

*The Place of French in Botswana's Language in Education Policy:  
Contradictions and Paradoxes?*

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**Abstract**

Society prospers on education to shape the individual; formal or informal. In modern times where governments are responsible for the organization of society, education serves as a developmental tool for the citizenry. The choices that a country makes towards developing its nation are very important, Botswana is a case in point with her Vision 2036 which stipulates her aspirations under the pillar of Human and Social Development. As Harworth Robert H. (2012) postulates, Education is political and as such, the decision to introduce a subject in the school system is always a political one guided by socio-economic factors. In Botswana's Education environment a monolithic and monoethnic political perspective has prevailed in the Education system where only two (2) languages: Setswana and English, have been taught as subjects and were equally used as languages of instruction. French disrupted this status quo when it was introduced in public schools in 2000.

Keywords: French in Botswana, Language Policy, Foreign Language Education, Language-in-Education Policy – Didactics of French

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## Introduction - Purpose of the Study

With its introduction in 2000, disrupting therefore the status quo and being a third and foreign language to be taught in schools, French naturally brought in a different dimension to the Education system of Botswana. This would have called for a modification in the policy pertaining to language education as well as in designing instruction and in the implementation of rolling out instruction of this new language. This article therefore seeks to bring to light the paradox emanating from the intent of teaching French in Botswana as an economic and political will and the reality of implementation which must be guided by national policy documents. Through desktop reviews and questionnaires, we investigated whether the requirements for a multi-layered approach in language policy were met. In conclusion, the paper will make suggestions on how to successfully implement an education policy which would be best suited to address the situation.

## Research Question

This research paper comes in the backdrop of low pass rates in French Junior certificate examinations, giving way to:

- Dwindling numbers of students taking French in secondary schools;
- Some school heads decommissioning the teaching and learning of French in their schools;
- Threats to job security for teachers of French in these affected schools.

## Hypothesis

A closer examination of why certain school heads would decommission a subject that has been earmarked for teaching in schools leaves suspicions of an irregular implementation of the pedagogy of the language as well as pointing to a big loophole in policy direction: that is, there is no policy to give direction to the integration of French in Botswana's education system.

- Question: Could this be a deliberate move by the government not to commit?

As postulated by Obene B. Bojosi, Boingotlo W. Kaome and Rodah Sechele-Nthapelelang (2022), it would seem like implementers are left to themselves and endure the most of manoeuvring a space which has little to no support in terms of policy back-up and material support. Implementers can therefore decide to rescind the offering of French in their schools. Teachers of French and students become *sacrificial lambs* in the process. This paper therefore seeks to respond to the question of how the Language in Education Policy of Botswana provides for the teaching of French in Botswana? Why was French introduced in Botswana: on a social, political, and economic level, what is the import of the French language to Botswana?

This study wanted to unravel the impasse that seems to prevail within the teaching of French in Botswana public secondary schools. A qualitative approach seemed the most appropriate since it allowed to carry out an environmental scan of the teaching of French as well as to get first-hand information from the people on the ground being the teachers who are involved in a triad of learning: learners on one side and policy makers on the other.

Data was collected using two tools:

- Open-ended questions in an administered questionnaire. Data was collected from a sample of secondary school teachers.
- Desktop reviews were used to guide understanding and analysis of policy documents.

In interrogating the participants, we sought to know:

- How long they had been teaching French and when their schools introduced French.
- Their opinions on the value and future of French.
- Challenges and successes in policy implementation.
- If in-service training was adequate.
- If there were any mechanisms put in place for support.

This is aimed at linking planning and implementation.

## **Background**

This study is limited to the Botswana context of teaching French and the policy environment that is expected to favour such an endeavour. Botswana has been chosen as the centre of focus primarily because being a practitioner in the field of teaching French as a Foreign Language, one is systematically brought to appreciate the context, its needs and intervention measures to alleviate the situation. The high failure rate in schools especially for the subject French, the decommissioning of French in some schools by school heads, the incessant lack of mutual understanding between policy makers and teachers of French became an eyesore that needed to be investigated. The geo-socio-political and economic context of Botswana is equally worth mentioning in a bid to put this study into perspective. Botswana is an Anglo-Saxon country, situated in Southern Africa boasting a small population of 2,346,179 (Statistics Botswana 2022). The cultural and linguistic diversity of this country puts it at about 28 languages spoken in the country but only two languages being officially recognized (Batibo, 2005): Setswana is used as a national language while English is used as the official language. French has been the only foreign language taught in public schools since 2000.

In Botswana, French is taught as a foreign language both in private and public schools since an undocumented period for the first and the year 2000 for the latter. According to an unpublished report of the Ministry of Basic Education on school performances in the 2019 Junior Certificate Examinations, 39 public junior schools and 7 senior secondary schools teach French currently (Maplanka, 2019). The teaching began in the 1980s in two public schools, which benefitted from exchange programmes with cognate institutions without any policy orientation. According to Obene B. Bojosi, Boingotlo W. Kaome and Rodah Sechele-Nthapelelang, 2022, the serious uptake of French in public schools and the institutionalization of such within the Education Policy of Botswana has been through a number of factors, some emanating from personal experiences by decision makers who saw the need for the country to adopt a political positioning within the world. The global move towards integration of economies has seen the SADC (Southern African Development Community) region as well as the Continent putting in place measures to ensure smooth integration, amongst which was a move to reduce the linguistic and cultural divide within the continent. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education implemented a pilot programme on the teaching of French in 15 secondary schools throughout the country, commencing in 1999. This followed a recommendation made in 1994 through the Revised National Policy on Education, Government Paper No 2 for the introduction of a third language in the school system and this gave way to the roll-out of French teaching and learning in public schools. We can safely say

that the choices made for the pedagogy of the country, programme prioritisation as well as course content and learning outcomes are guided by both the political and economic drivers. Following the success of the first phase of piloting French language in schools, the then Ministry of Education, currently Ministry of Education and Skills Development resolved to roll-out the teaching of French to all public schools in a phased approach depending on the availability of resources and the implementation thereof was left to the discretion of the regions and the schools. Further after rolling out the teaching of French to public schools, the government of Botswana took a step and signed a cooperation agreement with the Government of France for the introduction of French in public schools in 2008, followed by a more comprehensive cooperation agreement in 2015 between the governments of Botswana and France (Sénat & Australe, 2016). Given this background, it is therefore evident that the teaching of French has evolved in a context where it was preceded by structures put in place for English and Setswana. The underlying question to this situation is how prepared was the political atmosphere to accept French teaching into Botswana knowing that a learned language is a vehicle of the linguistic structures as well as its cultural imprints? How prepared was the country to put in the rightful structures for implementation of the teaching of French starting with syllabus design to allow for a smooth planning for teaching and learning of such a language?

### **French Teaching in Public Schools in Botswana**

French was from a long time back initially taught in private schools and mission schools. However, a deliberate roll-out of the teaching of French in public schools follows the following timeline which echoes the timeline established by Kewagamang and Kaome, 2020:

- **1999:** 18 recently graduated BA holders sent to France to be trained as teachers of French in preparation for the introduction of French in government schools as a pilot project.
- **2000:** Introduction of French as a foreign language in 15 Junior secondary schools as a pilot project.
- **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 (Kewagamang and Kaome, 2020).
- **2015:** Renewal of commitments of the Cooperation Agreement between the governments of France and Botswana (Senat & Australe 2016).
- Currently 39 public junior schools and 7 senior secondary schools teach French (Bojosi et al, 2022).

### **Factors Justifying the Introduction of French to Botswana**

Botswana's participation in the global economy would benefit from training her citizenry in foreign language skills and competencies since then the country would be able to export labour, goods, and knowledge. In her national plans and her Vision, on an overarching national prioritisation level, the country had envisioned within the Human and Capital development pillar to broaden and strengthen of our external partnerships as well as actively participate in global governance and international trade. (Vision 2036). This gels well with the commitments that the country has entered amongst which there is the hosting of the SADC Secretariat in Botswana since 2000 which systematically implied the opening of job opportunities as well as investment opportunities associated with the working languages of

SADC. The bilateral agreements between France and Botswana of 2008 and 2015 aiming at promoting the Teaching of French in Botswana, France-Botswana (2008, 2015) further intensified areas of collaboration between the two countries to cover vast areas such as teaching, agriculture, animal and human health and many others. Within the same vein of being a regional, continental, and global player, the country recently ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement in February 2023 which also places the country at a certain level of integration with regional and continental economies.

These developments, though not related to the teaching of French in Botswana, did attune the teaching of French in Botswana to what it has become today because every development of the economy must have its matching value in human and skills development and language is a tool through which humans communicate, regardless of the professional orientation. Based on the above imperatives of the year 2000 and beyond, there is proof that the country saw some value in introducing French in schools based on the above.

### **Discussion: Language Policy**

Language Policy defined:

A language in education policy must be anchored within a country's broader language policy. Language policy has been defined as a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules, and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in societies, groups, or in a system. (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997: xi). Further understood in the current usage as official government decisions regarding the use of language in the public domain, including courts, schools, government offices and health services. The emphasis on government's decision is equally echoed by Djite in the following terms:

"The deliberate choices made by governments or other authorities with regard to the relationship between language and social life" (Djité, 1994: 63).

McCarty (2011), on the other hand defines a language policy as:

a complex sociocultural process [and as] modes of human interaction, negotiation, and production mediated by relations of power. The 'policy' in these processes resides in their language-regulating power; that is, the ways in which they express normative claims about legitimate and illegitimate language forms and uses, thereby governing language statuses and uses. (page 8)

Theorists seem to converge around a similar postulate of language policy as the mechanisms or a decision through which a government uses to regulate how languages interrelate in terms of power relations, development, promotion and resourcing of the concerned languages.

The Botswana language policy has accorded the status of official language to English while Setswana is accorded the status of a national language. Setswana stands out as a national language because its varieties are spoken by 80% of the population. Apart from these two languages, there are 27 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 Botswana until high school.

Given that Botswana is a multilingual country, a move towards including the so-called minority languages is captured in the Revised National Education Policy of 1994 which recommends the introduction of a third language in the educational system. This was done for students whose mother language is not Setswana but what is remarkable is that French was recommended as the third language (Republic of Botswana, 1994). Botswana's policy on education is guided by the Report of the National Commission on Education of 1977, the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) Government Paper No 2 of April 1994, NDP9, Vision 2016 as well as the 2001-2006 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development. Having been adopted from the pre-independence era Botswana's education system came to a more domesticated approach with the setting up of a National Commission on Education of 1977 which was mandated to carry out a review of the education system. This Commission proposed that the starting point in the educational review should be the national principles of democracy, development, unity, and self-reliance. Needless to say, this was an era of nation building and as such, other actors equally participated in shaping the education system in Botswana. There has been numerous of them from state actors to non-state actors with one important stakeholder, the voice of the teachers coming through the Botswana Teachers Union (subsequently referred to as BTU) Policy on Education. According to the BTU Policy on Education "The Revised National Policy on Education Government Paper No 2 of April 1994 has guided the programme activities of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development in terms of curriculum reforms and ongoing improvements since NDP8. The RNPE was intended to cover a timeframe of 25 years given that its recommendations were to be implemented in the short, medium, and long term" (Bojosi et al., Botswana Federation of Trade Unions, 2007, p. 2). Regarding the recommendation of a third language in the school systems, as mentioned earlier, this third language became French at a later stage.

### **Language in Education Policy**

Language in Education policy on the other hand has been defined as "a set of principles agreed on by stakeholders, enabling decision-making about language and literacy issues in the formal education system at all levels: early childhood, primary, secondary, and the teacher education segment of the tertiary level". (Jamaica Ministry Of Education, Youth & Culture Language Education Policy, 2001). Studies on language policy in Africa have concluded that the choice of a medium of instruction in multilingual states in Africa has always been a major component of state language policy and Botswana is no exception. The choices made are often more informed by political, economic, and ideological considerations than being strictly educational ones, and are deeply controversial with issues of feasibility, popular aspiration, cultural identities, globalisation and development featuring prominently in the discussion, though these often pull policy in different directions. (Ferguson 2013,1).

"Even though it is common belief that English is Botswana's official language and Setswana is the national language, such a declaration does not exist in the Botswana Constitution (Anderson and Janson 1997; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2008). Botswana does not have a national language policy, it seems English and Setswana acquired their roles as official and national languages respectively mostly out of practice instead of legislation.

The Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994 is almost 30 years old and was unveiled before French was introduced in Botswana schools, therefore the teaching and learning of French is not covered in the policy. Apart from the bilateral cooperation

agreements (France-Botswana) of 2008 and 2015, no national policy guides the teaching of French in Botswana.

## **Findings**

Having interrogated the context into which French teaching was introduced in Public Schools, we then administered questionnaires and analysed them to gather opinions of teachers and understand them better. The results have been analysed as follows:

### **Experience**

The participants' experience ranges from 5 to 16 years in the teaching of French Foreign language.

### **Introduction of French in the School**

French has been taught in the schools investigated from as early as 2000 (the pilot schools) to 2022 latest.

### **Stakeholder Engagement or Lack Thereof**

Disengagement of learners which translates into lack of interest for the language as well as low completion rates. In their own words, the teachers said:

It is frustrating because learners lack interest in French lessons, lack of parental support for students learning. Also, where I teach learners drop out of school before they complete their term of study or perform badly in their final examinations.

This could be an indication that little to no consultation with parents and communities on the introduction of French in Botswana. It could also mean the parents and students do not know/see the importance of the French language.

### **Incoherent Planning and Implementation of Policies**

While the government currently advocates for the use of mother tongue in lower primary as a medium of instruction, students continue to be taught in the dominant Setswana language. There is therefore a disconnect between what is being preached and the reality on the ground: implementation and commitment of resources. This could make it difficult for the learners to embrace foreign language learning. Teachers' point of view was that:

“Also, there is a language barrier as the majority learners here are from the Basarwa tribe and French is their fourth language so, this makes it difficult for them to comprehend the content.”

### **Low Performance Continues on a Downward Trend**

Under this analysis point, teachers submitted the following:

“Learners' performance has been drastically deteriorating over the years.”  
“I feel frustrated the learners do not perform well.”

## **Teachers Decried Lack of Support**

Lack of support for the teaching of French in Botswana teachers of French from their supervisors (at school level or at national level).

### **School Heads**

“There's very little support from the supervisors in school.”

I feel frustrated at times just to see that even after so many years of teaching of French in schools, the school managers are not conversant with the subject: they do not appreciate it also some teachers still tell learners that it (French) is not important.

### **National Officers**

“Less is done in supporting the teaching and learning of the French language in Botswana and this affects us teachers in a negative way.”

“At national level the ministry of education makes effort by organizing training workshops every now and then.”

“None at school level but at national level there's a WhatsApp group whereby teachers can share knowledge.”

“Not even, there's a lot of negativities surrounding the teaching and learning of French from internal leadership to national.”

At school and regional level there is minimal or no support for the subject but nationally we do get support from in-service principal education officer and from Curriculum development office.

### **Successes**

“In senior schools policy implementation seems to be going well since learners are performing well.”

"As for my School we have always performed very well, being in the top 3 year in year out."

"Change in Junior Certificate syllabus and assessment to actionelle method."

### **Implementation Challenges**

All the participants from junior schools answered that the way the teaching of French is being rolled out is not effective. We have classified their opinions in the following categories:

#### **Inadequate Resources**

It came out clearly in the responses by teachers that the teaching of French in Botswana public schools has not been adequately resourced in terms of capacity building of teachers.



The desired intervention would be that there be In-service training every 2 years. It was observed that French was not accorded the same treatment as other subjects since for other subjects, teachers are sponsored for master's degrees by the government while for French the same is not accorded.

All these point to some inconsistencies between aspirations and realities of implementation and this translates into little value given to French and subsequently lack of motivation.

## **Conclusions**

The aspiration of introducing French to Botswana schools seems to have been founded on a good political, socio-economic, developmental, and cultural rationale. Planning for such an introduction started off reasonably well with training of teachers, signing of memoranda of agreements and piloting the project. However, full implementation was not backed with policy commitments:

Following the success of the first phase of piloting French language in schools, the Ministry adopted for a position to roll-out the teaching of the language to all public schools and the implementation thereof was left to the discretion of the regions and the schools. (Bojosi et al., 2022)

We have observed that even at a general overarching national level, even a language policy is not clearly enunciated and the language in education policy does not exist.

Consequently, resource commitments also lagged depicting contradictions between what the agreements signed entailed and practice. Another aspect that sends a strong message of lack of commitment on the Botswana side is A lack of re-commitment since last cooperation agreement (2016), The question remains: what really is the place of French when in some cases continuity from JC to Senior School is not possible? (39 Junior schools vs 7 senior schools).

## **Recommendations**

It is therefore recommended that the country needs to have clear policies to guide language developments in orthography and teaching: (a national language policy, a language-in-education policy, a foreign language policy). That there must be coherent linkages among policy, agreements signed and practice.

Another recommendation centres around the need to have a comprehensive approach to Education in full knowledge that Primary schools form the basis from which feeds Junior Secondary schools and the same applied for Junior Secondary schools being feeder institutions to one and the other. In that sense there needs to be a smooth transition in syllabi from Junior to Senior school and to tertiary.

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