

TEACHING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN BOTSWANA JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Phemelo Kewagamang

Department of French

University of Botswana

kewagamangp@mopipi.ub.bw

Boingotlo Winnie Kaome

Université de Clermont Auvergne

bynotwinnie@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language in Botswana's Junior Secondary schools since its inception in 2001 through an evaluation of progress made and the challenges faced so far. The paper thoroughly studies the objectives of teaching French in Botswana, the type of training received by teachers as well as the correlation between teacher action and learners' performance. This is done through the use of classroom action video observations and interviews of eight in-service teachers and four student teachers of French in Junior Secondary schools. Documents related to the teaching and learning of French are also analysed. Findings obtained from classroom observations reveal that, despite the progress achieved in the area of teacher training and professional development, the main objective of teaching French, which is the development of learner's communicative competence, and its implementation do not correlate. There is as a result need to discard the generalist approach to teaching, learning and teacher training and adopt a contextualized approach, in order to reinforce the relevance of French language teaching to developing globally competitive citizens in Botswana.

Key words: French as a foreign language, communicative competence, classroom practices, teacher training.

Introduction

The 1994 Botswana Revised National Policy on education recommended the introduction of a third language in the curriculum of schools (Government of Botswana, 1994). Against this backdrop, French was introduced as an optional subject in government junior secondary schools. The pilot project started with 15 junior secondary schools in the year 2000. Nineteen years later, French teaching has spread to 39 of the 207 junior secondary schools (JSS) and 7 of the 32 senior secondary schools in the country. The choice of French as the only foreign language offered in schools was an attempt by the Botswana government to meet regional and international exigencies. French is the working language of most international organisations. In fact, French is one of the working languages of the Southern African Development Cooperation which is headquartered in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. It is also used in all the five continents as an official, second or foreign language. Botswana has bilateral relations with most countries in these continents. (Government of Botswana, 2010). It is clear that in introducing French in JSS, the government aimed to offer young Batswana an opportunity to integrate the global and regional world and effectively interact with the

francophone world. Below is a table that summarizes progress that has been made since the introduction of French as a foreign language.

Table 1: Summary of progress made in teaching of French since its inception in 2000

1999	In anticipation of the introduction of French in Botswana schools, 18 students holding a Bachelor's degree in Humanities and majoring in French are sent to France for an intensive training on the didactics of French as a foreign language.
2000	Introduction of French as a foreign language in 15 Junior secondary schools as a pilot project.
2006	From 2006 to 2009, 10 French teachers are sent to Réunion Island every year to study for a 3rd year degree course in the didactics of teaching French as a foreign language. The teachers also take French language courses and examinations to determine their level of French.
2008	Signature of a Cooperation Agreement on Education and French Language between the French and Botswana governments. The Botswana government creates the posts of Principal Education Officer training for French, French officer at curriculum and the Botswana Examinations council.
2009	Introduction of French as a foreign language in 2 senior secondary schools.
2010	French Junior Secondary school syllabus revision
2011	The post of a pedagogical assistant is created with the mandate to rove in all schools offering French and assist teachers. From 2011 to 2013, seven teachers leave for France for a seven months pedagogical training.
2013	Audit of French teaching and learning in Botswana.
2016-2019	French is taught in 36 Junior Secondary Schools and 7 Senior secondary schools. Alliance Française de Gaborone embarks on an exercise to train teachers of French for B2 language level. The Alliance Française, in collaboration with the Embassy of France to Botswana and the University of Botswana organise needs analysis based, training for all French teachers.

It cannot be denied that progress with regards to the teaching of French has been slow. Its pilot stage has long elapsed, yet it is still taught in a handful of schools. Learner performance in the French Junior certificate examination has also been gradually declining. Whilst most teachers of French have benefitted from post-graduate training efforts by the Ministry of Basic Education, their output does not reflect this training. This shows that the roll out of the French language is fraught with challenges. With this context, this study attempts to answer the following main study research question;

- In what way can French teaching be organised in order to respond to the contextual needs of the Botswana classroom? In order to respond to this question, we ask the following sub-questions;

- What are the objectives of teaching French in Botswana JSS?

- What kind of training have French teachers in Botswana received and how can it be contextualised?

- Is there a correlation between learner performance and teacher action in the French classroom?

In reflecting on these questions, we will look at the teaching and learning process as a whole. This means that we will study the type of knowledge that learners of French in Botswana have to acquire. We will also scrutinize the French classroom in JSS as well as the teacher practices and the results of their action on the learner.

Literature review

The communicative approach has dominated language teaching since its inception in the early 1970s and the Botswana context is no exception. It is as a result important to present an overview of this approach in order to fully understand French foreign language teaching in the Botswana context. This teaching method considers that communication should be central to language teaching and learning (Berard, 1991). Its underlying theory is the acquisition of the communicative competence by learners (Hymes, 1972). Several scholars have explained the components of the communicative competence from which four main components emerge (Cuq & Gruca, 2005; Tagliante, 2006.)

- The grammatical/linguistic competence concerns all that is related to the structure of the language (grammatical, lexical, phonetical and orthographical rules of a language).
- The sociolinguistic competence refers the learner's ability to adequately use language utterances in different sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts
- The discourse competence concerns the learners ability to use and understand different types of texts to the context within which they are produced. For example the learner is sensitised to the fact that a formal letter is not written the same way as an informal letter.
- The strategic competence refers to the learners ability to use different verbal and non verbal communication strategies to maintain communication even in situations where their knowledge of the language is limited.

The aim of the teaching/ learning process is thus to develop the communicative competence of learners orally and in writing. This distinguishes the communicative approach from audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods to language teaching which put more emphasis on the structural aspects of a language than in meaning (Piccardo, 2014). In fact, with the communicative approach, both functional as well as structural aspects of the language are incorporated. The communicative competence allows for learners to use language appropriately in different contexts. The linguistic competence, which is a component of the communicative competence, enables learners to accomplish the functional use of language

(Germain, 1993). Content is thus not divided into grammatical structures but rather into speech acts that learners are to accomplish (greeting, giving directions etc).

Implications on the teacher's role

In a communicative classroom, the teacher's role drastically changes. He becomes a co-communicator whose mandate is to adopt a communicative attitude that would facilitate communication in the classroom (Courtyllon, 2003; Germain, 1993). His position in the classroom interaction is less dominant. He thus has to exercise a lot of reticence in order to allow for learners to develop their skills. Learning activities take precedence over teaching activities and classroom activities given to the learners should render them active and autonomous. These activities are centred around the four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) and relies on authentic classroom aids in order to provide learners with the opportunity for real communication in the target language and motivate them positively (Coste, 1970). The teacher also tolerates learner's errors and treats them as indicators of their progress.

This new role that the communicative teacher has to adopt requires rigorous pre-service as well as in-service training. According to Evelyne Berard (1991), the teacher, her knowledge and skills are primordial in ensuring the success of foreign language teaching that aims to develop the communicative competence of the learner. Inadequate teacher training could as a result inadequate classroom application of the communicative approach. Furthermore, the effective use of the communicative approach relies on the availability of resources at the teacher's disposal (teaching aids and material).

The learner's role

The communicative approach puts the learner at the forefront of the teaching and learning process. Lesson objectives, defined in terms of speech acts, are as a result organised according to the learner's needs in order to motivate them. Through group, pair and individual work, learners learn to communicate by communicating (Moirand, 1982). They thus become active participants of their learning.

The action-based approach

In recent years, there has been a transition from the communicative approach to the action-based approach which adds the social dimension of language to the teaching and learning process. The action-oriented approach considers the learner as a social actor who performs real-life language tasks with clear outcomes (CEFR, 2001; Springer, 2009). This approach considers that the learner uses communication in the foreign language to achieve social action, allowing for a great margin of autonomy. Nonetheless, the action is accomplished in collaboration with other actors in the classroom which is considered as a social environment. To accomplish the said tasks, learners draw on the appropriate strategies and competencies at their disposal. Strategies are considered as "any organized, purposeful and regulated lines of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted" (CEFR 2001: 10). Learning and teaching using the action-oriented approach therefore aims at developing the learners's communicative competence as well as learning strategies.

Methodology

This study relied on interviews and classroom observations to collect data. Data was collected from ten secondary schools between the period of June to August 2015, 2016 and 2018. A total of eight in-service teachers and four student teachers from the South east, South, Kweneng, Kgatleng and North-east regions were observed during 3 sessions of 80 minutes per session. The observations were accompanied by interviews before and after the sessions. Data collected comprised of 24 class sessions and interviews. The interviews and classroom videos were then transcribed manually. The use of transcribers such as Transana was made impossible by the code switching of three languages found in the classroom. The study also relied on documentation available on French language teaching in Botswana (syllabus, textbook, final examination results, assessment syllabus and dissertations).

Objectives for French Foreign Language teaching in Botswana JSS

The junior secondary school French syllabus was designed in 1999 and revised in 2010. Though the syllabus revised, the objectives for the teaching of the language remained the same. According to the syllabus, the outcome of three years of learning French should be for learners to be able to:

- *communicate in French at a basic level, both orally and in writing.*
- *use functional communicative skills in French.*
- *understand and respond appropriately to a variety of short texts.*
- *appreciate basic reading material in French.*
- *appreciate the culture of the target language.*
- *appreciate the advantages of learning a foreign language.*
- *establish a foundation for study of the French language at a higher level.*
- *appreciate the importance of international interactions in a global economy.*

(JCE syllabus, 2010, p. iii)

The above targets clearly outline the need for learners to acquire a complete communicative competence at a basic level, although they are not clear on the exact exit level outcome. This is despite the fact that the syllabus was revised in 2010 years after the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) was developed in 2001. The CEFR provides a framework for languages with clear language proficiency level descriptors (A1 to C2) that could help track learners' progress. That being said, the syllabus emphasizes the need for learners to be able to communicate orally and in writing in French. To achieve these aims, the syllabus recommends the communicative approach. However, a perusal through this learning program reveals a content that is more inclined towards the attainment of the linguistic component of the communicative competence. Yet this component is but one of the three that form the communicative competence (CEFR, 2001; Berard, 1991).

The disregard of other components is also reflected in the assessment syllabus which has not implemented its goal to include a speaking test, despite its assertion that “*Paper 4, which constitutes the speaking examination, will NOT be assessed until exemplar material is available and the necessary training has been achieved. Schools will be informed regarding the commencement of the assessment of the speaking skill*” (Botswana examinations Council, 2010). Eight years later the speaking examination has still not been incorporated. The assessment of listening comprehension, the only oral skill that is assessed, constitutes the lowest weighting at 15%.

In a context where teaching is examination oriented, this inclination towards written skills by both the syllabus and the assessment tools encourages the use of a more traditional approach to teaching French (Kewagamang, 2011). The learners in turn develop a partial communicative competence and the aims of teaching French are as a result not achieved.

Teaching and learning material

In a foreign language classroom, the textbook and the teacher represent the only references of the foreign language and culture for the learners. In schools that have adequate facilities, the internet can also provide learners with an insight into the target culture. Botswana JSS classrooms are not well equipped enough for foreign language teaching. In most schools, classrooms are dilapidated, electrical sockets have been vandalised and are not working. The efforts by the French Embassy to donate radios and televisions to schools are in vain as they end up gathering dust in storerooms.

Although most schools have internet, there is only one computer laboratory and it is not always available for French teachers to use. There are also instances where teachers are obliged to hold their classes in open spaces that do not have a power connection. This impacts badly on the teaching of listening comprehension as well as the variation of teaching methods by the teacher to include the use of ICT, song, audio-visual material etc.

These challenges are further compounded by the fact that the recommended textbooks (Metro 1&2, Tricolore 1 & 2) were not specifically conceived for the Botswana syllabus but rather the Scottish and IGCSE syllabuses. They, as a result, cannot be said to respond to the needs of the Botswana learner. Furthermore, these textbooks, especially Metro 1 &2, do not propose a variety of activities for the learner. Learners have expressed their displeasure with these books. It is also worth noting that there is an acute shortage of the textbooks in schools. Learners share textbooks on a ratio of one textbook to six learners. This shortage of textbooks hinders learners’ progress and eventually discourages them as most are not allowed to carry the textbooks home with them. They thus only come into contact with the target language at school.

French as a foreign language teacher training in Botswana

Several stakeholders are involved in French teacher training in Botswana. The pre-service training of all teachers is offered by the University of Botswana, where students study a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities with French as a major. The expectation is for them to achieve Levels B1/B2 of the CEFR. The students who aspire to be French teachers then continue to read for a year-long post-graduate diploma in Education (PGDE). During this polyvalent training, the student teachers have only three hours per week to focus on the didactics of French as a foreign language teaching. The time allocated to subject-specific

knowledge is hence insufficient to produce well-rounded teachers who are competent in the didactics of French as a foreign language.

That being said, the student teachers first learn the theory to later apply it to the context during a seven-week long teaching practice. The teaching practice itself is problematic in that the student teachers are partly supervised by in-service teachers no matter their experience. This could lead to their adoption of inadequate pedagogical practices which they will transfer to the next student teacher. This is especially the case if we consider the marginality of their training. Following completion of PGDE, teachers are then fully qualified to teach French.

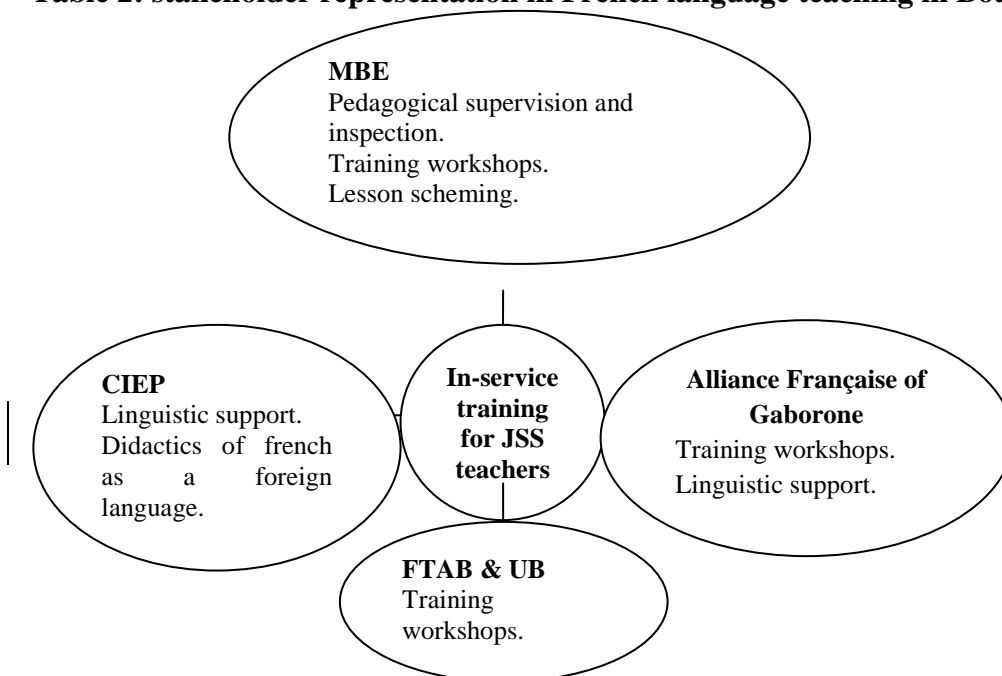
Teacher recruitment

There is no framework that guides the recruitment of French teachers in Botswana. They are only required to be in possession of a degree and a certificate in teaching French as a foreign language. In this regard, a teacher with a level of proficiency in French lower than the expected outcome level of the learners could be employed to teach as long as they have the required documents. It has been established that in this case, the teacher tends to rely exclusively on the language used in the textbook (Kewagamang, 2011). This then denies the learner the opportunity to be exposed to variations of the french language.

In-service training

All the institutions that are linked to French teaching in Botswana are involved in one way or the other in the in-service training of French teachers. The roles of the Ministry of Basic education (MBE), the Alliance Française (AF), the French teachers' association of Botswana (FTAB), the University of Botswana (UB) and the Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogique (CIEP) roles could be described as shown below:

Table 2: stakeholder representation in French language teaching in Botswana



As can be seen in the above illustration, there is rigorous in-service training of French teachers in Botswana. So far, the (CIEP) has managed to train 51 of the 91 teachers, which is

more than half of the total number of French teachers in JSS. This shows that there is notable progress in the area of teacher training. Nonetheless, this training is not without challenges. Despite the efforts by all institutions to contextualise training, none seems to really respond to the needs of the Botswana French classrooms, as existing problems persist. Learner performance is still declining. Most of the training is done following a top-down model. Teachers are sent a questionnaire about their training needs and an effort is made to include all their needs when conducting training. The training workshops organised by the Alliance Française and UB are all mass trainings that reunite about 100 teachers in one lecture room for about two days. The content and framework of the training seeks to address the gaps the teachers identify. However, since they are not research based, and there is no follow-up in the classrooms to observe the assimilation of training by teachers, they might not necessarily respond to the reality of the classroom.

Another challenge regarding training is the lack of qualified personnel to conduct inspection and supervise French teachers in regions as well as in schools. There is currently one principal education officer based in the south-central region. In other regions around the country, the monitoring and supervision is left to officers responsible for other subjects. They cannot be said to be able to observe and advise French teachers regarding the didactics of the language they do not understand.

Classroom Practice

Classroom observations undertaken during this study revealed generally homogenous teacher practices. Teachers who had only benefitted from pre-service training and training workshops, and those that had gone for further training in Réunion Island and student teachers had close to identical teaching practices. Below is a summary of the findings on French teacher's action in the classroom:

- Written skills take precedence over oral skills. Listening comprehension, when taught mirrors that of the final examination.

- Teachers' perception of authentic documents translates into bringing real objects into the classroom without any pedagogical exploitation.

- Interaction between the whole class and the teacher is predominant especially at form 3. Learner's motivation drops drastically when they reach form 3. According to teachers, a more traditional approach is needed at this stage as they prepare learners for the final examination which prioritizes grammar, hence the lack of motivation by learners. Learner to learner interaction was however observed in form 1 and some form 2 classes.

- All the classes were characterised by a lot of code-switching with English as the dominant language. French is mostly used when giving answers and examples or in rare cases during role plays.

- Assimilation of the communicative approach is incomplete and grammar is taught out of context.

- Teachers trained in the Réunion Island have linguistic advantage but their pedagogical skills remain similar to those who have not benefitted from this training.

- Lessons are characterised by a lot of repetition.

Conclusion

Since its introduction in 2000, it is evident that French teaching in Botswana has made notable progress in the area of teacher training. However, French teaching and learning in Botswana is fraught with a lot of challenges despite the high stakeholder involvement. Teachers are rigorously trained on new methodologies of teaching foreign languages but are confronted with the realities of their classrooms only when they finish training. The school environments, as well as the tools designed for French teaching do not cater for innovative teaching methodologies acquired during training. On the one hand there is the syllabus which is not suitable for the 21st century teacher and learner as it minimizes oral skills which are the most important, though the most difficult to learn in a foreign language class that puts forth communication as its aim. The grammar-based nature of the current syllabus puts both the teacher and the learner in an unfavourable position as actors in the french classroom as it promotes teacher-group of learners' interaction. On the other hand, assessment remains predominantly grammar based. This encourages teachers to adopt a grammar-based approach in the classroom, in an effort to prepare their learners for the examination.

Furthermore, the inadequacy of infrastructure, coupled with the limited availability of textbooks and insufficient general regional and school-based support weigh heavily against the French teacher. The end result is that French still remains one of the worst performing subjects in Junior Certificate examinations. Already, certain school heads are threatening to cancel French in their schools. Teachers have also reported that learners do not opt for French as it is perceived to be difficult. They end up being forced to do it, in an environment where teachers are poorly resourced to ignite their interest.

This should be reason enough to indicate to authorities that the first and only foreign language taught in the country's public schools is under threat. There is thus need for stakeholders to evaluate the training model to identify gaps that need to be closed to make it suitable for the Botswana classroom environment.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that efforts made by stakeholders bear fruit, the recommendations formulated below could help address these challenges.

Teacher Training

There is need to change the way French teachers' training is conducted and planned in Botswana. As it is, it is not classroom based and heavily theoretical. It is guided by what teachers perceive to be their most immediate training needs. The training should be extended to include preliminary classroom observations by the trainers, in order for them to make tailor-made training plans suitable for the complexity of the French classroom in Botswana junior secondary schools. A bottom-up model which starts with the classroom should be adopted when developing training programs. The training could follow the following pattern;

1. Lesson observations (with teacher and learner interviews/ questionnaires)
2. Analysis
3. Conception of training program
4. training
5. Follow-up classroom observations and support
6. Training reforms.

This would ensure that there is practical training with real learners. This is also where the University of Botswana needs to be more involved to intensify action-based research to guide French teachers training.

Monitoring of French content delivery

The follow-up observations mentioned above could be used to inform the implementation of training in a real classroom situation and assess its effectiveness. This should be done by Principal education officers for French responsible for teacher training in different regions. The Ministry of Basic Education should thus appoint officers highly trained in the didactics of French as a foreign language who could serve as pedagogical advisors and work hand in hand with teachers to come up with working solutions for schools in their regions. Interviews conducted by experts from stakeholders could help appoint supervisors who would improve French teaching in Botswana. Automatic promotion of teachers to serve as principal Education officers for French should in this regard be avoided. All these measures could drastically reduce the isolation that French teachers in regions other than the south east experience.

Teacher recruitment

There is need to develop a framework specific to the French teacher in junior secondary schools of Botswana. This would be used as guide when recruiting French teachers. The framework should outline the level of French (based on the CEFR descriptors) expected of the teacher, subject-specific skills as well as general pedagogical competencies. Interviews by a suitable board of experts as well as classroom observations should form part of French teachers' recruitment. Foreign language didactics is different from first and second language didactics hence the need to make provisions specific to the French language teaching, separately.

Resources for the French classroom

There is urgent need for an overhaul of the whole French curriculum for the Junior Secondary schools. With the advent of Outcome based education, the communicative approach recommended for French teaching in Botswana becomes irrelevant. Rather, the action-oriented approach, recommended by the CEFR, which incorporates the communicative approach and could be viewed as its continuation should be adopted. The adoption of the action-oriented approach implies the conception of a totally new syllabus as well as textbooks and teacher support material adapted to the syllabus. It also calls for the allocation of special French rooms or smart classrooms in schools, well equipped to accompany the learner in their foreign language journey. Most importantly, an experiential, classroom based, rigorous teacher training should be undertaken to ensure proper implementation of the syllabus. One example is the training model used by Kewagamang (2018). In this model, the researcher adopted a comparative approach to classroom observation. They firstly observed teacher practices to determine their classroom habits. The observations were recorded and accompanied by both pre-session and post-session interviews. The interviews were conducted in such a way that the teacher is confronted with their action through the recording and allowed to comment on it, in an attempt to develop their reflexive skills. The teachers also agreed to let other teachers observe their recorded action and comment on it. In the second phase, the researcher developed a learning sequence outlining the role of the learner and the teacher, with theoretical support based on the action-oriented approach. The sequence was then discussed with the teachers whose comments were taken into consideration as they knew their learners better. The teachers were then observed teaching the sequence and the same procedure was adopted before and after each observation. Teacher practice and classroom

interaction before the introduction of the sequence and during its implementation was then evaluated to find out if the action-oriented approach modified it. In their final interviews the teachers self evaluated their action. This kind of training develops the reflexive skills of teachers which in turn helps them become better professionals (Perrenoud, 2001).

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