

# Is the French you learn here good enough?

by Pete Reeder

Parlez-vous Français?  
Sound familiar?

It should. You've been hearing it for the better part of your life probably. Especially if you've lived it here in Canada. A country in which almost a third of the people speak the French language. But what is your answer to that question? Or do you have one?

Let's face it. Our country is composed of two major ethnic groups and there is no way one of them is going to melt into the other to form a uni-lingual nation. And why should one group give up its heritage and culture and its very existence as a community, just for the convenience of the other? They shouldn't and they won't.

Quebec is a society with a different language, a different heritage and a different way of seeing things from the rest of Canada and that stronghold of Wasp-ish egoism south of the border.

Quebec has something great and wonderful to offer the rest of this country in its unabashed enthusiasm for life, its singularity. And for the first time in nearly a century, the rest of this country is beginning to recognize

Quebec's importance and the stature of its people.

Increasingly more English-speaking Canadians are wanting to learn how their fellow countrymen think, how they communicate and how they live. It is this desire that has brought about the now widespread concern of Canadians in both Quebec and the rest of Canada, with the proper teaching of the French language.

York has here in its structure, a wonderful opportunity to make the French language and its learning, a vibrant and worthwhile experience. Small classes and the facilities of the language lab offer a superb means of giving to French and its learning excitement and importance. But is York, in its French language training programs, especially AS141, doing all that could be done to make the French language as unique and exciting an experience as it can be for the average student? The student who is attempting to establish a ground work and a useful knowledge of the language. The answer is vague.

Most students are enrolled in AS141, which is ideally suited to the grade 13 graduate in its goals and purposes. But are the means

to those ends the best?

This course consists of 8 hours of work per week; probably the heaviest in all first year courses. Five hours are spent in the classroom while three are spent in the language lab. Of the five classroom hours, three are spent repeating the contents of short dialogues over and over as well as hearing for two of the three language lab hours. Two other class hours are used for a grammar period in which letters are written and the last for what could be called class discussions, based on taped lectures with the culture of France as their topic.

In a recent "confrontation" between profs of the French dept. and students who were interested in making criticisms or suggestions, (about 24 out of 300 showed) some moves were advised and some considered, but none made definite, except the decision to vote among the students on whether or not they wanted to switch instructors at half-term.

When asked what was the purpose of five hours a week of drilling in dialogues that are based on everyday, unimportant little affairs, such as talking on the telephone or meeting someone at the

airport, — dialogues that turn into memory exercises and boring, self-induced monologues, the course director, Monsieur H. Bouraoui, called it a type of "over-learning", a process in which you are simply stuffed with it, till it comes out your ears. He admits it can be boring to some, but did not offer any new ideas to give it more power and interest.

These dialogues are simple and do not add that great amount of vocabulary. True, the goal is to give the student a good feeling for pronunciation and a smoothness in his use of the language, but this can be done in other ways besides what practically amounts to brainwashing.

Good instructors should be able to lead a class in simple conversations that would bring out new dialogue at will and at the same time give the students greater freedom in their expression and the instructors guidance would overcome problems in pronunciation and use. The use of phonetics would play an important part here.

An English-speaking person living with a French-speaking family for two or three months can gain as much knowledge as a

person who has gone through high school in the oral use of the French language. Why can't a person who has had the grammar points also, not do as well or better in six months in an atmosphere close to that of the freedom enjoyed in an open home? Free conversation will bring out more and give more to a person than a dozen years of regulated dialogue!

A second big point of this course is the cultural lectures. These are once a week in the lab and then there is the class discussion. These lectures are based on cultural aspects of French life. (France, that is). There exists some sort of conviction within the minds of instructors, all the way through high school till now, that the only French culture in the world is in France. For five years of high school it was French plays and French novels and French music. Has no one ever heard of the five and one half million French-speaking people next door to this very province? People who have their own culture, with their own theatre and their own authors and their own poets and their own singers? I guess not.

And so we find ourselves listening to 14th century history or about some little dirt farmer in a place none of us will likely see. We can't talk about five and a half million people next door who will affect our lives with their every decision. We can't learn about them and be part of them. And so we stay away from them because we don't know them and they stay away from us because we don't know them. And one day someone sets off a bomb in a mailbox and everyone wonders why.

Why don't we talk about Quebec and its relationship to us and our country? As we were told Wednesday, "We haven't got the qualified people to present the Quebec scene. We cannot find them. Bring us one and we will change the whole lecture course that is being followed." So why haven't we looked harder? Why must we be always contented to wait till they come to us?

If we lose this chance to create a complete country while the atmosphere is ready for it, then we will have only ourselves to blame. This is only one small thing, one small cog, but the machine won't work without it.

The ensuing class discussions to date have been fairly poor according to comments at the meeting. Teachers assign students to prepare questions about the lecture and then the rest of the students just regurgitate what they picked up from the lecture. There is no freedom of expression. The class is too strict. It was decided this was up to the instructor now. It was before too.

Movies were discussed. They have the same fate as movies in all other courses. Nothing new there. They're good too.

All in all, there don't seem to be any great changes in the near future for the French courses at York. Literature was ruled out as being an integrated part of AS141 by professor Don Jackson of the French Literature Dept. A separate fifth course may be in the offing, however. It would be a simple pass fail course in French readings. Not quite what is wanted by the student who wants complete integration of himself into the French language.

Grammar could be stepped up also. Once a week is not enough to keep from getting rusty, especially when tests are held regularly.

So for now, just relax and take what you can.



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