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On the necessity to focus more on the attitude towards French than on linguistic competence

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Introduction

Berne is the capital city of multilingual Switzerland. With its three official languages (German, French and Italian) but four national languages (Romansh, German, French and Italian), Switzerland is considered a “language laboratory” by sociolinguists (Ogay, 2000: 162). Berne is also the capital city of the bilingual (German/French) canton of the same name. As a city, it is nonetheless exclusively German-speaking. The Confederation is based on a three-level system that operates, in the case of Berne for instance, as such: confederal level (three possible languages), cantonal level (two possible languages) and communal level (one language). Most of the time, multilingualism in Switzerland actually means the juxtaposition of diverse monolingual operating procedures. Most matters are decided at a local level, meaning that one language can be an “official language” at the national level but at the same time a “foreign language” locally. The word “foreign” is officially used in law texts as well as in school textbooks whether the language in question is a national language or not. Though French may be an official language in Switzerland, it is called a *Fremdsprache* (literally “foreign language”) in the school curriculum of the German-speaking part of the canton of Berne.

We will first address how foreign language teachers at primary school level are trained in some other parts of the world. Secondly, we will focus on the sociolinguistic context of French learning and teaching in Berne as well as the related attitude of future teachers towards French. Finally, we will see how these aspects transfer to preschool teacher and primary school teacher training in French and the resulting pedagogical implications.

French teachers in defiance of themselves

The Institut Vorschulstufe und Primarstufe (IVP) at the Pädagogische Hochschule Bern trains future preschool and primary school teachers (PPST) during a three-year Bachelor program containing 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer

System). Each ECTS corresponds to a workload of about 30 hours. Preschool teachers and primary school teachers receive the same training since there is only one certification for pupils aged four to twelve years old. PPST are so-called generalists: they are certified in all the compulsory subjects of the curriculum. In the German-speaking part of the canton of Berne, French is the first compulsory foreign language taught with a compulsory allotment of three lessons a week starting from the third grade of primary school. English is the second compulsory foreign language and is taught from the fifth grade on. French as a Foreign Language (FFL) is thus a compulsory subject at IVP. One cannot become a teacher (even a preschool teacher) without fulfilling the academic requirements in French as well as in the other subjects. All IVP students are potential foreign language teachers although most of them think of themselves more as future PPST rather than as future language teachers.

In the confederal Swiss system, every canton can potentially have different rules. Geneva, for example, is the only French-speaking canton where German is not a compulsory subject in PPST education. It is also the only canton where a foreign language is not compulsory at all in PPST education. In some other German-speaking cantons, future teachers may choose between French or English as their compulsory foreign language. In this article, we will deal specifically with the German-speaking part of the canton in Berne where French is the only possible foreign language in PPST training and is compulsory.

Teaching French at IVP consists of a total of five to eight ECTS and requires a standard B2-level in French based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The level is certified through a DELF B2 diploma¹ which must be obtained by the end of their first year at IVP. FFL training covers subjects such as general principles in foreign language teaching, but also competences such as lesson planning, pupil assessment, etc. When finishing secondary school and applying to university (“Maturité” diploma), every student is expected to have already reached the B2-level and show evidence of this to IVP. This requirement might seem redundant but creates great turmoil, it being no secret that most candidates have not actually reached a B2-level in French. However, any subject can be compensated by another subject for the final exam of Maturité (for example a good grade in history may compensate a poor grade in French) and French happens to be the most failed subject in the canton of Berne (Robin, 2015a). As the competences of many IVP students in French are below expectations in terms of the CEFR, students are expected to improve their level by paying for an expensive certification, if not for extra classes in language schools. As future teachers, they are in charge of filling the well-known gap between the expected B2-level and the reality of their lacking this level.

FFL teacher training at IVP is accompanied by a three-week practicum in a German-speaking school during which they teach French. Since 2016, most students

¹ It is the official qualification awarded by the French Ministry of Education to certify the competence of a non-native candidate in the French language.

have also attended an optional three-week practicum in the French-speaking part of Switzerland during which they either assist a teacher in a French-speaking class or work with French-speaking children after school or during their holidays (*e.g.*, camps, day-care, etc.). This practicum simultaneously encompasses different types of mobility: geographical, linguistic and professional. The goal is to experience other school practices and interactions with pupils as well as to achieve some fluency in using school-specific language competences in French (commands, explanations, etc.).

The fact that all PPST are foreign-language teachers is considered a given. Foreign languages are regarded as subjects amongst many others, which PPST teach as generalists. In Berne in particular, their necessary training in French is politically well-established and no-one dares to question it. Why should a foreign language be treated differently than every other, equally important, subject in PPST education? Why should it be allotted more study time and/or be allocated more ECTS than other subjects? This question leads us to examine the situation in other Western and multilingual countries which also have French as one of their national languages.

Dual training, dual profession, but not recognized as such

No two sociolinguistic situations are alike. Yet, by examining foreign language teacher training in countries where FFL is also part of a compulsory primary school curriculum helps to put current practices at IVP into perspective. A widespread alternative, for instance, is to have regular primary school teachers voluntarily qualify in foreign languages in addition to their regular PPST education, as an “option” added to, or as part of, their initial qualification.

Contrarily to Swiss curricula, Belgian curricula use the term “second” to name another national language that is locally not the official language (such as French in the Flemish part of the country). Since 1998, learning a second language has been compulsory from the fifth grade on. Depending on the linguistic area, a second language may or may not be compulsory in PPST training. To become a PPST in Belgium, it is compulsory to qualify in a second language in the Flemish part of the country whereas it is not so in the French-speaking part of the country. The custom in the French-speaking part of Belgium is to have specialized language teachers teach second languages at the primary school level.

In Canada, the term “second” is used to name the national language which is locally not the official language (such as French in the English part of the country). The second language is taught at least from the fourth grade, although most schools actually start earlier. Second language teachers have an undergraduate degree in Second Language Teaching (French as a second language or English as a second language) and are therefore specialists of the subject. Foreign/second language teachers are specialists of their subject even if they teach primary school pupils.

Being a foreign/second language teacher is considered to be a specialized teacher position, regardless of the level at which the language is taught. The age of the pupils is not relevant, the subject is: contrarily to any other subject, a foreign/second language represents at the same time both structure and content in

the act of teaching. The foreign/second language is taught at least partially through the medium of the foreign/second language itself. As a consequence, teaching a foreign/second language seems impossible without a minimal degree of competence in the language itself. All other subjects are taught through the medium of the local language of education and therefore can be taught by generalist teachers whereas foreign/second languages partly rely on the teacher's competence in the language.

Furthermore foreign/second language teaching conveys certain types of social representations. It is culturally loaded and needs a specific training to tackle such issues. Becoming conscious of one's responsibility as a culture and language mediator is a long-term process.

“*Ils aiment pas le français*”: resistance towards learning and teaching French

From “mobility mapping” (Robin, 2014) to comprehensive interviews in self-confrontation, the author previously analyzed diverse IVP students' self-narratives, revealing a wide range of individual and collective representations of and about French. Most of them declared lacking confidence in French and having “Hemmungen”/[“Inhibitions”], *i.e.*, presented linguistic insecurity and resistance towards French learning and teaching (Robin, 2015a). The sociolinguistic status of FFL in Berne and the dual nature of PPST training, including a disproportionately short but decisive qualification in French, account for the fact that many IVP students are reluctant to undertake their professional training in French. The constraints trigger tensions between institutional thinking and individual experiences but also reveal gaps, so-called *interstices institutionnels* (Robin, 2015b), within the institution itself. Until 2016, for instance, the enrollment for a semester in a French-speaking university in Switzerland or abroad, was a well-known strategy among IVP students to minimize the risks of failing French and thus the PPST diploma or simply to avoid, through ECTS recognition, oral examination in French at IVP: “Da ich auf diese Weise vom Franzunterricht dispensiert wurde und mir das Französisch ohne Prüfungen angerechnet wurde” / [This way I was exempt from taking French at IVP and all the French tests would be recognized] (Robin, 2015a: 437). As a result, the option of spending a semester in a French-speaking university became very popular, especially among the students whose competences in French, as defined by the CEFR, were the lowest. However, the study of the mechanisms that helped subvert the system also points out the potential pivotal effect of mobility experiences on the attitude towards French. In fact, experiences such as mobility or practical training in a French-speaking school can potentially remedy the widespread resistance against French learning among students. The two mobility mappings below illustrate reconciliation with French through mobility.

For Mirjam (see Figure 1), French is just a school subject². Her school French career is dark and full of unhappy moments: bad grades, bad teachers, etc. Her school path eventually enlightened when she spent one month with a French-speaking family as a volunteer farm worker. As for Walter (see Figure 2), he depicted French

² All the names have been changed in order for the students to remain anonymous.

like French]³ (Robin, 2015a: 392). The situation might turn out to be more complex than it seems at first glance when she explains: “Ils se sentent pas à la hauteur donc forcément, ils aiment pas. Quand on sait pas quelque chose, c’est pas agréable”. / [They don’t feel good enough. It’s not pleasant to feel like you don’t master something]. According to her, the question is not so much to “like” or “dislike” French but whether one feels competent or not with the subject. As a professional consideration, it entails consequences in the future practice of teaching FFL as Tim expresses it:

Vielleicht habe ich Angst davon, Französisch zu unterrichten, weil ich das Gefühl habe, ich kann für die Schülerinnen und Schüler das nicht bieten, was nötig wäre. [...] Ich frage mich einfach, was ist dann der Sinn, wenn ich Französisch unterrichte, oder? Ist das gegenüber den Schülerinnen und Schülern fair?

[Maybe I’m afraid of teaching French because I have the feeling I can’t give the pupils what they would need. [...] I’m not sure it makes any sense for me to teach French. Would that be fair to the pupils?] (Robin, 2015a: 478)

This student is professional enough to identify the competences needed to be a good French teacher and yet realistic enough to recognize that he does not have them despite the regular FFL training he received at IVP. Therefore, he and many others do not wish to teach French. He plans to leave the canton of Berne and to teach in a canton where French is not compulsory. Others choose to avoid French by teaching inferior grades where French is not yet a subject: “*Ich wäre froh, wenn ich nicht Französisch unterrichten müsste.*” / [I’d be glad if I didn’t have to teach French] (Robin, 2015a: 478). Another widespread strategy is to exchange subjects with a colleague of the same school, French being the most exchanged subject in the canton of Berne.

Ich wäre froh, wenn Irgendjemand im Kollegium sagen würde: “Ich unterrichte nicht sehr gern Deutsch”, dann würde ich Deutsch geben und sie bei mir Franz, das wäre die perfekte Lösung für mich.

[I’d be glad if any of my colleagues would tell me: “I don’t like teaching German so much”, this way I could teach German in his/her class and he/she would teach French in mine. That would be the perfect solution] (Robin, 2015a: 478).

Some future PPST even explain how they will have to pay extra attention not to show their pupils how uncomfortable they feel towards French do not negatively influence the pupils’ judgement towards the subject.

A plea for socio-anthropological approaches in FFL teacher education

As previously pointed out, the attitude of the future PPST towards French is related to feeling neither competent nor legitimate as a French teacher. One cannot successfully learn and transmit French if one feels insecure about it. Therefore, the author suggests hereafter an essential curricular aspect: working on students’ linguistic competence should go hand-in-hand with working on their own perception of themselves as mediators of the French language and culture. This does not speak

³ Personal translation in English from the original German (language register and mistakes are intentionally reproduced).

against a necessary degree of linguistic competence since command of FFL classroom language is the targeted final goal of their FFL training. However, it implies that attending to future PPST's attitude towards French is of tremendous importance and should chronologically come first during FFL training. It represents the *sine qua non* condition of FFL teacher education. Teacher educators cannot influence the sociolinguistic situation in which most students do not have the necessary linguistic competence when they begin their PPST education. We advocate therefore for a realistic approach with realistic goals of productive intervention by starting from the students' actual situation instead of their theoretical position and by spending a consistent part of their training focusing on their inhibition/insecurity.

This is one of the goals of the current project “Didactique de la mobilité/Mobility didactics” (2016-2019)⁴. The methodological framework of the project is a “research-action-education”⁵, requiring constant critical and reflexive practices (on the part of both researchers and students) and aiming at changing the institutional learning environment (Clerc & Richerme-Manchet, 2014). Using methodological tools such as mobility mapping and comprehensive interviews in self-confrontation, the project follows the case of five volunteer students over several semesters of their training. Based on socio-anthropological principles and theories, the project focuses on the evolution of their relationship towards French and FFL teacher education through professional experiences achieved in a French-speaking environment. It includes a preparation (before the experience), support (during the experience) and reflection (after the experience).

To help the students explore the subject of their ambiguous relationship to French, the preparation of these experiences outlines the broader context of PPST training in Berne. Future teachers need to be informed about the Bernese sociolinguistic environment: Swiss language policies, Bernese language, school policies and linguistic minority politics. Swiss-specific sociolinguistic aspects such as the (un)balance of power between different language communities (whose symbolic power or size in terms of the number of speakers may vary) must be tackled. Language policies are strongly related to national cohesion in Switzerland and, as such, represent a very complex issue. Students need to realize that studying and potentially teaching French in Berne extends beyond their individual cases.

Secondly, a multidisciplinary approach provides effective tools to reflect on social constructions in the widespread discourses against French at IVP. Socio-anthropological notions such as “social representations”, “social constructions”, “ethnocentrism”, “habitus” and “capital” can be helpful when addressing this issue. As the example below demonstrates, these notions can be apprehended and made specific to PPST education through fellow students' testimonies of their three-week practicum in a French-speaking school.

J'ai contacté une prof en e-mail et elle m'a répondu tout sympha. Parce qu'elle m'a tutoyé et le son et le contenu me semblait assez familier et elle a mis son prénom et son nom, moi aussi j'ai la tutoyé la prochaine fois. O là là, mauvaise idée. [on] m'a

⁴ Official website of the project: <https://www.phbern.ch/didactique-de-la-mobilite/projet.html>.

⁵ “Action-research” combined with “education-research”.

répondu pour me dire, que je devrait vouvoyer les profs, c'était une règle assez basale. Point! Oops. Je me suis excusé, mais il n'a pas vraiment réagi. Est-ce que c'est normal?!? Je pense que c'est un peu bizarre, si elle avait écrit d'une façon plus formelle et si elle avait mis que son nom de famille, j'aurais la vouvoyé, c'est clair. Qu'est-ce qu'ils veulent comme excuse encore? Du Chocolat? Fromage? Des Montres? Quand j'étais la dernière fois en France tout le monde m'a donné deux bisous au lieu de dire bonjour, ça aussi était un peu extrême pour une Suisse:-/ Bof, je vais lui écrire encore une fois d'une manière super poli avec tous les phrases nécessaires...

[I got in touch via e-mail with the teacher and she answered very nicely. Because she used the “informal *you*” and the sound and the content all seemed familiar and she also used her first name and family name, I too used the “informal *you*” in my answer. Wow, bad idea. I was answered that I should use the “formal *you*” with teachers and that is a basic rule. Period! Oops. I apologized, but she didn't react. Is that normal?? I think it's weird, if she had used another tone or more formal ways or just used her family name, then I would have used the “formal *you*” back obviously! What is it that she wants now? Chocolate? Cheese? Watches? Last time I was in France everyone kissed me twice on the cheeks to say “Hello” and that was a bit extreme for a Swiss person:/ Well, I guess I will write back to her again in a super polite and formal way...]⁶

In groups, students analyze the given situation and discuss possible answers to the following questions: Do you understand your fellow student? Do you understand the teacher? What is this situation truly about? This intercultural activity underscores the implicit codes of politeness and the professional misunderstanding, which result from it. It leads students to question what they think is “obvious”. To conclude the activity, it is of interest to confront them with some French exchange students' thoughts and astonishment on the same topic when experiencing Swiss-German professional interactions for the first time:

Ici en Suisse, on met l'accent sur l'égalité entre tous ce qui me déstabilise encore profondément. Lors de mon stage, l'enseignante bien plus âgée que moi, m'a proposé de la tutoyer et de l'appeler par son prénom. Cela m'a mis mal à l'aise. Je n'ai pas cessé d'osciller entre des “vous” et des “tu” ne sachant pas trop que faire de cette nouvelle norme sociale. Bien que les autres étudiants parlent de ces normes comme des évidences, mettant en avant les valeurs démocratiques de la société dans laquelle ils vivent, je pense que je ne m'y habituerai pas d'aussitôt.

[Here in Switzerland, people focus on equality between everyone, which deeply destabilizes me. During the practicum, the teacher, who was a lot older than me, suggested that we use the “informal *you*” and that we go by first names. I felt so ill at ease. I couldn't stop swinging between “formal *you*” and “informal *you*”, not knowing what to do with this new social rule. Although students here talk about these rules as if they were obvious, evoking the democratic values of their society, I don't think I will ever get used to it.]

Even when improving French linguistic competences was the students' first goal before integrating a French-speaking professional environment, these linguistic competences came second (if they did not entirely disappear) from their reflective considerations once the experience was over. What indisputably remains at the core of

⁶ Personal translation for this and the following quotations in English from the original French (language register and mistakes are intentionally reproduced).

their experiences are the professional aspects gained along the way (Robin, 2019). The practicum in a French-speaking school provides an overview of alternative ways of dealing with specific professional issues and of reacting to daily professional situations, whether they concern school infrastructure, time-organization, pupils, parents, colleagues, lesson preparations, textbooks or curriculum, as this student explains:

J'ai essayé d'intégrer tous mes savoirs de la PH Berne, j'ai établi des préparations de cours avec beaucoup des changements de travail et des différents sou-sujets pour que ça soit plus intéressant. Mais déjà le premier jour j'ai remarqué qu'il y a beaucoup des différences et qu'il faut que j'adapte tous mes prépas ! Le niveau était moins fort que j'ai pensé et ils n'étaient pas du tout habitués aux travaux de groupes qui avait comme effet qu'ils n'ont pas travaillé et donc rien avancé. En plus je devais m'adapter aussi aux demandes du maître du stage car pour lui il y avait trop des changements pendant une leçon [...] J'ai expliqué mon point de vue et ce que j'ai appris et donc pourquoi moi j'interviens comme ça. Comme ça je devais remettre en cause mes propres attitudes et argumenter.

[I tried to adopt all the knowledge gained at PHBern. I prepared lessons with many different activities and a variety of sub-subjects so that it would be more interesting. But already on the very first day, I noticed that there were a lot of differences and that I had to adapt all my lesson planning! The level was lower and I expected that they weren't used to group work, so they didn't work at all and there was no progress. Also I had to adapt to the teacher's demands because he thought there were too many changes within one lesson [...] I explained my point of view and told him what I had learned and why I intervened like that. This way, I had to challenge my own views and defend them.]

Through her experience, this student realized that what she thought obvious (every lesson should include several changes of activity) was not universal. School practices are cultural practices (Veillette & Gohard-Radenkovic, 2016). These experiences prepared, supervised and reflected, give students the opportunity to reflect on professional matters.

Moreover, they help to mend linguistic insecurity: post-experience students reflect, with bewilderment for some, that they could successfully work and interact over several weeks in a professional French-speaking environment. Linguistic competences have been experienced on a daily basis in an inhibiting way because the focus was on professional training and not on grammatical or classroom language correctness.

Conclusion

An analysis of the project “Mobility didactics” shows that carefully supervised and reflected mobility experiences can potentially help reach multiple goals serving, first of all, the general professional training but also the FFL teacher training through potential reconciliation with French. We would nevertheless like to stress that didactics, whether it be general or language specific, should not be the first concern of PPST training. We argue the opposite: over the process of becoming PPST, the students themselves, being complex and diverse human beings, are at the centre. In the case of teacher training, didactics should be thought of as a flexible instrument dedicated above all to helping future teachers identify their community and position, with a view to developing curricular competences.

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