

## ***Interactive Language Learning Through Authentic Audiovisual Documents***

A Proposal for Mellon funding, Summer 2019

Barry Lydgate, Professor of French

April 30, 2019

### OVERVIEW

This proposal describes the creation of learning tools that enhance students' skills at the beginning and intermediate levels in French by giving them access to culturally authentic audiovisual documents—popular songs, videos by French comic actors, clips from feature films—at a pace and level of detail they themselves control.

### PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

These interactive tools are in the service of three pedagogical challenges: improving language skills, in particular listening comprehension; expanding cultural exposure and insight; and increasing student interest and motivation. The tasks embodied in these tools are designed to help learners (1) better apprehend oral language delivered at culturally authentic speeds, (2) recognize in greater depth the cultural references it contains, and (3) in the early semesters of learning another language, experience more consistently the intellectual pleasure of encountering on its own terms a cultural document whose creation is innocent of pedagogical intent.

### EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

Opinion among experts in second-language learning is virtually unanimous on the benefits of the judicious use of authentic audiovisual documents in the language classroom. Recent technological advances in digital media enable both easy access to audiovisual realia from other cultures—web materials, podcasts, on-line videos, DVDs, and the like—and their flexible use in the classroom. Parallel developments in learning theory point to the effectiveness of approaches that privilege “acquisition” (immersive and deductive) as opposed to those that stress “learning” (linear and prescriptive) in second-language study. These developments invite language teachers to shift toward more acquisition-friendly activities based on authentic materials and away from textbook-based, instruction-centered activities.<sup>1</sup> Such authentic documents can be “a useful means to motivate learners, arouse their interest and expose them to the real language they will face in the real world.”<sup>2</sup>

Among these documents, popular songs are seen as particularly productive in the language classroom. “The benefits of utilizing the popular song are numerous. They include: 1) holding the attention and interest of students; 2) introducing native and colloquial use of the language; 3) presenting cultural phenomena and points of view; 4) providing a mnemonic device and context for learning; and, finally, 5) furnishing an entertaining alternative to textbook study.”<sup>3</sup> To this assessment of the motivational, pedagogical and cultural power of songs, I would add a further consideration: Popular songs are miniature narrative gems. They tell a coherent story, with a beginning, a middle and an end, and the best of them adumbrate a psychological and emotional world that learners find compelling. Often this is because they are about love, and so are objectively seductive, but even those that aren't foreground performance skills on the part of singer and backup that make them irresistible to listeners, especially young adult listeners.

## ASSESSMENT

The success with which the tools and tasks proposed here meet the three goals of the project—linguistic, cultural and motivational—can be readily measured. Sakai, the educational platform that will carry the interactive files, has on-board evaluative functionalities that report how often and for how long each file has been accessed by students. Sakai also offers testing tools that give instructors a variety of means for assessing students' understanding and retention of particular linguistic or cultural points contained in a document. Achievement of larger learning goals can be measured by summative testing. To these instruments can be added more subjective measures such as interviews and questionnaires asking students to evaluate their levels of enjoyment using the interactive tools and their degree of satisfaction with the progress they have made.

## THE PROJECT

If apprentice learners are to have access to the vocabulary, advanced syntax and cultural content of authentic documents expressed in fully idiomatic contemporary French, those documents must be segmented, structured, and explained in the target language. I spent the summer of 2005 working with a programmer at Wellesley to develop a technique that integrated songs, text, images and explanatory apparatus. The result was some forty interactive files compiled for my courses *Beginning French* and *Intensive French*, and for *St.-Germain-des-Prés*, an upper-intermediate course on Paris in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>4</sup> Students' reaction to these songs since then has been strongly positive. Fifteen years later, the files have become technologically outdated and increasingly cumbersome to use, and of course popular culture has moved on. This fall I turned to colleagues at LTS to ask if they could find a way to duplicate the functionality of the old software with up-to-date digital tools. They developed a means of doing so using Sakai. Happily, their approach allows importing the data of existing files into the new software, which means songs from the original project can be preserved and updated.<sup>5</sup>

This summer I propose to update about two-thirds of these songs and add to them interactive versions of approximately twenty new popular songs, about a dozen video clips of French comics such as Norman and Gad Elmaleh, and another dozen or so clips from the 2001 feature film *Amélie*. Initially my focus will be on material usable in *Beginning French*, a course I and others teach that enrolls some 40 students a semester, although if my colleagues who teach at the intermediate or upper-intermediate levels express an interest in this initiative I will work with them to apply the software and pedagogical design to materials they find useful. Since this approach can be implemented with audiovisual material at any level—and indeed in any language—I anticipate that it will be of interest to colleagues in other language areas as well, and intend to explore this with my counterparts in other departments.

## RESOURCES

I will need the help of a student intern who knows French and has some familiarity with coding. My rough estimate is that the project will need 160-170 hours of her time at \$15/hour, for a total student employment budget of approximately \$2500. I myself expect this project will occupy me for most of the summer of 2019, certainly for at least as many hours as the assistant, and I ask for a stipend of \$1500. Total budget: \$4,000 (see p.4).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Kramer, D. J. (2001). A blueprint for teaching foreign languages and cultures through music in the classroom and on the web. *ADFL Bulletin*, 33(1), 29-35.

<sup>2</sup> Al Azri, R. H., & Al-Rashdi, M. H. (2014). The effect of using authentic materials in teaching. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 3(10), 249-254; p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> Abrate, J. H. (1983). Pedagogical applications of the French popular song in the foreign language classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 8-12; p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> These earlier song files are viewable here (it may be necessary to enable the browser file format Flash or Shockwave Flash in order to play them):

<http://academics.wellesley.edu/French/Intro/index.html>

Username: Etudiante

Password: 1chanson

<http://academics.wellesley.edu/French/StGermain/index.html>

Username: Germain

PW: snob1954

<sup>5</sup> The new interface will work as follows (my example is the audio file of a popular song, but it could just as well be a video or movie clip containing dialogue): A student wishing to listen to a song clicks on its link inside the course site on Sakai. This opens the song in a video player with standard QuickTime movie controls. The student can click on "Play" and hear the song from beginning to end, pausing and repeating at will. It's my hope that the player will also support slowed-down audio, but that's still to be confirmed.

If she wants to study the song in more detail, the student turns from the controls on the video player to links and buttons on the site page. Before being posted, the song has been chunked into segments ("verses") By clicking on a button, the student can play the audio of each successive verse. Once she's listened to a verse, she can ask to re-hear it any number of times. If that's enough for her to understand the verse, she can move on to the next one.

If on the other hand she wants to see the words she's been hearing, she can summon them by clicking another button. (The software is designed to require her to listen to a verse at least once in order to access the text.) The lyrics pop up in a box to the right. Words and phrases the instructor wants explained or illustrated appear as links; clicking on a link brings the student to another box that might contain any of a variety of illustrative documents: verbal explanations (in the target language, or not), graphics, cartoons, photos with or without captions, audio clips, and video clips, all designed to help the user understand that word or cultural reference. The student can then return to the verse and click on other links to get other explanations, or move on to the following verse.

Once she has listened to the entire song, she can click on a button and hear it again from the beginning; this time the full text of the lyrics, including the clickable links, appears in the right-hand text box.