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INTEGRATING ELEMENTS OF THE  
COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH INTO THE  
PREPARATION FOR THE PARIS CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE *CERTIFICAT* EXAM

The *Certificat pratique de français commercial et économique* is the most commonly-administered Business French exam for non-native Francophones developed by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Paris (CCIP) (see Cummins 71–96). Preparing students to take this exam is therefore the focus of many Business French courses in North American institutions of higher learning.<sup>1</sup> The *Certificat* is a comprehensive exam that includes written (general test, reading comprehension, correspondence and translation) and oral (conversation and translation) components, all of which require intensive practice on the part of test-takers, who are usually not accustomed to the testing methodology (or grading system) of the CCIP.

Due to the necessity of this arduous practice, courses that prepare for the *Certificat* (as well as some of the available textbooks) tend to be instructor-centered, relying heavily on drills and exercises that recall the Audio-Lingual, or even Grammar-Translation, methods. In this article, I will outline some class activities inspired by communicative approaches that can complement the rigorous practice sessions essential to an effective preparation for this exam.

Whether or not they serve as a preparation for one of the CCIP exams, Business French courses are in many ways ideally suited for the practice of communicative language teaching with proficiency-oriented goals: they provide a series of real-life, meaningful contexts (business presentations, sales calls, loan applications) (see Omaggio Hadley 125–26); they require students to interact, in pairs or small groups, according to pre-established formats requiring the sort of negotiation skills that facilitate linguistic interplay and creativity (employer-employee, sales representative-client);

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and, in an increasingly interdependent economic world, they help answer that most nagging of student questions “What use will this be to me when I leave college?”

Most college students undergo little or no training, preparation or practice for job interviews, despite their importance in “the real world.” Students taking a Business French course, on the other hand, can define their (real or imagined) professional skills, experience and qualifications, use authentic documents (for instance, the job ads in the daily newspaper *Le Figaro*), and match them to a position offered. They write the required application and resume, conduct role-play by making an appointment with the prospective employer by phone, then prepare a mock job interview (using vocabulary learned in the course) while remaining aware of the cultural nuances involved (such as etiquette and attire). Such contextualized role-playing can be applied to many everyday business activities, which provide realistic linguistic and cultural preparation for students.

Aside from its specific purpose, the *Certificat* is valuable as an in-class motivating tool. Students who have made the financial commitment of \$70.00 (the amount currently charged by the CCIP), in order to prepare for a difficult but potentially useful exam, have an added incentive to complete their assignments and participate in class. In this context, learner-centered classroom activities are essential to reinforcing a sense of purposeful involvement on the part of students, who need to integrate the rudiments of French business culture along with the technical terms and expressions they learn during the course.

#### RESOURCES: FROGNET, PRESS, AND TV NEWS

An essential part of a Business French class is the regular use of economic news from the Francophone world. Unfortunately, one of the most common problems with using news from France is timely access, since French newspapers are expensive, and customarily arrive several days late. The Minitel system does offer real-time access to several publications, but it is neither free nor easy to use.

On the other hand, Frognet is both free and easily accessible through ordinary electronic mail.<sup>2</sup> An on-line service provided by the French Em-

<sup>2</sup>Frognet is simply an electronic means of access to French news. It is not an interactive program and requires no special computer skills or equipment. While computer-aided instruction is well suited to Business French courses, its utilization is still relatively costly and complex for many instructors. The supply of appropriate software is also limited (see Coughlin in this regard).

bassy, Frognet is a daily summary of the main French newspapers. Its simplicity of use appeals to even the most stubborn technophobes.<sup>3</sup> Students with regular access to e-mail can thus read news from France every weekday (on the screen or on printouts) and select the sections (usually only a few paragraphs) relevant to class. Due to its condensed format and brevity, Frognet is an excellent way to introduce Business French topics in class, preferably through student presentations.

Individual topics (for instance, a merger between two companies, or an update on the privatization program of nationalized firms) can then be pursued with more in-depth newspaper or magazine articles chosen by the instructor, again preferably through student presentations. In both cases (Frognet or the regular press), the object of student presentations should be to prepare test-takers for the oral part of the *Certificat*; that is, summarizing and analyzing an economic article from the French press. If time allows, student presentations can later be expanded into written Business French research papers, particularly when the topics have some bearing on possible career opportunities for students (for instance, the marketing strategy of a French company's subsidiary in the United States, see Meyer).

Televised news from France is also widely available through cable or satellite services such as SCOLA, particularly the daily evening newscast of the *France 2* channel. Instructors with access to these services can use videotaped segments in various ways. One means of articulating this media resource with Frognet and the press is to review, through listening comprehension exercises, topics previously introduced in Frognet and covered more extensively in newspaper articles.

#### COMIC BOOKS

Comic strips—*les B.D.*—have long been considered an art form in France, worthy of the same sort of critical attention devoted to cinema or music. Their place in French popular culture makes them a useful vehicle for introducing cultural context in the Business French classroom.

An easily obtainable satire of the business world, *Obélix et Compagnie* provides a visual, less-than-serious complement to standard Business French resource materials, which are generally texts filled with facts

<sup>3</sup>To subscribe, send a one-line message (*subscribe frognet - your name*) to the following address: *listproc@list.cren.net*. On weekdays, you will then receive an e-mail message of five to seven pages in length. Of course, the amount of economic news in each message will vary.

and figures. It also provides a more pleasurable way of reviewing certain key terms. For instance, what is the relationship between Obélix and Analgésix on Page 18? How does that change on Page 20? What is most likely the type of company founded by Obélix (S.A., S.A.R.L., E.U.R.L., etc.)? How does Saugrenus's ever-increasing demand for *menhirs* influence prices? What happens when the demand suddenly evaporates? In effect, the entrepreneurship of Obélix and the marketing strategy of Saugrenus constitutes an effective case study. At various points in the story, students can become consultants, "advising" (through role-playing) these managers on their next moves in the *menhir* market.

Due to the comic strip format, students approach the abundant business terminology in a less stressful way. The visual format also facilitates acquisition and memorization. Moreover, *Obélix et Compagnie* provides discussion-provoking cultural input. For instance, how are Obélix and his fellow entrepreneurs portrayed? Does this say something about common French attitudes towards the business world?

This comic book is also a good way to introduce recent French political and economic history. It was published after the first oil shock, in 1976, when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (a graduate of *l'Ecole Polytechnique*) was President and Jacques Chirac (a graduate of *l'Ecole Nationale d'Administration*) was Prime Minister. For the first time since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, technocrats (or "Néarques," according to *Obélix et Compagnie*) occupied the highest political offices in France.

*Gaston Lagaffe* (by Franquin, Editions Dupuis) is another comic strip suitable for a Business French course. Most of the characters in the several *Gaston* comic books are office workers (although obviously unconventional), and much of the action revolves around common business situations (meeting deadlines, trying to sign contracts, dealing with the correspondence, etc.). While Gaston expends much energy in attempting to shirk his work, the fact that he is the "hero" of these books can lead to in-class comparisons of the French and American work ethics.

Many of the wordless *B.D.* drawn by Sempé are invaluable for provoking student reactions and discussions. For example, in *La Grande Panique*, the thoughts of the harried manager driving his family to their house in the country are presented in purely graphic form, with no accompanying text. Several activities can be based on this comic strip: narrating the events, role-playing the dialogue between the family members, or role-playing the manager's dreaded return to his office. Business-related

vocabulary (*une société d'import-export, un cadre, les heures de pointe, une résidence secondaire*) can thus be reviewed in a more pleasurable context, using only visual input.

## FILMS

Given the pervasiveness of audiovisual stimuli in our culture, the use of films or televised series in the Business French class seems a natural fit.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not an easy task to find French films that deal realistically (or indeed at all) with business situations. This very fact should be a topic for discussion in class.

*Romuald et Juliette* (directed by Coline Serreau, 1989) is one of the rare, recent feature films from France whose plot revolves around the workplace.<sup>5</sup> The numerous business topics include a French company seeking to expand into a foreign market (the United States), the pressure to meet increased production targets, a takeover bid on a competitor, rivalry within the board of directors, and insider trading. There are also scenes of everyday life not commonly seen in French films, such as supermarket shopping or the daily commute to work via bus and subway.

With its complex plot and ironic spin on stereotypical characters, *Romuald et Juliette* would be a valuable resource in several French classes. In the case of Business French, much use can be made of the corporate context for student role-playing. The cultural aspects of the film are also helpful. For instance, in the opening scenes, students can be asked to describe specific examples of the socioeconomic contrast between the families of Romuald Blindet (*le P.D.G.* “CEO”) and Juliette Bonaventure (*la femme de ménage*—“housekeeper”) before learning about these characters’ respective jobs (which they can then be asked to guess).

Another film dealing with work, or lack thereof, is *La Comédie du Travail* (directed by Luc Moullet, 1987). Essentially a series of skits on the *fonctionnaires* (“bureaucrats”) at a local (un)employment agency and the *chômeurs* (“unemployed”) they deal with, this film has several work-related scenes with little or no dialogue, thereby presenting perfect opportunities for student input.

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<sup>4</sup>As regards business, we are bombarded with innumerable televised commercials. French commercials (when available), along with magazine advertising, constitute excellent authentic resource materials.

<sup>5</sup>The (atrocious) English-language title is: *Mama, There's a Man in Your Bed*.

### CASE STUDIES

Case studies are a basic staple of Business Administration coursework. They encourage cooperation within teams and competition among them, which helps to foster in-class discussion. In the case of the Business French classroom, unless students have a similar Business Administration background, case studies cannot include the lengthy quantitative analysis required in Finance or Marketing courses.

A case should be based on actual events involving real people and businesses in the Francophone world. It should place students in the position of decision makers, faced with choices that will impact the company's future prospects in a positive or negative way: whether or not to introduce a new product on the market; choosing a new advertising strategy; when and how to cut costs; etc. Students are to analyze the information provided in the case (which is usually not complete, just as in authentic business situations) and arrive at decisions based on their analyses.

Since an essential element of case studies is teamwork, students should prepare cases in small groups. The aim is to emulate real-life business situations that call for cooperation among members of business teams, who compete against teams from other businesses. Each group then hands in one copy of its (common) written work. After one group presents, using transparencies or any other visual aid, other groups offer suggestions or criticism of the presenting group's results. In this situation, the role of the instructor is that of a moderator, facilitating and clarifying exchanges between groups, without seeking to provide "correct" or "definitive" solutions. Here again, the aim is to simulate actual business situations, where there are a variety of possible outcomes.

Unfortunately, there is no large *corpus* of readily-available cases in the field of Business French, compared to materials for Business Administration. Nuss and Paton provide valuable models of cases with follow-up activities, but these are quite dated. Until the utilization of case studies becomes more widespread in the field of languages for business (i.e. until the rising demand spurs an increase in the supply of useable case studies), instructors will have to prepare their own cases, or adapt for their own use what cases are currently available.

### THE TIME FACTOR

None of the activities outlined above should replace intensive practice for the *Certificat*. There is no substitute, for example, for the regular use of translation exercises. Similarly, students must write numerous business letters in order to familiarize themselves with the French formats. A thorough preparation for the exam necessarily entails repetitive tasks. However, wherever possible, exercises should be contextualized, and should simulate real-life uses of language. Similarly, role-playing activities, supported by authentic documents, can usefully complement the necessary practice sessions, as time allows. Even though the *Certificat* was not designed with the communicative approach in mind, students can benefit from its application.

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