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Experimenting with the Teaching of Academic Genres in the Target Culture: A Reflexive Testimony on my Collaboration with Emily Linares

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Before offering my remarks on the pedagogical experiment Emily Linares has presented, it might help to say a word about where I am speaking from, how I became involved in this study, and from what perspective I will be reflecting on it. I was born in New York of an American father and a French mother. I was raised in a consistently bilingual environment, while being schooled exclusively in French schools, from third grade to my doctorate in French literature and culture in 2001. Today, I am a professor of early modern literature and culture in the Department of French at UC Berkeley. I study both France and Italy, and my research is centered on the cultural history of early modern aesthetic discourses and practices. In other words, I am no specialist in applied linguistics. However, I do have a strong interest in how individuals relate to art and artistic practices. I also have extensive experience in teaching language, literature, and culture at American universities since 2003. In particular, I have taught a section of French 102 (Reading and Writing in French) almost every year at UC Berkeley since 2005. Last but not least, because of my university's strengths in applied linguistics, I have been exposed to the work of Claire Kramsch and Richard Kern, whose way of reframing the teaching of foreign languages and cultures in a globalized world has long been appealing to me because it places the understanding and negotiating of our cognitive, social, and cultural differences at the center of language and culture pedagogy. In a world suffering direly from social, ethnic, political, and economic divides, the goal of fostering transcultural symbolic competencies in my students is particularly appealing to me. I see it as a way to work daily to support not only a better understanding of social and cultural differences but also, whenever possible, their bridging.

I would also like to say a few words about my relationship, as a student and subsequently as an instructor, with the French academic genres used in this study, both institutionally and personally. I first recall been socialized to the genre of the *explication de texte* (an oralized linear analysis of a short literary excerpt) at age 13 or so, in a Parisian *lycée* filled almost exclusively with upper-middle class students. I was only introduced to the written counterpart of the *explication de texte*, known as the *commentaire composé*, a year later, and it was practiced in conjunction with the *dissertation littéraire*, a more abstract and general type of essay, generally centered on issues of literary theory. As a high school student, I prepared *explications de texte* at least once a week, on all sorts of literary texts selected by the teacher. We were also given *commentaires composés* to write at home every month or two, in alternation with *dissertations*. We turned in such exercises as “*examens sur table*” (in class) during midterms and finals. These genres were not confined to the teaching of French literature. Rather, they proliferated across

the high school curriculum: similar exercises existed in history, geography, philosophy, economics, and even foreign language classes, where they framed the study of relevant excerpts or whole documents. In other words, the analytical mindset, argumentative know-how, and rhetorical skills these genres privileged were required from students across the board in mainstream French *lycées* when I attended French schools in the 1980s and 1990s—and pretty much still are. I continued practicing these genres even more intensively at the university level, when I prepared for the *École Normale Supérieure*, an elite state school designed to train France’s future professorate, and subsequently for the *agrégation de lettres modernes* (the exam needed to teach in France’s public high school system), in which the *explication de texte* played (and still plays) a central role.

As a student, my personal (and at times emotional) relationship with the *explication de texte* and *commentaire composé* was somewhat ambivalent. I loved that these *méthodes* furnished me with hermeneutic strategies, poetic knowledge, and rhetorical skills that allowed me both to analyze a writer’s choice of words and to comment on it meaningfully. However, like many of my fellow students, I also often found these exercises overly rhetorical, if not somewhat artificial: with their predilection for reasoning falling neatly into three parts (*thèse, antithèse, synthèse*), *commentaires composés* sometimes oddly delayed the explication of important elements of the text, just to accommodate the threefold rhetorical model of the exercise. The *explication de texte* raised even thornier issues, as meaning was often implicitly bestowed on the text by the very delimiting of the excerpt to be studied, thus occasionally creating strange biases in its understanding. Furthermore, while the formulaic approaches to the texts put forth by the French *méthodes d’explication de textes* worked well for certain types of texts (a sonnet by Joachim du Bellay, for instance, totaling 14 lines), they were ill-suited to others (such as an excerpt of Georges Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, in which meaning was not designed to be enclosed in units of 25 to 30 lines).

When I became a teaching assistant at the University of Rouen, my discomfort with these exercises—which I was then tasked with teaching to students in 17th-century French literature classes—became unease. Most of my students came from lower middle-class to working-class backgrounds, and many of them were first-generation university students. Some of them came from families who had arrived in France in the 1970s, having immigrated from former colonial territories (the Maghreb, central Africa, or Indochina). None of them had had the bourgeois *Rive gauche* (Left Bank) education I had received from grade school onwards: their cultural backgrounds were very different from mine, as were their hermeneutic practices, and their writing habits. Yet, in order to help them become high school teachers in France (which for many would have meant not only a steady job but also a form of social promotion), I needed to teach them the skills I had been taught, because those evaluating them in France’s national teaching exams would expect of them the very same things which they had expected of me, making no amends for their origins or any difficulties with what the French call “*intégration*” (assimilation). Thus, I set out to teach my students the *méthodologie de l’explication de texte et du commentaire composé* prescriptively, as they had been taught to me. “You need to do things *this way*,” I insisted, implicitly suggesting that they would not be awarded the teaching position they were applying for if they did not. I explained the rationales for the prescribed rules when I knew them, and simply put them out there as *la règle du jeu* (the rules of the game) when I did not. The result was not infrequently painful, both for my students and for me. First, only a few of them effectively learned the cultural skills that I (and all my colleagues in French literature at the University of Rouen) staunchly believed were necessary to ensure the academic success of these students (and subsequently their social promotion, via their integration into the national corps of high school teachers). More worrisome still, the

prescriptions we showered them with relentlessly, from one class to the next, seemed to remain largely foreign to them, as if they could not (or more likely *would* not) make them theirs.

At the time, I saw this failure as the result of my lack of my experience or inadequate pedagogical skills. However, in hindsight, I can also see that the problem was largely structural, institutional, and even societal: The hermeneutic skills and argumentative strategies I had attempted to teach these students were difficult for them to own and feel comfortable with for sociopolitical reasons largely out of my control. These skills embodied what Pierre Bourdieu has described as “cultural domination”—they not only expressed (and affirmed) the culture of a dominating class (the French bourgeoisie), but also perpetuated, in cultural terms, a set of inherited socioeconomic inequities, originating in France’s colonial past and rehearsed on a daily basis in its postcolonial present. Asking my students in Rouen to reproduce these hermeneutic skills and argumentative strategies without allowing them to question, alter, or reframe them was akin, in symbolic terms, to asking them to willingly resubmit themselves to the very forms of social and political domination many of them had come to the university to escape or overcome. This structural contradiction was systemic and, by remaining largely unaddressed (if even noticed by instructors), made the skills we were attempting to teach foreign (if not undesirable) to these students—except perhaps those for whom social promotion was more important than the development of a critical perspective on their own history and the world around them.

After defending my *doctorat* (PhD), the sociopolitical tensions (and contradictions) of France’s educational system instilled in me the desire to try my luck in American universities. When I entered the American system, I was however not prepared for the type of spurning that French academic practices often elicit from American colleagues, even in French departments. I was quickly told to rid myself of my French pedagogical habits, which my colleagues—though apparently valuing the training, knowledge, and competence of young French scholars enough to hire me—seemed quasi-universally to hold as old-fashioned, conservative in their disciplinary approaches, and stifling for the students, generally describing them as inefficient if not counterproductive forms of teaching. I was urged to replace professorial lectures on a given work of literature, such as the ones I had attended when a student in France, with structured and carefully prepared class discussions, in which my central goal should be to foster active student participation (rather than share my own understanding of a given text). This pushback led me to refrain from attempting to train my American students in French academic genres. Instead, like my American colleagues, I socialized my students to the (no less codified) genre of the Anglo-Saxon academic essay, in which I myself had never been schooled. Though research is a skill that is not consistently taught in France until the MA level, I also began to train my upper-division undergraduate students in the writing of research papers.

However, as time went by, I came to see the drawbacks of American pedagogical practices. Depending on the types of students, class discussions could be slow, and it was rare that the collective discussion of a text arrived at the same level of sophistication and coherence, in its close readings, that it might in the interpretation of an experienced scholar. Furthermore, in Socratic discussions, it was sometimes more difficult for the instructor to provide contextual information and model interpretive strategies clearly and in depth. This was sometimes disorienting for my students who, in office hours, often asked follow-up questions regarding historical issues, or expressed perplexity about specific hermeneutical moves our discussion had only allowed us to schematically sketch out. The creation of knowledge and know-how, in my American classrooms, was more dynamic because it was collaborative and largely spontaneous—but sometimes the knowledge created was unstructured and somewhat

superficial. Little by little, I found myself longing for certain elements of the French system, which I thought could help mitigate some of these issues. I began experimenting with 10-minute lectures at the beginning of my literature classes, to provide context, suggest hermeneutical strategies to be pursued in the discussion, or ask specific questions to help frame, and advance, our approach to a given work. I also started to think of the (hitherto) unthinkable: strategically bringing French academic genres into my classroom. The idea had first crossed my mind upon hearing students who studied abroad in France describe their puzzling, if not destabilizing, encounters with these highly codified genres in the classes they had taken in French universities. They told stories of feeling bewildered by practices they had never even been told existed and underscored the difficulty of mastering these exercises on their own, in a year's (and, not infrequently, just half a year's) time. I had no trouble understanding why—and decided, that, if only to prepare those of my students who planned to study abroad, it would be important to incrementally introduce some of these genres in my classes.

During the fall of 2018, in a class centered on 16th-century French poetry, I included a *commentaire composé* among the written exercises I proposed to the class. I had chosen this particular class to experiment with teaching this written exercise because many of the texts studied in the class were brief and somewhat self-contained, thus lending themselves well to intensive close-reading practices, in which anything from poetic expression to philosophical inspiration can be studied. For fear of overwhelming the students, I introduced them to the genre of the *commentaire composé* in isolation, without covering the *explication de texte*, which, in France, is usually viewed as the oral exercise that the written *commentaire* is based on. I justified the choice of this exercise by telling them it would deepen their analytical skills and help prepare them for study abroad in France.

The results of this experiment were mixed. Some students' close readings were very detailed and offered original and convincing readings. However, my students clearly found it difficult to appropriate French rhetorical and argumentative strategies. Seeing this, I decided to temporarily shelve my experiment. In retrospect, I would say that I was too timid and overly cautious. By not introducing my students more widely to the cultural logic of these academic exercises, I had not given them the opportunity to understand them in depth, as cultural practices they could learn to perform—as well as to critique, transform, and even revamp according to own their cultural perspectives and personal goals.

When Emily Linares came to me late in the fall of 2019 to discuss the study she was designing, I expressed immediate interest in the idea of collaborating with her. In truth, I had wanted to revamp my French 102 class for several years: the class still worked well with students, but I had tired of teaching it and was eager to try new things. I also knew that Emily's pedagogical creativity and broad expertise in applied linguistics would be invaluable to me as I attempted such an overhaul. However, I expressed a fair amount of surprise at the specifics of the project. "Seriously, you are asking me to teach my French 102 students French academic genres? Ever since I arrived in the US, I have always been told *not* to do that..." She laughed and said she was well aware of the usual American attitude. However, from a multiliteracies perspective, things look different, she suggested, and what is seen as undesirable by some becomes a valuable cultural exposure, an enriching opportunity which will help students learn to successfully negotiate cultural differences and equip them with the skills they need to navigate an ever more complex world. "Still, I joked, in today's profession, only a student of Rick Kern would be likely come to me with such a deviant proposal..." "And of Claire Kramersch!" she interjected, breaking into a wide smile.

What I didn't tell Emily that day, but reflected upon often over the semester during which the study took place, was that her "deviant" proposal made me feel more included as a member of the Berkeley French department. It is not always easy for scholars trained in France to feel at home in America's French departments, where French habits (*manières de faire*) are not infrequently viewed as overly complicated or demanding, if not elitist or even arrogant. Emily's proposal, on the other hand, implicitly suggested to me that the skills I had developed in France, but seldom used directly in my classes since arriving in the USA, could be put to work at my institution to enhance and deepen the social, cultural, and intellectual diversity that top-tier American universities consistently proclaim should be at the center of a successful college education. In other words, Emily's project was modeling an inclusive understanding of foreign language pedagogy rather than one thriving on national assumptions and prejudices. This pedagogical approach, which required one to constantly renegotiate one's own cultural preconceptions by working consistently at the articulation of several languages and cultures, felt comfortable to me because it allowed me to capitalize on the transcultural exchanges that had shaped me since childhood, and made it possible for me to remobilize elements of this experience to help others develop critical understandings, not only of another culture but also of their own.

Late in the fall of 2019, Emily and I hastily started sketching out modifications to my French 102 syllabus. I suggested that the *explication de texte* and the *commentaire composé* were best suited to a class designed to help students develop their capacity to read French literary works and discuss them argumentatively and convincingly in writing. I also stressed, based on my 2018 experience, that it would be best to teach these exercises in tandem, as is normally done in France. Whereas the *explication de texte* performs a linear analysis of the text, the *commentaire composé* elaborates a carefully articulated reading, which allows for more a graduated, nuanced, and in-depth approach to the text. However, both exercises aim to develop the students' close-reading skills (by fostering minute linguistic analysis, as well as poetical and rhetorical approaches) while simultaneously asking them to elaborate a contextualized analysis of their readings, within literary history and in the framework of social, political, and intellectual history more generally. Emily agreed to the pairing of these two exercises, stressing that they both needed to be introduced gradually and practiced repeatedly over the entire duration of the course if we wanted to obtain satisfactory results. Given my prior experiences with the *commentaire composé* in my Renaissance poetry class, this seemed like a wise strategy.

I also suggested that to produce the kinds of cultural distancing and appropriation that we were hoping for, it would be helpful to present the students with critical approaches to these exercises, that is readings that stressed not only how to master them in prescriptive terms but also when and how they had developed in French history, and in what ways they were viewed and criticized in France today. This could include, I suggested, reading the Ministry of Education's national guidelines to teachers, parents, and students, with a critical eye, to better understand the exercises' hermeneutic assumptions (e.g., What is a text? Why do I or should I learn to read one? What is literature and why is it important to us? What does reading entail and how it is performed?) and their place and function in the French school system. I also suggested that we read brief scholarly contributions on the history of these exercises in French schools, where, under the name of *praelectio*, some version of what we now call an *explication de texte* has been practiced since the appearance of Jesuit *collèges*, during the second half of the 16th century¹. The aim of these preliminary readings would be to bring to the fore the cultural significance of these academic practices, so as to help the students better understand what the French call *l'esprit de l'exercice* (as opposed to its practical requirements and rules, commonly designated as *la lettre de l'exercice*). Understanding the "spirit" of the exercise, I speculated, would

help the students uncover the inner logic of its “rules” (*règles*) in the French academic system, thereby making the formalistic aspects of these “rules” easier to understand, critique, and master. I also hoped that this attention to the “spirit” of these practices, by bringing forth their *ethos* or unspoken practical philosophy, would facilitate cultural distancing vis-à-vis this very logic, as well as successful cross-cultural appropriation and redesign. This would be true, I hypothesized, because, in learning processes, critical distance and creative appropriation are usually dialectically intertwined: a fruitful and meaningful appropriation of a foreign cultural practice requires the development of an informed critical perspective on that very practice. We can make ours, in our own ways, only what we have perceived as different or foreign, and understood (as well as critiqued) as such.

Emily Linares agreed to these suggestions and moved on to discussing how and at what pace the exercises would be introduced. We decided to lay the groundwork with the *explication de texte*, planning ample time in the syllabus for the class to work on specific elements of the exercise (textual analysis, coming up with an interpretative perspective or *idée directrice*, organizing a successful introduction for the oral performance of one’s *explication*, etc.) in small groups, during class discussions, at a time when the class was working through a small selection of 19th-century poetic texts on poverty. Emily also insisted it was important to give students plenty of time to perform multiple iterations of these exercises, so as to find ways to master them. I therefore planned *explications de texte* for almost every session of the class, in the second half of the semester. This allowed students to propose several *explications de texte*, and their choice to work on them in pairs almost doubled that opportunity. This not only resulted in higher-than-usual student engagement in class readings and discussions but also provided ample occasion for the students to learn to negotiate the expectations of the exercise and devise their own strategies to prepare and perform their *explications de texte* in ways that were meaningful for them.

Once the elements of the *explication de texte* had been introduced, we brought in the *commentaire composé*, and I explained to the students that this written exercise was a variation of the oral *explication*, with different conventions for the elaboration of one’s argument, stressing that these analytical and rhetorical variations could support more in-depth analysis and the construction of a carefully contextualized critical perspective. I presented the *explication de texte* as a tool designed to generate more of a ground-level view (*vision au ras du sol*), stressing that, by comparison, the *commentaire composé* might best be thought of as instrument for crafting a bird’s-eye perspective (*vision surplombante*). Teaching these exercises in association helped the students understand the distinct logic, and uses, of each genre.

In this respect, Emily Linares’s suggestion that the students be offered not one but two occasions to produce a *commentaire composé* proved crucial. In their first attempt at the *commentaire composé*, which was compulsory and occurred at the beginning of the second month of the course, the students adapted gradually to the exercise, benefitting greatly from the opportunity offered to them to reorganize and rewrite the work after having received detailed comments on their first draft. The students’ second encounter with the exercise was framed as optional: for their final paper, students were given the choice between writing a *commentaire composé* on a passage of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée*, and reflecting more theoretically on her *mémoires*, based on a prompt asking them to examine the tensions of her autobiographic writings more generally. This final paper did not include a rewrite, but I did offer the students the option of running by me an outline of their paper or a draft of their introduction, if they needed guidance with their preparatory work. By making the second *commentaire composé* the result of a choice, we were indirectly able to measure the degree of comfort the students had acquired with the exercise, i.e., how familiar (rather than foreign) it

now felt and how confident they had become that they could do well in this particular genre. Strikingly enough, six out of the nine students in the class chose to produce a *commentaire composé* for their final paper and, even though they were only allowed one draft, all produced interpretations of the exercise that were competently based on the generic conventions we had rehearsed *and* were creative and original (rather than mechanical) in their use of these conventions. In other words, they were not simply complying with the “rules” they had been trained in: these argumentative skills had become a part of them to the extent that they could experimentally interact with them, and refashion them to express their thoughts with a voice that, though somehow modeled by Frenchness, was their own.

The *commentaires composés* produced by my students in this class were clearly different in their phrasing, as well as in their construction, from ones I saw French students write prior to leaving France in 2003. For instance, many of my students sparingly used transitional phrases, which, in French culture, are understood as necessary to underscore the logic of the writer’s reasoning, something that is not only a linguistic trait but a cultural one, since it ultimately reflects a cultural understanding of what rationality is and how it should be communicated and performed in front of others. My French 102 students, on the other hand, barely used such logical connectors, though I had frequently emphasized the benefits of these French ways of writing, even furnishing them with a detailed list of the most common “*mots de liaison*.” Most of my students, however, chose not to experiment with these structures, probably because they came to the exercise equipped with a different cultural understanding of the status of rationality and how it is expressed to others and manifested in writing.

Because they did not systematically emulate some of France’s most cherished and ubiquitous rhetorical conventions, many of the *commentaires composés* written by my French 102 students would probably not be perceived as “French” in character or style by instructors trained in the teaching and evaluation of this academic genre. Yet, I think that these very readers might nonetheless concede that they constituted acceptable or even “good” *commentaires composés*, because 1) they contained an in-depth hermeneutical investigation of the text, 2) they demonstrated purposeful use of tools, strategies, and perspectives that amounted to a form of recognizable analytical expertise, and 3) they incorporated a set of argumentative strategies that were not (too) foreign to them as French instructors. Obviously, to an instructor trained in France, the perception of students’ work as “French” or as understandable/acceptable/laudable according to “French” standards—if not intrinsically “French”—is largely subjective: “authenticity,” or rather the sentiment thereof, is a social (and socialized) construct, not an objective/essential quality of any piece of academic writing. More precisely, “authenticity,” in the case of academic genres, is a factor of the criteria set for the production and evaluation of these types of writing, which, in a national schooling system such as France’s, are collectively elaborated and institutionally transmitted over time in variety of complex ways. I would however like to further explore the sense of familiarity or recognition (rather than of identity or sameness) that I, as a reader and writer initially socialized in France, experienced when reading these papers. What can it tell us about the cognitive benefits, and advantages, in terms of building cross-cultural competencies, of introducing foreign academic genres to students of another language and culture? And what does it suggest about what *not* to expect from such attempts?

The *commentaires composés* written by my French 102 students in 2020 had what the French could call an “*air de famille*” with those I could have written at their age, as well as with the French examples we discussed when I had begun socializing them to the genre. The papers were not clones of their French counterparts, but they displayed many similarities, in the same way that the members of the same family stand out in a crowd. While such a sentiment of

recognition can be triggered by physical resemblances, and is more often generated by ways of speaking and gesturing, it can also be elicited by converging discursive content and the expression of common beliefs or perspectives. In the same way, several of the *commentaires composés* composed by my French 102 students exhibited what one could call internal (rather than external or formal) resemblances with the exercise I myself had practiced in France. For example, one of my French 102 students wrote his first *commentaire composé* on a short prose poem by Charles Baudelaire entitled “*Le mauvais vitrier*.” At first sight, the essay was not exactly organized according to French rhetorical models. In particular, it was composed of two dialectical parts rather than three, which French academic rhetoric usually favors, the third part being conceived of as the place where the tensions or contradictions brought to light in the first two can be explained and resolved. The student’s work also made sparing use of logical connectors and transitions, though, in its middle section, it did contain a set of phrases explaining to the reader how the poet’s critique of modern life (as studied in the first of the essay) could be connected to his aspirations for beauty (as analyzed in the second part of the essay), when the two had initially seemed to be at odds.

But mostly it was in spirit (*en esprit*) that this student had conformed to French ways, by adopting what I would characterize as a French perspective on Baudelaire’s prose poem. For in literary studies in France, approaches that attempt to define the author’s esthetic position, and focus on how the author expresses and reflects on this perspective, are often the preferred standpoint from which to examine a text. The centrality of these “aesthetic” or “autotelic” approaches to literature is difficult to account for, except in the broadest cultural terms: French literary culture, as a “bourgeois” discourse that developed into a “science” in 19th-century French universities, is to a large extent centered on art and art making because the attention paid to these elements allows for the creation of what Pierre Bourdieu has labelled “distinction” in those who speak or write about art works. By signaling their grasp of these aesthetic practices and claims, speakers/writers show that they have the capacity to perceive and rephrase them, a practice that socially (and ethically) distinguishes them from those who can’t (or won’t). Bourdieu studied the pervasiveness of such mechanisms in French culture in his book *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (2015, first published in French in 1979).

Explications de texte and *commentaires composés* as practiced in France are not the reason why such “aesthetic” or “autotelic” perspectives are widespread in the culture, but they certainly contribute to perpetuating the social and institutional centrality of these approaches to literary works, as well as the mechanisms of “distinction” that underlie them. While discussing examples of French *commentaires composés* with my students and working through *explications de texte* in class with them, I had both underscored the centrality of these perspectives in French approaches to literature and modeled for my students ways in which these types of literary analyses could be conducted. In his *commentaire composé* of “*Le mauvais vitrier*,” my French 102 student had convincingly emulated these approaches, applying them aptly to Baudelaire in a series of analyses that both situated him in the context of Decadentism and played close attention to the allegorical and poetic means by which Baudelaire expressed his belief in Beauty and Art. While this student’s aesthetic perspective was in part elicited by the text studied, many other perspectives would also have been possible (such as a sociopolitical analysis, or an ethical reading focused on the question of “evil”), as some of the other *commentaires* produced by the class made clear. Yet choosing this particular perspective offered the student an additional benefit: it allowed him to practice and display cultural appropriation, by emulating analytical perspectives associated with the target culture. This choice gave him the possibility to experiment with thinking as a French student (or professor) might. In other words, it had

furnished him with an opportunity to experiment with both acculturation and cultural distancing.

While marking this group of papers, I had wondered what had led this student to make this choice. His making room for such an experiment was all the more surprising to me since this very student had initially expressed frustration with the cultural intricacies of French academic genres and asked why he needed to learn to think and write in this way. This comment had come at the end of a session where I had explained how to elaborate and structure a *commentaire composé*, stressing the kinds of analytical perspectives the *commentaire composé* supported (if not induced), while also outlining the various rhetorical moves that would be expected in the French context. The student's question may have come from a place of anxiety: he was a strong student, with well-established reading and writing strategies that would normally ensure his success when writing essays requiring literary analysis, whether in English or foreign language classes. But if he had to think and compose according to different rules and standards, and in the context of cultural practices that were foreign to him, might he not lose this academic advantage, as well as the comfort and reassurance it provided him, within the American university system?

I replied by granting him that French habits, when it came to academic writing, were undeniably complex, and could easily seem overly controlling or at least limiting, to someone who had been trained in another academic system. I added that I was far less interested in students learning to craft an outline with three dialectal parts and three (no less dialectical) subparts—as standard methodological guidelines for *commentaires composés* often continue to require in the French system—than for them to learn to think dialectally in more general terms. I underscored that French ways of reading were different—both in what they looked for in texts and in how they looked for it—and that experimenting with these new reading protocols would not only expose him to cultural difference but also furnish him with new understandings of literary phenomena, making available to him perspectives and analytical procedures that would enrich those he already possessed.

In other words, I focused on “*l'esprit de l'exercice*” rather than on its formalistic aspects, and tried to convince my students to appropriate cultural practices that differed greatly from their own by underscoring how they might be changed by the process. This implicitly framed the class as a sort of laboratory in which my students could experiment with assuming another cultural persona, to see how deeply and profitably academic otherness might reshape them. As long as students are told that they are free to appropriate those cultural practices and perspectives which are of interest to them and leave aside those that seem less meaningful or enriching to them, such an experiment creates a sort of epistemological/cognitive free space: students can embrace (or, if they chose, impersonate) French “*manières de faire*” for a time, to see how well they suit (and serve) them—and once the class has run its course, they can work to retain these practices as part of their own, or relinquish them. Making this open-endedness clear to the students is crucial in creating the conditions for a dynamic form of cultural appropriation because it places their freedom to evaluate and choose at the center of the playing field.

When I read the above-mentioned *commentaire composé* on Baudelaire's “*Le mauvais vitrier*,” I knew that this strategy had worked in the case of this particular student: in his paper he had experimented with and appropriated a number of French perspectives and practices that were appealing to him and had left aside those that seemed too outlandish or simply not as enriching. Most of the other students had attempted similar moves, though sometimes less successfully, probably because their practice of literary analysis was less developed than his was when entering the class. However, by the end of the semester, all six of the *commentaires*

composés I had received exhibited French-inspired analytical perspectives, reading strategies, and argumentative rhetoric. In particular, a number of them had structured their essays “à la française,” with reasoning progressing from the most obvious to the more complex, in stages (but not necessarily *three* stages) that involved dialectical shifts.

The most interesting outcome of this experiment in socialization to a different academic culture, however, may well have been what was reflected in the student evaluations I received for this class. To the question I had asked whether the class had “bolstered their ability to write argumentatively,” all replied that it had, with one of them adding, “I think that this class really improved my writing abilities, especially in regards to the argumentative compositional style that we focused on throughout the class. Over the course of the semester, I think my writing became much clearer and easier to follow.” While the student was probably thinking primarily of their writing *in the context of the class*, the response they furnished referenced “writing abilities” more generally, suggesting that in the student’s mind, the skills developed in the class had become a part of them, and could serve them beyond French classes and study abroad programs.

Still, one could claim that while such outcomes might serve American students well in their own academic system, they might not serve them as well in the context of a study abroad experience. It is indeed unlikely that a French literature instructor in a French university would be as open to creative and personalized experimentations with French academic genres as I was in this study. Consequently, when studying in a French university, students would have considerably less leeway, if only because instructors in the French system would normally have little knowledge of how American students are trained, which would lessen their willingness to accommodate for practices they might spontaneously see as “clumsy” (“*maladroit*”) or as disregarding the “rules” of French academic genres.

I would argue, however, that the kind of daily intercultural negotiation process that went on in the French 102 class that Emily Linares and I designed would likely help the students adapt more successfully to study abroad situations. First, having been introduced to the most stringent conventions of these exercises, they would be in a good position to adopt them should they choose to do so to bolster their chances of academic success. Alternatively, they could choose to use them to experiment further with thinking and expressing themselves in different ways, to see how continuing to engage in the process of intercultural negotiation (and adaptation) initiated in the US might further change and enrich them. Furthermore, having been guided in such transformative experiences while taking a class in the US, they might have more confidence to engage in this process and more aptitude to do so. This is another reason why, in attempting such socialization to foreign academic genres, it is essential to foreground the continuous process of cultural distancing and appropriation that makes intercultural learning possible—for this (rather than foreign analytical know-how or logic) may well be the most useful and durable skill students will learn in such a class.

In the last weeks of my French 102, when it was becoming clear that our experiment would likely have positive learning outcomes for the students, I often found myself thinking back to the composition classes (*méthodologie du commentaire composé et de la dissertation*) I had taught in the early 2000s at the university of Rouen. Had I implemented some of the pedagogical strategies suggested by the multiliteracies framework with these French students, would those classes have had better outcomes? My sense is that there is a good chance that things would indeed have gone differently. For quite often my students of working-class backgrounds or immigrant origins had neglected to adhere to the academic writing practices I was teaching because they felt uncomfortable demonstrating their ability to master them. They seemed to implicitly associate the varieties of academic writing I was trying to teach them with

a culture where whiteness and bourgeois standards ruled—a culture that could not become their own unless they somehow abdicated part of their own identity, by embracing ways of thinking and writing they sensed as foreign to them. It is very possible that, in this context, making room for intercultural negotiations *within French society*, and providing a free space in which both cultural distancing and creative appropriation could have taken place might have allowed such students to experiment with these genres without feeling that they were somehow relinquishing core parts of their identities when doing so. Because the French academic system is so much more centralized and normative than the American system, such an experiment would not have spared these students from the need to internalize these academic norms, especially if they chose to take the national exams through which French schoolteachers are recruited. But it would most likely have helped them feel more comfortable and confident when doing so, by equipping them with tools to work through the inner cultural tensions that such academic trajectories can sometimes create for students of color or underprivileged backgrounds.

In today's multicultural nation states, where segments of the population feel disenfranchised, integrating a multiliteracies framework within existing academic curricula might go a long way towards helping foster a greater sense of belonging among low-income and minoritized students—not only in the foreign language classroom, but also in the humanities and the sciences more generally. When foreignness is within, foreign language pedagogy can have far-reaching societal implications.

NOTE

ⁱ These readings were 1) Bombart, M. (2010). Explication de texte. In P. Aron, D. Saint-Jacques, & A. Viala (Eds.), *Le Dictionnaire du Littéraire* (pp. 209–211). Presses universitaires de France; and 2) Rossellini, M. (1999). Les Mots sans guère de choses: La "Praelectio." *Langue Française*, 121, 28–35.

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