

Learning French... and Then What?

English translation of the original French text

I taught French for a long time in middle schools, including 22 years in reception classes for “non-French-speaking foreign children, newly arrived.” These inevitably marginalised classes plunged the administration and many colleagues into a certain pedagogical embarrassment that the “specialist” FLE (French as a Foreign Language) teacher was supposed to reduce, since his mission was to adapt these children as quickly as possible to the traditional educational structure and turn them into ordinary pupils who could be integrated into the classic “pedagogical progression.”

Personally captivated by school from the age of 4, having suffered through an interminable schooling (five years in the State’s “Écoles Normales” were supposed to finally allow me to cross over to “the other side of the barrier,” offering the worker’s son that I was an enviable but entirely relative upward social mobility), I began a “career” as a French teacher in a CEG in northern France and very quickly felt the unease of this condition within the State apparatus. I thought I could escape it by going to Morocco, where the FLE option imposed itself. Back in Paris, in 1977 I was offered a small class of 15 to 18 pupils in a small room of a “good middle school” in a fairly privileged neighbourhood — the class for “non-French-speakers.” The first part of this adventure lasted 12 years.

This location produced a certain “social mix” in the class (an expression which, in practice, has today practically fallen into disuse!): privileged European, North and South American children rubbing shoulders with poor children from Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa or the Maghreb. It was the happiest period of this “career.” The pedagogical difficulty resulting from the heterogeneity of ages (12 to 16 years), school levels, languages and cultures did not frighten me. On the contrary, I took up the challenge. It was notably the starting point of a PAE (Educational Action Project): “Opening up to the cultures of the world,” which led to several achievements: among others an exhibition of word-images in the languages of origin and in French, in the youth space of the 2nd Expo-Langues salon in 1984 at the Grand Palais, inaugurated by Minister Alain Savary with whom I had the opportunity to speak for a few moments, and the production of four short television pieces inserted into *Récré A2*: “What’s your country like?”

From that time on I used what are conventionally called “active methods,” notably introducing Freinet teaching materials designed for French-speaking primary-school pupils. I organised self-learning and/or mutual-learning workshops for the linguistically most advanced pupils who, parallel to the audiovisual FLE lesson with the group of complete beginners, settled at the back of the class, took from the cupboard the Freinet spelling or reading file that fitted into their work plan and, as they said, “did cards.” This self-correcting material allowed them in particular to learn the basics of spelling and syntax but also vocabulary, since the use of a bilingual dictionary was authorised and even recommended. I had the school buy a whole set in several languages: English, Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, Tamil, Turkish... as well as a collection of books of different reading levels in French and in all these languages, to create a small international classroom library.

This type of work, escaping the teacher’s direct control, meant that the habit of dishonesty often acquired in traditional teaching sometimes led some of them to complete the exercise card by directly copying the answers from the correction card. A tendency which, however, quickly reversed into serious and profitable investment as soon as the pupil, having been caught cheating, saw that I applied no sanction, that these pieces of work were not graded¹, understanding that the goal was not

to succeed in order to gain points or please the teacher but to learn for oneself and with others. For cooperation and mutual help were of course also encouraged; the pupils often worked in pairs on a box of cards, the more advanced one, the one who had understood, taking charge of explaining to the other. Of course this could lead to whispering that might interfere with the audiovisual lesson, but they all quickly became aware of it and the level always remained acceptable. They also knew they could interrupt me if they had a serious reason to do so, if they were stuck on an insurmountable item; I would then provide the necessary explanation and they did not abuse these interruptions.

They loved this type of workshop which gave them a relative autonomy, to the point that the beginners, as soon as they had acquired a certain competence in terms of communicative comprehension, in turn asked me when they would be able to “do cards.”

Twelve years having passed, and for reasons of its own, the academic administration closed the little “foreigners’ class” of this “good middle school” in a pretty Paris neighbourhood. I then accepted, in order to continue this type of teaching and relationship with the pupils, a post in a sensitive area in a much less privileged environment. The class officially called a reception class now received 24, then 26 and even 27 pupils, whose FLE learning time could no longer exceed one school year! Rapidly, at the beginning of the year, I observed that a small group of 5 or 6 pupils were illiterate or semi-literate in their original language and that here again it was necessary to diversify, to teach them simply to read. They were 12, 13 or 14 years old... I devoted 2 or 3 hours a week to them, while in parallel the card workshop continued for the others.

I also prepared for the more advanced ones individualised and evolving timetables by assigning them temporarily to the different classes of the school, according to their level, age and progress, in subjects such as English, maths, history-geography, etc., while still providing them with a level-2 FLE course in the reception class. I often left the school late because all the necessary documentation was on site, and it was sometimes at 7 or 8 p.m. that I left the establishment by the emergency exit.

It thus became heavier and heavier, more and more complex. The administration couldn’t care less. While the only concern of the education authority was to place these “newly arrived” pupils somewhere in an existing reception class², I one day pointed out to the management of this sensitive middle school that overloading the class numbers, imposing complete beginners at any time of the year, was no longer simply asking me to master differentiation and complexity, but that it was undermining my work and bordering on the absurd. They then tried to reassure me: I was free to judge independently what I was able to do and stick to that. This did not free my conscience, however; on the contrary it led me to invest myself even more with these children.

The libertarian teacher that I was viscerally and without knowing it, in a context where everything opposed it (I only understood this much later when, the time of retirement having come, I discovered the fundamental work of Faure, Ferrer and Robin), the libertarian teacher that I still am, cannot forget even today what all these years of contact with these children brought me. Seeing them progress so rapidly in a language they had not chosen to learn, living the class hours between the seriousness of learning and laughter, despite the social and psychological difficulties that were sometimes theirs and that concerned me, despite the pressures from the administration to increase the class size at any moment, still makes me feel today that this situation, so little valued in the “teaching body,” was a rare privilege that was given to me to live. For this work had a great deal of meaning. This class was like a resonance chamber of this chaotic world which all of a sudden projected into a disadvantaged Paris neighbourhood (especially in the last ten years) Africans, Chinese, Eastern Europeans, Indians, Maghrebis, Turks, Sri Lankans, thus brought to rub shoulders and try to understand one another. Which was accomplished without too many difficulties and often with joy.

When I see what is happening today, particularly the hunt for undocumented migrants, I think of all those brave boys and girls who had placed so much hope in being able one day to “integrate” into this France they had dreamed of — a France which now rejects them if their parents and they themselves cannot obtain a “residence permit.” And I am appalled at the idea that some of them, now adults, may be living in fear of being deported or may already have been. I have the feeling that their innocence, their desire to learn and their joy of living have been irremediably trampled by a selfish and brutal society.

Notes

1. I did not give numerical grades. To satisfy the school's requirement for termly assessment I used a letter grade from A to E in three categories: oral, reading, writing, which allowed me to escape the computerisation of the reports (when it was imposed in the mid-1990s). I had actually designed the prototype of these reports myself because the computer only accepted two letters for physical education: A for absent and D for excused...
2. The academic reception system has since evolved, it seems.