Lessons from a French Class on Becoming Literate: A Personal Reflection

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Recently I set myself the task of learning the French language. I knew the undertaking would be fraught with frustration. I did not know it would provide me with insights into the demands made upon the child who is learning to read and write. Neither did I know it would so soundly reaffirm my belief in the whole language approach to literacy instruction.

French, in common with other languages, can be taught by immersion. As suggested by the title, this is an instructional approach in which students are subject to only the new language with no recourse to their native tongue. Languages can also be taught through instruction with graded texts that specify vocabulary and grammar. In addition, discourse or dialogues and exercises that provide the learner with reinforcement of the concept(s) introduced are provided.

My experience in learning French was primarily with this latter text-based approach, with limited exposure to immersion procedures. During the course I began to see parallels between instructional methods used in language teaching and instructional methods used in developing

literacy. As a result, I began to develop a feeling that learning demands on a language novice would be similar to those placed upon the child learning to read and write. This prompted me to reflect upon my learning experiences and by extrapolation upon the literacy acquisition process from the learner's point of view. Understandings about reading gained from this reflective exercise are noted following discussion of teaching methodologies.

Teaching methodology: Text based approach

The text-based method of teaching a second language appears to have a number of features in common with the basal reading program used in 90% of American schools (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1984).

A typical text for instruction in French lists vocabulary to be learned in the next unit of study. It is usually discussed by the instructor with the class prior to the reading of dialogues which employ the new words. Likewise, vocabulary to be introduced in the upcoming story in a basal is generally presented by the teacher prior to reading and discussed with the students. In each case, that is with both French and reading texts, vocabulary tends to be heavily controlled, particularly at the introductory levels. This is to avoid placing too heavy a cognitive burden on the learner.

One effect of constraining the French vocabulary is that initially the dialogues tend to sound stilted and unnatural. For instance, the negative form of the verb *to like (aimer)* may be presented as follows:

J'aime la voiture. Et toi? (I like the car. And you?)

Moi, non, je n'aime pas la voiture. (Me, no, I do not like the car.)

Similarly, basal texts employ contrived sentences to accommodate the lack of sight word knowledge in the beginning reader. A page in a primer basal may read thus:

"I am up.
Sun is up.
Mother is up."

After reading a passage, be it dialogue or story, both the basal and the French text provide exercises to assist in consolidating understanding of a skill. For the young reader these consist of worksheets designed to enhance understanding of phonics, vocabulary or comprehension. Such activities as coloring pictures of rhyming words or filling in blanks in sentences are typical. Assignments in French relate largely to developing facility with vocabulary or grammar such as insertion of correct articles in listed sentences or completion of a verb form.

The approach to teaching via a text, be it reading or second language, has many commonalities at the beginning level, besides those already noted: controlled vocabulary, unnatural language patterns, a heavy skills component, and teacher-directed instruction. Vocabulary, stories and skills are presented to the students. They have no control over the content and little over the pacing of the program.

Lessons to be learned

While a certain amount of frustration and tension is essential for learning to occur, the presentation of French "a la basal" seems to increment it. Reflection suggests this is partly because the focus of the approach is upon components of language, grammatical understandings and vocabulary, rather than upon use of the language as a vehicle of communication.

An example may be illustrative. When working with grammar, rules for a given case are typically presented along with a sentence or two to demonstrate use. For instance, when introducing appropriate employment of "ce" (this) versus "il" or "elle" (he or she), the parts of speech to be used with each pronoun are listed along with a stilted sentence. The text typically looks as follows:

il/elle + adjective — Elle est intelligente.

C'est + proper noun — C'est Georges.

While some connected text to reinforce these learnings is always included, there is seldom any extended discourse provided. Thus, there is little opportunity to "see" the given grammatical structure in a natural language context.

What does this mean for the learner? One consequence of this text approach for the novice French student is that there is little chance of gaining an implicit understanding of French syntax. There is only meager opportunity to develop a sense of the grammar of the language, in the way very young children gain an implicit sense of the grammar of their native tongue while learning to speak. Thus, the relationship of the part to the whole, the particular skill to the language process is very difficult, if not impossible, to envisage.

It is posited that a similar situation exists with respect to skill instruction for the beginning reader. The drilling of consonant blends in isolation, for example, must seem as abstract an entity to the first or second grader as the use of "ce" or "il/elle" seems to the novice French student.

Working with vocabulary in French provided opportunity for an additional insight in the learning demands placed upon a student coming to terms with literacy. As noted

previously, words associated with each chapter are presented and employed in short dialogues to assist acquisition. However, on occasion there are terms employed without definition and their meaning has to be ascertained from context. From personal experience I know these words tend to be recalled more readily than those whose meaning is merely presented. Because the learner has had to actively process the information, it becomes more meaningful.

One implication of such an experience for reading instruction is that the time honored practice of preteaching new vocabulary prior to the reading of the story could be of little value. It may, in fact, be more efficient instructionally to tackle difficult or strange words only within the particular context in which they are presented. A recent, related study (Elley, 1989) of vocabulary acquisition through a program of story reading, suggests this to be an efficient means of enhancing word knowledge.

One further and significant lesson gleaned from the process of learning French via a text needs to be mentioned. The approach imposes an instructional agenda on the student with scant account of the contributions he or she makes to the learning situation. One effect of feeling little control within the instructional setting is a gradual loss of motivation on the part of the learner.

The basal series, similarly constructed to the French text also imposes an agenda with little opportunity for the student to control his or her learning. By extrapolation, one can suppose children may also feel themselves without rights in an instructional situation with a concomitant lack of motivation for the reading process. The failure of students

to read in their free time outside of school (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988) supports this suggestion.

All of the shortcomings of a basal program, of course, can be answered by competent and sensitive instruction. It is possible to relate skills to the story in such a way that their function within the reading process can be realized. The literature is replete with suggestions for dealing with vocabulary instruction (Noble, 1981; Richek, 1988). Alternatives to the stilted language patterns can be offered through a program of story reading and approaches such as language experience. Unfortunately, reports (Durkin, 1990) suggest that often it is the case that the basal, despite its limitations, becomes the reading program.

Teaching methodology: Immersion

Immersion procedures in teaching a foreign language were observed to be akin to those advocated by a whole language approach to teaching literacy.

During an immersion approach to learning a second language, correct grammatical forms, both written and spoken, are modeled by a mature language user. The student is required to make him/herself understood in the adopted tongue. Efforts at approximating the model are reinforced or rewarded and inappropriate usage is ignored. Under such a method, language acquisition occurs almost as a byproduct of making meaning through interaction with the environment. The learning agenda tends to be dictated by the needs and interests of the student.

Activities associated with the immersion approach range from conversation with a model, role playing, reading and discussing materials such as stories, newspaper articles and writing. Language is always dealt with in a

meaningful context and students are expected to be active participants in the program. Mistakes are regarded as a natural function of the learning process.

A similar philosophy underlies the whole language approach to teaching literacy. A full description of the holistic theory and methods, which have been elegantly advocated by writers (Graves, 1983; Goodman, 1982) is outside the province of this paper. Suffice to say all language functions – writing, reading, listening, and speaking – are regarded as an integrated whole. They are fostered concomitantly as development in one skill enhances development in others (Fitzgerald, 1989). A whole language classroom is characterized by use of literature for reading materials, discussion, basis for writing and drama, "publishing" of children's writing, considerable hands-on experience as a base for concept and related vocabulary growth, to name a few activities. Like immersion, it is learning that is meaning-based, learner-centered and exploits fully the student's contribution, such as writing, to the literacy process.

Lessons to be learned

I have many opportunities to speak and write in French, thereby simulating an immersion program. My instructor converses with me in the language frequently. In addition, notes between us are written in French. Access to French novels and newspapers provide a chance to read the language.

There are many benefits that accrue from such broad exposure to the language. Application of syntax (extension of vocabulary, for example) occur more readily when demanded as part of natural discourse. Perhaps more significant though is the sense of power working with the language bestows upon the learner. For instance, to my

delight I found Guy de Maupassant's "Pierre et Jean" almost readable despite my very rudimentary knowledge of the language. More importantly, I found dealing with the text immensely more motivating than: *J'aime le sport. Et toi? Moi, non je n'amie pas le sport.*

My level of persistence with this self-imposed story reading task was considerable even though verb forms, for instance, were much more difficult than those being learned from the text.

The assumption is made, based on reflection of these experiences, that children who have exposure to a wide variety of language activities, such as those noted above, will also enjoy this sense of empowerment. The feeling of ownership of the learning process engendered provides the motivation to carry children through the difficult cognitive task of learning to read.

Conclusions

The parallel drawn between the experience of learning to read and write a first language and learning to read and write in a second is obviously not totally congruent. For instance, the acquisition of a foreign language is aided by facility with a native tongue whereas learning to speak/write a first language is "from scratch." There are a number of striking similarities, though, in the approaches used to teach languages and the literacy process. The experience of being a novice with the French language led me to reflect upon my own reactions to the approaches and by extrapolation upon those of the child coming to terms with reading and writing.

In short, the experience of learning through an approach that permitted me to talk, read, and write freely, was

a highly satisfying one. I concluded that the satisfaction derived from feeling a growing sense of power gained through meeting self imposed learning goals. This occurred even though most language encounters were marked by considerable error. The experience with the text based approach to language was less satisfactory. The freedom to make mistakes appeared missing since most exercises and activities hold the learner to standards of correctness. This creates a tension that detracts from, rather than supports, the learning process because the learner tends to feel incompetent when failing. Learning is no longer fun, particularly when the value of the skill to the language process is not evident.

When learning to read, via a whole language approach or the basal method, children likely feel similar reactions to those noted. While their experience with the learning process is more limited than that of the mature language user, their reactions to positive and negative instructional situations undoubtedly are the same.

The implication for the classroom teacher is clear. A wide range of language related activities to create many different opportunitites to "play" with language is essential. Children will become truly literate inasmuch as they both can and want to read only if they are permitted to read and write, in some measure, on their own terms.

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