

GIVING BEGINNING FRENCH STUDENTS THE BUSINESS: THE CASE FOR TEACHING BUSINESS FRENCH AT THE BEGINNING LEVEL¹

I. The Curriculum and the Pluridisciplinary Needs of Our Students

When the members of the European Union introduced the use of a single monetary system (Euro) on January 1, 1999, the rest of the world was faced with a serious challenge. The leaders of our society are faced with the responsibility of educating its members and responding to a new globality. Education and learning become the clear medium for providing these skills and expertise. We, educators, have reached the point where our curriculum in the humanities and the liberal arts must also face the pluridisciplinary needs of our students. Nowadays we are constantly being faced by headlines where new large economic markets are replacing old countries, where technology and electronic communication will soon eclipse traditional means of communication, and “departments organized along national boundaries (France, Italy, Germany)—or language families (Romance, Slavic, etc.)—are representative of the past and willy-nilly will need to adapt to the new world order” (Furman, 1998, p. 69). There are many articles in our journals and many sessions in conferences that have already discussed this need for a change in our curriculum. Unfortunately, a majority of these articles are mostly responding to the implications of our changing enrollment patterns and thus, only indirectly accepting the challenges of our new globality. Our departments are reacting rather than acting. They are responding rather than establishing.

Rather than just reacting to the declining enrollment patterns in French, our curriculum must act on the changing, multi- and interdisciplinary needs of our students as they are faced with a new globality and technology that is characterized by rapidity, flexibility, adaptability, permanent change, and uncertainty (Smadja 94). The most serious threat to our enrollment pattern is the continued belief that we can maintain our curriculum and have our students learn foreign languages as we have taught them the past decade. Our globalized and cybernetic world will convince our students otherwise. As Finel-Honigman pointed out in her article, business French should not be perceived as a violation of the literary canon (15). To isolate French in its traditional literary program from global affairs is to prove its elitism, which may later lead to the demise of the French program altogether (23).

II. Re-thinking and Re-shaping Our Image or Establishing a New One?

Furman's article in *Profession 1998* states that to be relevant to our clients, the students, departments must rethink their goals, their disciplinary boundaries, and their course offering (70). I would like to prescribe a more basic modification by proposing a variation to the oft taken for granted beginning French class. In pursuing curricular changes to respond to the needs of our advancing globalization, we tend to overlook the basics. I am supporting a different way of teaching beginning-level French, not replacing the traditional way it has been done, but to complement it as an alternative (in the same way some universities use a video program to teach basic language classes like *French in Action*). Instead of just having a cultural and literary enhancement of the basic grammatical text, it can be enriched with business vocabulary and commercial discussions, and the activities following each grammatical lesson can be set in business context using commercial terms and scenarios. At this basic grammatical level, it would be unwise to offer a full-blown business French course. Instead, we can offer a class that will fulfill the language requirement but at the same time provide some cultural information other than just literature, history, or civilization in the culture sections.

In the textbook *Rendez-vous: An Invitation to French* by Muyskens and Omaggio Hadley (1998), each chapter is made up of the following four sections: themes and vocabulary, grammar and functional use, culture and readings, skills practice. A business French context can be incorporated in all these sections. Let us take *Chapitre 3* as an example. The theme and vocabulary regard *le logement*. A few business vocabulary terms can be added to this, perhaps in the line of a foreign student doing an internship program abroad. Words and expressions like *en stage*, *stagiaire*, *le dossier*, *l'affiche*, *l'imprimante*, *l'organigramme*, *surfer le Web*, etc. can be incorporated. This chapter also contains the grammatical lesson on -IR verbs. This section can be amplified with verbs like *remplir*, *investir*, *fournir*. This business vocabulary can also be added to the *Vérifions!* and *Parlons-en!* activities for functional use at the end of each grammatical segment. The section on culture and readings contains four parts: *En savoir plus*, *Réalités francophones*, *Le monde francophone*, *Lecture*. These sections are in English from Chapters 1-7, and from 8-16 are in French. Such readings can definitely be enhanced with business context,

or another part can be created with a purely business context. The proposed section could be called *Culture et affaires*. Since Chapter 3 is on *Logement*, a brief English passage on French/Francophone use of time and space can be informative. The last section of each chapter is comprised of parts like *Mots-clés*, *Étude de prononciation*, *Situations*, *Avant de lire*, *Par écrit*, and *À l'écoute*. The dialogues, readings, listening comprehension tape and vocabulary presented in these areas can be amplified with topics relating to technology, commerce, and the professions.

It might even be possible to incorporate and integrate the ten *comportements* which Eichmann (1998) suggests that we apply when teaching a unit on French economy. *Comportements* such as *l'harmonie de l'ensemble*, *l'horreur de l'imprécis*, *l'homme est un animal social*, *l'idéal de civilisation*, *le manichéisme français*, *la peur du risque*, *l'esprit du clan*, *l'État-papa* may be introduced as cultural readings in English or in French, then incorporated in dialogue scenarios and functional use contexts for application.

Universities that have not yet established Foreign Languages across the Curriculum (FLAC) or Languages across the Curriculum (LAC) might have a hard time accepting the idea of a business/commercially oriented beginning French level. On the other hand, those universities who already have strong cross-curricular or interdepartmental programs (like the Business, Culture and Languages Program of the University of Maryland [Hinshaw] or the University of North Carolina Charlotte Program [Doyle]) may be able to implement a separate track of beginning-level French for the professionally inclined students fulfilling their language requirement. This type of program in French and Spanish was implemented for the first time at the University of South Carolina Spartanburg during Fall 1998. Regis Robe, who taught the French class, said that this program works (A discussion of his experience is presented in the next section).

Business French introduced in the beginning level would serve four purposes:

- Students can use this class as part of their fulfillment of the foreign language requirement.
- This class can encourage students to pursue higher levels of business French.
- This class can also be a starting point for programs like FLAC or LAC (See Adams and Knox).

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d. This class can show students that pursuing their studies in French does not necessarily lead to literary studies. Gilbert clearly stated in her "Final Report of the ULA Committee on Professional Employment" in winter 1999 that departments should rethink or even cutback their graduate programs that lead to academic jobs (64). Based on statistics, undergraduates must first understand the job market crisis before continuing their education with a Ph.D. in a foreign language literature. Recent MLA studies show that between 1990-1995, 2,871 graduate students received doctorates in foreign languages and only 1,235 or 43% found full-time tenure-track jobs the same year as their degree (57). It will also be possible to assume that the Spanish graduates will have a higher percentage rate of employment than the other foreign language graduates. Gilbert and Franklin have in fact questioned the wisdom of producing more Ph.D.'s in a depressed job market (64). Angelini (1998) made a direct reference to the actuality that our universities' traditional graduate literary programs "are not producing educators" to face the realities of our professionally-oriented student body (53).

III. Problems Ahead

The first and most urgent problem of introducing a beginning-level of French with a business perspective is academic resistance. The implementation of a beginning level of French with a business perspective will most likely become a departmental decision, and most members of a foreign language department will value the literary and intellectual significance and prominence of French rather than the business perspective. Business will be perceived as more utilitarian, particularly since most full-time tenure-track members of the department whose votes will count do not teach the beginning language level. According to the *1999 MLA Committee on Professional Employment Report*, the staffing patterns in 1996-1997 of the introductory language sections of foreign languages are as follows: 68% by graduate students, 7% by part-time faculty members, 15% by non-tenure track faculty members and only 10% by full-time tenure-track faculty (Gilbert 57). Full-time tenure-track faculty teaching introductory level courses only account for 10%, and perhaps they teach these classes only for a temporary or short time period. Making a departmental academic decision to teach a beginning level of French with a business perspective will need much more support from faculty. Unfortunately, most faculty

members do not teach beginning-level courses, so first we have to convince them.

The first problem leads to the second problem. There is a very limited choice of textbooks, and those available need to be improved greatly to even come close to rivaling a beginning language text that has: textbook with an instructor's edition; workbook; laboratory manual along with an audio cassette program; instructor's manual and resource kit; student tapes of vocabulary and dialogues; testing program; electronic/computerized language tutorials; slides; training and orientation manuals; Web sites; video programs, etc.

We definitely need to develop the materials available for implementing a stronger case for teaching beginning level French with a business perspective. The most valuable resources for this level right now are two texts by Richards and Van Hooff (1996): *French for Business: An Interactive Approach for Beginners* and *French for Business: An Interactive Approach for Advanced Beginners*.

Will Thompson distributed a bibliography at the 1998 Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER)-sponsored workshop at the University of Memphis where he lists three other beginning-level texts in Business French. Coultas' (1992) *Teach Yourself Business French: A Complete Course for Beginners* (National Textbook) and Hill's (1993) *Just Listen n' Learn Business French* (National Textbook). Although both texts are for beginners, they do not essentially manifest a university text. The third textbook by Truscott, et. al (1994), *Le Français à grande vitesse* (Hachette) was not written for the American student.

The University of South Carolina Spartanburg just started teaching a business track in their introductory level of French and Spanish in 1998-1999. Regis Robe insists that teaching beginning-level French with a business perspective works but requires a lot of preparation from the instructor due to the limited resources available. Although he cautioned that it was still too early in the project to make conclusions, he mentioned that as soon as the students learned the verb *avoir*, activities could be created around it. He also pointed out that conversation was suffering since the students were preoccupied translating terms. He started with a class of 20 students during the first term and had 15 in the second term. Pascale Dewey from Kutztown University also cautioned about teaching too much at this level, adding that it might alienate students to have them learn too much vocabulary too soon. This type of class, according to her, features content learning, something students might not be used to. Despite this drawback, she indicates that this

contextual technique makes the language come alive and gives it more meaning for the students. Finally, she warns that there has to be a solid communication among the departments and colleges since knowledge "cannot be compartmentalized."

IV. The Spanish Perspective

Bruce Fryer, co-author of *Éxito comercial: prácticas administrativas y contextos comerciales* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1997) and an important contributor to the Master of Arts in International Business Studies (MEBS) at the University of South Carolina Columbia noted that an introductory language level with a business perspective may be successful in areas like California and in junior colleges. He referred to the success of the Spanish textbook of Jarvis and Lebrede, already in their fifth edition as of 1996. Their system works with the central *Basic Spanish Grammar* text surrounded by optional workbooks in different fields (such as Business and Finance, Social Services, etc.). Fryer further explains that for this type of introductory language level to work a homogenous group of students needs to be identified. Then comes the problem of maintaining and controlling this group. What will happen if students decide to crossregister, that is, to sign up for the business track introductory level then shift to the second term traditional introductory level? Will there be some information gaps?

At the Spartanburg campus of the University of South Carolina, Sharon Cherry has had similar problems. Miscommunication among offices and departments led to the second term of her business track introductory level being closed to students who took the first term.

I perceive these as learning experiences from which to improve future programs. For the textbook of Jarvis and Lebrede to reach its fifth edition must mean that it is being well used, and consequently being developed. The realities of Spanish may be quite different from those of French, but we can still learn from their experiences.

V. Conclusion

We in French do not really want to jump onto the bandwagon and do what Spanish has done, but we certainly need to establish a new perspective. This proposal reflects a change to mirror the realities of our world. Since this is a recommendation and just in the beginning stage, its development and a more careful study of its possibilities will be necessary if we as a faculty, as departments really wish to respond to the cybernetic fluctuations and vacillations of our globalized society.

In conclusion, I would like to use the information shared with me by Bruce Fryer

during the course of our conversations. He informed me that a CIBER office has received a large grant to formulate a Spanish Exam similar to but different from the Madrid Chamber of Commerce Exam. The reasoning behind this is that business from Spain represents approximately 5% of Spanish business in the U.S. compared to business from Central and South America. In the same light, one might ask the percentage of students taking introductory level French who are interested in pursuing a career in literature. We might be (un)surprised to find out that our mostly literary-oriented departments of foreign languages are not representing the needs of our introductory language level college students.

In responding to the evolving needs of the majority of students who study French (introductory level), full-time members of the department must actively interact with them to understand their goals. It seems unfortunate that most big universities use T.A.s and adjuncts to teach these classes. Despite the effort of some faculty to offer varied and globalized programs in higher-level French, most students are lost before they even reach the second year. French departments should seriously examine their response to the following questions:

- What career focus do our T.A.s and adjuncts project/give to beginning level students?
- Why do we have fewer students taking beginning level French every year?
- What image of French do our local high school teachers project to their students?
- Why do our departments insist on globalizing French for professional use only in the third and fourth years?
- Why do we emphasize literature in the beginning level?
- What kind of service do we give/fail to give our beginning level students by emphasizing literature?
- How much do we want to encourage our beginning level students to pursue further studies (other than literature) in French?
- And finally, what image of French do we as a department project to our students and to the university/college as a whole?

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