

[Discussion notes]

The challenges and successes of the French course at the University of Goroka

**Dawn Solevad Ilai
University of Goroka**

Abstract: One of the four strands in the Language and Literature Department which emphasizes the promotion and teaching of language is Languages Other than English (LOTE). This strand is comprised of three languages - Japanese, Alekano, and French. This paper is a preliminary study on twelve Papua New Guinean students taking French for the first time at the University of Goroka (UOG). The prime aim is to see students' challenges and the successes they faced in the course. These challenges and successes are addressed to discover where the students faced some difficulties in learning the French language and where they did well. On one hand, the main challenges faced by students are noted. For example, learning the pronunciation and spelling of many French words. On the other hand, the main successes are also noted concerning how the students learned the basics of French and were motivated to learn more. Drawing from the challenges and successes, findings and recommendations are made so that the students can be given assistance to improve their proficiency of French in the future, whether in class or elsewhere.

Key words: successes, challenges, French course, students of French, The University of Goroka

1. Introduction

Endurance

Perched upon a rock

A bird plans its next flight

A leap that endures

- Steven Winduo

As Papua New Guineans live in a country with over 800 languages, language is an essential part of their culture. Being surrounded by so many languages and having parents that speak different native languages perhaps, people are prompted to learn the other languages in

Papua New Guinea. Language learning brings with it many challenges as well as successes. In our search for meaning and attempts to find solutions to problems, we might ask the question, “Why?” or “What does this mean?” In the case of learning a foreign language, a non-native speaker might ask, “How do you say this word?” As learners are seated in a classroom learning another language, they also plan how they want to use the language in the future. This is a terrific leap and one that, with challenges and successes, will endure for the rest of their lives. The purpose of this paper is to address the main challenges and successes the students of French faced and to offer solutions as to how they can improve their proficiency in the future.

Schmitt and Lutz (2005) state good reasons as to why it is important to learn French. Several of these reasons are listed below:

- 1) French is an international language. As one studies the language, one will also begin to understand and appreciate the way of life, customs, values, and cultures of people from many different countries.
- 2) Learning French can be enjoyable and will bring a person a sense of fulfillment. One will be really pleased when he is able to carry on a conversation with a French-speaking person in French. One will also be able to read French literature, be up-to-date with current events in French magazines, newspapers, and journals, and understand French films.
- 3) One’s knowledge of French will also be a good resource in many careers. French companies do extremely well in many fields such as clothing, fashion, cosmetics, tourism, agriculture, the automotive and aerospace industries, and technology.
- 4) Perhaps one of the greatest benefits to learning French is the language link. Learning French will improve one’s English. Once he knows another language, he can make comparisons between the two and gain a greater understanding of how languages function. He may be more successful with English as a result. He will learn many French words that are used in English. For example, rouge, chaise lounge, chic, crepe, a la mode, omelette, déjà vu, liaison. French will also be useful if one decides to learn another language.

In teaching a foreign language, it is important for the students to use the language communicatively and to practice as much as possible. It was indeed encouraging to see that the students were so motivated to learn the language despite some challenges. This paper focuses on the successes and challenges of the French course during Semester 2, 2009 at the University of Goroka. Special consideration has been given to the successes and challenges of the French course at UOG because it is the first time that French has been offered and taught at this university. It was a beginning level course and there were twelve students in

the class – both in-service (year 1) and pre-service (years 2-4). The students were those enrolled in the humanities and science faculties.

2. Challenges

A language learner will face different challenges with learning another language such as anxiety, competitiveness in classroom language learning, self-esteem in language learning, and motivation (Allwright & Bailey, 1990). Anxiety might sound like a daunting word, but it is not that bad. It is an acknowledged feature of language learning, whether as cause, effect, or both. (Allwright & Bailey, 1990). If learners are particularly anxious, it is likely that this anxiety will affect their speech skills as well as their other language skills. If the learners' anxiety is affected, their motivation to learn the language will also be affected.

Competitiveness in classroom language learning occurs when students become preoccupied with a feeling of wanting to be the 'best'. Competitiveness and anxiety relate to a further factor which is self-esteem. Some learners may think they are better at learning the language than others, and so those who perform at a lower level are affected. "Language learning poses a threat to a person's self-esteem, as would any task where success was not guaranteed and the probability of making a fool of oneself was (so) very high" (Allwright & Bailey, 1990, p. 178).

As motivation can make a successful language learner, it is also another challenge language learners face. It is a challenge perhaps because of the presentation of the lecturer, the content is not interesting to them, it is too difficult and they lose interest, or they are only taking the language as a requirement. Several students of French at UOG found the pronunciation challenging. This was a factor that made some students lose some of their motivation in learning French.

A high number (88%) of the students indicated that they were challenged by the pronunciation of French sounds. These are sounds such as 'en'[ã], 'on',' ans'[ã], 'ai'[ε], 'eu'[ø]. In the word 'enfant' (child) the 'en' is a nasal sound. In the word 'bon' (good), the 'on' is also a nasal sound. The 'n' is not completely pronounced. In the word 'dans' (into), the 's' is silent and the 'an' is a nasal sound. In the word 'mais' (but), the 'ai' is pronounced as a long 'a', and the 's' is silent. Some of the students in the French class pronounced 'ai' as "I" and pronounced the 's' at the end. This made pronunciation rather difficult for some students. Another sound that gives some learners of French difficulty is 'eu', as in the word 'peu' (a little). Another challenge was the spelling, especially as there are so many silent letters in French. For example, in the word 'aller' (to go), the 'r' is silent. In the word 'prix' (price), the 'x' is silent.

A case study on teaching English pronunciation in China was done in 1993-94 by William Lang. He realized that after teaching his first course of English pronunciation to lower form secondary school students the audiolingual technique of drilling the English sounds was not useful because it did not focus on specific problems and language needs. He then decided to begin by working on sounds generally problematic to Chinese speakers and then deal with problems specific to the individual students. This approach worked because the students received individual attention with their specific pronunciation problems. Lang wanted his students to use their acquired pronunciation/speaking skills to interact in productive and meaningful ways (Richards, 1998). The approach that Lang used was one that the author was also interested in as it dealt with pronunciation skills. Lang was working in the context of Chinese, but the author thought that this work with pronunciation skills could also be done with many of the sounds in French that her students found difficult. She was interested in putting the sounds into context (for example, phrases, sentences, dialogues) and into practice (communicative games and tasks, such as Bingo and information gap activities) (Richards, 1998). Because of the problem with pronunciation, the author wanted the students to use their acquired pronunciation meaningfully and productively. She wanted to bridge the gap between sounds in French and sounds in English and try to make learning of French easier.

To help motivate the students to practice speaking French, the students were given different oral exercises to do. These exercises gave them practice with the different sounds in French that were used in the vocabulary words studied each week. They did personal exercises that had them answer questions in French about themselves. They also did oral presentations. For example, in the unit on family, they made family trees and presented these to the class. They practiced the sound “er”[ɛ:r] as in the word “soeur” [soe:r] (sister) and the sound [ɛ:r] “air” as in ‘frère’ (brother). They told their classmates how many sisters or brothers they have. For example, “J’ai deux soeurs.” - “I have two sisters.”

3. Successes

According to Tarone and Yule (1989), “Concepts such as attitude, motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety are frequently invoked in discussions of what makes a successful language learner.” The UOG students in the French course were quite enthusiastic that they could understand the basics of spoken and written French. They were also happy to be introduced to and gain an appreciation of the French language and culture. They had positive attitudes and a desire to learn French to be able to use it in the future. From the author’s experience in teaching the students, she saw they were determined to learn for the

satisfaction of learning.

Research work in Canada (Gardner et al. 1976) has shown, “Learners with an ‘integrative motivation’, who wished to learn in order to relate better to, and integrate with, the speakers of the target language, tended to be much more active in class, volunteering more, making more correct responses, etc.” As a result, these learners received more positive reinforcement or encouragement than the ‘instrumentally motivated’ learners (learners who were only after academic success or perhaps to get a job for which there is a language requirement) (Allright & Bailey, 1990, p. 182). In working with the UOG students of French, the author found that many students expressed a genuine interest in France, French people, and francophone (French speaking) countries. They asked questions about France and francophone cultures in class. Gardner and Lambert, (1972), p. 148 in Tarone and Yule, (1989) stated,

“The essence of an integrative orientation is that the learner views his or her learning goals in terms of being accepted as a member of the general French-speaking community. Identifying a learner with such an attitude, accompanied by other attitudes such as positive feelings toward France and French people, and a general interest in foreign languages, is essentially an identification of a well-motivated learner who will probably be a successful learner.”

Savignon (1972) in Tarone and Yule (1989) noted that attitude becomes more positive toward a language when the learner experiences success in the study of that language. This was the author’s experience. At first, several students were more reluctant to participate in class; but after they saw their positive results on the first quiz, they were more enthusiastic to learn French. The author gave the students encouragement as they were learning a new, difficult language. This encouragement motivated the students to perform in class, and the results were positive.

Other major successes of the course (in addition to those in the Findings) were the following:

- Being introduced to the French culture and way of life
- Gaining an appreciation of French language and culture
- Greater understanding of French and English

The students were quite keen to learn about French culture as they were interested in travelling to France or a French-speaking country one day. Several students were also interested in perfecting their English. As English is not the first language of many of the students, studying French helped to broaden their knowledge and understanding of English. For example, the lesson on the article ‘the’ was very essential. The first language of many

of the students is Melanesian Pidgin. The article ‘the’ is not used in Melanesian Pidgin as it is in French and English. Taking the short sentence, “The woman is at the library”, this is seen in Melanesian Pidgin and in French below:

Melanesian Pidgin: “Meri stap long library.”

French: “La femme est a la bibliothèque.”

In English, the article ‘the’ is in italics. In Melanesian Pidgin, there is no article ‘the’. In French, the article ‘the’ is the word, ‘la’ [la].

The students’ study of the article ‘the’ in French reinforced and reminded the students that this article is very important in English as well as in French. They also learned that one doesn’t see all of the articles in Melanesian Pidgin.

4. Findings/Responses from students:

The author conducted a small survey in order to seek the views of the twelve students in the French course as to why they took the course, what successes and challenges they would name, what would have helped to make the course more enjoyable, and a comment about their motivation. The analysis of their views is given below. The percentage of students who made those particular responses is found before each statement.

Responses to question #1:

Why did you decide to take French this semester?

- 24% of the student indicated that they would like to know other foreign languages apart from English.
- 16% of the students said that French is an universal language.
- 16% expressed that it is a privilege to learn languages that are foreign.
- 16% wished to enhance their understanding of other foreign languages and to speak French with French speaking people.
- 16% responded that learning French is something they have always wanted to do.
- 8% wanted to take French as a challenge.

Responses to question #2:

Was it challenging? If so, what were the challenges?

- 88% - pronunciation
- 88% - spelling of the words
- 16% - numbers and time
- 16% - vocabulary
- 24% - feminine and masculine forms of words

- 16% - understanding the negative form of sentences

Responses to question #3:

Please indicate two successes of the course.

- 72% - understanding the basics of spoken and written French and being able to speak basic French.
- 16% - attending classes, completing assessments
- 40% - being introduced to the French culture, way of life as well as the language.
- 8% - pronouncing without stuttering
- 16% - reading and interpreting French sentences
- 16% - telling time in French
- 16% - learning what was taught in the given time
- 16% - understanding of French and English was broadened
- 32% - gaining an appreciation of French language and culture.

Responses to question #4:

What would have helped to make this course more enjoyable?

- 64% - more French speaking scenes/movies/songs/short stories/role plays
- 16% - a course book with pronunciations under each French word
- 8% - to involve students more in speaking French
- 16% - more lessons about subject-verb agreement in French, listening lessons using CDs or cassettes
- 16% - phonetic symbols should be included in the course book.
- 16% - more variety in the lessons.

Responses to question #5:

Has this course motivated you to want to learn more French or another foreign language?

- 88% - Yes, the students want to learn more French or another foreign language.

The responses to the above questions indicated to the author that the students were serious in wanting to learn French. In #1, a good share of the students indicated that they took French because they would like to know other foreign languages apart from English. Others responded that they wished to speak French with French speaking people and that it is a privilege to learn foreign languages. A majority of the students in #2 pointed out that pronunciation and the spelling of some French words were challenges. Others indicated that learning the numbers and time as well as the vocabulary, feminine, masculine, and negative forms were challenges. Significant responses in #3 regarding the successes were those such as, understanding the basics of spoken and written French and being able to

speak basic French, being introduced to and gaining an appreciation of the French culture and language, and gaining a broader understanding of French and English. In #4, a majority of the students indicated that a greater use of French speaking scenes/movies/songs/short stories/role plays would have helped to make the course more enjoyable. Responses to #5 were very positive as a majority of the students responded that the French course motivated them to want to learn more French or another foreign language.

5. Conclusion

The French course was a newly introduced course in the LOTE strand in the UOG Language and Literature Department and was taught for the first time in the second semester of 2009. This paper is a preliminary study of how students at UOG have progressed with the French language. One of the biggest challenges was not having immediate access to CDs and other audio visual materials. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the students also found the pronunciation and spelling to be a true challenge. As this was the case, the author saw that helping students with their pronunciation of French by doing more communicative activities contributed to increasing the students' confidence and motivation in using spoken French. This played a major role in the success of the course. Another highlighted success was that 72% of the students said that they achieved learning the basics of spoken and written French. Studying French also helped broaden their understanding of English. In addition, 88% of the students indicated that they were motivated by the course and would like to learn more French or another foreign language. From working with the students and hearing their comments, the author confirmed that the students had positive attitudes in their language learning and more of an 'integrative motivation'. They had a true interest in learning French in order to use it in the future.

6. Recommendations

The following are recommendations for the future French courses at UOG:

- CDs and cassette tapes should be used – more audio visual materials.
- Students could do more pronunciation and spelling practice in and out of class.
- Students should do more oral exercises.
- Students ought to keep a diary of their language learning.
- More French songs, poems, movies, short stories should be provided.
- More variety in the lessons could be provided.
- Other creative ways to learn the pronunciation of French words should be emphasized.
- More interaction with native speakers of French (the international students from Vanuatu).

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