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## **Enseignement du français langue étrangère en contexte universitaire : divergences entre L1 et L2 – réflexion et méthodes**

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# “Ask a North Korean: do you learn foreign languages?” [1] Learning FLE for (not) using it?

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## Résumé

Dernier pays totalement fermé, sous un régime totalitaire depuis plus de 70 ans, il n'est pas exagéré de s'interroger sur la place de l'enseignement/apprentissage des langues étrangères en République Populaire Démocratique de Corée (RPDC). Or, les Nord-Coréens apprennent effectivement des langues étrangères et de manière plutôt efficace en dépit de méthodes d'apprentissages essentiellement basées sur la mémorisation et la répétition. Le psittacisme, largement utilisé dans le pays à des fins de propagande, semble fonctionner également pour l'enseignement des langues étrangères ce qui semble étonnant et ce, à plus d'un titre puisque les Nord-Coréens n'ont pas accès à l'Internet mondial, ne voyagent pratiquement pas hors de leur pays et n'ont pas de contacts avec des étrangers. Ceux qui interagissent avec les rares visiteurs le font dans des situations très précises (interprètes, serveuses de restaurant) et constituent une minorité de citoyens, de confiance et sous surveillance étroite. Mais c'est là que cet apprentissage des langues systématique et mécanique rencontre ses limites : car s'il fonctionne dans un contexte particulier, comment peut-il s'adapter à des situations ou des contextes inattendus ? Quelle est la capacité des apprenants à transférer leurs compétences ou à s'adapter à des situations non préparées voire à communiquer dans un contexte étranger ?

**Mots-clés :** motivations, objectifs d'enseignement, contexte, approche actionnelle.

## Abstract

Do North Korean learn foreign languages? It is indeed a legitimate question that foreigners who have heard about the DPRK (*Democratic Popular Republic of Korea*) may ask, concerning the last country of its kind, hermetically closed and under a totalitarian regime for the last 70 years. Actually, as unlikely as it may seem, North Koreans do learn foreign languages. What is even more surprising is that students learn them in rather an efficient manner in spite of methods essentially based on rote-learning and repetition. The psittacism massively used in the country for propaganda purposes also works when applied to foreign languages, which may be surprising given that most North Koreans do not have access to the world wide web, don't travel abroad and are forbidden to meet or talk to foreigners. It is where this type of learning finds its limits: it works in a specific situation for a specific use within a well-defined context; what would become of these students abroad or in a non-rehearsed situation? What are their abilities to transfer their knowledge in an alien context?

**Keywords:** learning motivations, teaching objectives, context, task-oriented approach.

## Introduction

The last country of its kind, the *Democratic Popular Republic of Korea* has been hermetically closed under a totalitarian regime for the last 70 years. In such a context, why learn foreign languages? Actually, as unlikely as it may seem, North Koreans do learn foreign languages and until 2011, it was even mandatory from secondary school onwards but since Kim Jong-un's accession to power, children start in primary school (*Ibid.*). If all children have to learn a foreign language in primary school, it is only the children from privileged families, a notion defined according to the *Song Bun* caste system (Kim, 2015), who will study them at university level. What is even more surprising is that students learn them in rather an efficient manner in spite of methods essentially based on rote-learning and repetition. Indeed, psittacism massively used in the country for propaganda purposes also works (to some extent) when applied to foreign languages which may be surprising given that most North Koreans don't enjoy free access to the world wide web, don't travel abroad and are forbidden to meet or talk to foreigners. It is where this type of learning finds its limits: it works in a specific situation for a specific use within a well-defined context; what would become of these students abroad or in a non-rehearsed situation? What are their abilities to transfer their knowledge in an alien context? This reveals the gap between the students' motivations and their need to use and practice (or not) their linguistic knowledge.

If the learning methods work, they do so in a domestic or very limited context. Students of foreign languages either become teachers, tourist guides or diplomats. Those from the "reliable families" (as defined by the *Song Bun* caste system) might eventually use their linguistic knowledge in business mainly with China at the moment. These limited applications explain the use of rote-learning methods. But North Koreans do know that there is room for improvement as Kim Jong-un's commands to get rid of them (Kim, 2012) testify. That is also the reason why they accepted the programme launched by the *British Council* in 2000 which trained students and teachers for over 17 years throughout the country. But declarations of principles are not enough to change a system. For that, two issues have to be dealt with: that of the motivations of the students and that of the objectives of the teachers. This is what this article is trying to investigate.

French as a foreign language at university level has to address those two challenges: identifying the real motivations of its students to learn French in order to set relevant teaching objectives. This will answer their needs but also contribute to maintain the status of French as a *central language* (Calvet, 1999) and eventually increase its appeal worldwide. The development of the various declinations of French as a Foreign Language such as "French for Specific Purposes" or "French for Academic Purposes" demonstrate the necessity to remodel the learning contents in order to offer to foreign students real possibilities to use the language in professional or academic contexts. Teachers of French as a Foreign Language must show that the language taught is useful and even necessary to make a successful entry into the international labour market or to study in francophone universities. This approach requires that teachers must first

identify the needs of their students in order to be able to build relevant curriculum and authentic learning situations. Students indeed are no longer only learners but users.

With the perspective known as "task-oriented approach" the necessity to communicate as well as the reasons for communicating is being taken into account. It adds to the communicative approach a new dimension that allows teachers to see students as "social agents, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances » (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001). Communication, indeed, is not limited to speech acts and learning French as a Foreign Language to linguistic objectives.

### **1. Learning foreign languages in DPRK**

Foreign languages learning is done according to traditional learning methods based on memorization and repetition. This psittacism is used in every discipline and is also at the basis of the propaganda mechanisms that allow the regime to convey forcefully its political orientations and slogans. Such methods work perfectly for these ideological purposes and to some extents, it also works for foreign languages. Some North Koreans do indeed master English or even French or German. But on a closer scrutiny, it appears that their proficiency is limited to very specific situations (thus limited lexicon and phrases). As mentioned in our introduction, everyone has to study a foreign language throughout their school years but only students from the top of the social hierarchy will have access to deeper learning prior to entering university. These students usually know that they will be able to apply this knowledge after they graduate. Other students are obviously less motivated as they know that their opportunities to deploy language skills will be limited. Indeed, unless they become diplomats or businessmen, North Koreans won't have chances to use foreign languages (Kim, 2015) ; in these cases, most of them will usually have a repetitive job which requires the display of well-rehearsed attitudes and speech. This domestic use of language skills hinders any transfer of competencies and thus one can doubt of their ability to face unexpected situations or function abroad. However, in a 2012 letter addressed to *Mangyondae Revolutionary School* and *Kang Pan Sol Revolutionary School*, Kim Jong-un himself highlighted the need for students to become versatile and proficient in foreign languages, and urged the schools to "do away with dictation, rote-learning and other crammy methods" (Kim, 2012). In spite of the contradictions of the regime procedures to educate its people - Kim Jong-un's speech of the first of January has to be learned by heart by all able adults - this statement, is significant. The programme launched by the *British Council* in 2000 – and which ran until 2017- shows a certain awareness among North Koreans of their deficiencies in language skills and a desire to improve both students and teachers' abilities. The core of the program was indeed to prioritize the training of North Korean instructors on best practices and methodology. Over the years, the *British Council* and DPRK had managed to negotiate a balance between direct English language teaching and teacher training.



## 2. New methods implications

What is true for Kim Jong-un is true everywhere else; changing teaching methods requires more than slogans and general commands. Acknowledging the necessity to improve methodology is a first step but it is a long and complex process that needs not only global policies but also a change in teacher mindsets. This implies to put students at the centre of the learning process and empower them; they should become actors as they will be the users of their acquired language knowledge. Therefore, teaching objectives have to stem from student needs in order to meet their expectations. However, too often, teaching objectives are set in advance : teachers who prepare their curriculum and lesson plans with dedication and care usually do so according to objectives they have identified ; this may be expressed in terms of linguistic contents or communicative situations. And this does produce legitimate teaching material.

## 3. The case of French

What remains to be discussed is the status of French and more particularly of French as a Foreign Language today: why do students wish/need to study it? The era of French as a “romantic” language or as the language of diplomacy has long gone. Although French is still spoken on various continents, it is no longer and will never again be seen as an international language whose knowledge is necessary for international communication. Louis-Jean Calvet who has built a *gravitational model* of the world languages (the *galaxy of languages*) defines English as the hyper central language while French alongside a dozen other languages is called “super central”. Those super central languages are themselves surrounded by hundreds of central languages, around which thousands of peripheral languages revolve (Calvet, 1999).

So, what is the status of French towards the hyper centre and what is its relationships with the other central languages? The war (if we can call it a war) against the predominance of English has been over for a long time. Endeavours to become the hyper central language would be vain. This does not mean that French has lost everything; it needs to re-evaluate its position with lucidity and, in order to remain in the centre, probably cooperate with the dozens of similar languages. What do we have in common? What do we have to offer? One way to do so would consist of identifying the needs and motivations of our students and then enlarge them. The various declensions of French as a Foreign Language (*Français Langue Étrangère* in French) such as *French for Specific Purposes* (*Français sur Objectifs Spécifiques* in French) or *French for Academic Purposes* (*Français sur Objectifs Universitaires* in French) are already a partial answer to these issues. French has to be presented if not as a necessary language, at least as a useful one to either study abroad or successfully enter the international labour market.

In the North Korean situation, the gap between students’ motivations and needs opposed to the teachers’ objectives raises an essential issue. As we have mentioned,

North Korean students do learn foreign language and whatever the teaching methods employed, they seem to develop acceptable linguistic capacities. But, in such a closed context, what will be the use of it? Do they actually learn them or are they just being taught to tick boxes? One can wonder about the students' frustration and their possible lack of appetite for such classes. Furthermore, can one really learn a language that one will never use? One element of motivation with language learning is the capacity to be able to use it quickly, even in limited situations of communication but what can be left of students' motivations when they are deprived of any try-outs?

#### **4. More relevant teaching objectives**

Setting teaching objectives poses a chronological challenge : they need to be set before being offered to students while, at the same time, taking into account their needs and motivations and this can be done with a good knowledge of individual profile and of the general situation of the language. But since languages cannot be isolated anymore from society and world realities it implies to put (back) students at the centre of the learning/teaching process. On the larger scale, language curricula should be students' needs oriented and on the narrower one, classes should also be organized around them and avoid lecturing-type settings

##### **4.1. Shifting approaches**

Changing teaching methods obliges us to modify our perspective on languages and students. It will allow us to avoid gaps between student needs and our teacher objectives but also to address the discrepancies between the source language and the target one avoiding also cultural traps and misunderstandings.

##### **4.2. From a communicative perspective to a task-oriented one**

Although teachers have for a long time considered their students as global human beings and not only as learning entities, they are still reluctant to see them beyond their linguistic needs ; learners are indeed human beings but moreover human beings who are part of a system, a society. Therefore, their needs are wider than linguistic ones. Beyond learning linguistic data, they need to be able to accomplish various tasks implying the knowledge of foreign habits, cultural ways and manners. This is where the task-oriented approach is important. With the task-oriented approach, learners now appear as:

[...] social agents, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form a wider context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning (...)  
The action-based approach therefore also take into account the cognitive, emotional and

volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001).

### 4.3. For a better understanding of our student needs

With the task-oriented approach, we take into account the necessity to communicate but also the reason why learners must communicate. This added dimension to the communicative perspective gives back to the teaching of foreign languages an authenticity of which it has been deprived for many years. We know that learning foreign languages underwent many trends and sometimes lost its main objective which is to bestow upon learners the appropriate tools to speak and interact with people in the target language in a meaningful manner. This rising awareness should, allow today's teachers to set more relevant objectives anchoring language knowledge in society and in "real life" if such a thing exists.

This is where the situation of foreign languages in North Korea is of interest ; not only do North Koreans learn them through traditional and mechanical methods but above all they learn them as if languages were isolated material like those found in "hard sciences". What works for math does not work for human sciences and even less for languages. Human sciences as the name implies cannot be isolated from human needs and relationships. In other contexts, this need for root learning in everyday life and actions offers many opportunities to teachers. It allows them various ways to develop and reinforce students' motivation and also it gives them endless teaching material. The North Korean context is showing us that language teaching must never be deprived of its human dimension and it reminds us of the infinite pedagogical situations that we enjoy in our classes.

#### Notes

[1] Article from *The Guardian*, Feb 5, 2015 « Ask a North Korean : do you learn foreign languages ?

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