understanding gaps between Kabiye and French.

Furthermore, the verb-tonal method developed by J. Froehlich emphasizes the importance of prosodic control: "Intonation, rhythm and melody play a central role in the correction of foreigners learning a language, especially to correct phonetic disorders and improve auditory perception" [6]. This approach is based on a structured phonetic rehabilitation combining listening, production and conscious control of the voice channel. It is here considered as a major pedagogical tool to be coupled with contrastive analysis. Finally, the use of opposition in minimal pairs, a concept put forward by A. Martinet allows a fine differentiation of phonemes to strengthen auditory perception and correct production: "minimal pair reveals to learners the difference in meaning carried by a single phonological segment, thus promoting a phonemic awareness necessary for acquisition" [7]. This method finds a direct application in the Kabiye-French context where certain segmental oppositions pose problems.

2.2. Methodological Framework

This study is based on reliable documentary data from descriptive work done on Kabiye language by Lébiakaza [8] on one hand ((see **Table 1** and **Table 2**); and on French by Gblem-Poidi & Kantchoa [9] on the other hand (see **Table 3** and **Table 4**). In case of conflicts, the preferred descriptions are those corroborated by at least two sources or supported by recent acoustic data. The "common" sounds are classified by strict identity, "divergent" by absence or opposition of trait. The synthesis proceeds by triangulation: comparative matrices (**Tables 5-8**) crossing articulatory, acoustic and functional characteristics, ensuring reproducible transparency and robust prediction of difficulties. The selection of pedagogical strategies is based on the critical review of phonetic methods, associated with a contextualised adaptation to the specificities of Kabiye learners.

3. Cross-Study of Kabiye and French Sounds

The comparative study of phonological systems of Kabiye and French is based on a precise description of consonantal and vocalic segments, distinguishing, on one hand, common sounds and on the other hand, divergent ones.

Kabiye is a language spoken mainly in the Kara region and occupies a central place in daily, family and school interactions. Classified among the Oriental Gurunsi lan-

guages of the Gur group, this language has a rich and complex phonological system which, due to its own characteristics, interacts strongly in French teaching/learning process. According to Lébikaza, of Kabiye sounds' system is as follows [8].

Vowels:

Table 1. Classification table of Kabiye vowels.

Position\Features	Non round (-ATR)	round (+ATR)
Front High	ɪ	i
Front Mid-high	ɛ	e
Back Mid-high	ɔ	o
Back Low	a (ouverte)	-

Source: [8].

Consonants:

Table 2. Consonants of Kabiye.

Stops	[p], [b], [t], [d], [k], [g], [kp], [gb]
Fricatives	[f], [v], [s], [z], [h]
Nasals	[m], [n], [ɲ], [ŋ]
Liquids	[l], [r]
Approximating	[w], [j]

Source: [8].

As for French, its sounds are presented as follows:

Vowels:

Table 3. French oral vowels.

Position\Arrondissement	Non round	Round
Front High	[i] (fille)	[y] (lune)
Front Mid	[e] (clé)	[ø] (peu)
Front Low-Mid	[ɛ] (père)	[œ] (sœur)
Central Low	[a] (patte)	-
Back High		[u] (fou)
Back Mid		-[o] (eau)
		[ɔ] (port)

Source: [9].

Consonants:

Table 4. French consonants.

Point of articulation	Mode/Sound	Phonetic examples
Labial	Voiceless occlusives	[p] (père)
	Voiced plosives	[b] (bon)
	Nasal	[m] (maman)
	Fricatives	[f] (fête), [v] (vin)
Dental/Alveolar	Voiceless occlusives	[t] (tout)
	Voiced plosives	[d] (dos)
	Nasal	[n] (non)
	Fricatives	[s] (sac), [z] (zèbre)
	Liquids	[l] (lire)
Palatal	Nasal	[ɲ] (gnon)
	Semi-vowels	[j] (fille)
Velar	Voiceless occlusives	[k] (car)
	Voiced plosives	[g] (gare)
	Semi-vowels	[w] (oui)
Uvular	Voiced fricative	[ʁ] (rue)
Others	Voiceless fricative	[ʃ] (chat)
	Voiced fricative	[ʒ] (joue)

Source: [9].

3.1. Common Sounds

The comparison of French and Kabiye sounds shows common sounds as presented as follows:

Table 5. Common consonants of French and Kabiye.

Kabiye	Common consonants	French
	b, d, f, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, ɲ, z	

Source: [10].

Table 6. Common vowels of French and Kabiye.

Kabiye	Common vowels	French
	a, e, i, o, u, ε, ɔ	

Source: [10].

3.2. Divergent Sounds

French and Kabiye divergent sounds tables are presented as follows:

Table 7. Divergent consonants of French and Kabiye.

	Kabiye	French
Specific consonants	kp, gb, d, ŋ, v	ʃ, ʒ, ʁ

Source: [10].

The table below presents divergent vowels of both languages.

Table 8. Divergent vowels of French and Kabiye.

	Kabiye	French
Specific vowels	ɪ, ʊ	y, ø, œ, ə

Source: [10].

With regard to the tables above, one can see that Kabiye and French share several sounds. In this case, G. Gnambi points out that “some occlusive consonants like /p/, /t/, /k/ are found in both languages with fairly similar articulatory characteristics”, which facilitates the simultaneous acquisition of these sounds by Kabiye speakers when learning French [11]. Similarly, W. Koula observes that “the presence of unrounded anterior oral vowels /i/ and /e/, as well as posterior vowels /u/ and /o/, forms a common, reassuring phonological basis for phonetic transfer” [1]. These correspondences constitute solid points of support in learning French pronunciation.

On the other hand, Kabiye and French present notable differences in their segmental inventory, which generate specific difficulties. According to J. Mensah, ‘Kabiye language does not contain certain fricative sounds characteristic of French, notably /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, nor the uvular consonant /ʁ/, which is difficult for Kabiye speakers to master’ [2]. Regarding vowels, L. Salifou underlines that “Kabiye language has fewer and less distinct nasal vowels than those of French, which can cause confusion in the perception and production of nasalisation” [12]. These divergences increase articulatory complexity by Kabiye language learners. Furthermore, the tonal nature of Kabiye language contrasts with French tonic accent, influencing phonetic segments’ realisation. K. Yao explains that “this prosodic difference can accentuate phonological gap, affecting phonemic segmentation and correct integration of French sounds” [13].

4. Predictable Articulatory Difficulties for a Kabiye Speaker Learning French

The acquisition of French by Kabiye speakers is marked by several articulatory difficulties, which are explained by phonological and articulatory differences between the two languages. These difficulties mainly concern the pronunciation of segments that are not found in Kabiye sound system. A first major difficulty concerns the vibrating uvular consonant /ʁ/. According to J. Mensah, “this consonant is often replaced by the alveolar rolled consonant /r/ or by the velar fricative /ɣ/,

leading to errors like [ʁœʁ] pronounced [rœr] or [ʁœy]” [2]. For example, the French word “rouge” can be pronounced [ruʒ] with a rolled [r], or “frère” [frɛr] instead of [frɛʁ]. Moreover, the distinction between rounded anterior vowels /y/ (e.g., in “tu”) and rounded posterior vowels /u/ (e.g., in “fou”) is problematic. W. Koula reports that “Kabiyè speakers tend to neutralise this opposition, often pronouncing /y/ as /u/, which leads to confusions like [tu] for ‘tu’ but sometimes [fu] for ‘fou’” [1]. This phonetic confusion affects listening comprehension and phonological accuracy.

Another delicate point is the production of French nasal vowels, which are few and less distinct in Kabiyè. According to L. Salifou, “French nasalization is often omitted or poorly reproduced, which leads to pronouncing bon’ [bɔ̃] like [bɔn] or ‘vin’ [vɛ̃] like [vin]” [12]. This difficulty results from a difference in phonological perception. Finally, the pronunciation of palatal fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ is difficult, since these sounds don’t exist in Kabiyè phonological system. K. Yao states that “learners often substitute /s/ and /z/ for these sounds, or use approximants, giving for example ‘chat’ [sa] instead of [ʃa], ‘joue’ [zu] instead of [ʒu]” [13]. These errors affect speech clarity and lexical differentiation.

5. Pedagogical Strategies to Overcome These Difficulties

Faced with the identified articulatory difficulties, it is essential to deploy appropriate pedagogical strategies allowing Kabiyè learners to gradually master the correct production of French phonological segments. These strategies are based on three complementary axes: Involvement of phonatory organs, verb-tonal method and exploitation of oppositions in minimal pairs.

5.1. Involvement of the Phonatory Organs

The correct acquisition of French phonological segments by Kabiyè speakers requires a conscious and targeted mobilization of the phonatory organs. These organs, including tongue, lips, soft palate, vocal cords and jaw. An awareness of their articulatory role is therefore essential to correct recurrent phonetic errors. According to J. C. Catford, “the effectiveness of phonetic teaching relies largely on the ability of the learner to feel and control the movements of the phonatory organs involved” [5]. In this context, the teacher must initiate exercises that lead the learner to locate and identify the phonatory organ involved in each problematic sound. For example, to produce the uvular consonant [ʁ], it is crucial to train the back of the tongue to vibrate against the uvula. Placement exercises such as repeated pronunciation of simple words such as “roi”, “route”, or “regard” accompanied by visual or tactile explanations facilitate this acquisition. The mobilisation of lips is another fundamental axis, particularly for the differentiation between rounded anterior vowels /y/ (as in “lune”) and rounded posterior vowels /u/ (as in “loup”). The learner is encouraged to practice isolated lip rounding exercises, followed by labio-vocal combination, in order to feel well the difference between rounded and unrounded lips. Techniques such as mirror to observe the position

of lips or a light touch of lips allow immediate feedback. Soft palate plays a key role in nasalization which, is a characteristic that is not very marked in Kabiye. Exercises targeting the sensation of lifting or lowering the soft palate strengthen the mastery of nasalisation, for example, by alternating the pronunciation of words like ‘bon’ ([bɔ̃]) and “beau” ([bo]). Through these exercises, the learner develops a kinesthetic awareness of the vocal apparatus essential for a correct production of nasal phonemes.

Finally, the coordination of different phonatory organs by mastering the jaw and breathing is often worked through repetitive articulatory sequences, such as repetition of slow-paced sentences to refine movement control. These phonetic exercises not only stimulate segmental production, but also promote the stability of articulatory gestures in spontaneous speech. In sum, actively involving the phonatory organs in a progressive and varied training process allows kabiye learners to overcome their phonetic difficulties in French, by developing better body awareness and a fine mastery of complex articulatory gestures.

5.2. Application of Verb-Tonal Method

Verb-tonal method, developed by J. Froehlich, constitutes an integrated approach centered on the mastery of prosodic parameters, namely intonation, rhythm and melody, which play a fundamental role in the correct phonetic production. This method is particularly suitable for Kabiye speakers learning French, as it allows to correct difficulties related to deep differences in prosodic patterns between the two languages. The first step of the method consists of tonal and rhythmic segmentation exercises. For example, in the simple sentence “Je vais à la maison”, the learner is led to isolate stressed syllables, such as “vais” and “maison”, and to exert variations of intensity and duration on these syllables. This helps to develop sharper intonation contours and better syllabic synchronization. In another example, during the interrogative sentence “Tu viens demain?”, the learner learns to perceive and reproduce final elevation of the voice specific to interrogative sentence, in contrast with the declarative sentence, thus strengthening the differentiation of speech modes. For the correction of the uvular consonant /ʁ/, which is not found in Kabiye language, the verb-tonal method uses modulation of pitch and articulatory timing. For example, when pronouncing words like “rouge”, “rire” or “regard”, the learner performs exercises combining the vibration of the back of the tongue against the uvula with specific rhythmic and melodic gestures, assisted by a mirror or haptic feedback in order to feel the uvular vibration. This approach aims to replace the rolled consonant /r/ often wrongly substituted among Kabiye learners, with a production in accordance with standard French. This method also pays particular attention to work on the rounded anterior vowels /y/ and rounded posterior vowels /u/, which often pose a problem. For example, in statements like “lune” versus “loup”, the teacher guides the learner to modulate the height and length of vowels while controlling the position of the lips via a mirror. Mini-dialogues and alternating exercises reinforce the discrimination

between these close sounds. This prosodic work improves both perception and production in a communicative context.

Furthermore, the application of the verb-tonal method includes the use of minimal pairs to work on fine distinctions between phonemes. For example, pairs such as /e/ versus /ø/ in simple sentence contexts allow the learner to perceive and stabilise tonal and timbre differences, while training production with an emphasis on prosodic contours. This phonological awareness is essential to avoid lexical and articulatory confusions. A crucial aspect of the method is the setting up of feedback loops where the learner registers, listens to their productions, and then receives guided feedback from the teacher on the prosodic aspects to be improved. For example, after a series of repetitions, the learner can compare their intonation with a native model, which promotes autonomous and lasting joint correction.

Finally, the verb-tonal method integrates exercises of active listening and temporal discrimination, allowing the learner to reproduce complex prosodic patterns, for example during oral dictations or dialogues where liaison, pause and emphasis are decisive. These activities promote immediate implementation in real communication situations. Thanks to this holistic approach, the verb-tonal method is not limited to segmental correction but proceeds to a global phonetic rehabilitation, combining perception, production and body awareness. It is therefore particularly effective in helping Kabiye speakers overcome their phonological difficulties and achieve better intelligibility in French.

5.3. Use of the Opposition in Minimal Pairs

The opposition in minimal pairs constitutes a fundamental pedagogical tool in phonological learning, because it highlights the minimal differences between two phonemes allowing to distinguish distinct words.

Let's take a 10-minute exercise for primary school: the teacher plays the recording of the minimal pair "tu" (/ty/) vs. "tou(t)" (/tu/), by showing images (a person vs. an entire object). Students, in front of a collective mirror, alternately repeat, observing the protuberance advanced labial for /y/ (lips pinched forward); against the posterior neutral rounding for /u/ (lips rounded without advance). They conclude with a playful discrimination: listen and point the correct image, strengthening perception and production in realistic communicative context, to be repeated three times a week to anchor the distinction among Kabiye speakers.

It helps learners to develop a fine phonemic awareness, essential for a correct acquisition of new sounds and to avoid lexical confusions. In the specific context of Kabiye learners, for whom some French phonemes do not exist or are perceived differently, minimal pairs allow focusing attention on crucial oppositions. A. Martinet explains that "the direct confrontation of two words distinguished by a single sound allows increased auditory discrimination and more targeted production of contrasted segments" [7]. A concrete example concerns the distinction between rounded anterior vowels /y/ and rounded posterior vowels /u/, difficult for Kabiye speakers. A minimal pair such as "tu" [ty] and "tout" [tu] highlights this essential

phonetic difference. The teacher can have these words repeated to the learner, emphasising the position of the lips and the quality of the vowel, accompanied by visual (mirror) and auditory exercises (listening to native models).

Another example concerns the palatal fricative consonants, absent from kabiyè, with the minimal pair “chat” [ʃ a] “sac” [sa]. By repeating these pairs, the learner avoids to substitute /ʃ/ to /s/. Auditory discrimination activities, combined with specific articulatory exercises, reinforce this acquisition.

Finally, the development of catalogues of minimum pairs adapted to the phonological profile of Kabiyè-French, enriched with examples and multimedia supports, allows for structuring the phonetic progression. These resources facilitate the learner’s autonomy in their process of phonological correction and in their awareness of crucial contrasts. In sum, the targeted use of oppositions in minimal pairs constitutes a powerful strategy to overcome the phonetic difficulties related to the gaps between Kabiyè and French. It combines improvement of phonological perception, articulatory correction and lexical enrichment, essential elements for a successful and lasting acquisition.

6. Discussion

The contrastive analysis of the phonological segments of Kabiyè and French, as well as the proposed pedagogical strategies, open promising avenues for the development of phonological didactics in African plurilingual contexts. In the short and medium term, it seems essential to consolidate theoretical foundations by extending the work to other languages related to Kabiyè and to other similar linguistic contacts. This extension will allow to better identify the invariants of articulatory difficulties and validate the effectiveness of the methods in various linguistic environments. Togolese plurilingualism complicates Kabiyè-French interference, because the phonology of other local languages intervenes. For example, Ewe which is a national language lacks posterior fricatives like /ʃ/, favouring a rolled substitution /r/ shared with Kabiyè, while Tem (related language) presents reduced nasals, accentuating the denasalisation of French vowels (/ɛ̃/ → /ɛ/). These trilingual interactions require extensive analysis models, integrating sociolinguistic surveys to modulate didactic strategies in mixed environments, where a Kabiyè learner exposed to Tem/Ewe risks more tenacious hybrid errors.

Moreover, on the pedagogical level, construction and dissemination of educational modules integrating the involvement of phonatory organs, the verb-tonal method and the use of minimal pairs will be crucial. These modules must be adapted to learners’ levels of competence and contextualised according to their socio-cultural realities, which will strengthen their relevance and impact.

At the same time, the multidimensional assessment protocol goes beyond traditional tests to measure a broader range of a student’s skills, knowledge and attitudes. Evaluation is not limited to “what the student knows”, but encompasses “what he can do”, “how he learns” and “how he interacts”. As for multimodal feedback, it consists of providing comments using several different modes or

channels of communication (text, audio, video, gestures, images) rather than being limited to the traditional written comment. The main implication is to improve the clarity, engagement and usability of feedback. By varying modes (for example, a general video commentary for motivation and a specific written commentary for grammar), the teacher adapts to different learning styles and facilitates dialogue and understanding of the feedback by students.

These two practices encourage a more inclusive and personalized learning culture, where assessment is an ongoing process that actively supports progression rather than just a final measure. On the other hand, the sociolinguistic perspective should not be neglected. Plurilingualism, interactions with other local languages and actual practices of using French strongly influence the dynamics of phonological acquisition. Interdisciplinary research combining sociolinguistics, didactics and phonology is necessary to grasp these mechanisms and adapt teaching/learning accordingly. Finally, the future methodology may benefit from combined empirical approaches: detailed phonetic analyses of productions, acoustic measurements, perceptive studies and observations in class will offer valuable data to refine models and practices. Such a participatory approach involving researchers, teachers and learners will promote mutual enrichment and real knowledge transfer. These perspectives reflect a continuous commitment to a contextualised, cooperative and innovative phonological didactics, capable of responding to the challenges posed by French language teaching in plurilingual and multicultural contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study, based on a contrastive analysis of Kabiye and French phonological segments and on the resulting teaching dynamics, ends with a synthesis of the acquired knowledge and on precise orientations for the future. It combines an articulated description of theoretical and methodological frameworks, a mapping of common and divergent sounds, the identification of the articulatory difficulties specific to Kabiye speakers learning French and, finally, integrated pedagogical strategies that aim to overcome these obstacles. This configuration allows not only to shed light on the learning mechanisms but also to propose didactic practices directly exploitable in plurilingual contexts. First of all, the results confirm that the detailed knowledge of phonatory organs and prosodic contours is decisive for the progression of Kabiye learners in French teaching/learning process. Targeted articulatory exercises, combined with prosodic perception and reproduction activities, reduce recurrent errors and improve intelligibility. This orientation emphasizes the importance of teaching based on the exact articulation of gestures and on the awareness of phonetic differences, rather than on a simple mnemonic repetition of sounds. This reinforces the idea that phonology cannot be fully learned without an integrated approach that brings together production, perception and linguistic sensitivity. Then, the application of methods such as the verbal and the use of minimal pairs demonstrate their effectiveness in structuring the acquisition of fine distinctions, particularly between rounded vowels and na-

salisation, or between uvular consonants and their more accessible substitutes. The progressive approach, guided by multimodal feedbacks (visual, kinesthetic and auditory), supports a measurable and sustainable progression. These results corroborate the pedago-phonics research that prioritises adaptive and learner-centered learning paths, capable of evolving with the needs and resources of the target groups. Finally, the perspectives outlined in the framework open up concrete avenues to broaden the scope and impact of the results. The consolidation of theoretical frameworks and comparative extension to other languages in the area will improve the generalization of conclusions. At the same time, the development of integrated and contextualized evaluation tools, accompanied by appropriate educational resources, will allow for lasting anchoring of practices in local educational and sociolinguistic realities. Cooperation with communities and educational actors is a crucial lever to ensure the relevance and sustainability of interventions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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