



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ADDING FUN TO THE ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Most foreign language conversation classes are heterogeneous, no matter the prerequisites. The instructor is faced with various issues, including how to create activities that help students progress at various skill levels without boring the advanced students and intimidating those less experienced. Many times, students in a conversation class still need help (including visual support) with learning to listen, with strategies for appropriating new vocabulary, and with experience working in a team. Topics should allow them to account for their personal styles and interests, engage them emotionally, and involve them in higher-order cognitive activity. Another issue is assessing learning outcomes in ways that involve students in the evaluation process and encouraging them to reflect on their own progress and meta-cognition. The Café Project in my French Conversation class is an integrative, collaborative activity that addresses these issues in a learner-centered fashion.

Finals and Grand Finales

One of my objectives as a foreign language instructor is to help students have fun interacting in the target language. This includes the final assessment of their progress at the end of the semester. I want a celebration, an enjoyable finale of what they have learned, and a means to increase their confidence level. One of my favorite activities is to have teams of students perform various coffeehouse skits based on scripts that include a setting of the scene (describing the type of Café), as well as exchanges between waiters and patrons of the Café—locals and tourists.

Like all good parties, this activity involves planning and prep work. To mobilize the students' schemata, I begin by showing part of the movie *Amélie*. I present students with readings on different types of French Cafés and ask them to evaluate *Amélie's* Café type. (The more advanced students read an article on the global economic crisis as reflected in the decline of traditional

coffeehouse trade in Paris.) Then they form teams based on the type of Café they would like to frequent. Next, they develop dialogs between tourists and locals that might take place in those Cafés, including a prepared paragraph that showcases their personal interests. In the end, they analyze and evaluate each skit on a rubric I provide.

The Cultural Dimension of the French Café

The institution of the French Café (usually combined with a Bistro, the way movie-goers may have experienced the workplace of *Amélie* in Paris), has a history almost as long as the Viennese variety. Cafés in Paris serve varied clientele—tourists, business members, and students; a few famous ones have histories as favorite jaunts of Enlightenment thinkers, Symbolist poets, Surrealist artists, and Existentialist philosophers. Different Cafés have different decors, serve different dishes at different prices, and attract different people. My students must include research and produce tangibles that include a description of the décor (projected images allowed), a menu of typical dishes served (with appropriate prices in Euros), and, of course, scripts that engage patrons and wait personnel in various dialogs, allowing for the (more advanced) “native” and visiting tourists to exchange culturally relevant information.

During a recent French Café final, some students chose the “neo” type with bright colors, a vegetarian menu, and “world music”; others preferred the touristy type next to the Eiffel Tower, with higher prices and outdoor eating, including a set fee for the place setting; others selected the worker's café with smoky curtains and people talking about daily problems, including gasoline prices; others focused on the historic type with wood paneling, paintings, references to 18th century literary figures, and students talking about their favorite French artists.

Students Learning to Work in Teams

Once students have formed teams based on their preferred Café type, they determine who would best fulfill the function of coordination expert for the project, based on the timeline I assign and previously prepared monologues that need to be integrated; who would be



the pronunciation expert during rehearsals and “native” in the skit; who would be the tourist expert ordering food; and who would be the idea expert to make the skit more interesting. Those without ideas on specific topics become question-asking experts tasked with finding out about things to do and where to go, based on personal interests (movies, shopping, discos, fitness centers, types of food). My function is to guide students along as I circulate around the room, have the different experts in each team report to me, and ensure that all scripts, as well as the vocabulary handouts prepared by each student, are copied for all by the presentation day (no last-minute submissions allowed). Each student receives a grade that is based partly on group work and partly on individual performance. As I start them out with group presentations before they give individual ones, they are accustomed to investing themselves in the group effort.

Students Developing Strategies

At the beginning of the semester, I tell students that I have learned four languages in a variety of ways and acquired the skills to function as a student and part-time employee in various countries I have lived, including France. Throughout the semester, as a “cool-down” at the end of class, I invite them to discuss mnemonic devices as well as learning strategies they are trying, based on lists I distribute for different learner types. I share strategies that I have developed out of necessity or encountered at conferences or in my reading of professional literature. One strategy includes creating prepared monologues or “islands” that allow for rest in between navigating the deep waters in which non-native speakers interact with native speakers. These islands function as fall-back topics that enable students to guide the conversation with a native away from the yes/no questions a non-native speaker is typically asked and that deteriorate into interrogations. Apart from researching and rehearsing a prepared paragraph, students learn how to interject it skillfully into a conversation, creating more power balance and restoring their dignity as adults.

Students Becoming Resources for One Another

Earlier in the semester, students in the conversation class prepare a written paragraph on a topic of their choice. After revising with my assistance, they present it to a group around midpoint. In the end, they will weave that topic into the Café dialog. The semester-long cycle allows for multiple auditory input, reviewing, and information synthesizing. Topics include describing family members or popular artists and giving details about a profession, a favorite film genre, an art movement, a leisure activity, a French recipe, and family celebrations in the United States. The prepared paragraph will be shared with other students, along

with lists of vocabulary researched for their part in the skit and a brief cross-cultural reference they wrote (in English, if necessary).

Instructor as Consultant

The experts in each group need to report twice on the group’s progress, and I consult on grammar and content. The latter usually consists of guiding students away from basic vocabulary—e.g., “nice” and “interesting”—to research more specific vocabulary—e.g., describing a Gothic cathedral in terms of stained glass windows, organs, and arches. While most students indicate a desire to “speak like a native” on their first-day questionnaires, many do not know how to anticipate lexical requirements. Nor do many realize that to produce increasingly fluent French, they need to practice it out loud.

Students Assessing Learning

One way to raise the level of specificity is to direct students to submit lists of vocabulary, structures, and cross-cultural references, based on their Internet and dictionary research. This needs to be done in a timely fashion so that the other students and the instructor can assess the work on the day that it is presented and the students can read along, in case there are pronunciation or comprehension issues. The submitted research lists are evaluated on the rubric, along with each student’s performance in terms of content and comprehensibility. This provides a mechanism for students to check their progress throughout the project, as well as to evaluate other students’ final performances.

Combining Role Play with Research Report

The French Café project is a learner-centered activity that allows for integration of subject matter taught in the first year of college French, as well as development of team spirit. It requires each member to play a specific role and assume specific responsibilities within the group. Above all, it assesses major outcomes of a conversation class—i.e., learning to communicate orally with relative fluency and comprehensibility, expressing basic needs, personal interests, and points of view using complete sentences, while demonstrating an awareness of aspects of cultural expression. With cafés serving as forums for communication all over the world, it should be possible to adapt this activity for any number of coffeehouse contexts in many living languages.

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