

Incorporating Media into the French Curriculum

A B S T R A C T For the past twelve years, foreign language departments have faced downsizing and many challenges as staff complements have been reduced due to dwindling student numbers. The French Department of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University decided to reposition French by adding Media as a new component to its language curriculum. The restructuring was preceded by a project which explored a task-based and action approach. The two-stage project was a successful introduction to the notion that linguistic and non-linguistic skills could be taught at the same time in order to make students more employable in the current marketplace. This article describes the second stage of the project as well as the incorporation of media into the French curriculum.

Key words: interdisciplinary, media, non-linguistic skills, foreign languages, challenges

1. Introduction

During the past twelve years, foreign language departments at universities in South Africa have faced a decrease in the staff complement due to dwindling student numbers. There is therefore a need for a shift in the teaching focus of these departments, within what Le Grange (2006, 367) calls 'the changing landscape of the contemporary university' Within the new education context in South Africa where the integration of theory and practice is stressed, it is necessary for languages, and in this case French, to explain ways of integrating the language curricula into the broader programme framework in order to demonstrate the relevance of French in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. In so doing, the emphasis shifts from language-specific knowledge to transferable skills. This article will focus on a project, whose first stage was discussed in a previous article (Thomas 2009). The project consisted of two stages: a first stage during which linguistic skills were developed, and a second stage in which multimedia competencies were taught. The project sought to improve linguistic competence in an applied context and thus demonstrated the potential to integrate the teaching of French and other foreign languages into a discipline-specific programme.

The teaching of French and other foreign languages is faced with an enormous challenge since

there are eleven official South African languages which often take precedence over a foreign language both in terms of funding and student interest. This is one of the reasons for the precarious situation of foreign languages departments at South African universities during the past twelve years which have seen dwindling numbers of students and retrenchments of staff. Nevertheless, French plays an important role on the African continent and indeed may be considered an 'African' language due to the fact that there are more than twenty French-speaking African countries. Moreover, at the economic level, South Africa serves as a gateway to these French-speaking countries and may open the doors not only to trade on the continent but also to the globalisation desired by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in its vision and mission documents (NEPAD 2005).

It is within this context and because of dwindling student numbers that we at a South African metropolitan university felt that we should adapt and transform pedagogic methods. Currently at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, French is part of many programmes and may be taken as a core or an elective module set. It was thus felt that there is a need for a pedagogical approach that incorporated linguistic competence in an applied context that could improve the students' 'employability'. The goal of the research on which this article is based, was to add a new component to the traditional focus on language and literature. Media (with the focus on journalism) was chosen as this component since 80% of our students are students registered for the Bachelor of Arts (Media, Communication and Culture). We decided to examine the efficiency of Nunan's (2004) task-based approach as well as the Cadre Européen Commun's (2001) action perspective as a means of teaching French for Specific Purposes within the context of a programme focused on a career.

Nunan (2004:1) differentiates between 'real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks: target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom'.

The Cadre Européen Commun (henceforth abbreviated to CECR) equates to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which is the fruit of years of linguistic research conducted by experts from the Council of Europe Member States. The framework was published in 2001, and constitutes a wholly new approach aimed at redefining language teaching objectives and methods (CECR 2001). The basis of both these approaches is experiential learning.

The aim of our project was to use both types of tasks to reach our objective. As Kohonen (in Nunan 2004, 13) highlights "... experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning".

This article explains how we repositioned the teaching of French in order to provide a curriculum that would be adapted to the students' professional ambitions and needs. Thus, the restructuring led to an inclusion of skills directly linked to the journalism profession since, as mentioned previously, 80% of our students are BA (MCC) students. As Gordon (2003,16) points out, "new technologies have tremendous potential to support progressive teaching methods". This did not mean that past practices, such as the teaching of literature, were discarded, but the aim was to allow such practices to evolve by widening the field of communication; in fact,

what was desired was a prolongation of communication within a concrete application and with a specific goal in mind. In this article, I will discuss the second part of the project, its results and the potential of such a project to prove useful in survival strategies for foreign languages in general, as well as the advantages of incorporating media into a foreign language curriculum.

2. Methodology

The current post-apartheid reform of the South African tertiary education system aims to bring together academic, professional and technical facets within more efficient and more equal structures that would offer a range of courses, degrees and diplomas.

After consultation with the attaché for the Promotion of French at the French Embassy, the Alliance Française and the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, it was decided to restructure the French curriculum. This was decided since the French department was in danger of closing as mentioned above. The dwindling of student numbers and the reduction of the staff complement was an indication that French was not viable in its present form. This was the same for all foreign languages that had to compete against the eleven official South African languages. The time for a survival strategy had arrived.

Our project was the first step in our strategy. This project, which was run in conjunction with the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy, offered a way to 'save' French by developing a niche area. This was done in most French departments at South African universities, where the University of Cape Town (UCT) developed a new FLE (French as a foreign language) teaching qualification, the University of KwaZulu-Natal introduced tourism modules and the University of Pretoria decided that its niche area was translation, to name but a few. Our decision to incorporate media into the French curriculum at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University was taken, since, according to a survey in the form of a questionnaire, 77% of first-year students learning French are Journalism and Media students. The questionnaire was drawn up by the French department in 2007 in order to determine in which programmes the students taking French were registered. It was decided to use the project to improve the linguistic and non-linguistic skills of students registered in disciplines linked to media and if successful to proceed to the incorporation of media which would be our niche area.

An eclectic approach adapted to interdisciplinarity was used in order to bring together the teaching of French and media. Block (2000:18) talks of interdisciplinarity as 'a discipline integrating new conceptual frameworks and new research outside its traditional limits or a new discipline emerging at the crossroads of several pre-existing disciplines'.

Although literature is invaluable for its ability to teach analytical skills, it is important within the context of the 21st century to integrate traditional theory with the practice that students need in order to find employment. It is equally important to find a new paradigm for the integration of change (Puren 2006:42).

Our project was structured over a four-year period. The project incorporated the assimilation of knowledge linked to media, the teaching of interview techniques, writing press releases and news articles, exchanges with a French journalism school, the Centre de Formation et de

Perfectionnement des Journalistes (CFPJ), the purchase of a relevant documentation and the creation of a multimedia blog.

Blogs are useful teaching and learning tools because they provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings. And because blogs can be commented on, they provide opportunities for feedback and potential scaffolding of new ideas. Blogs also feature hyperlinks, which can introduce students to the relational and contextual basis of knowledge, knowledge construction and meaning making (Ferdig and Trammell, 2004). The American site Technorati (Ibid, 2004) reports that, at present, there are more than 133 million blogs in the world, with over 10 000 new blogs added daily. In France, 2.7 million individuals have their own blogs, 2 million of which are hosted by Skyrock, a popular French web radio site.

3. Objectives of the project

Our project sought to incorporate the analytical skills of literary analysis into a new approach to language teaching, an approach which would include not only the linguistic theory but also the practice of a genre which is not literary. The aim of this exercise was to motivate and encourage the French students to improve their comprehension and writing skills as well as to teach them technical skills. Our objective was thus for the students to develop practical as well as critical and analytical skills.

Arevalo (2008:38) points out that “the action approach is considered as a logical result of the communicative approach, but with some nuances: before, students were placed in a delineated communicative situation in order to develop their communicative competence, now they are expected to carry out tasks” [‘la perspective actionnelle (PA) est considérée comme une suite logique de l’approche communicative, mais avec quelques nuances: avant, on mettait les apprenants dans une situation de communication définie pour développer leur compétence communicative, maintenant on attend des apprenants qu’ils réalisent des actions’] [In order to demonstrate their skills, the students had to undertake several tasks which would help French language theory become concrete practice. The specialised tasks, which were not merely linguistic ones, included research into the Ironman triathlon and the FIFA World Cup, the finding of relevant angles, the drawing up of questions for the interviews, the understanding of interview techniques, the translation of articles and press releases, the writing of articles based on their interviews, and the design of a blog using multimedia.

The exercise thus became role-playing at a higher level, the joining of theory and practice. Moreover it was important for students to recognise the integration of what they have learned in French in the wider context of the BA (Media, Communication and Culture) programme for which they were enrolled. Another aim was to prevent students from compartmentalising their linguistic and communicative learning and to show them that there are no barriers between different subjects. The result would be a unified and cohesive learning experience as well as skills which would be very important for their future careers. The main aim was thus to create a greater synergy between language learning and journalism.

3.1 Project themes: The Ironman and the FIFA World Cup

It was decided to base the project on a specific theme to safeguard coherence in the students’ articles. This would aid in the assessment of students’ articles. The Ironman South Africa, a

triathlon which takes place in Port Elizabeth annually, was chosen as the initial theme. During this race, each athlete must swim 3.8 km in the sea, cycle 180 km and run 42.2 km. The Ironman triathlon began in 1978 in Hawaii as an endurance race where the three disciplines of swimming, cycling and running were brought together. In Port Elizabeth, the Ironman draws 1 500 to 2 000 athletes a year, of which the largest group is the French contingent. The second task and the ultimate goal of the project was a multimedia blog on the FIFA World Cup, which took place in South Africa in June 2010.

3.2 The different stages of the project

First stage: 2007 and 2008

The first step was to train the second- and third-year students (about 30 students) in interview techniques. The students were then divided into groups of three or four, and ten interviews were scheduled with the French-speaking athletes participating in the Ironman. The students' articles were published on the Ironman France website with each student's own by-line. The idea was to imitate the site *Alter-Mondial* (September 2006:URL : www.alter-mondial.org), an electronic journal created by the students of the Centre de Formation et Perfectionnement des Journalistes in Paris. *Alter-Mondial* covered all aspects of the Soccer World Cup, except for the results. The aim was to do the same thing with articles on the Ironman.

Second Stage: 2009–2010

2009 was the culmination of the Ironman part of the project while 2010 was the end goal of the whole project. This stage of the project entailed creating two multimedia blogs, one on the Ironman (2009) and one on the FIFA World Cup (2010). Consequently, a multimedia trainer from the Centre de Formation et de Perfectionnement des Journalistes (CFPJ) in Paris, with whom we have a cooperation, was flown in. Twelve and eight students respectively were selected from French and Media Studies in consultation with the international office of the CFPJ and the Department of Journalism, Media and Philosophy. The decision to select the best students was taken by the relevant stakeholders as it was felt that a larger group would not be easy to monitor. The students that were not selected to construct the blog had to write and/or translate journalistic articles.

The extent of the project-based work was much more intensive than normal class times. It entailed attending a workshop in a computer laboratory from 09.00 to 16.00 every day for eight days with two extra days set aside for live coverage of the triathlon or World Cup events. The students were selected six weeks before the start of the due date and told to submit several possible angles on the Ironman or World Cup to the trainer in Paris. This was done in order to allow the students to familiarise themselves with the subject (the Ironman or World Cup).

Once the trainer arrived, the students were taught how to identify and conceptualise good angles and interview techniques and how to create a multimedia blog by using WordPress, Audacity and Sound Slides in order to incorporate photos, video, audio and text into the blog. The result were two visually pleasing blogs that provided a range of information about the Ironman and World Cup. The students were asked to select what they felt was their strong point: for example videography, writing, photography, or design. They were then given tasks based on their abilities. Two students took photos, two worked on the videos, while others wrote

press releases and articles (these were divided into those writing in French and those writing in English since the aim was to have a bilingual blog in order to appeal to a wider public).

The end results were two professional blogs. The students learned non-linguistic as well as linguistic skills, both of which will serve them in the 'real' world. The objective of the majority of the students was to gain insight about new media. At the end of the exercise they felt they had gained a lot of knowledge about it and online journalism.

4. Assessment

Two kinds of assessment were needed – formative and summative. The students had to be assessed on their work in order to receive a mark. The lecturer had to evaluate the exercise as well. Did it work? Were the objectives attained? Did the students learn something? What did they learn? How could the exercise be improved? The students were initially assessed in two ways: by means of questionnaires and a group interview, and ultimately by the end product. The findings were that the time spent on the project was not spent in vain. According to the group interview, the students learned many useful things about new media and some even discovered a passion for multimedia and French. The exercise was an example of authentic communication, which contributed linguistic and non-linguistic skills. The end product was proof of the students' new skills.

The students who were not selected had to work on their writing and translation competencies, although they were not able to acquire the new non-linguistic skills. In future, it is envisaged that all second- and third-year students will be trained in both linguistic and non-linguistic skills.

5. Findings

The first stage of the project improved the writing and comprehension skills of the students as well as their oral proficiency. This was evidenced by the fact that in 2005, 69.23% of students in the second year passed as against 87.5% in 2007.

The second stage added another dimension to the project: the creation of a blog, which falls under the banner of the action approach and is a good example of how technology can be allied to pedagogy. The three most important characteristics of the actional approach were incorporated into the project, namely: making students do something, communicate and work at several competences at the same time (Arevalo 2008:39). Working on the Internet was the ideal tool to bring these three characteristics together. The creation of a blog made French and Media more relevant as a combination. As mentioned above, the blog was chosen because it is a useful pedagogical tool which allows for adaptability and flexibility.

The results of the questions to gauge competencies and cognitive abilities revealed that two thirds of the students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to practise linguistic skills and to interact with French-speaking people. Several specified that the real-world experience was the most enjoyable aspect, while others indicated that the application of a specific field of study in French was most useful (Thomas, 2009).

It was equally important to assess the students' own understanding of the competencies the exercise aimed to improve. The majority felt that the exercise allowed them to practise their speaking, and writing, some indicated that it allowed them to practise comprehension, and a

few stated it helped with their reading and indicated that all four basic linguistic competencies were practiced (Ibid, 2009).

More importantly, the students were asked to assess which of the competencies they felt had improved as a result of the exercise. Speaking and writing showed the most improvement from the students' self-assessment. A few indicated that they felt their reading and comprehension had improved while many indicated that all four linguistic competencies had improved (Ibid, 2009).

Given the success of our pilot project, demonstrated by the fact that student numbers were increasing, our next step was to incorporate media into our curriculum.

6. The incorporation of media into the French curriculum

According to the CECR (2001), the action approach is not new. However, the CECR (Béacco, 2008) offers a new perspective on teaching: that of skills or competencies. Our aim was "to use popular media and computer technologies to create a learning environment that equips learners with the knowledge and skills to live and work thoughtfully in a changing SA "(Bertram et al., 2001, 3).

There was also a need to cut back on content-heavy, teacher-centred methodologies and to begin teaching in ways that:

- actively involve learners in their own learning,
- link learning with their lives and experiences, and
- develop learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bertram et al. 2001, 3).

Therefore, media was incorporated into the French curriculum in 2008 (at the second- and third-year level) in the following ways: short clips from the TV5 programme, *Sept Jours sur la Planète*, as well as songs, newspapers and films which were used to help improve listening, comprehension and writing and conversational skills while cartoons and magazines helped to develop translation competence.

Newspaper items are conveniently self-contained units which vary in length. They give a great deal of flexibility when planning lessons and selecting materials to meet certain criteria, e.g. the length of the newspaper item(s), the complexity of the language, the density of information, the subject-matter and content, the lesson time available and level of the students (Sanderson 1999:4).

During the project, the students were shown the journalist's inverted pyramid and told how to structure their articles according to the 5 Ws (What, Who, When, Why, Where) and 1 H (How). The simple structure of newspaper and magazine articles was pointed out – the fact that the writing is clear, logical and organised. The students were then encouraged to write in the same manner.

At the first-year level, the changes will be introduced in 2011. These will include a comparison of French and South African newspapers, the analysis of short newspaper articles and an explanation of the journalist's inverted pyramid.

It is hoped that the introduction of this niche area will prove even more useful in the future and that the students will realise the importance not only of learning a foreign language but also of the need to have additional non-linguistic skills.

7. Conclusion

On introducing a new approach in the classroom, it is important to analyse and to reflect on the process, on its strengths and failures. It was thus necessary to have a formative and summative evaluation, on the one hand, of the integration of this exercise into the programme, and on the other hand, of the experience of the students who participated in this project. In order to evaluate the results of the project, it was necessary to distinguish the outcomes, that is, how well the interviews were conducted, what kind of articles were produced and of what standard, and finally what was actually learnt. The main goal of the evaluation was to assess whether the students had managed to manipulate “the linguistic system, to the point where [they could] use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express [their] intended message” (Nunan 2004, 6).

Both evaluations showed that the project was successful in its objectives. The students were part of a positive experience that helped them acquire new skills, make them more ‘employable’, and progress towards achieving their full potential.

In conclusion, the two stages of the project were a success since the goals and objectives were attained. This is a continuous developmental project which should be improved each year. The results are to be found in the improvement of the writing and comprehension as well as the non-linguistic (multimedia facet) skills of the students. Another advantage was that the inherent flexibility of digital media gave us the opportunity for multiple representation of content to suit different learning styles or needs (Gordon 2003:75).

The end goal of the project is to continue to bring innovation and dynamism to the French curriculum by the addition of a media component. The project’s pedagogy is based on an innovative theory, teaching through projects, which is used frequently in other disciplines, but is new to language teaching. This approach may be adapted for other programmes having French or another foreign language as a core or elective language. This pilot project indicates that French no longer needs to be perceived as a choice or a subject without ties, but rather as an integrating and integrated part of structured programmes that offer students specific and usable competences. The result of the research being reported here, was the development of methodologies and materials specific to our goal, that is, the importance of an integrated approach within a framework of a career-focused programme, in our case, the Bachelor of Arts (Media, Communication and Culture). This approach, which is a survival strategy, should also prove useful to other foreign languages that find themselves in the same kind of situation as French.

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