

Investigating the pedagogical environments of paper-based and online media.

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Abstract

The investigation of both paper-based and virtual pedagogical environments allows us to reflect upon the diverse range of material available to the language learning community today. In this paper, the significance of the cultural component in language learning will be discussed firstly, highlighting its crucial role with regard to the promotion of tolerance and understanding between diverse cultures. Secondly, a number of FLE (Français Langue Etrangère) manuals will be analysed in terms of the transmission of cultural data. The study will then conclude with an examination of examples of online environments which reflect an alternative medium for the acquisition of information on the target language and culture.

Introduction

This article focuses on the important changes taking place within the context of the information society of today, highlighting the acquisition of the cultural component within both paper-based and online learning environments. Traditionally, the paper-based textbook format has been the conventional transmitter of data, emphasizing the dominance of the textbook in the classroom. However, in recent times, the arrival of the Internet has transformed our attitude towards learning, indicating the possibility of accessing alternative media for language learning. Consequently, French language or FLE textbooks now compete with the availability of online multimedia courses which combine text, sound, and video information within a virtual environment.

Firstly, we underline the significance of culture for language learning today and its evolving status within this field. Secondly, we outline the characteristics of the print environment and

highlight the impact of images and the challenge of communicating with the other within this particular setting. Three FLE books are considered: *Lire la Presse pour...* (Descayrac 1996), *Une Année en France* (Descayrac 1996), and *La France aux cent visages* (Monnerie 1996). For the purposes of our study the textbook medium is examined in isolation without additional media such as audiocassettes or video. Thirdly, we examine the specific learning environment associated with the Internet. We look at two online French courses: <<http://www.bonjourdefrance.com>> and the BBC French language site <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/languages/french>>. We consider the manner in which the target culture is represented within this alternative medium and reflect upon the use of multimedia for imparting cultural data to the language learner.

Defining culture

The idea of culture is difficult to define and has been characterized over the years by a wide variety of meanings. Interpretations vary. The earliest meaning associated with culture is that of husbandry, while other interpretations include 'to cultivate' taken from its Latin root, *colere*, and also 'to inhabit' coming from the Latin, *colonus* (Ayto 1990: 149-150). Thus, even within this brief account it is possible to identify the diversity of meaning synonymous with 'culture', indicating how it has evolved over time and suggesting the absence of a stable definition. A fourth explanation underlines the interpretation which is most relevant for this paper: 'Culture can be loosely summarised as values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group' (Eagleton 2000: 34).

Thus, within this context we can identify culture as an important phenomenon which outlines the belief structures of certain sections in society and which allows us to concentrate on questions such as the ideologies or the lifestyles which characterize particular groups. Therefore, the customs, beliefs, and practices defining the values and lifestyles of different countries are of particular importance to us, reflecting the unique cultures associated with each nation. Attitudes towards these different cultures and belief systems are also significant in revealing the tendency to normalize our own community and to view others as different or inferior.

The status of the cultural component in language learning has evolved greatly over the years. In the past, culture was not regarded as a specific discipline. Instead, the teaching of culture was marginalized in favour of the linguistic and grammatical features of the target language. Furthermore, such a restrictive approach increased the sense of distance between the native society and the target language community. As a result, the learner failed to obtain an adequate understanding of the foreign culture and the idea of difference in society. However, more recently, the values of understanding and tolerance as promoted by the European Union are playing a vital role in addressing the question of culture and language learning. The term 'intercultural communication' is used in the European educational sector to describe learning about the customs, the institutions, and the history of a society distinct from one's own. It attempts to understand how cultural data is integrated into a specific society. Kramsch refers to this as a process of de-centring and of relativizing both the self and the other in order to form an objective viewpoint of both, as well as considering the perspective of an outsider (Kramsch 1995: 87-8). In addition, the EU acknowledges the necessity of intercultural communication for the world today. In a post-war environment where the horrors of ethnic cleansing have been witnessed, the threat synonymous with ethnocentrism emerges as a significant factor in this debate.

An important example would be the Maastricht Treaty where Article 126, entitled 'Education, professional training and youth', highlights the unifying ideology of the EU (Zarate 1999: 4-5). According to this section, action is aimed at 'developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States' (<http://www.essex.ac.uk/info/maastricht.html>). Article 126 discusses the role to be assumed by the learning of foreign languages, underlining their important status within this ideological framework. Within this context, languages play a central role in the destabilization of stereotypical attitudes towards diverse cultures. Recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity within the member states underlines a key idea for overcoming ideological obstacles regarding difference. Kramsch reinforces this new approach, emphasizing the idea of educating society on cultural matters in order to destabilize the status quo and to subvert conventional practice: 'It embraces the particular, not to be consumed by it, but as a

platform for dialogue and as a common struggle to realign differences' (Kramsch 1995: 83).

The attempt to resolve the tension between the self and the other is a significant step forward for society as a means of addressing the ethnic divisions created by difference. Students can evaluate their interpretation of the world, develop analytical skills, and obtain a more comprehensive appreciation of their own society and that of the target community. Cultural diversity is a realistic feature of daily life from day-to-day interactions to the more complex phenomenon of online communication. We will now examine the representation of culture within the conventional textbook format.

FLE textbook: pedagogical environment

The teaching of culture through the medium of a foreign language manual is a complex process. The most common use of the FLE manual is within the enclosed classroom format characterized by the presence of a foreign language instructor who imparts knowledge to the student aided by the textbook. The necessity of transmitting cultural knowledge to the student in this situation indicates the responsibility attributed to the function of the textbook. A one-way transmission of information is transferred from the FLE manual – the active site of cultural data – to the student, a passive recipient of this information. Students can access this information by following a typically linear pattern and progressing from the beginning to the end of the textbook. This may take place from chapter to chapter or within the structural content of the chapter itself. Figure 1 represents an example of such a pre-defined format. Interaction with the information provided is limited due to the fact that the FLE manual is a self-contained and completed work. Students are offered a plan of the content where learning objectives are outlined, referring to a set structure which forms the basis of a pre-existent learning environment. Furthermore the chaotic and dynamic nature of culture is confined within the framework of this paper-based format. Therefore, the need to make a connection with the target culture in this isolated environment is conveyed through alternative means which attempt to enhance the student's perception of difference.

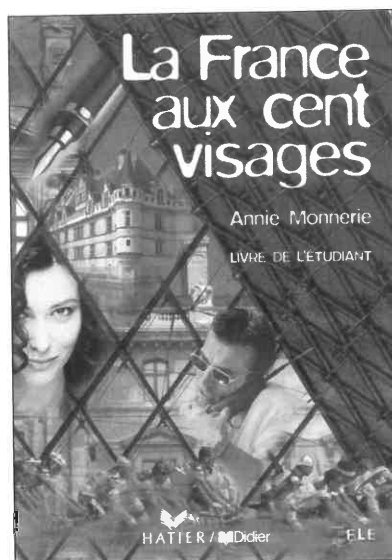
Figure 1: Predefined structure of FLE Manual of Lire la Presse pour...

SOMMAIRE	
TABLEAU SYNOPTIQUE,	2
AVANT-PROPOS,	3
LE RÉSUMÉ COMMUNICATIF	
Guy de Maupassant, déjà ...	6
Tchernobyl sur les planches	8
L'enfer de Béatrice	14
Quatre-vingt-dix ans de Nobel	20
L'oncle de géme des fausses cartes à puce	26
Filles, encore un effort !	32
Une histoire racontée par les enfants	38
Une caméra en solitude	46
LE RÉSUMÉ EXERCICE	
La double vie des étudiants salariés	58
Pas d'argent sale aux guschiets	65
France / États-Unis : les idées reçues	72
Une banlieue dans le pétrin	77
Des autobiographies écrites en main	84
CORRIGÉS	89

The impact of the photographic image

Within the structure of the textbook the power of the image emerges as a key component due to the enclosed classroom setting and the distance between the student and the target culture. Due to the limitations of the self-contained structure of the language manual, it must take every opportunity to promote an alternative view of the target language community. In Figure 2 the front cover of *La France aux cent visages* reflects this aspect. Firstly we can identify images from the past such as the historical architecture. This also indicates the many tourist attractions on offer in this society. The images from contemporary society such as the modern architecture or the mobile phone suggest the various stages of evolution which this country has experienced. The scene from the Tour de France may be easily recognizable by the student but the image also works on another level, indicating activity and dynamism. Therefore, as no one unified structure can be recognized the learner is challenged by this more complex portrayal of life in the foreign society.

Figure 2: *La France aux cent visages* cover



However, the dominance of tourist images of France highlights the difficulties in maintaining an intercultural approach within this context. On one level this is welcomed as it encourages the student to move beyond the national boundaries and to experience an alternative culture. Yet, on another level it is important to question why such simplistic images exist in the first place. Textbooks tend to move away from this approach at more advanced levels whereas we can identify clearly the presence of the tourism phenomenon in beginner to intermediate levels. There are a number of reasons for this notion. When a student begins a new language, motivation and interest are vital in order to make progress and to achieve a good level of language proficiency. Therefore such positive portrayals of the other culture are important features of the textbook structure at this early stage, underlining a typical marketing ploy. The establishment of a positive environment of the target society creates the potential for the student to become intrigued by the culture in question and to continue with the programme in the hope of some day visiting the places portrayed in these photographs. Figure 3 taken from *Une Année en France* is a not-uncommon example:

Figure 3: Une Année en France



These images are taken from the first chapter entitled: 'Janvier-Février'. The lifestyles portrayed accentuate the comfortable existence of the more affluent classes and represent this specific image as part of normality. Dominant scenes tend to focus on lifestyles of the affluent classes depicting a positive atmosphere, engaged in activities such as skiing and having dinner parties. Scenic areas and utopian countryside surroundings are also a common feature depicting the lifestyles of those who are not *défavorisés*. Traditional stereotypes of France are also popular concentrating on aspects such as fashion, wine, and food. The promotion of this stable, utopian world supports the image already known by the learner and does not challenge this point of view. Instead, a rigid and pre-existent societal structure is presented as a means to promote the positive features of the target society. In contrast, if a textbook is focused exclusively on more controversial and negative aspects such as *les banlieues*, immigration, or unemployment, the pupil may become discouraged and less enthusiastic about studying French. Thus, such positive images are significant components of the textbook which attempt to attract students to the target culture and to ensure their commitment to the learning programme.

Communication and interaction

Due to the absence of audio-based content within our own textbooks produced by French FLE publishers, textual information emerges as the dominant facilitator of cultural knowledge, supported by visual aids. Within this educational context, as both physical and audio contact are not possible, the text must diversify in both role and function. The emergence of specific exercises which prepare the student for eventual contact and interaction with the other is a significant feature of this pedagogical setting. Questions on culture are as standard as those relating to comprehension or written skills. This reveals a major step forward for the evolution of modern languages. Questions relating to culture indicate another approach geared towards enhancing the skills of the student in order to interact with the other. After a specific theme is introduced one can identify a number of tasks categorized as part of the learner's cultural education. *Lire la Presse pour...* provides an interesting example:

Commenter, c'est comparer des cultures

10. En quoi l'histoire de l'instruction des filles en France, est-elle comparable à celle de votre pays?
11. Dans votre pays, y a-t-il une forte proportion des femmes qui travaillent? Donnez des détails.

(Descayrac 1996: 36)

'Commentary: comparing cultures

10. Can you compare the history of teaching girls in France with that of your own country?
11. In your country, is there a large proportion of women in the workforce? Please give details.'

In this example the promotion of interaction with the other takes place within an analytical context. The nature of such profound evaluation is introduced following the thematic content of each chapter. The idea of comparison and contrast widens the learning context, allowing the student to reflect upon both native and foreign cultural systems. In this example the learner is encouraged to make a link between the educational systems of both environments and the position of women in both societies. The undefined cultural setting allows analytical work to take place across a multitude of cultural zones.

Inevitably, due to the limitations of the paper-based format many constraints exist relating to the inclusion of specific cultural themes. The target audience comprises one student within an enclosed self-study environment characterized by a one-way transmission of knowledge. This dependence on one particular source of cultural data raises a number of significant issues. Furthermore, the domination of a utopian portrayal of the other underlines the alienation of other matters such as *la Francophonie*, *les banlieues*, or unemployment because of various social issues affecting these alternative images of the foreign society. Practical concerns such as the budget allocated to each textbook mean that it is expected that alternative themes be omitted simply to reduce production costs. Such commercial concerns can also be identified in relation to the use of authentic material in cultural education. In many cases by the time the manual is published, these authentic sources are out of date and a valid representation of present-day life can be called into question. Thus, culture which has earlier been defined as a chaotic and disorderly entity is enclosed within this tight format, bound by commercial limitations and structural restrictions. We will now look at the representation of culture within the online learning environment.

Online courses: pedagogical environment

The idea of learning about the culture of the other within the fluid content of the World Wide Web can be explored as an alternative to the fixed content of the paper-based medium. Firstly, the ever-evolving structure of the Web facilitates and reflects the constant dynamism of culture. Secondly, the wealth of resource material as well as the absence of communicative boundaries influences the student's relationship with the other. Thirdly, the advent of computer technology allows learners to create a zone of learning wherever they please – at home, at school, or at work. The idea of education without frontiers underlines this unique setting, stressing the empowerment of the learner. By directly accessing lines of communication worldwide, one can identify the distinct reality of making contact with the other. Unlike the self-contained FLE manual there is no discernible dominant source of language material in the online setting. Instead, the vast array of information online allows students to pick and choose French courses specifically tailored to their needs. This more personalized approach to

language learning is facilitated by the almost unlimited supply of resource materials available online. Furthermore, the notion of hypertextual representation emerges as a significant component which challenges the more conventional linear form of learning. Unlike sequential development in the paper-based format, student progression is user-controlled, avoiding the need to conform to a set of pre-defined themes (Rouet and Levonen 1996: 9-12). This provides increased control for the learner who decides the order in which information is to be accessed.

We can clearly identify a sharp contrast between the stable and organized framework of the language manual and the chaotic nature of the Internet. However, it is important to note that the emergence of this user-controlled environment may not suit the needs of all language learners. Many may feel more comfortable within the self-contained and pre-defined medium of the textbook. For some students this disorderly environment may appear frightening and overwhelming and thus their decision to remain within the more familiar zone of the traditional print medium may be understood.

Representing the target culture

Due to the wealth of information available in this online environment it is possible to identify varying levels of cultural representation which place the onus on the student to recognize actively the presence of a constructed image of the target language community. Let us undertake a brief investigation of the section entitled 'Découverte' in <bonjourdefrance.com>. In this specific exercise the foreign language student discovers through pictorial and textual commentary the regions of Nice and Brest. This approach reflects a certain amount of intercultural awareness, underlining a heterogeneous portrayal of regional France which weakens the more traditional domination of Paris. However, a brief examination of the content menu of 'Découverte' reveals the prioritization of tourist values in the portrayal of these specific regional areas. In Figure 4 themes such as 'Le musée Picasso', 'St. Tropez' and 'St. Paul de Vence' are all categorized as 'visite touristique' catering for the needs of the tourist market which may access this site. The omission of sociocultural realities which define French society such as poverty or unemployment contrasts

with the stability of the environment portrayed. The cultural commentary accompanying such images compounds this fact.

Figure 4: Découverte: Nice

DÉCOUVERTE

EdF vous propose de découvrir le sud de la France et la région de Brest au travers de récits, de visites et de recettes de cuisine.

Ligne de couleur - le texte du dernier numéro de bonjourdefrance.com

Nice et sa région :

Titres	Thèmes	Matériel
Le musée Picasso	Visite touristique	
Le cours Saleya	Visite touristique	*
La pétanque	Visite touristique	*
Saint Tropez	Visite touristique	*
Mirabeau sur Siagne	Visite touristique	*
Antibes	Visite touristique	*
St Paul de Vence	Visite touristique	*
Rendez-vous à Gourdon	Visite touristique	*
Le musée océanographique de Monaco	Visite touristique	*
Palais de Saint-Paul-de-Vence	Visite touristique	*
Flâner au cœur du vieux Nice	Visite touristique	*

It is possible to identify the reason for the simplistic tourist-influenced images in <bonjourdefrance.com>. This website was created by a language school in Nice called Ecole Azurlingua (<http://www.azurlingua.com>) which runs French language courses all year round for students of all levels. Thus, the tourist marketing approach becomes clear when one takes into account the agenda of this online course. Positive portrayals of this part of France tap into the market of online students seeing them as potential customers. Therefore, the representation of a utopian environment may entice the learner to the region in order to attend one of the courses provided by Ecole Azurlingua. This factor reflects the many challenges facing the online learner in being able to distinguish between market-driven cultural content and data which offers a more balanced account of the sociocultural reality.

Therefore, due to the content of this course it is difficult for learners to evaluate cultural differences between France and their own native society. However, where the learner using the FLE manual would have to remain satisfied with the cultural content

provided, the active role of the student established in this virtual setting allows one to destabilize the dominant framework. The establishment of a unified other in <bonjourdefrance.com> is weakened by the status of the learners who in their active capacity are able to search for and discover other forms of cultural data.

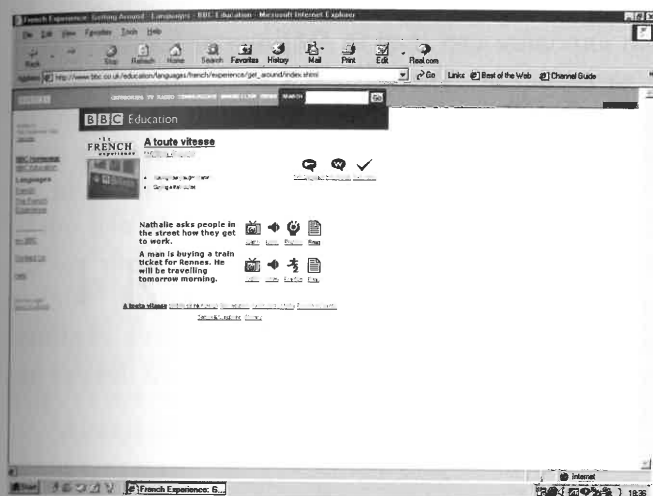
The use of multimedia

In the conventional classroom, print, video, and audio-based learning material are independent forms of media which are transmitted to the learner individually. In contrast, due to the developments of computer technology in recent years these three individual components can be combined in order to create a highly flexible learning tool. The online multimedia environment represents a number of important factors for the learner. It allows the learning experience to diversify, facilitating access to information in a number of ways. The student can access data through textual, graphic, and photographic representation as well as through other formats such as sound, moving picture, and animated pictures (Hoffman 1996: 58). The French Experience course (www.bbc.co.uk/education/languages/french/experience) is a good example of this phenomenon where textual, audio, and audiovisual information are made available for beginners and organized beforehand into appropriate learning tasks for the student. The course is based on a compilation of video clips taken from a twenty-part television series of the same name. The possibility of accessing audiovisual information relevant to the target language community indicates the significance of this programme in enhancing the learner's relationship with the other. An examination of 'A toute vitesse' (see Figure 5 below) highlights the significant attributes of this exercise which exposes the student to certain cultural practices within this community.

In this exercise, two audiovisual clips are provided. The first involves an interview with members of the general public asking how people get to work each day. The second clip details the purchase of a train ticket for Rennes. The video-based clips are highly effective, displaying interviews of people in an everyday context. They not only represent the spoken language in an authentic context but also convey the sounds and atmosphere of the public places in which filming takes place (the street and the train station). The use of video in this format is an effective means of

bringing the student closer to the target language community and thus reduces the sense of distance experienced in conventional classroom situations. While this is not as direct as first-hand experience with the other culture, a more engaging preparatory approach can be identified. The audiovisual content of this course tries to replicate as closely as possible face-to-face contact with the other. In this exercise, learners can decide which media best suit their needs. Information can be conveyed through audiovisual information ('watch'), audio-based content ('listen'), or textual data ('read'). Thus, with the click of the mouse the student has access to three diverse forms of media relating to the acquisition of cultural data within this socio-cultural context.

Figure 5: *A toute vitesse*



Conclusion

The ever-evolving and ephemeral nature of many cultural artifacts used for language learning purposes indicates a number of problematic issues for print and online media. Both represent a historical 'snapshot' of the community in question, recording its values and ideals at a specific moment in time. Publication restraints play an influential role in this regard. When writers begin to collect up-to-date authentic cultural information for their textbook it may take several more years for this data to be published. This delay influences the contemporary feel of the data in question and makes the constant renewal of information difficult. In contrast, the

convention of the 'last updated' statement on a website helps to combat the problems of maintaining the currency of language learning materials. It shows how website creators can constantly update their cultural data without having to worry about publication restraints. Thus, one could recommend the benefit of providing an accompanying regularly-updated CD-ROM or website with the FLE manual in order to enable the student to exploit the many pedagogical resources available in the context of the information society. Furthermore, the possibility of integrating both media may help to bridge the gap between traditional and alternative approaches towards language education. However, we must acknowledge that the print format represents a happy medium for many learners, outlining the creation of a 'comfort zone' in relation to the representation of the other. Thus the sense of being exposed to too much cultural data is also an important factor which must be considered, as such exposure can lead to feelings of bewilderment, confusion, and disorientation. Therefore, researchers and practitioners must strive to establish a balanced portrayal of cultural data in both pedagogical environments in order to facilitate a comfortable bi-directional movement between the print format and the online setting. This would allow the learner to move in and out of these distinct settings with ease in order to benefit from the diverse ways in which cultural data can be transmitted. Such a development would allow for greater and more effective exploitation of both media and, in addition, a much-needed and deeper appreciation of the culture of the other.

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