

# Learning French Through Ethnolinguistic Activities and Individual Support

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**Abstract.** For the last six years, the university has been offering a Tutorial Programme for learning French, combining intensive courses and highly individualised learning activities. The programme is based on an ethnolinguistic approach and it is continuously monitored. It aims at rapid progress through contact with the local population, real-life experience in the urban environment and confrontation to cultural differences. The 6-week programme, highly regarded by the attendees who enjoy learning French *in situ*, also grants students 6 ECTS, if all requirements are met. It is facilitated by a supporting team of tutors and an online learning environment allowing for distance pedagogical interaction. The target audience includes actual or to-be university students and immigrants in professional integration (20-40y.).

**Keywords:** individual tutoring, individualised learning scenario, tutoring tools.

## 1. Theoretical background

The programme is designed according to the underlying assumptions of ethnolinguistics. Progress is stimulated by a double active observation process in which both learner and tutor are involved. Language is not considered as knowledge to be mastered, but as a communication means whose use is facilitated by the intercultural competence of the learner and the ability to observe and compare (Limentani, 2010). Context and cultural interaction are taken into account to narrow the gap between learned language and used language. With the guidance of a tutor, pictures and audio samples of real situations provide the language

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student with spatiotemporal mnemonic devices that are efficient in reproducing words, sentences and idiomatic expressions in French. While being reinforced by learning-to-learn discussions, deep learning processes are thus set into motion even in such a short period (Clerc & Rispaïl, 2008; Montredon, 2005; Zarate, 1991).

The approach is also inspired by the research and assumptions that led to the development of the European Language Portfolio, namely the work related to its language biography section (see webography below). The actual learning scenario of the programme relies on notions such as learner's autonomy, formal and informal learning situations, and action-oriented learning processes.

## 2. The learning scenario in practice

In practical terms, students follow an iterative sequence of activities. Each week, they collect ethnolinguistic material, observations and pictures, record and transcribe conversations, then transcribe and comment on them. The resulting Diary of Stay is made of three types of contributions, with instructions adapted according to the student level:

- A photograph to be taken in a real situation that shows the use of a written statement, the description of the situation and a personal interpretation.
- An audio recording of a real-life conversation, with its transcription (more advanced students will be expected to conduct a linguistic observation of the situation - oral marks, gesture, tone, hesitations, repetitions, etc.).
- A written work in personal tone, using a real or fictional identity.

To help autonomous learners select useful activities, a set of propositions is available in the online learning environment (Table 1). After a few guided experiments, students become able to design their own activities. The proposed activities are organised by level of difficulty. They really are propositions, as opposed to instructions. Their main aim is to facilitate the appropriation of the approach by the student, and learners are encouraged to design their own activities as soon as they feel confident. An additional benefit is that the student realises that he becomes able to use the approach by himself after the course has ended.

In parallel, a second set of activities lead the learner to identify and work on lexical or grammatical aspects in the Learning Journal.

Table 1. A proposed activity

<i>Bookshop (A2-C1)</i>
<b>I. Ethnographic collection</b>
<p><i>At the place</i></p> <p>1) Take photos of the situation</p> <p>2) Take a photo of a detail which contains some text.</p>
<p><i>At your place</i></p> <p>3) Describe briefly the situation</p> <p>4) Write a commentary</p> <p>Your description and your commentary must contain at least 200 signs</p>
<b>II. Ethnolinguistic recording</b>
<p><i>At your place</i></p> <p>1) Before starting your recording, if necessary, prepare your questions for the redaction</p> <p>You will be offering a book to someone. Think to whom you would like to give this gift. You can choose a real or a fictional person. If so, imagine her life, her interests. For example, a woman in her 40's, who works in a bank, who likes to read in a park on a sunny day, etc.).</p>
<p><i>At the place</i></p> <p>2) Start your recording by telling where you are, the date and the time.</p> <p>Ask the seller which book in French he would suggest for this person. Ask if it's possible to get a gift voucher, if an exchange would be possible, etc.</p> <p>The dialogue should at least include 4 questions. Do not hesitate to take initiatives during the interaction!</p>
<p><i>At your place</i></p> <p>3) Listen to the recording and transcribe the dialogue. It does not matter if you do not understand everything, but try to write as much as you can, even phonetically. Your tutor will help you complete the transcription during the meeting.</p> <p>4) From the transcription, observe how the people express themselves in French:</p> <p>For example :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does the person hesitate?</li> <li>- Does the person repeat himself? Why ?</li> <li>- Does the person have a funny pronunciation? Some words in particular?</li> <li>- etc.</li> </ul>
<p><i>During the meeting with the tutor</i></p> <p>5) With your tutor, complete the transcription if necessary and speak about your observations on the transcription.</p>
<b>III. Short essay</b>
<p><i>At your place</i></p> <p>Letter : from a lover to the person of his/her heart</p> <p>You are in love and you write her/him a love letter.</p> <p>Your letter should contain about 1000 signs.</p>
<b>IV. Meeting with the tutor</b>
<p>1) Print your work and show it to your tutor.</p>
<p>2) With the tutor, get to understand the meaning of the words. Compare both the bookshop and the romantic customers from your country with the ones in Lausanne. Would they behave the same way?</p>
<p>3) After the meeting with your tutor, you will have to edit your work a second time and put it in your Electronic Notebook. Then you can start your Learning Journal.</p>

Based on the Diary of Stay, the lexical work integrates three aspects: the context in which the vocabulary was used, the subjective perception of the student, and the linguistic and cultural insights of the tutor (Montredon, 2005). As far as grammar is concerned, the learner is led to identify frequent mistakes and their explanations. Imprecisions and inter-languaging are allowed, as long as the explanations allow the student to deepen his or her understanding and avoid the error the next time a similar situation is encountered.

More advanced students work alongside on writing an academic essay (Mini-mémoire). After attending four talks in academic settings, the learner will choose one of them as a base to his/her written production. Guidance is provided at each stage of the writing process.

Each piece of work is corrected in detail and rewritten twice, both at a distance and during the weekly one-hour tutorial session, until being considered suitable for insertion into the student's Notebook. During the tutorial session (2 x 60 minutes), the teacher provides support and encouragement, linguistic and cultural explanations, and discusses remaining errors as well as context, idioms, typical oral forms, and any relevant topics.

The sequences of activities culminate in the production of an exportable student's Notebook, whose structure replicates the Diary of Stay, the Learning Journal and the Mini-mémoire, including pictures and audio recordings. When returning home, along with their credentials, the students will thus be able to showcase their progress and keep tangible tracks of their learning experience.

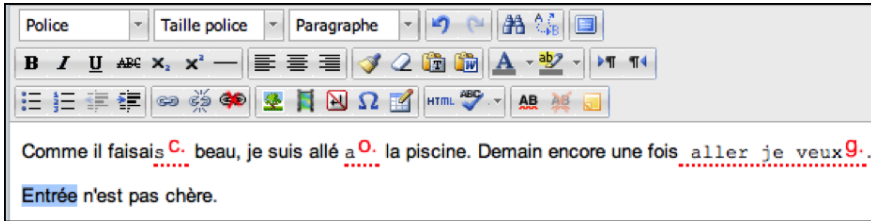
The student engaged in the programme is expected to devote about 85 hours of work over a 6-week period, which add up to the 42 hours of traditional classroom attendance in the morning. This sums up to a weekly average of 42 hours of intense study. Additional leisure activities in French are also provided. A tutor will devote between 21 and 25 hours to each student over the duration of the programme.

### **3. Supportive learning technology**

Such a complex learning scenario proved being difficult to run without supportive technology. Though providing a varied set of tools, the existing infrastructure could not cope with both the requirements of the correction process and of the production of the Notebook. Therefore, in addition to the replication of courses templates including activities and instructions adapted to language levels A1, A2 and B1-C1, two add-ons were developed for the Tutorial Programme:

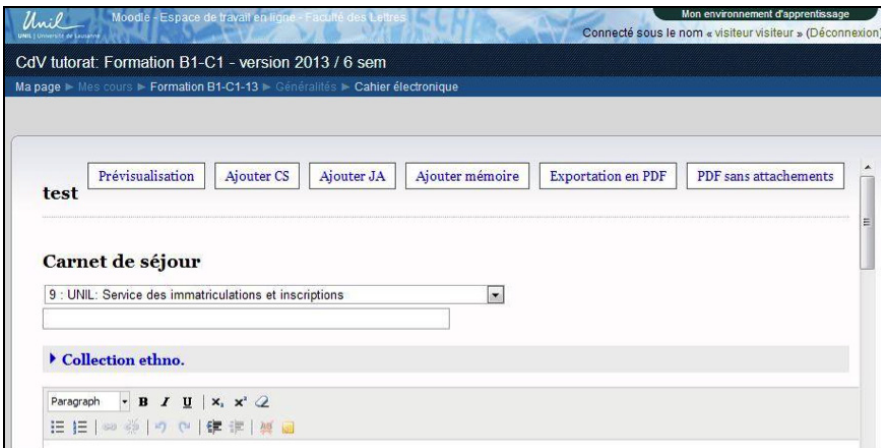
an extension to the Moodle standard editor allowing the tutors to specify nine types of language errors in the text itself and providing them with a history of the corrections.

Figure 1. Online tool for text annotation



An external interface for the Notebook, with a database for texts and artefacts storage, that allows modifications by both students and the tutor while maintaining the given structure when generating the final PDF file (a document of about 20 pages including images and audio references).

Figure 2. Student's notebook interface



## 4. Conclusion

As described above, the tutorial programme requires that the students get deeply involved in the learning experience. It is aimed at those learners who intend to take full advantage of their stay in a French-speaking region and are ready to

engage themselves in interpersonal activities that can be disconcerting. But when undertaken without resistance, the progress made in only six weeks is remarkable.

However, the overall positive appreciation of the programme should be nuanced by the following difficulties. First, both the ethnolinguistic approach and learner autonomy necessary to successfully complete the course can cause blocking resistance, since most students and sometimes tutors are not prepared for the actional learning approach. Then, the practicalities of the programme can be discouraging for those students who are not familiar with computers and learning technologies. Last, as the tutoring tools were developed in the context of a small-scale experimental project, they lack the usability which would be required for comfortable use. In the time being, these limitations would hinder a large scale deployment of the programme, should it be necessary.

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## Webography

- Anthropologie et observation participante : [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observation\\_participante](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observation_participante)
- Autobiographie de rencontres interculturelles : [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default\\_FR.asp?](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_FR.asp?)
- Biographie langagière : [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/elp\\_biography\\_FR.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/elp_biography_FR.asp)
- Expérimentation du Portfolio européen des langues (PEL) dans le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur: un projet transnational ELC/CEL : <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/elc/bulletin/6/fr/forster.html>
- Portfolio européen des langues pour l'éducation supérieure (PEL) : <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/elc/portfolio/fr-info.html>

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