

## ***A first Namibian portfolio for languages: From concept to context***

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### **Abstract**

Since its early beginnings in the 1970's, the communicative approach has established itself as the preferred approach in the teaching and learning of French as a Foreign Language. It has significantly changed teaching and learning methods by introducing innovative concepts, notions and material – such as communicative and intercultural competence, needs analysis, authentic material, and learner-centred practices. The assessment dimension had its share of transformation especially with the introduction of learners' self-assessment and self-awareness skills. To operationalise these new self-assessment skills, innovative tools have been developed and tested.

The *Portfolio for Languages* (a document produced by the European Council after the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* in 2001, which is now used in more than 38 countries in Europe) has proven its usefulness (for the learner as well as for the teacher) in the development of self-assessment skills, and in the monitoring an individual's language development and of understanding learning objectives.

To date no African portfolio for languages is in existence. In 2010, a team of five Namibian teachers of French conceived the first Namibian Portfolio for Languages that will be implemented in 2013 for all Grade 8 learners taking French as a Foreign Language in Namibian secondary schools. This pilot project will be carried out until 2017. The project is aimed at testing the effectiveness of the portfolio as an instrument if considered as a complementary tool to provide in the communicative approach needs in the Namibian context.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Shortly after independence in 1990, the Namibian government through the Ministry of Education in partnership with the French Embassy in Namibia, made provision for the teaching of French as a Foreign Language as a subject in various secondary schools. Mweshipandeka Secondary School in Ongwediva was the first public school to offer French as a Foreign Language (FFL) and it paved the way for five other public schools and several private schools in Windhoek. To also eventually offer the subject as a result of an increase in international contact with the Francophone community, the number of secondary schools offering FFL as a subject has increased significantly in Namibia.

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After more than two decades of implementation, the review on the FFL in Namibia shows a stable increase in learner enrolment, with a gross total of 1600 learners (from Grade 8 to 12) in 2012, and an average of 500 new learners registering for FFL in Grade 8 annually. The increase in the number of learners choosing FFL as part of their studies since the introduction of FFL in Grade 8 is testament to the demands and interest of FFL in Namibia. Nevertheless, the challenge emerges from the Grade 10 results at the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) examinations which recorded a disconcerting rate of failure, as in most of the other school subjects (DNEA, 2008). This in return prevents many learners from continuing with FFL at tertiary level. As a direct consequence, the main population of FFL learners at the University of Namibia (UNAM) is comprised of beginner level learners; the Polytechnic of Namibia offers a year course for two classes (about 30 learners in total studying FFL as a year course), whereas the UNAM registers approximately 80 learners following a three year course in French as a minor subject.

The team of teachers of French in Namibia is evolving in proportion and in quality due to the fact that French is offered as a school subject to prospective teachers in the Faculty of Education at UNAM. Today, Namibia has around 35 FFL teachers spread across public and private schools and tertiary institutions mainly in Windhoek. The interest in learning and teaching FFL in Namibia is increasing, but it necessitates continuous efforts to maintain the teaching quality and to appropriately define the target language in a Namibian context.

With this scenario, the various partners involved in the promotion and development of FFL in Namibia (namely the Namibian Ministry of Education, Secondary Schools, the French Cooperation in Namibia for the Development and Promotion of French Language and Culture, UNAM, the Polytechnic of Namibia and the Association of Teachers of French in Namibia (ATFN) are challenged to create and maintain an efficient and constant network to monitor and improve the status of FFL in Namibia. To engage in this long term task, the first author initiated a research project in 2009 pursuing the elaboration of in-service professional development programmes for teachers of FFL in state secondary schools. The research project was centred on methodology and teaching practice which among other objectives focuses on the capitalisation and exchange of knowledge and experience among Namibian education practitioners. One of the key research factors identified by Zannier's study is the production of pedagogical materials suitable for the needs of FFL in Namibia.

In 2010, the ATFN submitted a project proposal application to the International Federation of Teachers of French (FIPF)'s call for "Innovative Pedagogical Tools Proposals", and successfully obtained a sponsorship to create the first Namibian Portfolio for Languages (NPL).

This article follows the evolution of this project: starting with an analysis of the validity of a portfolio for languages in the framework of the communicative approach (CA) of language teaching; and finally with a presentation of the modifications made by the Namibian Portfolio research team to the NPL, in an attempt to adapt the concept to the country's particular realities.

### **The portfolio: a pedagogical tool positively meeting the principles of the communicative approach**

The CA which is used for teaching Foreign Languages (FL), and was groomed in the 1970s and then implemented in the early 1980s, broke away from traditional teaching methods

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by prioritising the notions of *needs orientated* and *learner centred* language teaching. This reoriented teaching focalisation, according to Bérard (1991), stood as a direct response to tackle the weakness of the preceding language teaching methods (such as the Structuro Global Method- SGM) which was accused of underestimating the learner's characteristics, needs and roles impact on the learning process (*Dictionnaire de Didactique du Français*, 2003, p. 39). The CA also criticized the SGM for not adequately using the communicative language in the class (Porcher as cited by Bérard, 1991, p. 14). Moreover, critics of the SGM argue that the teaching/learning progression is sometimes too rigid as it always follows the same order of the lesson plan. Bérard further explains that the passage to the CA has drastically changed aspects of FL didactics affecting methodology, practice, pedagogical material and assessment, by firstly putting an emphasis on communicative language use in context (Bérard states that teaching the communicative competence implies taking into consideration all its components; the linguistic, socio-linguistic, referential and strategic sub-competencies, providing authentic material such as authentic documents and real communicative situations, privileging a certain coherence between public target, target objectives, and syntax vs. meaning) and secondly applying a global learner centred teaching approach.

The learner centred teaching concept means, positioning the learner both at the heart and as the vector of the teaching process. The new attribution implied a recalibration of the didactical triangle: teacher, subject/teaching material, and learner. Hence, the learner, placed at the core of the teaching process requires the teacher to take on new roles and attitudes towards learners (as knowledge transmitter, teaching facilitator, technician, stimulating resource and advisor) (*Dictionnaire de Didactique du Français*, 2003, p. 83). Secondly, the learner's needs dictate the selection of the teaching content, of the target language and of the pedagogical material and precise teaching-learning strategies. Finally, the learner becomes a proactive and autonomous participant in the learning process. Creating new tools and pedagogical materials responding to these transformations grew as an imperative necessity: the portfolio for languages stood as a potential solution to more communicative methods of learner assessment.

The portfolio for language application found a huge audience in the United States and Canada from the 1980's and was developed in Europe ten years later. In 2001, the Council of Europe launched the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), - a result of the European Council's efforts to research and harmonise FL didactics and practice in Europe- and the European Portfolio for Languages. The European Portfolio for Language (EPL) experiment is now utilised in 38 countries at all education levels from pre-primary level to university level. This large scale application provides a valuable analysis basis for language portfolios; therefore it will constitute the main point of reference for this analysis. Noël-Jothy & Sampsonis (2006, pp. 22-23) define the EPL as a personal document belonging to the learner that is used throughout a learner's schooling in a language. The EPL is a booklet which allows learners to evaluate their competencies in languages, to valorise their experience in using languages and cultures.

By studying the principles, characteristics, and multi functionalities of the portfolio for languages, we aim at measuring to what extent the proposed educational tool adequately fits into the *learner centred* concept (in line with the CA) and therefore endorses its legitimacy in a language programme. This will be done by addressing the following relevant characteristics of a learner-centred methodology:

- A tool defining learners' personal profiles
- A record of learners' language acquisition
- A instrument promoting multilingualism
- A stimulus for learner's autonomy: "Learning to Learn"

### **A tool defining learners' personal profiles**

#### **An instrument identifying learners' identity**

Depending on its format and its authors' vision, the EPL gives variable feedback on the learner's personal identity, environment and interests. Some types of portfolios for languages, such as e-portfolios face the problems of individual copyrights, and therefore cautiously include this content in their digital material. Instead, hard copy portfolios, as the learners' properties, generally record learners' personal data obtaining valuable information about the learner's close surrounding later exploitable for defining the themes studied in class, and/or for selecting appropriate authentic documents.<sup>2</sup>

The EPL concentrates on the learner's linguistic identity. It dedicates an important section, entitled "The Language Biography", to question the learner's appreciation and use of languages. The CEFR indeed reiterates the importance of the public needs analysis in any educational language program but also insists on the fact that the learner's awareness of their language environment impacts their performance quality in languages (CEFR, 2001, p. 5). In multilingual contexts, because the FL acquisition is affected by the other languages, knowing the learner's linguistic environment is a valuable asset for the teacher as well as for the learner. The more conscious teachers and learners are aware of influences of other languages on the target language, and thus attempt to prevent predictable transfers from one linguistic system to another. With the increasing diversity of learners' linguistic identities, most recent pedagogical materials such as textbooks for FFL succeed to include intercultural activities but are written without taking foreign learners' linguistic identities (with the exceptions of the English mother tongue) into consideration. Linguistic identities if not easily defined can remain a handicap (Courtyllon, 2007, p. 27) and in this perspective, the language portfolio could be seen as a complementary tool. FFL prescribed textbooks in Namibian state secondary schools (*Champion* for Grades 8, 9 and 10, and *Méto* for Grades 11 and 12) are indeed conceived in respect with the CA main concepts in terms of learning progression, lesson plan and implicit grammar but poorly provide learners with themes and activities that are close to the Namibian social and linguistic context (e.g. chapters about European transports or European leisure activities).

#### **Defining learners' needs in a communicative way**

Richterich and Porcher, from Switzerland and France respectively, stand as the early experts of the *needs orientated* approach to FFL teaching. Through a long collection of publications started in the mid-70s both authors helped improve our understanding of the importance and the implications proceeding from this approach on the teaching method and practice. Richterich (Boyer, Butzbach, & Pendanx, 1990, pp. 58-59) explains that the

<sup>2</sup> Definition from the Dictionnaire de Didactique du français langue étrangère et seconde, Clé International, 2003. « Renvoie à un foisonnement de genres bien typés et à un ensemble très divers de situations de communication et de messages écrits, oraux, iconiques et audiovisuels, qui couvrent toute la panoplie des productions de la vie quotidienne, administrative, médiatique, culturelle, professionnelle, etc. »

« Refers to a panel of defined genders and to a collection of diverse situations of communication and written, oral, iconic and audio visual documents, which cover the diversity of everyday life, administrative life, media, culture, professional world, etc. » (translation)

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identification of the learners' needs is a necessity to be addressed with the best possible accuracy and to be conducted at many levels: the language needs, the specific needs, the institutional needs, the learning needs. Porcher (1995: pp. 23-25), moreover, emphasises that this data collection must occur before and during the language teaching and learning evolution.

Collecting learner's needs data through questionnaires, as suggested by Chancerel and Richerich (1977), remains a restrictive static operation. In contrast, in a portfolio, the learner's data collection is conducted in an interactive way (a constant dual transmission streamed between teacher and learners, and eventually the parents), potentially during the entire progress of the language acquisition, and that can be implemented as pedagogical class activities. Unlike a questionnaire, the learner is given the possibility to actively and frequently participate in the process of the needs analysis and he/she is allowed to select the information they found relevant to define their objectives. A report compiled by Little ([www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/documents/Exploitation%20du%20PEL.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/documents/Exploitation%20du%20PEL.pdf)) presents nine European case studies of the EPL which show how teachers used the portfolio for languages in their class activities; some of them opted to use the EPL as a weekly activity in class while others used it as a six months project. Unanimously, teachers privileged an interactive mode of delivery by investing in learner peer review and interaction, thereby permitting learners to negotiate meaning in the target language.

#### **Setting learners' motivations**

Motivational strategies in education are a complex problem emanating from a variety of reasons and conditions. Investigating the learner's close environment in order to orientate the pedagogical material selection (as mentioned above) is a first step in increasing the learner's motivation to participate in class, to feel confident and knowledgeable (CEFR, 2001, p. 123).

Moreover, creating an individual communication platform between teachers and learners also facilitates the learner's motivation by desacralizing the rigid poles Teacher vs. Learners (Bérard, 1991, p.58). The privileged exchange condition operated in this process is a contributing factor in increasing the learner's confidence. Including the learner in the whole process is definitely an asset in his/her motivation to progress in his/her language acquisition. The reflexive practice helps the learner to link up his needs, objectives and strategies.

Finally, most portfolios for languages directly ask the learner to assess his/her motivational reasons to learn the FL. The pedagogical stream carried by Carl Rogers defends that motivation is mainly dependant on the learner's intrinsic needs and that the teacher's predominant role relies in driving the learner to be conscious about his/her intrinsic motivations rather than just stimulating them. The EPL chose to directly question the learner about his motivation to acquire the FL. The interesting input of the portfolio is that it allows a long term monitoring of these motivations as they are often evolving with time.

#### **A record of learners' language acquisition**

##### **Covering duration of the portfolio**

The advantageous particularity of a language portfolio lies in the duration it covers. Unlike most of the other pedagogical tools or materials, a portfolio is generally drafted to follow a complete cycle of learning (covering the learner's entire schooling - primary, secondary,

tertiary-, or extended to the learner's ending less lifelong learning) to picture the learner's evolution in his/her linguistic knowledge and skills acquisition. This length of the follow up allows an exclusive traceability of the learner's progress in the language learning process. The teacher's monitoring task should therefore be facilitated and more efficient.

### **The definition of learning content**

A portfolio for languages is aimed at assessing and monitoring the language acquisition of learners. The pedagogical tool needs to be fed by content of acquisition in order to define learning objectives and to assess them through the learner's progression.

The "Warning" section introducing the fundamental principles grounding the CEFR reasserts the needs orientated pedagogy to define a curriculum. However, in order to clarify the language objectives in the learning progression, the European Council harmonized on a common teaching content that arises from ten years of European research on the subject (*Dictionnaire de didactique du Français*, 2003, p.52-53). The chapter three of the CEFR describes in detail the progressive FL acquisition and scales it into 6 different levels. Therefore, the flexibility of the learner's decision into defining his learning content is limited or framed. The EPL defined content is based on this classification and progression. Of course, many other portfolios for languages divert the content adapting their own national syllabuses or private programs as linguistic objectives.

Brushing aside the disillusion of elaborating a complete individual content based learning program directed by the learner, the portfolio for languages has the benefit of providing a platform for the teacher and the learner to discuss the language learning objectives. This step echoes what the CA suggests with the introduction of a "pedagogical contract" between the teacher and the learner. Pallotti (2002) explains that the "teaching-learning contract [between the instructor and the learner] fixes negotiated, shared and accepted rules". In other words, teachers and learners agree on the learning objectives and express their respective contributions to achieve the defined learning goals. The strategies need to be identified and discussed to inform and make learners more responsible.

### **Individual learning styles**

The CA reiterates that individuals' learning styles are part of the heterogeneity problem that teachers need to address in their classes. The remediation of these different ways of learning is to propose diversified ways of teaching so that any type of learner can have an opportunity to perform at his/her best. But the issue rather lies in how to identify these individual learning profiles.

In that perspective, the portfolio for languages is a valuable option. To have a detailed picture of each learner's learning style is a major challenge for teachers. Firstly because of the number of learners they teach to, secondly because each learner accumulates different learning styles so that an individual cartography is necessary.<sup>3</sup> As the portfolio collects activities, self-assessments, productions of each learner, the teacher's task to identify the learner's individual learning profile is more transparent. Moreover, we also know that these learning styles can change during the learning process as they are linked to the learning environment; whether the teacher consciously tries to direct/redirect them or the learner naturally transforms them. Therefore, the duration of the portfolio monitoring can allow a traceability of the learner's learning style evolution.

<sup>3</sup> See the description of learning styles proposed in the book by Bertocchini, P. and Costanzo, E. (2008) *Manuel de formation pratique*, Cle International, pages 40-42.

### **Multilingualism as a worldwide reality**

Bilingualism is a well-researched linguistic profile because it has been a worldwide reality for a while; it is estimated that 60 % of the world population is bilingual (*Dictionnaire de didactique du français*, pp. 35-36). In some countries such as India, the multi linguistic approach poses huge issues for effective implementation since hundreds of languages co-exist on the same territory. The global statistics prove that an average country has a bi or multilingual context. In Europe, where the slightly reduced variety of languages per country remains more manageable, multilingualism is retained as a priority orientation. Political ministers from the European Council recommended in the preamble of the *Recommendation R (82)* 18 that the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe is a common resource that needs to be saved and developed, and that countries should consider it as a source of enrichment and mutual comprehension rather than a communication obstacle (CEFR, 2001, p.10). They strongly encourage that European countries work on common language educational projects, methods, materials in line with the promotion of multilingualism.

### **The multilingualism concept as defined by the common European framework of reference for languages**

The European Council explains that the multilingualism perspective in teaching FL crosses beyond the simple recognisance of diverse languages' presence and their influences on each other during the learning process. They assert that the learner does not only accumulate languages side by side when learning them, but thanks to his/her individual linguistic identity he/she develops a more general communicative skill based on the use of all he/she knows and experienced from the other languages. The process of learning languages is then a global skill and not a compartmentalised skill (CEFR, 2001, p.105-106).

The EPL gives a formal transcription of these different linguistic and cultural experiences. To assess this global communicative skill, the EPL proposes crossed languages activities such as translating a passage into another language, participating to a multilingual conversation, or interpreting a cultural phenomenon according to another culture (CEFR, 2001, p.133). If not all portfolios for languages are identical, most of them are at least bilingual and stimulate this multilingual reflection. If one believes in the 'multilingual global skill', a portfolio for languages can help in valorising multi-disciplinary practice – at least between languages- and can thereby facilitate language teachers' capitalisation of knowledge in a more formal way. We can then assess that the didactic benefice for FL teachers thanks to the portfolio is definitely an added advantage.

### **Methodology towards learners' accountability**

The second Summit of Heads of States in Europe proclaimed the necessity to: "Promote teaching methods for FL that consolidate the thinking, judging, acting freedoms, combined with a sense of responsibility and social know-how" (CEFR, 2001, p.11). According to the CEFR, political ministers from the European Council guaranteed that their European language framework methodology favours the notion of "democratic citizenship" which is identified as a main challenge for the Europe of tomorrow. The EPL also aims at valorising this linguistic political notion. The process of accountability transmitted to learners and the multilingualism promoted in the portfolio should enforce the feeling and understanding of the European identity.

The learning accountability is a process that can be reached in many different ways. As already discussed, the act of asking the learner to identify his/her own linguistic profile and needs in languages is a first stone cast towards his/her independence and responsibility in

the language acquisition process. Same applies to the on-going reflection on the learning objectives where learners are totally involved and has to formulate goals that learners will try to respect (CEFR, 2001, p.145).

### **Self-assessment**

Accepting that the main way of assessing language proposed in the portfolio for languages is the concept of learner self-assessment which does not necessarily mean that the learner is doing assessments alone. Firstly, self-assessment is a skill that learners need to be taught. Secondly, the teacher's reflection on the learner's self-evaluation is compulsory. More than a summative assessment evaluation, the portfolio opens the path for a formative evaluation – meaning that the focus of the assessment even though in connection with a linguistic defined content is aimed at helping in the identification of learners' strengths and weaknesses in order to make instructional adjustments.

As mentioned earlier, the self-assessment process is a foundation of the portfolio for languages. It appears in the general self-reflection that the portfolio for languages encourages the learner to do, about his/her linguistic and personal identity, needs, objectives and learning strategies, and it appears again in the section of self-assessment as compared to the defined content objective. There, the learner needs to evaluate his performances and acquisitions in the FL at different moments of his/her language learning process.

### **The question of the accreditation of the portfolio's assessment**

The problem of the ratio allocated between formative and summative assessments remains a debatable topic between practitioners and theoreticians. In any case, both tend to agree that evaluating the learners' skills and progression in a FL should be conducted in different ways. Therefore, portfolios for languages can be at least considered as complementary assessment tools without necessarily targeting a summative finality. For instance, the EPL affirms that it is not a "substitute of the evaluation proposed by the education system of a country" (EPL, 2006).

### **Learning to learn**

The "learning to learn" process is vital in the CA. Porcher explains, as early as 1995, that the notion of learning to learn is a "decisive education competence" and that 'to learn' is in itself a competence (Porcher, 1995, p.27). The teachers' task is to develop as many strategies to reinforce the learning to learn competence to ensure that the point of focalisation is centred on the learner. Furthermore, Porcher adds: "The goal of teaching is not to explain [...] but to make understand" (*Ibid.*). Therefore, all strategies teaching "learning how to learn" to learners teach an essential skill which learners will keep on developing to get closer to autonomy in their language learning process. As Porcher precises, a language is made to be practical and to put learners in situations that require them to negotiate meaning. A learner basically needs to know 'how to learn' from the beginning of his/her acquisition of the language: how to learn to read, to speak, to answer, to behave...'.

The 'Learning to learn' skill developed in the EPL includes different areas. The section dedicated to draft the learner's linguistic identity and environment could answer the skill 'Learning to learn what is my linguistic surrounding'. The other part proposing the self-assessment based on objectives rather addresses the learning content and learning strategies (learner's needs, objectives, learning profile, strategies) (EPL, 2006, p.7 & 14).

### **Perspective**

Through this short analysis of the concept of a portfolio for languages, it is clear that the pedagogical tool answers most aspects of the CA, especially the notion of *learner centred* material, learning strategies and practice.

At a macro scale, the European Council felt the stake of harmonising language policies, content, methods and objectives among its 'assembled' territory and therefore implemented different projects and material to unify people and communication. At a micro scale, a portfolio for languages can contribute to harmonising the teaching-learning practice at gradual levels: the learner, the class, the school, with parents, between institutions. The portfolio gives the possibility to link up all persons involved in the learning-teaching process. This conversation can be extended to the language teachers from a school, and can stimulate multi-disciplinary activities, or at least a common reflection on the learner's acquisition in a multi-linguistic competencies perspective.

### **Contextualisation**

The preceding section demonstrated the increasing interest in the use of the portfolio tool worldwide. The EPL and e-portfolios are increasingly being accepted as communicative teaching materials. The portfolio provides opportunities for the exploitation of authenticity and realia in language teaching.

In Namibia, the portfolio is a relatively unfamiliar tool. Although teacher training programmes incorporate the pedagogical use of the portfolio tool in teaching, the portfolio remains a theory. The non-existence of a Namibian or African portfolio for languages was always going to make the portfolio a theoretical concept in Namibia, a country faced with insufficient teaching materials, even so with regard to FL, even more so with regard to FFL.

Today, the EPL is used all over the world in FL teaching. While the EPL provides relevant opportunities for FL teaching using contemporary teaching methods, a portfolio that fits the Namibian context is more appropriate. The Namibian Portfolio for Languages (NPL) draws a lot from the EPL, with specific modifications to adapt to both the curricula and educational needs of Namibia. This part explores the relevancy of the NPL, highlighting the differences between the EPL and the NPL.

### **The multilingual scenario of Namibia**

Namibia has more than 13 national languages, each with its unique cultural background. Mono-lingual communities of different Namibian language speakers exist in many parts of Namibia, especially in rural areas. Töttemeyer (2001) argues that the language scene in Namibia is so diverse that it calls for interventions to allow Namibian citizens to communicate with each other and allow children of different ethnicities and mother-tongues to learn effectively in a highly competitive world. Cultural diversity in Namibia continues to grow as more and more different languages are incorporated into the Namibian society. While promoting national multilingual diversity, the Namibian government promotes the teaching of FL such as French and Portuguese in an effort to allow Namibians access to the international community.

Schmied (1991) points out that in Africa the process of nation building is crucial, but there is a need to strengthen ties with other countries for the purpose of economic strengthening. Therefore, the teaching of FL is vital. As countries continue to co-operate and trade in economic and diplomatic areas, the world appears more increasingly a 'global village'. It is said that to equip learners with European language literacy skills would be to enable them

access to international literature. FL, such as French, are increasingly becoming important to the Namibian tourism sector which is drastically expanding.

#### **The Namibian language policy for schools <sup>4</sup>**

The Namibian language policy was adapted on the Constitution of Namibia.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Namibia (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1990, p.3) states:

“The official language of Namibia shall be English. Nothing contained in this Constitution shall prohibit the use of any other language as medium of instruction in private schools or schools financed or subsidized by the state, subject to compliance with such requirements as may be by law, to ensure proficiency in the official language, and for pedagogical reasons”.

Article 3 clause 2 paved the way for the language policy formulation in education as it implies that there is no default relationship between the official language, medium of instruction, and languages taught in schools (Trewby Fitchat, 2000). In the foreword of the language policy (1998) by the then Minister of Education and Culture, Nahas Angula says that the policy:

“Embodies the twin goals of establishing English as the official language, as the official medium of instruction and promoting the equal development of the main Namibian and other languages. As we move towards achieving these goals, ideally all learners should become proficient in at least two languages: their Home Language or Mother tongue, and English. Thus, there can be an appropriate balance between consolidation of the learners’ own culture and background, and acquisition of language, offering wider communication and opportunity. No one should feel that their Home Language is threatened in any way, or that its use should be curtailed. Indeed, we look to the encouragement of a multilingual rather than a monolingual society, but one which uses the official language to unity in diversity “(Ministry of Education and Culture, 1991(b), p.4).”

According to the Minister, the goals of the National Language Policy were to promote English as the official language and for the local and other languages, including FL, to have the same status in education in order to serve the multilingual society of Namibia. A key objective of the language policy is therefore the promotion of multilingualism.

#### **Multilingual education materials in Namibia**

The national language policy for schools in Namibia prescribes that education should promote multilingualism and reject monolingualism. It is expected that by the end of their schooling, children should be proficient in a minimum of two languages. The school curriculum hence prescribes that children be taught two language subjects: *English* and ‘*other*’ language, with the aim of promoting multilingualism. It is therefore logical that teaching and learning materials permit multilingualism.

Likewise, any assessment, and teaching and learning process that is in line with the objectives of the Namibian education curricula should have provisions for multilingualism. The use of a single culture in pedagogical materials at the expense of others can be seen as promoting tribalism at a time where a country such as Namibia is recovering from the disunity caused by the apartheid era. Nevertheless, there is a number of secondary

<sup>4</sup> The Namibian Language Policy for schools – Document written by the Namibian government, through the Ministry of Education to serve as legal document prescribing the use of languages in Namibian schools. The Language Policy was first written in 1990 and revised in 2002.

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school textbooks published in Namibia which contains some background of a multilingual Namibia. However, the same cannot be said about FFL materials in Namibia.

The NPL provides opportunities for learners to develop awareness of how multilingual they are, at the same time relate to the diverse cultures. The language and cultural diversity of Namibia distinguishes the Namibian learners from other learners. A European learner, for example, may only encounter three or four cultures, while the Namibian learner might encounter seven or eight. It is thus important that schools promote multilingualism and multiculturalism, with materials responsive to the realities outside the classroom.

In spite of the emphasised significance of the portfolio, there exists no African portfolio for languages whereas Africa has a unique diverse multicultural and multilingual profile. Since the EPL does not encompass African cultures and experiences, and specific needs of the African learner, it is thus not adapted to the educational learning goals and outcomes prescribed by the Namibian [and African] education system which favours country specific pedagogical materials. The differing education goals of countries dictate a difference in school curricula and syllabi structures. The EPL, designed in accordance to the education goals of European countries, might not necessarily be responsive to the education goals of an African country such as Namibia. For instance, the EPL follows the CERF six levels of acquisition which are accepted as common grading in many European education systems, while the Namibian education system refers to specific syllabi.

The NPL is bilingual. Presented in two languages, English and French, the NPL conforms to the objectives of the Namibian Language Policy for schools. The use of English permits teachers of other language subjects to use it. Although some French cultural aspects were incorporated, particular interest was placed on the culture of the learner's environment.

#### **Self-assessment (opportunities for auto-evaluation)**

Evaluating languages and understanding connections between a learner and his/her language acquisition is not always easy. Unlike skills in subjects such as history or geography, a learner's mastery of skills in language is not always assessable in a single test or examination. Agustina (2011) argues that traditional assessments have been used to obtain learners' grades, which decide a learner's achievement or performance. The fact that emphasis is placed on the learning product rather than on the learning process is a weakness of traditional assessments. Assessing the learning process, however, requires more than a written test or examination.

The learning product entails an ability to perform a particular skill, the processes that an individual goes through are not considered. There are two commonly used types of assessment: formative assessment and summative assessment. Garrison and Ehringhaus (2008) define formative assessment as a part of the instructional process which provides necessary information to adjust teaching and learning while they are happening, while summative assessments are given at a particular time to determine what learners know and do not know.

Savignon (2012) found that contemporary teaching methods such as the CA call for active learner involvement at all levels of teaching and learning. Whether it is in the lesson presentation phase or the assessment, proponents of learner-centred teaching approaches support active learner involvement. More recent moves propose the exploration of notions such as self-assessment and auto-evaluation as means to make learners more reflective of

their learning. In the absence of materials that permit learner self-assessment, traditional assessment tools will continue to be the only option for many teachers.

The Ministry of Education in Namibia remains silent on the forms of formative assessment used in schools, while summative assessment is the most recognized. The NPL might provide opportunities for teachers to have a better understanding of formative assessment at different levels and times of the year.

The EPL, however, is based on the CERF. For the portfolio to be effective, it is necessary that it conforms firstly to the curricula specifications but also to the internationally accepted assessment norms. The combination of the Namibian school curricula assessment guidelines and the CERFL in the NPL provides both a Namibian relevant tool, as well as a tool that can be referred to under the CERFL framework.

Similar to the EPL, the NPL has opportunities for learner self-assessment at the end of each Grade. The NPL is designed for learner use for a period of five (5) years, from Grade 8 through to Grade 12. At various stages of each Grade, learners can reflect on their learning with the help of icons. At the end of the Grade/year, learners are given the opportunity to take stock of the different language competencies they have learned throughout the year. Learners can also see the course content outline for each Grade, and the curriculum requirements. These are central for learner-centred assessment as it guides learners into self-assessment through reflection.

The learner-centred concept has received a lot of attention in Namibia. The government requires that teachers use the learner-centred and learner friendly teaching approaches and methods (NIED, 2003). While the methodology used in lesson delivering is usually learner-centred, teachers do not have much support in the use of learner-centred assessment tools. There exists no directive on learner-centred assessment and / or self-assessment in Namibia. The NPL provides a new sphere of exploitation of the latter concepts by providing guidance in the Teacher's Guide (discussed in the next section).

In Namibia, as in many other African countries, schools are faced with a lack of adequate teaching and learning materials. The available materials do not always provide enough support on assessment of learnt content. Textbooks also do not always contain sufficient learner-centred activities to complement the teacher's activities.

### **The Namibian portfolio for languages**

To many Namibian teachers, the portfolio remains a theoretical concept. Many teachers would perceive the portfolio as a mere document collecting and storage tool. The TG published with the NPL provides guidance to teachers on how to incorporate the portfolio in the classroom. Although many teachers received theoretical training on the use of portfolio in classrooms, many have never seen a printed portfolio. The TG is thus relevant.

The main objective of the TG is to guide teachers on the adaptation of the NPL into their teaching. From the onset, the authors of the NPL remind teachers that the portfolio is essentially the learner's document. It is expected that learners will take ownership of the portfolio and keep it as a personal document which they have to maintain.

Namibian learners sometimes change schools and teachers due to various reasons (e.g. parent migration, teacher resignation). It becomes a challenge for the teacher to trace the learner's learning journey, identifying weaknesses and strengths. The NPL serves as a

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language passport encompassing the language learning journey and providing a platform for the assessment of the learning process. Chapter two of the NPL is especially aimed at tracing the linguistic development of the learner.

Textbooks are usually designed, written and published in countries other than those they are used in. This raises concerns over adaptability and contextual relevancy. The NPL was designed especially to suit the Namibian and African context which is different from the European context. Cultural and learner background, for example, were not considered relevant in the EPL, but these feature on the NPL.

The NPL is a unique portfolio in a form of a booklet that posits itself into an African context, and distinguishes itself from the EPL. The NPL comprises of three chapters with three different purposes. The first chapter is centred on the learner's identity; the second is on the learner's linguistic journey; while the third chapter is a dossier. The first chapter presents the learner's biographical data. The linguistic journey is a recollection of the learner's language learning processes. The dossier is a repository of documents that the learner feels proud of. As in the EPL, the learner has control over what goes into his/her NPL.

#### **A tool defining the learner's profile**

The NPL has four sections in the first Chapter dedicated to collecting data on the learner's identity, interests, environment and background. The learner's daily experiences, hence background, are overlooked in the EPL. The NPL considers these as defining the learner's identity and character. By putting focus on the learner, the NPL subscribes to the communicative language teaching norms. Because of the diverse multicultural make-up of Namibia, it is impractical to generalise learner identity. It is thus interesting that the NPL treats each learner as a unique being with a unique background and unique experiences, consequently unique interests. The four sections in Chapter 1 of the portfolio are:

- My identity
- My environment
- My school
- My location

Namibian classrooms are sometimes characterised by large classrooms with learner sizes of up to 40 or more learners. It gets challenging for teachers to know the individual likes, needs and interests of learners. The four sections enable the teacher to better understand the background and environment of the learner. Information from these sections can assist the teacher in stirring activities in the direction of the interest of learners, keeping the focus on learners.

My identity includes information on the learner's identity, origin and background. Because of the geographical make-up of Namibia, which was divided into language regions during the colonial era, different parts of Namibia have different experiences and backgrounds. For one to fully understand the identity and background of the learner, one needs understand where the learner comes from. The 'My identity' section therefore includes a map requiring learners to show their region of origin. This part also provides information on the languages spoken and learned by the learner, and the reasons the learner chose to learn or to use these languages. This gives the NPL its 'language passport' credibility.

Immediately after the 'My identity section' is the 'My Environment' section which collects data on the nature of the learner's environment. The learner's environment comprises mainly of relatives and friends. Family and friends as important entities in the learner's

environment are given the focus in this section. Information of the family tree and favourite personalities enables the learners to better understand the people in their environment, while at the same time allowing the learners to express their likes and interests.

As part of developing on the learners' interests, the third section of Chapter 1 centres on the data on the school. This complements the preceding section as it also collects data on the learner's environment. Schools, just like homes, are an integral component in the learner's growth. The learner's association to friends at the school and the learner's activities at the school describe the character of the learner. In the NPL, particular focus is placed on collecting data on the school, the principal, and the different register and language teachers of the learner while at the school.

Finally, data on the learner's location concludes the first Chapter. The location is an extension of the learner's environment. Who the learner mingles with in the location can influence the learner's character. Sometimes children can take pride in their locations. Allowing learners to write about their locations not only makes the learning less formal, but it also attracts the learner's interests.

### **The linguistic journey**

As in the EPL, the second Chapter of the NPL is focused on more technical matters. The different learning competencies and syllabus components are captured in this chapter. With the assistance of icons, learners evaluate their mastery of language competencies. Each of the four language competencies (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) has the syllabus objective presented; the learner simply shades the icon that best suits their mastery level.

Self-assessment is especially central in this chapter. Learners are required to reflect on what they have learnt in each month, in each school term. If used at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade, the NPL follows the learner's progression throughout the year, and throughout the secondary school years. Learners then finally reflect on skills they can perform, using the syllabus competency specifications. This provides for the first time in the history of Namibian education, a tool that allows learners to view the outline of their study programme and assess themselves on where they fare on the programme. In brief, learners take a more active participation in their learning, thereby understanding the learning processes they go through. Although 'my linguistic journey' is a more technical chapter, it posits itself in the communicative language teaching approach and the learner-centred requirements.

As part of guidance and support to teachers, activities are provided in the NPL and the TG. The activities are based on the Grade level of the learners and conform to the specific syllabus requirements. In addition, samples of lesson plans on the incorporation of the activities into lessons are provided in the TG. This makes the NPL not only learner user friendly, but the first tool that provides maximum support to teachers.

The NPL is designed for use for a period of over five years, over five different Grades. The longitudinal data collection nature of the NPL provides an interesting perspective on the evolution and growth of the learner, throughout his/her schooling. Considering the economic situations around the world, in Africa in particular, the use of one NPL per learner for a period of five years can be viewed as way of preserving the already limited resources.

As in the EPL, the last chapter of the NPL is a repository of relevant documents. It is a collection of tests, assignments, evaluation activities that the learner is most proud of. It is

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also a platform where learners can store important subject documents such as classroom handouts and notes.

#### **Conclusion**

It is a well-known fact that developed countries had enough time and resources to put into practice the language teaching theories that they developed in the 1970s and the opportunity to create tools fitting these concepts. Among these innovative tools, the Portfolio for Languages has garnered a lot of interest from educators all over the world, particularly proponents of the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

Indeed, moving from theory to practice remains a challenge in language education. The African continent is constrained to putting resources and knowledge together to adapt the theory to their education practice. At a time when some parts of the world are already using e-portfolios, the NPL presents itself as an important step in this fast evolution that is hard to keep up with.

The NPL will be implemented in early 2013 on all 500 Grade 8 learners taking FFL as a school subject in Namibian secondary schools. Before implementation, the NPL work team will provide initial training sessions to FFL teachers to create a better understanding of the exploitation of the NPL. However, the expected constraints in implementation are the frequency of use of the NPL in the classroom without disturbing the normal class proceedings. Therefore, consultations with the teachers of FFL will be done before implementation.

This pilot project will be monitored over a period of five years with regular meetings with the teachers to get consistent feedback. One Grade 8 class will be selected as a control group to get a more accurate trace.

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