

Title: Developing Intercultural Competence and Critical Thinking in Intermediate French

Author: Olivia J. Choplin

Affiliation: Elon University

Summary: A French professor redesigns multiple assignments in a 200-level French course focused on the cultural implications of “the stories we tell” in order to help students develop critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, and awareness of their own cultural-situatedness.

Background:

French 222 is a fourth semester course and the last of what is traditionally called the Introductory Sequence at Elon. It is themed “French Today.” This course counts toward the French minor, and each course beyond it counts toward the French major. It is a very important course for recruiting students to continue with their French study. My course redesign focuses on the fall section of the course, which is **not** a continuation course for most students. They frequently place into this course right out of high school. The course typically enrolls between 14-20 students; 19 students were enrolled in Fall 2014; 14 students were enrolled in Fall 2015; 16 students were enrolled in Fall 2016.

Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes

The goals of this course are that students:

- communicate in French, orally and in writing, with increased grammatical accuracy, ease, fluency and sophistication.
- solidify their ability to describe and narrate in the present, past, and future.
- read and understand a wide variety of texts in French (short stories, news articles, essays, a short novel).
- increase listening skills through multimedia resources (music, news clips, films...).
- improve accent and intonation through in-class practice and self-recordings.
- demonstrate awareness of their own cultural rules and biases as they discover elements of French and Francophone cultures.
- express openness to new cultural perspectives.
- gain a basic understanding of wide-ranging cultural norms in Canada and Haiti, and compare and contrast them thoughtfully with their own cultural norms.
- become aware of how differences in language can point to differences in culture.
- conduct rudimentary research in French related to current events in the Francophone world.

Course goals are linked to the overarching curricular goals in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Elon. We want students to acquire linguistic proficiency in the target language, intercultural competency, and critical thinking skills. In order to achieve these goals, I have recently experimented with eliminating the traditional language/culture/text/chapter textbook in which grammar, culture and texts are (supposedly) integrated around certain themes.

Instead, students bought a grammar review manual containing explanations of grammar rules and mechanical practice exercises that they could self-check, and the rest of the student work was with primary texts: folk tales, news articles, episodes of a Québécois sitcom, and a short novel.

The overarching theme of the course is "The stories we tell..." and it is divided into 3 main units: "How to tell a story" (reviewing various past tenses, object pronouns, adjectives and adverbs through the reading of folk tales from Quebec and Haiti); "How to re-imagine a story" (reviewing articles, negations, clauses of condition, future and conditional tenses, relative pronouns) while we watch a Québécois sitcom about a Haitian immigrant who marries a Quebecker; and "How to react to a story" (presenting/reviewing the subjunctive mood while we read a novel written by Haitian-Québécois author Marie-Célie Agnant. In 2014 and 2015, we read *Alexis, fils de Raphaël*, the story of a young boy who fled Haiti with his mother and immigrated to Montreal. Since the novel was over 200 pages, students did not read the entire book, but were given plot summaries (written by me) of the un-assigned chapters. In 2016, I chose a shorter text, *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, which tells the story of a fictional immigrant author's obsession with the story of her neighbor's immigrant nanny. Students have the grammar manual to study the rules, but then are asked to identify and think about linguistic features of the texts they are reading for the course so that the grammatical concepts are always contextualized in authentic ways. Thus the structure of the course simultaneously focuses student attention on the linguistic structures necessary for certain types of expression—telling, re-imagining, and reacting to a story—while also encouraging critical thinking about what the stories we tell in different societies might signify about our cultural perspectives.

Student achievement related to linguistic proficiency, intercultural competency, and critical thinking is assessed via collaborative grammar quizzes, daily homework, multiple writing assignments of various genres, oral presentations, and classroom participation. While students certainly improve their comfort with the French language in the course, and demonstrate knowledge of and curiosity about the Haitian and Québécois cultures they encounter through their readings, I joined the CHRP team because I was not yet satisfied with the depth of their critical thinking as it relates to a more complex understanding of the texts they read. In particular, I wanted them to hone their skills in close reading, learning to make interpretive claims about a text that they justify using valid textual evidence. This skill, central to many disciplines in the humanities, is particularly important in the study of language, because it helps students understand the foundational concept of language as a way of being in the world, i.e. as something that is inherently linked to, rather than separate from, culture. When they are capable of understanding how the language of a text can *point to* a cultural perspective, they get closer to seeing both members of the target-culture and *themselves* as culturally-situated beings whose understanding of the world might differ because of their different cultural perspectives. Recognizing the connections between the texts they read and the cultural perspectives revealed by those texts is an essential element of intercultural competence. It is also very important to me that they build their capacity to *articulate* their recognition of the cultural lenses through which they themselves and others view the world. When revising my assignments for the course, I attempted to encourage metacognition at every stage of the semester in order to help them bring to their own minds the cultural assumptions they carry and compare them to those of the Francophone cultures we were studying. Considering that the students enrolled in my course are

primarily first- and second-years, I am asking them for high-order thinking, but I think it is essential to develop their sensitivity to these types of questions as early as possible.

Implementation:

What is the general format of the course?

In this course, students study and do practice exercises related to grammar points outside of class, and they come to class ready to use the grammar and to discuss the primary texts they have read or watched: folk tales, news articles, a sitcom, a short novel. Each class period consists of a warm-up (which puts students in the mindset of communication in French), contextualized practice with grammar, and discussion of texts, both for their linguistic particularities and their cultural content. In general, when working with students on grammatical concepts, I ask them to identify the use of that grammatical concept in the primary text of study. Throughout the semester or during the second half of the semester (according to enrollments), some class sessions include partnered students leading their peers in a discussion based on comprehension and reflection questions they prepared in advance related to a news article of their choice or to one of the course texts. There is little to no traditional lecture in the course. I may present introductory information related to an author, a cultural practice, or historical events, but most of our work involves asking students to make (guided) hypotheses about the cultures in question as they are presented in the texts we study.

What assignments target the specific skills I am working to develop, and how have they evolved?

If the main goals for the course are to help students learn to better justify their claims with textual evidence and to better understand their own cultural lenses and those of others, the three most important writing assignments/sets of assignments that I have used to assess their knowledge in those fields over the past three years were the Discussion Dirigée (Guided Discussion) Responses, the Conte Project, and the Final Exploratory Essay. The rubrics and descriptions for these assignments are linked below, but they have had varying degrees of success, and have gone through several different iterations.

The Discussion Dirigée Responses began as 250-300 word prompted responses to classroom discussions of a particular text. From the beginning, they were designed as a part of the scaffolding for the Final Exploratory Essay. The goal of the DD Responses is to provide a low-stakes space for students to practice justifying claims with textual evidence. (They wrote 6-7 responses during the semester, which totaled 15% of their grade in the course.) In the first two iterations of the course, the students wrote their responses after having engaged in discussion with two of their peers about a particular text, either an article from a news outlet in Haiti or Quebec, or one of the course texts. In 2016, I decided that the current events, while interesting, were not always easily connected to the overarching course materials or course goals. I learned of a relatively new program called TalkAbroad, which pairs students with vetted conversation partners in the target language all over the world. The students pay to have thirty-minute conversations via Skype, and the conversations are recorded on the website for student and instructor access. In Fall 2016, I had students write their responses to their TalkAbroad Conversations rather than to articles from the news media. The revised prompts and rubrics can be found here. The implementation of TalkAbroad gave students additional opportunities to engage with native speakers of French and to think about and process cultural perspectives in more lively and meaningful ways than were occurring when they were responding to journalistic texts.

The second assignment that is used to scaffold student work and build towards the Final Exploratory Essay is the Conte Project (2014 Project Guidelines, 2015 Project Guidelines, 2016 Project Guidelines) which has gone through several iterations over the past eight years. In various formats, students enrolled in Intermediate French 2 have written original folk tales in French in order to demonstrate their understanding of the genre of the folk tale as well as to increase their capacity to narrate in the past tense in French. In Year 1 of the CHRP, students wrote individual folk tales after having read and studied several traditional tales from Haiti and Québec. While their stories were often fun and clever, I wanted a way to connect students' creativity to the cultural content of the course. In Year 2 of the CHRP course, I decided to have the students write their tales in small groups, and I required them to write stories *from the perspective of one of our target cultures*—either Haiti or Québec. In this way, they were expected to understand the form, structure, and important cultural elements that were common to the Haitian and Québécois tales and incorporate those in their own work. In addition to writing the tales from that perspective, they were also required to turn in a short reflection, in English, explaining how and why their folk tale represented the target culture. Thus a piece of the metacognition was built into the project. The addition of that explanatory paragraph encouraged students to process the cultural elements they had come to understand while they were reading the folk tales from the target cultures. They also had to demonstrate understanding of their own cultural perspective and how it might differ from that of the cultures they were studying. For examples of how their discussions promoted an awareness of their cultural lenses, see the linked examples of student work in the Sample Student Work and Reflections.

Ironically perhaps, the success of the stories themselves was not equal to the success of the other assignment linked to the Contes. Despite having evolved between the two iterations of the course, the Conte Essay, which asked students to analyze and compare the folk tales they read in our class to those they read growing up was less successful, both in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015. The Conte Essay, which students complete before mid-term, asks them to perform high-order thinking about texts from another culture. In general, in Fall 2014, students did a mediocre job of connecting their observations about the folk tales to the cultural implications of those generalizations. Although they did guided preparatory work in class, both with me and their peers, their work remained generally superficial. This may have been a function of the fact that students completed this project fairly early in the semester, and were not yet prepared for the deep thinking that I asked of them. In Fall 2015, I prompted the students to process the cultural implications of stories more clearly and intentionally at the end of each class discussion. Since the Conte Essay is the first significant writing assignment that requires higher-order thinking skills, I also decided to have the students complete it as a group. In groups of 3-4 students, they worked together to write a slightly longer essay than what I have requested in the past. They completed much of the group work in class under my supervision. In this way, I “flipped” the classroom, asking them to complete some of the hard work of thinking and writing that they usually do on their own while they could use me as a resource. I also revised the rubric for this assignment in order to make it more explicit. In the past, I had used what I call “polarized” rubrics, giving students a description of “Excellent” work and “Insufficient” work in each of the categories, and then filling in the middle with comments after I have marked an X somewhere on the scale. I had hoped that these rubric revisions, and the fact that they were completing the essays in groups, would improve their results. The essays, however, were once again incredibly frustrating to read, both in terms of their linguistic expression and their analysis of content. They

certainly proved the second-language acquisition axiom that when cognitive load goes up, linguistic accuracy goes down. This is not truly surprising, although one might think that with four students proofreading a text, most careless errors would be eliminated. The relative difficulties that the students had with the first drafts actually made me re-evaluate the assignment entirely, and I chose to eliminate the second draft, substituting instead a round table discussion in my office that was geared toward the same intercultural reflection. Based on the advice from esteemed colleagues that I should never assign something I don't want to grade, it felt like a very good decision to drop the essay re-write.

In Fall 2016, I no longer assigned the Conte Essay, but instead focused on the Round Table Discussion that I substituted for the second draft in Fall 2015. The rubric I used in 2015 can be found [here](#). The rubric for the Round Table in 2016 has been incorporated into the full description of the different elements of the Conte Project and the can be found [here](#). For my reflections on the success and failure of the Conte Essay, see the Reflections section.

The final written assignment that asks students to demonstrate their progress in linguistic proficiency, intercultural competency, and critical thinking is the Final Exploratory Essay. Using all of the course materials, students are asked to respond (in 1000-1250 words) to the following prompt. "When I came into this class, I thought XYZ about Haitian/Québécois culture). After reading/watching, QRS, I now understand ABC because..." On the first day of class, they do free-writing (in English) about what their thoughts, knowledge and/or stereotypes about Haiti and Québec are. Many students have little or no knowledge about these two areas of the Francophone world, which is typically reflected in their free-writing. I keep these and give them back to them at the end of the semester. They look at them and think about what they have come to understand better. In theory, the Final Exploratory Essay allows them to demonstrate how their perceptions have been nuanced throughout the semester. It is also a place where I have sometimes observed them demonstrate knowledge transfer from their first-year seminar. Overall, I had been pleased with the work students did in their Final Exploratory Essays. Students demonstrated the ability to articulate how and why their understanding of Haitian and/or Québécois culture had evolved over the course of the semester. Since this was the culminating assignment of the semester, it was reassuring and invigorating to see students reflect on their own growth. I did not change the format of the essay from 2014 to 2015, but instead intervened in the scaffolding leading up to it, hoping that those interventions would help students to better justify their claims with textual evidence. The scaffolding appears to have worked. In 2015, *all* of the students successfully integrated citations from course texts into their discussions, as opposed to 12/19 students in 2014. Only 5/14 students from 2015 clearly missed citation opportunities in their essays as opposed to 8/19 in 2014. Since justifying claims with textual evidence was one of my explicit areas of focus, these results were promising.

Reading the students' texts with distance, however, I learned several things about how I wanted to revamp the project in the future, which led me to change the assignment description and rubric for the 2016 iteration of the course. For insight into those ideas, see my Reflections section.

What were the concrete changes I implemented from 2014-2015?

- Explicit debriefing after every folk tale, comparing and contrasting it with American folk tales and to other tales we had read.

- Made the “Conte Project” a group project. Students wrote both their folk tales and their analytical essays in groups. The essays were then dropped in favor of a Round Table Discussion. Asked students to adopt the perspective of the target culture in writing their folk tale and to write a paragraph explaining how their tales reflected target-culture norms.
- Asked students to process the feedback on their Discussion Dirigée Responses in writing before beginning to write subsequent responses.
- Distributed the written script of the episodes of the sitcom *Pure Laine* that we discussed in class order to facilitate student comprehension.

What were the concrete changes I implemented from 2015-2016?

- Eliminated the use of the articles from the news media as prompts for the Discussion Dirigée Responses. Students responded instead to their TalkAbroad Conversations, which paired them with conversation partners from around the Francophone world. They wrote one response to the first conversation, and two responses each for the second and third conversations (with at least one week between the first and second responses), thus encouraging them to re-listen to their conversations with a fresh perspective.
- Significantly revised the assignment description and rubric for the Final Exploratory Essay.

Reflections:

Students have generally responded well to this course, and it is a joy to teach them at such a crucial point in their development as foreign-language learners. I have learned many things over the course of the CHRP initiative, both about course scaffolding and about my own goals as an educator. I have also learned that the intermediate foreign-language classroom is both an ideal and a tricky space for encouraging student metacognition about their learning processes and about culture writ large. I asked students to perform multiple types of metacognition in the classroom, from the simplest written processing of feedback on their work to more complex dissections of their cultural views and biases. In general, asking students to think about their learning and discovery process yielded positive results, but the failures were often as useful to me pedagogically as the successes.

The relative failure of the Conte Essay project taught me that I had missed a key point in my course scaffolding. While trouble-shooting the assignment with colleagues, I realized that I had never explicitly asked students to generate, either collectively or individually, a list of their *own* cultural expectations regarding storytelling. We had discussed how individual stories we read differed from those of our own culture, but we never listed our own assumptions about the common traits of “American” children’s stories (“American,” because what our students read or watch during their childhood often represents a U.S. adaptation of traditional tales from all around the world, be that through Disney or via translation and/or textual adaptation). After the disappointing first drafts of the essays, I took the time in class for us to come up with a list of our own cultural baggage. Students discussed and negotiated what they thought were common traits, pointing out contradictions within those traits, evolutions over time, and the ways in which the Haitian and Québécois stories demonstrated similar or different traits. When they came to my office in small groups (the same groups that had initially drafted the essay together), I asked them to have a conversation with each other about the cultural perspectives revealed in the various stories. Once again, they were graded for linguistic accuracy and content, and they were also graded for their fluency and their interactions with their peers. The conversations were on the whole *much* more satisfying than the essays had been, and they gave me another opportunity to assess students’ oral proficiency earlier in the semester (which I appreciated). In the future, I will continue to use the Round Table discussion after a full-class debrief of our own cultural conventions related to storytelling. In that way, I will better prompt students for the types of deeper comparisons I hope to hear.

Coding the student work in the Final Exploratory Essays, I made several other discoveries about my own expectations of my students, which led to further changes in the structure of the essay. Rereading the students’ texts with several months’ distance in 2014 and 2015, I was struck by what improvements I saw between the two years and also by what was missing. Although the students from 2015 were stronger, generally, throughout the semester, their final Exploratory Essays read more like cultural comparisons than explorations of the recognition of cultural-situatedness that I was seeking. This led me to believe that I should change the nature of the assignment so that students would be less likely to say: “This is what I learned about these two cultures” and more “This is what I learned about cultural perspectives...” What I am seeking in these essays is a representation of how students became aware of cultural lenses, not so much what they learned, precisely, about the various cultures. These two concepts are related, but not

identical. Obviously, it is necessary that they be capable of explaining certain elements of culture in order to explain a cultural lens. I think what I am seeking from them is more nuance: not “the Québécois are like this and the Haitians are like this” but “this particular text demonstrates/ hints at a certain perspective or mindset.” I wanted the hypotheses to be more careful, but I also wanted a more explicit recognition of the fact that they themselves approach the world from a particular perspective. It might best be summarized to say that the 2015 essays demonstrated more skills and knowledge than habits of mind. Reading them, I realized that while I seek to facilitate the development of their skills (close reading and careful citation) and knowledge (of certain cultural norms and practices), I am most interested in cultivating their habits of mind. How can I best train them to seek the underlying assumptions of any given text? The underlying assumptions that govern their own approaches to texts? These habits of mind are complex, but also essential to becoming a more interculturally competent human. My goal was to restructure this assignment so that would prompt this type of recognition.

In Fall 2016, I implemented a few changes in course texts as well as a different prompt and rubric for the Final Exploratory Essay. In Fall 2016, I explicitly asked students to talk about a specific moment in the course when they became aware of their own cultural lens.

This final tweak in the assignment description and rubric finally gave me a batch of student essays that demonstrated skills, knowledge, and habits of mind. The essays were not perfect, but they were generally more balanced, more nuanced, and more careful in their declarations. The table below represents the percentage of students in each class whose Final Exploratory Essay demonstrated the positive or negative traits expressed on the horizontal axis. While there was a marked improvement between 2014 and 2015 in students’ capacity to justify claims using textual evidence (which had been an explicit area of focus with them), all of the categories related to cultural self-awareness suffered (except that of a reduced number of students making cultural assumptions without any proof). In 2016, however, *every single student* demonstrated cultural self-reflection; nearly all of the students explicitly acknowledged awareness of their own cultural lenses, and yet the percentage of students who successfully justified their claims using textual evidence remained nearly the same. While the 2016 students also missed more opportunities for citations, those numbers of missed opportunities did not signify that the students were incapable of finding textual evidence to support their claims—they just didn’t offer it to support every single claim. They often relied on paraphrase rather than direct citation to make their points.

While I am well aware that my bright, hard-working, and high-achieving students are capable of detecting my expectations and of performing reflective writing in order to “give me what I want,” I am also confident that the act of *articulating* their awareness of their own cultural-situatedness can lead to increased awareness of their cultural lenses as they interact in the world outside the classroom. I do not expect that my course will have entirely erased their ethnocentrism, but instead that it has made them aware of the ways in which their experiences—and the stories they tell about them—both define and reflect their understanding of the world, and that the same is true of members of other cultures around the world. Additionally, infusing this type of deep reflection about culture in a course that is traditionally more focused on linguistic acquisition helps students to understand the relevance of language study outside of the classroom.