

Research Ethics in the Didactics of French as a Foreign Language: Methodological Transparency and Responsibility in the Use of Tools

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Abstract

This article falls within the field of the didactics of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) and addresses two fundamental imperatives that condition the quality and legitimacy of any research endeavour: methodological transparency and responsibility in the use of tools. Drawing on a theoretical framework that brings together epistemology, ethics, and language didactics, and complemented by an empirical study based on the direct observation of FFL sessions with first-year Master's students in the Department of French at Mohamed El Bachir El Ibrahimi University, Bordj Bou Arréridj, the article argues that research ethics does not constitute an external constraint upon scientific inquiry but is instead one of its founding and inseparable components. The observational findings reveal contrasting pedagogical practices, pointing at once to an emerging awareness of ethical concerns and to persistent shortcomings in methodological transparency and in the reflective use of tools.

Keywords: research ethics; didactics of French as a Foreign Language; methodological transparency; pedagogical tools; classroom observation; Algerian context.

Introduction

For several decades, research in the didactics of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) has undergone remarkable growth, both in the diversification of its objects of study and in the refinement of its methodological paradigms. This expansion has been accompanied by a progressive recognition of the need to frame scientific inquiry within rigorous ethical principles capable of safeguarding the integrity of data, respect for participants, and the reliability of the results produced.

In the Algerian university context, where FFL research occupies an increasingly prominent institutional place — particularly within Master's and doctoral programmes — this question takes on particular urgency. Student-researchers, engaged in their first scholarly work, face methodological and ethical demands for which they have not always been sufficiently prepared. The question of methodological transparency and of responsibility in the use of tools therefore arises with singular force in this setting.

The present study examines these issues by articulating three complementary dimensions. The first two sections provide a solid theoretical grounding: the first establishes the epistemological and ethical foundations of research in FFL didactics, while the second develops the notions of methodological transparency and responsibility in the use of tools. The third section, empirical in nature, reports on a

direct observation of FFL sessions conducted with first-year Master's students at the University of Bordj Bou Arréridj, in order to confront these theoretical principles with the realities of the field.

The study is guided by the following research question: *Are first-year Master's students in FFL didactics sufficiently equipped to conduct research that is ethical, transparent, and responsible in both its methods and its tools?*

Our initial hypothesis is that, despite growing awareness of ethical issues within Algerian university training, actual research and teaching practices still reveal tensions between the methodological ideals that are professed and the real uses of tools and methods. It is this tension that the present empirical work seeks to document and analyse.

1. Epistemological and Ethical Foundations of Research in FFL Didactics

1.1. FFL Didactics as a Field of Scientific Research

The didactics of French as a Foreign Language gradually established itself as an autonomous field of research from the 1970s onward, distinguishing itself from applied linguistics through the primacy it accorded to reflection on teaching and learning practices (Puren, 1988). This disciplinary emancipation was accompanied by an effort at epistemological clarification aimed at defining the objects, methods, and paradigms specific to the field.

Galisson and Coste (1976) helped lay the conceptual foundations of the discipline by defining language didactics as a discipline of both reference and intervention, situated at the intersection of the language sciences, the educational sciences, and cognitive psychology. This constitutive multidisciplinary accounts for the richness — but also the epistemological complexity — of the field, which must continually negotiate between paradigms and methods drawn from different disciplines.

In the Algerian context, FFL didactics occupies a distinctive position owing to the specific place of French within the country's educational and university systems. As a language of schooling and of higher education, French is at once a foreign language and a language of social prestige, which lends research conducted in this context an irreducible sociolinguistic and political dimension (Taleb Ibrahimi, 1995; Cherrad-Benchefra, 2004).

1.2. The Ethical Foundations of Research in the Human Sciences

Research ethics in the human and social sciences developed in response to the abuses observed throughout the history of science, particularly in the medical and psychological domains. The pioneering work of Beauchamp and Childress (2001) set out four fundamental principles — autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice — that today form the bedrock of all ethical reflection in this area.

Within the specific field of FFL research, these principles assume particular forms. The principle of autonomy implies that research participants — learners, teachers, institutions — consent freely and knowingly to their participation. The principle of beneficence requires that research yield genuine benefits for participants and for the scholarly community. The principle of non-maleficence demands that any moral, psychological, or social harm to those involved be avoided. Finally, the principle of justice guarantees an equitable distribution of the benefits and risks of research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

These principles resonate in a particular way in the Algerian university context, where relationships between researchers and participants are often marked by power asymmetries — between teachers and students, between experienced and novice researchers — that may compromise the genuinely free and informed character of participants' consent.

1.3. Ethics and Reflexivity in FFL Research

Beyond its normative dimensions, research ethics must be understood as a fundamental reflexive stance that runs through the entire scientific endeavour. Bourdieu (1992) developed the notion of epistemological reflexivity to designate the researcher's capacity to subject their own practice to the same critical scrutiny they bring to bear on their object of study. In FFL research, this reflexivity entails constant vigilance regarding the theoretical presuppositions, cultural biases, and effects of power that may shape the research process.

Blanchet and Chardenet (2011) emphasize that research in language didactics is always situated research — that is, conducted by a researcher embedded in a particular sociocultural, institutional, and biographical context that inevitably inflects their methodological choices and interpretations. Methodological transparency is precisely what makes it possible to render this positioning visible and to incorporate its effects into the analysis.

This conception of ethics as a reflexive and critical stance converges with the notion of action research developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), which places critical reflection at the heart of scientific inquiry. In the context of FFL teacher training in Algeria, this perspective opens fruitful avenues for connecting training, research, and professional development.

1.4. The Epistemological Status of Observation in FFL

Observation is one of the oldest and most fundamental methods in the human sciences. In the field of language didactics, it has been theorized by numerous authors as a privileged means of access to actual teaching and learning practices — practices that cannot be reduced to the accounts participants themselves give of them (Cicurel, 2011).

Classroom observation in FFL can take many forms, which differ according to the degree of the researcher's involvement (participant vs. non-participant observation), the level of structure of the observation instruments (closed grids vs. ethnographic notes), and the duration and intensity of data collection (one-off vs. longitudinal observation). Each of these forms presents specific advantages and limitations that must be explicitly justified in any transparent research design.

2. Methodological Transparency and Responsibility in the Use of Tools

2.1. Methodological Transparency: Definition and Stakes

Methodological transparency may be defined as the set of practices through which the researcher renders explicit, justifiable, and open to evaluation the choices that have guided the research — from the definition of the object of study through to the presentation and discussion of results. It is a requirement that is at once epistemological — since it conditions the validity and reproducibility of results — and deontological — since it engages the researcher's moral responsibility toward peers and toward the scholarly community.

Mucchielli (1996) distinguishes three levels of methodological transparency. The first is the procedural level, which concerns the precise description of the procedures for collecting, processing, and analysing data. The second is the interpretive level, which requires the researcher to make visible the hermeneutic choices that guide their interpretations. The third is the reflexive level, which entails an explicit acknowledgement of the biases, limitations, and uncertainties inherent in the approach adopted.

In FFL research, these three levels of transparency warrant particular attention, since the data collected — verbal classroom interactions, learner productions, teacher discourse — are by nature polysemous and open to multiple interpretations. Methodological transparency is therefore the indispensable condition for a rigorous critical evaluation of the results produced.

2.2. The Notion of the Tool in FFL Research

In FFL research, the notion of the tool encompasses a multifaceted reality that includes data-collection instruments — observation grids, questionnaires, interview guides, audio and video recordings — as well as analytical tools — corpus-processing software, discourse-analysis tools, statistical instruments — and, more recently, the digital tools and artificial intelligence systems mobilized in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

In his instrumental theory, Rabardel (1995) distinguishes the artefact — the material or symbolic object produced by human beings — from the instrument — the artefact appropriated by the subject within a goal-oriented activity. This distinction is heuristically fruitful for thinking about the researcher's relationship to their tools: corpus-analysis software is not in itself a research instrument; it becomes one only when it is appropriated by the researcher within an approach guided by precise scientific questions. This instrumental perspective implies that responsibility in the use of tools cannot be reduced to the technical mastery of those instruments; it requires sustained reflection on their appropriateness to the questions posed, on the theoretical presuppositions they carry, and on the effects they exert on the data collected and the results produced.

2.3. The Researcher's Responsibility Toward Digital Tools and AI

The rise of digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) systems in research in the human sciences opens up unprecedented possibilities while raising major ethical challenges. In FFL didactics, these tools — natural language processing software, online learning platforms, automatic transcription tools — are profoundly transforming practices of data collection and analysis.

Guichon (2012) stresses that the integration of information and communication technologies into FFL research cannot proceed without critical reflection on the nature of the data produced and on the effects of these technologies on the phenomena under study. Such reflection is all the more necessary because digital tools can introduce systematic biases into data collection and analysis without the researcher always being aware of them.

The researcher's responsibility in the use of digital tools involves at least three dimensions: a technical dimension (mastery of the functionalities and limitations of the tools), an epistemological dimension (awareness of the effects of the tools on data and results), and a deontological dimension (transparency in declaring and justifying the tools used). These three dimensions are inseparable and must be integrated into all training for FFL research (Narcy-Combes, 2005).

2.4. Publication Ethics and Scientific Integrity

Methodological transparency and responsibility in the use of tools concern not only the phases of data collection and analysis; they also extend to the dissemination and valorization of results. The ethics of scholarly publication entails, among other things, respect for the rules governing the attribution of contributions, honesty in the presentation of results — including negative results or those that run counter to the initial hypotheses — and the prevention of any form of scientific misconduct.

In the Algerian context, where pressure to publish is growing and where the norms of scientific integrity are still undergoing institutional consolidation, these issues deserve particular attention. Training Master's and doctoral student-researchers in the norms of scholarly writing and publication — notably the APA norms for bibliographic references — constitutes a pedagogical and ethical priority of the first order.

3. Empirical Study: Observation of FFL Classes with First-Year Master's Students

3.1. Framework and Objectives of the Study

This third section presents the results of an empirical study conducted through the direct observation of FFL sessions in an Algerian university, with students enrolled in the first year of a Master's programme in the didactics of French as a Foreign Language. The study aims to document actual teaching and research practices in this specific context in order to assess the extent to which the principles of ethics and methodological transparency developed in the first two sections are effectively embodied in observed practice.

More specifically, the empirical study pursues three objectives: (1) to describe the actual pedagogical practices in the observed FFL sessions, with particular attention to dimensions relating to methodological transparency and the use of tools; (2) to identify the tensions and contradictions between the ethical principles set out in training curricula and the practices actually observed in the classroom; and (3) to formulate recommendations for a better integration of ethical principles into the training of FFL teacher-researchers in the Algerian context.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Choice and Justification of the Method

Direct classroom observation was chosen as the principal method of data collection for several reasons. First, it provides direct access to actual practices, which cannot be reduced to the accounts participants give of them. Second, it offers a descriptive richness that captures the complexity and singularity of pedagogical situations in their real context. Finally, it is particularly well suited to the study of the ethical and methodological dimensions of teaching practice, insofar as it makes it possible to observe actual rather than reported behaviours (Cicurel, 2011; Van der Maren, 1996).

Non-participant observation was adopted in order to minimize the effect of the researcher's presence on the behaviours observed. The sessions were observed using a structured grid developed on the basis of the theoretical frameworks presented in the first two sections, supplemented by field notes recording qualitative observations not anticipated by the grid.

3.2.2. Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the Department of French of an Algerian university. The observed group comprised 24 students enrolled in the first year of a Master's programme in FFL didactics, with a mean age of 23. Of these students, 18 were women and 6 were men, reflecting the characteristic predominance of women in language and didactics programmes at Algerian universities. All had completed a Bachelor's degree in French language and literature or in FFL didactics before entering the Master's programme.

Four class sessions were observed over a two-week period, corresponding to two different course units: a course in research methodology in FFL didactics and a course in linguistics applied to FFL teaching. Each session lasted 90 minutes. The instructor responsible for these two units gave informed consent to the observation, in accordance with the ethical principles set out in the preceding sections.

3.2.3. Data-Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a structured observation grid comprising several criteria organized around three main axes: (1) the transparency of objectives and methods in the observed pedagogical practices; (2) the use of pedagogical and digital tools in the conduct of the sessions; and (3) the quality of interactions between the instructor and the learners. These criteria were operationalized as observable indicators, allowing a systematic and quantifiable recording of the behaviours observed.

3.3. Presentation and Analysis of Results**3.3.1. Synoptic Table of Observations**

Table 1. *Synoptic grid of the observed sessions*

Session	Observed criterion	Frequency	Remarks
Session 1	Presentation of objectives	5 times / 60 min	Objectives only partially made explicit
Session 1	Recourse to the L1 (Arabic)	12 times / 60 min	Frequent code-switching
Session 2	Corrective feedback	8 times / 60 min	Reformulation predominant
Session 2	Learner participation	Moderate (30%)	Linguistic reticence observed
Session 3	Use of digital tools	1 time / 60 min	Video projector, PDF handout
Session 3	Transparency of instructions	3 times / 60 min	Instructions occasionally ambiguous
Session 4	Formative assessment	2 times / 60 min	Little systematized
Session 4	Teacher–learner interaction	High (60%)	Question-and-answer predominant

Note. Data drawn from direct observation (author, 2024).

3.3.2. Analysis of Methodological-Transparency Practices

Analysis of the data collected during the four observation sessions reveals a mixed picture of methodological-transparency practices in the observed context. With regard to the presentation of objectives, although the instructor generally states them at the beginning of the session, this presentation often remains partial and lacking in detail. Students rarely receive an explanation of the methodological choices underlying the proposed activities, which deprives them of an overall understanding of the pedagogical and scientific approach in which they are engaged.

As for the formulation of instructions, the observations reveal a tendency toward the implicit: instructions are often phrased ambiguously or incompletely, leaving students to infer what the activity requires. While this practice may foster learner autonomy in certain contexts, it proves problematic in research training, where precision and the explicit statement of procedures are fundamental competencies to be developed. With regard to corrective feedback, the observations show a predominance of reformulation as a corrective strategy, which reflects a sensitivity to theories of second language acquisition. However, this practice remains largely unexplained and untheorized by the instructor, who does not consistently take advantage of corrective moments to develop students' metalinguistic and methodological reflection.

3.3.3. Analysis of Tool-Use Practices

The use of pedagogical and digital tools observed over the four sessions was characterized by its relative scarcity and lack of diversity. Recourse to the video projector and to PDF handouts constituted the bulk of the technological resources mobilized, without this use being accompanied by explicit reflection on the didactic functions of the tools employed. This situation contrasts with the normative discourse of training curricula, which value the integration of information and communication technologies into language teaching.

Moreover, the observations reveal frequent recourse to code-switching between French and dialectal or Standard Arabic, particularly when complex concepts were being explained or when students' incomprehension had to be managed. Although this practice can be justified on sociolinguistic and didactic grounds (Causa, 2002), it would merit being made explicit and theorized by the instructor rather than remaining a matter of pedagogical implicitness.

Finally, formative assessment appears to be little systematized in the observed sessions. Moments of assessment are rare and scarcely ritualized, which does not foster in students a culture of self-assessment and metacognitive regulation — capacities that are nonetheless essential in research training.

3.3.4. Discussion of the Results

The results of this empirical study confirm our initial hypothesis: there is a significant gap between the principles of ethics and methodological transparency promoted in training curricula and the practices actually observed in class sessions. This gap is not attributable to ill will or to a lack of competence on the instructor's part; rather, it reflects the effects of structural constraints — overloaded syllabi, a shortage of digital resources, and inherited pedagogical traditions — that weigh on practices in the Algerian university context.

These results are consistent with those of other studies conducted in comparable university settings (Chachou, 2013; Dakhia, 2008), which highlight the persistence of transmissive and insufficiently

reflective pedagogical practices in Algerian higher education, despite the curricular reforms undertaken since the adoption of the LMD (Bachelor–Master–Doctorate) system.

They invite a rethinking of the training of FFL teacher-researchers in the Algerian context, giving a more central place to questions of ethics, methodological transparency, and the reflective use of tools. Such training should draw on action-research and reflective-practice frameworks, enabling students to confront their practices with theoretical principles and to draw lessons for their professional development.

Conclusion

The reflection carried out throughout this article has shown that research ethics in FFL didactics cannot be reduced to a set of formal and constraining rules; on the contrary, it constitutes a founding dimension of scientific inquiry as a whole. By combining a rigorous theoretical grounding with an empirical study conducted through direct classroom observation, we have sought to give this reflection a foundation that is at once conceptual and empirical.

The first two sections established the epistemological and ethical foundations necessary for any FFL research endeavour, underscoring the centrality of the notions of methodological transparency and responsibility in the use of tools. They showed that these notions are not mere deontological requirements but epistemological imperatives that condition the validity and credibility of the results produced.

The empirical section made it possible to confront these principles with the realities of a specific field — first-year Master's FFL classes at an Algerian university — and to identify the tensions and shortcomings that persist between methodological ideals and actual practices. The results argue for a renewed training of FFL teacher-researchers, centred on the development of reflexive and ethical competencies and articulating more explicitly the theoretical and practical dimensions of research.

Ultimately, to promote research ethics in FFL didactics in the Algerian context is to contribute to building a more rigorous, transparent, and responsible scholarly community — one capable of producing knowledge that meets the standards of the international scientific community while remaining anchored in the specific realities and needs of the local context.

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