



An Exploratory Approach to the Teaching of French in the Middle School

Curriculum Unit 80.01.07
by Kathleen M. Ryerson

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

The trend, it seems, in the teaching of foreign language in the Middle School has changed over the past few years. The emphasis on the teaching of the language itself has been replaced by an emphasis on the national geographies and cultures.

The idea behind this educational trend is to expose students to many languages and cultures, “to broaden their horizons,” and finally to give students the choice of the language they enjoy the most and feel the greatest desire to learn.

In order to do this, each teacher divides the school year into three or four separate units. Each unit concentrates on a different language. I have decided to do an eight week unit for this type of course in French (since we have no curriculum or books). However, this unit hopes to provide an approach that could be adapted in an Italian or Spanish class, in a humanities program, or even in a team teaching situation.

This unit will be divided into two main sections, each unit approximately of three weeks’ duration. The first week will be spent on language—the last on review. Each section will concentrate on different skills and these skills will be presented through two of France’s great writers, Victor Hugo and Guy de Maupassant. It will be through their works that students will discover France the country, the history, the culture, and finally, the language.

The goals that I hope students will achieve are: an ability to speak French; a sound knowledge of the geography of France; an understanding of French history (and therefore U. S. history); some knowledge of French literature, and a larger English vocabulary.

I must stress that although we only want to introduce students to the language and our concentration lies on the culture of France, our true function as language teachers is having the student speak the language. The teacher should spend the first few class periods on the teaching of the language itself, since students usually enjoy the excitement of learning a new language for the first few days. It is during the first week that I am able to provide my students with the basic principles of French that I will be building upon during the remaining six weeks. (I have listed at the back of this unit, in Appendix IV, some basic vocabulary and

sentences for those teachers who are not French teachers.)

Throughout the remaining weeks I will spend approximately ten minutes each day in the target language, reviewing. Greetings and simple instructions should be in French. The teacher should review vocabulary, introduce new words and make simple conversation with students, i.e., with regard to weather, date, time, etc.

SECTION 1.

The approach I will use to introduce students to France is to have them read an excerpt from one of the works of Victor Hugo. Through television many students are familiar with Quasimodo the famous hunchback and know his home adorned with gargoyles in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris. Some have even seen the film version of *Les Misérables*. Introducing Hugo is, therefore, quite simple. Students will read excerpts from the chapters on Quasimodo and Esmeralda taken from the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. They are amazed at the descriptions of two people living in this cathedral—one an ugly monster, the other beautiful.

The people living in this cathedral are imaginary but the cathedral is real. (Give class an introduction to Paris, through slides of the city and the cathedral and gargoyles.)

The story is set in 1480 during the Middle Ages. (Introduce Gothic architecture—dark and mysterious with beautiful and elegant columns and portals.) The central theme of this novel is the magic of alchemy, a theme that still holds the interest of most of us. Some of the class does research on this topic.

I introduce Hugo by introducing the geography of his country. I have students research France's location, borders, climate, rivers and major cities. We discuss and review these subjects in class orally and through projects. Some of the projects students enjoy doing are topographical maps, projects depicting natural resources and a re-creation of the Eiffel Tower.

Victor Hugo holds an appeal not only because of the great masterpieces he has given us but because of his own fascinating life and the time in French history during which he lived. Students do a report on the biography of Victor Hugo. In order to understand fully his life and works, students must have a true understanding of French history during his lifetime. (At the back of this unit I have listed a summary of the history.) Students make a time line of French history from 1789 through 1852. We spend time comparing the French Revolution with the American Revolution. At the end of this study, students should have a fairly complete understanding of French Revolution and therefore have increased their knowledge of European history generally.

I give students a lesson on the government today, explaining and comparing it to our own. Students will have already understood by now how much the French people had to go through to live in a democracy and why they are so proud of their motto: "Liberty, equality and fraternity".

SECTION 2.

It will be through the works of Guy de Maupassant that students will be introduced to the culture of France. The class reads *The Necklace*. This story holds an appeal for most students. Many are able to relate to Mathilde; they understand her plight. They feel that she is a victim of fate and has been treated unfairly. But de Maupassant feels that she is wrong for trying to be someone she is not. He sees her as a vain and selfish person and feels her punishment was just.

I then point out that de Maupassant was very critical of people who tried to be members of a class to which they did not belong. (Explain the class system.)

The class should understand that de Maupassant wrote satire. He describes human beings as they are, with all their flaws. I feel that students should have a basic understanding of the genius of this great writer who has been called by many the father of the short story. Generally, students like de Maupassant's stories, so we read another.

Another de Maupassant story that I have found most successful is *The Vendetta*. This is the story of a mother whose sole purpose is to revenge the murder of her son. She undertakes this in a most brutal way, by training her dog to kill. Many students are able to relate to the idea of vengeance. The training of the dog is so revolting that students cannot help being fascinated.

It is through these stories that I concentrate on vocabulary skills. I feel that one of the true reasons for learning a foreign language is to improve English. I start by showing students the number of French words we use in the English language, i.e., bon voyage, boulevard, grand, petite, camouflage, chaise longue, coup 'd'etat. Students enjoy looking up the definitions of these "French" words in the English dictionary.

At this time students discover the large number of French words used in the restaurant. Students act out a scene in a restaurant, pronouncing the words correctly.

A class can have a lot of fun working with cognates. Some are easy: enfant—infant; femme—feminine. Some present more of a challenge: 'etat—state; soeur—sorority; but students always increase their vocabularies with this type of exercise.

At this point, I would suggest that students read and do a report on a short story by de Maupassant or read a work by Hugo. (Of course, the assignment would depend on the ability of the class.)

The eight-week unit would then end with a final examination. I would spend the remaining class periods reviewing for it.

LESSON PLAN—SAMPLE

First Week : Study of French language. (Teach how to count, days of week, simple conversation.)

Suggested projects : Do scene based on French studied. Play games.

Second to Fifth Weeks : Geography of France. (location, borders, climate, rivers, major cities, etc.)

Suggested projects : Topographical maps, map of provinces and cities, project depicting natural resources, re-creation of Eiffel Tower.

Victor Hugo. (Read poetry, *The Ocean* and excerpts from some novels, such as the chapters on Quasimodo and Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* .)

Suggested projects : Make time line of French history, compare French Revolution with American Revolution, report on Napoleon.

Fifth to Eighth Weeks : Read *The Necklace* . (With emphasis on vocabulary.)

Suggested projects : Determine which vocabulary words are originally French. Increase vocabulary.

France's influence on everyday life. (Food, fashion industry, customs)

Suggested projects : Make French menu, act out restaurant scene using French pronunciation, make collage representing products with French names.

SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS

Several short stories by Guy de Maupassant:

The Umbrella : This story is about a lady who is very tight and the lengths to which she will go to save money. Students enjoy it.

The Vendetta : The story of a mother who avenges her son's death.

The False Gems : This is the story of a man who loves his perfect wife. She has only one weakness: she loves false jewels. Or so he thinks until her death, when he discovers they are real.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame : A love story on the theme of beauty and the beast. Students enjoy the eeriness surrounding the cathedral.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

Artinian, Artine. *The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant* ; New York, Hanover House, 1955. Excellent for teachers as it contains so much material. Should be screened for students.

Cartier, Bresson. *France*. New York: Viking Press, 1971. Excellent study on the culture of France today. Beautiful pictures.

Fowlie, Wallace. *French Literature* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973.

Each period in French literature is given in this book.

Hugo, Victor. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1947.

Story by Hugo with some good illustrations.

Hott, Maurice. *Napoleon* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970.

A well written biography for teachers or students.

Knapton, Ernest. *France* . New York: Scribner and Son, 1971.

This is an interpretive history with excellent maps.

Nitze, William. *A History of French Literature* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950.

This anthology divides French literature into three major categories: Medieval, Renaissance and Modern.

O'Rourke, Lorenzo. *Victor Hugo's Intellectual Autobiography* . New York: Funk & Wagnall's Company, 1907.

This volume consists of Hugo's own thoughts on literature, philosophy and religion.

Sherard, Robert. *The Life Work and Evil Fate of Guy de Maupassant* . New York: Brentan's, circa 1907. Detailed biography with many of de Maupassant's own thoughts.

Williams, Henry. *The Poetical Works* . London: George Bell and Sons, 1885.

This book contains some excellent translations of Hugo's works into English poetry. This is quite unusual as they are usually translated into prose.

LIST OF MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE

Teachers should have a large map of France.

Slides on France. (Slides on as many areas as possible.)

Films on French geography and history.

Vocabulary games.

A set of French flash cards.

Cassettes on vocabulary.

APPENDIX I

Geography

France, often called “la belle France”, has a variety in climate, scenery and products. France is smaller than the State of Texas, with an area of 210,000 square miles. France is shaped like an hexagon; it has water on three sides: the English Channel, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea, therefore, the climate is essentially temperate. The countries that form France’s borders are: Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Spain.

The principal mountain ranges are: the Alps, which includes the Mont Blanc, the tallest peak in Europe; the Pyrenees, which form a natural barrier, separating France from Spain; the Vosges, which are located near Germany; and the Jura, which forms a natural border between Switzerland and France’s Central Plateau.

The principal river is the Seine. It flows from central France up through Paris, dividing the city into the left and right banks. The Loire, which is the longest river, is famous for the beautiful chateaux which adorn it. The Garonne, the Rhone and the Rhine are the other major rivers.

APPENDIX II

Biographical and Historical Data

During Hugo’s young years France was ruled by Napoleon, and later it was Hugo who rebelled against Louis Napoleon: “We had had Napoleon the great, must we now have Napoleon le petit?” When Louis Napoleon came into power, Hugo was forced to flee from France and take refuge on the island of Jersey. However, when England and France became allied against Russia in the Crimean War, Hugo’s attacks against Napoleon III became embarrassing to the British government and he was again forced to leave his home and settle on the nearby island of Guernsey.

In order to understand Hugo’s works, it is essential to understand his rebellion against and dissatisfaction with the government of his time. Hugo wrote: “True to the engagement I have made with my own conscience, I shall share to the end the exile of Liberty. When Liberty returns, I shall return.”

And in order to understand Hugo’s sentiments one must have a true understanding of French history during the period of the French Revolution. It was the French Revolution that changed the whole political system in France. On July 14, 1789, the people of Paris stormed and captured the Bastille. The Bastille represented tyranny and royal authority. Its capture, of course, marked the end of the feudal and hierarchical rule and led France and the rest of Europe into the modern age. It was the murder by guillotine in 1793 of Louis XVI and

his queen, Marie Antoinette, that set fear into every European monarch and divided France between those who favored the old rule and those who wished to promulgate the ideals of the French Revolution. It was at the Convention of 1793 that the gospel of liberty, equality and fraternity was accepted as a doctrine for internal improvement.

General Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the new government in 1799 and in 1800 he was named First Consul. However, in 1804 Napoleon crowned himself Emperor Napoleon I. The French people were willing to accept him because of his many military victories: at the height of the first Empire one million people were under French control. However, Napoleon lost battles against Russia and was forced into exile on the Island of St. Helene in the Atlantic Ocean.

France returned to monarchy through the rule of Louis XVIII, but when his brother, Charles X, succeeded him in 1824, he tried to establish an absolute monarchy again. The French did not want this return to monarchy, and a rebellion that broke out in 1830 proved that France would never again be ruled by an absolute monarch.

It was Louis Phillippe who guided France through the industrialization. Louis Phillippe was accused of supporting too heavily the bourgeoisie and the poor started to revolt, forcing him to abdicate.

It was during this period that universal suffrage was announced and many reforms in working conditions were planned. However, a severe economic depression set in, upset the nation and gave way to the rule of the second empire. On December 2, 1851, Louis Napoleon, elected for a term of four years, decided to crown himself emperor and become Napoleon III, who was to be president for life.

APPENDIX III

French Language and Its Influence on English

French is a Romance language. It derived from Latin over 2,000 years ago. Other Romance languages are Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Rumanian.

French has had a lot of influence on our own language—English. This is due in part to the constant wars between the French and the English. For a time French was the official language in the royal and law courts and for the educated people in England.

Cognates are words in different languages but they are derived from the original word. Some are:

<i>French</i>	English
état	state
chien	canine
blanc	blank
maison	mansion

Many words that we use in English are “borrowed” from the French:

bourgeoisie: middle class
boulevard: broad avenue
cuisine: style and preparation of cooking
demi-tasse: small cup of black coffee
faux pas: social blunder, bad mistake
gourmet: person who understands and appreciates fine food
née: term applied to the maiden name of a married woman
nom de plume: pen or assumed name
rendez-vous: appointment or meeting place
R.S.V.P.: (Repondez s'il vous plait) please answer

APPENDIX IV

Vocabulary

Days of the Week

Lundi—Monday

Mardi—Tuesday

Mercredi—Wednesday

Jeudi—Thursday

Vendredi—Friday

Samedi—Saturday

Dimanche—Sunday

Family—La Famille

Le pEre—father

La mEre—mother

Le fils—son

La fille—daughter

L'enfant—child

Le frEre—brother

La soeur—sister

Home—La Maison

Le salon—living room

La chambre ^ coucher—bedroom

La salle ^ manger—dining room

La salle de bains—bathroom

La cuisine—the kitchen

Other Ideas that may be used in this type of program

Teach the French monetary system.

Teach the metric system.

Study Canada or other French speaking countries.

(Algeria, Cameroun, Haiti)

Study the French Scientists.

(Pascal, Pasteur, Marie Curie)

Study the French Painters

(Cézanne, Manet, Monet, Dégas)

Study the French Composers

(Bizet, Debussy)

Study historical Figures

(Charlemagne, Jeanne D'Arc, Louis XIV)

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