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Precarious Language Learning and Teaching: The Case of German, French and Mandarin in South African Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and reflect on the position of what are called second additional languages in the language teaching landscape of South African schools. This landscape is crowded, with different South African languages vying for attention. Amidst efforts to increase the number of learners who offer an African language as one of the subjects in the school exit examination, initiatives to introduce languages like Mandarin and Swahili put additional pressure on an already over-burdened system. The paper considers this crowded landscape and the implications for the teaching of German, French and Mandarin at secondary school level. These are only three of at least fifteen languages offered as second additional languages. This paper focuses on these three because they are most widely taught in mainstream schools. The policies and practices as well as the problems with teaching these languages are described, focusing on the types of learner who will choose these languages, the approach to teaching them and possible actions that could ensure the continued offering of second additional languages at primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: *Second-additional Language, Non-official Language, Teacher Education and Training, Curriculum Development*

Introduction and Background

My interest in the teaching of second additional languages or non-official languages as they are called in South Africa, resulted from schools in the town where I live cancelling the teaching of German or, when teachers resigned or retired, struggling to find replacement teachers. In this period the PGCE module that was meant to train French language teachers was discontinued in the Education Faculty. Shortly afterwards the decision was made that a part-time lecturer to train German teachers would only be appointed if there were at least 15 students who applied for this particular module. Since the module normally had between 5 and 7 students, this effectively discontinued the German module as well. I felt concerned that these

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languages that have been part of South African history, would simply disappear if a solution could not be found. In this time, the South African government decided to develop school curricula for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese. Some universities started offering undergraduate modules in this language and teachers were recruited from China to teach at primary and secondary school level. In discussions with the Confucius Institute it seemed to me that South Africans could also make a contribution to the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, because they knew local languages and contexts.

Against this backdrop I will consider the precarious position of teaching and learning these three non-official languages in South Africa. Although I know no Mandarin Chinese, I have had contact with teachers and curriculum developers. I know German and French and can therefore access literature on the teaching of these languages in South Africa, keeping in mind that literature on the topic is scarce and articles on the teaching of Mandarin Chinese have been published only recently.

In a country with eleven official languages (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), with South African Sign Language added recently, it stands to reason that the language teaching landscape is crowded, with competing agendas driving a contested arena which seems to be limited by time on the school timetable and by resources, particularly in the form of teachers. Languages are taught at three different levels in South African schools writing the school-exit examinations that are managed by the national Department of Basic Education (DBE). Each level has a different curriculum:

- for home languages (also called the first language or primary language in the literature);
- for first additional languages (often referred to as second languages); and
- for second additional languages (or foreign languages).

The official languages that need to be taught at home, first and second additional language levels (at least in principle), are (in alphabetical order), Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi (Sesotho sa Leboa), Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. On 2 May 2023 the National Assembly of South Africa unanimously endorsed an amendment to the Constitution to include South African Sign Language as a twelfth official language (Masweneng, 2023). At the moment it is only taught at home language level. The languages offered as second additional (or non-official) languages, are Arabic, French, German, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Latin, Mandarin, Modern Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. It is assumed that these languages are offered mainly as second additional languages, but school-exit examinations are set for German as a home language and for Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu at all three levels.

The curriculum documents are clear in their delineation of the differences among these three levels and their curricula, stating that (*Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement Grades 10-12: English Home Language*¹, 2011, p. 8, referred to as CAPS EHL FET from here onwards):

Home Language is the language first acquired by learners. However, many South African schools do not offer the home languages of some or all of the enrolled learners

¹ Although the reference here is to English, all language curricula contain a section called *Languages in the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement*. However, the reference to English has specific relevance, as will be explained.

but rather have one or two languages offered at Home Language level. As a result, the labels Home Language and First Additional Language refer to the proficiency levels at which the language is offered and not the native (Home) or acquired (as in the additional languages) language.

Although it is not clear to me how the third sentence follows on the second one, as the words 'As a result' indicate, most South African language teachers will understand what is meant here. The reason why African languages are not offered widely as home languages, is because schools still reflect the country's apartheid past, with most schools offering Afrikaans and English as home and/ or first additional language.

The reason for the above quote from the English curriculum, is because all the other curricula were 'versioned off' the English curriculum. I have discussed the problem with this modus operandi elsewhere (see Van der Walt 2010), but it stands to reason that languages from different language 'families' may not benefit from being poured into an English mold. In fact, even languages that are more closely related to English (like Afrikaans, German and French) present difficulties when taught according to the dictates of the English curriculum.

Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour (2019, p. 297) point out that African languages prior to 1996 were only offered up to Grade 10, which meant that they were not chosen as subjects for the school-exit examination, called the National Senior Certificate. Much value is attached to this certificate, mainly by future employers and the further and higher education sector. For that reason even private schools register with the national DBE to make sure that they teach to this examination. In practical terms a subject that is not offered for the school exit examination is unlikely to be chosen in lower grades. This state of affairs had an impact not only on learner choices, but also on higher education students who might want to become teachers of African languages, but who would avoid them as areas of specialisation. Their chances of employment would be better with English or subjects like Mathematics and Accounting, for example. There is still a shortage of teachers of African languages, specifically at secondary school level. Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour (2019, p. 305) describe the complex and interwoven set of considerations that limit the teaching and learning of African languages, including "language and power, the perceived status of the African language in relation to English, language teaching methodologies and course content". When one takes into account that schools will probably choose one regional African language to include in its repertoire of subjects, it stands to reason that speakers of African languages outside the region will not be studying their home language but might study another African language at home language *level*.

As far as English language teaching is concerned, the curricula themselves reflect the different levels by emphasizing aspects that may require higher levels of language sophistication for the home language curriculum. Essentially the same content is covered in the home and first additional language curriculum, but with emphasis on literature study and creative writing in the home language curriculum and a sharper focus on grammar and reading comprehension in the first additional language curriculum, particularly since English is used as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in 91% of schools from Grade 4 onwards (Spaull and Pretorius, 2019). Reading and understanding non-fiction and academic texts would therefore seem more important than the study of literature. This pattern is followed in the other language curricula.

It is against this background that the teaching and learning of second additional, or non-official languages in South Africa need to be considered. It is only when we heed Larsen-Freeman’s (2018, p. 55) call to consider local context from a global perspective while being mindful of social injustices that have affected and are affecting African languages in particular, that we can understand and evaluate the position of languages like German, French and Mandarin.

Second Additional Languages and their Place in the Language Teaching Landscape

Second additional languages are typified as languages that learners encounter for the first time at school (*Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement Grades 10-12: Mandarin Second Additional Language* 2014, p. 11, referred to as CAPS MSAL FET from here onwards),

The focus upon exposure to Second Additional Language is on developing learners’ ability to understand and speak the language – basic interpersonal communication skills.

As can be seen from the non-official list given above, the assumption is that learners would choose a language from this list because they are interested in it. In some cases it could also be that parents or grandparents still use these languages in the home and that learners have receptive ability in them. Additionally, anecdotal information points to learners taking a second additional language as an extra subject, particularly if they have some knowledge of this language, to increase their chances of getting good results in the school-exit examination. For somebody with receptive competence in a language, the second additional language curriculum may indeed prove to be easy.

It is at this point that the situation with second additional languages becomes interesting. When one looks for curricula for specific languages on the national education department’s website, the results are patchy. The curricula for all school subjects have been operationalized in what are called ‘CAPS documents’ – CAPS is short for Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. The following non-official languages can be found on the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) website:

Table 1
Presence of Curriculum Documents on DBE Website

Language	Intermediate (Grades 4 – 6)	Phase 9	Senior Phase (Grades 7 – 9)	Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10 – 12)
French	✓		✓	✓
German	✓		✓	
Mandarin	✓		✓	✓
Serbian	✓		✓	

Since all these subjects are offered as school-exit subjects, the question is where the curriculum documents for German and Serbian can be found? The answer lies in three decisions that affected the teaching of non-official languages in a significant way.

The first decision relates to the Department of Basic Education's concern that learners were not developing enough proficiency in official African languages. In 2013 a draft policy called *The Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) in South African Schools* was published for public comment. In terms of this policy, selected schools would start in the Foundation Phase with a home language and two additional languages, one of which needs to be an African language. The two additional languages would continue up to Grade 12, increasing instructional time from 27.5 to 32.5 hours per week. In a meeting of the Department of Basic Education with the Minister of Education, the Director General reported on 27 June 2017 that "27% of public schools nationally are implementing the Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) in Grades 1 and 2 in 2017 despite challenges, which include an inadequate number of willing and competent teachers as well as negative attitudes and misconceptions about African languages being inferior in the global scheme" (<https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/24712/>). At that stage the Department was aiming to have the programme implemented across all school levels by 2029. Different provinces developed different programmes to start implementation in 2017, using the language(s) of the region as one of the additional languages. For example, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) asked for schools to volunteer participation in the project, noting that participating schools should "continue to offer isiXhosa SAL in Grade 1 after 2017 and incrementally introduce the subject each year to the next grade and be willing to extend the Grade 1 timetable by 30 minutes per day" (WCED Minute, 2017).

The second decision, which seems an inevitable consequence of the first, was that the national department decided that no time will be scheduled for non-official languages in the official timetable. The statement can be found in all the CAPS documents for non-official languages: "Schools offering an optional language or at least Second Additional Language level may do so if they can make an arrangement for the allocation of additional time to the allocated 27.5 hours" (CAPS Senior Phase Mandarin 2014, p. 7). This effectively removed these subjects from the school timetable and to a certain extent, from learners' and teachers' awareness. It also placed the responsibility for negotiating teaching time with learners and their parents squarely on the relevant teacher's shoulders. In one particular school the only time the teacher and her small class of 6 learners could agree on for 2022 and 2023, was after 17h00 on two days of the week. However, there are schools that disregarded this instruction and they still scheduled time on the official timetable.

The third decision was that the teaching and assessment of non-official languages would be the responsibility of the so-called Independent Examination Board (IEB). This is an institution that describes itself as "an independent assessment body offering a range of certified assessments, benchmarked assessments and training" (at <https://www.ieb.co.za/>). They link the work of the Board to accreditation by Umalusi, a quality assurance organisation that has been tasked by the government to investigate and maintain the standard of the matric examination. In other words, although the IEB offer additional material and skills to mainly elite schools, the examinations need to be approved and accredited by the national DBE. This decision was not a direct result of the IIAL initiative. The fact that IEB schools include SALs as part of their offering, says more about the type of school than any direct actions by the DBE to transfer responsibility for assessing these languages to the IEB. In other words, it seems as if the IEB took on this responsibility over time and the DBE allowed the process to continue.

When Larsen-Freeman (2018, p. 60) calls for a focus on context, the relevance to the South African context is crystal clear: “Language learning does not occur in an ideological vacuum but rather is affected in a serious way by prevailing beliefs held by others, including the general public”. It seems self-evident that the beliefs driving the DBE’s decisions regarding non-official languages have serious consequences for these languages. When the IIAL was introduced in 2013, the IEB made a submission to the DBE, warning that the policy has the potential to be detrimental to the teaching of non-official languages. This has indeed happened. As Ferreira-Meyers and Horne (2017, p. 26) note, “the receding status of SAL [second additional language], at the crossroads between local language reform and the hegemony of English (perceived as the language of social ascension, distinction and employability both locally and internationally), seems inevitable”. The way in which this ‘inevitability’ is playing out, will be discussed next.

Particular Problems with the Teaching of German, French and Mandarin

Who Learns Non-official Languages?

Academics who write on the teaching of German and French at secondary schools agree that it is an elite phenomenon. Riedner (2020, p. 45) points out that German was taught during the Apartheidsera in white, Afrikaans-speaking schools.² French has been taught mostly at English-speaking schools. What is true for both languages is that “most SAL are offered on the privileged margins of South African schools, in privately run or former Model C schools³” (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017, p. 25).

In the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) minute referred to above, the Department states that it cannot provide additional funding to appoint teachers for African languages (WCED Minute, 2017), depending on schools to (possibly) draw on their existing resources to teach the additional language. It stands to reason that if provincial departments of education struggle to fund the IIAL, they would certainly not support the appointment of teachers for German, French or any other non-official language. The fact that these languages are therefore taught in elite environments, where teachers can be appointed (part-time) based on parents’ contribution to school fees, is a logical consequence. This is probably why Mbohwa-Pagels and Rode (2014, p. 13) refer to non-official languages as “niche languages that can make a positive contribution to the educational programme *in particular contexts*” (my translation, my emphasis).

What does this tell us about the learners? One could draw the conclusion (based on the school contexts) that they come from privileged households, because their parents can afford the school fees. Their prospects are bright – with reference to the *particular contexts* mentioned above. However, it is also the case that such schools often offer bursaries to high-performing learners whose parents may not be able to afford elite schooling. If learners need to find time outside of the school timetable to attend their classes, they, or possibly their parents, must be motivated, which could mean that they have additional support at home. It is possible that these languages may be heritage languages, with learners’ parents or grandparents using the language. With regard to French, Ferreira-Meyers and Horne (2017, p. 27) claim that,

² “Deutsch wurde in der Apartheidzeit vor allem an weißen, afrikaanssprachigen Schulen gelernt.”

³ Model C schools were partly funded by the state, retaining some characteristics of private schools.

“[i]ndeed, for many learners, the language represents a prestigious form of linguistic and cultural capital that carries high symbolic and instrumental value”. In the midst of these suppositions, it is certainly true that the classes from Grade 10 onwards are small, with much interaction between teacher and learners.

Mbohwa-Pagels and Rode (2014, p. 15) found in their survey of South African schools that offer German as a foreign language, that most of these schools are in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal. In my own experience, schools where principals keep non-official languages on the regular timetable, it is possible for learners to choose German in Grade 8 and continue without interruption to the higher grades. In schools where the DBE’s instruction to keep non-official languages off the regular timetable is adhered to, these languages may be offered in various combinations with other electives: for example German will be offered in the first half of the Grade 8 year and the second half of the Grade 9 year, alternated with for example, Mandarin Chinese (i.e. taught in the second half of Grade 8 and first half of Grade 9). If learners choose German as one of their matric subjects in Grade 10, this will mean that the teacher effectively starts from scratch. However, the learners in both these scenarios will write the same school-exit examination. It seems safe to say that learners who follow classes after school have a difficult task, probably coming to class when they’ve finished their sport or cultural activities. When one takes into account that “[l]anguage evolves and changes in the dynamics of language use between and among individuals” (Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 591), it stands to reason that the conditions for learning non-official languages at South African schools that adhere to the DBE instructions, are not ideal.

Teacher Certification and Professional Development

Teacher education and training is the responsibility of universities. Two pre-service qualifications are offered: a bachelor’s in education (B Ed) and a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE). The most recent policy documents that govern pre-service education and training of teachers dictate that there should be separate programmes for foundation phase teachers (Grades R – 3), intermediate phase teachers (Grades 4 – 6) and senior phase teachers (Grades 7 – 9) (Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (hereafter MRTEQ 2015). These grades constitute the nine years of compulsory education. To the best of my knowledge no South African university trains primary school teachers to teach non-official languages despite the fact that most have CAPS documents from the intermediate phase level onwards. Training teachers for non-official languages is generally more the preserve of PGCE teacher trainees who majored in these languages at undergraduate level.

However, PGCE teacher training for non-official languages encounters two significant barriers. Firstly, there seems to be competition between academics who train teachers and those who want their senior students to stay on for postgraduate studies in these languages. The perception seems to be that once students train as teachers, they would not be interested in further studies. Secondly, and this is perhaps the more pressing issue, is that the number of learners at school level has been shrinking to such an extent that university departments/sections where these languages have been taught could not remain functional anymore. As Riedner notes (2020, p. 45) with regard to German, “[b]etween 1982 and 2008 the number of

learners studying German declined by 80%. This means that German is taught at only 8 of 26 universities". (My translation.)⁴

Despite its presence in Africa, French is in the same position as German when it comes to the number of learners at secondary school level. Ferreira-Meyers and Horne (2017, p. 27) claim that

French has largely remained a "luxury product" by default. Universities and Alliances Françaises offer beginner's courses to adult students and professionals to make up for this gap, but these are rarely sustainable in the long term.

In contrast, there is growing interest in Mandarin at both secondary school and university levels. Chutel (2019) claims in an online publication that there were 53 schools teaching Mandarin Chinese in South Africa at that stage. On average 60 candidates have written the school-exit examinations since 2020 (S. Ren, personal communication, July 7, 2023). It is currently taught at four universities where the student population is diverse, ranging from those who have no knowledge of the language to those who took the subject at school. In this regard it is no different from French and German. Everson (2005, p. 55) note that the composition of her first-year class would include 22% with no knowledge of French, 78% who studied French at school and 9% who are home language speakers of French. Although the percentages would differ for German and Mandarin Chinese, classes will include students from each of these groups.

The composition of first-year university classes often means that universities would develop two pathways: one for students who studied the languages at school level and the other for those who may be attracted by their "exoticism", as it is called by Ferreira-Meyers and Horne (2017, p. 23). If these language departments/centres can be seen as responsible for future language teachers, then they have to ensure that the students who studied such languages at school get the opportunity to become highly proficient before they can be accepted for teacher education programmes.

Teacher education and training is a problem in itself, mainly because the number of students for each language is small. Most universities require a minimum number of students to offer a module. In this regard teacher educators for these languages are in the same position as the teachers. It is too expensive for a department or section to appoint a lecturer permanently for just one module, in only one programme. For example, most lecturers of English or isiXhosa would teach in the PGCE and B Ed programmes. In practice, non-official languages are offered only at secondary school level, which means the lecturers would only teach in the PGCE programme, which is not enough to merit a permanent appointment. As a result the number of universities that are training teachers for non-official languages has declined in the past few years. Teachers are appointed based on the fact that they are home language speakers of these languages, even when they have not been trained as teachers, or they are home language speakers of German or French, who trained as Afrikaans or English language teachers, and

⁴ "An den Schulen ist die Zahl der Deutschlernenden zwischen 1982 und 2008 um ca. 80% zurückgegangen. So kann Deutsch heute nur noch an acht von 26 Universitäten in Südafrika belegt werden."

who are then tasked with teaching German too. Although one could argue that teaching a language depends on certain universal principles, it must be said that in the South African context teaching English and Afrikaans to home and second language speakers and being able to draw on a well-developed curriculum and a range of materials, is very different from teaching non-official languages based on the IEB assessment system and limited, expensive teaching materials.

In the case of Mandarin Chinese, teachers have been recruited from China, which may not always be a good fit for South African learners, unless they (the teachers) can also use English. In her study of Mandarin teaching at a particular school in Pretoria (Gauteng province), Nel (2016, p. 54) notes that “The Chinese Culture and International Education Exchange Centre (CCIEEC) became involved, provided and paid for the Chinese teacher”. Of course it would be preferable if South Africans could be trained, and it seems as if the Confucius Institutes are determined to get involved in such enterprises.

There is one particular advantage that novice teachers of German, French and Mandarin Chinese have and that is the involvement of language associations: The Goethe Institute for German, the Alliance Française for French and the Confucius Institute for Mandarin Chinese. These associations make learning materials and support in the form of workshops available to all teachers. In addition, teachers often form WhatsApp groups or professional associations (like the *Deutschlehrerverband im Südlichen Afrika*) to continue their professional development.

It does not take much to imagine the workload for teachers who need to schedule time after school hours. The point that Wittman and Olivier make regarding the teaching of German, is true of all teachers of non-official languages (2019, p. 129):

In practice, this translates to teachers having to offer SALs outside of regular school hours, either early in the morning or in the afternoon, while having to teach other subjects during regular school hours. This puts German SAL teachers under great time constraints, which have the potential to be a major obstacle to these teachers’ professional development.

Other models that schools use, is to employ teachers part time, in which case they can teach at more than one school.

How are Non-official Languages Taught and Learnt?

It is probably safe to say that the Communicative Approach is the dominant paradigm for language teaching currently. What makes the teaching and learning of non-official languages so precarious, is not only the education policy implications, but also the variability of a potential learner corps. In the case of German, French and Mandarin Chinese, why are learners enrolling for these languages? What use might they see for knowing them?

It is possible to see from the school-exit examination papers how the examiners think about the learners writing these papers. In formal terms, the examination for German, French and Mandarin Chinese follow a similar format. There are two papers for each language. Paper 1 assesses reading comprehension, visual literacy and questions on literature. Paper 2 focuses mainly on extended writing, which expects of learners to write descriptive or narrative texts,

transactional texts and a section where learners are expected to manipulate a text in a variety of ways. Some elements of grammar seem to be assessed in this last section, specifically in the German paper.

Riedner (2020, p. 48) points to the situation where South African learners of German are confronted by a European context (represented by the textbooks and other learning materials) which seem to be at odds with the Communicative Approach and its requirement for *authentic* communication. Indeed, when one looks at the prescribed oral texts that are made available for teachers, one finds topics that are of general interest (e.g. planting trees, a female champion chess player) but their context is Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Of course, this will probably be interesting to learners and will teach them something about the countries and cultures that use German and varieties of German, but there may not be much in terms of authentic communication or genuine interest.

The problem is more acute when one looks at the school-exit examination papers⁵, where there may be contextual references that rely on a familiarity with German and European contexts that South African children probably do not have. In the November 2022 German Paper 1 there is a text on the problems of refugees in Germany. Although South Africa has refugees too, the topic of integration is a very German one. The second text deals with popular German crime series, the so-called *Krimis*. Again, the orientation is towards Germany. One of the writing tasks asks learners to imagine that a particular text was written for the “Bordmagazin *Wings*”. This question assumes that learners know what a *Bordmagazin* is. Except for the fact that this examination was set when international flights had still not been re-instated after the COVID-19 pandemic, South African learners would not be ‘frequent flyers’!

In her discussion of French teaching at university level in South Africa, Everson (2005, p. 55) includes teaching practices at secondary school level by discussing the progress made in the teaching of French as a foreign language through the involvement of experts in that area. With reference to teaching materials, she claims that “the approach to French language teaching is more communicative than in the past”. In terms of authentic communication, Everson (2005, p. 56) declares that,

[there is] greater awareness of the need for their teaching methods to reflect language as a tool for communication; [...] authentic documents such as transport tickets, travel timetables, advertisements and may be accompanied by other learning supports such as sound bytes and film clips.

Indeed, the texts in the French Paper 1 seem more general; a discussion of how hand gestures may be innocent in some cultures and offensive in others; the phenomenon of memes in popular culture and how Tik Tok was used to save somebody’s life. In the second section of the paper, where visual literacy is assessed, all the images are linked to French contexts but, as was the case with the German paper, their themes can be seen as universal: homelessness, public service jobs and public indecency.

⁵ Papers are all available from the Independent Examination Board website at [IEB - Independent Examinations Board](#), where anybody can log in as a guest.

The Mandarin Chinese papers are interesting in that they are presented in ‘traditional’ and ‘simplified’ versions. The instruction on the cover is either: *Answer ALL questions in traditional Chinese characters* or *Answer ALL questions in simplified Chinese characters*. According to the subject guidelines, it is up to learners to decide whether they want to answer in traditional or simplified Chinese characters. The subject guidelines justify this practice by claiming that it is international assessment practice for Mandarin, adding that both traditional and simplified versions will include Pinyin. In a discussion with the current examiner for Chinese as a second additional language, he revealed that the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘simplified’ are translations from Chinese government documents and can be seen as similar to a distinction between UK and USA English (S. Ren, personal communication July 7, 2023). In the example below it is possible to see what this looks like in the paper, with Pinyin presented first.

Figure 1

Extract from 2022 Paper 1 Mandarin Second Additional Language: Paper 1 Traditional

NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE: MANDARIN SECOND ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE: PAPER I – TRADITIONAL Page 2 of 17

SECTION A READING FOR MEANING: UNSEEN TEXTS

Yuèdú yī
閱讀 一

Wǒ shì Wén Yuèměi, jīnnián shí sì suì. Wǒ de àihào shì kànshū hé kàn diànshì.
我是文月美，今年十四歲。我的愛好是看書和看電視。

Wǒ shénme shū dōu xǐhuan kàn. Xīn shū, lǎo shū, Yīngwén shū hé Zhōngwén shū,
我什麼書都喜歡看。新書、老書、英文書和中文書，

In her article on the teaching of Mandarin at a primary school in Pretoria, Nel (2016) describes the lessons presented by a teacher recruited from China. Much of the activities in class seem to centre on writing either in Pinyin or Chinese characters and, according to Nel (2016, p. 49) this is where language learning progressed well. In her thesis on the introduction of the Mandarin Chinese curriculum in South Africa, De Man (2017) criticizes the way in which the curriculum copied other non-official language curricula, pointing to the way in which writing is emphasized in the teaching of Mandarin to a far greater extent than alphabetical languages. It seems a good point to make, since German and French use the same writing system as all the other South African languages. Teaching another script should necessitate another approach to the teaching of Mandarin. De Man (2017, p. 32) argues that more time is needed for Mandarin Chinese than German and French, for example, to allow for the extra effort required by another script⁶.

All three languages include literature in the curriculum. This, again, is a contentious issue. Everson (2005) and Riedner (2020) refer to the problematic issue of choosing literature that would serve learners’ needs, both in terms of language acquisition and familiarisation with

⁶ This recommendation would also apply to other non-official languages like Arabic, of course.

French (Everson, 2005) and German (Riedner, 2020) thought and culture. Language teachers may agree with Everson (2005, p. 57) that “the most compelling of all arguments in favour of teaching literature is the polysemy of all literary texts”, but the next question then is, which texts? French has a rich tradition of literature written in and about Africa, and Everson (2005, p. 58) suggests contemporary Moroccan women’s fiction as one possibility. For German and Mandarin Chinese, the problem may be bigger. In fact, the question could be, why teach literature (in the form of poetry and novels) at all, when one takes the limited amount of time that is available for language teaching and learning into account.

The problem, as Riedner (2020), Von Maltzan (2018) and Everson (2005) argue, ties in with attempts to embed the curriculum in a South African context. Von Maltzan (2018, p. 109) in particular warns that simply focusing on language acquisition, presumably to avoid the teaching of literature, would not serve any language well. She points to the relative ease with which German literature that is embedded in Africa can be included in the language classroom. The same is true for French, as Everson (2005) shows.

However, how would the current learner corps react to such literature? If their presence at élite, urban schools signifies a particular orientation, probably towards Europe, and their reasons for studying these languages are as complex as has been indicated earlier, it would probably be wise to include a mixture of African and European literature. The question, as Riedner (2020, p. 48) points out, is how learners position themselves as opposed to how they are positioned on the basis of the European Framework of Reference, specifically against the background of the requirement for authentic communication as required by the Communicative Approach.

“Psychological authenticity”, as Larsen-Freeman (2013, p. 120) calls it, needs to be involved so that learners are enabled to transfer knowledge from more formal instruction to a variety of real-life communication settings. It is interesting that she mentions “turning the classroom into a market”, since this is a typical language classroom activity that appears in German and French materials. However, for South African students the concept of a market is very different from the typical European street market, which may again confound the issue of authenticity.

To answer the question in the heading of this section is difficult. There seems to be a mixture of language teaching traditions with attempts to include the Communicative Approach. The IBE assessment guidelines for German includes a 9-page ‘overview’ section on grammar for Grade 12 teachers. In the French document there is a 1-page summary and there is no section on grammar in the guidelines for Mandarin Chinese. The difference in focus can be seen in the Grade 12 final examination papers too. In the German Paper 2 the final section includes discrete-point grammar questions (using grammatical terms) to the value of 40 marks (out of a possible 100). In the French paper the same section includes one piece of diary writing which requires rewriting in the past tense and a second which requires constructing a coherent passage from notes. The Mandarin paper requires rewriting continuous text as a dialogue (requiring correct language) and then rewriting a dialogue as a letter. Clearly the languages themselves present different challenges that need to be treated differently in the available curriculum documents.

The different languages require careful consideration in terms of what learners need communicatively, culturally and linguistically. The concept of a “porous classroom” (Larsen-

Freeman 2018, p. 65) seems a possible answer to the complexity presented by the interplay of curriculum, learners, teachers, parents and communities. The existence of non-official language speakers outside the classroom must surely offer many opportunities for authentic communicative interaction, not to mention printed materials for classroom use.

The national DBE follows an approach that is diametrically opposite to the idea of a porous classroom, instead treating the non-official languages as similar by imposing an English-based curriculum on all of them. In turn, the IBE imposes an assessment format that is similar across the different languages. Clearly a more nuanced approach is needed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As pointed out at the start of this paper, the precarious situation in which non-official languages find themselves is not conducive to quality teaching and learning. In fact, one could say that the problems with timetabling and teacher provision form a barrier to quality language learning experiences. Teachers and learners are never sure whether the language courses will be continued. Such insecurity will not inspire learners to sign up for these courses and more importantly, teachers are wary of committing to initiatives that may not have a good chance of surviving the academic year. For example, one teacher wants to start a film club in an effort to win over younger learners. However, it makes little sense to recruit learners for Grade 10 if there are rumours of the current Grade 11 class being the last to move on to the school exit examination.

My interest in South African non-official languages stems from my concern that they are not managed in a way that does justice to the languages, the learners or their teachers. I would extend Von Maltzan's (2009, p. 213) call to German teachers and say that active engagement by the custodians of all the non-official languages can counter the inward-looking orientation of the DBE. The government language curricula (where they exist) follow a pattern that is not fit for purpose. There does not seem to be clarity about the type of learner who follows these courses or of their needs.

As a teacher educator, the training of teachers is paramount for me, but there is resistance from language departments as well as teacher training units, mainly because of financial restrictions. Although the teachers for the separate language groups can access support from the various institutes (Goethe, Alliance Française and Confucius) and from teacher associations, there seems to be a need for a *combined* effort to liaise with the various provincial education departments and through them with the DBE.

At a subject meeting of the Western Cape Education Department, the Deputy Chief Education Specialist informed the meeting that the Language Unit of the DBE is developing a curriculum to introduce KiSwahili in the intermediate phase (Grades 4 – 6). It is also collaborating with the Pan-South African Language Board to develop curricula for Khoisan and Nama. (Presentation available upon request.) It is clear that even more languages are being loaded on to an unsteady boat that does not seem to have much direction.

The training of teachers requires innovative solutions. As a pilot, I developed a module in Foreign Language Teaching which focuses on French, German and Mandarin. Since 2022 students who qualify for these three languages study and discuss the various aspects of foreign language teaching, using the DBE curricula (where available) and the IEB assessment guidelines. These classes are conducted in English. Since I do not know all the languages, I

collaborate with local schools where the languages are taught so that student teachers spend at least two hours every second week with practising teachers. They observe their classes, discuss aspects of teaching a particular language and get included in the teacher support groups. The project is ongoing, and in 2024 it will be decided whether the module will continue.

Learning a new language is exciting and difficult. It requires effort and a steady hand from the teacher. Larsen-Freeman (2013, p. 122) notes that language learning is as much about the product as it is about the process:

Thus, a unified view of context and learner lies in the recognition that giving learners an opportunity to do something a little bit different each time they engage in a particular activity is good training not only for perceiving difference, but also for being able to make the adaptations they need when faced with a different context or task.

A stable, predictable environment in the form of a regular timetable, a permanent teacher and a language-appropriate curriculum are needed to structure such opportunities. Teetering on the brink of maybe – maybe not is not conducive to a vibrant, outward-looking language teaching and learning landscape.

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