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HOW TO ENHANCE INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Having participated in the special training program, “*Enseignement du Français des Affaires*,” at the Centre International d’Études de Langues à Strasbourg from July 18 to August 5, 1994, my article deals with current and innovative materials on intercultural understanding and international business and how these materials can most effectively be used in the foreign language classroom. The program in Strasbourg was sponsored by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy to the United States and by the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) at San Diego State University, and concentrated mainly on diverse aspects of teaching Business French. I will present materials that are ideally suited for a class in Business French, but that can be easily and readily adapted to other foreign language classes and to classes on cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural understanding is the key to the success of international business. Therefore, foreign language classes must incorporate activities that demonstrate the point of view of both interlocutors: the perspective of the student who is learning the foreign language and that of the native speaker of the same foreign language. In this manner, the student is better able to grasp the multiple facets and nuances of communication. To illustrate my position clearly, I will describe the assignment design of a specific activity and highlight its pedagogical aspects. The activity is based on the law proposed by Jacques Toubon, France’s former Minister of Culture, that prohibits further foreign words from entering the French language. The activity design introduces the examination of cultural differences through the use of articles from French as well as American newspapers and periodicals. It uses small group work and role playing to

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build towards a class discussion on intercultural understanding, and on the international and financial consequences of Toubon's ethnocentric ideas.

To begin the activity, groups of three to four students are formed. Students are asked to brainstorm about French words that they know are used in English; for example, *rendez-vous*, *coup d'état*, or *encore*. After making their lists, the individual groups present them to the entire class. A discussion follows as to why and how these words entered the English language. Many possible opinions are presented. In my experience, the most popular opinion is that most French words entered the English language during the Revolutionary War. This was brought about by the help that the French army gave the Colonists and by the ensuing diplomatic relations established between the newly formed United States and France. My students have also argued that French words, such as *croissant*, have only recently entered the English language because foreign foods have become the fashion or the latest trend. By beginning the activity in this manner, students are made aware of the fact that English is not the only language that has world prominence and that English, their own language, is in the continual process of change and adaptation.

Students are then asked to rejoin their small groups and to form a list based on English words that they know have entered the French language. Most students produce words such "walkman" or "sweatshirt," and argue that such terms have been adopted because of the international dominance of American pop culture. They forget, however, that Sony, a Japanese company, was the first company to introduce the walkman on the world market and that Japanese business practices insist on the fact that business people learn the language of the client. The students are correct in pointing out the influence of American pop culture, but they should be made aware of the fact that many English words entered the French language by American soldiers in France at the end of World War II.

These two preliminary activities demonstrate to students that intercultural understanding is a two-way street. In order to arrive at an understanding between two cultures, there must be a give and take on the part of the people of both cultures. Moreover, students begin to recognize that intercultural understanding is a process that requires a knowledge of the previous history that exists between the two cultures.

Following these two brainstorming activities, it is necessary to give the students a current events article that reinforces the constant need for intercultural understanding. In my advanced French classes in the fall of

1994, I used the following article: “Le dictionnaire Toubon du management” by Patrick Arnoux. This article clearly outlines Jacques Toubon’s proposed law that would prohibit further foreign words from entering the French language. This article appears neutral because it gives reasons for and against the law and provides a history of this law and its predecessor. Moreover, the first page of the article shows a picture of Jacques Toubon and American film actor and director Clint Eastwood speaking at the Cannes Film Festival. Because Eastwood uses *franglais* and Toubon uses only pure French, translations are provided so that the two can understand each other, thus clearly illustrating future linguistic difficulties that could occur. Yet, the great usefulness of this article lies in the dictionary section or lexicon located at the end. Here, five categories of *franglais* terms are given: *le vocabulaire du cadre* or the executive manager’s vocabulary; *le jargon du publicitaire* or advertising jargon; *le lexique du financier* or financial lexicon; *le français de l’ingénieur et de l’informaticien* or French of the engineer and the computer scientist; and *l’abécédaire des loisirs, du sport et des voyages* or the alphabet primer of leisure activities, sports, and vacations. As was done on the first page of the article, the dictionary section includes six illustrations that show business executives using either *franglais* or pure French and their corresponding translations given directly below the original statements. In addition, immediately following each *franglais* term in the dictionary, the pure French equivalent is given in parentheses. Consequently, students often remark about the difference in length between the *franglais* and pure French term as well as wonder whether the French find the pure French equivalents awkward to use after having used the *franglais* terms.

Yet because the article and its dictionary section are quite dense, I followed my usual practice and gave the students the following ten comprehension questions:

- 1) La loi Toubon a été votée en _____.
- 2) Pour une première infraction, on impose une amende de _____ FF.
- 3) Pour une deuxième infraction, on impose une amende de _____ FF.
- 4) Les aspects de la commerce qui sont touchés par la loi Toubon sont: _____, _____, _____, _____, et _____.

- 5) Parmi tous les milieux professionnels concernés par la loi Toubon, les plus touchés sont ceux des _____, des _____, et des _____.
- 6) L'entreprise qui a le mieux prévu les conséquences de cette loi est _____.
- 7) Quand un slogan paraît en anglais, il faut que les annonceurs utilisent _____.
- 8) Relevez deux exemples de mots anglais associées aux marques de produits et leur remplacements français.
 - a) "_____" remplacé par "_____"
 - b) "_____" remplacé par "_____"
- 9) Trouvez un argument *contre* la loi Toubon: _____.
- 10) La loi Toubon se rapporte à une loi du 31 décembre 1975 sur l'emploi de la langue française. La première loi n'a pas marché parce que _____.

After we discuss Patrick Arnoux's article, and in order to provide a balanced perspective on this sensitive issue, I supply my students with an article from an American point of view. For example, in the past I have given my students the following article: "Bar English? French Bicker on Barricades" by Marlise Simons. I have also given them "Defending the 'French Way': French Ministers Take Stands on French Language" by Howard LaFranchi, in order to provide as much of an international perspective as possible. A discussion was then held on the differences in points of view among the three articles. To promote better discussion, students should be encouraged to maintain their opinions based on whether or not they agree with the material presented in the articles. Furthermore, they should be made aware of polls conducted in France. These provide students with the point of view of the French people, sometimes in direct opposition to the French government. For example, the agency Sofres recently conducted a poll indicating that 70 percent of the French are receptive to foreign words entering their language (News A3).

This preceding discussion should lead to a debate. To prepare the students, I propose three functional activities that allow them to become more familiar with the vocabulary. All three activities are based on the lexicon at the end of the Arnoux article:

Activity A: Students carefully read the vocabulary list and then classify the words by function: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and ad-

verbs. While studying the vocabulary list, students should note the length of the French equivalents; how they are formed; and if they are not new, how they are currently used for other purposes.

Activity B: Role playing—in groups of three, students write three dialogues using the *franglais* words and expressions found in the Arnoux lexicon. As was previously stated, examples of dialogues are given in the body of the lexicon.

Activity C: Role playing—based on the dialogues created in Activity B, the students, in their groups of three, must now introduce the role of the interpreter who will change the *franglais* words and expressions into pure French according to the requirements of the *loi Toubon*. Students refer to the examples of dialogues with *franglais*, which is then translated into pure French given in the body of the lexicon. In class, the students will be obliged to present their dialogues to their classmates. A variation of this activity is to have two students do a *causerie*. In a *causerie*, two students sit back to back and have a telephone conversation. Without any previous preparation of skit lines, the students are told to conduct a business deal but one can only understand pure French and the other can use *franglais* words and expressions. The format of this activity forces the students to listen carefully to each other and clearly express themselves, since they cannot depend on visual cues. Indeed, *causeries* stimulate spontaneous free speech.

The combination of the three preceding activities highlights the consequences of the *loi Toubon*. If the students are to be international businesswo/men, they will need to know how a term is used both before and after the *loi Toubon*. This is especially true if private industry were allowed to continue to use *franglais* and public industry would have to follow the requirements of the *loi Toubon*. Presently, it is enforced only in government dealings.

Possible financial consequences of the *loi Toubon* are discussed. In particular, the question of how advertising will be handled is addressed: for example, possible differences between local and global marketing techniques. Students design an advertisement, first according to the use of *franglais* and then according to the *loi Toubon*. A class discussion examines differences in the two designs.

However, even if the students are not planning on working in international business, these exercises demonstrate the need for intercultural understanding. They need to be aware of the fact that the French are very proud of their language and are seriously concerned about its demise. The role of the Académie Française should be introduced into the discussion.

As an example of how one might adapt these activities to other foreign language classes,¹ I asked students in my Spanish classes to make lists of how many Hebrew and Arabic words they knew had entered the Spanish language and how they had entered. To further this discussion, we examined how these words had remained in the language or had been transformed. Two examples of supplementary readings of the Jewish and Muslim influence on the Spanish language are: “The End of Tolerance” by Howard LaFranchi and “For Jews, Edict a Resounding Memory” by Jane A. Lampmann. As a follow-up activity, we also investigated how the meaning of some Spanish words changes as one moves from one Spanish-speaking country to another. For example, the word *guagua* means “bus” in Puerto Rico and Cuba, but it means “baby” in Peru and Chile. Students studied the reasons for the dramatic change in meaning of the word *guagua* that arose from its different origins.² A discussion ensued about cross-cultural misunderstandings, as well as the need for American businesswo/men to be aware of these changes in meaning. I also asked my Spanish students to research the history of the word *gringo*. A class discussion was held on this word’s origins and the implications it has today.

In conclusion, the main role of the foreign language teacher is to have her/his students think and react in the foreign language. Just as important, however, is that we make them aware of the cultural differences that exist in today’s world and of the need to meet the challenges of intercultural understanding in an increasingly interdependent world.

¹To adapt these activities to classes on cross-cultural communication, the teacher need only ask students to make a list of foreign words they know exist in English and a second list of English words they know exist in other languages. The same articles can be used. However, an English summary of the French article should be provided so that the lexicon would still be useful.

²Similar to the *causeries* described in Activity C above, *charlas* can be conducted in Spanish classes.

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