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Editors

Diversity and Decolonization in French Studies

New Approaches to Teaching

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CHAPTER 2

Multilingual Texts and Contexts: Inclusive Pedagogies in the French Foreign Language Classroom

Cecilia Benaglia and Maya Angela Smith

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, demographics in the United States in general and higher education in particular have become increasingly diverse. Currently, about 40% of the population identify as other than white, up from 20% in 1980, and as the Brookings Institute notes, “the 2010 to 2020 decade will be the first in the nation’s history in which the white population declined in numbers” (Frey 2020). Even larger gains have been made in higher education. According to the American Council of Education’s *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*, 45.2% of higher education

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students were people of color in 2016, up from 29.6% in 1996. Hispanic students saw the biggest gains, almost doubling their numbers (from 10.3% to 19.8% of the student body over the same period of time) (American Council, xvi). This racial/ethnic diversity translates into linguistic diversity where 20% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (up from about 14% in 1990 according to the US Census). If one takes into account the 5.5% who are foreign students, the classroom is even more linguistically diverse.¹

While classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, educators and curricula have not adapted to sufficiently address the needs of these students. Instructors remain overwhelmingly white, accounting for almost 80% of full-time faculty (American Council, xvi). Furthermore, as Macedo argues, language programs “reflect class biases where the foreign language curricula are geared toward white, middle-class realities” (2019, 10). For example, he notes the expectation that “students will go to Spain to be fully immersed in the ‘model Spanish’ reflected in the curriculum” instead of being encouraged to engage with immigrant communities near campus that also speak Spanish but whose varieties are considered inferior (10). The French curriculum in the United States suffers similar pitfalls, almost always championing a French language that is associated with white, monolingual speakers of Parisian French and thus eliding the diversity of Frenches in the world.² As such, it is important for educators to systematically reassess the ways we teach French because being a good instructor requires learning from, adapting to, and reflecting our changing world.

Recent work in Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics have called on these fields to decenter whiteness and reimagine language education. Macedo’s (2019) edited volume implores educators to acknowledge and combat linguicism—language discrimination that has emerged from linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2008) and that is tied to racist and classist notions of “good speech.” Meanwhile, Blackledge and Creese’s (2014) edited volume explores how Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia can widen our understanding of linguistic diversity by going beyond the “naming and separation of languages” inherent in traditional

¹These numbers come from a 2019 report from the Institute of International Education. While COVID and U.S. policies toward foreign students have impacted these numbers, the long-term trend suggests a continued increase in foreign students.

²See Chapelle (2016) and Uzum et al. (2021) for cultural depictions of French in language textbooks.

conceptualizations of multilingualism and embracing the flexibility that speakers have in using signs to make meanings through their communicative repertoires (1–2).

This chapter takes into account this evolving understanding of linguistic diversity as well as the importance for implementing inclusive pedagogical practices in the French foreign language classroom. Inclusive pedagogy, a student-centered approach, “responds to learner diversity in ways that avoid the marginalization of some learners in the community of the classroom,” as well as considers how educators’ choices “convey messages which are much wider than the formal learning focus of the lesson” (Spratt and Florian 2015, 90). Both authors of this chapter have realized that in order to best serve our students, we need to put their needs and their identities at the center of what we do. The first part looks at how the concept of the native speaker (NS), a constant in foreign language teaching, is harmful to language learning in general and to minoritized students in particular. The second part offers ways that educators can address these issues by presenting how we have approached teaching French in our own classrooms. These concrete suggestions offer a template for how others can start to decolonize their classrooms, regardless of the language in question, the course level, or the demographics of their students.

GLOTTOPHOBIA AND MONOLINGUAL BIASES IN THE TEACHING OF FRENCH

Just as the national trend suggests, our own classes are composed of students from a large variety of cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite their various differences, many students have something in common: they are multilingual. Besides English, they speak several languages and enjoy a “diversity of linguistic practice” within these languages.³ As such, from a linguistic point of view, they do not correspond to the “norm,” that is, the standard monolingual speaker of the national language of the United States, English, nor the standard speaker of the language they are learning, French. Therefore, in various contexts our students are labeled as non-native speakers (NNS), a maligned category that stands in opposition to the coveted native speaker (NS) one. It has been 25 years since Firth and Wagner (1997) called on the field of Second

³The discussion of heteroglossia in *Heteroglossia as Practice and Pedagogy* (2014) expounds on this idea of “diversity of linguistic practice” (3).

Language Acquisition (SLA) to move beyond this binary opposition, arguing that it leads “to an analytic mindset that elevates an idealized ‘native’ speaker above a stereotypicalized ‘nonnative,’ while viewing the latter as a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence” (285). However, this NS ideal still influences how most instructors teach language and how most learners understand their L2 identities.

The NS of French, which informs “international French” (i.e., the language taught outside of France), is conceived as a white, monolingual speaker marked by a so-called neutral accent, which is, de facto, the Parisian accent. Multilingual speakers that fall outside this model regularly experience a sense of linguistic insecurity that accompanies their exchanges with interlocutors, especially in institutional and official contexts.⁴ This type of insecurity, which is often reinforced through the negative stigma on accents, is integral to the one nation=one language ideology inherent in the conceptualization of many modern languages. France is probably the modern nation that historically, and even today, has most insisted on the relationship between nationhood and linguistic norm and that has focused its attention on notions such as linguistic purity, standard language, and neutral accent—embodied best by the prominent position of the *Académie Française* in French society. As Posner notes, “the standard language is viewed in the French tradition as a *trésor* [treasure], a *patri-moine* [heritage]—an institution, which has been elaborated and perfected over time” (1997, 11).⁵ Consequently, when multilingual learners who already face linguistic discrimination in their everyday life study French, their complicated relationship to languages becomes even more complex.

As mentioned above, schools and universities play a crucial role in the development of linguistic insecurity by promoting an inaccessible and

⁴Linguistic insecurity is defined by sociolinguist Philippe Blanchet as “la prise de conscience, par les locuteurs, d’une distance entre ce qu’ils parlent et une langue (ou variété de langue) légitimée socialement parce qu’elle est celle des classes sociales dominante, parce qu’elle est perçue comme « pure » (supposée sans interférences avec un autre idiome non légitime) ou encore parce qu’elle est perçue comme celle des locuteurs fictifs détenteurs de la norme prescrite par l’institution scolaire” [the consciousness that speakers have of a distance existing between what they speak and a language (or a variety of a language) which is socially legitimated because it is the one spoken by dominant social classes, or because it is perceived as “pure” (i.e. perceived as being without interferences with other non-legitimate idioms), or because it is perceived as the language spoken by fictive speakers of the norm prescribed by the school institution] (2017, 807).

⁵All translations in the chapter are our own unless specified.

mythical model of French. Teaching and learning models espouse a monolingual ideology, promoted by the French state, which values and extols the standard variety of French to the detriment of dialects and other varieties spoken outside the country. The very existence of these norms leads to the formation of what Philippe Blanchet calls *glottophobia*, a form of linguicism based on a person's accents and languages. *Glottophobia*, which generally manifests itself through microaggressions, is always a key dimension of racial, class, and gender discrimination. As such, it has major consequences for people and, specifically, for students' academic outcomes (e.g., undermining their self-confidence, sense of legitimacy, and belonging).

A language pedagogy based on the "sacralizing overpromotion of homogeneity" ["survalorisation sacrilisante de l'homogénéité"] (Blanchet Emp1856) is a key component of *glottophobia*. This pedagogy adheres to a French-only policy in the classroom, in which students supposedly learn a foreign language or culture better when they are immersed in the exclusive usage of the standard variety of this language. However, several studies counter this perspective, showing that incorporating students' other languages into the teaching of the target language is an asset for learning (Auerbach 1993; De Angelis 2007; Daniel and Pacheco 2015).

It is worth noting that suggesting a move toward a multilingual and/or inclusive pedagogical model may seem antithetical to the teaching of a specific language such as French. How will students learn to speak French if we do not alert them to their production of non-standard French? Do we open them up to ridicule by Parisians who may correct their speech? What effect will the multilingual classroom have on opportunities for students to practice French? We acknowledge that the language classroom is often the only site of language immersion available for students. However, we must also recognize that the model generally adopted in our teaching has been created for a monolingual, white, middle-class student population and fundamentally fails to take account of the multilingual, multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic reality of our communities. By presenting this model as the only possible and desirable one, we are hampering our students' learning capacities and potential both as speakers of French and as individuals. While there is a place in class for the standard variety of French, students should also learn that "they have a choice in the language they produce as well as in whether to align themselves with standard forms or to subvert linguistic norms that conflict with how they identify socially

and politically” (Smith [Forthcoming](#)). The following section will look at two pedagogical strategies for empowering our students.

MULTILINGUAL TEXTS AND VOICES IN THE CLASSROOM

Our diverse classrooms require us to rethink the type of teaching we do with regard to content, teaching modalities, strategies, and assessments. Students often struggle with their multilingual and multicultural identities, viewing them as a hindrance instead of an asset, because our pedagogy myopically focuses on teaching students how to use the target language in a monolingualistic, sterile vacuum. What happens if we promote students’ investment in the learning process and empower them by building on their already existing linguistic and cultural capital so that they can navigate the diverse societies in which they would use their languages?

In this section, we present the value of using multilingual texts in the French language classroom. The first part demonstrates how real-world examples of language use permit students to make connections with their multilingual identities instead of simply trying to attain a monolingual native-speaker norm. The second part details how by having students analyze various authors’ multilingual language memoirs and then create their own multilingual journals, they can explore the relationships between multilingualism, emotions, and power relations. This reframing centers the students’ experiences, instills confidence, and motivates their language learning.

Sociolinguistic, Ethnographic Texts

While the French foreign language curriculum often relies on literary texts, there is much value in diversifying our pedagogy and exposing students to a wider range of language production. For example, in a bridge course where students build advanced language skills and cultural competency through oral and written production in French, Smith has students analyze sociolinguistic, ethnographic texts from her research on the Senegalese diaspora in Paris, Rome, and New York published in *Senegal Abroad* (2019). Students in the course, many of whom are French majors and minors, have finished the language sequence and are preparing to take upper division content courses in French. They are also learning about the multifaceted uses of French in the Francophone world.

As a former French colony and a multilingual country, Senegal has a complex relationship to the French language. While French is the sole official language, only 10% speak it fluently with another 21% using it on a regular basis. Meanwhile, more than 80% speak Wolof, the main national language, and most people also speak one of the 25 or so other national languages as well. The majority of Senegalese are multilingual, and when they migrate to other countries, most learn the national languages of their new homes. Smith has found that her interviewees in *Senegal Abroad* take great pride in their multilingual repertoires, lauding the virtues of being able to cross geographic and linguistic borders.

For instance, Duudu, a Senegalese man in his fifties who had lived in Paris with his family for two decades, ruminated on his multilingualism: “Quand on maîtrise ces trois langues là, ça devient un jeu, quoi. Quand on parle le français, quand on parle le wolof, quand on parle le pulaar, on sait que dans la tête on est toujours sénégalais” [When we master these three languages, it becomes a game, you know. When we speak French, when we speak Wolof, when we speak Pulaar, we know that in our head we are always Senegalese] (Smith 2019, 128). In comparing this multilingual ability to a game and focusing on the playfulness of language, Duudu elevated the aspects of joy and creativity in manipulating multiple languages. Language students are often so focused on producing what they see as perfect language that they entertain feelings of failure when they think they fall short. They seldom realize the power that derives from navigating various linguistic codes. Hearing this perspective from a multilingual speaker means they are learning more from authentic texts than just what French looks like. They are learning to expand expectations they have of themselves as language learners. By being able to see themselves in a person such as Duudu who thrives in multilingualism, students can reframe their multilingual acts as successes instead of failures. It may also be useful for instructors to point out that even French people are known to often sprinkle English words in their discourse. Languages are not as separate as often assumed. Students can thus ruminate on the porous nature of language instead of focusing on the ill-conceived assumption that multilingualism is impure.

While Duudu described his multilingual usage, other interviewees produced multilingual speech that students can analyze. Ousseynou, a 37-year-old taxi driver from Dakar who had spent nine years in the United States, explained to Smith during his interview in New York how he wanted to learn Spanish for his job: “Por me, è muy interesante de hablar

muchos different languages ... si le client entre dans ma voiture, je dis, ‘Cómo estás? Muy bien?’ They say ‘Ah OK, tu hablas español!’ Tu vois?’⁶ [For me, it is very interesting to speak many different languages ... if the client gets in my car, I say, “How are you? Very good?” They say, “Ah OK, you speak Spanish!” You see?] (Smith 2019, 134). He was proactively cultivating a space of linguistic hospitality where his multilingualism served to put his clients at ease. Throughout the interview, he switched between French, Italian, Spanish, and English.

Thirty-eight-year-old mechanic Bouba, who was also from Dakar, enjoyed similar multilingual abilities. He heard Pulaar and Bambara at home, picked up Wolof through neighborhood interactions, and learned French at school. He then studied in Morocco, worked in Switzerland, and returned to Senegal for several years before calling New York City home. Bouba conveyed how both his linguistic experience in Senegal and his moving to different places allowed for multilingual language learning: “Je **parlo italiano** mais *just a little bit* parce que je travaille avec des Italiens au Sénégal. ... Mais ici, quand je suis venu aux États-Unis, ici je n’ai pas mal de travail avec des Espagnols ... Mon *big boss*, il ne parle pas français. Maintenant, quand il veut quelque *translation*, il m’appelle, pour que je puisse faire cette *translation*. Ça c’est fort pour moi”⁷ [I **speak Italian** but *just a little bit* because I work with Italians in Senegal. ... But here, when I came to the United States, I work quite a bit with Spaniards. My *big boss*, he doesn’t speak French. Now, when he wants some *translation*, he calls me so that I can do that *translation*. That’s important for me] (Smith 2019, 135). This ability to adapt, facilitated by his access to different languages, minimized borders that often constrained other people. Through this cultivated linguistic ability, Bouba transcended restrictions that could be imposed on him for being a foreigner, a non-native speaker, or an immigrant.

These real-world experiences of multilingualism center multilingual subjectivity and casts doubt on the NS/NNS dichotomy so entrenched in language teaching. Kramsch (2009) calls for a third culture pedagogy that “leaves space for mischievous language play, carnivalesque parody, simulation and role-play and the invention of fictitious, hybrid identities that put

⁶The excerpt uses the following notation: Spanish, **Italian**, *English*, French.

⁷The excerpt uses the following notation: French, **Italian**, *English*.

into question NS claims on authenticity” (238).⁸ By having students perform close readings of these texts and dissect how languages are used in specific contexts (e.g., the relationship between language choice and semantic content, the specific placement of code-switching, the affective qualities associated with creative language usage), students begin to embody linguistic freedom. In other words, when students see how actual French speakers move between languages such as with Ousseynou and Bouba or describe the joy of playing with languages such as with Duudu, they are no longer restricted to imagining themselves as monolingual native speakers, an identity that they could never truly claim. Instead, they can express pride in becoming a multilingual being and the freedom it entails.

In addition to having students analyze these multilingual, sociolinguistic, ethnographic texts, Smith also incorporates guided journaling exercises followed by group discussions so that students can reflect on their multilingual abilities. She asks them questions such as (1) How have you pushed the boundaries between languages such as in the examples provided? (2) Have you ever code-switched (switched between languages, varieties, registers, etc.) or engaged in translanguaging (the flexible use of linguistic resources)?⁹ (3) What are your thoughts about these practices? She also brings in examples of her own experiences with code-switching, translanguaging, and multilingualism to further normalize the practices. Students always have a lot to contribute to these discussions and seem eager to share the various ways they use language in their lives. Even the students who would consider themselves monolinguals realize how they may speak differently among friends than with their teachers and are able to reflect on the facility in which they switch between registers and linguistic varieties of English. Therefore, everyone can participate and feel like they belong.

Multilingual Memoirs/Journals

Another possible way to promote students’ role as language explorers and creative users is by systematically introducing translingual and multilingual writers in the corpus of texts studied in language, culture, and literature

⁸ Bakhtin described “carnival” as a celebration of change and a reversing of power dynamics. See Bakhtin (1984, 107–108) for a more detailed discussion.

⁹ See Blackledge and Creese (2014, 11) for more information on translanguaging.

classes. Reading writers from both migrant and postcolonial literatures, like Ágota Kristóf, Abdelfattah Kilito, Patrick Chamoiseau, or Nancy Huston, exposes students to different varieties of French but also to the ways in which individuals relate to this language and use it as a space to form their multilingual selves through writing.

In order to fully take advantage of the study of multilingual writers in the classroom, Benaglia has also tasked students with writing their own multilingual journal. She first proposed this assignment for a MA course on multilingualism and translation in the Francophone world, in which students were introduced to the main language policies adopted in France and in the colonies since the French Revolution as well as to multilingual and translingual literature. In this course, 90% of the students were at least trilingual, with around 30% of them speaking more than three languages. Through this assignment, which requires a critical self-reflexive perspective, students are invited to think and write about the contexts in which they learned their languages, referring, for instance, to histories of mobility (including any type of mobility that implies a change in the language but also in the sociolect spoken by an individual, be it transnational, social, or intergenerational mobility) marking their families or communities, and reflecting on the relationships they entertain with each language they speak. By producing their own language learning autobiographies, students have a chance to use their experiences and lives as an entry point into the study of Francophone literary texts.

The multilingual memoirs they read in class function as “pretexts” to writing (Mathis 2016, 4), as a guide accompanying them in the exploration of the relationships between multilingualism and emotions as well as multilingualism and political power. For Abdelfattah Kilito, French, along with Classic Arabic, is the “*langue de la faute*,” “*faute*” which can be translated simply by “mistake” but also as “sin” and “wrongdoing,” adding a key moral dimension to the word. When he writes in French, Kilito is “*taraudé par un sentiment de culpabilité*” [tormented by guilt], and by the fear of making mistakes (Kilito 2013, 16). For Ágota Kristóf, French is the “enemy language” because it is a language that resists her and, at the same time, kills her mother tongue. These writers endure endless suffering from the language war taking place in their own writing and experience language as a battlefield in which histories of colonialism, racism, exile, diaspora, and discrimination find expression. These authors show that emotions—confusion, hate, anger, guilt, rejection, but also love—are entrenched in our relationship to languages and are often reactions to the

power relations and the violence languages project on us. Writing autobiographical narratives through the lens of language acquisition makes students more aware of the inextricably affective and political factors that influence our usage of language and that have shaped the history of French specifically.

The instructor can choose literary excerpts that address several issues or topics, such as the ones mentioned above. In the following passage, taken from *Nord perdu*, Canadian writer Nancy Huston addresses her feelings of linguistic insecurity caused by bilingualism and the way she perceives herself with regard to monolingual speakers:

Quand les monolingues perçoivent un objet familier, son nom leur vient automatiquement à l'esprit. Pour moi, le nom qui vient dépend de la langue dans laquelle je suis en train de réfléchir. Parfois l'un des mots me vient, alors que c'est de l'autre que j'ai besoin. Parfois les deux affleurent, simultanément ou en succession. Mais parfois ça se complique, s'emballa, se bloque, et je m'en arracherais les cheveux [...]. Il y des mots qui refusent tout bonnement, que ce soit dans la langue maternelle ou dans l'adoptive, de faire le trajet de mon cerveau jusqu'à mes lèvres - des mots que je ne trouve jamais au moment où j'en ai besoin. (Huston 1999, 54)

[When monolinguals perceive a familiar object, its name automatically comes to their mind. For me, the name that comes up depends on the language I am thinking in in that precise moment. Sometimes one of the words comes to me, while it is the other that I need. Sometimes both come up, simultaneously or in succession. But sometimes it gets complicated, it gets out of control, it gets stuck, and I would tear my hair out [. . .]. There are words that simply refuse, whether in the mother tongue or in the adopted language, to make their way from my brain to my lips - words that I can never find when I need them.]

Students realize here that accomplished writers can openly speak about the difficulties they encounter in learning and then practicing French and how, instead of letting these difficulties hold them back, they transform them into literary material.

Écrire en pays dominé by Patrick Chamoiseau is a text that can be used in the classroom to introduce students to the political and colonial history of French, to its symbolic capital, and the place it holds even today in the hierarchy of global languages.

Comment écrire alors que ton imaginaire s'abreuve, du matin jusqu'aux rêves, à des images, des pensées, des valeurs qui ne sont pas les tiennes? Comment écrire quand ce que tu es végète en dehors des élans qui déterminent ta vie? Comment écrire, dominé? (Chamoiseau 1997, 17). La langue dominante, quand elle est apprise comme extérieure à soi, se conserve à distance: on la manie en demandeur; voulant la conquérir, on sollicite ce qu'elle a d'orthodoxe. (Chamoiseau 1997, 274)

[How can you write when your imagination, from morning to night, feeds on images, thoughts, values that are not yours? How to write when what you are vegetates outside the impulses that determine your life? How to write, dominated? ... The dominant language, when it is learned as external to oneself, is kept at a distance: one handles it as a seeker; wanting to conquer it, one solicits what it has of orthodox.]

Similarly to what Chamoiseau himself does by creating in this book what he calls a *Sentimenthèque* (a montage of excerpts from the writers with whom he is in dialogue and who populate his “mental library”), students can start to mirror themselves in multilingual Francophone writers’ words and view them as models for their own learning of French. These writers do not aspire to write and speak as “native speakers.” Instead, they affirm other possible appropriations of French. By incorporating different accents, foreign vocabulary, and syntactic structures, they value a broader understanding of what this language is and can be.

The composition of the multilingual journal can be a semester-long activity or done in one or a few sessions. It can also be adapted to a variety of levels, from intermediate and advanced language courses to graduate seminars. Benaglia usually asks students to start by writing the chronological order and detailed circumstances in which they learned the languages they speak. She then asks them to recall one good memory or episode they associate with each of their languages and one less pleasant one. Starting from these simple autobiographical elements (which can be complemented, for instance, with the description of the most important people students associate with each language), they are asked to identify, among the literary excerpts studied in class, a passage or two that most resonate with their own experience and then explain why. This is a canvas for an activity that can be adjusted for upper-level classes or drawn out to be completed throughout the semester. Following the general topic of the course and the students’ level, the instructor may decide to put the accent on the language learning process described in certain texts, on the cultural and political aspects of multilingualism that emerge from others, or on

both. At the MA level, for instance, the instructor can invite students to produce a longer piece of creative writing as well, inspired by the initial exercise briefly described above and by the readings and in-class discussions.

Students inevitably come to class with certain preconceived images and representations of French and are often drawn to the study of this language by the prestige it holds as a dominant European language. This activity asks students to make their assumptions around French explicit, with the goal of complicating the received images they have. The composition of a “multilingual journal,” similarly to the use of ethnographic texts, also fosters an atmosphere in the classroom in which students are not inhibited about mobilizing their multilingual resources but instead are encouraged to do so and to see their multilingual repertoire as an asset, both in learning French and in grasping its socio-cultural and political significance.

CONCLUSION

In the classroom, much as in real life, French does not exist in a void, but rather coexists and constantly interacts with a plurality of languages, which are embodied by our students and cannot artificially be put aside at the time of a lesson. The activities we have briefly presented in this chapter take seriously the consequences of this reality. They insist on the fact that acknowledging students’ multilingualism has the potential to help them see their own experiences and histories reflected in what they study, narrating their multiple and often conflictual identities and cultural roots in the process. What we have discussed here are different types of *translingual practices*, defined as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of [a given language]” (García 2019, 207). Helping to “liberate the voices of language minoritized students” (García 2019, 200), translingual practices transform the classroom into a laboratory in which new forms of appropriation of French are promoted and in which French becomes a tool for linguistic and political emancipation.

In conclusion, if we want to transform the French classroom into a truly diversified, decolonized, and decentered place and to challenge the methodological nationalism and neocolonialism that still inform the teaching of modern languages, a first step is to embrace the classroom’s glosso-diversity and stop conceiving it as a homogenous, monolingual space.

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