Developing French Materials with Québécois Cultural Context

Carol A. Chapelle
Ghinwa Alameen
Iowa State University

This paper reports on a project resulting from an examination of the cultural content in French language learning materials used by students at Iowa State University. Noting the minimal presentation of Canada in the first year course book as well as the potential benefits of studying about Canada, this project developed a web site with Canadian content for French learners at Iowa State University. The project demonstrates use of Internet-based materials for expanding the cultural dimension and activity types beyond what is available in published language learning materials.

Relative to textbooks and workbooks, the Internet is capable of expanding the options from which teachers and materials developers may choose when selecting linguistic resources, arranging cross-cultural contacts for their students, and accessing culturally illuminating artifacts. The broadened range of opportunities for materials development in turn creates the need to better understand the materials provided on the Web and the educational benefit they can offer students. This paper explores one such benefit by describing the development of materials intended for learners of French at Iowa State University. We explain the educational benefits that might be gained by U.S. French learners as a result of their exposure to French in Canada as one of the bases for development of the web site, which incorporated a principled choice of both cultural content and language learning activities.

CULTURE TEACHING

The cultural dimension of foreign language teaching and learning consists of three interrelated aspects (Byram & Risager, 1999). The first is the cultural knowledge that is directly relevant to a learner’s ability to construct and interpret cultural meanings in the target language. In other words, this dimension is conceived of as part of communicative competence. The second is the self-reflective ability to see one’s own culture as one of many in the world. The third is the ability to mediate between the specifics of the learner’s culture and that of the speakers of the target language. As learners develop specific knowledge about another culture with the help of the teacher’s mediation, they may be expected to increase their self-awareness of their own cultural positioning in the world.

Technology dramatically increases the options for teaching culture through vivid depictions of cultural events in multimedia, direct links to cultural artifacts and information on the Web, and cross-cultural communication exchanges through the
Internet. Furstenberg and Levelt (2001) demonstrated the range of cultural explorations that can take place by drawing from the resources on the Internet. One central resource is, as Belz and Thorne (2006) put it, “the inclusion of living, breathing human representatives of the languages and cultures under study in classroom-based FL instruction” (p. x). Numerous projects investigating the interplay of culture with various forms of computer-mediated communication reveal the complexity of the choices that teachers can make (Levy, 2007). Perhaps the most fundamental decision, however, revolves around which culture the learners are to be exposed to. For example, should this culture represent one that is dominant among speakers of the target language? Should the culture be one to which the learners may most easily identify? Should it be an idealization created by materials developers?

In the United States, this issue has received little attention, despite the fact that culture is one of five major goals targeted by foreign language education, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Standards (1999). In addition, Schulz (2006) points out that textbook authors do not choose cultural content on the basis of articulated principles:

In the United States, as yet there are no commonly agreed upon minimal cultural contents that textbook authors are expected to include in materials… For instance, there is no agreement among teachers of German as to which representatives of German culture their students should know about [and] what events related to German history they should be familiar with… (p. 13)

The implicit choices made by authors may be of consequence from the perspective of critical theory, which asserts “pedagogical choices about curriculum development, content, materials, classroom processes, and language use, although appearing to be informed by apolitical considerations, are in fact, ideological in nature, with significant implications…” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 9).

Accordingly, critical perspectives on culture in foreign language teaching highlight the need for materials developers and teachers to carefully select their approach to teaching culture. Risager (2007) argues that foreign language educators need to better understand the intercultural dimensions of foreign language learning, and that achieving such an understanding “demands that education authorities, language teachers, and authors of teaching materials seriously consider their image of the world and remain open to the diversity of contexts that might be relevant and interesting for learners” (Risager, 2007, pp. 236-237). Such materials may affect—positively or negatively—students’ perception of users of the target language as well as their interest in study abroad, which can be an important aspect of their education in terms of both linguistic and intercultural competence. Students at many universities in the United States, including Iowa State University, have opportunities for study abroad at universities in Canada; however, the implicit connection between the study of French and the culture of France may preclude students’ learning about French Canada and taking the opportunity to study there.
THE NEED FOR CANADIAN CONTENT IN FRENCH

Students studying French at Iowa State University have the opportunity to participate in a study-abroad program at Université Laval in Québec City in Canada, as well as in programs in France; however, the programs in France are dramatically more popular. In the period between 1998 and 2006, for example, over 10 times the number of students chose to go to France than the number that chose to go to Québec. The observation of one of the authors is that students studying French at Iowa State know close to nothing about French in Canada, and consequently they never seriously consider the idea of studying in Québec. Americans in general have little knowledge of or interest in Canada (Gecelovsky, 2007); moreover, a survey of 59 students studying French at Iowa State University revealed that fewer than half of those surveyed knew that French is the official language of Québec, although the percentage increased with year of study from 18% to 44% to 50% in the first, second, and third year groups, respectively (McCormick & Chapelle, 2008).

If students are going to learn about French in Canada, they need exposure to Canadian content in university French classes; evidence suggests that such content may not normally appear in such classes. One study counted the number of times Canada was mentioned in nine first-year French textbooks and their accompanying workbooks and CD-ROMs, which were selected because of their use at large public universities in the Northern United States (Chapelle, 2009). On average, Canadian content appeared in 15.33% of the analyzed sections of texts, 6.47% of workbook sections, and 29.87% of the sections in CD-ROMs. The relatively high percentage of Canadian content in the CD-ROMs is due to the fact that all of the video on one text's accompanying CD had been shot in Canada; the others had virtually nothing about Canada. The book used in first-year French courses at Iowa State contained Canadian content in 14.5% sections of the book, in 17% of the sections of the workbook, and in 15% of the sections of the CD-ROM materials. In this analysis, a section was counted as containing Canadian content if there was any mention of Canada within a section, regardless of whether it contained other content as well.

These percentages reveal that although Canada is mentioned, the coverage is not extensive, particularly in view of the potential benefits students might attain from learning about French in Canada. Canada affords an opportunity for students to see language in a new light—a light that some would argue is essential for understanding globalization. A report from the Modern Language Association of America (2007) emphasizes the critical need in the United States for students to see the political and personal dimensions of language based on the authors’ view that the study of language should help students to see themselves as world citizens. These dimensions are generally not evident to students for whom English is considered normal. As Brecht and Rivers (2005) point out, in the United States the public has little understanding of the significant social and political role language plays because monolingualism is considered normal.
Embedded in a largely monolingual English environment, the majority of American students need to be challenged to see the role that language plays in individual and social identity. Even though students expect that very well-educated individuals may have at least a limited knowledge of a second language (almost always another language of wider communication), in fact bilingualism and multilingualism are most commonly associated with groups and individuals at the lower end of the socioeconomic continuum. This association, in turn, simply reinforces the idea that bilingualism and multilingualism are problematic. (Reagan, 2002, p. 18)

Students may be able to examine critically and perhaps see beyond language ideologies that are based on their lack of information if they are exposed to French as it is used in Canada. The view of language one sees in Canada offers lessons that are potentially consciousness-raising for American students: French in Canada is a lesson in language politics, because the ideological aspects of language are inseparable from discussion of the history and contexts of French use there. In a country with a long history of bilingualism and an official federal bilingual policy set out in the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, monolingualism cannot be assumed the norm, as it is in the United States and France. In addition to having a province which is predominantly populated by Francophones, Canada is dotted with pockets of French-speakers; as a result, its citizens encounter language contact, code switching, and contested language rights regularly.

However, the amount and type of Canadian content in published language learning materials largely fail to convey the ideological dimensions to French learners. For example, in the *Entre Amis* (Oates & Oukada, 2006) textbook used at Iowa State, a 218-word paragraph in English is the sole entry on how French became established in Québec. It explains that Québec is the geographically largest province, that a majority of people there speak French, and that “sizable” French minorities exist throughout Canada. It provides readers with some historical facts about Québec such as that Jacques Cartier established a French colony in North America and Samuel de Champlain founded Québec. The paragraph goes on to explain that in 1763 the British took over thereby surfacing “the Québécois' tenacity” that “has resulted in a vibrant French-speaking culture” (p. 83). The passage explains that by the 1960s, the French majority in Québec had gained strength and the Charter of French Language was made official in 1977. The authors explain that French was established “as the sole official language in the province of Québec. Its goal was to ensure the quality and influence of the French language in North American civilization” (Oates & Oukada, 2006, p. 84). The other thirteen mentions of Canada in the text include topics such as news headlines (not language related), weather, food and the location of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon. Thus, although some important history about French in Québec is provided in this textbook, it is done so concisely and in English.
The only other mention of language is in the extensive coverage in French of singer Céline Dion, whose success is linked to her learning English. “Pour avoir une carrière internationale, Céline étudie l'anglais. L'objectif de René Angélil est de propulser Céline dans la grande machine qui est le show business américain” [To have an international career, Céline studies English. The goal of René Angélil is to popularize Céline in the big American show business machine; translation ours] (Oates & Oukada, 2006, p. 86). In this paragraph, the author explains that she succeeds in learning English, and becomes “la chanteuse numéro un du monde” [the number one singer in the world] (Oates & Oukada, 2006, p. 86). This presentation of Céline Dion’s success would support Iowan students’ likely view of the normal workings of the world: Anyone who is sufficiently diligent can learn English and succeed.

In short, for all of the opportunities Canada might provide for raised consciousness about the political and personal significance of language, the textbook offers very little. Moreover, Entre Amis, like other ones which students in Iowa have studied, seems to fail to provide an image of French in Canada capable of altering the exclusive links students have between French and France or of interesting them in what many Americans see as their inherently uninteresting neighbor to the North. Our materials development project was prompted by the need for materials that would add these dimensions to materials that students currently use in class.

MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

The materials development project used technology to provide learners of French with a dimension of cultural content that is underrepresented in most French materials. The target audience for the web site is students at Iowa State University of lower-intermediate to intermediate-level proficiency in French who are studying in second-year French (201 and 202). The site may be viewed at http://www.public.iastate.edu/~apling/qcfrench/. Students from other universities in the United States, specifically those in northern states, may identify with and benefit from the materials as well. The materials are centered on the sociocultural and linguistic experience of an American exchange student at the Université Laval, Québec, and all dialogues, structures, and communication activities are situated there. The site also includes a section where students can learn about the importance of the French language in Canada and its political dimensions. Ultimately, the web site will also function as a link for communication exchanges between Iowa State students and Laval students.

Like the Design-Based Research approach described by Pardo-Ballester and Rodríguez (this volume), design decisions for the French in Canada web site were made on the basis of theoretical perspectives in second language studies about the importance of culture in foreign language study and of input and interaction for language acquisition. The process of development, therefore, was both context-sensitive and theory-informed.
Exploring Students’ Interests and Needs

The project, which was funded by grants from the Council for International Programs and the Culture Corps Program in the Office of International Students and Scholars at Iowa State University, was carried out during Spring semester 2008 by a group consisting of a faculty member in applied linguistics, a graduate student with expertise in Web design and second language acquisition, and an undergraduate student with expertise in language learning, French, and Québécois culture. Our team explored students’ interests and needs by consulting French teachers at Iowa State, student advisors at the Study Abroad Office, and the undergraduate member of the team.

Our team also reviewed materials relating to students’ needs for traveling to Laval and challenges they might face in adjusting to the linguistic and cultural demands of the new environment. In addition, we surveyed textbook materials currently used at American universities for themes, cultural contexts, communication skills, grammatical structures, and vocabulary. Based on this groundwork, we aimed to develop materials that would make French Canadian language and culture accessible while simultaneously prompting students’ interest in the exchange program at Université Laval.

Website Design

The web site supports both skill-based and culture-based learning goals. The thematic content of the materials is the sociocultural and linguistic experience of an American exchange student, Kate, at Université Laval. Learners using the web site accompany Kate on her journey, following what she faces and how she adapts to a new culture. The site contains five sections, namely, *Home, Journals, Culture, Communication Skills, and Linguistics*.

The *Journals* section consists of 16 entries which structure the thematic content. Each entry contains a letter written by Kate to her family or friends in the United States in English, as shown in Figure 1, followed by an audio dialogue in French from a specific incident that relates to the letter and demonstrates the cultural aspects of Kate's experience. The audio dialogue is supported by a transcript and practice exercises on the web site.

Another section of the web site, named *Culture*, provides cultural background in English and French about major topics in Québec, such as history, architecture, media, family, festivals, and Québécois identity; these also tie to the events in Kate’s journals. The web site also provides links to external web sites for supplemental information. Communication skills encountered in the *Journal* section are also compiled in separate sections for easy access to specific skills and examples of linguistic functions. This section includes entries such as *asking for clarification, expressing thanks*, and *suggestions/advice*. It works as a corpus that provides examples of mini-dialogues.
expressing those communication skills. Every mini-dialogue links back to the corresponding conversation so that it can be reviewed in its original context.

Finally, the web site has a section dedicated to sociolinguistic issues encountered by the people of Québec in various aspects of their lives. This section includes links and summaries of news taken from various English and French Québécois media such as the Internet, newspapers, and podcasts. These clips from contemporary Québécois life demonstrate the significance of linguistic issues in society and the intersection of language and politics in Canada.

Figure 1. Sample journal page from the French in Canada web site

Theoretical Foundations for Language Learning Activities
The design decisions for the language learning activities were motivated primarily by an interactionist theoretical perspective of second language acquisition, which highlights the role of linguistic input and interaction in SLA (Long, 1996). Interactionist SLA hypotheses about why input and interaction are beneficial for learning have been applied to human-computer interaction in computer-assisted language learning tasks as well (Chapelle, 2003). Some of the key aspects of activities from this perspective are the authenticity of the linguistic input to which the learners are exposed, their opportunities for noticing important linguistic features, and their opportunities for receiving modified input which can help them to understand it. All of these aspects have been included in the web site.

Authenticity, in terms of the web site, refers to use of authentic Québécois material that fulfills a personal and social function learners can identify with (Little, 1997). The scenarios depict realistic situations and language the learner is likely to encounter; the dialogues in the scenarios serve as the central piece of the journal section. They were written collaboratively by a native Québécois speaker and one of researchers, starting from an analysis of skills and cultural aspects which needed to be tackled based on the suggestions about what can be learned from Canada. Situations were based on real-life experiences of students moving to a new campus with insufficient language skills. The dialogues show Kate code-switching, losing her way due to poor pronunciation, and buying the wrong item because she does not understand what the vendor is saying. Furthermore, the dialogues reveal a variety of aspects in the daily life of the Québécois, such as their transportation system, meal-time topics, shopping, and language controversies. Such topics were chosen to make the content interesting to American students, who might find themselves in similar positions once they leave the United States.

Authentic language for each scenario was obtained by recording native Québécois speakers and an undergraduate American student whose proficiency level in French was comparable to that of the character Kate. Speakers were given the liberty to change the dialogue while they were recording it in order to render the material authentic-sounding; however, they were not introduced to the text in advance. Recordings were then edited by adding special effects, such as transportation noise or restaurant sounds, so that the recordings resembled real-life situations.

Figure 2 shows one of Kate's letters to her family and friends, which function as the anchoring piece of the journal. They were modeled from the journals of an undergraduate female student at Iowa State University and then modified to better accompany the dialogue and highlight cultural aspects of Kate's life in Québec. English was chosen for the language of the letters in view of the fact that Kate is writing to her American relatives. They are intended to help learners comprehend and become engaged in the story easily by giving them context and background knowledge. Pictures are also used as another contextual device intended to help learners visualize the situation.
Kate's letter, a contextualizing image, and an audio recording are what the learners see when they access a given *Journal* page. However, as noted above, they have other tools at their disposal which can be used upon request, namely the audio transcript and the practice sections. Tools such as the transcript appear upon the learner’s request to provide some autonomy in choosing what kind of help they need and when.

![Image of a letter and a street in Québec]

**Listen to Kate fight with the coffee machine**

Figure 2. A letter from Kate with a picture of a street in Québec and the audio control

The tools provided on the web site were designed on the basis of theoretical perspectives suggesting that students are more likely to notice linguistic features of the input when they are made salient (Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990) and explicitly enhanced (Sharwood-Smith, 1993). On the web site, input enhancement was accomplished by
making input salient, offering input modification, and elaborating input. For example, as students listen to the dialogues, they have a variety of opportunities to notice and receive help with aspects of the language through input modification. Modified versions of the recordings are available to students through the “slow down” button. The speed rate for these versions was reduced by 25% and special sound effects were removed for clarity's sake. Since input simplification depends on the learners and their needs (Chaudron, 1988), modified audio recordings are accessed on demand, and the normal speed version is the default. Audio control was made available in both slow and normal speed versions so learners can listen at their own pace.

Research shows that highlighting alone is not related to vocabulary acquisition and that glosses are needed for the words to be better processed (DeRidder, 2002). Therefore, in the transcript section, as shown in Figure 3, particular vocabulary items are made salient by highlighting them with a contrasting color; annotations are provided to students on demand. Highlighted vocabulary in the transcript is accompanied by a javascript tooltip; when the learner points at the highlighted word/phrase, a box appears containing its meaning in English. In this sense, input was modified to provide an accessible version of the L2 input (Chapelle, 2003). Modifications did not only include L1 translation, but also frequently contained some contextual clues as to when this word is used. For example, *valises*, which means bags, is the Québécois equivalent to “bagages” which is used more often in France. Thus, the tooltip for *valises* indicates that it means “baggage, Québécois use.”

In order to select words that students might not know, words were selected for glossing based on *Vocabprofile* (Cobb, 1994; and Heatley & Nation, 1994). K2 and K3 words (i.e., the 2nd and 3rd thousand most frequent words in French) and some off-list words (that are not proper nouns) were glossed in English, in addition to idiomatic expressions which were overlooked by *Vocabprofile*. The web site's complete transcripts consist mainly of 70.8% K1 words, 3.6% K2 words, and 0.6% 3K words. Off-list words comprise a large portion (25%), yet are mostly proper nouns and fillers.

Communication skills were also made salient in the transcript by typing them in bold so that while students read the transcript for meaning, they would notice the skills used to accomplish certain functions. When students click on a highlighted sentence, they are transferred to the relevant skill page, which includes mini-dialogues representing how this particular skill is used in other conversations on the web site. This section functions as a skill corpus, where the learner can deductively learn how to use specific structures to perform particular communication functions without explicit explanation.
Repetition of the language may also enhance noticing (Skehan, 1998) and be valuable for learners. On the web site, repetition is maintained through audio and text. Input enhancement throughout the web site is offered interactively on demand from the learner. In other words, various types of help can be displayed or hidden at the learner’s request, which is intended to enhance learner autonomy. Such forms are further reinforced in the Practice It section (see Figure 4), which provides learners with an opportunity to revisit skills in the conversation/script and construct their own task. Feedback yields yet another opportunity to repeat and notice the material. It appears once learners submit their answers to questions in the activities, inviting them to try again so they can reconsider their response.
According to theory and research, these features (e.g., help and repetition) should be expected to help students to explore and learn the linguistic content presented while allowing them to learn about French in the Canadian context. However, the success of such features depends on how they are accepted and used by the students studying French at Iowa State University.

Next step in development is to pilot the web site with French learners and instructors at Iowa State University in order to get their feedback on the layout, navigation, content, and language. As a result of their feedback, more activities—based on the journals and the culture section—can be developed to provide additional authentic material. Feedback from prospective users can be used to make modifications as well as to assess students’ reaction to the Canadian content as part of a French class. The introduction to Canada
that students receive from this web site can be followed up with subsequent in-depth cultural studies derived from other Internet-based cultural materials, according to Spodark’s (2004) four-step process for the exploitation of materials identified by the teacher for learning and analysis of culture. Whether students go forward to participate in such activities, engage in Internet collaboration, or study abroad in Canada, the French in Canada web site is intended to provide an engaging first glimpse into Canada for students of French.

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