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CLÉA: A BASIC SKILLS FRAMEWORK FOR LOW EDUCATED PEOPLE?

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ABSTRACT: In France, French language is seen as a vocational skill. Companies are able to put in place French language vocational training for employees, mostly from foreign origin with very different sociolinguistic backgrounds. Many of these employees never went to school and, with vocational training, learn to read, write French and numeracy. Since 2016, a basic skills framework designed for low-educated adults called *CléA* (Key for Adults) has been developed by the French government so as to make every worker or unemployed person more autonomous, efficient at any workplace. Through an immersive ethnographic approach, we present the first outputs of developing *CléA* into two training courses. We analyse this basic skills framework, the way people are evaluated, if they pass the assessment, what training is put in place in case of failure, how this new approach is perceived by trained people, by their companies...and if *CléA* could change things for low-educated people in France.

KEYWORDS: framework, basic skills, vocational training, French language, assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

France has sustained a tradition of French language policy over many years. In 2004, the ability to communicate in French was officially recognised as a vocational skill in common with other technical skills. This very new paradigm has permitted companies to put in place French language vocational training for their employees. In the first part of this paper, we will set out a brief history of French language policy in France, at the workplace. This brief overview will lead us to 2016. This year, a new official basic skills framework designed for adults with limited education (especially LESLLA), called *CléA*, has been put in place. *CléA* is presented as the “Foundation-level Vocational Knowledge and Skills” every worker and unemployed person ought to master so as to

be autonomous, efficient at any workplace. The second part of this paper will consist in a presentation of the *CléA* framework. As *CléA* is very new, in the third part of this paper, we will analyse through two pilot courses still in progress, how *CléA* is being implemented in two different contexts: a cleaning company and a staff canteen. Using an ethnographic approach, we can give the first results of these pilot courses and see how people have been assessed, how training courses have been organised, how learners and trainers deal with *CléA*. These first outputs show us that it is often difficult to deal with such an official framework and there is a lot to manage in order to ensure that low-educated people improve their basic skills, especially their French.

2. FRENCH LANGUAGE POLICY IN FRANCE

2.1. FRENCH LANGUAGE POLICY THROUGH A FEW DATES

Since 1539 and the Ordinance of *Villers-Côterets*,¹ France has been maintaining the pre-eminence of the French language. At this time, the Latin was being replaced by French. One of the goals of that ordinance was to begin a kind of linguistic unification all over France.

Later, after the French Revolution, in 1794, Abbé Grégoire continued the programme of linguistic unification writing a report on the necessity and means to annihilate patois and to universalise the use of the French language.² At that time, the main goal of the Revolution's spirit was to unify the whole country for a better efficiency between regions and different administrations and French language became compulsory in all administrations in 1794, July 20th.³

French became the language of instruction at the end of the nineteenth century. More and more, the state had been trying to promote French over regional languages even when no law imposed "French only" at school.

French was formally recognised as the language of France in 1992 in the context of European Union and the Maastricht Treaty.⁴ At that time, the second article of the French Constitution was changed and a new clause added: "The language of the Republic is the French language".

One last important date is 1994 with the *Toubon* law.⁵ The main point of this law was to assert the right to use French at work, in courts, when people buy something, read a user manual or a guarantee, for example.

1. "We intend that henceforth all decrees and other proceedings, whether of our sovereign courts or others, subordinate and inferior, or whether in records, surveys, contracts, commissions, awards, wills, and all other acts and deeds of justice or of law, that all such acts are spoken, written, and given to the parties [concerned] in the French mother tongue, and not otherwise". *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* signed by Francis I of France (August 10th, 1539).

2. "Idiom's unicity is part of the Revolution" (author's translation) Abbé Grégoire (1794).

3. 1st article of the decree of the same date

4. 1992, February 7th

5. Assemblée Nationale (1994).

2.2. FRENCH LANGUAGE PLANNING AND MIGRANTS

If French is the language of the nation, of the French Republic, obviously migrants should speak, understand, read and write French.

Firstly, instead of migrants being forced to speak French as suggested in the Benisti report,⁶ a specific diploma has been created for low-educated people, the *DILF*: a pre-elementary A1.1 level French diploma. This diploma has been designed for "people with minimal skills in French: real beginners and new migrants to France, often less or badly educated in their own country, sometimes non-readers, non-writers when they begin to learn French".⁷ As we can see, this level is linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages⁸ (now CEFRL) and sits below the A1 level, a kind of survival level. It is important to notice that it was not compulsory but more and more recommended for non-European migrants wishing to stay in France. Indeed, in 2007, a compulsory welcoming contract of integration (*CAI*)⁹ was put in place for new migrants wishing to settle. When people are judged (based on an interview and some informal assessment) unable to speak and read French, the *DILF* has become mandatory.

In 2011, the process of naturalization was re-examined and the government made intermediate level oral skills a precondition to become French: B1 level.¹⁰

Till now, no new decrees or laws have been put in place but there are some proposals relating to foreigners in France. One¹¹ from the Senate is linked to the French language level required for resident status (B1 level in all competencies) and for French nationality (B2 level in all competencies). With Europe exposed to a wave of migration from the Middle-East and Africa, with Presidential and legislative elections this year in France, it seems possible that French language requirements for foreigners could be an issue.

2.3. FRENCH LANGUAGE POLICY AT THE WORKPLACE

In France, since 1971,¹² companies have been forced to contribute to a levy for vocational training. Each month, a percentage of the employee's social taxes goes to a training account. To pay has been compulsory since 1971 but not to train. That is why companies (mostly little ones) have been paying for many years without training their own employees for many different reasons (they did not want to, they could not substitute, employees did not want training, funding from the levy was insufficient, etc.). The main point is that vocational training is a right in France and some money is available to fund it.

In 2004, French language became a recognised vocational skill. That was more or less revolutionary in that it made companies responsible of the French language skills

6. Benisti, Jacques Alain (2004).

7. In CIEP (October 2007).

8. Council of Europe (2001).

9. Contrat d'Accueil et d'Intégration: art. 5 of the Law relating to immigration's command, integration and asylum (2006, July, 24th)

10. Decree n° 2011-1265 (2011, October, 11th)

11. Kennel, Guy-Dominique (2015, October 1st).

12. Law n° 71-575 (1971, July, 16th).

of their employees (though, in fairness, some companies were already offering French courses to their employees before this law). Anyway, in 2004, it was decreed that French could be learnt at school during compulsory education and at the workplace through vocational training. The law of 2004 is very important because it gives the same rights to French people and foreigners: "Training people against non-literacy and learning the French language are included in lifelong learning".¹³ Effectively, in France, a distinction is drawn between people with limited literacy (*personnes en situation d'illettrisme*) and analphabetic people (*analphabètes*). In the law, the first expression refers to French people of low educational attainment, limited basic skills; the second one refers to migrants with limited knowledge of writing systems based on the Latin alphabet. French language, thanks to this law, could have been teaching to everyone in vocational training.

Different laws, agreements¹⁴ address the importance of French language at work. The most significant, still in progress, is the 2013 National agreement about vocational training. It is really fundamental because it changes the paradigm of the 1971 law. Nowadays, companies have to train their employees whether they receive levy funding for this or not. Vocational training is now compulsory. Moreover, each person, from the age of 15 to pension age, can create a vocational training personal account¹⁵ entitling them to vocational training hours that they can access throughout their career. We can imagine that this account could facilitate the Lifelong learning process.

In this agreement, a Certifications Committee had been asked to "define vocational basic skills before the end of the first 2014 semester". Two years later, this definition of vocational basic skills has been formalised through the "Foundation-level Vocational Knowledge and Skills Framework", known as *CléA*: Clé for Key, A for Adults.

13. Law n° 2004-391 (2004, May 4th).

14. See bibliography.

15. *Compte Personnel de Formation* everyone can create on the web.

2. CLÉA

2.1. WHAT IS IT FOR? WHO IS CONCERNED?



Figure1: The Framework¹⁶

As we can see on this front page, the "Foundation-level Vocational Knowledge and Skills Framework" (now *CléA*) is a framework which has been negotiated between trade union organisations and employer organisations. Every organisation has signed, so all of them should engage them in the promotion of this framework.

A preamble defines the main goal of the framework: *CléA* "has to be considered as the knowledge and competencies/skills package a person, whatever his job or his professional sector, must fully attain, to facilitate his employability and his access to vocational training".¹⁷ Hence, *CléA* is seen as a first priority to work in any sector and also as a first step before other training courses. This is confirmed later, in the same preamble, when it is written that *CléA* represents "the very first level of vocational competence".

Assessment in the *CléA* competencies is a pre-requisite to obtaining an occupational certificate. That is why *CléA* is seen as a first step, a recognised step, to progress.

16. COPANEF (2015).

17. All the extracts from *CléA* have been translated by the author of this paper.

2.2. SEVEN DOMAINS OF COMPETENCY, 28 AREAS OF COMPETENCE, 108 ASSESSMENT ITEMS

After the preamble, comes the real framework (page 3 to 14). Seven domains of competency "have been fully covered" ¹⁸ by the framework. These take into account the following skills:

> S'EXPRIMER EN FRANÇAIS	<input type="checkbox"/> French Language
> CALCULER, RAISONNER	<input type="checkbox"/> Numeracy
> UTILISER UN ORDINATEUR	<input type="checkbox"/> Using computers
> RESPECTER LES RÈGLES ET TRAVAILLER EN ÉQUIPE	<input type="checkbox"/> Working in team with regulations
> TRAVAILLER SEUL ET PRENDRE DES INITIATIVES	<input type="checkbox"/> Working alone with taking initiatives
> AVOIR L'ENVIE D'APPRENDRE	<input type="checkbox"/> Wanting to learn
> MAÎTRISER LES RÈGLES DE BASE : HYGIÈNE, SÉCURITÉ, ENVIRONNEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> Mastering basic rules of Health, Safety & Environment

Figure 2: the 7 CléA Competency's Areas

First of all, we see that all the usual basic skills feature in the framework. It's very close to the 2010 *Reference For Key Skills in Work Situations* ¹⁹ setting out the skills that underpin occupational competence, including four generic basic skills (French communication, writing, reading, numeracy) and six employability skills (IT, specific technologic terminology, health and safety, attitude at work, non-verbal communication and body language, cultural awareness). It's very similar in all but the sixth competency domain: Willingness to learn, in other words *learning to learn*. We might place CléA closer to the Canadian Essential Skills framework ²⁰ (Reading, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Working with Others, Thinking, Computer Use, Continuous Learning) from 1994 and the OECD Key Competencies ²¹ framework (Communication in the mother tongue, Communication in a foreign language, Mathematical literacy and basic competencies in science and technology, ICT skills, Learning to learn, Interpersonal and civic competencies, Entrepreneurship, Cultural awareness) from 2003, for example. Even if CléA could be really useful, it is hardly groundbreaking.

As mentioned in the preamble, ²² this framework has been designed as a tool to adapt in any situation so as to make "every sector, every professional world, able to appropriately adapt, contextualize, according to each occupational area or professional environment". That is why we may see CléA as a foundation framework for other

18. Written in the preamble

19. ANLCI (2010).

20. For more information, see http://www.esdc.gc.ca/en/essential_skills/index.page

21. Dominique S. Rychen, Laura H. Salganik (2003).

22. It was the same with the ANLCI's reference as it is written in the preamble.

frameworks, a kind of super framework.

Therefore, the main point is to adapt each domain of competency to each context without forgetting any of the competency areas. For example, ²³ with the French language competency domain, competency areas are: listening and understanding, talking, reading, writing, describing-formulating.

Moreover, as people are entitled to get a certificate with CléA, they need to be evaluated (using a number of the 108 assessment items). The CléA process has been articulated under three steps: an initial assessment, training (as necessary) and a final assessment, the approach "test, t each, test".

3. AN IMPLEMENTATION IN PROGRESS: LOOKING INTO TWO PILOT COURSES

3.1. OUR FIELD OF RESEARCH AND WORK

Our field of research is directly linked to our work. As a training organisation manager, with a team of trainers, vocational basic skills training is organised for (mainly) low educated-people at the workplace. As a PhD student, I do a research with an immersive ethnographic approach in my own workplace. Hence, I "have been studying the hum of the world" ²⁴ of our field and following the lines of Goffman or Austin. ²⁵ Vocational language learning at the workplace could be seen at the crossroads of many fields: Language policy (Calvet), Linguistic competencies (Beacco, Hymes), Basic skills and Work (Leclerc), Working sociology (Le Boterf, Zarifian), Language and Work (Boutet, Murlon-Dallies, Grünhage-Monetti), Sociodidactics (Adami)...

Indeed, in order to understand this complex field, we shall take all these fields into account. So, to be efficient, we have been working with a field book and android mobile (to record audio files, take pictures, movies) hoping we could catch different kinds of material that could be more relevant in our research. During training sessions, assessments, meetings (officials and unofficial) with trainees, trainers, companies, branch sectors, symposiums, we gathered audio records, pedagogical practices, pedagogic materials, interviews and so on.

To highlight CléA's implementation, we have been studying two different pilot courses. Such a study highlights contrastive analysis between two assessments and training processes in progress. We present these two pilot courses in the inserted table hereunder:

23. See the framework for more details of each area. Cf footnote 19.

24. «étudier le ronronnement du monde», Winkin Yves (1996).

25. Cf. bibliography.

	Cleaning company	Staff canteen
People trained	Cleaners and team leaders	Store-keeper and dishwasher
Education, origins and Languages	4 non-literate people (Cape Verde, Morocco), 2 people 3-5 five years schooled with different writing systems (Sri Lanka, Cape Verde), 7 people educated at different levels with different writing systems (Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Sri Lanka, India)	5 non-literate people (Mali, Algeria, Tibet, Cape Verde), 2 people 3-5 five years schooled with different writing systems (Algeria, Cape Verde), 4 people educated at different levels (France)
Where ?	Client's corporate building	In their own head office
Objectives	Being more efficient at the workplace, more confident, autonomous even at home and help them to take basic skills cleaning mastering certificate and cleaning CléA certificate	Help them to achieve a store-keeper vocational technical training and to take technical certificates, to take general CléA certificate (for a part of them)
CléA assessment and CléA training	Assessments and training managed by the same training organization specialising in Basic skills at the workplace (willingness of the Cleaning Sector ²⁶)	Assessments and training managed by two different training organizations (State's requirement ²⁷ and willingness of the branch sector to get two different providers): the assessment organisation specialises in technical training; the training organisation specialises in Basic skills training at the workplace
Assessment	Continuing: 12 hours in the first 70 hours of training by an assessor different from the trainers	Preceding the training: done by an occupational psychologist with the national grid of the assessment provider
Training link	The knowledge of basic skills by the assessor reinforces the training. The assessor assesses to facilitate the training and gives some qualitative results directly linked to the training.	There is neither possibility to know how assessment has been done, nor results that could help the trainers. The results are too linked to the 108 questions, too quantitative (a grid is filled with acquired/not acquired)

Table 1: Pilot Courses

3.2. THE FIRST RESULTS

Obviously, as *CléA* is being implemented this year, it is not possible to get a lot of results. However, the two previous pilot courses still in progress, with their differences, could be seen as the first steps of how trainers, assessors manage approach the new framework.

The first feedback we get is as follows:

26. When a training organisations is habilitated by the branch sector, it is possible to do both (asses and training) but with different trainers/assessors.

27. On behalf of the French State, the *COPANEF* has accredited 6 national to be able to assess and train people relating to *CléA*.

	Cleaning company	Staff canteen
Assessors	It has been very difficult to assess people because there was a lot of absenteeism due to work. The 12 hours assessment engaged took 24 hours so as to assess each one 12 hours. The assessor asked himself many questions: "how to assess 10 people with 28 competency areas in 12 hours?" / "as we do the same assessment, is it possible to assess 3-4 people at the same time?" / "when I assess somebody in ICT, if the person has never seen a computer, it is difficult to explain to her that she could manage later and I have to show her she has failed" / "I know easily who is able to write or not, to count or not: is it compulsory to assess all the competency areas?"	Nothing have been said but " <i>we did the assessment</i> ". After a long talk between assessors and trainers, a few comments have been emailed so as to make the <i>CléA</i> results understandable for the trainers and help them to imagine possible training.
Trainers	"when assessment is being proceed, sometimes, I have no one to teach" / "it is easy to train people 'cos I know how assessment is done" / "'cos of absenteeism, I have to teach the same things many times"	After the beginning of the training "if you are able to register this person to all the competency areas, it would be useful to him" / "of course, I don't make any link with assessment" / "hopefully, assessors explain a little, otherwise, I wouldn't understand why this person passed all technical oral assessments but not <i>CléA</i> oral assessments"
Trainees	"I am fed up with assessments, I want to learn" / "I don't want to be assessed today, let me learn"	"we didn't really understand why we have been assessed" / "we did the assessment at home and treated it as a joke" / "I am good at numeracy, why should I learn what I know?"
Companies	"how are things going on with the pilot?"	"we know we are putting in place <i>CléA</i> as experimentation pilot, that's why there are some slip-ups"
Training organisations	"To make assessment easier at the workplace, we put one assessor and one trainer in the same session, that is expensive"	"we put in place training without knowing which are the real needs of the trainees" / "we have no confidence in the assessment results"

Table 2: Feedback

As these two pilots have not been managed in the same way, these results are not really surprising. According to us, the most interesting part is the trainees' comments about assessment: they seem not to be really involved in it. They did it because they had to. These people are working, they want to be trained and they need to be trained. This statement made us wonder about the need of such an assessment at the workplace. Moreover, when the assessment is disconnected from reality, it may be very difficult to involve them. As *CléA* requirements enforce a compulsory initial assessment, it is firstly necessary to contextualize the framework with people at the workplace. Secondly, when people don't write, it is not necessary to assess their writing competency.

4. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Are low-educated people the first beneficiaries of *CléA* framework? Who really wants to introduce such a framework? Do companies need *CléA*? Does a *CléA* qualification help individuals to progress? How do trainers and assessors deal with *CléA*?

The very beginnings of *CléA* foresee an unsteady future. Till now, a lot of assessments have been put in place but there is little training. A very big state communication campaign promotes *CléA* and the six accredited networks to assess people are struggling to put themselves into the limelight. Indeed, assessments are well-paid, training not.

By the way, for a company, it is very easy to get money for *CléA* training and occupational sectors are promoting *CléA* heavily, and besides, doing *CléA* with your vocational training personal account could be the best way to get vocational training.

So, trade unions, the State, companies, occupational sectors, trainers, training organisations... should work in the same direction: the learners. *CléA* seems to be a good framework to help low-educated people become autonomous, more efficient, more able to find a job or get promoted. To reach these results, things are missing today.

There is a missing bottom up link between all these actors especially in a very competitive market – because vocational training is really a market.

It is absolutely necessary that trainers and assessors work together to improve the aim of the framework.

How can we engage low-educated people (the target of *CléA*) in *CléA* training?

Even if anyone can use his vocational training personal account to be trained with *CléA*, how is a low-educated person able to use his own account if he is not aware of this possibility or if he's not able to create it on the web? Should everyone be responsible for his own training, especially vocational training, a fortiori *CléA* training?

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