

Problematising Simplicity: Addressing Comprehension Gaps of RFI's 'Le Journal en Français Facile'

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Abstract

This paper evaluates Malawian learners' French language comprehension abilities concerning the French radio program 'Le Journal en français facile' (The News in Simple French), broadcast by Radio France Internationale. Specifically, it assesses learners' levels of aural comprehension of this Francophone news content designed for non-native audiences. The paper examines whether the universal applicability of the 'français facile' (simple French) concept across heterogeneous learners can be assumed, considering linguistic aspects deemed elementary from a Francophone perspective may not prove equivalently rudimentary for anglophone learners of French. Methodologically, the paper is grounded in the Bottom-up and Top-down listening comprehension model, which emphasises integrating linguistic and prior sociocultural knowledge to facilitate aural meaning-making. Through French listening exercises and teacher interviews with a sample of Malawian college students, the study highlights limitations in comprehension, with listeners restricted to grasping essential lexical news components like numbers, names and locations while failing to parse complex news concepts—attributed to newscaster accent, pronunciation, speech rate, unfamiliar vocabulary, and insufficient prior knowledge activation. This paper argues the notion of "simple" French may be misconstrued when applied uniformly across diverse global learners engaging with RFI broadcasts, evidenced by difficulty comprehending the news program among numerous Malawian learners despite its simplified linguistic profile. Mastery of these broadcasts, it is contended, necessitates more advanced proficiency.

Keywords

Simple French
Newscast;
Prior knowledge;
Listening comprehension

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Introduction

Following the recent emphasis on the communicative approach in language learning, listening has become a critical skill that a learner is expected to acquire, in addition to reading, writing and speaking. As Petersen (2001, as cited in Yildirim & Yildirim, 2016, p. 2097) points out, through listening, learners become aware of the interworking of language systems at various levels, and this establishes a base for more fluent, productive skills. Newscasts in the target language form part of the material that learners must listen to. It is considered authentic material that increases their vocabulary, improves pronunciation, and informs them about worldwide events. More importantly, using original material in listening, notably radio or television programmes, enables the evaluation or self-evaluation of learners of a foreign language (Inyang, 2017, p. 135). This study, therefore, evaluates the comprehension of oral French news by Malawian learners of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), using two editions of “Newscast in simple French”, initially called in French, *Le journal en français facile*, a news programme broadcast on Radio France Internationale (RFI), featuring news on global events. Specifically, it defines the learners’ understanding of French news and examines the universality of the concept of *français facile* (simple French) among the learners.

The Teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Malawi

Following its colonial relations with Britain, Malawi, an African English-speaking country, introduced French language teaching in schools in 1961 to meet its regional and global communication and trade needs. As Lipenga (2001, as cited in Lipenga, 2016) points out, the decision to introduce French was arrived at, among other factors, following a meeting between the former Heads of State of Malawi and France, Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda and General Charles de Gaulle, respectively. The administrative decision made several schools begin to offer French as a subject. Today, a look at the state of French language education in the Malawian classroom reveals that though the course aims to help learners achieve the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, many learners fail to develop the listening skill.

In response to the introduction of the language, primary schools have been offering French, but no curriculum has been drafted yet at this level. Hence, only private institutions have offered French using their international syllabi as a guide. Many private schools have introduced French to attract more pupils, thanks to the prestige that the language brings because, as pointed out by Lipenga (as cited in Lipenga 2016), it has been the only foreign language officially accepted to be taught in the country's schools. Today, apart from international schools, local private primary schools offer French using their own 'guides' since there is no primary school syllabus for French. Often, this teaching and learning is considered informal and leisure for learners. Hence, the four language skills, including listening, are not fully imparted, and in most schools, pupils are made to memorise and recite French passages. Moreover, the subject is not examined during the government's Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations. Similarly, Makani (2009) argues that primary school French cannot be taken seriously since the schools do not have appropriate teaching and learning materials, and often, the teachers who teach the subject are not qualified enough to handle it.

At the secondary level, however, the introduction of French witnessed several public, private and grant-aided secondary schools begin to offer French as a subject. By 1989, thirty-nine Malawian secondary schools were offering French (Chilipaine, 1989, as cited in Makani, 2009). However, some schools have stopped due to the shortage of French teachers, among other factors. It is worth noting that, unlike English, French has been and is offered as an optional subject, especially in the upper classes (Forms 3 and 4). Hence, the first two years tend to have large numbers of learners, which dwindle in the last two years. This is why some scholars argue that, as regards the language teaching policy, French does not have a status in the country. Still, it is recognised as a foreign language, important to education, economic and political fields, just like other foreign languages (Sefu, 2014). The teaching of French in secondary school has so far revolved around three textbooks or teaching methods, approved by the Ministry of Education. The first was *Pierre et Seydou*, used until the early 1990s and subsequently replaced by the

Transafrique. Around 2016, *Transafrique* was replaced by two new books, *Méto* and *Entre Copains*, which are still in use today.

A close look at each of the course books shows exciting scenarios. Described as a method of teaching French to English-speaking African students at the secondary level, the *Pierre et Seydou* series (1A, 1B, 2, 3 and 4) mainly comprise French dialogues. During a lesson, the teacher reads out the dialogue loudly for learners to grasp the correct pronunciation of French words, after which they repeat the lines after their teacher. Learners must also memorise the lines and act out the dialogue as a role play. Everything in the book, including exercise instructions, is written in French. This is a deliberate move because, as Oduke (2013) opines, the course book was conceptualised for Cameroon, which has been bilingual (one side francophone, the other anglophone) since the colonial era. According to Oduke, the course developers wanted “to create content which was supposed to make the Anglophone Cameroonian francophone”. In other words, the course book aimed at immersing the learner in the French language.

The *Transafrique* series (1, 2 and 3) is a three-year course written for junior secondary school learners in English-speaking Africa. The Malawian syllabus spreads the three volumes across the four secondary school years: a few Book 1 chapters are covered in Form 1, and the remaining ones, plus some Book 2 chapters, are taught in Form 2; later, a few Book 3 chapters are covered in Form 3, and then Form 4 focuses on the remaining chapters. As stipulated by the authors of the book, the course puts more emphasis on writing, reading and speaking skills (Godard & Paisant, 1991; Godard, Pachtod & Paisant, 1991). Comprising dialogues and short passages, during a lesson, the teacher reads a dialogue or passage and the learners listen, after which it is their turn to read. After the reading, learners work on a series of written exercises to show their understanding of the dialogues read. Unlike in *Pierre et Seydou*, only the dialogues, passages and activities are in French, and all instructions are in English. Although some teachers consider the course book as foreign since, as Makani (2009) stipulates, several linguistic situations are based on West African sociocultural realities, including proverbs and names of

people and towns, other teachers find it easy to use because its topics build on one another.

Finally, *Métro* and *Entre Copains*, described as lively and communicative, seem to have been introduced to respond to modernity. The former is designed to come with cassettes or CDs, although in Malawi, as revealed by some teachers, the textbooks arrive in schools without audio resources. The latter is based on a modern approach to learning French as a foreign language since, as the publisher points out, it also covers “emerging issues such as modern trends in technology, economic issues and environmental conservation”, aspects that were lacking in the previous course books. However, according to the teachers, with the absence of CDs in the course books, teaching listening is not easy, forcing the teacher to read the dialogues as the learners listen to grasp the pronunciation. Moreover, the presentation of topics in these textbooks is challenging to follow. In the previous course books, a teacher progressed from one unit to the next following the order presented in the book, with topics building on one another. However, in these books, the teacher has to decide which unit to pick first and which one to cover afterwards. This brings disorganisation and inconsistency when a syllabus is non-existent, as one school may follow a pattern of topics different from another school since teachers may see things differently.

The Teaching of French Language Listening in Universities

At the tertiary level, the teaching of French began in 1965 at the University of Malawi (UNIMA), in 1997 at Mzuzu University (MZUNI) and in 2009 at Domasi College of Education (DCE). Currently, only three tertiary institutions offer French studies in Malawi. Today, sections of French from these institutions provide four-year French courses to students pursuing undergraduate degrees in Arts Humanities, Hospitality Management, and Education, with the latter being trained to become teachers of French in secondary schools.

A glance at university French courses shows that the content taught is advanced and sometimes challenging, taking the learner to a higher level of

knowledge of French. The learner is exposed to various domains, including French linguistics, literature, and translation/interpretation. The curriculum for French is developed by the lecturers themselves and approved within the institution, and it does not limit course deliverers on textbooks to use. Like the secondary school level, the university curriculum for French is expected to pay attention to French oral skills. As such, the three institutions' (UNIMA, MZUNI, DCE) respective curriculums for French feature a course that tackles and enforces oral competency (speaking and listening). For instance, describing a first-year French course, *Oral Expression and Communication*, the UNIMA's Bachelor of Arts Humanities Programme Document (2018, p. 29) stipulates that: “[it] focuses on the acquisition of oral competence (speaking and listening) to improve their reading and writing. Students will practise orally in and outside class in pairs or larger groups. Students must also complete written and listening exercises outside class hours.”

Thus, being the final stage of learning French formally, the tertiary level offers the learner an opportunity to develop their oral competency further before they are sent to the world to be “socially and economically engaged for sustainable development of Malawi and beyond” (UNIMA, BAH Programme Document, 2018, p. 29). However, teaching oral competency in one semester during a four-year programme seems inadequate.

Obviously, with the nature of course books used in secondary school, listening is at a disadvantage since the books do not come with audio materials to help learners listen to native French speakers' pronunciation. Due to financial constraints and the optional status of French as a subject, it is difficult for schools or teachers to purchase the materials. Instead, the teacher relies on reading while the learners listen to learn pronunciation, but not all teachers' pronunciation may be correct enough to emulate. Furthermore, doing little or nothing on oral competency in the four-year university programme is damaging for learners of French, considering that the only place and time a Malawian learner practises French entirely is the classroom, during a French lesson. Thus, this is the learning context that Malawian learners of FFL go through, evoking whether these learners

can comprehend French radio news like “Newscast in Simple French” just like francophones. Therefore, this question led to this study to explore the reality on the ground.

Listening to Radio News Broadcasts

As indicated on RFI’s website, this is a real-time newscast that tells the story of each event in its context, history and characters for listeners to understand the words and concepts of world news. Therefore, this kind of French news distinguishes itself as that which aims to simplify the communication of ideas (so that people with low French linguistic competency should be able to understand) from the standard or technical French, which is hard to understand. RFI seems to have conceived the idea in light of basic French vis-à-vis standard French, which emanates from what France did long ago to simplify learning its language. Basic French is a list of words and grammatical guidelines developed in the early 1950s to be used in the teaching of French to foreigners and the people of the French Union when France wanted to increase the spread of its language in the world (Klinger & Georges, 2006; Wikipedia, 2010). A series of studies in the 1950s and 1960s showed that a limited number of words were used in everyday speech, writing, and all situations. The studies also revealed that French speakers used a limited number of grammatical rules necessary for the language to function. Thus, basic French with fewer grammatical rules than standard French was introduced.

However, it was rejected during the 1970s, as the authorities were reorganising the language teaching without replacing it with a new method. Even though the idea was abandoned, RFI started to broadcast the ten-minute “Newscast in simple French” twice a day, using a simple and limited vocabulary of 300 words and giving the context of events. This approach is similar to that of the Voice of America, which since 1959 has been broadcasting to the basic-level English audience programmes in Special English, a form of basic English.

Some scholars have studied and commented on this concept and the broader aspect of news listening. Inyang (2017), in an attempt to understand listening

comprehension in Nigeria, conducted a study using RFI's "Newscast in Simple French" to evaluate the oral comprehension of Nigerian learners of FFL. The author recorded two editions of the newscast and played them for intermediate and advanced learners of French, after which they answered English questions to test their comprehension of the news content. The study found that simple French was elusive since it was not simple for the learners involved. Although the language of the newscast was simple, it was still difficult to understand for a good number of Nigerian learners of French. Inyang concluded that what is easy for native speakers or francophone countries cannot automatically be easy for anglophone French learners.

However, as Zhang (2019) observes, certain features of any newscast, simplified or not, can present several obstacles to comprehension. The first obstacle is when the learners have insufficient background knowledge. When listening to some reports about international current affairs, many students get puzzled since they are not aware of the related context of the news, although the principle "to know something about everything" is often encouraged in education. The second obstacle is the vocabulary or terminology used in the newscasts. As Zhang (2019) points out, a good command of vocabulary is essential for news listening comprehension, but most of the time, learners do not have it. Often, a newscast widely covers topics from politics, economics, and health to security, sports, fashion, and many others. Thus, the terminology used in the newscast is abundant, mixed and less familiar to the learner. Thirdly, the speed of the speech in the newscast is another obstacle, and the author notes that most learners fail to understand newscast content due to a high reading speed. He argues that to improve news listening, beginner and intermediate-level learners need to challenge themselves by practising with newscasts with more words per minute or high reading speed to overcome the problem of reading speed.

Similarly, Underwood (1989, cited in Yildirim & Yildirim, 2016) identifies more obstacles learners encounter when listening to newscasts. His study lists challenges, such as speed of delivery, not being able to have words repeated, failing

to follow signals like transitions, failing to concentrate, and habits by some learners, such as trying to understand every word they hear in what they are listening to. Renukadevi (2014), however, suggests ways to counter listening obstacles and argues that teachers should devise strategies for teaching effective listening. According to him, learners should be given more exposure to various listening activities; they should be taught how to recognise the context of a listening text and its purpose, and, more importantly, learners should be taught to use listening models to comprehend. Furthermore, López, Moura and Delgado (2020) suggest adding a student-centred dimension to the listening process. According to these authors, this means bringing to class topics that may be meaningful and relevant to learners to make listening lessons enjoyable and accessible.

Many scholars have commented on the issue of foreign language learners and their listening to newscasts. Still, very little is known about what obtains when learners listen to a particular newscast, such as RFI's "Newscast in Simple French." The present study contributes to the debate using experiences of learners of French from the Malawian context, and it goes further to relate the learners' comprehension to an international language proficiency evaluation framework, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), to establish a substantial description about the learners' comprehension ability.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Anderson's three stages of listening guide the current study. Anderson suggests three interconnected steps in his model to explain the listening comprehension process: perceptual processing, parsing, and utilisation (Nazarieh, Razmi, Azizian & Ghani, 2022; Sah & Shah, 2020). Perceptual processing involves paying attention to the sounds stored in short memory. In this stage, the listener pays attention to meaningful sounds and keywords, which can lead to constructing meaning. In the parsing step, however, the listener transforms the incoming words into a mental representation of the overall meaning of the words. Finally, in the utilisation stage, the listener associates the incoming oral input and the existing knowledge stored in long-term memory in schemata to construct meaning. Other

scholars have written around Anderson's ideas, constructing two fundamental principles relating to listening ability. In the words of Brown (2006, p. 2), these are "using our prior knowledge and experiences" and "using the information we have about sounds, word meanings and discourse markers" to interpret things that we have heard. The former is called the *top-down process*, and the latter is the *bottom-up process*. Today, the two principles are called the Bottom-up and top-down listening model or simply the listening process.

On the one hand, the top-down process occurs when the listener uses prior knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. This includes the knowledge of the topic, the listening context, the culture or other information stored as schema. On the other hand, the bottom-up process involves the listener using linguistic knowledge to understand a message. This includes information about sounds, words, lexical meanings and even discourse markers, such as "first", "then", and "after". However, it should be noted that the two processes are interactive, interpretive techniques whereby listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge to understand messages. Furthermore, as Vandergrift (2004, as cited in Yildirim & Yildirim, 2016) argues, depending on the purpose of listening, the listener can use top-down or bottom-up more than the other.

This model provides a practical framework for this study. The outlined premises are in tandem with our investigation since one way through which the present study evaluates Malawian learners' comprehension of French news is to analyse their ability to exploit their schemata during listening tasks in an attempt to understand a message. In addition, the study analyses how learners use their linguistic knowledge (sounds and keywords heard in a message) to construct meaning. The model explains the learners' behaviours shown in the findings.

The data used in this study is from a listening comprehension exercise by five UNIMA and fifteen DCE students and conversations with teachers from secondary schools and universities on whether listening comprehension was part and parcel of their institutions' teaching of French. Twenty students (ten from the third year and ten from the fourth year; 13 males and seven females) participated

in the listening activity. The participants underwent two listening sessions. In each session, each participant was given a questionnaire which had questions in two parts. The first part contained ten comprehension questions in French based on the news recording, requiring the participants to identify the type and name of the news programme they listened to, place the topics covered in the news, and remember critical details they heard in the news and reports. The second part of the questions required the participants to comment on the newscast and say more about their listening experience in English.

In the two listening sessions, two five-minute pre-recorded editions of the newscast, *Le journal en français facile*, were played twice. The participants were given one minute to read the comprehension questions before they listened to the newscast for the first time. Then, the participants had three minutes to answer the questions, at the end of which they heard for the second time. This was followed by five minutes to complete answering the comprehension questions before proceeding to the second set of general questions. The listening exercise format was borrowed from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international framework used to determine language proficiency levels. The researcher took this route to systematically carry out the comprehension exercise and to relate, at the end, the participant's level of French comprehension with the international framework.

The study focused on College students because, in Malawi, this is the final level of learning French formally before students' graduation. Hence, it is regarded as the advanced level and assumed as the point where students have a higher knowledge of French than those in secondary school. Only third- and fourth-year students were deemed suitable for the comprehension exercises, considering that they have a significant level of mastery since they are about to complete their College studies. Furthermore, only those who started learning French from secondary school were eligible for the study. This criterion gave us fifteen participants from DCE and only five from UNIMA. However, the study was limited to two of the three tertiary education institutions (UNIMA and DCE) due to time and logistical

factors. The researcher needed to conduct the exercise in person to benefit from the personal observation of the participants. This was impossible with MZUNI since it is about 500 KM away. Nevertheless, the researcher managed to converse with some French teachers for the institution regarding teaching oral competency.

The Extent to which Malawian Learners of French Understand French News Content

The study participants could grasp some details from the French news content. Still, they had some challenges to comprehend fully, and their comprehension ability varied depending on their familiarity with the news content, the level of news content, and their listening background or exposure to listening.

Familiarity with news content: The results reveal that for Newscast 1, 50% of the participants (third and fourth year) were above average. Considering the years of study separately, most of the fourth-year participants (60%) were above average, while only 40% of the third-year participants were above average. However, for Newscast 2, most participants (55%) were above average. For each level of study, 70% of the fourth-year participants were above average, while only 40% of the third-year participants were above average. A total of 70% of the participants indicated that they understood the content of the newscast because they were familiar with some terms and expressions used. Only 50% admitted hearing about some of the events elsewhere before the study.

The participants scored better on familiar content than on unfamiliar content. The Newscast 1 covered topics such as Queen Elizabeth II's diamond jubilee celebration in Britain and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Newscast 2, on the other hand, covered the appointment of Elizabeth Borne as French Prime Minister in France, the Ukraine war and the legislative elections in Lebanon. Because of their global impact, some news items have made headlines in many local English media outlets (such as Zodiak radio, The Nation newspaper, etc.). Hence, during the comprehension exercise, many participants had prior knowledge of some of the events, making comprehending much of the content easier. However,

the participants who did not have prior knowledge (50%) found the content strange as they heard about it for the first time, making it difficult to understand. This result reflects this study's premise, of which one tenet indicates that for the listening process to occur successfully, an individual must use prior knowledge and experience (Brown, 2006).

Level of news content: The results reveal that many participants grasped low-order content quickly, including the type of programme they listened to, numbers, names of people and places, etc. However, it was difficult for most of them to grasp high-order content, including identifying other vital details and topics mentioned in the newscast. For instance, in Newscast 1, most participants (55%) could recognise numbers, and all participants (100%) managed to identify the names of people and places mentioned in the newscast. However, only 30% of the participants could identify key news details and topics. Similarly, for Newscast 2, 65% of the participants could identify numbers, and all of them (100%) managed to remember the names of people and places. However, only 15% of the participants could identify key news details and topics. Many participants (60%) indicated that they understood the meanings of many terms, especially those that they usually hear around, but 65% of them revealed that it was hard to grasp some aspects because the French used was too challenging to understand and that the news was read at a fast speed.

The low-order content of the news included basic single-word details, such as numbers and names of people and places, which were answers to who-where-when questions. Considering that most of these terms and words do not change in meaning and sound, it is possible that when the participants heard similar sounds, the degree of difficulty was low, and they grasped what the words meant, leading to a high pass rate on the primary content. On the contrary, the high-order content, which contained headlines and other essential news details as answers to what-why questions, included complex sentences. The complexity, coupled with the reading speed, made it difficult for most of them to understand. Nevertheless, knowing a language is more than knowing basic words and their meanings. In addition,

language scholars agree that to comprehend and use a language, one needs to handle combinations of structures and, more importantly, the ability to decode complex sets of concepts that are not literal. Likely, many study participants did not have this linguistic knowledge during the comprehension test, hence the low pass rate. As stated in the study's premise, using our linguistic knowledge to interpret things we have heard equally plays a fundamental role in listening comprehension.

French-learning background: The results also show that the study participants have had little or no exposure to news-listening activities since they began to learn French. Many (55%) indicated that they had never listened to the radio or watched television as part of a French lesson in a classroom, and the rest stated they had done it once or twice. A common reason given was that their teachers ignored listening and focused more on reading, writing and speaking. This could be due to a lack of resources, as indicated previously. Worse still, most of the participants (85%) revealed that even today, they do not listen to French language radio news or other programmes of their own will, with some of them arguing that they get put off by the speed and the French accent, which is too difficult to grasp. The participants revealed a lack of exposure to French natives' pronunciation hindered their comprehension. Thus, the lack of native-speaker models in French may be the basis for the challenges with word pronunciation, understanding meanings and reading speed. The students seem familiar with the French using local accents and find the RFI accent challenging. To overcome this challenge, there is a need, therefore, for French teachers to expose their learners to listening activities that involve native-speaker audio.

RFI's "Newscast in Simple French," Simple for Malawian Learners of French as a Foreign Language?

The findings show that the study participants' listening and comprehension of French news is limited to identifying the type of programme, the names of people and places and numbers, among others, representing basic content. It is easier for them to identify such content than to analyse complex ideas in the content. Three aspects likely contribute to this challenge: firstly, the level of

language used in the news is difficult for the participants. Since the newscast has a broad coverage of topics (politics, economics, entertainment, etc.), its vocabulary is mixed and less familiar to the learners. Secondly, a good vocabulary is necessary for news listening, which the learners do not have. The participants lack a profound linguistic knowledge of French, and their vocabulary seems limited due to a lack of exposure to French news. Thirdly, the fact that they are not up-to-date with information cannot be disregarded. This makes it difficult for them to grasp all news content. As Inyang (2017) points out, a listener must be up-to-date with information to decipher everything in a newscast because the information presented in the news is a follow-up on current events, often mentioned in previous editions. Thus, this newscast is not straightforward for Malawian learners of FFL since their comprehension is limited to a particular nature of news details.

Relating the Participants' Level of Comprehension to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL)

The CEFRL has three primary levels of knowledge, labelled A, B and C. Roughly, the levels can be seen as similar to Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced levels, but CEFRL calls them Basic, Independent and Proficient users. Each level is divided into six sub-levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), where A1 is the breakthrough level while C2 is the mastery level. Each level contains a descriptor that shows what a language learner is expected to do or achieve across the four language skills to be classified as belonging to a particular level: A1, A2, B1, etc. Relating the CEFRL levels with the listening of the study participants, which is mainly limited to basic content, such as identifying the type of programme, the names of people and places and numbers, and challenged on the analysis of high-order content, the following listening descriptors apply to the two years of study:

B1: I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters [...] I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs [...] when the delivery is relatively slow and precise; **B2:** I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can

understand most TV news and current affairs programmes [...] in standard dialect (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*: n.d., p. 26).

On the international framework, the study participants, whom we usually describe as advanced learners of French, can be described as belonging to level B or independent users, with third-year participants represented in B1 and fourth-year participants in B2. This means the participants need not rest on their laurels as they have not yet reached the advanced levels, C1 and C2.

Thus, this picture clearly shows that more work needs to be done in teaching and learning French in Malawi. French teachers must apply the communicative approach for language teaching at all levels by exposing learners to listening comprehension activities using authentic material. This may be done by making learners listen to RFI programmes or French radio. This will enable learners to familiarise themselves with the speech accent, pronunciation, speed and vocabulary, particularly in our case, where learners of French lack native-speaker models and where the classroom is the only place where learners practise French.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the comprehension of oral French news by Malawian learners of French, using editions of “Newscast in Simple French” from RFI. The paper argues that listening to and understanding French news, Malawian learners of French are limited to identifying basic news details, and the learners have severe challenges in analysing and comprehending complex details from news content. This indicates that “simple French” is not universally applicable since not everyone listening to the newscast can understand it. Considering that the challenges are based on, among other factors, the high level of language used in the news, lack of a good command of vocabulary in the learners and lack of exposure or failure to be up-to-date with information, the paper suggests that language teachers at all levels need to help their learners develop the listening

comprehension skill by exposing them to more listening activities using authentic material involving native French speakers.

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