

Statement of Teaching Philosophy:  
**In between books and travels**

Teaching and learning a foreign language in the classroom are inevitably artificial and students often yearn for that moment when they will leave their textbooks behind and step into France. In fact, most of us think that mastering a foreign language is only possible by traveling to the country where that language is spoken and immersing oneself in the culture. However, the classroom experience can be an invaluable one, provided that the mind, and not only the tongue, gets activated.

I believe that, for this to happen, the artificial setting must first be overcome. This is why I bring postcards, museum brochures, magazines, songs and even crêpes to the classroom. Whenever possible, I also take the students to see French movies at a nearby theater. Finally the web is another powerful instrument I frequently use to break free from the physical constraints of the classroom environment, go beyond textbooks and syllabus, and therefore bring out the reality of the French language and of the French and francophone cultures. This semester for example, I am asking my FREN 102 students to examine the sites of three French restaurants and, then, to create a role-play based on specific vocabulary presented in their textbook and on what they have learned from the websites.

I emphasize realia in my teaching for many reasons. Realia can model and illustrate a grammatical point very vividly, so vividly indeed that it has an impact on the student's mind which, therefore, assimilates the particular point better and faster. When teaching the imperative for example, I like to use the "De vous à moi" section of a French magazine. This section exposes people's problems and concerns and suggests more or less judicious advice that exemplifies the imperative perfectly.

Using realia also works well because it stimulates all the senses: there is little doubt that bread and cheese have a stronger flavor than a dull vocabulary list of edible items. But more importantly, images, documents and other realia demonstrate the humanity behind a language. When looking at a "billet de train composté" for example, students know immediately that someone actually traveled from one place to another using the receipt they now have in their hands. In order to increase the awareness of the "real other" in the classroom, I make it a point to invite guest speakers to my classes frequently. And recently, I have built a website where I introduce American students to the children of a school in Southern France. I base exercises and composition topics on this website which truly is an open and living window into French (and France) for my students.

Once students have been exposed to the "real thing", they necessarily want to play an active role in the language they were up until then learning passively. What was my language now becomes theirs. For instance, one semester, I had my class watch the news in French. After learning key-vocabulary, my students analyzed the content of the news I had provided them with. They were soon able to talk about the way the information was structured and presented. Then, in small groups, they composed a small paragraph describing a particular event that they considered worth commenting. We finally recorded each group delivering their small piece of news. The end product was shown to the whole class and the students were amazed at what they had been able to accomplish in so little time and with such a limited knowledge of the language. This exercise taught them not only French vocabulary, but also creativity, initiative, and focus, all necessary virtues for anyone who wishes to express him/herself in any language. This also turned out to be the least painful pronunciation exercise I ever came up with!

This process of gaining knowledge, confidence and experience in a language is what I try to offer to my students. I cannot take them all to France but I make sure I provide them with the opportunity to discover a world as rich as the one they would otherwise encounter by traveling. For I believe in the power of the mind, a power that Montaigne acknowledged when he said in "De l'exercitation" that "plusieurs choses nous semblent plus grandes par imagination que par effect -- because only the mind can go beyond books and experience reality in its own powerful and mysterious ways.