A Touch of ... Class!

Beatrice Dupuy and Jeff McQuillan

Handcrafted Books: Check this out!

There is strong evidence that reading, particularly self-selected or 'free voluntary' reading (FVR) is a major contributor to both first and second/foreign language development and literacy (Krashen, 1993; Elley, 1991; Elley & Manghubai, 1983). FVR has also been found to be more motivating than traditional form-focused instruction, therefore resulting in more positive attitudes toward reading and greater frequency of out-of-school reading (Greaney & Clarke, 1973; Cho & Krashen, 1994, in press 1995; Constantino, 1994, 1995; McQuillan, 1994, 1995; Tse & McQuillan, in press). However, despite these advantages, FVR is seldom a significant part of beginning and intermediate second/foreign language curricula (Huber, 1993), and many second/foreign language students report doing little reading for pleasure in the language they study (McQuillan, 1995; Dupuy, in preparation).

One reason for the lack of FVR in second/foreign language programs is the difficulty of finding texts that beginning and intermediate adult students find both interesting and comprehensible. Simple children's stories, for example, may be comprehensible but not very interesting; conversely, novels, magazines or newspapers may be interesting, but unlikely within the linguistic reach of beginning/intermediate student. There is also the matter of cost and availability: imported foreign language texts are often very costly, and not readily available in many areas.

One solution to this problem is to have second/foreign language students create their own texts for their fellow students at a similar or lower level of competence. These handcrafted books can provide students with comprehensible texts on topics of interest to students at low cost. Producing such books in a second/foreign language context also gives intermediate students an authentic task and useful purpose in composing (Johns, 1990).

© 1997 *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 53, 4 (June/juin)

What was tried?

At the beginning of the semester, intermediate semester (3rd semester) French as a Foreign Language students were invited to participate in building a reading collection for lower level students of French. They were told that their stories could be original or retellings of familiar, not-so-familiar tales from their culture – anything from children's stories to classic novels (Appendix). They were told that whatever was of interest to them was fine. Students were also advised to write without the use of the dictionary, since it was important to ensure that these texts remained at a level appropriate for beginners and intermediates. If students with an extra year of exposure to French did not know a word or expression, chances were that their fellow students at the lower level would not either. Interest and comprehensibility were the key factors to be considered.

Students were also advised to illustrate their story. Not only would the illustrations make their story more appealing to read, it would also enhance their comprehensibility. Some students drew their own illustrations, while others chose to cut out pictures in magazines or have friends help them. Another way to approach illustrations would be to have intermediate and beginning students collaborate, where intermediates would write the stories and beginners illustrate them.

Handcrafted books were part of the writing component of the intermediate course. Students participated in writing with a real purpose – texts that would be part of the foreign language library of the school, read by peers and future students. The types of texts that students produced were varied: children's stories, both original (L'Étrange Boucle d'oreille noire, Le Mauvais Noël de Françoise Frisée, etc.) and retellings (La Chenille qui avait très, très faim, Boucles d'Or et les trois ours, La Petite Poule rousse, etc.); fables (Crapaud apprend une leçon: Ne jamais remettre à demain ce qu'on peut faire aujourd'hui); limericks (Un amour de Fromage); travel reports (Chicago, Okinawa, La Nouvelle-Orléans, etc.); and comics (Le NoneSuch). Other types of texts such as magazines/newspaper articles, collections of poems around a theme or short stories could also be produced by students. Teachers helped students in the editing of their texts. On the first draft, teachers restricted their comments to the content of the story. Recommendations regarding the development and coherence of the story, the sequence of events or the characters were made when necessary. On the second draft, students and teachers worked collaboratively on improving the style and accuracy of their text. Interest and comprehensibility were the main criteria for assessment. Teachers graded the handcrafted books on a Pass (HP, P, LP)/Fail basis; only students who did not turn in a handcrafted book received a failing grade for the project.

What was accomplished?

About four hundred handcrafted books, ranging from handwritten, stapled texts with no illustrations, to word-processed, desk-top publishing quality documents with computer graphics, have been produced in the course of a semester. A home-made library, where handcrafted books will be kept for other classes and future students, has also been opened.

Another major accomplishment was that after participating in this project, students viewed themselves in a different light. They were happy to be able to show friends and parents what they had created, and proud to know that their work would be part of a library. They enjoyed the fun and creative aspect of the project. Students experienced the pride of authorship. They had become more than writers. They had become authors.

What will be done next?

In the hope of expanding the use of this library, the books will be placed on the Internet. It will provide maximum latitude to the user in downloading and reproducing these handcrafted books, as well as an opportunity for students to share their creations with a much wider audience. Students and teachers will have a source of easy and interesting reading materials.

References

Cho, K. & Krashen, S. (1994). Acquisition from Sweet Valley High series: Adult ESL acquisition. *Journal of Reading, 37*, 654–662.

Cho, K. & Krashen, S. (1995). From Sweet Valley Kids to Harlequins in one year: A case study of an adult second language acquirer. *California English, 1*, 18–19.

Constantino, R. (1994). Pleasure reading helps, even if readers don't believe it. *Journal of Reading, 37*, 504–505.

Constantino, R. (1995). The effects of pleasure reading. *Mosaic, 3*, 15–17.

Dupuy, B. (in preparation). Voices from the classroom: Students favor extensive reading over grammar instruction and give their reasons.

Elley, W. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of a book based program. *Language Learning, 41*, 375–411.

Elley, W. & Manghubai, F. (1983). The impact of reading on a second language learning. *Reading Research Quarterly, 19*, 53–67.

Greaney, V. & Clarke, M. (1973). A longitudinal study of the effects of two reading methods on leisure-time reading habits. In D. Moylle (Ed.), *Reading: What of the future?* (pp. 107–114). London: United Kingdom Reading Association.

Huber, B. (1993). Characteristics of college and university foreign language curricula: Findings of the MLA's 1987–1988 survey. *ADFL Bulletin, 24*, 6–21.

Johns, A. (1990). L1 composition theories: Implications for developing theories of L2 composition. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second Language writing* (pp. 24–36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

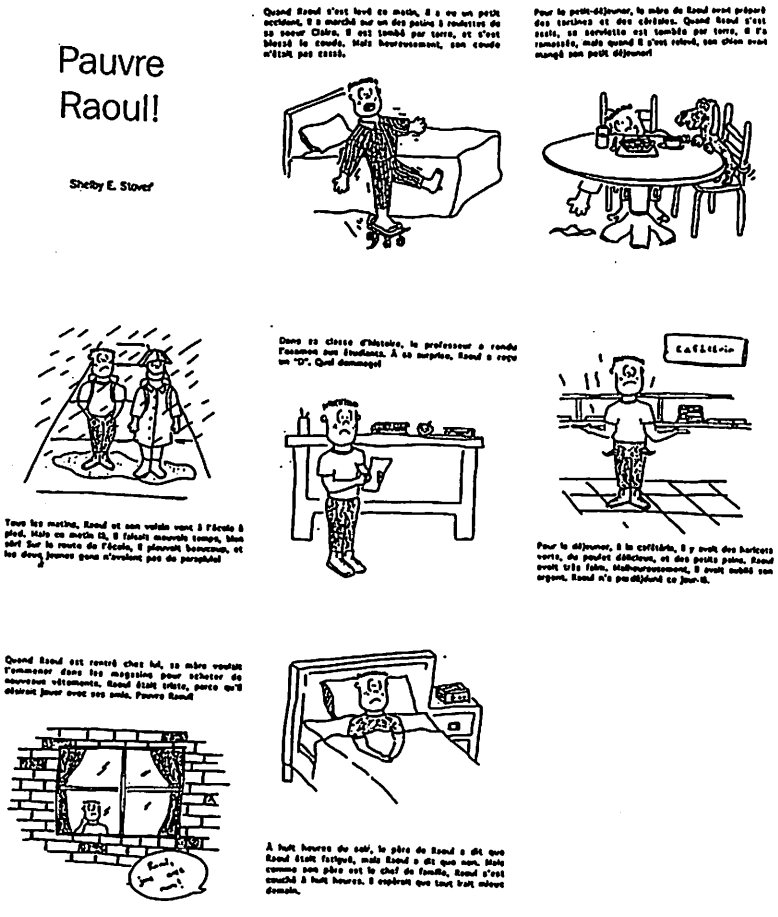
McQuillan, J. (1994). Reading versus grammar: What students think is pleasurable for language acquisition. *Applied Language Learning, 5*, 95–100.

McQuillan, J. (1995). How should heritage languages be taught? The effects of a free voluntary reading program. *Foreign Language Annals, 29*, 56–72.

Tse, L. & McQuillan, J. (in press). Changing reading attitudes: The power of bringing books into the classroom. In R. Constantino (ed.), *Linguistic minorities and literacy: Access and opportunity*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Appendix

Sample story



used with permission