

Teaching an Undergraduate Course on “La Francophonie”: Guiding Students from Practice to Theory

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Francophony: a governmental organization, a language policy, an identity marker, or an object of study? The concept of francophony has made and is still making waves. As defined by Senghor, “La francophonie, c’est cet humanisme intégral qui se tisse autour de la terre, cette symbiose des énergies dormantes de tous les continents, de toutes les races, qui se réveillent à leur chaleur complémentaire” (194). While there is no doubt about the aesthetic stylistic of this definition, in the context of teaching French as a foreign language, how can we as instructors deliver its core to students in an introductory course on francophony?

In this article, I present a set of activities using a practical approach that includes comics, colonial city maps, and photos as well as popular song lyrics to teach theoretical concepts such as colonial and post-colonial identity, the assimilation doctrine, the civilizing mission of the West, immigration, and integration. This is done by planning the course around targeted materials and learning practices that will lead students to induce theory, increasing teaching and learning effectiveness.

Given the complexity of these concepts, there is a great need for developing effective interdisciplinary teaching materials in courses on francophony. This method of teaching is not novel; it has been discussed at length by Nuthall and Alton-Lee and echoed by Randi and Corno, who define it as a model of teaching that emphasizes the use of examples to introduce theory gradually (336). This teaching practice has been applied for a number of years in foreign language courses: Nuessel and Cicogna used stamps in a course in Italian, and Di Napoli used postage stamps to teach history and geography and to increase students’ interest in a German civilization course.

Currently French is struggling to compete with Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and even American Sign Language at American universities. Assessing the status of the French language in the US, Loucif reports a decrease in interest in French and enrollment of students taking courses or graduating with a French degree (115). Despite this decrease, courses on francophony have been expanding. In 1977 Hancock remarked that 44.3% of colleges offered a Francophone literature course (65). While today this number is probably higher (Gadjigo) and the teaching approaches may differ, teaching a francophony course for undergraduates at American institutions is still challenging, and “there is plenty of room for improvement,” as Zéphir commented in her study on Francophone culture in curricula (515). There is a need for textbooks that impart accurate cultural knowledge “without falling into the trap of exoticism [or] folklore” (Bensmaï 22) by means of effective teaching strategies (Hale 445).

Today, offering a course on francophony is a must in any foreign or modern language department. Scholarly work is being published, there are job openings for francophony specialists, and annual conferences on francophony are becoming popular, bringing what Yaari and Mark describe as a “climate of openness fostering curricular diversity” to the French studies field (433). This was not always the case; as Bensmaï reports, francophony went through several stages in which the field had to prove that it was “something standing on its own” (20). While there is progress in the visibility of the francophony field, Shultz reports that there remains a need to review teaching strategies. For instance, to increase students’ interest Shultz encourages reading texts at the intermediate level that have a “shared cultural base,” such as Acadian and Cajun texts, as they are part of the Francophone culture as well as the American culture (264). Gadjigo, speaking about teaching Francophone African literature in the US, applauds progress but reminds us that there is still work to be done for African literature to be recognized as a full discipline (38-39).

Today, it is clear that a fresh look is needed at our curriculum and teaching to develop new methods as a means of strengthening French programs while preserving academic expectations and the discipline. The objectives of this paper are (a) to address some of the challenges in teaching a course on francophony at the undergraduate level, and (b) to share

information and ideas on how to better introduce students to the theoretical background of francophony through teaching models based on practical pedagogical practices. Activities and comments presented in this paper derive from my own classroom experience. This article does not aim to provide solutions to all problems related to the teaching of a francophony course, but rather to contribute to the ongoing conversation on finding effective teaching strategies in a course on francophony (Gadjigo; Hale; Koné and Poynter).

Sketching out the francophony course content and its challenges at the undergraduate level

A course on francophony is not a threat to the traditional canons of French literature, culture, and civilization. It is simply an addition that is playing a major role in strengthening the position of the French language in the world (Hale 444). At the introductory level, the primary goal of a course on francophony is to introduce students to non-Hexagon French-speaking countries, allowing them to experience diversity and linguistic variations within the French-speaking world (Arteaga and Herschensohn; Auger and Valdman), a key factor for the development of critical thinking (Halpern 451). The course I offered is a 300-level undergraduate course taught entirely in French, with all readings in French. This course gained official status in the course catalog in the last few years after being taught as a special topic numerous times. The course's title has been modified slightly from "Francophone Culture" to "Francophone Literature and Culture" to better prepare potential students for the amount of reading.

For most students, this course was not the first time they were encountering Francophone cultures, as most modern French textbooks give a significant amount of attention to francophony. However, as stated by Fleig-Hamm in her examination of francophony references in French language textbooks, representation in the US tends to suffer from what she calls "réductionisme," where cultural references are often confined (464). For instance, Haiti is linked to voodoo, and the Maghreb to couscous. The task of an introductory francophony course is to overcome this "réductionisme" and create awareness of wider issues such as Negritude, Creole, and colonial and post-colonial identity, and to discover the sociolinguistic contexts of the French language,

including gender roles and the contribution of women Francophone writers (Loucif 130). Now, the question is: What methodology would be the most effective for carrying out these tasks in an introductory course on francophony?

One of the first difficulties for students is the language barrier. Despite the fact that students may be placed in an advanced course, they still experience difficulties understanding French texts because of competence levels, the amount of reading required for each class, and the language variation and cultural contexts within texts. Students were surprised, if not dismayed, to be dealing with a variety of material that included literary texts, poems, political speeches, comics, films, songs, and maps. This may have been due to their preconception of what constitutes a French course, which until this point was probably limited to grammar rules, basic cultural content like food and clothing, and sometimes short reading texts. Koné and Poynter underline that “American students have, in general, limited knowledge of Africa. Teaching so-called Francophone literature in the US therefore requires inventing strategies which are not the business of an amateur” (70).

From the instructor’s perspective, one of the main challenges to overcome is the lack of satisfactory textbooks related to francophony that are appropriate for the undergraduate level. As commented by Abrate on her experience teaching culture, “Textbooks are often dry, quickly out-of-date, and do not usually cover the kinds of topics which really engage students intellectually and make them aware of cultural variation” (701).

Unlike a traditional French literature course, which is often organized diachronically following genres and literary movements, this course on francophony was organized by geographic regions: Asia, West Africa, the Maghreb, and the Caribbean. Foreseeing that students lacked general knowledge of the French-speaking world, when each region was introduced, a brief PowerPoint lecture presented its geography, history, and sociolinguistic background. This presentation was stored on the Blackboard course page to allow students to retrieve information to complete assignments or to prepare for tests.

Literary texts were a major part of the course. Students were initially assigned complete novels—*Une si longue lettre*, by Mariama Bâ; *Le fils du pauvre*, by Mouloud Feraoun—as well as passages from *Métisse blanche* (Kim Lefèvre’s autobiographical narrative of colonial Vietnam), and poems by Senghor, Césaire, and Laâbi. Later in the semester, more difficult readings were assigned, for example, *Le portrait du colonisateur* by Memmi and a short passage of *Peau noire, masques blancs* by Fanon. The course was supplemented by documentaries, songs, photos, maps, and films either shown in class or reserved in the library. Students had daily assignments, tests, and two research papers: one shorter one at the midterm and one longer one at the end of the semester. Students were also required to give an oral presentation on a chosen topic related to a theme covered in class.

Some teaching ideas

Like teaching any other subject, the first task is to *joindre l’utile à l’agréable* by creating an enjoyable environment to increase students’ motivation and engagement (Gaspar 74). As shown in studies related to teaching effectiveness, visuals like photographs, postcards, films, and maps capture students’ interest (Omaggio Hadley 102). The first set of activities presented deals with the famous comic book *Tintin au Congo*, published in the late 1940s by Hergé. In this comic, Tintin, a Belgian reporter, travels with his dog Milou to the Belgian Congo, where they have numerous adventures. Students were asked to research the comics and the author, to read the whole comic, and to be prepared to discuss the content in class. This activity was the first assignment in the semester, allowing students to have an easy introduction to the subject through enjoyable reading materials.

In class we started the discussion by introducing the author, his country of origin, the characters and their facial expressions, attitudes, and gestures, and where the story took place. In small groups, students were asked to describe the physical appearance of the characters and explain the meaning of a picture by writing a short paragraph as a group. Once the assignment was finished, each group read its description and its perception of the story and a picture, followed by a group discussion in which students shared and discussed their ideas in French. We

then moved the discussion to the controversy surrounding the comic book as racist by reading a short article in French from the newspaper *Le Figaro* (Sasportas), followed by a YouTube video showing a Congolese condemning the content of the comic because of the way Africans were depicted, which he saw as offensive. In an additional assignment, students worked specifically on the narrative by analyzing this passage involving Coco, a native boy hired by Tintin to help him in his adventures:

COCO (*to Tintin while crying*): Hi ! hi! hi... Ca y en a missié blanc venir et battre petit Noir... Coco Liavoir peur ... Et missié blanc parti avec tomobile.....
 MILOU : Il ne faut jamais avoir peur.

This assignment was guided by the following questions:

1. Describe the words and phrases used by Coco.
2. Compare Milou's sentence with Coco's.
3. Rewrite these sentences in standard French. Discuss the two versions.
4. Explain why Milou said, "Il ne faut jamais avoir peur."

The objective of this assignment was to prompt students to discuss the use of verbs, the sentence structures, and the unbalanced relationship between "missié blanc" and "petit Noir" and the colonizer and the colonized, in which the native is a subaltern who needs to be under the European's protection. As commented by Rahier in her analysis of the representation of natives by colonizers, "Dominant and powerful groups produce and reproduce the representations of themselves and of others that justify or naturalize their position at the apex of racial/spatial orders and the subjugation of the negatively depicted others" (61). This activity aimed to help students understand the often stereotypical imagery of the natives, who were portrayed as intellectually inferior.

Another important topic in the colonial field, often forgotten, is the place of religion during the colonial period. In the case of West Africa, Christian missionaries were sent to colonies to create schools and hospitals in addition to spreading Christianity. Ekeh reports that

“Africans were virtually told that the colonizers and missionaries came to save them, sometimes in spite of themselves, from their past” (97). Once again *Tintin au Congo* was the perfect source to introduce the question of the link between religion and colonialism at the undergraduate level.

“Le bon missionnaire” and his colleagues, as portrayed by Hergé, had the ability to build a hospital, a school, and a chapel within one year, replacing the bush in the native land of Congo (35). Later on in the story, we learn that one of the missionaries who teaches math is ill and cannot conduct his class. Tintin volunteers to substitute for the ill missionary and is shown teaching math and asking the native students the following questions:

TINTIN: Nous allons commencer, si vous le voulez bien, par quelques additions.
Qui peut me dire combien font deux plus deux ? Personne ? ... Voyons, deux plus deux ?... Deux plus deux égalent?...”

In this activity, students explored the following questions:

1. Why does Tintin become a teacher?
2. Describe the physical appearance as well as clothing of the missionary.
3. Explain the missionary’s role in Congo.
4. Analyze the addition, “Deux plus deux égalent.”

The activities using *Tintin au Congo* targeted introducing students to the theoretical concepts of the *assimilation doctrine*, a colonial doctrine developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that was based on teaching the French language and culture to the natives in order to make them more French (Betts 8). A second goal was to introduce students to the *civilizing mission*, a moral, humanist ideology that aimed to bring Western civilization to the indigenous (Conklin 12), as depicted by the creation of a school and a hospital in the Belgian Congo in the comic.

Another practical activity used to teach the French occupation of the Maghreb involved maps. Of course maps are first used to geographically locate a place, but maps are rich visual material. City maps, for example, can be used as a narrative in which a city becomes a “city text” that shows the colonial ideology through commemorative street names (Palonnen 219). For this

activity, I used a map of the city of Fes in Morocco (see figure 1), a country that was under the French protectorate from 1912 to 1956. Students were asked to make a list of street names and to investigate their origins. For instance, students had to explain the street name “Rue Lyautey” as well as explain why the main street is called Avenue de France.

As a follow-up to the map activity, students were introduced to the urban dichotomy between the indigenous quarters and the European quarters often found in colonized cities such as Fes, Algiers, and Dakar. This activity was supplemented by showing excerpts from the film *The Battle of Algiers* by the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo. The film beautifully depicts both the Casbah, the natives’ urban area, and the French quarter of Algiers. Personal photos of the city of Fes were also used (see photos 1 and 2). Students were asked to describe and compare both photos in writing. Using maps and images of the colonial urban city, they discussed the differences between the colonizers’ quarters and the native quarters. By using maps as historical documents of colonial cities, students learn to see maps as more than just tools for locating places; a map becomes valuable pedagogical material that informs students about the colonial ideologies that are expressed in street name choices. Photos of colonial cities directed students to explore the impact of colonialism on urban planning.

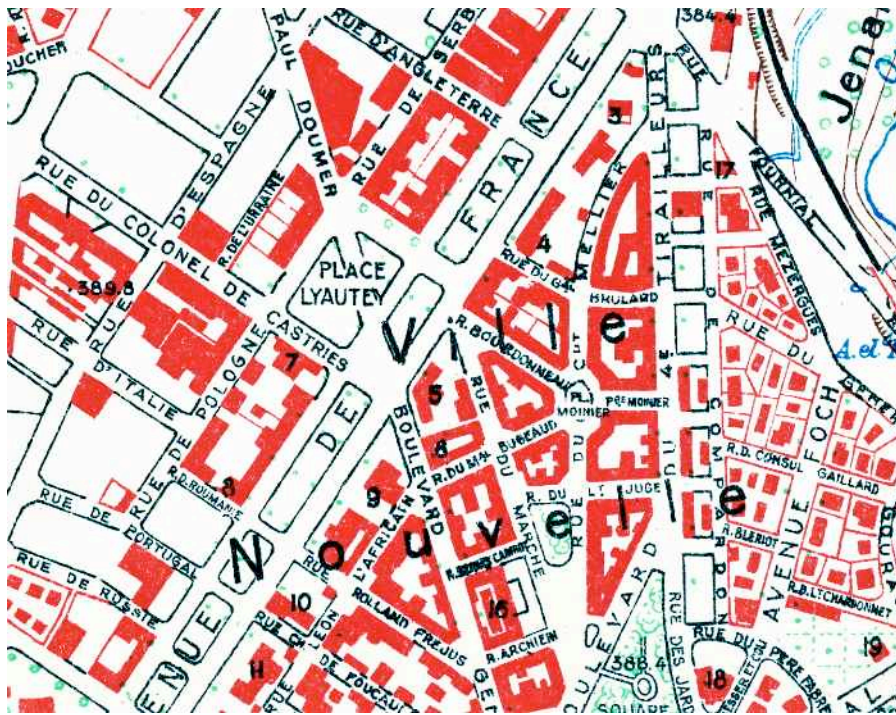


Figure 1: Map of the city of Fes in 1933 (U.S. Army Map Service).



Figure 2: *Ville Nouvelle* in Fès, the French quarter (photograph by the author).



Figure 3: Medina of Fes, the natives' quarter (photograph by the author).

Songs are another rich pedagogical source for language learning (Weinberg). In the course on francophony, songs were used to give students a taste of the different rhythms and music genres present in the Francophone world. More importantly, songs were used to better explain concepts of Berber identity, immigration, integration, racism, and national identity. Therefore, they had to be carefully chosen.

The first song presented here is *Tizi-Ouzou* by the Algerian singer Idir:

C'est une maison bleue
 Adossée à la colline
 On y vient à pied
 On n'y frappe pas
 Ceux qui vivent là
 Ont jeté la clef

Students were assigned to gather information in French about Idir, the languages he is singing in, and the Berber language and communities. Idir, from the northern region of Haute-Kabylie where the city of Tizi Ouzou is located, is considered to be the unofficial ambassador of the Kabyle culture, language (Berber), and identity. This song was chosen because it was connected to a novel the students were reading, *Le fils du pauvre*. In this autobiographical novel, Mouloud Feraoun relates his childhood and adolescence in a village in the mountainous Kabylie. He describes the values and customs in a small Kabyle town while raising the question of Berber identity. *Tizi Ouzou* describes a village and the strong ties within the community and illustrates people's strong attachment to the land.

The second fruitful pedagogical element in this song is that half of the lyrics are in Berber. Despite the fact that I, the instructor, do not speak or understand Berber, it was an excellent opportunity for students to hear lyrics in a totally foreign language (neither the native nor the target language). This activity made students aware of the complex sociolinguistic dynamics of the Maghreb in a real context, which piqued their interest in the Berber language and

communities. As a follow-up, a lecture was given on the sociolinguistic status of the Berber language and of other language varieties spoken in the Maghreb, and the ethnic distinctions between the Arabs and the Berbers were discussed at length. Sadiqi (7) states that more than 45 % of the Moroccan population is Arab while the rest is Berber, a fact often unmentioned in courses on francophony.

Further music was used to introduce students to the post-colonial era and to the deep connection between colonialism and immigration. This was accomplished through Faudel's song entitled *Mon Pays*, in which he reminds us that France is his country of origin. Faudel is a French singer of Algerian descent born in Mantes-la-Jolie, a suburb of Paris. He is a Raï star, a folk music genre from Algeria that has gained great presence in France due to immigration and to the historical and colonial ties that France has with Algeria. Through this song, students were able to grasp the intrinsic relationship between the past and the present, between colonialism and post-colonialism, while opening the debate on the immigration that started in the mid 1950s in France, largely from former colonies (Bleich). These phenomena were introduced using the song's narrative:

Je n'connais pas ce soleil
 Qui brûle les dunes sans fin
 Je n'connais pas d'autre terre
 Que celle qui m'a tendu la main
 Et si un jour, je pars d'ici
 Que je traverse le désert
 Pour aller voir d'où vient ma vie
 Dans quelles rues jouait mon père
 Moi qui suis né près de Paris
 Sous tout ce vent, toute cette pluie
 Je n'oublierai jamais mon pays

Through this song, students followed Faudel's personal story, in which he juxtaposes his country of origin, France, with his father's country of origin, Algeria. This has become a social issue as children of immigrants are often torn between their parents' culture and the culture of their country of residence, as exemplified by the song's further lyrics:

Je n'connais pas ce parfum
 De menthe et de sable brûlant
 Mais seul'ment les embruns
 Sous les rouleaux de l'océan
 Et toi qui me trouves un peu mat
 Pour ces rues bordées de prairies

Faudel's lyrics became a life story for students that allowed them to examine the relationship between colonization and immigration. The song depicts social issues such as the racial discrimination that children of immigrant parents face, expressed in the line "Et toi qui me trouves un peu mat." Another issue is the complexity of the identity of these offspring of immigrants, a phenomenon that minority students in the class identified with.

Through this activity involving a song, the gap between theory and practice was reduced (Nuthall 2004). Students gained a better grasp of the cultural diversity within France as well as the sociological challenges that France has in recognizing its diverse population. Moreover, topics such as racism and integration were raised in correlation with the colonial past, allowing undergraduate students to comprehend the concepts of identity construction and national identity in France, and to gain key insights into the impact of the colonial past that continues to shape the French national identity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to address some of the challenges in an introductory course on francophony at the undergraduate level and to share teaching ideas based on targeted examples that allow students to deconstruct theory from practice. The proposed model course

teaches traditional literary texts but also requires incorporating interdisciplinary materials to better introduce the theoretical framework of francophony that is intrinsically linked to colonial and post-colonial diasporas. Instead of learning these concepts through memorizing definitions, students learned them through direct practice, resulting in deeper and more complete understanding. Thus, Hergé's drawings, maps and photos of colonial cities, and popular music were used as narratives to depict colonial ideologies and to explain the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the assimilation doctrine, integration, and the concept of national identity. By juxtaposing practice and theory, complex concepts were successfully discussed in an introductory-level course in francophony in the target language. Using focused teaching material that bridges the gap between theory and practice allows students to work collaboratively and to be more engaged critically and analytically, drawing their own conclusions and improving all four language skills while developing a sense of control of their own learning process. More importantly, these hands-on activities allow students to see that a francophony course is about much more than just the French language and some basic cultural information; it is an interdisciplinary field where history, geography, literature, and cultural studies all come into play to construct a definition of what constitutes the francophony field and the Francophone identity today.

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