OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES : DESIGNING A CULTURE-BASED FRENCH LANGUAGE INTERNET COURSE. AN INTERIM REPORT

Joanne BONNEVILLE, Ellen CHAPCO[1],
David LAWLOR, Brian RAINEY, Emily SCHUDEL
University of Regina

At the Vancouver conference, members of the University of Regina WEBteam reported on the development of a course in which new technologies would be used to present traditional grammatical principles. What follows is an overview of our course design, including a rationale for the development of this course in the Saskatchewan setting, as well as a *mise au point* of our progress to date, including a summary of the opportunities and challenges presented in creating this course.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The WEBteam project, the preparation of *FR 104 : Grammar* Review, a culture-based French language course delivered via Internet, is the most recent step in the progression of the University of Regina's historical commitment to make courses available to those who, for one reason or another, are unable to attend regular classes on the university campus. In the early days, the University and, more particularly, its Department of French, reached out via University Extension, now the Centre for Continuing Education, to distant students, either by sending out instructors from the Department or hiring on-site teachers who taught sections of classes being offered on campus. With the participation of the Department in the pioneering Hermes communications satellite experiments in the late 1970s and the development of the Saskatchewan fibreoptics network by SaskTel, new perspectives opened up. A class taking place in a dedicated room in Audio-Visual Services on campus was delivered by audio and video link to students who came together in one of the community colleges in the province. From time to time, instructors went out to meet the students in the community colleges.

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[1] http://www.ellen.chapco@uregina.ca/

While such an approach was an improvement, it nevertheless presented drawbacks for instructor and student alike. The chief problem was that of travel, occasioned by the sheer size of the province. Students had to drive long distances to community college sites; those living too far away were not able to benefit from the classes offered. Instructors or their assistants had even longer, sometimes overnight, trips if they were to visit all their students.

Since 1994, distance learners have been taught by various combinations of communications technology[2]. Recently, a second-year class has been delivered via the Internet, using WEBCT, (successfully integrating the chat-room function of this program) and « live » candid classroom satellite broadcasts.

In the past year, the post-secondary educational institutions of Saskatchewan agreed to work together to develop a Saskatchewan Virtual Campus, the objective of which is to enable these institutions and their partners to offer an integrated and coordinated array of on-line courses and programmes which would respond to identified needs of learners, employers and communities. Such an initiative will increase the possibilities for learners to fulfil part of their degree requirements off campus. Through the effective use of technology, the Saskatchewan Virtual Campus proposes to enhance the quality of, and the access to, post-secondary education for the people of rural and northern communities. In addition, it will offer new educational and training opportunities for Métis and First Nations peoples. The WEBteam project is one of five at the University of Regina which received funding from Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training in April, 2000.

COURSE CONCEPT

Various considerations were involved in developing a concept of this course. The first was the type of clientele to which *FR 104, Grammar Review*, is directed. The students will have completed Grade 12, but, because of the nature of schools in the province, their preparation will have been very uneven and some may even have forgotten much of what they had learned. They may lack oral ability and their knowledge of grammatical concepts may be vague to non-existent. For this reason, the introduction to the course will be given in English, as will grammar explanations and terminology. French

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[2]   Dave Lawlor, a WEBteam member, taught the first distance courses offered by the Department of French, in cooperation with the Saskatchewan Communications Network, and has continued to do so.

will be introduced gradually and English then phased out. Second was the element which we believe constitutes a major part of the originality of this course : the use of authentic documents by and about the Fransaskois, the French-language minority of the province. The class has, therefore, a double aim : to teach French to non-French speakers, but also to make them aware of the existence of a vibrant community in their midst, which most of them will not know. A summer student employment grant, supplemented by funds from the original grant awarded for the development of the course, has allowed WEBteam to engage two Fransaskois students as research assistants to develop a database of archival documents and photographs, using materials obtained from the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives, as well as a base of website links, both cultural and historical, related to the course material.

TECHNOLOGY TO BE USED IN THE DELIVERY OF THE COURSE

Three different types of technology will be used to deliver this course : ClassPoint, WebCT and CD-ROM.

ClassPoint**,** a software product created by CUSeeMee, based on the CUSeeMe (MeetingPoint) video conferencing platform and on the NetMeeting (Microsoft) application sharing platform, is basically an instructor-controlled learning environment—in other words, an Internet classroom which comprises several functions : two-way audio communication (question and answer); text chat; video interactions (including face-camera and document projector for presentations); instructor-led Web tours; whiteboard and application sharing. To be used for approximately one hour per week in live (synchronous) classes, it will be broadcast to five dedicated regional college receive sites in the province.

WebCT, developed at the University of British Columbia for post-secondary course delivery, integrates a variety of interactive Web-based tools into one password-protected course package : communication tools for the creation of bulletin boards, e-mail, chatrooms; organizational tools, such as the calendar, and glossary; assessment tools for quizzes and self-testing; and administrative tools to facilitate grading and student tracking. Allowing instructors to put up almost anything that can go on the Web, including HTML, FLASH, JavaScript, etc., this component will be used to give the students and instructor an asynchronous discussion platform outside of live class time, and a place to post additional course-related information.

WEBteam will create a CD-ROM, incorporating multimedia elements such as graphics, photos, video and audio clips to be used as the textbook for the course.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

As the course was being created, WEBteam applied two basic principles to its development : the use of Fransaskois content; and the reversal of the traditional roles of the instructor and of language lab technology.

The use of Fransaskois content allows Saskatchewan students studying French to discover the francophone culture of Saskatchewan (*la Fransaskoisie*). Many of these students do not know this community exists. As well, it encourages students to participate in Fransaskois cultural events that will provide them with direct involvement in the target language. Twelve letters, six of which will form the cultural basis of the six grammar modules, written by members of a fictional Fransaskois family over a period of 100 years, serve to illustrate important events in the history of the Fransaskois community. Mr. Laurier Gareau, a well-known Fransaskois who is, among other things an author and Executive Director of *La Société historique de la Saskatchewan*, has written these letters and is acting as historical consultant for the project. The letters serve as well to illustrate the use of the grammar concepts studied in the course. By following links provided in the texts, students will be able to visit authentic websites which will enable them to build up a picture of the development of the province of Saskatchewan and, in particular, to follow the fortunes of a typical Fransaskois family, the Caillé. The hardships of the pioneer years give way to the First World War and the trials of the « Dirty Thirties », and the Second World War is followed by the changes leading to Saskatchewan as it is known today, circumstances experienced by all residents of the province. In addition, the material presents the particular struggles of the Fransaskois to maintain their language, to gain the right to French-language education and to preserve and develop their culture.

ORGANIZATION OF THE MODULES

A preliminary lesson comprising six sections (*Introduction; Préparation à la lecture; Lettre; Compréhension; Grammaire; Synthèse*), provided on the CD-ROM, is intended to familiarize students with the layout of each of the six modules and to introduce them to the types of exercises they can expect to find in each. No grammar topics are explained in this preliminary lesson.

Introduction

The introduction, written in English, serves to place the letter in a cultural and historical context. Highlighted words or phrases provide links to Internet websites, video and audio clips and archival documents and photographs. These links introduce the student to the events that have shaped the development of the Fransaskois culture.

Préparation à la lecture

Multiple-choice and point-and-click introductory activities are designed to provide students with a basic understanding of the grammar points contained in the letter. These activities will prepare students to identify these elements more easily when they read the letter.

Lettre

Initially, students are encouraged to read the letter as many times as they wish, focusing on understanding the text and identifying the grammar points being studied. At the second stage of reading, vocabulary is highlighted for the student : essential vocabulary in red and vocabulary of interest in blue. Definitions and the applications of this vocabulary appear when students click on the highlighted words. The *Lettre* section concludes with an audio recording of the letter which allows students to hear and assimilate correct pronunciation.

Compréhension

Students provide true/false answers to oral questions and short answers to written questions designed to evaluate their comprehension of the letter. Each question contains a hint button that provides a view of the section of the letter on which the question is based. These questions serve as a basis for in-class discussions during the weekly on-line classroom sessions.

Grammaire

The grammar section provides a detailed explanation of all important grammar topics. The presentation of certain grammar topics begins with the student rereading the letter in which the specific point to be studied is highlighted. Explanations are presented in a step-by-step manner that will help students to assimilate the rules quickly. Most are followed by short, interactive, self-correcting exercises, offering students immediate reinforcement. All grammar topic explanations have their own access button and may be retrieved individually and in any order. However, students are encouraged to follow the grammar topic list in the order presented as the assimilation of grammar rules is frequently a cumulative process.

Synthèse

In this cumulative review section, students are first presented with a recorded *dictée*. They are allowed restricted access to the *dictée* audio file and are then required to submit their written work to the professor using e-mail. The *synthèse* section also contains interactive activities that reinforce the grammatical, cultural and historical importance of the letter. These activities include drag-and-drop exercises, open-ended questions that invite students to express their personal opinions on cultural, personal or historical events described in the letter, and short, written assignments which require students to gather information from relevant Internet sites.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES
PRESENTED BY THE COURSE

Scheduled to be offered for the first time in the Winter semester 2002, *FR 104 :* Grammar Review has presented WEBteam members with both opportunities and challenges during the course of its development.

In the traditional delivery of grammar courses, the grammar material was presented by the instructor in the classroom and opportunities for oral "interaction" were provided in the language laboratory. The technology has presented the opportunity to reverse the traditional pattern of second-language learning. Students are invited to discover and assimilate the written material, independently, through the CD-ROM and to verify, in a limited way, the concepts they have acquired. Opportunities for written exchange and

communication are provided via WebCT and the weekly in-class sessions are reserved for oral communication via ClassPoint.

The development of this course has also given us the opportunity to present Fransaskois culture to anglophone students, through the exploration of archival and electronic materials presently available. This is particularly important in the Saskatchewan context where the Fransaskois are a vibrant, but very small and fragile, minority.

The creation of this course has not been without challenges. Although two teaching releases were secured for one WEBteam member, this has not proven to be sufficient. Consequently, course development is being done by team members on a part-time basis, as an overload to their regular teaching assignment. Although the members of WEBteam are seasoned instructors, all of whom have, individually, developed courses, they had never done so as a collaborative effort. Time was thus required to establish an efficient and effective process of working together. Finding an appropriate medium through which to present cultural content to first-year anglophone students was another major challenge. Use of a novel was considered, but this was found to be too long and complicated a literary genre for the level of students who would take the course. While letters and cultural notes were found to be a more manageable medium, finding the right level for the target audience required several tries. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all was the vast amount of material to be incorporated into the six modules, given the level of the target audience. An ongoing challenge of a more delicate nature is the need to respect the cultural material itself. None of the members of WEBteam being Fransaskois, we must recognize the importance of using the cultural material without appropriating it and to do so, must take care to respect the work of our Fransaskois author and to maintain contact with the Fransaskois community.

As we work towards our final product, we are ever conscious of the need not to complicate the learning experience for the student by inappropriate use of new technology. To some extent, the interaction between non-technical team members and the technical designer helps in this regard. Even more important will be the feedback from students when the course is offered for the first time.

While the content remains constant, methods of teaching French grammar and culture have evolved over time. We hope that by putting this « old wine » into the new bottles provided by today's technology we will succeed in making it accessible, appealing and effective for students at the beginning of the twenty-first century.