LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AT PLAY: UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA SITUATION FOR THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF FRENCH

Rodah Nthapelelang
Department of French
University of Botswana
nthepelelangr@ub.ac.bw

Obene Bojosi
Department of French
University of Botswana
bojosib@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract
This paper seeks to further question the continuing interface between language and culture and between the different languages and different cultures; a common situation in foreign language learning contexts. Research has shown that culture is inherent to a language and it follows therefore that the classroom situation is a melting pot of such an interface of culture and language, of cultures and languages. The main problematic of this paper is to elucidate how identity of the learner is constructed within this hybrid space where cultures and languages co-exist. This paper gives an overview of the University of Botswana context, which is examined through the guiding loupe of the constructionist theory of identity. The main aim being to guide in offering a contextualised learning environment of a foreign language that does not alienate the learner. The paper concludes with a recommendation for teachers to take into consideration the learners' cultures in foreign language acquisition. It recommends that in developing the intercultural competence without making the learners feel that their culture is inferior, the methodology and textbooks design should incorporate the learner's culture.

Keywords: learner identity, culture, foreign language learning, alienation

Introduction
Languages commonly known as International languages are undergoing some sort of renaissance in foreign lands; a sort of *acclimatization,* just to borrow the term used by Calvet (2006) and this is so thanks to their introduction and use in countries which were initially remote to the influence (colonial, economic, imperialist etc.) of such foreign languages. The current protectionist global focus which has seen countries coming together and forming regional and trading blocs has had a cascading effect on international languages as well. Not only have these languages become more relevant in the countries where they are spoken, but they sort of radiate in a much larger sphere represented by the regional blocs. A good example is Southern Africa; a region which is predominantly English speaking, but the SADC (Southern African Development Community) configuration in itself being a "win-win" partnership, accords the Portuguese and the French languages the same status of working/ official languages of the SADC region. These languages, which initially had no status of a *working language* in most countries of the Southern African region, eventually acceded to this status by virtue of being official languages of the SADC. It then follows that as official languages, they automatically are taught in these countries and the resultant factor is their growth in the sphere of influence by the mere fact of being learnt and taught throughout generations

The teaching and learning thereof brings to the fore the problematic of cultures at play. We are here focusing on the culture/s brought in by the foreign International language which becomes an official language and a working language, the local cultures within the country and the dominant culture of a nation. This emanates from the fact that culture is inherent to any language. Therefore, a subject who learns a foreign language constructs their identity in a space of hybridity: their native language on one hand, their first language and cultures thereof, and on the other hand, the foreign language, the *lingua franca* in a professional environment which equally conveys its culture and civilization. As Alptekin (2002, p.58) puts it, "learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers." This then brings in the question of how possible it is to convey the foreign culture in a context dominated by another culture and especially how possible it is to strike a balance between a culture inherent to the language taught, a carrier of this culture and the culture of the learner.

In an attempt to answer these questions, we focused our analysis on the learning and teaching of French at the University of Botswana's Department of French where French is taught as a Foreign Language. The teaching and learning levels for French at the University of Botswana follow a Four-Year Bachelor of Arts Degree programme whose progression is equally modelled on the European Framework of Languages, levels A1 to B1/B2. Our analysis of the research problem follows a sociolinguistic approach where the guiding hypothesis were that the culture of the learner might override the culture of the learned language given that the language is learnt in a context where the predominant culture is that of the learner and that contact with the foreign language is very limited to the classroom contact hours, unless in exceptional situations where there are deliberate efforts to create a platform for the expression and existence of these foreign languages. We carried out overt observations of level A1 at the University of Botswana's department of French. The basis of these observations was to establish the link between culture and language in the learning space and in the identity configuration space of the individual.

Taking base from the theory of intercultural communicative competence, this article would therefore present the results of our findings: first of all, we will give a brief overview of the context of our analysis, followed by the actual analysis that we did and this will lead into a conclusion.

Botswana, Overview: history and linguistic context
Botswana is a landlocked country located in Southern Africa, with a population of 2 million inhabitants (Statistics, 2015). It is bordered, to the south, by South Africa, to the north, by Angola and Zambia, to the East, by Zimbabwe and to the west, by Namibia; all of which use English as their official language except for Angola. Botswana an ancient British protectorate is equally English speaking since the country has inherited the English language as its official language. The language use in this country has accorded the status of official language to the English language while Setswana became a national language. Setswana stands out as a national language because it or rather its variants are spoken by 80% of the population. Apart from these two languages, there are twenty-seven other minority languages spoken in the country (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000).

The languages of instruction in the educational system of Botswana are English and Setswana. The National Education Plan advocates for the use of Setswana in the first year of primary school. As early as the second year, English becomes the language of instruction and

it is recommended that Setswana be a compulsory subject for all Batswana nationals until high school. Given that Botswana is a multilingual country, a move towards including the "minority" languages is captured in the Revised National Education Policy of 1994 which recommends the introduction of a third language in the educational system. A few reasons can be advanced for the non-introduction of a minority language in the Botswana education system: first of all, we have to appreciate that teaching a language requires that the language be coded and that the teachers be trained. Unfortunately for a long time Setswana and English were the only coded languages in Botswana and the decision as to which language to start coding was going to be one sleeve to roll up on the politics of ethnicity. Second hypothetical reason could be traced back to the number of speakers of that local language, its relevance on a national level as well as on an international level. This would require that there be a sound national language policy. Botswana's language policy being silent on the status of English and Setswana could not afford to introduce another local language in the formal learning system. Consequently, instead of introducing a local language as a third language in the school system, it only made sense that a foreign language be introduced. This was initially targeting students whose mother language is not Setswana and it was recommended that these students learn French.

French became thus a foreign language of choice taught in the Botswana schools owing to two reasons: first of all, the language policy of Botswana does not make provision for an indigenous language to be taught or used as a medium of communication. Nyati-Ramahobo states that:

> "Botswana is silent on language policy. However, Sections 61(d) and 79(c) of the constitution state that the ability to speak and read English are requirements for one to be a member of the House of Chiefs or the National Assembly. This indicates that English is the only language that is permitted for use in Parliament and the House of Chiefs. The constitution therefore covertly prohibits the use of other languages. In 1998, Setswana was permitted to be used in Parliament; this was a 250 Current Issues in Language Planning move from prohibition to tolerance for Setswana on the assimilation continuum. However, the use of other languages is still prohibited. The Botswana case, therefore, can best be described as assimilation prohibition, in which speakers of other languages are prohibited from using their languages while having to assimilate to Setswana and English. Practice over the past 33 years further indicates that only Setswana and English are permitted for use in social domains including education." (Nyati-Ramahobo 2000, p. 150).

This language policy issue is also analysed from a political perspective as that of a silent diplomacy on language policy which has always aimed at cohesion of the nation by advocating for a monolithic state as opposed to a multi-ethnic society that Botswana is. Nyati-Ramahobo further puts it into context from the independence era to-date in such terms:

> 'After being elected into power, Seretse Khama sold the idea of a monolithic state to the international community. He termed the agitation for cultural rights as "tribalism" and appealed to the nation to deplore those who might promote it (Carter and Morgan, 1980). He viewed those who wanted to assert their ethnic identity and the use of their language in education as divisive and likely to disturb peace and prosperity" (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004, p. 7).

The second argument justifying the introduction of a foreign language is related to the fact that French is a working language of the SADC, a regional economic bloc to which Botswana is party. The SADC operates a trilingual policy that recognises English, French and Portuguese as its official languages (Mooko, 2009). In view of all these developments, Botswana seemed to have had a limited choice of which foreign language to introduce in the school curricula between French and Portuguese and the decision came down in favour of French.

Teaching of French in Botswana
Currently, apart from Mandarin which is slowly making its way into the teaching arena in Botswana, French is the only foreign language taught in public and private schools. The teaching began in the 1980s in two public schools in Gaborone, the capital town, but it was not a great success due to lack of qualified teachers as well as to the lack of a political orientation geared towards the teaching of foreign languages at the time. The teaching of French at that time had no organized structures in terms of trained personnel as well as a well-adapted teaching curriculum to implement the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language. Everything was thus left to the discretion of teachers, themselves not sufficiently trained while in private schools the teaching of French was of a relative success. The teaching and learning of French were almost left to chance since even the summative evaluation of French at the time was not a local evaluation, it was a foreign evaluation over which Batswana nationals or structures had no control (Kewagamang, 2011).

The teaching of French in Botswana follows a logical development of the region where the old SADCC was transformed into SADC in 1992 and Botswana became headquarters of SADC. This change in focus, as captured below buttressed the need for French proficiency within the school system in Botswana.

> "In 1992, Heads of Government of the region agreed to transform SADCC into the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with the focus on **integration of economic development**. SADC members are Angola, Botswana, DR Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe" (SADC, 2012).

The French speaking countries who became part of this *ensemble* brought about a language dynamic to the countries of Southern Africa: the use of French and Portuguese languages. It then became apparent that the lack of direct communication can be frustrating, and that our space of professional play is not only confined to our national boarders but rather to our linguistic and cultural boarders. This opened doors to the teaching of French and the latter was motivated by the aim of reducing the linguistic and cultural divide within the continent. Subsequently, in 2000, the Ministry of National Education implemented a pilot program of the teaching of French in fifteen (15) secondary schools throughout the country (Maplanka). Following the success of this first phase, the aim was now to generalize this teaching to all educational institutions. This was further made possible through a cooperation agreement between the Government of Botswana and the French government signed in 2008 and renewed in 2015, for the introduction of French in public schools.

The teaching of French at the University of Botswana
Regarding the context of our analysis, the University of Botswana, the teaching of French dates back to as far as the early years of setting up the university. From this period, up to the year 1994, French was offered with an output level equivalent to an A2 on the European

Framework of Languages. At present, French is taught within an accredited BA programme in the University of Botswana and the Department offers studies of language, translation, literature and French for Specific Objectives to 4 levels of certification (first to fourth years). The level at the end of the fourth year is currently a B2. Currently, there are 105 students, the majority of whom (+/- 95%) are Tswana nationals, enrolled in the French department programmes and instruction is provided by 6 lecturers. In addition to the Bachelors' Degree programme, the department offers tailor made proficiency classes to the university community and the general public in the evenings.

Given this background, it is therefore evident that the teaching of French evolves in a shared context between English, Setswana and other national languages. This presupposes that the learning takes place in a context dominated by other cultures. So, now the underlying question to this situation is how possible is this and what is the influence of the French culture on the cultures of the students and what is the influence of the students' cultures on their domestication and ownership of the French language and culture?

At this point in our argument, it is necessary to define the term 'culture' as we are going to use it in this paper. An etymological tracking of the term informs us that this term: 'Culture' is derived from the latin *cultura* which means cultivation of the soil; a term which later gave way, in the 16th century, to cultivation of the mind, faculties or manners This definition informs on two points: that a culture is inseparable from a person and therefore forms the basis of their identity and that a culture is repetitive. Citing E. B. Tylor, Armand Mattelart defines culture in these terms:

> "In its general ethnographic sense, the term culture refers to an array which encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, customs and any other faculty acquired by the human being as part of a society" (Mattelart, 2010, p. 6)[1].

Context Analysis

With this understanding of culture in mind, and the background of French in Botswana, we worked our observation through the classes of the University of Botswana language courses at level A1 (complete beginners' level) over a period of eight months. This period totalled two semesters/ one year of study at the university. The A1 level became our target because of the obvious reason that it is the entry level, the contact level with the French language and culture and as such, it plays a major role in the identity dynamics that come into play. As we observed this level, we had the following guiding questions in mind to which we responded as the learning and teaching progressed through the set objectives:

1. What is the nationality of the learner?
2. What is the ethnic origin of the learner?
3. Did the learner grow up in a rural area or an urban area?
4. Does the learner come from a highly traditional background or a modern background?

These first two questions were asked because different nations and different ethnic groups may have different cultural heritage and therefore this may influence how the students interpret the target culture. As for questions 3 and four, we were taking into consideration the

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[1] Armand Mattelard. Dans son sens ethnographique le plus large, le terme de culture désigne ce tout complexe qui comprend à la fois le savoir, les croyances, les arts, les lois, les coutumes ou toute autre faculté acquise par l'être humain en tant que membre d'une société.

cultural diversity that may exist between leaners of the same nation who grow up in different areas and backgrounds. Our view being that learners from rural areas and traditional backgrounds may have a difficult time assimilating a new culture given the fact that their experience has been limited to one set of cultural practices.

5. What cultural interactions and conflicts come into play in a class of French as a Foreign Language for each learner?
6. Are there any cultural inhibitions that somehow hinder access to the target language and learning in general?
7. How does the learner construct their own identity in a space where French as a Foreign Language somehow de(re)constructs their acquired identity?
8. Does the learning of French seem to make students to be outward inclined or inwards inclined?

During our observations, we were confronted with a group dynamics where the learners were either in a competitive spirit or in a complementarity spirit one to the other. These were all at play in the following situations:

- Interactions between students of the same nationality having grown up in similar cultural backgrounds and in that case the referential differences will be minimal.
- Interactions between students of the same nationality but having grown up in different cultural backgrounds and in such a situation, the referential differences were moderate.
- Interactions between students of different nationalities, different cultures and where referential differences will be important. This situation literally sets a scene where different cultures are at constant interaction within the classroom space.

This was to be expected since the classroom space systematically confronts the learner to the *other*[2]: the other learner, the *other* being the instructor, the *other* in French language and culture and eventually the *other* in the learner themselves; the person they are becoming. To best define the group dynamic Agailbert Dalgalian et al. represent the rapport to the *Other* by saying:

> " In a competitive system, the presence of others in a group is perceived as a virtual threat at many levels: in school performance, in evaluation and criticism, and for the image of the self and status thereof within a group. On the contrary, that is in a system where learners are not in any competition but rather in a situation where they cooperate, individual performance is no longer put in the fore and evaluation and criticism are done in a bid to build and not to penalize (Dalgalian A, Lieutaud, & Weiss, 1981, p. 12) [3]

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[2] Ref : Theory of Otherness as captured by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

[3]* Our Translation : « Dans un système compétitif, la présence des autres dans le groupe est ressentie comme une menace virtuelle à plusieurs niveaux : dans la performance scolaire, dans l'évaluation et la critique, et au niveau de l'image du moi et du statut dans le groupe. Dans le cas inverse, c'est-à-dire dans un système où les apprenants ne sont pas en concurrence mais en situation de coopération, la performance individuelle n'est plus au premier plan et l'évaluation et la critique se font dans une perspective d'aide et non de sanction ». (Dalgalian, Lieutaud, & Weiss, 1981, p. 12).

This sums to a certain extent the notion of otherness and identity dynamics where in the *Lacanian* perspective the other is perceived as both attracting and rejecting.

As our observations ensued, we realised that we had two levels of interface between language and culture: the first one was the interface between the local cultures of Botswana. This interface between the cultures of Botswana had the potential to render learning difficult for a student who was originally from a minority culture. As a result, the student did not wish to participate in the classroom because they were afraid that by uttering a word, they will reveal their "minority" culture and thus expose themselves to ridicule. For such a situation oral production became a challenge in a situation where spontaneity in conversing and interaction were expected of such a student.

The second interface of language/culture featured between students who were of different origins. For this case, we did not have many foreigners in our courses. On average, there were four foreigners for a group of 17 students and this then implied that the foreigners were in the minority. There were situations where the foreigners came from another continent, and in this case the political, imperial representation of the country of origin of the student-foreigner came into play between their relationships with the Botswana students. What came to the fore in this interaction was the active participation of the foreign students in their learning process and this had two consequences: it was either a *leitmotif* of the class or it intimidated the majority of the students who could have felt less valuable. In our observed situations, the foreign students came from insular states which spoke creole and therefore as much as the students were all at a beginners' level, the foreign students had the advantage of possessing within their vocabulary, a few expressions derived from French and therefore their expression was somewhat easy. This had a double sword effect of intimidating the local learners who felt that they were somewhat confronted with a situation where there was disparity in the level of competency between themselves and their fellow classmates. The extreme effect of this was that the fact that these foreign students kept on pushing their efforts and making grammatical, morpho-syntaxic errors as well as pronunciation errors helped in demystifying the French language as inaccessible and it broke the cultural walls of inhibition and self-cruxification by the learners.

Another obvious but subtle level of interaction was the one between the culture of the student and the culture of the French language. This interaction applies to all students: whether foreign nationals to the Botswana culture or Tswana nationals. It imposes itself by the very fact that the teaching of French is done in a Botswana context and that the French language, like all languages, has its cultural realities entrenched in it. In the classes of French as a Foreign Language that we observed at the University of Botswana, there was an intercultural component which aims at striking a balance between the Botswana culture and the French culture. This approach is appropriate in the sense that the learning of the foreign language should allow the student to represent their context, their reality.

During observations, we therefore noticed the shortcomings of this approach: a culture is lived through practices and customs and rarely is it learned in the most explicit ways. Much as we talk about culture, most people have difficulties defining their cultures or even defining themselves before they are confronted with the *Other*. It was only in confrontation with the French culture that the question arose of whether the students had a clear understanding of their culture in an explicit manner. The students therefore had difficulties self-representing because throughout their lives, their culture was never defined in an explicit way. This became a problem because the representation of another language passes through the

understanding of the culture inherent to that language and as such, in a class of French as a foreign language, it is ideal to start with the context of the learner before talking about the French context. This will augur well with an approach that is suggested by Ovando (2011) who insists on the importance of covering topics that allow learners to discuss their own culture in the target language.

In line with the above discoveries, we can therefore say that the proximity of languages brings about the power dynamics between the languages in contact. These power dynamics can turn out, on the basis of the language policies applied in the country, as well as the individual value system and many other factors, to either alienate the learner from their language and their identity or to reinforce their self-worth.

A third level of analysis focused on the dichotomy of the "French-language, an international language and Colonial language" *vis-a-vis* the learner. This language, as it is the case with all colonial languages, is not devoid of some historic weight. The contact that the Botswana learner has with the French language, fortunately, is established through stereotypes seen in advertisements. This then implies that the relationship between the language and the learner is superficial and does not represent real life situations. It represents a relationship founded on some fascination for the French language and culture. When we asked them questions like: "what comes to mind when you hear the word France?" The students easily responded by such positive stereotypes like "*fashion, romantic, civilisation, the Eiffel tower, croissant, wine, cheese, Paris, love, nice food, elegant people, class etc.*" Stereotyping is one way humans define other and themselves through perceptions and through clustering people and denying the individual identities.

As the student starts the learning of the French language through a perceived superiority of the French language and culture, this has the consequence of passive learning on their side simply because their learning is now clouded by their fascination for this language to a point where the new culture and identity that they are learning is not feeding onto their already existing identity. This then brings about an unbalanced construction of identity between the foreign language and the local language. It has even happened that when the students were asked to talk about the monuments in Gaborone, they would say "let's talk about the monuments in Paris, the Gaborone ones are boring!" or even "There are no monuments in Gaborone". This is so because to them, the reality of such can only be perceived through the French language and as such within a French reality. If this is allowed to persist, then the students learn French in complete assonance with their reality and by extension, their identity suffers the prejudice.

Conclusion

In light of this context, we can say that the context that we have followed for 8 months now, has allowed us to establish that the learning of French as a foreign language within the University of Botswana has got its present challenges. These challenges are fundamental because they relate to the identity of the learner. Given that in a learning environment, the speech of a learner is organized in an identity constructionist paradigm; between the 'I' of the learning subject and the 'I' of the person subject, it has since become clear that on the basis of the learner's maturity to synchronise the two identities: that of the learning subject and that of the person subject, the learner can easily be destabilised in the identity construction configuration in that they would create a fantasist identity as the Paris they see in the movies and in so doing they deny their own identity. This would then impoverish their self-

representation and eventually their self-expression because speaking a language is basically a mechanism of self-representation, self-expression and self-actualisation through a linguistic code.

It therefore follows that foreign language teachers should appreciate the diverse cultures/ identities of our students. This will assist in knowing how they are likely to interpret the foreign language and how to best plan for instruction with a view of providing a contextualised instruction that builds the individual into a well-rounded graduate. The design of teaching/ learning approaches need to take into consideration the native cultures. Beyond the instructor/ teacher, a manual method which would allow a learner to make a back and forth movement between their language and culture and the foreign language and culture in a way that enriches the two would be most appropriate to promote an education which participates in the strengthening of the identity of the learner, so that they can represent their context, their culture through this language. An undesirable situation in the twenty first century would be that where the learner will say like Patrick Chamoiseau speaking of his alienation:

> "I had read a great deal, I had imitated a lot, imagined small events which did not take place in the islands but in places from my readings: Paris, the Province, New York, Chicago, the African jungle, a deserted island, forests with snow, steppes. My characters did not resemble me in any way [...]. I expressed what I was not. My perception of the world was through a European construction, uninhabited, and it seemed to be the only valuable way" (Patrick, 1997, p. 44)[4]"

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[4] *Our translation: "J'avais beaucoup lu, j'avais beaucoup imité, beaucoup dessiné de petites histoires qui ne se passaient pas aux Antilles, mais dans les endroits de mes lectures : Paris, la Provence, New York, Chicago, Montréal, la jungle africaine, une île déserte, des forêts enneigées, les steppes [...]. Mes personnages ne me ressemblaient pas non plus [...]. J'exprimais ce que je n'étais pas. Je ne percevais du monde qu'une construction occidentale, déshabitée, et elle me semblait être la seule qui vaille. » (Chamoiseau, 1997 : page 44)

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