TEACHERS OF FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (FFL) IN MALAYSIA: NEGOTIATING THE GAP BETWEEN EDUCATION IN FRANCE AND PRACTICE IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education’s current practice of training secondary school teachers of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) includes sending them to French universities to undertake four years of study leading to a degree in FFL studies. Thus, from 1991-2010, the Malaysian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and the French language centers in France including French universities, initiated three teacher education programs for Malaysian teachers in the French Language. In this presentation, the genesis of these programs, their objectives and their issues in terms of the teachers’ linguistic, cultural and didactic knowledge acquired will be presented and discussed. The presentation will also report the analysis of the discourses of 9 teachers regarding their initial training received in France and their interpretations of the different concepts of FFL didactics in the Malaysian school context. This research project was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis with the aim of better understanding the effects of teacher education training programs for FFL proposed in France on the professional lives of the Malaysian teachers of French and more specifically on how they negotiate the gap between their training in France and their teaching practices in the Malaysian school context.

Key words: Teacher education, French as a foreign language (FFL), didactics, context, gap, Malaysia

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education’s current practice of training secondary school teachers of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) consists in sending them to French universities to undertake four years of study leading to a degree in FFL studies. Thus, from 1991-2010, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE), in partnership with the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, French language centers in France and French universities, initiated three teacher education programs for Malaysian teachers of French. For the 1st Program (1991-1997), the MOE worked collaboratively with the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée (CLA) and the Université de Franche-Comté in Besançon, France. From 1991 to 1997, six cohorts of teachers were sent for their studies in linguistics and French as a Foreign Language (FFL), producing 55 graduate teachers. As for the 2nd Program (2003-2004), the MOE worked collaboratively with the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the Université de la Rochelle and the Université de Poitiers in France. From 2003 to 2004,
two cohorts of 24 teachers were sent to France to do their studies in English and French as a Foreign Language (FFL). Finally, for the 3rd Program, the MOE worked again collaboratively with the Embassy of France in Kuala Lumpur, the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée (CLA) and the Université de Franche-Comté in Besançon, France. From 2005 to 2010, five cohorts (15 students per cohort) were sent to France to pursue their studies in linguistics and French as a Foreign Language (FFL). It is important to note that the first two programs stated above were considered “In-service program for mainstream teachers” whereas the 3rd program was considered “Pre-service program for school leavers”.

Many reasons can be cited to explain the decision by the MOE in sending these teachers to France to undergo the teacher education program for teachers of FFL. The first reason is in terms of practicality: there were no such training programs in the country. Today, only two public universities offer degree programs in French, which includes the University of Malaya since 1998 and Universiti Putra Malaysia since 2002. In addition, with major reforms in teacher education programs in 1996, teachers are now given new opportunities for professional development through in-service courses abroad and Special Degree Courses are also being initiated by the MOE for foreign language teachers such as German and Spanish. Besides that, we must be aware that the teacher education programs in France involve also some ideological implications such as:

- assumptions and beliefs that Malaysian teachers will Master the foreign language from the native speaker, thus, validate the competence of Malaysian teachers of French;
- obtaining a degree from French universities fulfils the objective of the Ministry of Education to internationalize the qualification of Malaysian teachers;
- Malaysian teachers with a French degree can guarantee the teaching quality/competence of the language in Malaysian schools;
- the idea that a foreign language learnt in a native context is a necessary component of educational quality;
- the belief that an educational system of international standards can be measured via its internationally qualified teachers.

2.0 Literature review: Overseas Teacher Education and Impact on Teachers Knowledge

Teacher education in general and preliminary teacher training in particular can be considered the main ingredients in equipping teachers with the basic knowledge, competencies and the necessary tools needed to practice their profession. Moreover, teacher education in the target country offers second and foreign language teachers many advantages as this could help them develop not only their linguistic and communicative competence in the target language but also their socio-cultural competencies. As highlighted by McKay (2000), cited in Kurihara and Samimy (2007), overseas teacher education experiences offer teachers great benefits by developing professional expertise, for
example, in their overall communicative competency and understanding of innovative teaching methods.

In addition, according to Murphy-Lejeune (1999), overseas stay, since it involves students’ displacement into an environment where the target language (and culture) is present outside the classrooms, promotes necessarily certain ways of learning which are different from the ones acquired when one stays in one’s own environment. In fact, she explains that an overseas stint encourages new ways of learning and gives three reasons for its importance: the stay contextualizes language learning as a social practice, it frequently puts in balance a new process of socialization and it constitutes a complete experience which would have a deep impression on the individual. In other words, an overseas stay offers students an original learning situation in the sense that it offers them a linguistic and cultural environment that is extremely rich outside the classroom.

In this perspective, immersion programs in the target country are valued and considered as a means to develop not only students’ competency in the language and their cultural understanding but also, as in the case of the Malaysian teachers in France, to train themselves to didactics of FFL in the country where this didactic has been thought and developed. As such, in the case of these Malaysian teachers, we believe that it is important to try to understand how they have lived their teacher education programs in France, their implications on their professional lives, and how they learn to apply their experiences in France upon returning to the country; all these with the aim of rethinking education programs for future teachers of FFL in Malaysia. In a way, teacher education for Malaysian French teachers has been “exported” to France when the Ministry of Education decided to send these teachers to French universities for their initial training in FFL.

2.1 Research questions
The following were the guiding research questions for this study:
1) What are the perceptions of Malaysian French teachers regarding their teacher education programs in France?
2) How do they negotiate the linguistic, cultural and didactic knowledge acquired in France upon returning home?

3.0 Methodology
3.1 Participants
The participants in this study were made up of teachers from the 1st. (1991-1997) and 2nd. (2001-2003) programs of the teacher education programs for the Malaysian teachers of French initiated by the MOE. The participants were limited to these two programs since none of the student teachers from the 3rd Program (2005-2010) have yet to graduate from the university at the time of this study. Furthermore, the main objective of this study was to examine the impact or the effects of the teacher education programs for FFL proposed in France on the professional lives of the Malaysian
teachers once they return to the country. As such, the participants in this study were Malaysian teachers of the French language who have completed the teacher education programs in France and were teaching French in Malaysian secondary schools at the time this study was undertaken. It is important to note that participation to this study was on a voluntary basis.

3.2 Data collection

Data collection for this study was carried out from June through September 2008. The two instruments used to collect data were in the form of a questionnaire and semi-structured individual interviews. For the questionnaire, 43 questionnaires were distributed and 22 were collected giving a response rate of about 50%. As for the individual interviews, 9 teachers had been interviewed with each interview taking between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The aims of the open-ended type of questionnaire were to collect certain personal information of the teachers (gender, age, qualification, number of years teaching, type of school where they teach, level of classes taught, etc) and the teachers’ first testimony of their education and stay in France as well as their classroom experience upon returning to the country. Thus, data collected via questionnaire survey allowed us to obtain an overall view, among others, of participants’ perceptions not only of their 4 year stay in France but also upon their return to the country, the significance of their profession as a French teacher, their conceptions of FFL teaching and their difficulties in their professional practices in Malaysia. Subsequently, the individual interview sessions were conducted in order to clarify in depth underlying themes, points and questions in the questionnaire. More specifically, these interviews allowed us to better understand the responses to the questionnaires and to hear teachers’ perceptions in their own words. In all, two interviews were conducted in French whereas seven were conducted in English.

3.3 Data analysis

Data collected via questionnaires and the individual interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method adopted from Miles & Huberman (1994, 2003) and Blanchet & Gotman (2007). This method was chosen for the following reasons: a systematic approach and a validation method according to themes and categories. As such, the objective of the analysis is to make teachers’ representations emerge from their discourse related to their education in France and certain didactic concepts of FFL.

4.0 Results

In this section, we will discuss the findings of the study by examining the questionnaire results and interview data. The teachers’ perceptions of the teacher education programs underwent in France were analyzed, more specifically, the positive and negative points of the programs and whether or not they had fulfilled the expectations and the professional needs of the Malaysian teachers. Secondly, we
examined the teachers’ conceptions of the teaching of FFL in the Malaysian school context so as to gain insights on how they negotiate in their own teaching context the linguistic, cultural and didactic knowledge acquired during their training in France.

4.1 Teachers’ Perceptions of the Teacher Education Program in France

Similar to any other training programs, the teacher education program in FFL in France is considered by the Malaysian teachers as one having its positive and negative points or, in other words, its benefits and limits. In terms of benefits, the discourse of our participants indicates that they have acquired, in particular, competencies in the target language and culture as well as intercultural experiences. As revealed by the excerpt below, their daily and direct contact with the French language and culture has allowed them to acquire not only the competency in language but also the knowledge and understanding of the French culture:

*I’ve learnt a lot about their language, their culture over there [in France] because I stayed on the same floor as the French students and other foreign students […] we spoke only French. We had a common kitchen. Everybody did their cooking there so we had the opportunity to taste each other’s cuisine. It was really a good experience.* (Patrick, Interview in English: 24/9/2008)

In a certain way, the above comments from the Malaysian teachers reinforce the idea that the immersion in the country of the target language is the most effective model enabling learners to acquire not only linguistic competencies but also socio-cultural competencies which are essential to language use knowledge. A few teachers also stated that the “real” contact with the target language/culture helped them “gain confidence” in speaking the language and in their competency in the target language. Nora, for example:

*When we went there [France], we don’t really study simple French. We listen to French, we read French, we eat French, everything French, so we grab the language more. That’s what they say, if we want to learn the language, you go to the county [where they speak the language]. Over there [in France], we listen, we read, we watch everything in French so that one gives us more confidence to speak French.* (Nora, Interview in English: 24/9/2008)

Thus, the real contact with the target language/culture allows these teachers to develop another rapport to knowledge. The language becomes less “foreign” and the learner feels more comfortable with the target language. It is important to emphasize that the “confidence” in their competency in the second/foreign language that they are teaching is very important to non-native teachers. As a matter of fact, to teach a foreign language, one must feel comfortable with this language or must be confident in
one’s own competency in this language. The insecurity faced at the linguistic and cultural level put language teachers in a vulnerable situation.

As for the intercultural experience, certain teachers expressed the benefits of their personal experience with the French culture in their teaching of the cultural content to their students. If for some of them, this experience constitutes a tremendous help in explaining the cultural content to their students, for others, it allowed them to make a real difference in teaching the rudiments of the French culture:

*I would say that if you just go for classes here [in Malaysia] at Alliance Française or somewhere, and then you teach, you can only teach. You don’t have the experience of life in France. I don’t think you can prepare the students to live that kind of experience. It’s just to pass exams.* (Patrick, Interview in English: 24/9/2008)

Reading Patrick’s comments above, we can understand that his personal experience of life in France allowed him to transmit to his students the “taste of elsewhere”, that is, to anchor the language and culture teaching in a social and cultural context and not only in linguistic and academic terms. Learning a language must be more than just communicating, it must incorporate meeting people living elsewhere and understanding people who live differently from oneself.

If the comments of the teachers regarding the benefits of teacher education programs in France are mostly related to their stay, the ones regarding their negative points are mostly related to the content of their academic courses at the university. The first reproach expressed by these teachers with regard to the teacher education programs in France is that the course transmits too much “theory” and very little “practical” aspects or one which focuses merely on the acquisition of “theoretical knowledge”. Nora, for example, stated that the theoretical knowledge taught was more on language, linguistics or psychology rather than on didactics or pedagogy:

*I can’t remember learning how to use teaching methods during my courses at the university. The program was more on theory about language, about linguistics, that was what we learnt […] psychology, phonetics, lexicology and everything.* (Nora, Interview in English: 24/9/2008)

Reading Nora’s comments, we understand that the teachers had other expectations with regard to this program. Frankly, Nora considered the teacher education program in France as one which was “distant” from its “professional vocation” In other words, since it does not teach teachers how to apply the acquired knowledge in their classroom, in that way, it did not train students to become future teachers:
They don’t really train teachers to be a French teacher teaching French. It’s more like they train teachers to get their foreign language certificate, just the language part but not how to reconvert whatever you’ve learnt and then use it in your teaching. (Nora, Interview in English: 24/9/2008)

Another teacher, Diana, expressed the difficulties in applying the didactic knowledge acquired in France which were partly due to the fact that the course content did not take into account the issues of the application of the didactic knowledge in a specific context such as in the Malaysian context. In a certain way, Diana’s comments below reconfirm the gap between teacher education programs in France and the real and specific needs of the Malaysian teachers:

We didn’t have that many in-depth discussions. It was very general and the discussions on didactics were mostly on French-speaking context. We’ve forgotten that Malaysia is not a French-speaking country […]. Sometimes, we can’t put in place the activities [learnt during the courses in our own teaching context]. Upon returning [to Malaysia] we were very motivated but after that we were very disappointed. (Diana, Interview in French: 2/9/2008)

4.2 Teachers’ Conceptions of the Teaching of FFL in the Malaysian School Context

To explore how Malaysian French teachers negotiate in their own teaching context the acquired linguistic, cultural and didactic knowledge in France, we examined what they had to say about their strategies to teach FFL in Malaysia, more specifically, French language and culture. Translation method seems to be one of the teaching strategies that cannot be ignored in the Malaysian context. The teachers interviewed explained that they often resort to English or Malay to conduct their French classes. Linda, for example, considers that translating into English or Malay allows her to save time and to assure that students understand the lessons even if she acknowledges the fact that it would be more effective to teach in the target language:

Of course we want to teach the language in the language itself rather than to teach the language in another language, but I have no choice. I have only something like 35 or 40 minutes of class, 3 times a week. You need to prepare the students for the DELF A1 and A2 exams. So, you have to do it faster. The fastest way is to translate. (Linda, Interview in English: 2/9/2008)

In another case, a respondent teacher mentioned that she uses mainly English or Malay to help students understand the grammatical rules. She is of the opinion that learners are more motivated in their learning when they understand what they are learning:
Here [in Malaysia], I have to use a little bit of translation not like those lecturers in France. You’ve to do translation otherwise they will be motivated if you’re speaking French all the time. So when you explain and all that, they get motivated. I know that there are things they can speak in French but for explaining the rules, I have to use their mother tongue [Malay] or English. (Anita, Interview in English & French: 7/9/2008)

Regarding the teaching of culture, a number of teachers interviewed mentioned that the main reason for including the cultural content in their French lessons is to motivate the students in their learning. Besides that, they have to adapt the cultural content taught to the age and the competency level of their students in the French language:

I think for Form 1 and Form 2, their level of French is not there yet, so it is difficult to introduce a lot of the French culture [...] I think for Form 1 or Form 2, you can tell them about ‘les fetes’, the food, they would love to know about the food, the “touristique” places that they can see. That should be enough to motivate them. (Linda, Interview in English: 2/9/2008)

Another teacher went even further in terms of his choice with regard to the cultural content taught to his students. He explained that he only teaches to his students the cultural themes that he considers as “positive” and gave as an example, the new technology:

I just tell them the good culture. I mean the positive culture, for example, new technology. This can motivate the students to go there [to France] and see for themselves, if I say good things about this French culture. (Zul, Interview in English: 7/9/2008)

5.0 Conclusion

In this study we explored the effects of the teacher education programs in France on Malaysian French teachers when they return to their homeland to practice their profession. In particular, this study examined how these teachers negotiated the gap between their training in France and their professional work. One important point that emerged from this study was that if, on one hand, the Malaysian teachers were less critical towards their stay, on the other hand, they were very critical towards the university courses. Our findings suggest that the university courses did not really fulfill these teachers’ personal expectations nor their professional needs since the program focused more on discipline knowledge rather than on didactics and pedagogical knowledge. Therefore, we can say that it is an education program that is totally cut off from the context in which these Malaysian teachers work and foreign to the educational issues and objectives peculiar to Malaysia. Another important
point is that Malaysian teachers’ teaching practices are greatly influenced by the contextual factors, which involves rethinking the relationship between didactics and context.

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