

French in Zimbabwean Schools: How to Save an "Endangered Species"

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Abstract

The state of French in Zimbabwean government schools is examined in light of the concepts practical utility (Bogaards, 1991) and foreignness (Dabène, 1994). Given the closure of numerous French departments in schools across the country as well as the sustained reduction over the years in the rate of registration for the French 'O' Level examination, the subject may be termed an "endangered species". This state of affairs does not seem to bother authorities within the Ministry of Education where motivation to support, if not promote, the teaching of French appears to be at its lowest since independence. A number of possible reasons for governmental stakeholders' attitude are identified. It, however, goes without saying that foreign languages are promoted by their countries of origin. It is argued French's loss of popularity may be correlated to the reduction of European influence in Zimbabwe's educational system as a whole. In this context, misalignment of French Embassy language education strategies to the current state of affairs in Zimbabwe is suspected. The concept of local "ownership" of French (Manyawu, 2007b) is proposed as a strategy to resolve the current crisis in Zimbabwe and pre-empt it in fellow former British colonies.

Introduction

French, a subject once associated with top "streams" (Ruperti, 1976) in elite, formerly White, Asian and Coloured Group A and B secondary schools in Zimbabwe is now almost extinct in government schools. With the departure of Whites after Independence in 1980, French suffered an initial decline. That decline was countered by combined French and Zimbabwean government efforts. These efforts sought not only to maintain the subject in Group A schools, but also to avail it to poorer urban and rural schools formerly reserved for African pupils. The mid-nineties, however, saw a fresh decline in schools offering French and since then the subject appears to have been unable to regain popularity. As numbers of candidates for the 'Ordinary' Level ('O' Level) French examination continue to dwindle, the subject appears to be slowly exiting the public school space. This poses major challenges to stakeholders such as qualified French teachers with no French classes to teach, lost investment by government in training albeit it relatively few French teachers. The situation is also frustrating for a French Cultural service which has as one major priority the teaching of French in the country and has, over the years, invested significantly in this endeavour. Above all, it deprives youths in government secondary school of an opportunity to broaden their horizons and enhance their chances on local and global job markets.

This paper proposes to problematise issues surrounding French in Zimbabwean public schools by defining the context in which French is taught from perspectives

of practical utility (Bogaards, 1991) and what Dabène (1994) terms “xénité” or foreignness. The paper will then make suggestions pertaining to the way forward for French in Zimbabwe. The paper will benefit all stakeholders involved in foreign language education in the SADC region, including Embassy officials, government officials, curriculum experts, school teachers and heads as well as scholars engaged in current debate on foreign language education in SADC countries.

Some useful background information on the country

Zimbabwe is by definition a multiracial Southern African country with a predominantly rural population (only 27% live in towns). It is a former British colony independent since 1980. Almost 98% of the population are of African origin while the rest are Whites, Asians or of mixed race (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/zi.html>). Bantu languages are dominant from a demographical point of view: Shona is the mother language of 82% of the population while about 14% speak Ndebele as their mother language (ibid.). English is the mother language of less than 2% of the population and yet it is the country’s official language (“language of record”) while Shona and Ndebele are “official national languages” (<http://www.tlfg.ulaval.ca/axl/afrique/zimbabwe.htm>). Most official communication is done in English, which is also the language of instruction as from the secondary level. Shona and Ndebele are nevertheless written and taught all the way to the highest levels of tertiary education. Since Independence there has been a steady drive to “indigenise” all aspects of public life in Zimbabwe, including industry, commerce, agriculture, politics, education and culture in pursuit of the national goal that Africans must become masters of their own destiny (Mugabe, 2001).

Zimbabwe is considered a highly literate country: 90.7% of those aged 15 and above are “literate” according to (CIA-The World Factbook – Zimbabwe). According to 2003 estimates 94.2% of men and 87.2% of women are literate (ibid.). It is at school that the majority of the black population learn English. Thus 90.7% of the population have acquired competence in English going from the elementary to the highest level that can be attained by a second language speaker. It is in this sense that Zimbabweans are termed bilingual, a stable and generalised bilingualism (Bogaards, 1991: 146) defined by the country’s colonial past.

French in the Secondary School Curriculum in Zimbabwe

Among factors that go into designing a curriculum is the concept of “ideals” to pass on to the younger generation. “The curriculum is the most obvious and direct means in the whole educational organization of transmitting national and community ideals from the older to the younger generation” (Ruperti, 1976: 113).

Immediately after Independence, Zimbabwe embarked on a process of “localising ‘O’ and ‘A’ Level examinations. For ‘O’ Level examinations, the process of localisation started in 1984 (four years after Independence) and was completed in 1995. It was completed in 2003 for ‘A’ Level examinations. Among advantages of localising examinations, ZIMSEC cites the need to put an end to cultural

imperialism in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council, FAQs, <http://www.zimsec.co.zw/subjects.htm>). The argument is that, "Indigenisation of the curriculum ensures that education is made relevant to the socio-economic environment" (ibid.)

Post-Independence reforms to the curriculum were motivated by the view that the existing curriculum was "urban-based" (Ministries of Education and Higher Education, 1996). The response to that weakness was a shift towards vocational and technical subjects. Core subjects to be taught to all secondary school pupils were Science, Mathematics, English and a vernacular language (ibid.). The rest, including "modern languages" such as French, were categorised as optional with the final decision on which ones to teach in which school lying with the school head. The official curriculum position on French did not therefore vary from the pre-Independence dispensation and yet the subject was doomed to suffer the fate of a transplanted organ rejected by the recipient's organism.

French in Zimbabwean schools

Having studied French in government institutions from 1981 to 1989, the author has personally witnessed the post-independence growth and decline of French in government schools since Independence. Immediately after Independence, the French invested immensely in the development of French in Zimbabwe. French teacher education was identified as a key tool in a strategy aimed at bringing the subject to Group B schools in poor black urban communities and in some rural schools. Hillside Teachers' College hosted the country's sole French teacher-training programme. The French government supplied teacher educators from 1985 up to 1999. From 1990 to 1993, four groups of Hillside Teachers' College graduates were sent to France to do a one-year diploma in French as a foreign language. During that same period, two black graduates of the college were sent to France, the first in 1990 and the second in 1993. They specialised in French as a foreign language in order to take over from the French teacher educators at Hillside Teachers' College.

The project for further training in France was a collaborative effort between the governments of Zimbabwe and France. While the Zimbabweans provided for the return journey to France, the French were responsible for the students' needs while in France. In 1993, the Zimbabwean government reportedly failed to satisfy its end of the bargain and the project all but collapsed. Thenceforth, the French sent smaller numbers of selected students from the college and from the University of Zimbabwe to the French island of la Reunion to do a much shorter course than the one in France. In the meantime, departments that had been opened in group B schools started mysteriously closing down. Several others in Group A schools followed suit. For instance, in 1993 the author left one big Group A girls' high school in protest after the school head told him she intended phasing out the subject and transferring him to the English department.

In November 2002, there were very low registration figures for "O" Level French – 1255 (Manyawu, 2002) compared to the tens of thousands who registered for

subjects such as English (figures provided by the ZIMSEC Subject Officer for French) for the French final examination. This number had fallen to only 900 candidates for the whole country in November 2006. Secondly, French is no longer offered by the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council in its June 2006 'O' Level and 'A' Level sessions (Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council, <http://www.zimsec.co.zw/subjects.htm>, 05.12.07). The omission of French from the list of subjects offered by ZIMSEC in June may be indicative of a tendency to phase out the subject altogether.

The obvious reason why a subject would be excluded from a session is the absence of candidates, which means total lack of demand. 'O' Level examination candidates who participated in a study the author conducted in 2002 (Manyawu, 2002) confirm the gravity of this problem. In response to a question on the subjects they would like to study at "Advanced" Level ('A' Level), only 1/20 candidates mentions French. On the other hand, only 2/20 candidates consider French as useful for an eventual career. One candidate would like to be a French teacher; yet another would consider becoming a French teacher only if she failed the examination. Policy in their school was that pupils placed in a class that took French – generally the "top" class in the stream – had no choice but to attend French classes. This is the case in all government schools that offer the subject. There could thus be a general tendency among black pupils in government schools to consider French a burden imposed on them for reasons best known to national education officials and school heads.

We shall examine the state of French in Zimbabwe from a perspective of the concepts "exolingustic environment" (*milieu exolingue*), developed by L. Dabène (1994), and that of utility value (Bogaards, 1991).

The Practical Utility of a Foreign Language

The practical utility of a language defines the benefits a learner gains from his/her linguistic knowledge in the more or less long term (Bogaards, 1991). For instance, a language may be a prerequisite for study at tertiary level institutions. This concept has implications for the learner's attitude (interest and personal investment in the learning process) towards the target language as well as the approach s/he may favour to learn it.

The value of the concept of practical utility lies in its incorporation of the concept of stakeholder motivation. Curriculum developers and other decision-makers predict motivation levels and thus utility value by assessing the extent of a foreign language's "foreignness" (Dabène, 1994).

An "Exolingustic" Environment

The conditions in which French is learnt in Zimbabwe can best be qualified as "exolingustic" (Dabène, 1994, p. 37), a concept which subsumes that of practical utility. This means that the target language is absent from the universe of the learner and that the institutional contact that the learner establishes with the

language is not accompanied by extra-institutional acquisition. This is the very essence of the adjective "foreign" in the term "foreign language".

Dabène uses the concept of distance to define what she terms various degrees in the foreignness ("xénité") of languages². She describes three different types of distance that define the foreignness of a so-called foreign language. These are material, linguistic and cultural distance. For the purposes of this study, we shall examine only cultural distance.

French in Zimbabwe

In an officially bilingual country such as Zimbabwe, every pupil must learn a national language – Shona and Ndebele for most – as well as the official language, English. Since English is already, for many, akin to a foreign language (Chimhundu, 2002), learning French can seem quite onerous for most Zimbabwean school children. Reasons most frequently cited by those opting not to learn French include:

- a) the difficulty of the language ("It's so different from Shona/ Ndebele and English."); and
- b) its apparent "uselessness" ("What will I do with it?"; "Where will I use it?").

Such perceptions, albeit stereotyped, signal a need to examine and characterise the environment in which the language is learnt. The concept of cultural distance appears apt to characterise the environment in which French is learnt in Zimbabwe.

Divergences of a cultural nature can take the form of differences in interpersonal practices and in value systems. In Zimbabwe, the historical factor further widens the original gap between the candidates' Bantu-Christian (author's term) worldview and the target French culture. Before Independence in 1980, French was only taught in European, 'Coloured' (mixed race) or Indian schools. But then these three races represent a tiny minority (under 1% of the population) of the candidates in government schools. French is thus a subject which is totally absent from the educational tradition of the majority of blacks now involved in one way or the other in the process of teaching/ learning it. They include ministers, ministry officials, school heads, pupils and parents. Zimbabwe's current anti-neo-colonialist discourse may further diminish the value of French in local stakeholders' eyes. It is highly likely that in a post-colonial political environment that seeks to deliberately prioritise the construction of an indigenous African identity, the degree of foreignness of so-called modern European languages is further accentuated in the eyes of Blacks (cf. Dabène, 1994, p. 33 on a similar situation in Nigeria). South Africa where the proportion of citizens of non-African descent is the highest of any African country south of the Sahara is quite likely the only former colony where the impact of such a discourse may not be felt in the medium term. The crisis may, however, occur in more or less worse similar proportions throughout the rest of the

² « degrés dans la xénité des langues » (Dabène, 1994, p. 34)

region. It has already been observed that in Lesotho, a country that owes a number of key institutions and even its orthography to French missionaries, not a single government school teaches French (Manyawu, 2007b).

In Zimbabwe, the “exolingualistic” environment in which French is learnt in schools is characterised by worldview conflict at a political level. In that country, worldview or cultural distance has the tendency to evoke racial conflicts of the past. This point cannot be overemphasised. The only form of distance undermining the position of France in Zimbabwe today is politico-cultural distance.

One clear indication of the politico-cultural foreignness of the French as a subject in Zimbabwean schools is government apathy. While government actively supports the teaching of all other subjects through provision of funds, equipment and training of teachers, etc., very little is done for French. Government plays only a token role in curriculum issues pertaining to French. Its nonchalant treatment of French is in sharp contrast to its vigorous promotion of Chinese, for instance. Here are some signs of this apathy:

- a) French is the only ‘O’ level subject in whose examination a foreign government is allowed to play a leading role. The comprehensive list of themes and questions, which is the examiner’s chief resource during the “general conversation” part of the oral examination, is provided to the ZIMSEC Subject Officer for French by the French Embassy’s Linguistic Attaché (Manyawu, 2002).
- b) Government plays virtually no role in the choice and provision of textbooks for French: virtually all of them are donated by the French government through its embassy or by the Alliance Française. It is the French Linguistic Attaché’s office that determines which textbooks to use in schools. There can be no clearer evidence of government’s apathy than this laissez-faire attitude in a matter involving the aims and objectives as well as cultural, philosophical and linguistic content of an examinable subject.
- c) Only one out of ten teachers’ colleges in the country trains French teachers. Even that training is inadequate and must be supplemented through programmes funded by various French institutions.
- d) None of the country’s ten regions has an Education Officer (EO) for French, as do all other subjects. The EO responsible for French at national level in 2002 did not even speak French. The French Linguistic Attaché is obliged to work part-time within the Ministry of Education to fill this gap. The French government pays his/ her salary. At Independence, qualified EOs for French were available not only at national level but also at regional (provincial) level.
- e)

In the 5 schools that participated in this study, French is the least funded of all subjects on offer. Headmasters’ position is generally that the French Embassy will or should fund the subject while government resources are channelled to subjects deemed to be more essential for the country.

This virtual abandonment of a subject by government institutions sends powerful signals to all other national stakeholders about the attitude to adopt vis-à-vis the subject. In short, government appears to be saying the subject has no place in its scheme of things; it's a luxury they are willing to accommodate in the national curriculum for as long as and wherever the French government continues to actively support its teaching. In other words, the least motivated of all stakeholders in the teaching of French in Zimbabwe are probably to be found in government, starting with the Ministry of Education.

To some extent, though, government's laissez-faire strategy gives interested stakeholders leeway to act. Opportunities for development and expansion are likely occur in a system that gives the school head considerable latitude to decide which non-core subjects – among them French – to offer in his/her school.

Recommendations

Since government's position is clearly apathetic at the moment, my recommendations cannot but be targeted at the French institutions responsible for the propagation of the language in the country. The need to align discourse about French to the new dispensation in Zimbabwe and indeed elsewhere in the SADC region cannot be overemphasised. The subject needs to be repackaged and remarketed. Strategies that worked under colonial regimes have clearly failed and must be replaced by new ones that will be functional in the current worldview. I suggest a two-pronged paradigm shift culminating in one goal: local "ownership" of French as a subject.

1. Engage all stakeholders

There is need to aggressively motivate and "activate" all stakeholders in the teaching/ learning of French. These include managers and decision-makers such as school heads, EOs, teachers, parents and learners.

While it is highly commendable that the Cultural Service of the French Embassy routinely funds activities targeting French teachers and learners, it is high time strategies targeting the other stakeholders were considered. These strategies should seek to:

- a) acknowledge the key role played by strategic stakeholders, starting with Ministry and school authorities, in shaping the curriculum and thus in the teaching of French;
- b) characterise stakeholders' perception of French and its place in Zimbabwe;
- c) "sell" them the language;
- d) get their input on a way forward; and
- e) obtain their commitment to the continued teaching of French in Zimbabwe.

There is need to recognise the fact that most of the current black leaders in the Education system were previously excluded from the foreign languages curriculum under the discriminatory policies of the Rhodesian regime and may have little or no sympathy for French. They therefore need to be "invited" on board or else they may work at cross-purposes with the sponsors of the subject. In 1995, one high

school Headmaster told the author in no uncertain terms that he was unhappy with the French Embassy's strategy of sponsoring young French teachers in his school to attend what he termed numerous workshops in Zimbabwe and abroad while totally ignoring him and yet he was expected to accommodate French on his school's curriculum³. He wished to know why the French Embassy seemed averse to interfacing with Headmasters when it was the Headmaster who made curriculum choices in a school. He attacked what he termed the arrogance of the French in using bilateral agreements to foist their language on schools and thinking it could thrive there without the support of local stakeholders like him. He suggested that the French Embassy could organise workshops and seminars that brought Headmasters and other key stakeholders together to map out a common strategy. But underlying his suggestion was the need to be *recognised* by the French Embassy as a key player in the diffusion of the language in Zimbabwe. Such recognition may indeed motivate many key decision-makers to take their place as partners in the diffusion of French through the school system. A special French course could even be designed for interested officials. Once these key players appreciate the need for the country to have people who can communicate effectively in French, they can be relied upon to actively encourage parents and pupils to learn the language.

2. Motivate not coerce learners

As pointed out above, in Zimbabwe, French is a non-core subject (Ministries of Education and Higher Education, 30 June 1996). The practice of coercing pupils to learn French is thus not only unjust but also counterproductive. It entails total disregard for the learner's intrinsic motivation concerning the choice of a foreign language. This is a key factor in the high dropout rate suffered by French classes with learners simply opting not to register for the 'O' level examination in the subject. Coercion must come to an end and be replaced by a culture of informed choice. Where French is concerned, flexibility might just save the day: secondary school learners must be treated as thinking beings capable of making decisions affecting their lives under the guidance of adults acting as counsellors. By refusing to register for the 'O' Level French examination, they are quite likely rejecting the notion of learning a language for the sake of the language; they want instead to learn it for their own sake, so to speak.

Local "ownership" of French

Local ownership is taken to mean first political commitment to the propagation of the subject. Zimbabwe is currently undergoing a process of national reorientation characterised by a belief that institutions in Zimbabwe must be genuinely "owned" and controlled by indigenous Zimbabweans. Much as this philosophy may be deemed controversial, it would be foolhardy to think it is reversible. In fact, the desire for indigenous ownership or leadership is salient in the strategy of most formerly colonised African countries and it permeates all domains, including language policy. An intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa,

³ This was part of a survey conducted by the author for the French Embassy in 1995.

held in Harare in 1998 set out to "... define prospects for the political and technical management of the African linguistic context" (Chimhundu, 2002).

History has, nevertheless, shown that it is possible for African governments to deliberately move to embrace foreign languages once political and economic benefits for the country have been clearly defined. This is the case of Zimbabwe, which recently introduced the teaching of Chinese language and culture at the University of Zimbabwe in support of the State's "Look East" economic policy that seeks to develop relations with Asian countries (*The Zimbabwe Standard*, 22 January 2006). One publication announced, "Zimbabwe's largest university will soon begin teaching Chinese, in the latest example of **increased ties** between the Beijing and Harare governments" (www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-09/2006-09-01-voa43.cfm?CFID=83659411&CFTOKEN=30457436; my highlight).

Studying a similar situation in Kenya, Damien Mulinga argues that the French language in Southern and Eastern Africa would benefit a great deal from a stronger presence of French businesses in the region (Mulinga, 2006). At another pan-African language policy development workshop, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) concluded that, "No language policy can be dissociated from economic, social and cultural realities..." (www.adeanet.org/newsletter/Vol8No4/cn-n8v4-2, 16 March, 2001). Clearly, the Zimbabwe government's vision is at variance with that of those who sponsor French in Zimbabwe. There is no escaping the reality that ADEA recognizes: "Political will lies at the heart of any reform effort" (ibid.). By implication, the decline of French in schools means that bilateral relations between France and Zimbabwe must be at their weakest since Independence.

Local ownership thus means a sense that French belongs in Zimbabwe and that its propagation benefits Zimbabweans who then commit themselves to it. Local stakeholders in the propagation of this language need to feel that they matter. School heads, for instance, need to feel that the subject is no longer just a symbol of bilateral relations foisted on them by the French.

Conclusion

The decline of French in Zimbabwean government schools appears to be marked by a sense of the politico-cultural foreignness of the language (as compared to Chinese, for instance). So long as Zimbabwean stakeholders do not have a sense of ownership of French, the subject will continue to lose ground in government schools. It is a problem of worldview. In the new politico-cultural dispensation, a sense of ownership can only derive from a relationship of mutual benefit between the two countries. The cultural wing of the French Embassy should seriously consider new approaches to working with local stakeholders at all levels. Key among these strategies is the need to interface with strategic actors. Ministerial approval for the subject alone is obviously no longer sufficient.

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