

2 Navigating a triple challenge: linguistic, academic, and sociocultural integration of students in refugee-like situations

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Abstract

According to the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), since 2016 many French universities have set up French language teaching programmes for refugees and people with subsidiary protection to respond to their need of linguistic support in French before starting or resuming their higher education studies. Welcoming such students however requires taking into consideration a wide range of complex situations for which the French higher education system is not designed. The universities concerned have therefore to face the same issue: what kind of programme can be set up to support the integration of such students and respond to their linguistic insecurity without altering standards? In 2017, the AUF launched AIMES (Accueil et Intégration des Migrants dans l'Enseignement Supérieur), a programme initiated to support universities willing to develop the appropriate learning structures needed to obtain the accreditation for the University Diploma Passerelle (DU Passerelle), an integrated university diploma aiming to enable students with an atypical background to acquire a B2 level in French, B2 being the language level required to continue their studies at a French university. In this chapter, I will first introduce the CIEF (Centre International d'Études Françaises) of the University of Lyon 2 which is one the language centres involved in this programme. I will then present the CIEF curriculum for the DU Passerelle and finally, develop the teaching

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How to cite: Morel-Lab, A. (2022). Navigating a triple challenge: linguistic, academic, and sociocultural integration of students in refugee-like situations. In C. Hampton & S. Salin (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education* (pp. 23-34). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.56.1370>

methods set in place to respond to the specific needs of the students in refugee-like situations, introducing the notions of *glottophobia* and *bienveillance linguistique* as theoretical tools helping to analyse their linguistic environment.

Keywords: Glottophobia, linguistic insecurity, bienveillance linguistique, DU Passerelle, exiled students.

1. The DU Passerelle – an innovative approach to French learning developed by the CIEF

The CIEF is an institute within the Université Lumière Lyon 2 in France, specialising in linguistic and cultural training for people wishing to learn French. It designs and delivers programmes in French language and culture, and contributes to teacher-training in French as a foreign language (FLE). The CIEF caters mainly for year abroad and exchange students studying at the university, and provides foundation courses for international students wishing to apply to French universities. Most students are enrolled in the DUEF (Diplôme Universitaire d'Études Françaises), a diploma offered at all levels of the CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference for languages) by over 40 universities, and increasingly recognised for access to higher education. Their aim, beyond acquiring their certification, is to practise their French in context, get an international experience, and discover the country, especially its social and cultural environment. Every year, hundreds of students join one of the CIEF's programmes and stay in the city of Lyon for at least one semester. Most of them plan on returning to their home country once they pass their DUEF. Some of them decide to carry on their studies in France in a given field of studies. Various curriculums and programmes have been developed over the years to respond to this consistent activity. Beyond the student population, the CIEF also serves the needs of non-francophone adults living in Lyon. Since 2015 and the surge in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, the number of applicants has increased, leading the teaching team to reconsider the relevance

of the curriculums. This is how a working group was set up to start thinking about innovative approaches to meet the demand of these students in refugee-like situations, who arrive in France without having mastered its language, which represents a serious obstacle to their settlement in what is to become their new home country. In 2018, the CIEF joined the working group that developed the *DU Passerelle - étudiants.es en exil*, a nationwide initiative of the MENs (Migrants in Higher Education) network and the Association of the Directors of University Centres for French Studies for Foreign Students (ADCUEFE). In 2019, the first cohort completed its DU Passerelle B2 CEFR.

2. FLE for students in refugee-like situations

When they register to the CIEF, most of the refugees and asylum seekers have already lived in France for quite some years (between two and five). However, the precarity of their everyday life has not allowed them to learn beyond a survival type of French which is hardly sufficient to get basic employment. Their main reason for applying to the DU Passerelle is to learn standard French as they have come to realise that mastering the language is the gateway to their socioeconomic integration and the unique way to fulfil their dreams of a better life. The CIEF has chosen to develop its DU Passerelle to support all the selected students in fulfilling their aspirations and potential as much as possible. Mastering the language is the main goal, but many other factors must be considered to reach B2 CEFR level. The framework set by the teaching team attempts to take all these different elements into account.

2.1. The framework

The general framework of the *DU Passerelle - étudiant.es en exil* is designed to support exiled people transiting from living in their home country to settling in their host country, enabling their acquisition of B2 level, and preparing them for French higher education or for their return to graduate level employment. All candidates must be at least 18 years old, be a refugee, asylum seeker, or beneficiary of subsidiary protection. They also need to hold a high school

diploma (equivalent to the baccalaureate), or a higher education diploma. Within this general framework, each university implements its own variation according to its approach, resources, and existing practices.

At the CIEF, it has been decided that group sizes do not exceed 15 students. Due to the number of candidates, the selection process takes place in three steps. First of all, there is an online pre-registration. Then applicants have to provide information to confirm they match the requirements. Once applications are completed, all applicants sit a placement test followed by an interview. This enables the teaching team to constitute a group of 15 students whose level in French, personal objectives, and commitment are considered compatible with the programme's aim of reaching a B2 level between September and May.

The equivalent of A2 level is required to be selected. This is a major impediment as most candidates have no knowledge of French at all before reaching the host country, after weeks and weeks of a wretched and sometimes traumatising transit, followed by months and even years of tedious bureaucracy. The survival French they have learnt since their arrival is usually far from being standardised, with often an important gap between their oral and written skills. Due to their situation, exiled people are forced to acquire basic oral skills in order to survive, much before they get the opportunity to work on their writing or reading skills. Only a few of them have had the opportunity to follow proper linguistic training. In any case, the basic sessions that the local authorities have a statutory duty to provide to enable applicants to deal with everyday life during the residency application process are not sufficient to prevent common mistakes and prepare candidates for French university standards. Furthermore, not all of them have yet completed the residency process by the time they apply to the CIEF for this programme which is accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and gives access to reduced tuition fees and subsistence grants. Overall, the main characteristic of this population lies in the heterogeneity of their profile due to the complexity of their various backgrounds and current circumstances. Their determination is usually their best asset, but their life journey and their living conditions – sometimes close to survival – have been identified as their

major drawbacks. All these vicissitudes have been taken into account when designing the curriculum.

2.2. The curriculum

One of the issues of the CIEF DU Passerelle was to keep the framework compatible with the curriculum of the normal DUEF diploma. The DU Passerelle plays the part of an incubator adapting to individual projects. This is seen as essential to the social recovery of these refugee-like students, as many of them used to be students or graduates or established professionals, a status they lost, together with much of their belongings. The curriculum therefore offers a mix between dedicated classes and activities they share with other students. A strong focus is put on social and cultural activities within Unit 5, which represents 44 out of the 240 contact hours of the curriculum. This unit offers a wide range of activities within the university, such as sports or outings organised by the CIEF, as well as other types of activities outside the university, such as volunteering for various organisations.

Eleven hours of individual mentoring are also scheduled, together with a workshop on academic and careers advice, which complements Unit 3 that is dedicated to university study skills. This last topic makes the real difference with the DUEF which does not focus on options after the CIEF, as most enrolled students are meant to return to their home country or already know which studies they want to undertake in France. The last significant difference lies in the reinforcement of the written skills (63 hours instead of 42), as reading and writing have been identified as the main difficulties faced by this population of students whose first language is frequently based on a different alphabet. Apart from these special arrangements, refugee-like students follow the same core curriculum, with a total of 240 contact hours corresponding to 20 hours of classes over 12 weeks.

As an illustration here is the curriculum presented in the B1 syllabus of the DU Passerelle:

- Unit 1 – Oral skills (42 hours) – focuses on phonetics in half groups;
- Unit 2 – Written skills (63 hours) – focuses on constructing an argument;
- Unit 3 – University study skills (21 hours) – focuses on the French university system;
- Unit 4 – Complementary (42 hours) – focuses on French culture and social life;
- Unit 5 – Social and cultural activities (44 hours) – Other activities offered by the university including sports, individual mentoring (11 hours) and a workshop on academic orientation.

To consolidate language acquisition, Units 1 and 2 are based on the same topics as for DUEF students, chosen for their relevance: languages (French as a world language); city (housing, transportation); leisure (money and consumption); health and environment; and human rights and differences (racism, disabilities, sexism...). At the end of the semester, the students from the DU Passerelle sit the same final examinations in Unit 1 and 2 as the DUEF B1 students.

It has been decided that the same teaching team composed of three to four dedicated teachers will manage the programme for several years. This facilitates practice sharing amongst teachers and team-building between teachers and students, which has proved to be essential to the success of this programme and which is now ensured through common teaching methods.

3. The teaching methods

The precarious situation of these students has an impact on teaching methods. Teachers have to take into consideration the fact that they do not live the life of exchange students, free to choose their priorities and organise their free time. Quite the contrary, most of the refugee-like students are young adults who have

to deal with grown-up obligations, either because they have to care for their family or because they are left alone to face the hazards of their new life. One of the main challenges is to make sure they attend classes regularly and keep up with their independent work, without putting them under too much pressure. This is achieved with a balanced timetable and competency-based work. Priority is given to authentic resources in classes, together with outings, such as visiting an exhibition together. The aim is to encourage students to consider their environment in Lyon and the social interactions they can develop there as a source of learning. Over time, it has been identified that their past, often traumatising, social interactions lead to their linguistic insecurity, which is one of the major barriers they have to face in their struggle to succeed.

3.1. Dealing with linguistic insecurity

Linguistic insecurity was first described by the linguist William Labov (1972) in a paper on the social stratification of the pronunciation of common sounds. His fieldwork in three different retail stores in New York demonstrated the gap between social attitudes and speech patterns. In other words, how awareness of not keeping up to the linguistic standards can create a feeling of linguistic insecurity which, depending on the situation, will lead to a wide range of social behaviours such as negative attitudes, lack of confidence when it comes to speaking, and even complete withdrawal from any speech interactions. This gap, which is revealed during a face-to-face formal or informal conversational exchange, or when having to write a paper, or read and complete a form, can have stimulating positive effects on linguistic training when it occurs in a supportive environment. However, as often in the case of exiles and asylum seekers, this awareness can also provoke more negative reactions, when misused speech patterns stigmatise a lack of knowledge of the appropriate codes and norms of the current environment. Consequences of such an awareness are lack of confidence, low self-esteem, social non-integration, and attempts to compensate for what speakers consider as a deficiency.

Such observations can be made among the DU Passerelle students, indicating the instability of their psychological state. Most of the time, nothing in their

previous life has prepared them for feeling dismissed or undervalued for not mastering standard speech patterns. Hence, they remain ill at ease, torn between their will to master standard French, their awareness of their linguistic shortcomings, the need to improve their language practice, and the belief that they will never be able to measure up. This belief is mostly based on the fact that they did not expect learning French to be so difficult, and reinforced by their personal experience of *glottophobia*, by far the most challenging issue the teaching team has to deal with.

3.2. Language insecurity and glottophobia

Most of the DU Passerelle students, who in no way feel, behave, or even look like visiting students enjoying exotic discoveries, have already experienced glottophobia in their everyday life or in their interactions with French bureaucracy before joining the CIEF, and will continue to do so during their studies. This linguistic discrimination derives from dissymmetrical relations which can take violent forms because of cultural and linguistic stereotypes and a lack of experience of otherness. This type of combined discrimination linked to speech patterns was coined under the name of *glottophobie* by the French sociolinguist [Blanchet \(2013\)](#):

“[t]he contempt, hatred, aggression and thus overall rejection of people, actually or allegedly based on the fact of considering certain linguistic forms (perceived as languages, dialects or language uses) used by these people as incorrect, inferior or bad, generally felt when focusing on linguistic forms without always being fully aware of the extent of the effects produced on the people concerned” (p. 45, translated by the author).

The expressions of this glottophobia contribute to the linguistic suffering experienced by and observed in some of the DU Passerelle students during classes. It requires teaching methods capable of rebuilding their self-esteem and taking into account their suffering to make them feel safe while working to improve their linguistic abilities.

3.3. *Bientraitance linguistique* or linguistic healing: a response to linguistic insecurity and glottophobia

Annemarie [Dinvaut \(2016\)](#) first introduced the notion of linguistic healing as a

“teaching posture to encourage speech on all language practices, research posture and action when variations are received with equal esteem to that enjoyed by standard productions. [...] It can refer to macro, meso and micro behaviours. It can be the answer to glottophobia in the political, institutional and professional fields, to the phenomena of undermining and domination” (p. 105, translated by the author).

This transdisciplinary concept can be applied in various ways aiming to build a balanced linguistic relationship between all members of the group: students and teachers.

One of the learning devices which I have tested during classes with the DU Passerelle students is the *art of conversation* ([Morel-Lab, 2020](#)), a very informal introduction to the topic of the session in which everyone is welcomed to contribute by relating personal experiences or sharing anecdotes. Depending on the topic, students are invited to come with a cultural object or something they have created themselves to illustrate what they want to talk about. I have often noticed that speaking out about a personally created item or a cultural object relating to someone’s life or identity facilitates speech production and communication with the rest of the group, whose interest is maintained through the joy of sharing a common discovery. The speaker can then forget about linguistic issues to focus on their desire to communicate, and therefore reduce the stress and pressure due to the fear of mistakes.

To illustrate this point, I will relate one specific moment that occurred after a cultural outing at the *Musée des Confluences*. The photo exhibition we had gone to see was on the Kalash, who are people living in the mountains in the North West of Pakistan. The photographer was there to comment on his photos – mainly portraits and images of traditional events – and share his stories and

memories. The students had many questions to ask and memories to talk about as some pictures reminded some of them of their own previous life. The following week, once back in class, quite naturally, we started to talk about the visit to the museum. One of the youngest students – one of the most insecure too – started to talk about the feelings and emotions these pictures had brought up, how she had kept on thinking about them. Then she started to talk about traditions in her own country, and all the students started to compare their own traditions, what they meant symbolically and socially. They asked me to help them find the right words, the exact expressions. This lasted for quite some time, longer than usual, but this moment stayed as a milestone in their appropriation of the French language.

This transcultural approach, based on an informal conversation in which all students got involved, in the way they wanted and as much as they wished, to share what they believed would be of some interest to the others, contributed to the building of a community capable of accepting and supporting each of its members with their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It participated in the reconstruction of everyone's self-esteem and had an effect on the improvement of linguistic abilities. The young student who spoke up spontaneously for the first time on this occasion was a revelation not only to all the other students who had hardly heard her voice in class until then, but to herself too. Passing this gateway opened the path for her to feel more secure in speaking French.

This occurrence of *bienveillance linguistique* was made possible through an innovative pedagogical approach based on a process – from the preparation for the visit to the exhibition and for the encounter with the artist to the narration of what this experience represented to everyone. In such a process, the teacher, who is the one to initiate the project and who controls its processing, has several roles, from being an organiser to acting as a linguistic mediator facilitating creative communication amongst the group of students in the class. Combined with more formal pedagogical approaches, this holistic approach can offer creative alternatives to support students who have been made to feel insecure in their learning of foreign languages.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the innovative programme set up by the CIEF of the Université Lumière Lyon 2 to help exiled students transiting from their home country to France, their host country. The linguistic and socioeconomic situation of this population necessitated the creation of a dedicated curriculum focusing on cultural and socioeconomic integration as part of the DU Passerelle, a university diploma accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. At the end of the year, divided into two semesters, refugee-like students should reach a B2 CEFR level, as this is a prerequisite for foreigners wanting to study at a French university.

Alongside this dedicated curriculum, special care has been given to the teaching methods. A small team of dedicated teachers supports the 15 students selected. It has been shown that for this programme to succeed, it is vital to take into consideration both the socioeconomic context of these students and their cultural and linguistic background. Healing their self-esteem that has been partly damaged by their experience of *glottophobia*, this linguistic discrimination relaying cultural stereotypes, is one of the key challenges. Based on the principles of linguistic healing, special teaching postures encouraging speech and language practices are consolidated to facilitate the process of appropriation of standard speech patterns. This approach has proved to be helpful in supporting students in refugee-like situations who need to reach a B2 CEFR level, this gateway to fulfilling their career aims in their new life in France. This holistic approach, based on creativity and interactions in which the teacher contributes to the consolidation of a learning community, could possibly open new perspectives in teaching practices and benefit all students experimenting transition in their lives.

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Chapter 2

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin

Publication date: 2022/05/30

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Cover layout by © 2022 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-98-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2022.
