

# **A Virtual Trip to France: Focusing on Proficiency and the Five C's**

**by Clara Krug**

When the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) published the first edition of *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 1996, it included generic standards of student achievement across world languages in grades K-12. The third edition (2006) includes two major revisions. It elaborates on the generic standards by applying them to individual languages. For example, it includes a 44-page chapter dedicated to “Standards for the Learning of French, K-16.” This chapter title indicates the second revision: The standards also apply to students enrolled in postsecondary French courses.

As learners work toward reaching a standard or a series of standards, they focus on all four skills: listening comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension, and writing. The authors of the third edition specify that “informed teachers will recognize within the standards the work that has preceded this initiative under the rubrics for proficiency-oriented or communication-based instruction . . .” (97). Regardless of the grade level or the course level, it is likely that classes include a heterogeneous student population. That is, not all students function at the same ACTFL proficiency level. An individual student may not function at the same proficiency level in all four skills. As a result, helping learners in a course meet any standard poses a challenge to their instructor. Carefully planned projects may help teachers address this challenge.

A project should require that students try to integrate language and content by gathering and processing information (Mills 613). Altstaedter and Jones include an Internet component in their projects, which they design as Web-based inquiry projects (641). Dodge coined the term WebQuest to refer to “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing” (1). He, Mills, and Altstaedter and Jones emphasize the collaborative nature of a project and de-emphasize the role of individual activities. However, creating projects that allow students to work both as individuals and as members of a pair or small group may provide the optimal opportunity for them to function at their own varying proficiency levels as they strive to reach the standards on which the project focuses.

A WebQuest has two major advantages. First of all, contemporary students at various grade levels use the Internet regularly. In addition, with its vast number of websites, the Internet includes information that is not included in French textbooks, but that has the potential to enhance textbook content. If the project is constructed properly, surfing on the web allows students to focus at least partially on what interests them and, thus, motivates them to complete the project (Sconduto 724). Nonetheless, Theisen

advises that teachers need to align use of technology with the curriculum: “Unless it can be connected back to the lesson and its objective, it is not ultimately useful” (29-30).

### **Proposed Standards for an Internet Project about a Virtual Trip**

The six standards identified below are specific to the postsecondary sector in the 2006 edition of *Standards for Foreign Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>1</sup> Italicized words indicate grammar, research topics, or research sources that students will need to include as they complete this project during the fourteenth week of their third-semester course.

#### Communication:

Standard 1.1: “Students use French to talk with classmates about past and *future activities*, such as weekend plans, *vacation*, jobs, and *travel*” (253).

Standard 1.2: “Students understand in French the principal elements and main ideas of . . . *Internet* pages on current events and *topics of general interest*” (255).

#### Cultures:

Standard 2.2: “Students discuss and analyze *concrete products that reflect daily life* . . . in various regions of the francophone world, such as *food*, *dwellings*, *transportation*, and *leisure activities*” (261).

#### Connections:

Standard 3.1: “Students discuss in French *topics from other college courses* such as *history*, . . . *art*, and *music*” (263).

Standard 3.2: “Students carry out research on francophone cultures using contemporary French-language sources, such as . . . *Internet sites*” (265).

#### Comparisons:

Standard 4.1: “Students are familiar with common French-English *cognate patterns*” (267).

### **Proposed Proficiency Levels for the Project**

As a student first reads and writes to conduct research on this project, then listens to and speaks with a partner to collaborate on a script based on their individual research, and finally performs the skit with classmates as an audience, he or she may function at various proficiency levels. The author anticipates that students will perform within the Novice-Mid to Intermediate-Mid proficiency levels in reading, writing, and speaking at the conclusion of a third-semester course.<sup>2</sup>

#### Reading:

Novice-Mid: “The reader can identify an increasing number of highly contextualized words and/or phrases including cognates and borrowed words...”

Intermediate-Mid: “[T]exts are still linguistically noncomplex... They impart basic information about which the reader has to make minimal suppositions and to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge” (*ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: Reading* 1).

### Writing:

Novice-Mid: “Writers at the Novice-Mid level are able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases, and reproduce from memory a modest number of isolated words and phrases in context.... Novice-Mid writers exhibit a high degree of accuracy when writing on well-practiced, familiar topics using limited formulaic language.”

Intermediate-Mid: “They can write short, simple communications ... and requests for information in loosely connected texts that are based on personal preferences.... Most writing is framed in present time.... The writing style closely resembles the grammar and lexicon of oral discourse” (*ACTFL Preliminary Proficiency Guidelines—Writing* 5-6).

### Speaking:

Novice-Mid: “Speakers at the Novice-Mid level communicate minimally and with difficulty by using a number of isolated words and memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned. When responding to direct questions, they may utter only two or three words at a time or an occasional stock answer.”

Intermediate-Mid: “Speakers ... handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward social situations. Conversation is generally restricted to those predictable and concrete exchanges necessary for survival in the target culture

“Intermediate-Mid speakers ... are capable of asking a variety of questions when necessary to obtain simple information to satisfy basic needs, such as directions, prices, and services.”

“Intermediate-Mid speakers are able to express personal meaning by creating with the language, in part by combining and recombining known elements and conversational input to make utterances of sentence length and some strings of sentences ” (*ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking* 4-5).<sup>3</sup>

## **The Internet Project**

This four-session project is designed to help third-semester students satisfy the six standards indicated and work within the Novice-Mid to Intermediate-Mid proficiency levels as they focus on a virtual trip to Saumur, France. From the outset, students know the time frame: receiving the description of the Internet assignment and beginning research in the language laboratory during the first session; continuing Internet research in the lab during the second one; receiving a description of the “jeu de rôles” about a trip to Saumur and working with a partner to write a script during the third class session; rehearsing and performing the “jeu de rôles” during the final class. Between class sessions, students may conduct additional research on the Internet. Between the third

and fourth sessions, partners may meet to begin rehearsing. Students have no additional homework assignments during this project.

The instructor may provide the addresses of one or two sites to guide students' research. As a result, students will not be "left to wander through webspace completely adrift" (Dodge 2). However, to foster the Internet literacy espoused in the French standards (1.2, 3.2), she should also provide them with key words and a home base, such as <<http://www.google.fr>>, that they may consult to locate additional pertinent web sites. Although high school and college students are acquainted with Facebook, YouTube, eBay, and various other social and commercial web sites, they may not have experience consulting non-Wikipedia French-language sites. So it is important to circulate among them as they conduct research.

### **Figure 1: Assignment**

#### Une visite à Saumur

1. Visitez <<http://www.saumur-tourisme.com>> ou <<http://www.ville-saumur.fr/>> au sujet de Saumur. Ou utilisez <<http://www.google.fr>> pour chercher encore des sites. *Ne consultez aucun site "Wiki," s.v.p.*
2. Choisissez un site pour commencer. Attention: *Etudiez la version en français.* Etudiez les renseignements au sujet de Saumur:
  - la ville en général, son histoire
  - le château de Saumur
  - les attractions touristiques
  - les activités culturelles possibles
  - les activités sportives possibles
  - les spécialités gastronomiques de la région
  - l'hébergement
  - l'accès en train-départ de Paris/arrivée à Saumur: la sorte de train, l'horaire, le prix d'un billet
  - etc.
3. Faites une copie des pages importantes. S'il est impossible de copier les pages, prenez des notes.
4. Choisissez un ou deux autres sites (Voir #1). Répétez les #2 et #3 de cette activité.
5. Des problèmes à trouver les renseignements au sujet des trains? Visitez <<http://www.voyages-sncf.com/>>, ou peut-être, prenez contact avec l'Office de tourisme de Saumur.

Most students have never heard of Saumur. This town of slightly more than 30,000 is small enough not to overwhelm them with the number of its related web sites. When students read the directions for “Une visite à Saumur,” they recognize various cognates (Standard 4.1) that will help them identify research links at these sites. When they conduct research on the topics listed in the assignment, students recycle vocabulary and cultural information that they have already studied: the food, sports, leisure activities, art, and travel information included in a French student’s typical textbook. This repetition helps “connect their existing knowledge to a new and interesting context” (Mills 631), a French town where they will vacation. It also serves as a heuristic device by helping students activate background knowledge at the beginning of the activity (Lomicka, Lord, and Manzer 42). As they analyze information about foods, dwellings, transportation, and leisure activities, they learn that, in Saumur, foods, hotel rating systems, availability and quality of train travel, and popular sports differ from those in Georgia (Standard 2.2). Investigating the town’s tourist attractions, they learn about its history, art, and architecture (Standard 3.1). When they have concluded research on the specified topics, students receive their “jeu de rôles” assignment.

## Figure 2. Role-Play

Un jeu de rôles: “Une visite à Saumur”

Voici la situation:

Vous et votre ami(e), vous êtes à Statesboro. Vous allez passer les vacances à Saumur. Vous avez déjà acheté vos billets d’avion. Vous discutez de votre voyage en train Paris/Saumur et de votre séjour à Saumur.

Voici les guides pour écrire votre scénario:

Entrée en contact:

Votre discussion: Par exemple,

Une visite au château? Pourquoi est-ce que vous voulez visiter le château?  
 Les attractions touristiques que vous voulez visiter? Pourquoi ces attractions?  
 Les activités culturelles ou sportives qui vous intéressent?  
 Les spécialités gastronomiques de la région que vous voulez manger/boire?  
 L’hôtel où vous voulez réserver une chambre (2 femmes ou 2 hommes) ou deux chambres (1 homme et 1 femme)? Pourquoi est-ce que vous préférez cet hôtel?  
 Le train que vous prenez? Quel est l’horaire? Quel est le prix?  
 Etc.?

Fin de la conversation:

1. Commencez d’écrire ce jeu de rôles aujourd’hui en classe. Pour trouver les informations, consultez vos notes de l’Internet et vos copies des pages de l’Internet. *Travaillez avec votre partenaire.* Attention: Actuellement, 1€ = \$1.26.
2. Comme devoir, finissez de l’écrire. Commencez d’en mémoriser *un rôle*.
3. Mercredi, en classe, vous allez vérifier le contenu de votre jeu de rôles, le répéter et le réciter avec votre partenaire. Attention à la mémorisation, la prononciation, l’intonation et l’interprétation.

4. *Il est nécessaire aussi d'écrire une copie claire du scénario de votre jeu de rôles (avec les 2 rôles) pour votre professeur*
5. Vous et votre partenaire, vous allez donner vos notes de l'Internet et/ou vos copies des pages de l'Internet à votre professeur.

Although this incarnation of the project specifies that pairs of students plan a discussion with each other as potential travel partners, another might ask that they play the roles of a tourist and a travel agent or a tourist and an employee at the Office de Tourisme in Saumur.<sup>4</sup>

A “tirage au sort” matches partners. The assignment provides a clear framework for the roleplay. It also allows each student to select from various options among tourist attractions, cultural activities, sports, gastronomic specialties, hotels, and trains. As indicated in the directions, in the case of cultural activities and sports, a student may select either one or both. Some learners prefer the cultural activities that Saumur offers; others opt for sports associated with the Loire or the surrounding countryside. Providing these options is important because “successful integration of the Internet in the teaching of a foreign language results from a match between the pedagogical activities proposed by FL instructors and their appeal to FL students” (Dassier 16).

It is important to circulate among partners as they compose their script to help them stay on task, to verify that they speak French (Standard 1.1), and to help identify errors in content and grammar prior to the final draft. For example, there are “faux amis,” such as “travailler,” which does not mean “to travel,” and “une journée,” which is not “a journey,” to avoid. In addition, the question/answer format and sentence-level conversation in the roleplay encourage students to attempt to function at the Intermediate-Low or Intermediate-Mid proficiency levels toward which this project is geared. However, constructing a sequence of authentic questions that yield the information specified in “Un jeu de rôles: ‘Une visite à Saumur’” is difficult for them. The instructor may find it appropriate to review briefly the interrogative adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns that elicit certain categories of information. She may also want to remind students of the distinctions between formal written and spoken questions and the informal register inherent in this project.

## **Evaluation**

The instructor may average the following three grades for each student’s final grade on this project: one for the Internet research, one for the script, and one for the performance. Each component has the same maximum number of points, perhaps 20 to mimic the French grading system. Students receive a copy of the grading rubric for each component. For the individual research, each student earns a maximum of three points for details about the required train travel, two points each for information about the seven remaining required items, and one point each for consulting the three required web sites. Their script earns each partner a maximum of three points for details about train travel, three points for information about tourist attractions, two points each for the four

remaining required topics, three points for correct use and form of verbs, and three points for correct grammar, such as formation of questions. Each student's performance merits a maximum of 10 points for memorization, four for pronunciation, three for intonation, and three for interpretation. Recording the performance for review helps ensure accuracy and fairness when evaluating it. The maximum total number of points is 60. An instructor who bases his or her grading system on percentages might assess 54 points as an A, 48 points as a B, 42 points as a C, and 36 points as a D.

## **Conclusion**

This Internet project resulted from two concerns. The first was a perceived lacuna in the college/university French curriculum. Although a teacher may recycle vocabulary and grammar during a semester, a student may rarely have an opportunity to help select the content in that recycling. That is, at the university level, faculty members or coordinators responsible for third-semester or fourth-semester courses may not consider reworking content to configure a project that allows for significant individuality and creative research. The second concern was the challenge of integrating the standards in a university curriculum that focuses on helping students improve their proficiency levels in all four skills. In keeping with the standards, this also meant incorporating Internet research in a sequence of classes when few third-semester university students are proficient in using the Internet to conduct research about French culture.

This project addresses both concerns. It includes a manageable individualized research project. The site of the virtual trip is small (30,000 people) and has a limited number of web sites. To guide students as they navigate, directions for the research project include three specific web sites. The directions focus student attention on eight required topics about which they must locate information. For each topic, the web sites provide numerous options among which each student may select his or her favorites for inclusion in the research report and subsequent script. The three components of the project provide various types of learning opportunities: searching the Internet; reading; writing; speaking; interpreting a script through actions, expressions, gestures, and props. As a result, a student may excel either at conducting the research, collaborating to write and rehearse a script, or performing for his or her peers. The project also addresses the second concern because it is organized around specific standards for postsecondary students of French (including using the Internet) within a specific range of ACTFL proficiency levels for all four skills.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Although ACTFL identifies these standards as specific to postsecondary students of French, some of them resemble those specified for high school students. Therefore, a high school teacher may find this project suitable for his or her curriculum.

<sup>2</sup>The potential proficiency levels identified for each skill reflect those that third-semester students have typically reached. Rarely does a student reach the same proficiency level in all three skills. The

instructor assumes that students will not function at the Advanced level consistently enough to reach the Intermediate-High level.

<sup>3</sup>Proficiency levels for listening comprehension are not included here. It is implicit that partners need to understand each other's speech when they perform.

<sup>4</sup>Or, instead of writing a script and playing roles, pairs of students or individuals might design a poster-like magazine cover or Internet advertisement about the town or region. The project might result in a written product, for example, a paragraph about the town for inclusion in a travel magazine section about "le patrimoine" or a brochure that includes descriptions of various tourist attractions.

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