FRENCH LANGUAGE VARIETIES AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: HOW CAN COMIC BOOKS HELP TEACHERS?

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Abstract. French is a language commonly associated with a rich cultural and literary environment, and comic books are an important part of that universe. For that reason, they can be a good means of discovering the vast francophone cultures, which count the majority of its speakers in Africa. Despite that fact, the variety that is usually taught to learners is the one called standard, which is supposed to be a neutral form of the language. However, language cannot be separated from culture. By favoring only one variety in class, teachers limit the possibilities for developing their students' intercultural competence (IC) for communication in a multicultural setting. With the aim of exploring possible ways of both introducing other varieties of French in class and developing students' intercultural competence to enable them to interact with different parts of the francophone world, in this article I analyze the potential held by comic books for the development of IC by proposing a class plan that applies some of the principles presented here. To do so, I highlight the importance of nurturing IC, the subset of skills that make it, and how to develop them. Furthermore, I suggest a class plan based on some pages of the comic book Aya de Yopougon. The choice of material derives from the idea that authentic material can display different varieties of French while also expanding knowledge on the cultures that form the francophone world. Through the analysis, it is possible to point out three aspects: first, comic books can be a good source of cultural interaction for the classroom setting. Second, teachers can use them to encourage students to learn more about different French-speaking peoples. And last, classes can revolve around literature as a way of fostering intercultural competence at the beginner level. In conclusion, I present some ways in which comic books could be used in classroom activities to both show diverse varieties of French and to support development of IC, with the added benefit of fostering students' reading habits.

Keywords. French teaching, comic books, language varieties, francophone cultures.

1. Introduction

French is a language commonly associated with a rich cultural and literary environment. It may be one of the reasons why it is the second most learned foreign language in the world [1], especially considering the variety of artistic, philosophic, and cultural artefacts many countries from the francophone world have created and continue to do so. Despite that fact, the varieties of French commonly used by most of its speakers, that is people in the African continent, are still not displayed in the classroom setting.

Moreover, if we consider that language and culture cannot be separated, as stated by Santos [2], the variety that is usually taught, called standard, is not actually neutral as it reflects the culture and values from a group of speakers.

The inconsistency between what is taught in the classroom and what actually makes up the variety of ways of expression across the francophone world is acknowledged by the most recent report written [1]. However, acknowledging it is not enough. According to Huang [3], in the foreign language classroom, exposing students to only one culture can be problematic, especially when considering that the language will be used in global settings. Even though the author discusses the issue in the domain of English teaching, the same conclusion can be drawn for French teaching, as it is a language that is

present in all continents and is widely learned.

The contact with groups of varying cultures that share the target language as their way of expression is essential to develop intercultural competence. In the literature, there are many definitions of that competence [4], [5], and [6], but a functional model that encapsulates a number of characteristics that generally appear in other definitions is the one introduced by Byram [7].

In his work, Byram defines intercultural competence as an essential part of teaching and learning. It is so because students learn languages in order to communicate with people from other nations, and for that to be effective it is necessary to be aware of one's own beliefs and attitudes, all grounded in one's culture, while interacting with people who have a different sociocultural background [7]. For that to happen, one of the necessary skills is relating and interpreting, defined as the ability of understanding documents from a different cultural environment and identifying and establishing relationships to one's own world [7].

Considering those aspects and not forgetting that a string of factors need to align in order for these varieties to be introduced in the learning setting, such as the public policies and the didactic material, it is most commonly teachers that can begin to address it. Referring once again to the discussion promoted by Huang [3], the importance of using multicultural texts augments in the face of developing students' intercultural competence.

It can be done through the introduction of literature in the classroom for purposes that targets both linguistic and cultural teaching. Drawing from Mota's [8] and Kaspary and Parot de Sousa's work [9], it becomes evident that the literary text offers a range of possibilities that can develop students' language skills, but most importantly their ability to discover other identities, relate to them, and ultimately appreciate manifold realities that might be far from what they know, but that may also be closer than previously imagined.

A special form of literature can supercharge the already-mentioned objectives: comic books. Authentic material considered to have a high potential in terms of engagement and of learning for students [10], even those in the beginning of their journeys, due to the particular mix of image and verbal language to make meanings that would not be the same if they were separated [11], comics also present an interesting possibility for teachers to bring varieties of French to the classroom, for they frequently include marks of the oral language [12], besides encasing the cultural background that makes up the target language's society [13] and being a witness of its time [14].

To make the most of the engaging qualities of comics, different approaches that enable students to interact with the content being presented and also relate to it by way of analysis and comparison can be employed. Three of them are experiential learning, or learning by doing; project work and cooperative learning [6]. These approaches share components of the action-oriented approach [5], which has gained importance since the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference in 2001 and of its companion volumes. It favors a vision of learners as social agents who build meaning beyond language through collaboration and interaction [5].

Taking into account all of those elements, this article's goal is to analyze the potential held by comic books for the development of IC by proposing a class plan that applies some of the principles introduced and briefly discussed here. In the following section, I present the chosen comic book, the method of analysis, and the elaborated class plan. Then, I present the results of its analysis and discuss them. Finally, I draw some conclusions, point out limitations and further studies to be carried out.

2. Methodology

Puren [15] travels through time highlighting the methods used in the teaching of French as a foreign language spanning centuries. When talking about the ways of the direct method, he mentions one aspect that is still heard nowadays as an argument against bringing literature into the beginner classroom: they refrained from presenting literature on the basis of it being a way of facilitating learning without causing cultural misunderstandings.

Going against this idea, however, Mota [16] elaborates two class plans that, while being directed towards English teaching, offer ideas of how literary texts can be used in a range of levels, starting from the beginner courses. Basing her suggestions on a play and a romance, the author illustrates how teachers can discuss complex themes, such as linguistic variation, colonialism and social class prejudice, through literary texts making the right choices in regards to teaching context, linguistic level, and age.

It is drawing from her work that I aim at elaborating a class plan in which literature in the form of comic books, more specifically Aya de Yopougon, can be used with learners of French. It is combined with Hueber and Reynolds [6] suggestions on how to develop intercultural competence. The chosen volume does a double job of showing a different variety of the language while also introducing the story's universe, characters, and first cultural insights into life in the Ivory Coast of 1978.

2.1 The comic book

Aya de Yopougon is the most well known work of writer Marguerite Abouet and illustrator Clément Oubrerie published in France in 2005. It is a comic book series that follows the adventures of three young girls in transition from teenage to adult life and their families in the Ivory Coast in the late 70s, centering on the character of Aya. Some of the most present themes are the young adult dilemmas of

love and doubt about the future, but also friendship and family relations. It is based on the author's own experience living in the Ivory Coast as a young girl before moving to France.

The award-winning comic has been translated into more than 5 languages and in 2012 it was adapted as a movie by UGC. The first volume was translated to Brazilian Portuguese in 2009 by Julia da Rosa Simões, and later it became a single volume. It is also worth mentioning that at the end of the book, a glossary compiles the slang, recipes, habits, and other cultural information introduced throughout the book.

The chosen pages, numbered from 1 to 3, are the ones in which she introduces her family and friends, a common topic in beginners' courses. That is part of the reason that motivated the choice for the comic. Another is the fact that the author is Ivorian, and in her work the variety spoken at the turn of the century captures some marks of oral discourse. The third reason for it concerns the book's translation to Portuguese, a crucial element to encourage students to further investigate the story and find out more about the Ivory Coast and its citizens' culture.

The setting is Aya's family home. Her mother, father and siblings are gathered with her neighbours and friends to watch the national beer commercial from her father's company. Further on page 3, we also get to see a glimpse of the streets of her city, Yopougon, as well as a common recreational place in the country called *le maquis*.

In the presentation she makes, some Ivorian cultural aspects permeate her words, but is also evident in the drawings, the colors, and the places shown.

Considering the pages and their content, the plan was developed for beginners, which corresponds to A1 in the CEFR, adults ranging from 18 to 50 years old, centering on family formats and dynamics in an in-person class.

2.2 The class plan

Tha class plan here described was elaborated based on three moments. In the first, students are encouraged to call upon their previous knowledge in order to approach the theme and start discussion. In the next, they work together to build understanding of the written document. At that moment, linguistic matters are in focus so as to ensure a level of understanding that will be useful for discussion later. In the last part, they go through discussion exercises that reinforce the new information while it allows them to build connections between the material and themselves. A homework activity designed to carry on the development of intercultural awareness was also designed.

For the plan based on the initial three pages of Aya de Yopougon's first volume, the main objective is to present one's family, considering it as both blood-related and symbolic families. In the first activity, learners are asked to brainstorm words they relate to FAMILY. The teacher notes it on the board and after the brainstorm is finished, she can request they explain the words they have added. If it happens, focus especially on words such as *friends* and *neighbours* to discuss how families are not exclusively tied by blood.

Then, show the pages of images without any written text. Separate students in small groups and ask them to imagine the narrative being told and by whom. It can be done in Portuguese, but if any of them wants to try it in French, they are encouraged to look up words and phrases. At the moment of sharing their creations, note on the board elements they have mentioned in common.

Then, give the original pages and tell them to read and compare the narrative they have told and the actual content being presented. Encourage them to search word definitions only after trying to guess the meaning through context and images. Offer an appendix with images that illustrate difficult-to-guess vocabulary, such as *margouillat* (a gecko common of West African countries) and *cadre* (an executive).

After they have completed it, and to further work on comprehension and comparison, ask the following questions to be answered with the whole class: who are Aya's direct family members? Who are the other people in the living room? If you had to guess, what would you say their relation to each other is? Do you consider friends as part of the family?

Following their answers and once again in groups, learners need to choose someone's family to present in the same way Aya presents her family. Each student in the group has to represent a family member and do what the narrator says in French. They are encouraged to add brief dialogues among members so that everyone has some speaking time.

For homework, the recommendation is that students watch the movie or read the comic book, available in Portuguese. They should get to know the characters better and put themselves in their shoes by reflecting on what motivates each of the main characters' initial decisions. That is, what motivates Aya to concentrate on her studies; what expectations Adjoua has for her future and how it influences her choices; and what moves Bintou towards dancing more than towards school. By interacting with the content in any of the chosen formats and reflecting on it to answer the questions, students are led to consider multiple perspectives and identify elements that could further help them relate to characters or recognize aspects they might have in common.

3. Results and discussion

The first activity is designed to call students' attention to what they already know. It is supposed to prepare them to connect new information to previous knowledge.

The discussion that ensues serves the purpose of finding out what students define as family. Considering that in the comic not only blood-related members are introduced, it can become another point of connection, considering that it is not uncommon for Brazilian families to also include friends, neighbors, and people who are not directly related by blood or marriage.

The second activity centers on creativity and linguistic purposes. It is designed so that students can analyse the images and derive meaning from them while questioning if they suffice to understand the whole story. It hints at the specificity of the medium in which image and text work together to create meaning [11]. By doing so, students put in practice the creation of narratives, which is pointed by Hueber and Reynolds [6] as a multiperspective skill which allows for taking different points of view and decentering from one's own values.

Moreover, the next step supports the discovery of new words as well as sociocultural and geographic specificities, and builds comprehension of the material. It also increases the chance of starting to relate to some elements, such as the way of referring to a particularly annoying family member or the conveying of dissatisfaction through humorous facial expressions or witty quips, well-known symbols of teenage behavior.

As an extension of the comprehension activity, a discussion can be carried out with the aid of some questions. They can spur students to make connections through comparison between their own family patterns and those introduced by Aya as well as prompt reflection about the place of symbolic relations in the family. It can equally help paint a portrait of what community means in Ivorian and Brazilian contexts. In other words, it makes it possible for learners to compare seeking to relate with the other being presented in the comic.

The group task in class and the homework were elaborated based on Hueber and Reynold [6]. When discussing types of activities to develop students' intercultural competence, they point out the possibility of using both role play and films and texts.

The role play offers learners the opportunity of putting themselves in a new identity and confronting a different set of values. Through that sort of experience, it becomes easier to discuss differences while promoting respect for others. In the plan, although learners are asked to play family members issued from the same culture as them, after reading the comic, it is almost inevitable to compare Brazilian family members' usual way of expressing their thoughts towards each other in a similar way as the main character from the Ivorian story does.

By further encouraging their interaction with either the movie or the whole comic as homework, it is possible to incite curiosity for the unfolding of events and to extend the contact that will enable learners to find more similarities between Brazilian and Ivorian cultures as well as differences.

4. Conclusion

This article's goal was to investigate how comic books can be used to teach French by showing different language varieties in the classroom while also developing students' intercultural competence.

The analysis shows that comic books offer a number of opportunities for learners to find cultural similarities and differences between them and a target group's culture while also introducing a distinct variety of French.

Besides, it also offers clues as to how teachers could make use of comic books as a way of developing students' intercultural competence. It points out especially to how important the choice of comics can be considering the cultural content on display in regards to the learners' original culture, as is the case of Brazilian and Ivorian cultures, for it eases the process of comparing and relating.

As evidenced, they can also foster creative power among students through narratives that allow them to decenter from their own values. Additionally, comic books can also develop reading habits.

Despite the positive remarks, some limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. The first concerns the literature review. Even though many works present principles that can be applied across multiple language teaching practices, it would be more recommended to focus on works that investigate the use of literature exclusively for teaching French. It would better ground and direct the analysis and the discussion.

Another limitation, that can be surpassed in future studies, is that of not applying the class plan here presented and designed for developing IC. By not doing it, there was no way of actually measuring and evaluating the degree of success of the use of comics for presenting a different variety of French and for developing students' IC.

A third drawback is the choice for only one comic. Considering the goal of showing different varieties of French, it would be suitable to also include comics from different francophone countries, such as Senegal, Mali and Madagascar. For that, more than a class plan likely should be developed. Also, choosing a story that unfolds at a time closer to the present could make it easier for teachers and students to find common elements in daily life in the age of globalization.

All in all, this article contributes to putting comics at the center of the learning and teaching process as a way of both developing students' intercultural competence and of showing varieties of French that are not the *standard*.

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