

Towards an integrated curriculum for French: A case study

A B S T R A C T Within the new education context in South Africa, French has to re-invent itself in order to demonstrate its relevance in a multicultural and multilingual society. Traditionally the teaching of language at tertiary institutions has been inward-focused and the language itself has been the emphasis. But in an environment in which the integration of theory and practice is stressed, particularly with the creation of comprehensive institutions, it is necessary for languages, and in this case French in particular, to interrogate the integration of their curricula into the broader programme framework. In so doing, the emphasis shifts from language-specific knowledge to transferable skills applied within the linguistic context. Our article will therefore focus on a particular theme-based project that seeks to improve linguistic competence in an applied context and therefore demonstrate the potential to integrate the teaching of French into a discipline-specific programme.

Keywords: task-based learning, French for specific purposes, integrated curricula, linguistic practice, applied learner-centred teaching.

1. Introduction

The teaching of French as a foreign language presents us with very specific challenges. Not only is the teaching of a foreign language at tertiary education level hampered by the difficulties of language acquisition at a later age, but the South African context provides little opportunity to practise skills learned and little incentive to rather learn French than local languages. Despite this, French has a role to play in Africa and in particular in South Africa, and within this context, teachers of French as a foreign language must adapt their methodologies to the specific needs of their students. This article will argue that the French language courses can be revitalized by using task-based language teaching (*Le Français à Objectifs Spécifiques*) and illustrates this by a case study done at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU).

2. Background of the project

The French discipline and the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy in the School of Language, Media and Culture at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University devised a plan of action for an innovative cooperative project for their students.

The objective was to design a language teaching curriculum that addressed what Jordaan (2004:233) refers to as "the stated commitment by the Department of Education to a mode of knowledge production and application that transcends the conventional boundaries between academic education and vocational training". Therefore, given the fact that the NMMU has become a comprehensive institution since its merger at the beginning of 2005, French needed to show that learning the language would lead to greater employability for the students – a balance had to be found between maintaining the standards of a conventional university and the vocational and practical training needed to compete in the 21st century.

The project was initiated once the need to restructure the French language section of the curriculum at the NMMU was identified. Traditionally the French language section of the curriculum at NMMU focused on the basic communication competencies of reading, writing, speaking and comprehension. Within the current context, however, it became necessary to realign this section of the curriculum with the needs of the students and the core focus of the School of Language, Media and Culture.

This would be in line with the South African Quality Assurance vision (2000:9) that states that "the NQF is primarily about systemic change: how a system is put in place that allows for adaptability, flexibility, responsiveness and accountability in setting standards, relevance, quality, creativity and accountability in the design and implementation of learning programmes".

The restructuring sought to incorporate an integrated applied focus to the French language section of its curriculum through a linkage with the BA Media, Communication and Culture programme. The curriculum would need to change in order to allow room for new approaches to release the students' potential. As Marie-José Gremmo posits (in *Le Français Dans Le Monde 2001:125*), we need « la mise en pratique, chez chaque apprenant d'une méthodologie d'apprentissage adaptée à la fois à la nature de l'aptitude d'expression orale, et à sa personnalité d'apprenant". [For each learner, we need to put into practice a training methodology adapted both to the aptitude for oral expression and to his or her personality as a learner.]

Notwithstanding the fact that the study of literature is still paramount in university studies, it was argued that a new approach was needed to teach the French language component of the course. Therefore, an applied methodology was devised to bring the teaching of French into the 21st century and to demonstrate the usefulness of the language to the student. This new methodology needed to incorporate both the analytical skills of literary analysis and a brand new approach to language teaching that did not rely solely on grammar teaching or on the popular communicative approach

Thus, with the assistance and support of the Alliance Française and the sponsorship of the French Embassy in South Africa, the project aims to create a greater synergy between the French and Media curricula at the NMMU. This is being accomplished through the integration of media projects into the curriculum, such as the creation of a blog, an online newspaper, the

writing of press releases and the teaching of interviewing techniques within an applied context. The rationale for the focus on media is that a survey carried out by the French discipline revealed that 77% of students taking French at NMMU are Media students.

3. Delineation of key stages

The project is envisaged to last three years and evolve in different stages, which will now be discussed:

Stage 1: Students learned interview techniques in order to interview French-speaking athletes taking part in the Ironman 2007 triathlon which took place in Port Elizabeth in March 2007.

Stage 2: Students were taught to write short articles using their interviews of the Ironman athletes.

Stage 3: The English press releases and articles were translated into French.

Stage 4: A blog was created.

Stage 5: An online newspaper is ultimately to be produced in the longer term.

Stage 6: The end objective is to publish a hard copy newspaper.

This investigation into developing new techniques to encourage and motivate students to improve their French comprehension and writing skills is intended to be a collaborative effort between lecturers and students, and "aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore both spoken and written language through learning activities that are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes" (Curriculum Development Council in Nunan, 2004: 14).

4. Project theme

For this project, it was decided that the focus would initially be theme-based. Thus the Ironman South Africa 2007 triathlon was chosen for the first stage. The Ironman 2007 triathlon is a race combining swimming, cycling and running, that attracts hundreds of competitors from all over the world.

The Ironman per se dates back to 1978 in Hawaii when the three disciplines of swimming, cycling and running were brought together into one great endurance race.

The Ironman triathlon that took place in March 2007 in Port Elizabeth was an endurance race that attracted 1500 athletes from all over the world. The triathlon consisted of a 3.8 km swim, a 180 km cycle race and a 42.2 km run. It started at 07:00 from Hobie Beach on the Port Elizabeth beachfront and ended at midnight on the same day. Everyone who crossed the finish line was deemed a winner and was presented with a medal.

There were various events throughout the week with the climax on the Sunday when the Ironman itself took place. The events included a pasta party (which helped the athletes socialize while carbo-loading), an IronKids event in which children took part in a swim and a run, and a Corporate Challenge race for companies.

The production resulting from this stage would be a series of articles based on interviews with the Ironman triathletes. This would be in the same vein as the Alter-mondial sample site (www.alter-mondial.org), an online newspaper about the Soccer World Cup held in Germany in 2006. This online newspaper was created by student journalists from the Centre de Formation et de Perfectionnement des Journalistes (CFPJ), one of the two top Journalism Schools in Paris. Working journalists involved in continuing education focused on all aspects of the Soccer World Cup except sport, that is, the social, economic and political aspects of the event.

The Ironman South Africa organizers agreed that French coverage of the event would be beneficial to all concerned, as one of the largest groups participating was the Francophone contingent. The implementation of the project took the form of ten interviews which were organized during the week of the Ironman competition. It was decided to use the interview technique since:

L'interview se prête bien au travail journalistique en classe. De l'idée au texte final, le processus peut en effet s'étaler sur plusieurs séances et permet d'aborder des tâches spécialisées telles que la recherche d'information (pour préparer l'interview), la circonscription du thème de l'interview, la rédaction de questions ouvertes ou encore la synthèse. (http://www.franparler.org/fiches/presse_interview.htm).

[Interviews are ideal for journalistic work in the classroom. From the initial idea to the final text, the process may, in fact, be spread out over several sessions and allows the students to tackle specialized tasks such as research information (in order to prepare the interview), the choice of the theme of the interview, the drawing-up of open-ended questions or even the synthesis.]

The idea of embarking on a project of this nature was prompted by the need to empower the students and thus release their potential to speak, write and comprehend the French language in a modern-day context that would have relevance to their studies. Since French is part of a larger programme rather than the core focus, the discipline recognized the need to integrate its methodologies into the broader curriculum rather than remain inward-focused and discipline-specific.

An editing team was selected from the senior French students to guide and facilitate the production process and students from the second and third year contributed to the project at different levels. Students were divided into groups of four and had to draft questions that were to be used during the interviews. The students followed the procedures recommended by Cohen, Manion, Bell, and Spradley (in Nunan, 1999: 151-153):

- Preparing the interview schedule. At this stage the question format needs to be devised once the research objectives have been established.
- Piloting. It is important that the interview questions are piloted with a small sample of subjects before being used in order to eliminate any questions which may be ambiguous or confusing to the interviewee.
- Elements of the interview. It is possible to delineate a number of key elements that need to be present, such as briefing the interviewee on the nature of the research and the purpose of the interview.

As mentioned above, the facilitator needs to prepare and pilot the interview schedule. This is done by explaining the different types of interview to the students (our type would be a

combination of an informative and a portrait interview), asking them to research the subject chosen (in this case the Ironman South Africa triathlon), and preparing their questions, stressing the fact that they need to learn the vocabulary that is part of the lexical field of sport.

In this way, the students practise not only their French linguistic abilities, but also their analytical skills by identifying the core focus of the interview and their research skills. The result is skills learning that is transferable across linguistic boundaries.

According to Martin-Lagardette (2005: 128) "le rôle du journaliste est très important pendant l'interrogation elle-même. Mais il ne doit pas transparaître dans la mise en forme. Les **questions** doivent être visuellement courtes, pour mettre en valeur les réponses » [The role of the journalist is very important during the interrogation itself. But it must not appear in the transcription. The **questions** must be visually short, to emphasize the answers].

Subsequently the students were taught the six key questions that journalists need to answer in order to write a good article: (a) **Who?** This is the subject of the information (a person, an event, a fact); (b) **What?** This is the action, the verb of the sentence; (c) **Where?** In what country, city, establishment, room; (d) **When?** The date (day and month) ; (e) **Why?** The causes, objectives, reasons, and (f) **How?** By which means? In what way?

(Translated from Martin-Lagardette 2005: 40-41).

The students' interviews were to be a mixture of the acquisition of information and the discovery of the person's personality.

5. Tasks

As mentioned above, in order to meet the requirements for this practical exercise and assessments, the students needed to complete certain tasks to demonstrate their competence in applying their knowledge. These tasks included the understanding of interview techniques and how to conduct interviews (see Appendix B); the translation of articles and press releases; the transcription of interviews; the writing of articles based on the interviews as well as on the Ironman events and activities, and the mastering of journalistic writing and style in French.

As Martin-Lagardette (2005:39) states "l'on entend par là une écriture qui privilégie la concision, la description des faits, la vulgarization. C'est un style en quête **d'efficacité**: il faut se faire comprendre en peu de mots, éviter les digressions ». [What is meant by a journalistic style is writing that privileges conciseness, the description of facts, popularisation. It is a style that is on a quest to find efficiency: to make one understand in a few words, to avoid digressions.]

This is in contrast to the traditional focus of academic writing in French which has privileged the "analyse de texte" (academic essay) as the predominant form of writing, and brings a new, more applied dimension to the French curriculum, a different genre.

6. Language learning and methodology

It was felt that there existed a need to balance critical/analytical skills with practical skills. Moreover, it would be useful for students to move out of the classroom and interact in real-world activities. This would be role-play on a higher level with its distinctive features being the balance of theory and practice. In order to meet their objectives, the students were taught the necessary

semantic and lexicographical formulas, such as the interrogative form, the polite conditional and the sport vocabulary necessary to conduct the interviews (see Appendix A). The semantic field of the sport vocabulary was given to the students both in order to help them formulate the questions for their interviews and to help their oral comprehension skills since the athletes would be using a specific kind of vocabulary, such as "crossing the finish line", "the starting line", etc. This introduction of a specific lexical field would add to their traditional vocabulary.

In addition to the semantic and lexicographical formulas, the students had to learn how to write articles in the journalistic style as mentioned above:

« Pour être efficace et donner un bon article, une interview doit être bien menée par s'informer sur le sujet de l'interview (articles déjà parus, livres, rapports, autres interviews) s'informer sur la personne interviewée.

Cela permet non seulement de faire évoluer l'entretien en fonction des réactions de l'interlocuteur mais aussi de noter immédiatement les éléments saillants que vous allez mentionner dans votre article » (www.franc-parler.org).

[In order for an interview to be effective and produce a good article, it must be conducted well by collecting information about the subject of the interview (articles that have already appeared, books, reports, other interviews), that means obtaining information about the subject being interviewed.

This allows the interviewer not only to allow the interview to develop according to the reactions of the interviewee but also to write down immediately the salient elements that are going to be mentioned in your article].

Moreover, Swarbrick (1995:82) insists on the autonomy of language learners if they are "to be efficient communicators in their target language. This entails being aware of the socio-pragmatic requirements of the different situations in which they will be called upon to use the target language: sensitive to the various psychological relations they will have to the different persons with whom they must communicate: and capable equally of taking initiatives in communication and responding to the initiative of others".

Linguistic competence is the core focus of the exercise. However, it was also important for students to recognize the integration of what they learned in French into the broader BA Media, Communication and Culture curriculum. In so doing, students would no longer compartmentalize their learning but rather apply it across discipline boundaries, resulting in a unified and cohesive body of knowledge and set of skills that have a meaningful impact on their future careers.

The methodology used was mainly a qualitative one with a quantitative approach to the findings of the case study as will be explained later.

7. Cooperation with the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy

In line with this integrated focus, the French discipline extended its cooperation with the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy to allow for cross-pollination of ideas and the interaction of students across disciplines. The cooperation with the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy therefore also consisted of using or 'hiring' the expertise of video production stream students to assist with the project by videotaping the interviews and producing usable video clips.

Ultimately, design stream students will be approached to help with the design of the online newspaper as well as with the layout of the hard copy newspaper which is to be the culmination of the project and the goal of which is to cover the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa.

There is also an exchange of knowledge between the two departments with Media providing the journalistic expertise and the French students supplying the linguistic ability needed for communication in the language.

The intention is to have exchanges about points in common between the French students and the Media students. The goal is for the project to be a communication tool in both French and English.

8. Findings

Stages One to Four have been successfully completed. Students gained insight into interviewing techniques and improved their oral comprehension skills and writing competencies. Lecturers in the French discipline guided them in the process.

The second-year students who interviewed some of the French athletes, subsequently had to write articles based on their transcriptions of the interviews. One of the skills to be mastered was how to write *résumés* of the interviews. This entailed both comprehension and writing skills. The interviews with athletes originating from all parts of the world, such as Cameroon, Reunion Island, New Caledonia, France, Oman and Canada, was not only an oral and comprehension exercise but an intercultural one as well as it was an opportunity for students to meet and interact with Francophone people from the different corners of the world.

The third-year students had to apply their translation skills as well as their comprehension and writing skills. Their brief was to translate the English press releases and articles written by the Ironman organizers into French. They were thus exposed to translation theory and techniques. The improvement in their writing skills, added to the thrill of seeing their articles with their own by-lines printed on the Ironman Nice site, boosted their self-confidence and motivated them to continue on their learning curve.

The senior students were also required to attend the various Ironman events, such as IronKids, the Pasta party and the race itself, in order to write brief articles on each. They had to take cognisance of the fact that they were not to report on the sports results but rather on the social aspect directly related to the contestants. These articles were subsequently published on the Ironman France website (http://www.triangle-events.net/netautor/napro4/appl/na_professional/parse.php?mlay_id=2500&mdoc_id=1008772#popup).

A second phase of the project was to create a blog which was to be the product of students' perspectives on French and Francophone culture. This was created successfully and may be viewed at <http://lesilluminations.over-blog.fr>. The blog contains several categories of interest to the students and ranges from short stories to the Ironman coverage to recipes. This is an extension of the IronMan project, but focuses on the broader context rather than the event itself and utilizes the skills learned during the initial phase.

9. Evaluation/Assessment

Skehan (in Nunan, 2004:3) puts forward five characteristics of a task, three of which are relevant

to our project: a relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority, and the assessment of the task is in terms of outcomes.

The relationship to real-world activities is applicable in terms of the IronMan coverage, as the students' task involved interviewing French-speaking athletes from all over the world and offered them the opportunity to submit articles to real websites and magazines and have them published.

Moreover, 'task completion' had priority, as the interviews had to be conducted in time for the Ironman website deadline. Thus discipline in producing an article was tantamount and the students were exposed to the realities of real-world journalism in an international context. Lastly, the 'assessment of the task is in terms of outcomes', and in this case the outcomes were the productions of the students, who were then assessed on their work. This formed part of the French evaluation for the language module and was therefore both formative and integrated. The students were assessed throughout the process in order to gauge their progress in applying the theory in practice.

10. The learning experience: findings

In introducing new methodologies into the classroom, it is important to reflect on the process and its strengths and weaknesses. It was thus necessary to evaluate the integration of this exercise into the curriculum and the experience of the students in this regard.

A questionnaire was drawn up to assess the success or failure of the project (see Appendix C) and demonstrates the students' positive experience of this kind of evaluation.

Of the students that completed the questionnaire, 100% stated that they would participate in such a project again.

The results of the questions to gauge competencies revealed:

Almost 72% of the students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to practise linguistic skills and to interact with French-speaking people; 36% specified that the real-world experience was the most enjoyable aspect, while 46% indicated that the application of a specific field of study in French was most useful.

It was also important to assess the students' own understanding of the competencies the exercise aimed to improve. The majority, 75%, felt that the exercise allowed them to practise their speaking skills, 43% indicated that it allowed them to practise comprehension skills, 11% reading skills and 61% writing skills, while 29% indicated that all four basic linguistic competencies were practised.

More importantly, the students were asked to assess which of the competencies they felt improved as a result of the exercise.

Speaking (61%) and writing (36%) showed the most improvement from the students' self-assessment. Seven per cent indicated that they felt their reading had improved, 21% that their comprehension had improved and 21% that all four linguistic competencies had improved.

The project therefore also aimed to provide the students with the opportunity to reflect on the learning process and monitor their own progress and development in the language.

While self-assessment is important, the lecturer also noticed a genuine improvement in linguistic competency in the four areas of communication after the exercise. Though this was not a uniform improvement across all students and levels, it did signify the utility of the exercise in terms of the learning goals.

11. Conclusion

The aims and objectives of the project for the first few stages have been successfully met. The results indicated an improvement in the writing and comprehension proficiency of the students. The final objective is to produce an online newspaper as well as a printed newspaper with the 2010 Soccer World Cup as its theme. The end result should show a greater synergy between the French and the Media curriculum.

The project has been formative in nature and is intended to provide an ongoing growth of the curriculum. The transformative and innovative theory was geared towards student empowerment and the theory that there is no growth without motivation; it also led to social or community involvement. It permitted students to release their potential and apply their learning in a new context, which allowed them to see the cohesion in what they were studying and the utility of the subject.

To summarize Cerette (in *Le Français Dans Le Monde*, 2001: 130-131), the success of the project was measured by the fact that the students were able to practise three types of knowledge: a) how to be a better listener, b) how to learn to use their linguistic knowledge and c) how to learn to use cultural knowledge. Therefore, this project provides not only a motivation for improved language use but is also a gateway to international and interdisciplinary communication.

Though this project focused on cooperation with the BA Media, Communication and Culture programme, the methodology used could be applied to other programmes in which French is offered, such as in a tourism curriculum that could make use of a practical real-world exercise in order to test and develop linguistic competency among students. The focus is therefore on the integration of the language into the broader programme. In this way French will no longer be an ancillary elective or a stand-alone subject but an integral and integrated part of structured programmes that focus on producing students with demonstrable skills within a specific discipline.

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APPENDIX A

Lexique du sport/Sport vocabulary

Discipline	Discipline	Entraîner	To train
Accident	Accident	Franchir	To cross
Accomplissement	Accomplishment	Gagner	To win
Arbitre	Referee	Lieu/zone de départ	Starting place
Assistance	Aid	ligne d'arrivée	The finish line
Athlète	Athlete	Ligne de départ	Start-off line
Catégorie d'âge	Age category	Longueur du parcours	Length of course
Chute	Fall	Marquage	Body marking
Circuit	Course	Médaille	Medal
Classement	Placement	Nager	To swim
Classer	To place	Natation	Swimming
Compétition	Competition	Parcours	Course
Concurrent	Competitor	Pasta party	Carbo loading party
Coureur	Rider, runner	Persévérance	Perseverance
Courir la distance	Complete the distance	Régime alimentaire	Diet
Course	Race	Règles	Rules
Course à pied	Run	Retirer de la course	To drop out of the race
Course à pied	Foot race	Sportif/sportive	Sporty
Cyclisme	Cycling	Temps limite	Time limit
Départ	Start	Temps total/final	Overall finish time
Disqualification	Disqualification	Triathlètes	Triathletes
Enregistrement	Registration	Triathlon	Triathlon
Enregistrement des temps	Recording of times	Vainqueur	Winner
Entraînement	Training		

APPENDIX B

An example of an interview:

1. Pouvez-vous vous présenter s'il vous plaît: votre nom, votre âge, votre métier.
(Could you please introduce yourself: your name, your age, your profession).
2. Est-ce que c'est la première fois que vous participez à l'Ironman en Afrique du sud?
(Is this the first time that you are participating in the Ironman in South Africa?)
3. Pourquoi avez-vous choisi l'Ironman en Afrique du sud?
(Why did you choose the Ironman in South Africa?)
4. Quel est votre motif à participer à l'Ironman?
(What is your motive for participating in the Ironman?)
5. Combien d'heures par semaine entraînez-vous?
(For how many hours a week do you train?)
6. Quand est-ce que vous avez commencé l'entraînement pour l'Ironman?
(When did you begin your training for the Ironman?)
7. Avez-vous un coach?
(Do you have a coach?)
8. A quel âge avez-vous commencé votre discipline sportive?
(How old were you when you began your sport discipline?)
9. Quelle discipline du triathlon préférez-vous et pourquoi?
(Which section of the triathlon do you prefer and why?)
10. Quelle autre passion avez-vous en plus du sport?
(Which other passion do you have besides sport?)
11. Est-ce que vous préférez le temps en France ou en Afrique du sud?
(Do you prefer the weather in France or in South Africa?)
12. Avez-vous des enfants? Et si oui, sont-ils sportifs?
(Do you have children? If yes, do they like sport?)
13. Pouvez-vous nous raconter une anecdote marquante de votre carrière?
(Could you tell us an important anecdote of your career?)

A proviso of each interview was that each interview was to contain a request for that particular athlete to recount an anecdote related to his or her participation in previous Ironman triathlons .

14. Que pensez-vous de l'accueil à Port Elizabeth?
(What do you think of your welcome in Port Elizabeth?)
15. Que représente pour vous le fait de franchir la ligne d'arrivée?
(How do you feel when you cross the finish line?)

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire on integration of practical application in language teaching: the IronMan case study

This questionnaire seeks to investigate the effectiveness of the integration of practical learning methods into the French curriculum through the exploration of the experiences of students involved in the French IronMan collaborative project at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). Responses are anonymous and results will be disseminated in the form of a research article for an educational journal. By filling in this questionnaire you are indicating your consent to use this information for research purposes.

Please mark the appropriate answer with an X.

Demographical Information

Year of study:

1st

2nd

3rd

Postgraduate

Faculty:

Arts

Business

Law

Other (Please specify): _____

Questionnaire

1. Did you participate in the French IronMan practical exercise? (If no, do not continue with the questionnaire.)

Yes

No

2. Did you enjoy the exercise?

Yes

No

3. If yes, what did you enjoy about it? (Tick all that apply)

Real world experience

Opportunity to practise linguistic skills

Application of field of study in French

Opportunity to interact with French-speaking people

Other (Please specify): _____

4. If you answered no to question 2, please indicate why you feel that way:

5. Would you participate in such an exercise again?

- Yes
- No

6. If you answered no to question 5, please indicate why you feel that way:

7. Which of the four basic linguistic competencies do you feel the exercise allowed you to practise? (Tick all that apply.)

- Reading
- Writing
- Speaking
- Comprehension
- All of the above
- None of the above

8. Which of the following competencies do you feel improved for you as a result of the exercise? (Tick all that apply.)

- Reading
- Writing
- Speaking
- Comprehension
- All of the above
- None of the above

9. Indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements, with 5 being strongly agree, 3 being have no opinion and 1 being strongly disagree.

Statement	5	4	3	2	1
The IronMan Exercise should be part of the assessment for this module.					
More exercises of this nature should be integrated into the curriculum.					
I would not participate in such an exercise again.					
The exercise was relevant to the curriculum.					
The exercise helped me to apply my knowledge in a practical way.					
The exercise contributed to my understanding and knowledge of the French language and culture.					

10. Please provide suggestions for improving the exercise:

Thank you for your time