

A Note on Real-Life Technology and the L2 French Classroom: Using Images, Charts, and Maps to Stimulate Conversation

by Melanie Conroy

One of the biggest trends in online media is information visualization. Major media outlets like *Le Monde* and companies like Google are creating lots of content that is visually driven and does not require an extremely sophisticated vocabulary or a great deal of historical context to understand. These are excellent tools for language teachers, especially in beginning classes or classes with variable levels of proficiency in L2. Teachers can use maps, infographics, and multimedia objects as authentic real-world materials that are easier to access than many texts. With more time, students can even create their own content to share, or to use in a presentation in lieu of PowerPoint.

Infographics

Infographics from major newspapers are one source of authentic L2 material -- often at a beginner or intermediate level, yet they are often current and conceptually complex. One chart that I have used in an intermediate course is an infographic published by the French newspaper *Le Monde* in April of 2014. It displays the most common first names for boys and girls in the major French regions since 1946 on a map (Léchenet 2014). This infographic reveals the shift from “traditional” French names like “Marie” and “Jean” to American-influenced names like “Kévin.” While there is a short accompanying article written at a high level of French, the infographic is quite basic and easily understood by a high-novice or intermediate-low French student who knows words like “prénom.” Since the text on infographics is limited, these charts can also serve as topics for open conversations and as material for students to generate questions.

Virtual Visits

A number of French cultural institutions have built impressive multimedia tools based on Google Maps and Google Earth. For example, the Louvre and the château de Versailles have worked together with the Google Cultural Institute to produce high-resolution virtual visits of France’s most famous museum and its most famous castle (Versailles 2014). These immersive experiences contain far more information and are higher resolution than the first “walk-through” websites created in the 1990s. Moreover, they are easy for students to use since the interface is the same as Google Street View’s. The art works -- whether paintings, statues, tapestries, murals, or ceiling décor -- are rendered in very high resolution, so much so that individual brush strokes are visible. The visual nature of these websites to description, storytelling, and questions-formation activities.

360° Visits to Paris

Another useful multimedia site for teaching is the 360° official Tour Eiffel website (Tour Eiffel 2014). The site contains not only views of the tower and its surroundings, but also views of Paris

from the tower. The panoramic photos of Paris are overlaid with the names of common monuments and information about each monument. This is an excellent way to introduce Parisian monuments: first discussing the Eiffel Tower, then “climbing the tower,” and looking out from the tower. The Louvre, the Seine, the Champs de Mars, and even Bercy (on the far east of the city) are included. With a little prompting, students unfamiliar with the layout of Paris can direct the teacher to explore the aspects of Paris that they are interested in. Questions that I used with this tool in my intermediate French class include the following:

- What do you see? (e.g. bridges, water, buildings, the Louvre, etc.)
- Where do you want to go?
- How can you get there?
- Where can you go from there?

Itineraries

Itineraries are readymade tools that are excellent for in-class use, whether as a five-minute conversation-starter or a jumping-off point to build a class around. Making your own itinerary has never been easier. Google Maps Engine Lite allows you to place up to 300 points on a map, to customize the base map, modify icons, and add other media and text to individual points (Google 2014). After adding points on the map, you can add photos from the web or a personal collection, online videos, and text with a few clicks. If you would like to create an itinerary, you can select two or more points and then a mode of transportation (foot, car, bicycle, or sometimes public transportation). You can select images, text, and video to go along each stop on the itinerary -- whether depictions of the place, people associated with the place, historical events that occurred there, or even fictional characters who are associated with it.

Some ideas that I have used to create a custom itinerary:

- A day trip around Paris
- A bicycle trip in the South of France
- The locations of famous novels
- The locations of wildlife and plants

For a personal touch, you can use your own photos or videos (whether from a trip to a French-speaking place or not). You can also draw on personal interests, or the interests of students, in planning the trip: theme parks in Europe, for example, or chocolate and cheese stores. All of the commercial information about businesses, with addresses and phone numbers, is accessible through Google Plus, and this box is a good prompt to practice numbers, addresses, and other words to do with businesses. The itinerary is available online so students can review the places discussed or write responses to the itinerary or propose their own trip from home or the library.

Quick Student Projects

Finally, students can create their own itineraries, with their own themes and purposes. Having students produce online collections of materials is a good way to model engagement with vast French materials available, as well as to teach the basics of searching for material in a foreign language. By modeling the selection of materials and the use of contextual interpretation, we can

shows students how to archive the materials that they find and put them into a meaningful relationship with one another. Pictures become part of a story that can be told in French rather than just an illustration of single word. Students can revisit their projects at the end of class and tell a more complicated story using the same places and events with more vocabulary and more complex grammar. Finally, they can share their itineraries with the class through short presentations.

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