

As seen on PBS



French in Action

A Beginning Course in Language and Culture

The Capretz Method

Teachers and students alike praise this innovative, highly effective multimedia system of teaching French:

"I believe *French in Action* is the first second-language video program to fuse entertaining and substantive video materials with sound pedagogy. The manner in which [*French in Action* has] exploited the basic dialogue format of each tape in the second half of the video and the use of the audio cassettes creates an **extremely effective** integration of the materials." —Robert S. Balas, professor of French and director of the computer and video laboratory, Western Washington University

"I find *French in Action* to be the **best method ever devised for teaching French**. . . . My students are crazy about the method." —Alan Astro, Trinity University

"**We were talking French—all French—the first day!**" —William Watt, student, Western New England College

"Now that *French in Action* has been in use for several weeks at Andover, I want you to know of the pleasure of French 10 and 11 teachers at Phillips Academy in using your work. . . . We feel lucky to be able to use materials which we find **up-to-date and refreshing!**" —Natalie Schorr, chair, French department, Phillips Academy

Textbook \$29.95; workbooks, study guides, instructor's guides, audio cassettes, and video programs are also available. Write to Yale University Press for full information on the *French in Action* system and available materials.

Yale University Press

Dept. 087A
92A Yale Station
New Haven, CT 06520

A Video-Based System for the Teaching of French Language and Culture

*Replacing the written text with a "video text" as the basic material from which foreign languages are taught is the most recent advance in foreign language teaching. This change is radical because it insists on the teaching of culture simultaneously with language, that is, language as culture. The overwhelming reception of the *French in Action* method over the last two years shows that academia and the general public recognize the tremendous advance in language teaching contributed by the program.*

A number of foreign language teachers are now experimenting with an approach quite different from what we have known so far; they are teaching with a new video-based pedagogical tool called *French in Action*.

What is *French in Action*?

French in Action is a set of materials in 52 lessons designed to teach French language and culture to adult and young adult beginners. Under normal circumstances, the 52 lessons represent four semesters of work; successful completion of the course should satisfy the language requirement in most institutions that have a "two year" or "intermediate level" requirement.

Each of the 52 lessons is made up of three components: video, audio, and print. All three have been designed, developed, and produced together in order to form a fully integrated system. The 52 lessons have been organized sequentially to constitute a full-fledged, self-sufficient course.

Purpose of *French in Action*

At the heart of *French in Action* is a concern for the unsatisfactory status of foreign language teaching, and a desire to do something radical about it—a task which is hard, considering the status of foreign languages as "poor relations" within the academic community. Even for the secondary school market—which is quite sizable—publishers are reluctant to invest huge resources in serious research and development. Even when presented with an innovative program that has already been researched and developed,

they are unwilling to take any risks in publishing it: They want to publish “what teachers buy.” Unfortunately, teachers buy what publishers publish. No real progress can ever be made until such a vicious cycle is broken.

Traditionally, research is expected to be carried on at universities. Unfortunately, in most universities, foreign languages fall within the domain of “Languages and Literatures” departments. These are dominated by professors whose real interest and competence lie exclusively in literary history and criticism, and who consider the teaching of language as a somewhat dishonorable—though often unavoidable—chore on which little talent, time, and budgetary resources should be wasted. As a result, relatively little research in the field of foreign language teaching is conducted at institutions of higher learning. Whatever research takes place consists, for the most part, in more or less well-controlled experiments relevant to some small aspects of learning psychology; the results are often rather limited in scope and not entirely conclusive.

It was felt that another kind of “research” was needed: research that would, undoubtedly, require greater investments and would not pay immediate dividends but would eventually have a significant impact on the fate of foreign language students; research that would treat the problem of language teaching as a whole; research that would be based on a vast amount of observation and practical experience rather than theories; research that—starting from a set of materials actually used in teaching regular courses—would progressively refine those materials, incorporating the lessons drawn from experience to create new and better versions year after year.

General Notions Underlying *French in Action*

Three decades of trial and error suggest a number of realities that now appear to be generally accepted truths: 1) learning is a function of motivation; 2) a printed text in a foreign language (by itself and in itself) is not particularly motivating, especially for beginners; 3) the simplified language proposed by most textbooks

turns students off; 4) students are equally turned off by unnatural language that does not carry actual information; 5) learning the transformational rules that enable one to decode a foreign language into one’s own may be an exciting intellectual exercise but this kind of activity is not particularly fascinating for many students who have not yet opted for a career as cryptologists; 6) what attracts most students to the study of a foreign language is not its appearance as an abstruse code saying the very same things that are said more simply in their mother tongue, but, rather, the opening up of a new world by the foreign language; 7) understanding is a prerequisite to speaking; 8) students, at any point, can understand much more than they can say; 9) there can be no understanding without a knowledge of the context in which language occurs; and, 10) language cannot be invented by the learners; it can be imitated and adapted to individual use through re-combination of observed segments.

Video and Structured Immersion

We concluded that what was needed first was the capacity to expose the students to the foreign language spoken by native speakers in culturally authentic situations; the exposure would be such that students would be motivated to observe the use of the foreign language, make efforts to understand it, and, eventually, imitate and recombine elements of what they had observed in order to communicate in the foreign language.

But, sheer exposure to authentic language in the most engrossing situations would not be enough. The students’ exposure to the foreign language must be carefully structured to ensure that comprehension and acquisition will take place in the most efficient way.

The purpose of *French in Action* is to provide such an exposure to the foreign language by taking advantage of the capacity of video vividly to record language used in real situations and to rearrange—through editing—this recorded reality to present it in the order and fashion most propitious to efficient learning.

If properly used, video provides almost all of the advantages of being in the foreign country,

with one enormous additional advantage: While the linguistic experience of the learners living in the foreign country is almost entirely random, with video, this experience can be structured. The role of video is then to combine authenticity with systematic structuring.

A Live Basic Text

Contrary to what happens in most programs where the “basic text” is represented by a printed page in the textbook, in *French in Action*, video (in the form of 52 30-minute lessons) is used to introduce the linguistic corpus on which all the teaching and learning will be based.

The corpus is made up entirely—from the very beginning—of natural language spoken by native speakers in real-life situations. The first ten minutes or so of each half-hour program are devoted to one episode of a continuing “story.” This story has not been arbitrarily imposed; instead, it is presented as being created as we go. It starts from the actual situation of the learners: They are there to learn French with the help of a teacher. To do so, students and teachers will invent a story together. The teacher will offer options: who will the protagonist be (an old man, a young woman, an elephant)? After a brief discussion, one of the options is chosen, and the story begins to take shape. It turns out rather conveniently that the selected female lead, Mireille, is a young student who lives in Paris, has an adorable younger sister, tolerable parents, an eccentric aunt, and a great variety of friends (many other possibilities have been considered and can always be called back at will as variants).

After a while, students tend to believe in the very existence of the characters in the story. Some, curious to know how Mireille has been found, were surprised to learn that she was a professional actress hired through a casting director. Many, on their first trip to Paris, have rushed and rung the bell at Mireille’s house on the rue de Vaugirard, apparently half-expecting that Mireille herself would answer. (Measures have been taken so that the right bell cannot be found.) Suspension of disbelief is welcome and encouraged. Great care has been taken to ensure that all characters speak and behave naturally enough for learners to believe they were real,

and for critical native observers to deem their performance entirely natural. Everything was shot on location, and all setting and props are scrupulously real. The fact that learners have the illusion of living in France along with the characters of the story plays a major part in motivation, perception, and retention.

Yet, every effort has been made to remind students that the story is not “for real.” The yarn is as fanciful as can be, and it is told ironically. It is an obvious parody of soap operas that nobody could or should take seriously. That the story does not appear as set in concrete but as purely contingent is essential for a number of reasons. The chief one is that, at the end of each lesson, students will be invited to tear the story apart and in so doing draw on the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and various options that have been presented in an attempt to encourage them to use language in re-inventing the story in their own way.

First Objective: Listening Comprehension

The first objective in teaching a lesson is to lead the students to a certain level of comprehension. This is done through the use of video, without any previous reference to the written text (which can be found in the textbook but should not be consulted by the students before a considerable amount of work has been done with the video and the audio program). The recommended procedure is for the teacher to show the video—a brief segment at a time—playing back utterances several times if necessary, to make sure that the students first perceive the sounds spoken and then gain a global understanding of what is said. Since the language used on the video is natural and has not been simplified, students are, of course, not expected to understand everything at first; instead, they get a general notion of what is going on. Comprehension will be gradually refined later as the spoken text is manipulated further. The assimilation of the spoken text is carried on through the first part of the audio program for each lesson. At the beginning of the audio-cassette, students find the dialogue of the story reproduced exactly as it is heard on the video soundtrack. Then, they hear it again from a studio recording—segmented into shorter

utterances—with repetitions, pauses for imitation, and questions that can be answered using the utterances just rehearsed. Though perception of sounds and global understanding are the first two steps, establishing the meaning of key words and expressions will be necessary to reach a higher level of comprehension.

Establishing Meaning

Meaning is established without any reference to English. The meaning of a French word is not an English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew or Sanskrit word, but, rather, the sum total of all the situations in which that French word has been used. For this reason—in this program—French words are not associated with English words but with what they actually refer to: situations in which these words are being used within the French cultural context. For example, a new word that occurs in the dialogue of the story will be displayed in a number of other situations culled from a vast array of authentic documents such as French TV programs, French films, advertising spots, interviews, etc. In this way, the language contained in the story is “illustrated” with several thousands of short excerpts that constitute as many glimpses of French culture.

Students are not given English translations of words to be memorized, but are trained to discover the meaning of words through contexts. Students are shown when and how French words are used; this encourages them to bypass the mediation of English and helps them to reach the moment when they begin to “think” in French more rapidly.

Grammar

The same approach is applied to the teaching of grammar. Just as vocabulary is taught through context rather than vocabulary lists, grammar is taught through the text of the story rather than sets of grammatical rules to be memorized. In both cases, students are trained to figure out how the French language “works” instead of merely being “told” how it works.

Since the language of the story is natural, it contains, from the start, a great variety of grammatical structures; as such, these structures do not need to receive special attention at first,

as long as we are seeking only a global understanding. We focus on a given grammatical point only after it has been encountered many times in the context of the story. A number of these occurrences are then gathered and presented together in such a way as to reveal the pattern that is common to all of them. After a grammatical structure has thus been shown through examples taken directly from familiar situations of the story, the students are given opportunities to use it in a variety of activities all referring to the material of the story.

Liberated Expression

In order to achieve maximum efficiency, the activities mentioned above are systematically structured. As a consequence, students’ responses are, for the most part, controlled. The last phase in each lesson is designed to lead the students into using the language freely to say the things they choose to say. After practicing with role-playing—which serves to recall the language featured in the story—the students are invited to tear that story apart and to reconstruct it in their own way. They are encouraged to say whatever they wish, provided they do so by recombining only lexical and grammatical elements they have already encountered and with which they are familiar enough to be able to use them properly. In fact, they are encouraged to operate in two different ways: They may look—in the stock of what they already know—for phrases and even full utterances that will fit into new situations, thus recombining whole chunks of language to create a different story. They may also recombine known words and grammatical structures to generate new utterances.

Of course, the students’ freedom of expression is always limited by the vocabulary and grammar they have at their disposal at a given point, since they cannot invent the language. However, within these unavoidable linguistic limitations (which, of course, will be less and less constraining as students progress through the course), they can express themselves freely—and all the more freely because they may take refuge behind the mask of fictional characters in the story.

The re-invention of the story can be done in many different ways. It can be done as a collective

activity involving the whole class or as an individual (oral and eventually written) exercise. Groups of two to four students can be asked to prepare a very short re-invention skit and to perform it in front of the camera. This last technique is extremely productive, especially if it is followed by a careful critical review of the filmed skit—even more so if a second filming can take place some time after the first performance has been discussed.

The Making of *French in Action*

It is hoped that *French in Action* will bring a major revolution in the teaching of foreign languages. There are some signs that it will—among them, the widespread dissemination of the program after its appearance. Though revolutions seem to happen overnight, they usually have been brewing for a long time before they break out. The rapid success of *French in Action* should not hide the fact that it was some 25 years in the making. The “research” period extended over 20 years during which seven successive versions of the prototype were produced and tested at Yale University. The last two versions were tested in a dozen institutions, including Wellesley, Colby, University of Pennsylvania, Brandeis, Philips Academy at Andover, the Hotchkiss School, etc. over a 10-year period. It took 25 years to identify pedagogical problems, find solutions to them, try them out, and integrate them into a coherent system, not to mention finding the several thousand illustrative documents needed. It took more than three years to find—and many more to collect—the \$3.25 million needed to turn the prototype course into the present *French in Action* (major funding was provided by the Annenberg/CPB Project; additional funding came from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the French Ministry of Culture, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Commissariat à Langue Française, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Florence J. Gould Foundation, Inc., and the Cox Charitable Trust.)

If *French in Action* has enjoyed faster and greater success than any other previously published single set of materials in foreign language, it is, in part, because a greater amount of research, time, effort, and funds were invested in its development.

Lessons To Be Drawn from *French in Action*

French in Action was released in September 1987. Just a year later, it was used in several hundred on-campus courses and in some 45 telecourses offered to distant learners for credit by various institutions. It was used at practically all levels, from grade four up to graduate courses and teacher training programs. Reports from teachers and students have all been enthusiastic. Enrollments have gone up and attrition down in French programs that have adopted *French in Action*. This shows that materials that are too innovative to attract commercial publishers can attract students and teachers. It also shows that, though some teachers are still intimidated by video, the fact that video is an integral component of *French in Action* proved to be no major problem. Teachers are learning how to teach with video; institutions with no or sparse video facilities are purchasing at least the minimum equipment needed (one VCR and one TV or monitor), and many are expanding their video facilities because of *French in Action*.

The impact of *French in Action* has not been limited to educational institutions: It immediately reached a wide public. After it was announced that information about this program could be obtained by calling 1-800-LEARNER, 500 calls were received on the first day; some 200 calls have kept coming day after day ever since. The program is carried by most of the major PBS stations, in some cases because of arrangement with institutions offering *French in Action* as a telecourse, but in many cases because of public demand. It just so happened that WETA—the PBS station in Washington, D.C.—began broadcasting *French in Action* during the week that it was also broadcasting the Bork confirmation hearings. We are told that during that week, the station received 135 calls about the Bork hearings and 169 about *French in Action*. Even though home-viewers are recording *French in Action* on their VCRs, over 20,000 individual videocassettes have been sold at this time. Well-known film critic, Roger Ebert—among the first to buy a complete set of *French in Action*—reportedly said he considered this program among the five essentials he would take with him were he to be stranded on a desert island (along

with the King James Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare). This is extremely encouraging because it shows that there is much more interest in the public for foreign languages—French in particular—than is usually thought.

If we take foreign languages seriously enough, if we are willing to invest a couple of decades of focused thinking and hard work—as well as a few million dollars—we can take advantage of what video has to offer today and develop materials that

will not just help some students in garnering a few credits or satisfying a language requirement but rather motivate large numbers of people and give them the means to learn how to understand a foreign language and use it in actual communication.

J.E.T.T. Contributor Profile

Pierre J. Capretz is at Yale University. Interested readers may write to him at the following address: Yale University, 111 Grove Street, New Haven CT 06511