

CREATIVE WRITING IN FRENCH

When I was asked to teach the Grammar and Composition course at my institution, I was worried that students would not want to enroll in the course for fear of being overcome with too many grammar rules. I desired to make grammar as interesting as I could, while still maintaining the focus of the class, which was to promote the development of technical command of French through grammar review, vocabulary amplification, and writing exercises. Not only did I use a grammar review text, but I also included the text, *L'immeuble*, originally designed for a drama/conversation class. This book provides students with the opportunity to create characters and to act out dialogues that occur between neighbors in an apartment building. I use this text as a starting point for the grammar course, and rather than acting out the scenes of the apartment dwellers, the students write out the scenarios, using grammatical structures that were relevant to each situation.

On the first day of class, the students spent time creating the characters of the apartment building: from native French inhabitants to foreign immigrants, from young to old, from single to married, from dog to bird and everything in between. During the first week of the semester, we assigned each character a name, a profession, an age, and an apartment. Some were joined with others to make eclectic families (a 21 year old dancer and her pet snake living with a 50 year old French pastry chef). Once the apartment building was established, we changed our focus to grammar. In an effort to prepare students for the writing assignments, I selected appropriate elements from the grammar text. Class time was used to introduce the structures and to check for student comprehension. Students were then asked to manipulate the targeted structures during guided activities (both written and spoken). Homework assignments reinforced the grammatical structures. After time was spent working with the grammar text and corresponding activities, I assigned a written composition that was linked to the grammatical content. For example, one assignment required students to select a character from the apartment building and to narrate a story about his/her life. Using *L'immeuble* as a guide (p. 29), the composition included a description of the character, the age, profession, personality, hobbies, likes and dislikes. Students worked on the composition as part of the homework assignment and continued to complete corresponding grammatical exercises from the grammar text.

On the due date, students brought three

typed copies of the composition to class. Students submitted one copy to me for a grade, while the other two copies were given to peers in the class who worked one-on-one during a peer-editing session. I provided the students with a list of questions written in French that served as a guide for editing a fellow student's composition. (Are the verbs correctly conjugated? Is the tense consistent throughout? Are the professions mentioned? Do you find errors with articles and prepositions? Is the composition clear and organized? Is there an introduction and a conclusion? What do you want to know more about? Are there clear transitions?) In this way, students were guided during the peer-editing. They discussed with one another the strengths and weaknesses of the composition. After the discussion with the first student's composition, they both worked on the same editing process for second student's composition. After the first peer-editing session, students switched partners and were asked to retrieve the third copy of their composition. By implementing a second peer-editing session, students benefited in two ways. First, each student received feedback from two different students. This allowed them to receive comments and suggestions of varying opinions that would then allow them to write a polished final draft. Second, each student served as the peer editor twice with different compositions, thus providing each student with the opportunity to be responsible for providing constructive feedback and remarks to their fellow classmates. By serving as peer-editor, students were made aware of their own grammar capabilities.

During the peer-editing sessions, I circulated throughout the room in order to get an idea of the most common errors that were being made (subject-verb agreement, tense choice, word usage, article use, and sentence structure). I noted several errors and wrote them on an overhead transparency. After the peer-editing session, I asked the students to correct their compositions. Some of them recognized that a specific error listed on the board was taken from their own composition, and so they would mark the correction. Before leaving class for the day, I assigned students to rework their compositions based on this discussion.

Because I wanted students to learn from their mistakes, I required them to complete a second draft of every composition. In this way, the feedback they received from the two peer-editors was of value to them because they were required to use those comments to improve their composition. Additionally, they received a graded,

corrected draft from me and used my comments as well in a final version of their composition. I did not provide them with the correct responses to their grammatical and vocabulary errors. Rather, I provided them with coded comments so that they were required to investigate the nature of their errors and to come up with the correct responses on their own.

This process was repeated throughout the semester as each composition provided an opportunity to explore the life of other inhabitants in the apartment building. In addition, several compositions required different types of writing styles (narration, dialogue, interview, post cards, recipes etc.) which also targeted different grammatical structures. By the end of the semester, a thorough grammar review had been completed, and students submitted their final portfolio, which included the blue print of the apartment building, a list of all of the characters and a brief biography, 10 final versions of the composition assignments and photos, magazine cutouts or other realia or documents that students included to make their portfolio more attractive and visually stimulating.

Looking back, I cannot say that teaching grammar was boring, nor can I say that the class was unappealing to the students. Based on the quality of the final portfolios that were submitted at the end of the semester, it was clear to me that the students were engaged in the class, that they demonstrated creativity in their writing, and that they had gained a deeper understanding of French grammar, which was evident from their final compositions. Through the use of the *L'immeuble*, a creative component was added to a class whose content has not been traditionally embraced by foreign language students. However, because the grammar structures served as tools with which to create the stories of the apartment dwellers, the students were eager to develop the stories in their writing. Students felt that they knew these characters and their idiosyncrasies, and as the semester progressed, the characters' lives became more complicated and colorful as different events unfolded and impacted them. Through the implementation of creative writing assignments, students gained a deeper understanding of complex grammatical structures of the French language and had fun while doing it.

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References

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