

Bringing Foreign Language Learning into the 21st century

ABSTRACT

Bringing Foreign Language Learning into the 21st Century. The different challenges facing foreign language lecturers are considered as well as the different methods used to teach a foreign language. Technology and multimedia are proposed not only as tools and supports but also as a possible solution. With the change in the student demographics, there is a need for engaged learners to take full responsibility for their language learning. There is also a need for lecturers who are not only language experts but who are also trained in the use of technology and who can facilitate foreign language learning.

Key words:

foreign-language learning; technology and multimedia

Bringing Foreign Language Learning into the 21st century

French foreign language learning has come a long way from the days of *Voici la plume de ma tante*. Not only have methods changed but student demographics also differ. Yet what remains constant is the importance of foreign language learning especially in the light of the international global marketplace and South Africa's position in it. French is important both as an international language and an 'African' language given that it is also spoken in many African countries. As Kasanga and Mathubela (2000:138) state "the maintenance of French as an academic subject, even at universities with low enrolments, is highly justifiable and worthwhile because of the real benefits associated with national needs for international trade, political and diplomatic purposes".

As Cunningham (2001: 201) points out it is imperative to realise that as "the global population increases there is an ever-growing need for communication, equity, access and peace. Languages play a key role in this process of harmonisation and promotion of cultural diversity. Education, communication and languages have never been more important, despite the explosion of knowledge in science, medicine and technology".

Lecturers and teachers do, however, face a number of factors that make the teaching of foreign languages especially challenging. In her article, *The Professional Development of Foreign Language Teachers*, Joy Kreeft Peyton (1997) lists some of these factors, which may be considered challenges, such as the diversity of today's student population, the variety of reasons

for studying a foreign language, and the changing role of the teacher. The objective of this article is to consider some of these factors in the light of the South African context and propose a possible solution.

The first challenge: diversity of the student population

The cultural, socio-economic, linguistic, and academic diversity typical in today's student population requires foreign language teachers to work with students whose needs, educational experiences, and native language skills are very different from those of students they have typically taught. This is one of the most important challenges faced by teachers in South Africa who now have to teach foreign languages to multilingual and multicultural classes with limited resources and a small budget. Several factors influence the students' foreign language learning. "These factors include the linguistic distance between the different languages, students' level of proficiency in the native language and their knowledge of the second language, the dialect of the native language spoken by students (i.e. whether it is standard or non-standard), the relative status of the students' language in the community and societal attitudes towards the students' native language" (Walqui, September 2000).

The student population demographics have changed dramatically in the last five years and provision has to be made for the different language groups in the classroom. Unlike mother tongue acquisition which is subconscious, learning a foreign language after Krashen's "critical age" becomes language learning, "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them" (Krashen in Fromkin & Rodham 1998:349). This leads us not only to the distinction between acquisition and learning but also to the debate on communicative versus traditional teaching methods.

The multilingual context plays an important role in the teaching of French in South Africa in that French is taught as a third language, since the majority of pupils learn two languages formally (either English or Afrikaans and an African language) at school and one or two others informally. This has certain implications for learning French. On the one hand, students are used to a multilingual environment, but on the other hand, French is a Romance language, derived from a group of languages originating in Latin and thus totally different from English, Afrikaans and the African languages. This represents a major obstacle, but one that is not insurmountable.

Another problem compounding the issue is the fact that grammar, whether English, Afrikaans or IsiXhosa is no longer taught at schools. As Van der Walt (1998:30) points out "The teaching of English has recently been influenced by the view of language primarily as a form of communication; a holistic approach to language which argues that we cannot understand form independent of function. As a result, form is often ignored, and many so-called communicative tests contain no grammar. This approach [...] focuses on fluency, and grammatical forms are regarded as secondary issues". The result is that there are lacunae in the language and cognitive skills of learners who register for university.

As Walqui (2000:1) points out "the student's level of proficiency in the native language – including not only oral language and literacy, but also metalinguistic development, training in formal and academic features of language use, and knowledge of rhetorical patterns and variations in genre and style – affects acquisition of a second language".

Teachers should also take into account the fact that students have different learning styles, as well as different strengths and weaknesses. Some prefer a more analytical style than others and prefer to learn the target language through grammar, which they view not as a static system of

rules, but as a rational, dynamic system. Others prefer to use the communicative method to communicate in the target language.

The second challenge: variety of reasons for studying a foreign language

Students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse needs and goals as regards the learning of foreign languages. The different ways they approach this learning require that foreign language curricula and instruction address a range of student goals and learning styles. In South Africa students learn a foreign language, such as French, in order to go to France and be able to communicate, to improve their job opportunities, or to learn a new culture. Teachers need to keep up with the evolving educational landscape and adapt the existing curricula to fit in with the changing needs of this diverse student population.

Students need to be made aware that there is much more to language differences than mere dissimilarities in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Learning a foreign language entails using the activities of any normal communication, i.e. expressing an intention (sending a message), interpreting an intention (receiving a message), and negotiating the intention of these messages. Moreover, learning a foreign language such as French entails becoming familiar with the French culture.

The third challenge: the changing role of the teacher

The emphasis on collaborative learning and student self-directed learning requires that teachers be able to act as facilitators and guides, not just as language experts.

The introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in South Africa has put the accent on learning outcomes and not on content. Outcomes-based education is an education theory that guides curricula by setting goals for students to accomplish. Outcomes-based education focuses more on these goals, or outcomes, than on “inputs”, or “subject units”. It is up to the learners to demonstrate their skill in mastering the knowledge necessary to accomplish these outcomes.

In order to succeed in this, it is necessary for the students to be engaged learners, “who are able to define their own learning goals and evaluate their own achievement. [...] They should know how to learn and be able to transfer knowledge to solve problems creatively” (Jones 1994:1). Thus, whatever the reasons that students choose to learn French, if they are engaged learners, they should be able to cope with the study of a foreign language, no matter how much it may differ from their own mother tongue.

Clearly there needs to be a paradigm shift not only in the role of the teacher but also in that of the learners. They need to be made aware that the teacher is now a guide and facilitator, but that ultimately the students are responsible for their own knowledge. Students have to be actively engaged in learning rather than be passive receptors of given knowledge.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has spelt out the critical outcomes for learners in one its Decision Statements (0204/96). These comprise identifying and solving problems by making decisions involving critical and creative thinking; working effectively with others as a team or group member; communicating effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills; using science and technology effectively, and demonstrating an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognizing that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation. These critical outcomes increase the teacher’s responsibility in that the teacher has to ensure that students attain the level of competency necessary.

A possible solution: the emphasis on technology

The emphasis on technology for language learning and teaching requires teachers to keep informed about new technologies and their instructional uses. Technology plays an important role in the 21st century. This has been demonstrated by the South African Government's strategy and vision for the South Africa of the future (Government's White Paper on Science and Technology). Gauteng MEC for Education, Mr. Ignatius Jacobs announced at a media briefing that 25 schools had been selected for the Gauteng-on-line Pilot Project, a project which will "direct the energy and talents of our learners to constructive learning, and make them part of society's efforts to create jobs and to build our economy" (Jacobs: 2001). R500 million has been set aside for this programme, which aims to integrate technology into the classroom. The Government's stance on technology is clear (see: SAQA critical outcome on technology) and technology is here to stay. Foreign language teachers in South African schools and universities should thus be encouraged to integrate technology into their teaching. This can be done in various ways: by using the World Wide Web and the Internet, by using educational software programmes, and by using French TV programmes as instructional material.

The World Wide Web and the Internet

The 21st century is the age of information and communication and as such the Web becomes a tool to facilitate sharing and discovering information.

An important aspect of using the World Wide Web is that interactive lessons are available twenty-four hours a day, allowing students to work at their own pace.

Students can also receive input from a number of sources and teaching is not limited to one individual and one method, as is often the case in small language departments nowadays. An example of a website which gives access to a multitude of information is Tennessee Bob's Famous French Links (<http://www.utm.edu/departments/french/french.html>). Students have the choice of the following sub-headings:

- Finding new Francophone Sites
- Books and Literature
- Art, Music, Film and General Culture
- History of France and the French-Speaking World
- Virtual Francophone Tourism
- The French Language
- Press, Radio/TV, Telephone
- Education in French-Speaking Schools
- French across the Curriculum and in Everyday Life

Another excellent site is the Foreign Language Lesson Plans and Resources Page (<http://www.csun.edu/~hcedu013/eslp.html#LessonPlans>), which offers many lesson plans and activities at different levels. One of the activities, for example, is "Le Shopping à Paris" (<http://members.aol.com/classweb/activities97/paris.html>).

In this activity the students visit websites to shop from Les Trois Suisses, the popular mail order-catalogue that people in the French-speaking world use to buy clothes, home items and gifts. The student learns to choose different items of clothing, sizes, prices and colours.

Software programmes

There are many different software programmes for teachers wishing to adapt them to a particular curriculum. There is no ideal programme as yet, as there are still bugs present, but there are some programmes that are useful for pronunciation exercises, dictation and interactive comprehension exercises. One such programme is Auralog's Parle-moi CD for débutant moyen (Beginner) and Avancé (Advanced). This programme has vocal recognition and voice analysis functions and allows students to record and hear their own pronunciation of certain French sounds. The programme also has a translation function for the students who do not understand complicated sentences. A possible problem is that the translation is in English and there is no equivalence or reference for those students whose mother tongue is not English.

At the University of Port Elizabeth, we have been experimenting with the integration of technological sources with more traditional teaching. Our French beginners' students have two formal lectures a week (1 hr 15 minutes each). To these lectures we add a practical session where use is made of the Language Laboratory. During these practical classes, we use the Parle-moi CD (Débutants). We have found that students like to re-inforce their pronunciation by listening to the native speaker and then recording their own pronunciation. However, background noise and bugs in the software programme are a problem, as the programme accepts the wrong answer or rejects the correct one. We have also found, that it is desirable to alternate these practicals with conversation classes to avoid too much repetition of the same activity.

Auralog has recently brought out the Parle-moi Encore series, which has a beginners', intermediate and advanced CD-ROM. Auralog claims that this method is the complete solution to a personalised learning experience. It includes 200 hours of teaching and more than 1000 exercises. Using the most advanced technology, this series has the usual vocal recognition and voice analysis function, phonetic exercises, as well Internet services and videos in MPEG format which can improve the student's comprehension. This programme allows a student to choose between the guided mode, which is a tailor-made course, or free-to-roam mode, which allows the learner to choose whichever exercise best suits him or her. This programme also allows the student to choose his/her learning priorities from the four basic skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. The learner follows a progressive learning path and has a progress chart to show whether he or she is making progress. An added feature of this programme is that you can have access to an online tutor to help you. Access is free for 15 days, after that you have to pay \$259. You do, however, have free access to the Auralog website (<http://www.auralog.com>) if you want to go into a Chat room or visit the Horizons section with travel, work or lodging information.

Using Neuro Concept's Dites-moi programme will help students attain a more advanced level in French. Paul Estrade, Christian Destarac and Christiane Magne who are the creators have devised 40 modules with tests and exercises as well as voice recognition and recording functions to help intermediate and advanced students in their language training.

EuroTalkInteractive's Apprenez le français is "an excitingly different language learning series", according to the creators. It uses games and quizzes as a basis for making the learning process fun and relaxing. This CD is ideal for beginners who want to learn greetings, useful phrases, food vocabulary, numbers, etc. It allows the student to record his/her pronunciation and compare it to the correct French one. It also has multiple questions to test a student's progress and a useful picture dictionary, which may be printed.

Thus the use of software programmes can be an innovative instructional method whereby the teacher-oriented classroom method is centred on interactive learning and obliges the student to concentrate on the four major elements of language learning: reading, writing, speaking and

listening. Moreover the use of a software programme helps with the integration of various cultures, as in front of a PC everyone is on an equal footing. The ideal would be to have a program, which would cater to the unique needs of South Africa. At present, most textbooks and accompanying CDs have cultural comparisons with America or Britain.

Games

Games are a wonderful way to teach the students certain concepts while they are having fun. The use of games also makes students more receptive to new information. Syracuse Language Systems have a games CD, *La méthode de Langues Multimédia*, which is excellent for reinforcing basic vocabulary usage. There are twenty-seven games at different levels of difficulty on the CD. The student controls what he or she wants to do, by choosing which vocabulary he or she wants to practice. The student works at his or her own pace and may stop and repeat any exercise that is not clear. These are not lessons but games, which help students to learn and immerse themselves in the foreign language.

Another excellent software programme is the Language Publications Interactive game *Qui est Oscar Lake? (Une aventure interactive pour apprendre une langue)* which is also available in English, German, Spanish and Italian. The creators point out that “*Qui est Oscar Lake? ouvre la porte à une nouvelle génération de CD-ROM, il est le premier programme au monde de ce type: jouer pour apprendre une langue étrangère Oscar Lake vous plonge dans une aventure en pays étranger et vous oblige à résoudre l’énigme dans la langue du pays*”. [“*Qui est Oscar Lake?*” opens the door to a new CD ROM generation; it is the first programme of this kind in the world which allows the student to play in order to learn a foreign language...Oscar Lake launches you into an adventure in a foreign country and forces you to solve the mystery in the language of that foreign land.] This programme promises total immersion in the foreign language. It teaches a student 1200 words, allows students to interact with the characters in French and record their pronunciation. It also has a translation function. This programme encourages students to learn by challenging them to solve a crime. The importance of the games approach to learning should be stressed as it maintains the students’ interest and motivates them.

Multimedia, Television and culture

The problem of immersion is a major one facing French language teachers in South Africa, as we are far away from France and everything is in English, the official administrative language. Learning through multimedia can be extremely successful provided that an adequate balance between the new methods and the traditional methods is established. As Wright (2001) states “the use of multimedia allows students to interact with the computer and the combination of graphics, text and sound allows students to learn through their different senses, involving almost every aspect of their physical and intellectual selves in the learning process”. Technology can offer support in a variety of ways and offers a solution to some of the challenges facing a French language teacher in South Africa.

Students do benefit from watching French videos, television programmes in French and reading French magazines. However, they do not hear spoken French often and multimedia may be a solution as there are many video snippets with audio on the Internet. Students need to be made cognisant of the fact that communication in a different culture also has a large part, which is non-verbal. We need only consider the importance of greetings in different cultures to understand the importance of non-verbal communication.

When greeting a person, the French like to add a name or *Monsieur, Madame* or *Mademoiselle*, such as *Bonjour, Monsieur* or *Salut, Pierre*. For Xhosa society, greetings are very important as they indicate an interest in someone's health and are also a sign of respect. Thus if you know the people you are greeting and they are your age, you use *bhuti* (brother) or *sisi* (sister). If they are your parents' age, you use *tata* (father) or *mama* (mother). If they are your grandparents' age, you use *tatomkhulu* (grandfather) or *makhulu* (grandmother). A married woman whom you do not know is addressed as *nkosikazi* (ma'am), an unmarried woman is addressed as *nkosazana* (miss) and a man as *mhlekazi* or *mnumzana* (sir) (Dowling: 26).

The French differentiate between the polite *you (vous)* and the familiar *you (tu)* to show intimacy or respect. Afrikaans distinguishes between the polite *u* and the informal *jy*, whereas IsiXhosa makes the distinction between *you* singular or plural by means of a prefix, but does not differentiate between formal or informal. English only has one *you* form which is used for both singular and plural.

France's TV5 has sites with interactive programmes corresponding to its television programmes. These programmes could be used by French language teachers who are faced with the problem of understanding differences between the students' own culture and the French culture.

An excellent site on the Internet for learning about French culture is Marie Ponterio's site (<http://www.cortland.edu/flteach/civ/Index.html>). This site offers useful information, questions to test one's knowledge, photos of daily life, audio recordings, video interviews, role plays, proverbs and jokes, film titles, etc. The main section that offers audio passages with video snippets has a comprehension section with *passages à trous*. Our students utilise this site to do oral presentations on a specific topic.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to enumerate some important challenges facing a French language teacher in the South African context. In my role as a French lecturer at the University of Port Elizabeth, I have had to face all the above challenges.

As a solution to some of the problems facing language teachers in the present context and situation, I suggest that the Government's emphasis on technology should be supported, in order that learners may "use science and technology effectively and critically (Critical Outcomes 1997). Technology can add a new dimension to the classroom that can facilitate language learning" (Wright: 2001). Technology should be used to complement rather than replace the traditional language teaching methods.

However, the use of technology may be limited by certain logistical problems. The use of technology is dependent on the number and availability of computer systems, the time available, the level of computer literacy of the students and the availability of adequate software. There is also the question of teacher training.

We should take cognisance of the fact that technology in and of itself is not the answer; it cannot replace the teacher, but it may be a useful tool to help teachers facilitate the learning of a foreign language. According to Paulsen (2001:2) FL Tech Strategies that work are "meaningful, interactive and user-centred, [and] increase the ability to communicate and to understand other peoples and cultures. They open the world to the students and open the students to the world. They motivate deeper and longer sequences of foreign language study".

In conclusion, I would like to state that technology, as a support for French language learning, is one of the answers we are looking for, provided that certain important factors are considered.

These factors include the following: the students' needs and priorities must be considered; flexible classroom-designed instructional activities must be designed to meet these needs; the teacher should receive individualised technological training, and classroom-specific performance-based assessment methods should be drawn up, in other words "the relationship between technology and learning could be summarised simply: the success of educational technology is totally dependent on collaboration between all parties that include learners, facilitators, designers, and technological tools" (McNaught & Amory. 2001: 152). If we could achieve all this, we would then be bringing foreign language teaching into the 21st century.

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