UC Berkeley
L2 Journal

Title
What Does It Mean to Develop Academic Literacy Practices in a Foreign Language?

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jv002km

Journal
L2 Journal, 13(1)

Author
Linares, Emily

Publication Date
2021

DOI
10.5070/L213148886

Copyright Information
Copyright 2021 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

L2 Journal, Volume 13 Issue 1 (2021), pp. 64-68 http://reposittories.cdlib.org/uccllt/l2/vol13/iss1/IP1

What Does It Mean to Develop Academic Literacy Practices in a Foreign Language?

EMILY LINARES

University of California, Berkeley
Email: *emily.linares@berkeley.edu*

Hi Carol,

I just had a question about one of my Education Abroad Program classes this semester. I signed up for Modern French Literature (lecture and discussion). I have read *Molloy* by Beckett and *les Mémoires d'outre-tombe* by Chateaubriand—a strange combination to say the least! I am feeling odd because we will only be evaluated on the basis of one written commentary and one in-class final (a dissertation written over the course of 4 hours). I just wrote my commentary which is about 8 pages in length and, while I think it would be considered a great paper back home, I'm not sure how it will be received here. This is only because I am unfamiliar with the French methodology. We are required to take a 4-hr weekly class, which is supposed to train us to write "commentaires composés," "commentaires linéaires," "explications de texte," etc... but my class is a complete joke. The professor spent the first two classes talking about "jeans, symbole de libération ou d'ostracisme?" [jeans, a symbol of freedom or exclusion] ... A few people could not bear the course any longer and transferred into different sections (as late in the term as last week!). As I do not feel trained in French methodology, and as I feel strange being evaluated on the basis of two papers, I am considering changing my French literature lecture and discussion to Pass/No Pass. What are your thoughts on this? Lecture here has only become more and more dismal and seemingly pointless.

Any advice would be greatly appreciated!
Thank you so much,
Emily
(November 7, 2011 email correspondence)

Looking back at my old emails from the undergraduate years usually proves cringeworthy, yet this one had me nodding in sympathetic understanding. Though the glossy brochures would lead us to believe otherwise, study abroad is characterized by a myriad of challenges on the ground. I had not, however, expected academic literacy in French to be one of them. As I wrote in my email plea to the undergraduate advisor at the time, the standards that I was up against had changed: "While I think it would be considered a great paper back home, I'm not sure how it will be received here." What was a "commentaire composé," a "commentaire linéaire," or an "explication de texte?" I knew how to read and write to do well in my foreign language coursework at home, but my decision to enroll in a literature course with local

students made me keenly aware of my lack of training in a French context. The required *méthodologie* (methodology) course provided a space for philosophical debate but did little to socialize me to the academic literacy practices that I would need to complete my coursework abroad. Support seemed unavailable: My French peers were intrigued by my presence in this classroom, passed me copies of their English translation assignments for advice before or after class, but remained ever elusive beyond the walls of the classroom. Office hours did not exist and email (if you could even find an address for an instructor) was a black hole that offered no consolation. I turned to Google, scouring web pages for hours to gain some insight into what the French genres required of me, but no easy how-to guide saved me from my confusion. When I did manage to find a French peer willing to read my effort at a *commentaire*, her advice was not of the kind that I had hoped for: She informed me that I did not use the comma in accordance with French norms. My woes, I feared, were far greater than a punctuation mark. When I approached my *professeure*'s desk to sheepishly hand in my attempt at a *commentaire*, I indicated that I had left a note for her on the last page:

> Un petit mot…
>
> J'ai fait de mon mieux pour traiter cet extrait. Toutefois, je dois avouer que je ne connais pas bien du tout la méthodologie française. Les étudiants de mon programme sont obligés de suivre un cours, intitulé « Suivi Méthodologique », dans lequel nous sommes censés apprendre toutes les formes que peuvent prendre les dissertations en France. Mais, je suis fortement déçue par celui-ci, car l'on ne nous enseigne rien à ce sujet. J'espère que mes efforts seront appréciés.
>
> (Just a note…
>
> I did my best to work with this excerpt. Nevertheless, I must confess that I am not at all familiar with French methodology. The students in my program are required to take a course, called "Methodological Oversight," in which we are supposed to learn about all of the different forms that essay can take in France. But, I am extremely disappointed by this one, because we are taught nothing of the sort. I hope that my efforts will be appreciated.)

I will never forget the nervous anticipation that I experienced as the *professeure* began to return our *commentaires*. The question that she posed to the class after moments of heavy silence, under the fluorescent (spot)lights above my head, could not have come as more of a surprise: How did it feel, she asked my French peers, to be outperformed by the American? She congratulated me on my 14/20 grade as she returned my paper. I will never know if her evaluation was born out of sincerity or was merely mobilized as a means to further demoralize my French classmates. I still did not understand what a *commentaire* was, but now I only had to try to decipher what a *dissertation* was before a four-hour final on the assigned 800-page installment of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires* that I had been reading over a café crème for long hours each evening, tucked away in the quiet back cellar of a café on the Place Bellecour. Perhaps if I had not strayed beyond coursework that was designated for study abroad students, I would not have felt so foreign. As I walked across the Pont de l'Université to meet my fateful four-hour final, it seemed as though the founder of French Romanticism, François René de Chateaubriand himself, had been summoned to accompany me. The sky was a deep, stormy

gray and powerful gusts of wind sent leaves swirling in mini cyclones. This ambiance offered some comic relief, a moment to pause and laugh. "*Bonjour, René*," I whispered with a smile.

Once back at UC Berkeley, the mysterious *commentaires* and *explications* were behind me. In all of my subsequent foreign language coursework, in French as well as Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Catalan, no one would ever again call upon me to read and write using an unfamiliar genre. Compositions would ask me to attend to meaning, to explore themes and language use, to support my arguments with ample exemplification—but I had been refining these practices for many years. Excelling in foreign language academic literacy, in all of my experience, meant reading and writing as I had been trained throughout my education in the US—only in French (or any other foreign language). When I applied to French graduate programs, I was required to provide writing samples. I chose to include my *commentaire* from study abroad in Lyon as one of these. In this case, at least, my attempt at a French genre seemed to have proved acceptable enough in a US context.

My experience as a student abroad may be relatable to international students who arrive at US institutions of higher education. Language socialization researchers have documented some of the challenges of academic literacy socialization for arrivals to the US and Canada. In my own experience, I recall a conversation with one of my Spanish language graduate student instructors at Berkeley, a native of Uruguay, about academic literacy conventions. He described his horrified surprise as his PhD advisor had literally torn his term paper to shreds before his eyes, deeming it incomprehensible. His paragraphs, she contended, did not clearly announce their motive and his ideas did not follow a logical sequence. A term paper that the US advisor had deemed a messy game of connect-the-dots had all of the makings of a well-structured, serious contribution in a Latin American context. Why would you tell the reader where you would be taking them with your argument in advance?

I continued to reflect on foreign language academic literacy as I became a graduate student instructor of French and Spanish at the same institution that had trained me. "*Écris une composition*" or "*Escribe una composición*," I told my foreign language students. Prompts and instructions (length, font, text size) were xeroxed and cut into strips to be distributed at the end of class. When I showed students ways into a text by helping them to attend to linguistic features and content, I drew on my training as an applied linguist, a Romance linguist, and a product of the US K-12 and collegiate systems. As a language instructor, I guide students not only in the exploration of a new language but in a critical engagement with language and culture: reconsidering assumptions, questioning the very questions they and others ask, considering not only that which is expressed by language but also that which is left unsaid. My primary goal is to confront students with new perspectives through a less familiar language. Even so, their academic literacy practices remained monolingual and US-centric. Did they even know that such genres as *commentaires* and *explications* existed? Did they realize that practices of reading and writing are not universal but are instead the product of years of socialization?

As a graduate student research fellow in the Berkeley Language Center (BLC), I set out to explore ways to sensitize students, of both lower- and upper-division French, to the fact that academic literacy practices vary across languages and contexts. My research agenda drew its inspiration from my personal experiences as a student and instructor of foreign languages as well as my interest in academic literacy socialization and multiliteracies. I understood academic literacy socialization as a process of "learning how to participate […] in the discursive practices of a given academic community" (Morita, 2009, p. 444) and sought to complement existing scholarship on the topic, which has largely centered on international, post-secondary students of English as a Second Language (ESL), through a focus on foreign language (FL)

learners. Research on multiliteracies, which explores how learners encounter new resources for meaning making (e.g., target-language academic genres) and manipulate them in idiosyncratic ways, also shaped my approach to academic literacy interventions.

I met with the first-year French language coordinator, Dr. Hoffmann, and a departmental lecturer, Dr. Tourmen, to envision moments in the curriculum where it would be possible to socialize first-year, second-semester students of French to target-language generic conventions. This level, French 2, was selected out of an effort to smooth the transition from first- to second-year French through the introduction of more literacy activities and related reflections. Currently, whereas French 2 is a grammar marathon with far less attention given to the development of reading and writing practices, French 3 requires students to write analytic essays on a variety of texts. Together, we collectively devised and piloted three activities that fit into the existing French 2 thematic curriculum.

The first activity was designed around Boris Vian's famous antiwar song, *Le déserteur*. In addition to offering students an opportunity to identify instances of the future tense forms that they had been studying, the activity that we developed drew on the epistolary nature of the song (as a letter addressed to *Monsieur le président*) to introduce French letter writing conventions. In reflecting on their exposure to French formal letters and their attempt to write one, some students went too far in their generalizations—making claims about the French themselves ("There is no limit of politeness for the French" or "The French tend to be super formal"). These conclusions reinforced the importance of asking students what they have learned so that they can be led to nuance their understandings. Overall, however, their musings on writing practices reinforced a budding awareness of the myriad of ways in which literacy practices vary across languages and cultures and communicative contexts. One student wrote:

> For written letters in my first language (Chinese), the formatting is a lot more complicated. There are strict rules on how to start the letter regarding whom you're writing to, sometimes extra spaces have to be added in front of names to show respect, and there is even a single correct way to fold the piece of paper.

In the second activity, French 2 students were introduced to the French academic practice of dictation. In addition to learning about this French cultural staple and its use within and beyond the classroom (e.g., on weekly dictations broadcast on national television), students were asked to relate this exercise to examples from their own schooling. They were also prompted to consider why dictations might be particularly useful for the French language. Some students commented that dictations in France were very nationalistic and functioned as a symbolic means to unify the language and country. Others focused on linguistic difficulties brought to light by dictation: the challenge of identifying word breaks and the existence of homophones. To emphasize this latter point, one of the instructors presented students with two short texts—*Une dictée sans fautes* (A dictation without mistakes) and *Une dictée, 100 fautes!* (A dictation, 100 mistakes!)—which share a common phonetic representation but vary greatly in written form and meaning.

In the third and final activity, the first-year language program coordinator devised a way to train students in the French argumentative style of the French genre *la dissertation* without explicitly announcing this purpose. Rather than formally present *dissertation* reasoning, a move that would have risked overwhelming students with a foreign practice late in an action-packed semester à la Zoom, we determined it more judicious to initiate them to its formulaic structure through film-based discussions. After viewing Truffaut's classic *Les 400 Coups*, students were provided with a series of "*Propositions à remettre en cause*" (Statements to put into question) (e.g.,

Antoine is a delinquent who doesn't obey authority, Antoine plagiarizes Balzac because he's dishonest and wants a good grade). In examining each statement, they were asked to consider "What's true about this statement? What's not *quite* true? And how could the initial statement be redefined with more nuance?" In French 3, students will explicitly learn this approach to argumentation as the "*thèse, antithèse, synthèse*" (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) of the *dissertation*. The early introduction to this line of reasoning will hopefully ease the transition to *dissertation* writing in French 3. I had begun my undergraduate language studies in French 4, where there was no mention of *dissertations* and I wrote my compositions as I always had in English. Looking back, perhaps the instructor of my course in *méthodologie* in Lyon, with her seeming obsession with the function of jeans as a symbol of liberation or ostracism, was trying to teach me something about *dissertation* thinking. As study abroad students unaccustomed to this practice, we never made the connection.

Through my BLC fellowship, I also collaborated with Professor Blocker to devise a lesson sequence that would socialize students in French 102, Reading and Writing in French (the gateway to all other upper division coursework), to two academic French genres: *l'explication de texte* and the *commentaire composé* (Linares, 2020). Students learned about the history of the genres from assigned readings, models, and discussion with their instructor, who was educated in France. While the work that they produced, like my own effort at a *commentaire*, did not exactly adhere to French conventions (in a very American adaptation, for instance, students were permitted to prepare and deliver their *explications* in pairs), they had been initiated to unfamiliar academic practices. Moreover, the aim in French 2 as in French 102 was never to endeavor to transform Berkeley undergraduates into full-fledged *étudiants* (students) but to sensitize them to the fact that other educational systems trained students in different modes of reading and writing. In addition to this realization, students left the course with new approaches to textual analysis that they could implement in future French and non-French coursework. Should they someday decide to study abroad and be asked to write a *commentaire* or to perform an *explication*, they will arrive with a working understanding of the French genre, which could be further refined through socialization on the ground.

These pedagogical experiments, designed within the curricular constraints of the French sequence, grew from a desire to confront students with an additional form of cultural immersion: exposure to target-language academic literacy practices. These are just some examples of the ways in which we can show our students alternative forms of meaning making in their academic work. Without an understanding of practices from the target culture, the foreign languages that we study will inevitably remain somewhat more foreign. Ideally, through interventions such as this, students can realize that new perspectives are not only available in the French language or the content of Francophone literature but also in the approaches to textual analysis practiced in other Francophone academic contexts.

REFERENCES

Linares, E. (2020, May 1). Literacy *en français* and *à la française*: Socializing students to academic literacy practices in a foreign language [Video]. Berkeley Language Center.

Morita, N. (2009). Language, culture, gender, and academic socialization. *Language and Education, 23*(5), 443–460.