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“I love how the content stimulates and encourages me to want to continue to learn French” or How teaching literary adaptations makes for better French students

Abstract

Since 2011, we have been teaching a semester-length course to first year intermediate and second year beginners French cohorts, in which students read five short stories and then watch their respective film adaptations. The overall aims of the course are both linguistic and cultural: in the process of developing comprehension skills (both oral and written), we seek to foster a heightened appreciation of France’s rich cultural tradition. An essential objective is also to develop the skills for close textual and film analysis by encouraging students to explore and explicate the general changes made in the adaptation process across particular scenes. This, in turn, allows them to gain an awareness of the limits and the creative potential of literature and film, respectively. Other pedagogical benefits to this approach include: reinforcement of language acquisition, improved retention rates and, above all, heightened satisfaction on the part of students, who confirm that the course is successful in helping them to develop an understanding of the interconnectedness between language and culture, intimating that the course is rigorous and intellectually challenging at the same time as being enjoyable and relevant. If one of the fundamental goals of the foreign language-culture nexus is to create confident students who are adept at combining critical analysis and cultural competency, then we argue that the teaching of film adaptations represents a valid means of embedding these skills.

Students who undertake the study of a modern language at university level today are typically motivated by a variety of factors—the desire to learn more about another culture, for example, or the aspiration to travel, study or work in a foreign country and to experience a different way of life. There have been numerous studies of the motives, beliefs and expectations that lead students to undertake and continue with language study at tertiary level, particularly in the American context (see, for example, Dupuy and Krashen 1998; Harlow and Muyskens 1994; Horwitz 1988; Morello 1988; Tse 2000) but also in the Australian setting (Bouvet and West-Sooby 2004; Dutton, Nettelbeck and Saint-Léger 2004; Hajek and Warren 1996, among others). The conclusions drawn by these studies are varied and often complex. Nevertheless, on the whole it is fair to say that instrumental reasons play a decisive
role, notwithstanding the importance of affective factors such as the emotional response to a particular language or the simple enjoyment of learning another language. And underlying these instrumental factors is the need—or the desire—to use the language that students have chosen to learn in order to interact with native speakers of that language.

This is, of course, not an unreasonable goal. In designing a language programme, however, it is important to consider what students think it means to ‘communicate’ with people from another culture, as their assumptions and expectations may not always match our own as language teachers. It is generally accepted that learning a language involves first and foremost assimilating in some way or other its basic building blocks: acquiring vocabulary, practising the pronunciation of these unfamiliar words and learning how to combine them in order to form meaningful sentences. Most language learners also recognise that the ability to communicate in a foreign language requires the development of a range of generic skills: speaking and listening, as well as reading and writing. Interestingly, however, a familiarity with the cultural practices and traditions of those who speak the target language is commonly seen as separate from the study of the language itself. While curiosity about other cultures is a source of interest and motivation for many, if not all, language students, relatively few of them would see the development of cultural competence as either integral to their acquisition of the language per se or essential to their ability to use it.¹

They would be comforted in this view by the various language proficiency descriptors that have been developed around the world, almost all of which focus on the four macro skills already mentioned: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here, for example, is an extract from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001: 24), setting out the factors that determine the assessment of proficiency at Levels A2 and C1:

Level A2 (elementary)

- Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).
- Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.
- Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

Level C1 (advanced)

- Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.
- Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.
• Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
• Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

The Proficiency Guidelines developed by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) are even more explicitly focused on the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In a similar vein, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) focuses on listening and reading comprehension, as the following extract from the official website makes clear:

Linguistic competence required for the JLPT is expressed in terms of language activities, such as Reading and Listening, as shown in the table below. While not noted in the table, Language Knowledge, such as Vocabulary and Grammar, is also required for successful execution of these activities.

Cultural proficiency, if it is mentioned at all in such descriptors, is presented simply as a consequence or a by-product of linguistic proficiency. It is, in other words, considered to be facilitated by the acquisition of language skills rather than instrumental in their development.

And yet, as language teachers well know, there is a symbiotic relationship between language on the one hand and society and culture on the other. As many commentators have observed, language is a social practice, and the sociocultural context from which it emerges and which it in turn helps to shape, needs to be understood if we are to create meaning. In order for our students to attain more sophisticated levels of communication, therefore, they need to come to an appreciation of the fact that, when native speakers engage in conversation, they bring with them a whole range of social and cultural experiences, references and assumptions. This is of vital importance when it comes to the exchange of (reasonably sophisticated) ideas and opinions but it is relevant even at the most elementary level, given that particular words or phrases can have resonances that are only fully understood by those who have a certain degree of familiarity with the socio-cultural heritage of their interlocutor.

It is, of course, not possible to replicate for the foreign language learner the experience of native speakers, who have developed their social and cultural habits and practices in an organic fashion and over the course of a lifetime. It is, however, our task as educators to make our students aware of the significance of cultural competence and to provide them with at least some cultural knowledge and skills of their own in order to facilitate more meaningful interactions with people from the target culture. There are many ways of approaching this task but the teaching of screen adaptations of literary texts offers particular advantages. Firstly, it provides students with the opportunity to become acquainted with some of the important cultural products of the society or societies whose language they are learning—namely literary texts and films. Hopefully, it also acts as an incentive for them to
continue exploring that tradition outside the classroom. Importantly, the study of adaptations in the foreign language classroom allows the study of language and culture to be fully integrated, thereby conveying to students the message that they are indissociable and that each is a window onto the other. In terms of student attitudes and motivation, courses devoted to adaptations combine an occupation that language students find accessible and enjoyable (watching films) with an activity which many find challenging and are reticent to engage in (reading literary texts—which is all the more difficult to persuade students to attempt, given that many of them are not regular readers of literature in their own native language). The expectation is that film viewing will become more of an intellectual exercise, while reading literature will be seen as both achievable and rewarding. Finally, and on a more general level, this kind of study, as the scholarly work devoted to adaptation demonstrates, helps to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, as it provides insights into the possibilities and limitations of both literature and film as modes of artistic expression—insights that stand to make students better readers of texts and more informed viewers of film, becoming aware in the process that adaptations can be treated “as the work-in-progress of institutional practices of rewriting” (Leitch 2007: 302-303).

These advantages were, in our view, particularly relevant to our cohort of intermediate French students—that is to say, those who have studied French to Year 12 level at school and who are in their first year of university language study, as well as those who have completed the intensive first-year beginners course at university and who are now in their second year of French study. At this particular stage, students have acquired a sufficient level of proficiency to allow them to begin the transition towards putting their language skills to use in a more analytical context. This kind of training in critical analysis is, we would assert, best developed by focusing on aspects of society and culture that play a significant role in the particular language community being studied. In our case, literary texts and films are obvious choices because of the place they occupy in the French cultural landscape and their long-standing heritage. While literature and film are no doubt important in all societies and cultures, they are especially pertinent to the French and Francophone world, where writers enjoy a privileged status and where cinema is revered as the ‘seventh art’. It was this reasoning that motivated us to introduce a course of study entitled *Du texte à l’écran* (‘From Text to Screen’) at the intermediate level in 2011.

In seeking to develop students’ cultural proficiency through the study of adaptation, we were at the same time looking to build on their language skills. The communicative potential of film in the classroom is well established. Both Altman (1989) and Snyder and Colon (1988) found that foreign language students exposed to film in the classroom scored higher in vocabulary and listening comprehension tests than students not exposed to them. Pennycook (1985) demonstrates that film provides many of the ‘hidden’ paralinguistic clues that are part of communication (such as non-verbal signs, body language and speech register).
It goes without saying that all source materials for the course—that is to say the stories and the films set for study—are entirely in French. But it should be noted that all classes are also conducted in French and students must use the target language in every assessment task. The course was thus designed to scaffold the development of the full range of linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and vocabulary acquisition) around the study of culture and the development of cultural proficiency. It was particularly important to nurture the apprenticeship of reading and analytical skills in French, given that many of our students find this to be the most challenging aspect of their studies with us. Film was seen in this way as a means of fostering the enjoyment and appreciation of literature, as well as being an object of critical study in its own right. Our hope was that students would come to appreciate the usefulness and relevance of culture to their language learning and that they would be better prepared for upper level French courses devoted to more challenging texts and films. And more generally, by choosing to study adaptation in the foreign language classroom and adopting a particular pedagogical approach to our teaching, we were seeking to equip students with an array of analytical tools that could be deployed across a range of different disciplines.

As noted above, this semester-length course, which we teach in tandem, has been offered to the first year intermediate and second year beginners French cohorts since 2011, and has now (in 2013) been through its third iteration. Over the course of twelve weeks, our five chosen texts and their film adaptations are: *Une partie de campagne* (short story by Guy de Maupassant, film directed by Jean Renoir and released in 1936), *Toine* (another Maupassant short story, the 2007 telefilm version of which was directed by Jacques Santamaria), *La Femme du boulanger* (an episode from Jean Giono’s 1932 fictionalised autobiography, *Jean le bleu*, famously adapted for the screen in 1938 by Marcel Pagnol), *Le Petit Vieux des Batignolles* (a short crime story by nineteenth-century writer Émile Gaboriau, adapted for television in 2009 by Claude Chabrol), and *La Nuit du carrefour* (one of Georges Simenon’s famous Maigret stories, made into a film in 1932 by Jean Renoir). In 2013, *La Femme du boulanger* was replaced by the classic short story by Vercors about the German occupation of France, *Le Silence de la mer*, a new screen version of which was produced in 2004 by Pierre Boutron (extracts of the earlier film version made in 1947 by Jean-Pierre Melville were also shown in class). This change of text/film was made in response to student feedback in the first two years: the film version of *La Femme du boulanger*, which runs for more than two hours, tried students’ patience, and the language of Giono’s text proved to be difficult. The stories and films are studied as intertextual webs, with subsequent seminar discussions concentrating on the standard types of analysis (plot, structure, character, themes, style, technique, etc). The two stories by Maupassant are examples of classic 19th century French naturalist fiction and the short story form. Two more (*Le Petit Vieux des Batignolles* and *La Nuit du carrefour*) belong to the tradition of French crime fiction and rounding out the list are stories that illustrate provincial life (the Provence of Giono and Pagnol) and a particularly traumatic moment in French history (the Occupation). By exposing students to a variety of French literary traditions, styles, dialects and idioms, as well as the different
cinematographic approaches adopted by each director, this programme functions both as a discrete survey course and as an introduction to the intertextuality of French cultural forms.

As the 2013 study schedule indicates (see Table 1), the course allows for a certain structural neatness, with two weeks devoted to each text and film and the semester bookended by an introductory lecture on the key debates of adaptation theory and a concluding lecture that summarises the main discussion points and allows the opportunity for student feedback and comment.

Table 1: Study Schedule—Du texte à l’écran (2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Assessed Tasks</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maupassant, <em>Une partie de campagne</em> (texte)</td>
<td>Maupassant, <em>Une partie de campagne</em></td>
<td>Comprehension Test 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Renoir, <em>Une partie de campagne</em> (film)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Maupassant, <em>Toine</em> (texte)</td>
<td>Maupassant, <em>Toine</em></td>
<td>Comprehension Test 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Santamaria, <em>Toine</em> (film)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Boutron, <em>Le Silence de la mer</em> (film)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Chabrol, <em>Le Petit vieux des Batignolles</em> (film)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehension Test 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Simenon, <em>La Nuit du carrefour</em> (texte)</td>
<td>Simenon, <em>La Nuit du carrefour</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L’adaptation: état des lieux</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Essay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the second year beginners students, this is a discrete, stand-alone course comprising three contact hours per week: a lecture in French, followed by a two-hour seminar. There are two such stand-alone ‘culture’ courses offered for students at this level, one in each semester. They are therefore elective courses for this cohort, although students who wish to complete a major in French must undertake...
one culture course at Level II and one culture course at Level III, alongside their six semesters of language study. This is to ensure that students who graduate with a major in French have some knowledge of French and Francophone culture, as well as an awareness of the intimate links between language and culture. It is also a means of providing them with an initial level of cultural proficiency. Of the 60 or so students who enrol in the second year beginners language course, roughly half elect to study *Du texte à l’écran*.

For the first year intermediate class, which usually numbers between 40 and 50 students, the study of French culture forms an integral (and therefore compulsory) part of the course. In addition to the weekly lecture, the conversation tutorial every second week is devoted to discussion of the texts and films that are set for study and listening comprehension exercises are also set in the weekly language laboratory class. This particular cohort generally has a better range of vocabulary in French and is better equipped in terms of listening skills and reading comprehension than the second year beginners students. They are consequently more autonomous learners. The second year beginners students, on the other hand, need extra class time in order to develop their reading and listening skills, as well as their vocabulary and productive skills, in order to reach a comparable level of autonomy.

For both cohorts, the weekly lecture covers biographical information on the writer or director, the cultural, social and historical contexts in which the text or film was produced and an analysis of the specific literary qualities of texts and the means by which the filmmakers have translated them to the screen. In the subsequent seminar or tutorial, students carry out the usual array of tasks, such as reading/viewing for comprehension and analysis, individual oral presentations, tests and class discussion. The overall aims of the course are both linguistic and cultural: in the process of developing comprehension skills (both oral and written), we hope to foster a heightened appreciation of France’s rich cultural tradition. An essential objective is also to develop the skills for close textual and film analysis by encouraging students to explore and explicate the general changes made in the adaptation process across particular scenes. This in turn allows them to gain an awareness of the limits and the creative potential of literature and film adaptations, respectively.

To provide students with a deeper understanding of this creative potential, we deploy what Richard J. Hand (2010: 17) calls the Five Creative Strategies of Adaptation: “omission, additions, marginalisation, expansion, and alteration”. In other words, students are asked to identify what narrative material has been removed or introduced in the adaptation, what thematic issues in the source texts have been made less or more prominent in the adaptation and what themes, events, details and plot points have been modified. By focusing on these questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’, students can in turn begin asking ‘why’. For instance, the five texts each contain extensive, detailed descriptions of features such as the décor or landscape, the characters, the weather or the scene of the crime. One area we ask students to focus on is the ways in which these literary descriptions are manifested cinematically. Why, for example, does Renoir change the ending of *Une partie de campagne* so that
the day finishes with a storm rather than the hot weather of Maupassant’s original text? And how can specific filmic techniques such as the close-up, the tracking or travelling shot, musical interludes and editing be deployed to replace or rework the literary original? By ‘breaking down’ both text and film in this way, students begin not only to learn how cultural artefacts can be scrutinised (a skill we would expect all Arts students to cultivate) but also, crucially, to appreciate the significance of the French language-culture nexus mentioned earlier and which is highlighted in this way at an early stage in their university French programme.

There are four pieces of assessment across the semester for the second year beginners group. Two are formative—an oral presentation and a set of five comprehension tests (one on each text) and two are summative—an 800-word scene analysis and a 1200-word essay (both of which are written in French). Students in the first year intermediate class must produce the same two written pieces and make an oral presentation but they are not required to undertake comprehension tests. The class presentation requires students to work in pairs to select a scene from one of the literary texts and compare it to the film equivalent; the comprehension tests are designed to ensure that students have read the story before coming to the seminar (always a thorny issue!). While the majority of our students will possess some rudimentary literary analysis skills, there are often clear gaps in their ability to analyse and discuss a film. To help students overcome this, we provide them with a raft of specialised film terms and definitions that they can use in seminars and assessments to express their opinions more accurately and present a coherent argument on the differences and similarities between the literary and the cinematic. Again, by mapping a targeted set of linguistic terms onto cultural artefacts, we can show students that language and culture do overlap. And by harnessing their existing knowledge to the assimilation of new and unfamiliar knowledge, students become capable of making sophisticated and elegant connections between the two—and, what is more, they actually do it!

How have our students responded to this new course? The answer is, generally, very positively. In the end-of-semester Student Experience questionnaires for the second year beginners course, the overall satisfaction level has risen markedly: on a 1 to 7 Likert scale, the mean score for overall satisfaction was 5.4 in 2011 (with 86% Broad Agreement) and 6.6 in 2013 (with 100% Broad Agreement). The statement, “This course helps me to develop my thinking skills”, generated a mean score of 5.5 (with 86% Broad Agreement) in 2011 and 6.4 (with 100% Broad Agreement) in 2013. The statement regarding the appropriateness of the assessment to the achievement of the course learning outcomes produced a mean score of 5.7 (86% Broad Agreement) in 2011 and 6.2 (100% Broad Agreement) in 2013. Student motivation has also improved, with a strong mean score of 5.4 in 2011, rising to 6.6 in 2013. The refinements that have been made to the course over the three years of its existence have clearly produced significant improvements but even in its first year, in 2011, the questionnaire results were better than for previous iterations of the course, where the topics set for study were different. The 2013 questionnaire
results are particularly noteworthy, and are significantly higher than the aggregate means for the Faculty as a whole—an important achievement, in our view, as we are asking students to do work that is similar in nature to that required in other disciplines but using a foreign language. The questionnaire scores are also remarkably consistent across both cohorts (first year post-Year 12 and second year beginners), indicating that, despite differences in their background and their prior experience with French texts and films, students across the board are satisfied with the course content, structure and required learning modes. Two particularly relevant responses to the open-ended question, “What are the best aspects of this course, and why?” were, “The combination of grammar and culture [creates] an ‘easy’, approachable, interesting course and keeps one on one’s toes” and, “I believe [the culture course] is important to help us better connect with the language”. Both of these students have thus confirmed that the course was successful in helping them to develop an understanding of the interconnectedness between language and culture, intimating that the course is rigorous and intellectually challenging at the same time as being enjoyable and relevant.

There are, inevitably, a few grumbles. Here are some sample responses to the question, “This course could be changed in the following ways to improve my learning”: “The texts that we study could be more modern and relevant to today’s society”; “Make the readings shorter please!”, and our personal favourite, “Perhaps not talk about just the novels in the culture lectures. There is no incentive to read the novels if you’re not writing about them for an assignment”. The first two comments are valid and these issues are addressed in some of our other course offerings: students moving into second and third year culture courses do indeed have the opportunity to study more contemporary texts (both literary and journalistic, both long and short) in our “Contemporary France” option, for example. Yet students who baulk at the obligation to read novels (and engage with any other course component that is not tightly linked to assessment outcomes) continue to pose a genuine challenge for us, particularly in the beginners stream, where students have a more limited vocabulary and reading is consequently more difficult. Clearly, students need to be encouraged to think that reading is useful for the development of their linguistic and cultural proficiency—that, as the title of our paper alludes to, reading, and the act of literary and cultural engagement, will stimulate and encourage students to want to continue to learn French. As students move through the three years of French study at university, reading will become the integral part of each discrete culture course that we offer. Yet before confidently embracing three hefty works of 19th century realist fiction, texts by Proust or Beckett, women’s fiction and autobiography or mediaeval French (as may be the case in third year), students need to serve an apprenticeship with the short-story form, learning to read in a more fluent manner without being afraid of encountering unfamiliar language. The opportunity to see the story unfold on screen is intended to be both an incentive and a source of comfort in this regard. This is where our new course has its merits: setting the base-level foundations for our beginning students to become confident and contented readers.
As this brief outline suggests, the introduction into the French curriculum of a course on adaptation has produced a number of positive outcomes, though it remains a work in progress. One of our aims was to improve student retention, particularly in the beginners stream, by offering a course that might generate higher levels of motivation and engagement. During this three-year period, we have seen a modest but steady increase in enrolments in the third-year beginners course, though this is no doubt due to a range of factors. More research is required to determine what impact, if any, this particular course is having in terms of retention. As far as our linguistic and analytical goals are concerned, there are still some students who, in their end-of-semester essays, are not able to go much beyond the notion that a particular writer’s style is ‘literary’ or ‘descriptive’, whatever that may mean (perhaps that the vocabulary is difficult!) or that some films are less effective than others because they are old and made in black and white. Happily, however, this is the exception rather than the rule and most students produce thoughtful and occasionally sophisticated responses to the material set for study. This is quite an achievement when we consider that comparative analysis can be a complex task, even in one’s native language and that this is generally the first time our students have written an essay in French. We have been pleased to observe that, while it takes time, classroom discussion becomes more animated and focused by the end of the semester, with students showing greater confidence in their ability to express their ideas in French. There have also been some less tangible but equally important benefits in terms of student attitudes towards the study of culture more generally, in our French curriculum. It was never our expectation that we would generate unprecedented levels of enthusiasm or excitement about literature (or film, for that matter) but we have noticed a greater degree of acceptance and a heightened level of awareness of the advantages that derive for their language skills from the study of literature and film. Further monitoring is no doubt required in order to gauge the longer-term benefits of the course with respect to student motivation and the development of linguistic and cultural proficiency but the early signs are suggesting to us that, far from acting as a deterrent, the study of literary adaptations is indeed stimulating and encouraging students to continue to learn French—and is making for better French students.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the prime concern here is with matters of a pragmatic nature related to student attitudes, not with the theoretical debate regarding motivation itself. For a cross-section of points of view regarding that theoretical debate, see Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1994), Dörnyei (1994), Dörnyei and Ottó (1999), Gardner (1985), Gardner and Tremblay (1994), Tremblay and Gardner (1995).


4. The important work on ‘communities of practice’ has been influential in helping to understand the socio-cultural dimension of language use. See Scribner and Cole (1981), and especially Lave (1988), Lave and Wenger (1991), Rogoff and Lave (1984), Wenger (1998), and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). For an interesting perspective on this work, see the collection of essays edited by Barton and Tusting (2005).

5. For an interesting investigation into the attitudes of tertiary level (French) language students towards reading in general, and the study of literary texts more particularly, see Bouvet (1999).

References


