



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume I: Society and the Detective Novel

Reading is a Mystery!

Curriculum Unit 82.01.07
by Harriet J. Bauman

One of the intriguing facets of teaching is the search for a new way to introduce a particular concept. Learning to read and comprehend a foreign language, namely French, is difficult for advanced students because they tend to see sentences as isolated items and not as parts of a whole. An added complication is the tendency of foreign language teachers to introduce “classical” literature at the same time they are teaching the students how to read. A way of simplifying the problem is to use mystery or adventure stories written on an intermediate level. These stories will pique the students’ interest in reading French and will provide the teacher with a means and a format for teaching the necessary techniques for successful reading.

Several mystery or adventure stories will be used in this unit. Some have been written expressly for use in the classroom. Others were written for the general public by authors such as Georges Simenon, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Sébastien Japrisot, as well as some authors whose works have been translated into French like Agatha Christie and Ed McBain.

The classroom activities for this unit will alternate between large group (whole class), small group (3-4 students), and individual types. Students will practice finding clues, unraveling puzzles, noticing details, following directions, etc. through a series of activities and games in French. These will foster a pleasant atmosphere within which the students will begin the task of learning how to read in French.

This unit is designed to be covered in two marking periods of eight weeks each. A major part of the first marking period should be devoted to preparatory activities such as those mentioned above. Then the students should be introduced to a mystery like *L'affaire du cadavre vivant* by Claude Dubois, one of the Monsieur Maurice Mysteries published by the National Textbook Company. After several of these stories have been read, the students could be introduced to a novel written by Simenon, or a Christie or McBain translated into French. Since some fluency in French is necessary to attain the skills being taught in this unit, I recommend that it be initiated no earlier than the second half of French II and continued into French III.

FIRST OBJECTIVE

Motivating students to read is a very important task. Therefore, the first objective for this unit is to encourage the students to want to read. A very carefully planned introduction to this unit might include the following: a visit to a movie such as “Deathtrap” or “Murder on the Orient Express”; listening to a recording of “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “The Black Cat”; playing a game like “Clue.” Even though these activities are in English, their purpose is to build enthusiasm for the mystery genre. The class discussion following these events should be in French to emphasize the acquisition of vocabulary needed in reading, writing, and discussing mysteries. Also, the students should be made aware of the audience’s reactions to the events as well as the author’s purpose.

SECOND OBJECTIVE

The second objective pertains to the students’ acquisition of two types of vocabulary: current or popular, and analyzing. In learning to read and enjoy this genre of literature, the students will be able to learn current or popular vocabulary in context. To reinforce the meaning of these words, the students could be asked to make displays in which the meaning of the words would be shown by selected pictures either cut out of magazines or drawn by the students. They could play *Password* using the new words. Another activity might be a Treasure Hunt in which the students match words with objects. They could also participate in a Scavenger Hunt where they search for objects to illustrate the meaning of particular vocabulary words.

Some guessing games will help reinforce the meaning of words being studied and the idea of being a detective: “I spy something in the room that is _____. Who knows what it is?” (“Je vois (Je regarde) quelque chose dans cette salle qui est _____. Qui sait ce que c’est?”); Twenty Questions; “I’m thinking of something that begins with _____ and is a(n) _____”. (“Je pense de quelque chose qui commence avec _____ et c’est un(e) _____.”); “Who (What) am I?” (“Qui (Qu’est-ce qui je suis?) suis-je?”); etc.

The analyzing vocabulary could be written in a list for the students to use throughout the reading of the stories. There would be two types of words on this list. The first would contain words like: hero (le héros), detective novel (le roman policier), detective (le détective, l’agent de la sûreté, le policier), detection (la découverte), mystery (le mystère), mysterious (mystérieux), crime (le crime, la criminalité), to charge with a crime (accuser d’un crime), criminal (le criminel), thief (le voleur, le larron), robbery (le vol), chase (la chasse, la poursuite), police car (la voiture de la police), police wagon (le panier de salade), police court (le tribunal de simple police), police inspector (l’officier de paix), police sergeant (le brigadier de police), police station (le commissariat (le poste) de police), policeman (l’agent de police, le gendarme, le flic), supernatural (le surnaturel), witch (la sorcière), witchcraft (la sorcellerie, la magie noire), demon (le démon, le diable), etc. These are general terms which might appear in any of the reading material that has been selected for this unit.

The second type of analyzing vocabulary would also be listed, and would deal with terms necessary for analyzing literature, such as: author (l’auteur), plot (le complot, le trame), climax (le point culminant), foreshadowing (la préfiguration), to foreshadow (préfigurer, annoncer), flashback (le retour en arrière), rising action (la montée de l’action), dénouement (le dénouement), theme (le thème, le leit-motif), etc. The students will use these lists for discussion and written assignments.

THIRD OBJECTIVE

Achieving comprehension of written French is the third objective of this unit. The students will begin by learning to ask and answer comprehension questions before or after the reading selection. They will start by reading simple paragraphs, then more complicated ones. They will also read short stories.

The students will be taught how to read for the main idea. Two activities for teaching this skill are: 1) giving a one sentence summary of the selection; and 2) choosing a title for the reading assignment.

Being able to keep track of the sequence of events in a story is a very important skill. This skill is especially important in reading mysteries. Students should participate in activities such as retelling the story in their own words, or as a character; taking the events of a story that have been mixed up and placing them correctly in the order in which they occur in the story; making up an ending for the story.

Another necessary skill is being able to keep track of details. The students would be encouraged to enumerate details in a story which show that the conclusion is the only possible solution. They should be prepared to list the details in the order of their appearance. The students might have a selection presented to them with the main idea included but with blanks to be filled in.

The students need practice in following directions such as for reading a map, putting an object together, or following a recipe (which might be important in the mystery they are reading). Activities designed to increase the students' ability in these areas might include a Treasure Hunt with specific directions which they must follow to attain the end. A Scavenger Hunt might include certain steps through which each group must go in order to find items on their list. Puzzles or mazes might also be designed with directions for the students to follow.

Making inferences is extremely important especially when reading mysteries. On the simplest level, the students would learn the meaning of new vocabulary words as they are used in several different sentences. The teacher would ask questions about the sentences which would help explain the various meanings or uses of the words.

Another activity which would help students in making inferences might be to present them with a description of someone through which they must guess what type of person he/she is: his/her name; profession; hobbies or interests; types of books he/she reads; family; home; where he/she lives, etc. A description of an object could be used as well. They must guess its function; what it looks like; who would use it; where; how, etc. After the students finish their preliminary investigation, they might be presented with the actual person or object and they could judge for themselves how to improve their ability to infer.

In order to reinforce the students' ability to read for information, many exercises should be presented to them. They should be asked questions in which the answer restates the text. They could have questions presented to them before they read which would act as a guide for their reading. They could be asked to make up their own questions to a passage before finishing it. They could be asked to invent a title for a particular selection.

FOURTH OBJECTIVE

The fourth objective is based on the five objectives of foreign language teaching, which are: oral, in which the students speak the language with close to native pronunciation; aural, in which the students hear the language spoken most of the time; reading, where they can read aloud as well as silently selections in the foreign language; writing, in which the students become proficient at writing the foreign language; and comprehension, oral and written, of the foreign language. To achieve these objectives within this unit, there are some specific activities that can be used. Oral-aural work might take the form of reading aloud. Students could ask and answer questions about the reading assignments. They also could prepare a radio broadcast on tape of a summary of the material being read. They could prepare and present a dialogue based on the reading. A debate could be presented about the possible alternatives facing a character in the reading selection.

The writing objective might be achieved in various ways, from the simplest to the most complex kinds of exercises. The students should be taught how to paraphrase what is being read. They could answer the following questions in a paragraph: who? what? where? when? why? how? They could transform the plot, changing the nouns and adjectives but keeping the sentence structure.

The students could read a selection filled with details. While they are reading they could keep a list of the sequence of details in order to answer questions at a later time. They could keep this list in a chart like:

Tom was a very studious person. It was 10:00 p.m. and he was still studying for an important test he had the next day.

WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? WHY? HOW?

Tom studying 10:00 ? test ?

Another way of getting the students to write would be to take pictures from magazines, for example, and have them write captions using complete sentences. They also could match pictures and sentences.

The teacher might present the students with descriptive paragraphs about characters in their reading selection. The students could write some descriptive paragraphs themselves focusing on characters or landscape or action.

The students could write their own mystery stories either by themselves or in collaboration with classmates. This might be a culminating activity.

To attain the reading objective, the reading selections should be interesting and exciting. Jean Valjean's escape through the sewers of Paris in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo is a good example of writing which gets the reader involved immediately.

As the students move through this unit, their comprehension of written and oral French should improve dramatically. Their need to communicate with each other about what they are reading will encourage them to express themselves more clearly and accurately. Playing games such as Clue in which they must speak French in order to discover who did it, with what, and where will help their fluency, as well as their comprehension.

FIFTH OBJECTIVE

The fifth objective of this unit is to introduce the students to literary analysis in French. The standard procedure is called *explication de texte*. The selection that is being analyzed is first presented to the audience by reading it aloud. Then they are given facts and information about the author and his/her time. The selection is then situated within the body of the work—what happens right before and right after, and what it is: character description, setting, a certain point in the action which is crucial to the story, etc. Vocabulary and verb tenses are then analyzed for usefulness to the plot or author's meaning. This is rather difficult for students to accomplish at first, so I would recommend that it be done as a group exercise, taking each part of the *explication de texte* separately and doing several exercises with each part before attempting to do it as a whole.

In addition to the *explication de texte*, the students should be able to pick out the theme(s) in a reading selection, and describe the theme(s) in one or two sentences either orally or in written form. Choosing a title for a selection is a good exercise.

The students should be taught about point of view—who is telling the story? An exercise for teaching this is for the student to rewrite the passage from another character's point of view.

The students should recognize the role of description in the story. Is it important? Is all of it necessary? They can determine the answers to these questions by figuring out if the story would be different without it. They should be encouraged to get the sense or flavor of the story and then decide what devices of the author make it what it is. This could be done in small discussion groups.

As for plot, the students should be able to describe the unfolding of the story if it is chronological from beginning to end; if there are flashbacks; when the story occurs. They could be given an assignment to represent the plot visually using pictures, cartoons, collage, montage, three-dimensional structures, etc.

SIXTH OBJECTIVE

The sixth and final objective of this unit is for the students to recognize the role of culture of the countries in which the stories take place, in the stories. Is it part of the story? Is it important to the understanding of the crime or mystery? Does the author teach the reader about specific cultural matters, or does he/she expect the reader to have this knowledge already? The students can learn the answers to these questions through careful questioning by the teacher. They should learn about these countries through reading the stories as well. The students could visually represent the milieu in which the story takes place, or specific customs that they find appealing.

In order to be sure that the students learn the facets of culture presented in any of the stories used in this unit, the teacher must make them an integral part of what is being studied. If, for example, the story takes place in a foreign country, it should be located on a map, and pictures or slides should be shown to the students. They could make an oral presentation of the area in which the story takes place.

If the main part of the mystery concerns a musical composition by a known composer, some class time could be devoted to listening to the music and discussing its significance to the story. The same is true for a work of

art. The students should be able to visualize the action of the story with these aids. If there are historical events wrapped up in the mystery, they should be discussed so that the students understand the background of the story.

Holidays and customs should be explained or researched and their significance discussed or presented in a lively or interesting manner. The students could do oral presentations or act out skits based on them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING THIS UNIT

I would recommend the following sequence of lessons. The introduction would be motivational, using the wealth of movies, games, stories, etc. in English. Once the students' interest is established, I would then introduce the analytical vocabulary pertaining to mysteries as stated above, and I would have the students do many exercises for following directions, keeping track of details, guessing, understanding the plot, etc.

Depending upon the ability of the students, I would introduce one of the mystery-adventure stories written for the intermediate level (See *Reading List for Students*). All the students would read one novel such as *le Collier Africain* . They would learn the techniques necessary for reading, understanding, and appreciating this type of story as a whole group with the teacher's guidance.

Then, I would suggest that the students be divided into groups. Each group would read a different story (See *Reading List for Students*). Working together will reinforce the knowledge gained while reading the previous novel. Each group would share the plot and author's techniques with the other groups as a sort of *explication de texte* .

The next logical step would be to introduce a Simenon such as *Maigret et le Marchand de Vin* or an Agatha Christie such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (in French). The students should be able to read these with guidance from the teacher. Vocabulary could be explained. Any other necessary explanations also could come from the teacher.

If the students learn quickly, there should be no difficulty accomplishing this unit in sixteen weeks. If it takes longer, it will still work out well because the students will be enjoying what they are reading and they will be learning the necessary skills for successful reading of "classical" literature.

If the students are more advanced, I would include readings such as *Les Misérables* by Hugo, specifically the scenes of Jean Valjean running through the sewers of Paris pursued by unknown menaces. This selection would be useful for discussing author's techniques and the role of description. The students might read *Arsène Lupin* by Maurice Leblanc and compare and contrast it to a Sherlock Holmes mystery.

FOR FURTHER STUDY . . .

By now I hope the students are as excited about mysteries and detective fiction as I am. As they peruse and purchase Agatha Christies or Ed McBains written in French, I would encourage them to analyze why these authors have had their works translated into French, and why this genre of fiction is so popular both in France and the United States.

For those students who are interested, I will arrange an opportunity for research on the following questions: Do other French-speaking peoples read detective stories? For what reasons? Do they read the same authors? What role does their culture play in their literature? All this could be a point of departure for cultural and human or global understanding.

SAMPLE LISTS FOR SCAVENGER HUNTS

A. Cherchez les objets suivants dans l'ordre donné (Look for the following objects in the given order):

- une plume rouge (a red pen)
- un morceau de papier orange (a piece of orange paper)
- un crayon noir (a black pencil)
- une table blanche (a white table)
- des verres verts (some green glasses)
- trois roses roses (three pink roses)
- une automobile bleue (a blue car)

B. Trouvez pourquoi les dates suivantes sont importantes
(Find out why the following dates are important).

- 1848 1789 800 le premier mai (May 1)
- le deux mai (May 2) le trois mai (May 3)
- 1803 1601 1982

C. Cherchez les objets suivants et devinez les liens entre eux (Look for the following objects and guess the connections among them).

- une poupée antique (an antique doll)
- une robe blanche (a white dress)
- un ruban rouge (a red ribbon)
- des bas blancs (some white stockings)
- un chapeau de paille (a straw hat)
- une balle rouge, blanche et bleue (a red, white and blue ball)
- des chaussures blanches (some white shoes)

READING LIST FOR TEACHERS

Brean, Herbert, ed. *The Mystery Writer's Handbook A Handbook on the Writing of Detective, Suspense, Mystery and Crime Stories by the Mystery Writers of America* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers), 1956.

Many different mystery writers collaborated on writing this book as a guide for the novice writer. It explains the reasoning behind and the planning of a detective novel.

Haycraft, Howard. *Murder for Pleasure The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Biblo and Tannen), 1974.

This book is a history of detective fiction. It shows the evolution of the detective novel from its beginning to the present time. Chapter VI deals specifically with French detective novels.

Murch, A.E. *The Development of the Detective Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers), 1958.

Murch traces the evolution of detective fiction from its sources to the present (1958). The reasons for this genre becoming so popular are explored as well. Chapters III, VII, and XIII give excellent background on the rise of detective fiction in France.

Narcejac, Thomas. *Une Machine à Lire : Le Roman Policier* (France: Editions Denoël/Gonthier), 1975.

Narcejac proves that detective fiction is a real genre of literature. This is another history of the detective novel, but from the French point of view. Chapters worth noting are 1, 2, 5, 9, 10-17.

Rodell, Marie F. *Mystery Fiction Theory and Technique* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce), 1943.

This is a how-to book for beginning writers. It explains the elements of detective fiction.

Winks, Robin W. *Modus Operandi : An Excursion into Detective Fiction* (Boston: Godine), 1982.

An informative, easy-to-read background of the genre of detective fiction. It convinces the reader that this type of novel is a worthwhile and legitimate endeavor. It brings the books listed above up to date, and has convincing arguments for the establishment of detective fiction as a genre of literature.

READING LIST FOR STUDENTS

Dubois, Claude. *The Monsieur Maurice Series* (Skokie, Illinois: the National Textbook Company), 1982.

L’Affaire du Cadavre Vivant —Monsieur Maurice and his helper Anatole search for a missing wife. The student learns about the Latin Quarter, Montmartre and the métro.

L’Affaire des Trois Coupables —Is it suicide or murder? The readers will find out in Nice at *carnaval* time.

L’Affaire des Tableaux Volés —International art thieves rob the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and a museum

in southern France. Our heroes solve the crime while enjoying themselves on the French Riviera.

L’Affaire Québécoise —Monsieur Maurice and Anatole travel to Canada to do surveillance of a suspected spy. They also get to enjoy Québec’s Winter Carnival.

Galembert, Pierre-Jean. *Les Aventures de Pierre et Bernard Series* (Skokie, Illinois: the National Textbook Company), 1982.

Le Collier Africain —The two heroes go to eight French-speaking African countries in search of a special necklace’s beads.

Les Contrebandiers —Pierre and Bernard’s visit to Brittany is spoiled by a chance encounter with smugglers.

Le Trésor des Pirates —On a visit to the Caribbean, the heroes search for sunken treasure. They also get to learn about the French-speaking Caribbean islands.

Les Assassins du Nord —Pierre and Bernard are in Quebec covering the Winter Carnival for their newspaper when they get involved in an attempted murder and spying.

Le Grand Prix —During the Grand Prix auto race in Monaco, Pierre and Bernard try to help a driver who is having problems because someone is trying to ruin his car.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>