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Factors Explaining Students' Poor Performance in Literary Essay Writing in Niger

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Abstract

Education is a cornerstone of national development. Its quality depends substantially on the institutional, pedagogical and social conditions in which it is provided. In the teaching and learning of French at upper secondary level, essay writing presents a major challenge for students. Yet proficiency in literary essay writing is essential to improving academic achievement, given the role of written production in the development of individual literary competencies. This study was conducted in the Zinder region, specifically at two schools located in two municipal districts: CES Karkada and Lycée Amadou Kouran Daga (LAKD). The study population consisted primarily of upper secondary French teachers, final-year students in the A and D streams, and administrative staff, including principals, deputy principals and librarians. Data were collected through documentary research, questionnaire surveys and interviews. The findings indicate that students' poor performance in literary essay writing is attributable to institutional and pedagogical factors, individual factors and social factors. Students at both schools performed poorly in written production because their learning and social conditions were insufficiently conducive to success in essay writing. These circumstances adversely affected their engagement and motivation to learn the task and contributed, in particular, to negative perceptions of literary essay writing.

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Keywords

Factors, performance, literary essay writing.

Introduction

One of the central aims of foreign language teaching and learning is to enable learners to acquire the competencies required for oral and written communication, rather than simply to accumulate academic knowledge. Only then can they produce clear, coherent utterances in a range of situations (as cited in Baladjal Hanane, 2021, p. 1). Introduced and acquired following the arrival of colonial authorities in Niger, French is described here as the official language and serves as a means of communication, information and institutional functioning. It is used in the media, public administration, economic sectors and the education system, including primary schools, lower and upper secondary schools, and universities.

At secondary level, French is essential to both humanities and science education through subjects such as mathematics, physics and chemistry, life and earth sciences, and history and geography.

This study arose from observations of students' marked reluctance to engage with essay topics, the poor methodological and syntactic quality of their written work, and the substantial linguistic difficulties they

encounter in writing. It seeks to understand the causes of this poor performance in written production. Beyond French, essay writing also occupies an important place in philosophy, history and geography. Learners therefore need to take an interest in, and become familiar with, this beneficial activity. Essay writing matters because of the central role of written communication in both scientific and literary fields. Writing develops "through trial and error, through successive revisions that allow new, more precise anticipations before its definitive construction" (Cuq J. P. and Gruça I., 2002, p. 160; translated from French). According to Hubert G.C.S. (1998), writing is supported by a norm described as "the art of tracing and arranging letters on a surface" (as cited in Baladjal Hanane, 2021, p. 1; translated from French). Mastering writing is therefore more than a school task: it is essential to communication and institutional exchanges. It reflects an individual's identity, competencies, educational attainment and professional development. This article comprises sections on methodology, results and discussion.

Methodology

The study was conducted at two schools in the Zinder region: CES Karkada and LAKD, also known as the city's original lycée. Two complementary approaches were used for data collection. Quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires administered to students and teachers. Qualitative data were collected through interview guides used with administrative staff, including principals and deputy principals, and with librarians. Interviews with librarians provided information on students' reading practices and library use. The aim was to identify the causes of students' poor performance in literary essay writing.

The target population consisted specifically of upper secondary teachers and final-year students in the A and D streams at the two schools. Twenty-five students were randomly selected from each final-year class, giving 50 students per school. All the relevant upper secondary teachers were included. The resulting sample comprised 110 respondents.

The survey began in early May and continued until June 2025. Data collection was organised in two stages at each school. The first involved scheduling interviews with the principal, deputy principals and librarians. This stage was relatively brief because appointments were arranged according to the availability of administrative staff.

The second stage took account of the teaching schedules of the teachers surveyed. Student questionnaires were administered with the assistance of the teachers responsible for the classes. This stage took longer because each teacher's timetable had to be respected.

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyse the data, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified several factors associated with students' poor performance in literary essay writing. These were institutional and pedagogical, individual, and social. Given the importance of each category, their effects on students' performance warrant close examination.

Institutional factors

Table 1 shows that 80% of respondents reported that they did not teach literature at upper secondary level. Nevertheless, some explained that they introduced literature at the beginning of the school year to provide students with essential literary knowledge. Others revisited literary concepts after presentations on a particular work, using the opportunity to discuss its genre and literary movement. By referring to the author's background, they also introduced aspects of African literary history and its movements.

Most students reported having no knowledge of literary history. They explained that no chapter or lesson on African or French literature had yet been taught, although the theoretical component of literary essay writing had been completed. Consequently, they lacked knowledge of literary genres and movements and generally obtained scores below the pass mark, indicating poor performance. A minority of students in the A stream, however, reported acquiring this knowledge through reading, personal curiosity and the limited information provided by teachers during presentations. These students generally obtained scores between 10 and 11, indicating average performance. None of the respondents demonstrated good performance.

Table 3 highlights the need to introduce literary history at upper secondary level because of its importance in improving literary writing skills. All teachers (100%) considered that students needed literary history to contextualise essay topics and construct well-supported

arguments using their literary knowledge. Teaching literature and its various components is therefore necessary to improve essay writing.

- 60% of students obtain reading materials from libraries in the city centre.

- 40% of students use their school library.

- 0% of students have a home library.

Table 4 indicates that no learner has a home library, owing to financial hardship that prevents families from establishing one. Most therefore turn to public libraries to address this shortfall. Although their schools have libraries, only 40% of students use them. This situation is attributed to the limited collections and lack of appealing materials in most school libraries.

Pedagogical factors

Lack of teacher training

Figure 1 shows that, among the ten upper secondary French teachers surveyed, three held professional qualifications for secondary teaching: two held a professional master's degree (MPPES), representing 20% of the sample, and one held a professional bachelor's degree (LPPES), representing 10%. Two other trained teachers held the CAP-CEG qualification, also representing 20%. Half of the respondents (50%) had received no professional teacher training.

Figure 2 shows that master's degree holders accounted for the largest proportion of teachers (40%), although two held degrees other than the professional teaching qualification referred to as MPESS in the source. Three teachers held a maîtrise (30%), two held a licence as their highest qualification (20%), and one held a DEA (10%).

Table 5 reveals a performance gap between students taught by teachers with professional initial training, specifically the MPPES, and those taught by teachers without initial training in education. Among students taught by MPPES-qualified teachers, 24% achieved good performance and 44% achieved average performance, with scores between 10 and 20; together representing 64% of respondents in two final-year classes. For students taught by a teacher without initial training, only 5% obtained a score of at least 10. A substantial difference is also apparent between students taught by an LPPES-qualified teacher and those taught by an untrained teacher. Students scoring below the pass mark, between 0 and 9, represented 80% of the surveyed class taught by the untrained teacher, compared with 40% of the class taught by the trained teacher.

Table 6 shows that only five teachers (50%) had attended continuing professional development. The remaining half had never received such training during their teaching careers. This suggests a lack of pedagogical training that may limit their ability to teach effectively and create difficulties in classroom practice.

Table 7 shows that students with good performance, scoring between 12 and 20, were primarily those taught by teachers who had participated in continuing professional development during their careers. They represented 24% of the respondents in the two final-year classes concerned. Conversely, poor performance, with scores between 0 and 9, was more prevalent among students taught by teachers who had not received continuing professional development, accounting for 50% of the respondents in the two classes concerned.

Strategies to encourage reading

Teachers share responsibility for encouraging their students to read literary works. Table 8 shows that, of the ten teachers surveyed, five (50%) organised presentations on literary works and three (30%) assigned essay-writing homework. The remaining two teachers (20%) used continuous assessment, including quizzes, to encourage reading.

Individual factors

Students' perceptions

Figure 3 presents students' attitudes towards the task. Most learners, 80 respondents (80%), reported that they did not enjoy essay writing at all, whereas 20 students (20%) reported enjoying it. This indicates limited interest in the activity, which students associated with the numerous difficulties they encountered.

Figure 4 shows that 80 of the 100 students surveyed (80%) considered essay writing difficult, compared with 20 students (20%) who regarded it as less difficult. Those who found it difficult explained that it required extensive reading, a rich and coherent vocabulary, and mastery of essay-writing methods. Others considered it easier when they read many literary works.

Limited engagement with reading

Table 9 shows that all 100 students surveyed (100%) reported enjoying reading. They explained that reading enabled them to broaden their knowledge, discover other worlds and enrich their vocabulary.

In their view, reading provides entertainment, escape and vocabulary development. Despite these statements, however, the study suggests that students engage relatively little in reading.

Figure 5 indicates that:

- 50 of the 100 students surveyed (50%) reported having read no books during the year.
- 30 students (30%) reported having read fewer than five books.
- 20 students (20%) reported having read at least ten books.

Limited engagement with writing

Table 10 indicates that:

- Of the 100 students surveyed, 70 (70%) experienced difficulty generating ideas relevant to the assigned topic. These students generally obtained scores of 9 or below, indicating poor performance.
- For 20 students (20%), the main difficulty was insufficient vocabulary for written expression. Nevertheless, they managed to achieve the pass mark.
- Ten students (10%) performed better, obtaining scores above the pass mark, although difficulties with grammar and spelling prevented them from achieving a score of 20/20.

Sociocultural factors

Limited cultural capital

Table 11 shows that most respondents, 70 students (70%), had no novels at home. Twenty students (20%) reported having a small number of books, fewer than five, which they considered insufficient. Ten respondents (10%) each reported having at least ten novels at home.

Table 12 indicates that no student reported regularly speaking French at home with family members. Half of the respondents (50%) sometimes used it within the family, while the other half (50%) reported never speaking French at home.

Parents' lack of formal employment

Table 13 shows that ten of the 100 respondents (10%) reported that their mothers were employed, and the same proportion (10%) reported that their fathers were employed. For five students, both parents worked in the civil service. The largest group, comprising 75 respondents (75%), reported that neither parent held a formal position. The study links this situation to difficulties in achieving at school, arguing that educated parents tend to be more demanding and more attentive to their children's academic circumstances.

Parents' limited educational attainment

Table 14 indicates that:

- Of the 100 respondents, 60 students (60%) reported that their fathers held no qualification. These students generally obtained insufficient scores in essay writing, between 0 and 9. The study attributes this to a lack of paternal support and encouragement to improve their competencies, leaving students free to prioritise the subjects of their choice.
- Ten students (10%) reported that their fathers held at least the CEFEPD, but that this educational level was insufficient to help them achieve good essay-writing scores.
- Ten respondents (10%) reported that their fathers held the BEPC; this level of education was also considered insufficient to develop their children's essay-writing skills.
- Ten students (10%) whose fathers held the baccalauréat obtained scores between 10 and 11, indicating average performance.
- Five respondents (5%) reported that their fathers held a licence, which was considered beneficial because these students obtained good scores.
- Among the remaining five respondents, three had fathers with a maîtrise and two had fathers with a doctorate. These students were described as higher performers, with scores of up to 20.

This study indicates that institutional, pedagogical, social and individual conditions were generally insufficiently favourable to ensure students' proficiency in literary essay writing, particularly among those preparing for final examinations.

The main findings are discussed below.

Table.1 Distribution of teachers according to whether they teach literature, including its history, genres and movements

Teach literature	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	2	20
No	8	80
Total	10	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.2 Relationship between students' literary knowledge and their performance in essay writing

Literary knowledge Student performance	Yes		No		Total	
Performance scores	n	**%**	n	**%**	n	**%**
0 – 9	0	0	96	100	96	100
10 – 11	4	100	0	0	4	100
12 – 20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	4	4	96	96	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.3 Teachers' views on the importance of literary history, genres and movements in teaching essay writing

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	10	100
No	00	0
Total	10	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.4 Distribution of students according to where they obtain books

Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Home library	00	00
School library	40	40
City library	60	60
Total	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.5 Relationship between initial teacher training and student performance in essay writing

Initial training Student performance	Untrained		MPPES		LPPES		Total
	1		2		1		4
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
0 – 9	20	80	16	32	10	40	46
10 - 11	5	20	22	44	10	40	37
12 – 20	00	00	12	24	5	20	17
Total	25	100	50	100	25	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.6 Distribution of teachers according to whether they have attended continuing professional development

Continuing training Training years	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
No training	-	-	5	50	5	50
>2000	1	10	-	-	1	10
2000 - 2010	1	10		-	1	10
2010 - 2020	2	20		-	2	20
< 2020	1	10		-	1	10
Total	5	50	5	50	10	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.7 Relationship between continuing professional development and students' performance in essay writing

Continuing training Student performance	Trained		Untrained	
Performance scores	n	%	n	%
0-9	20	40	25	50
10-11	18	36	20	40
12-20	12	24	15	10
Total	50	100	50	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.8 Distribution of teachers according to the strategies used to encourage students to read novels

Strategies used to encourage novel reading	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Continuous assessment of essay writing	2	20
Presentations on literary works	5	50
Essay-writing homework	3	30
Total	10	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.9 Distribution of students according to whether they enjoy reading

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	100
No	00	0
Total	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.10 Relationship between writing difficulties and students' performance in essay writing

Performance scores Difficulties	0 – 9	10 - 11	12 - 20	%
Lack of ideas relevant to the topic	70	00	00	70
Insufficient vocabulary for written expression	00	20	00	20
Difficulties with grammar and spelling	00	00	10	10
Total	70	20	10	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.11 Distribution of students by the number of novels available at home

Number	Frequency	Percentage (%)
None	70	70
Fewer than 5	20	20
About ten	10	10
Total	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.12 Distribution of students according to whether they speak French at home

Speaking French at home	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	00	0
No	50	50
Sometimes	50	50
Total	100	100

Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.13 Distribution of students according to their parents' employment

Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mother	10	10
Father	10	10
Both	5	5
Neither	75	75
Total	100	100

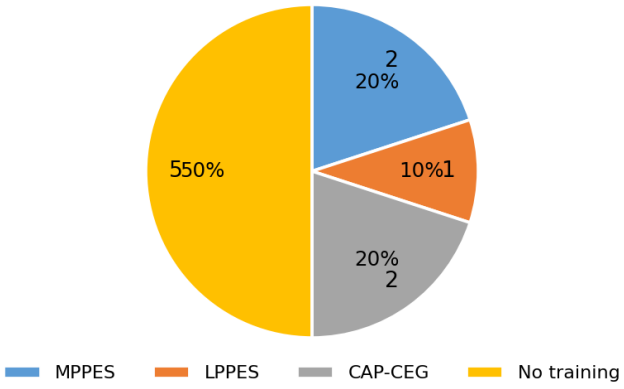
Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Table.14 Relationship between fathers' educational attainment, their support and students' performance in literary essay writing

Performance scores Father's education	0 -9	10 - 11	12 - 20	Total	%
No qualification	60	-	-	60	60
CEFEPD	10	-	-	10	10
BEPC	10	-	-	10	10
BAC	-	10	-	10	10
Licence	-	-	5	5	5
Maîtrise	-	-	3	3	3
Doctorate	-	-	2	2	2
Total	80	10	10	100	100

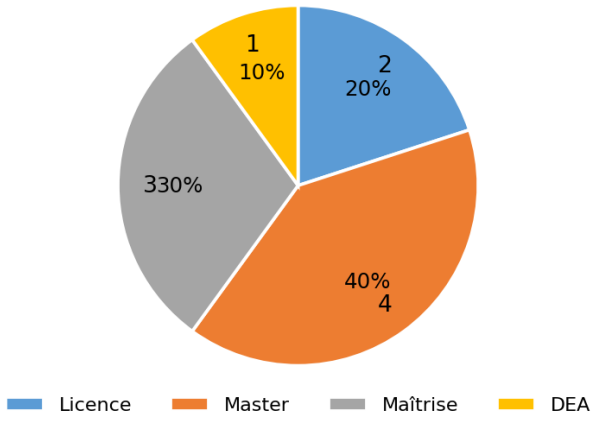
Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Figure.1 Distribution of teachers according to their initial teacher training



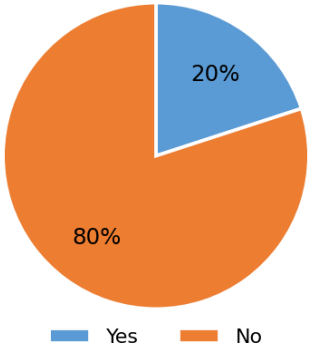
Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Figure.2 Distribution of teachers by highest qualification



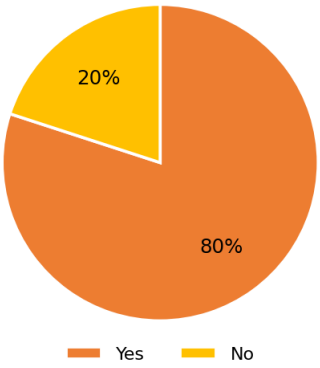
Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Figure.3 Distribution of students according to whether they enjoy literary essay writing



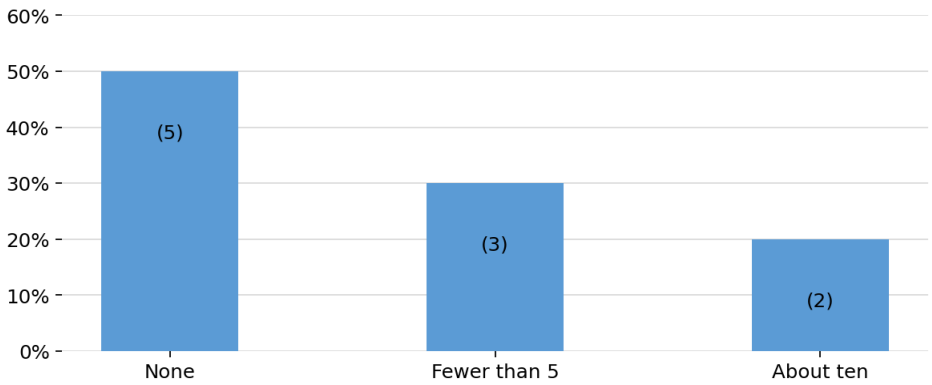
Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Figure.4 Distribution of students according to whether they consider essay writing difficult



Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

Figure.5 Distribution of students by the number of books read during the year



Source: Field survey data, May–June 2025

First, most learners lacked sufficient literary knowledge to write successful essays. Teachers no longer taught literature in upper secondary classes because it had been excluded from the new curriculum (NPE) in previous years. Students also lacked access to literary works in school libraries that could help them develop and illustrate arguments. Moreover, many upper secondary teachers lacked either a literary background or the professional training required to support their classroom practice. Consequently, students struggled to master essay writing. Research on the exclusion of literature has highlighted the importance of literary knowledge in written production. François Le Goff states that there can be "no essay without knowledge", referring specifically to literary knowledge, and demonstrates that the history of the essay is closely associated with that of literature. These findings also align with those of TCHAGNAOU Akimou (2008) and MAMANE Nassirou (2022), both of whom demonstrated the importance of teacher training for educational outcomes, although the former focused on initial training and the latter on continuing professional development.

Second, most learners showed little interest in learning essay writing because of the difficulties associated with their limited engagement in reading and writing. Their lack of motivation contributed to negative perceptions, further undermining performance. These findings are consistent with those of PHILIPPE de Carlos (2015) and Beladjal Hanane (2021), who demonstrated the influence of individual student factors, particularly perceptions, engagement and motivation, on success in school activities.

Finally, unfavourable social conditions prevented students from developing essay-writing competencies. All respondents (100%) lacked a home library, limiting encouragement to read. Parental educational attainment

was also low: 70% of mothers and 60% of fathers held no qualification. The study interprets this as a lack of cultural capital in its various forms, associated with limited formal employment and insufficient support for children's literary writing performance. These findings are consistent with those of CHRISTINE Détrez (2015) and Hélène DE VARENNES (2017), who emphasise the importance of parental involvement and cultural capital for children's academic success.

In conclusion, Student performance cannot be discussed without considering academic outcomes. While the study assigns students half of the responsibility for the success or failure of their work, it attributes the remaining half to other factors.

By examining the main factors that negatively affect students' literary essay writing, this study contributes to reflection on how to improve academic results and overall educational outcomes.

The findings identify several causes of poor performance in literary essay writing. Institutional and pedagogical factors relate primarily to the current curriculum, facilities such as libraries, and the profiles of upper secondary teachers. These conditions were insufficiently conducive to the development of students' writing competencies. Poor performance was also linked to social backgrounds that did not provide a supportive environment for developing written production. Students consequently became disengaged and demotivated and gradually developed stereotyped views of the activity, reflecting personal or individual factors.

Beyond schooling, mastery of essay writing can benefit learners who intend to pursue advanced studies, particularly master's and doctoral programmes requiring dissertations and theses. In professional life, students proficient in literary essay writing may also be better equipped to prepare workplace documents, develop action plans for development initiatives and produce scientific writing.

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