

Cultivating Cultural Capital in French through Composition and Conversation

by Rebecca Léal

As many French programs struggle with budget cuts and questions concerning the language's relevance in career driven education, recent trends in curricular developments across the country include the creation of *Composition and Conversation* courses which blend skills in writing and oral communication, which have traditionally been taught as separate entities. At the university level, this intermediate level bridge course is very often the first step for potential French majors and minors, the “make or break” moment which underscores its vital importance in student retention. While it is clear that “Comp and Con” courses, as they are commonly described, have great potential to both inform and motivate students, many educators remain perplexed concerning actual course development and implementation. This paper will present a practical model for successful and creative *Composition and Conversation* courses at the university level, but whose activities could easily also be adapted and implemented for advanced high school courses. Designed to maximize interest in French studies through an in depth introduction to popular culture across the Francophone world, this course presents students with real world skills that make French relevant to their career goals as well to their everyday lives. Focusing on topics traditionally outside of formal academia, the course is themed as a popular interest online magazine created by individual students in which they pen editorial information, conduct interviews with French speakers, produce the news, explore Francophone cinema, learn about the economy (and how to get a job!), engage in creative writing, and take virtual trips across the Francophone world. In addition to continued learning about French and Francophone cultures, students enrich their vocabulary and develop advanced critical thinking skills which include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information in French at both the spoken and written levels as well as build crossover skills in the use of technology, such as web design and video editing.

It is perhaps best to start with a caveat. This course was developed in direct response to my first two positions after graduate school teaching intermediate French courses in small, liberal arts schools with relatively small French programs. In both cases, I was assigned to teach *Conversation and Composition* without having any experience with this type of course or direction from the part of my predecessors. My experience and training was with a more traditional program structure at the intermediate level, namely a semester of grammar followed by a semester of composition. To complicate matters even further, when I arrived in a new institution as the director of the French program, I discovered two *Conversation and Composition* courses to structure, beginning and advanced. The course which is described in this paper details the design and implementation of the beginning course, *Conversation and Composition I*.

Firstly, what is a *Composition and Conversation* course? Who are the intended students and what objectives is such a course designed to meet? As third year college level course, the majority of learners are first year students who have tested into the course through their institution's placement exam. In contrast with the first four semesters of French which may have students taking the class to meet a foreign language requirement, this third year course is generally populated by students interested in pursuing a French major or minor. With the exception of the occasional heritage

speaker, transfer or nontraditional student, students enrolled in *Composition and Conversation* are, for the most part, first year college students who, after extensive experience with the language in high school, have decided to continue their study of French. In other words, this is a bridge course, a preparation course for university level French studies tailored to fit students with a wide variety of interests as well as a wide discrepancy in their French abilities. It is also worthwhile to point out that since this is a bridge course from high school to college, the activities and ideas developed here could easily be adapted to the high school environment as well and would be a great tool to promote French studies.

A second important point to consider in this type of course is that in many institutions, it constitutes the first course in the sequence for a French minor or major. From this perspective, as a required course, students do not necessarily enroll because they are attracted to its content (as students would be to a cinema course, for example). The course must be diverse enough in content to attract and hold the attention of a student body from a variety of fields; today's average French major has at least one other major and often numerous minors. We must be aware that with the current utilitarian focus in higher education, we are competing for students' time and attention. With colleges and universities that do not have a language requirement, creating and advertising courses that are attractive and appealing to students becomes an urgent priority. When designing and implementing courses, faculty should take into consideration the role of innovation in marketing to and recruiting students who have studied some French in high school and are considering continuing language study at the post-secondary level. With the pressures and demands of programs in the STEMs, among others, which so tightly proscribe course sequencing, language programs have limited opportunities to create inroads. In other words, as a prerequisite for upper level study in French and as a bridge course, *Composition and Conversation* is in many ways a First Year Seminar in French, to borrow the terminology often used in liberal arts programs. In one short semester, French faculty must "market French" showcasing what French studies at the college level is all about.

With these considerations in mind, I decided to structure the beginning *Conversation & Composition* course, which is usually taught to first year students in the fall, around themes that are traditionally thought of as non-academic skills, those of contemporary French cultural capital. The more advanced course, *Conversation & Composition II*, usually taught in the spring, is reserved for more traditional academic skills including formal paper writing and literary analysis. Both courses are semester long courses (16 weeks) and meet three times a week (65 minutes sessions). Although the course content can be considered less formally academic in nature than traditional programs, course learning objectives clearly fit within the National Foreign Language Standards, as stated in the course syllabus and Figure 1.

[fig. 1]

The course structure itself can be envisioned as an editorial room, where students as editors produce their own electronic popular interest magazine in French, which is unveiled during a *Congrès des Ecrivains* at the end of the semester scheduled in lieu of the traditional final exam period. Throughout the course of the semester, students explore six units: Travel the Francophone World, Autobiography/Biography, Cinema, Current Events, Creative Writing, and Economy and Employment. Each unit extends over a minimum of seven to eight class sessions and includes written components as well as student audio or visual productions, which are each peer and instructor reviewed several times before being evaluated for a formal grade. In addition, students are provided with an intensive grammar review, focusing on concepts which pertain well to the unit. The Autobiography/Biography unit, for example, reviews use of adjectives while the Economy and Employment unit practices future and conditional tenses. While a textbook is not used for the course structure itself, a grammar textbook and workbook such as *Contrastes* is recommended to supplement each unit, providing students with practice exercises as well as reference material. As mentioned previously, since students test in to this course, they have widely varying experiences with the French language. Some students may find that they need to focus more on one concept than another and a comprehensive grammar review helps reduce the gap between student learning levels. Grammar is generally assigned as work outside of class, with students expected to self-correct. The instructor is available to provide a quick review of concepts and answer questions at the beginning of every class period. Phonetics textbooks such as *Savoir Dire* may also prove useful to instructors interested in working in greater detail on student pronunciation, although care should be taken to not inhibit student participation and augment their affective filter.

The semester begins with Travel in the Francophone World a two-week unit which is designed to increase awareness of and knowledge about French speaking countries and to inspire a Francophone mindset in the course from the very start of the semester. This unit helps to protect against a purely *France Métropolitaine* approach to the units and themes which follow, and it is also a good introduction to the course, with engaging and interactive activities which focus on geography and diversity. Focusing on multiculturalism and difference across the French speaking world in the first few class sessions of the semester also shows students that the French program welcomes diversity of all kinds, and may specifically speak to underrepresented populations in the classroom, encouraging them express themselves in French. As illustrated in Figure 2, the unit

project consists of an advertising campaign to encourage travel to a Francophone country, while classroom activities include geography games as well as short video clips and instructor designed listening comprehension questions from TV5 Monde's *Destination Francophonie*.

Voyages en Francophonie: Une campagne publicitaire

Your Task:

Imagine that you are on an advertising team working in a Francophone country. Your task is to come up with an advertising campaign for promoting travel to that region. The campaign must include a magazine ad and a radio spot.

Project Requirements:

Composition: Magazine ad-creative license is expected but should be 200-250 words. You can create a traditional print ad or an online ad using visual presentation software medium such as glogster, active inspire, prezzi, etc. If your ad is digital, be sure to send me the link or file by the due date.

Conversation: Radio spot—you may add sound effects, but you should speak in French for approximately 60 seconds. Feel free to incorporate elements from your magazine ad, but it should not be identical. Be sure to turn in your radio script and send me the file/link to the audio.

Due Dates:

Draft of ad text & script due
Final version due/presentations

Fri, Sept 6
Wed, Sept 11



Guidelines:

1. Choose a Francophone country
2. Do a little research, write a couple of paragraphs to describe the country.
3. Proofread your French.
4. Brainstorm the basic idea behind your campaign and then create a slogan that will be used in both advertisements.
5. Write the text for your magazine ad and the script for your radio spot.
6. Proofread your French.
7. Develop your magazine ad by incorporating images, etc. to the text
8. Record your radio spot.
8. Present your ad campaign to the class, who will vote on the best campaign (for a prize!)

[fig. 2]

The second unit of the semester centers upon more personal information through the themes of Autobiography and Biography. Approximately two weeks long, this unit has for goals to increase knowledge of the French speaking world through the “Biography of a Famous Francophone” activity as well as to create a closer community of learners and to prepare for the upcoming Language Exchange with an advanced French speaker. Students are encouraged to describe

themselves and asks questions of others. At nearly two weeks into the semester, the students now know each other well and feel more comfortable sharing personal information. Unit activities during class sessions include describing famous Francophone works of art and portraits, reading authentic examples of autobiographies in various forms (song/poetry/short story), and watching interviews of Francophone celebrities. Students also explore a “Top 10” list of the most famous French nationals of all time; these activities will provide them with the information to create their own imaginary interview with the famous Francophone of their choice (see Figure 3 below).

Une interview célèbre

Your Task:

Imagine that you are a journalist interviewing a Francophone celebrity for a popular magazine...

Project Requirements:

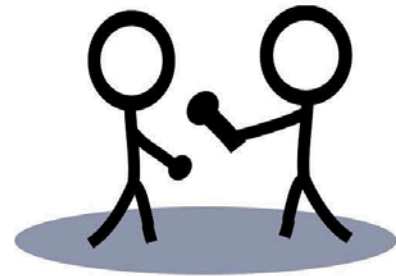
Composition: Write a short, 1 page handout to distribute to your classmates about your famous friend; include essential information in list format/bullet points as well as a picture!

Conversation: Record your interview!—you may choose to read your interview with a partner or record it alone, creatively transforming your voice! Save your file to your Elmhurst Google Drive account. Your script should be 1 page in length. Be sure to turn in your script and send me the link to the audio using the “share” feature of Google Drive. *Practice, practice, practice!*

Due Dates:

Presentations in Class

vendredi 12 septembre



Guidelines:

1. Choose a famous Francophone (actor, artist, writer, singer, etc).
2. Do a little research to find out essential information about your famous friend.
3. Brainstorm a few questions that you might ask the famous friend based on the information that you have found.
4. Write the text for your interview including your questions and your famous friend's responses (format Q & A) based on steps 2 and 3.
5. Proofread your French.
6. Write a short handout to distribute to your classmates about your famous friend; include essential information in list format/bullet points as well as a picture!
7. Proofread your French.
8. Present your interview to the class. Distribute your handout.

[fig. 3]

The film unit which follows transitions well from interview with famous Francophone celebrities to watching them on screen. The unit, which is four weeks in length, is designed to increase student autonomy in exploring French culture by encouraging learners to explore meaningful French language resources that are available to them, including such services as Netflix and Amazon

Prime, as well as their local libraries. Students are required to present to the class a summary of a film of their choice (but previously unknown to them) as well as the screening of a movie trailer or clip in class, whenever possible. As illustrated in Figure 4, the written component for this unit consists of authoring a review of a second film of their choice (previously unknown to them). Class activities for this unit include reading film reviews which model proper form and structure for this genre as well as screening short films in class (See *A l'écran* for short film suggestions and activities).

Comment écrire la critique d'un film ?

Vous allez rédiger et mettre en forme la critique du film de votre choix. Une critique est un texte qui porte un jugement sur une œuvre (livre, film, pièce de théâtre, etc.) et qui vise à persuader ou à dissuader le destinataire de s'engager à son tour dans la découverte de cette œuvre. Le texte est rédigé à l'intention d'un destinataire sensé ne pas avoir vu le film afin qu'il puisse se le représenter. Elle comporte à la fois une partie informative (fiche technique, bref résumé, description du contenu) et une partie argumentative (appréciation personnelle argumentée sur divers aspects de l'œuvre).

TACHES NECESSAIRES

1. Fiche technique et résumé

- Titre du film ?
- Nom du réalisateur ?
- Date de sortie du film ?
- Durée du film ?
- Musique de ?
- A quel public s'adresse l'histoire ?
- Noms des principaux acteurs ?
- Genre (comédie, tragédie, drame, etc.) ?
- Site officiel de référence ?
- Origine du projet ?
- Titre et auteur du livre dont est adapté le film ?
- Conditions de tournage ?

2. Éléments subjectifs – Expression d'une opinion

Quelles sont vos premières impressions ?
Avez-vous aimé ? Avez-vous détesté ?
Vous êtes-vous ennuyés ? A quels moments ?
Avez-vous eu l'impression d'avoir perdu la notion du temps ?

Que pensez-vous de.... ?
Le héros
Les personnages

L'histoire
Les lieux et les décors
La narration, la
Manière de raconter
Les images
Graphisme, couleur, lumière
Le son, le bruit, la musique,
La parole

3. Lecture et réponse à des critiques du film

Trouvez et lisez quelques critiques du film. (Imprimez-les pour les rendre en classe)

- Que vous apprennent ces critiques ?
- Partagez-vous l'opinion de ces critiques sur le film ?

4. Mise en page d'une critique claire et lisible

Vous devez :

- Chercher un titre pour votre critique
- Chercher des illustrations pour l'article (affiche de film, acteurs, etc.)

- Associer une légende à chacune des illustrations
- Elaborer une maquette qui permette d'obtenir un article clair et agréable à lire

Source : http://lewebpedagogique.com/surlefil/files/2010/03/Feuille_de_route-critique_entre_les_murs.pdf

[fig. 4]

The Current Events unit (2 weeks) inspires students to become more aware on a global scale as well as increases their interest in French culture and linguistic autonomy. As Figure 5 demonstrates, during this unit, students as editors write their own op-ed and are assigned one newscast segment to produce in video form based on their personal interest (sports, culture, French national news, international news, health, science, etc.). Classroom activities prior to unit project presentations include daily summary reports by students of headlines from French newscasts, readings and comprehension activities from authentic sources (including the children’s French news site *Ijourlactu*), and comparative discussions of French and American journalism styles.

Les actualités francophones

Your Task:

Imagine that you are a journalist working in a Francophone country. Your task is to report the most important and interesting current events from your region. The report must include an editorial and a short newscast.

Project Requirements:

Composition: *L’Éditorial*—your work must be 1 page in length (typed and double spaced); organization and style instruction will be given in class.

Conversation: *Les actualités*—prepare a short video (60 seconds) based on a story different from your editorial. Be sure to turn in your script and send me the file/link. Be creative!

Due Dates:

Draft of Editorial due	Mon, Nov. 4
Final version of <i>Éditorial</i> due	Fri, Nov. 8
Presentation of <i>Les actualités</i>	Fri, Nov. 8



Guidelines:

- Choose a news subject to explore (health, culture, sports, science, business, politics, education, international...)
- Do a little research; pick 2 stories that interest you and will be of interest to your readers (1 story will be used for the editorial and 1 for a news report)
- Brainstorm your editorial; what angle are you going to take?
- Write the text for your editorial.
- Proofread your French.
- Turn in your editorial draft.

- Write the script for your news report.
- Record your news report; the format is up to you (film yourself, others, use pictures or video that you narrate, etc...). Contact Dr. Léal if you need assistance with technology.
- Present your news report to the class.
- Turn in the final version of your editorial.

[fig. 5]

The Creative Writing unit (2 weeks) is strategically placed near the end of the course and in the fall semester, typically occurs around the Thanksgiving break. This unit is one of the most popular units for students, who are free to choose their own topic from a list of suggestions (see Figure 6). Once again, students are strongly encouraged to engage in work of personal interest that is meaningful to them and present their creative projects to the class.

L'Écriture libre

In this unit, you are free to explore your own interests. Below is a list of suggestions, but feel free to propose your own ideas!

- ✓ **L'Écriture créative:** author your own literary work (fiction or non-fiction) or publish a book review of a French work
- ✓ **La Traduction:** find a short work in French (fiction or non-fiction) and publish a translation
- ✓ **La Poésie:** write your own poem (or publish a French poem and write a response to it)
- ✓ **La Bande dessinée:** write your own comic strip (or write an article about comics in Francophone cultures)
- ✓ **La Gastronomie française:** Research how to write a restaurant review, including how restaurants are classified in France. Go to a French restaurant in the area and write a restaurant review (or share recipes with your readers!)
- ✓ **La Musique:** Research topics in Francophone music and write a news article.

Requirements: 2 to 2.5 pages of creative text written by you

Due Dates:

Project proposal due	Friday, Nov. 15	
Draft due	Monday, Nov. 18	(in-class workshop)
Presentation of project	Wednesday, Nov. 20	(5-7 mns)
Final version due	Friday, Nov. 22	

[fig. 6]

The last unit of the semester (3 weeks) explores themes surrounding employment in France encouraging students to explore careers in French or prepare for study abroad applications. This final element of the semester provides a transition from the popular culture atmosphere of this course, *Composition and Conversation I*, to the formal writing and oral communication that will be expected of students in *Composition and Conversation II*. Through a close study of authentic texts, students learn how to write professional correspondence including cover letters, résumés, and professional email as well as learn professional oral communication skills through a mock job interview and the creation of a video CV. Classroom time is used watching mock, yet authentic job interviews, brainstorming possible interview questions and responses, and learning how to find a job through French speaking websites such as *pole-emploi*.

[fig. 7]

In addition to the assignments outlined above which are linked to each unit, students are required to pass oral proficiency exams (2) as well as participate in Language Exchanges via Skype with advanced French speakers (a minimum of 4 exchanges). Although the Language Exchanges are open to any topic, as Figure 8 indicates the oral exams are more structured with topics announced in advance on the syllabus that address the themes and units explored in class.

Oral Exams

L'art de la conversation

For this mid-semester oral activity, you will be expected to engage a French speaker (Dr. Léal) in conversation. Throughout the semester, you have had opportunities to practice and perfect your conversation skills through Skype peer conversations and language partners as well as active participation in class. We have discussed many diverse topics in class including travel, film, music, current events, and more....The topic/s should be of your choosing (travel, weather, art, history, vacation, school, politics, etc...). Keep in mind that you are in charge of the conversation and must converse for a minimum of 7 minutes. Although you should not have a memorized monologue, the best conversations will be planned well in advance (look up any necessary vocabulary words); come prepared!! *Bonne chance!*

L'entretien d'embauche

For this end of semester activity, you will be expected to simulate a job search in France. Using the French national job website (<http://www.pole-emploi.fr/accueil/>), find a job for which you are (or will be) well qualified for and "apply" to the desired position. You should submit your complete dossier (job ad, your résumé, and a cover letter) during a job interview scheduled during the final week of classes. Your interview will be scheduled via email, so please respond promptly and professionally to confirm your appointment. The interview will last approximately 10 minutes, and sample questions will be posted on the course website and discussed in class. Although you should not have a memorized monologue, the best responses to interview questions will be planned well in advance (look up any necessary vocabulary words); come prepared!! *Bonne chance!*

[fig. 8]

Sample questions used during the mock job interview/oral exam 2 are from authentic texts and include:

[fig. 9]

The Language Exchange activities require students to engage advanced French speakers in conversation. As the instructions in Figure 10 indicate, students are free to explore topics that are of interest to them, however many choose to develop themes explored in class. The Language Exchange activities expose students to a variety of French speakers not commonly found at American colleges and universities and teaches them how to be good language learners by demonstrating the importance of taking active and personal responsibility for one's learning.

[fig. 10]

Although the Language Exchange activities are a cornerstone of *Conversation and Composition* as they permit to students to take their language out of the classroom environment and into more authentic spaces, these activities are also the most problematic to implement. Students often use websites such as The Mixxer, Interpals, Skype Classroom and TalkAbroad to find language partners. Many students, however, are not willing to pay for fee based sites such as TalkAbroad and are concerned about the safety of the free, open access pen pal type sites. As technology and communication opportunities continue to evolve, it is hoped that better solutions for language students to communicate with advanced speakers will be presented.

The model I have provided for a *Conversation and Composition* course is exciting and intellectually stimulating for students and instructors alike. It is designed to meet the unique situation of students entering intermediate French programs who, in many cases, are in need of both academic support and motivation to continue in the study of French at the college level. This course encourages students to take responsibility for their own language study and personalize it to their interests by showing them the wealth of resources that the Francophone world provides through way of modern technology. Such courses illustrate the flexibility and relevancy needed to foster the study of French at all levels.

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