French 101: Learning from the Behaviorist Approach

A Design Study Proposal

Behaviorist Design Project Study Proposal

ED 333A

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Introduction

Foreign language acquisition is an important component of high school education in the U.S. and especially for college preparation. Many universities have entrance qualifications that require students to have taken 2-years of foreign language studies in high school. It has been noted that second language learning by school-aged children takes longer and is more difficult than it is for younger children. (McLaughlin, 1992) By the time a student reaches high school age, learning a new language becomes more challenging.

Often, it is assumed that once people can converse comfortably in another language, they are fluent and in full control of the concepts of the language. Yet there is much more involved in knowing a second language than having the skills to speak it. A person who is proficient in verbal communication does not necessarily have the required grammar and vocabulary skills and building blocks to fully understand the language and progress to fluency. It has been noted that often children appear to be fluent in a language “because of their oral skills but have not mastered the more disembedded and decontextualized aspects of the language.” (McLaughlin, 1992) Therefore, it is important that the language is taught in an effective way so students learn the basic skills to later build on. Grammar and vocabulary skills are essential components of learning a foreign language.

Learning Problem

French vocabulary and grammar skills are difficult to acquire by high school students because of the seemingly unrelated lists of vocabulary words and grammar usage rules they are required to learn. Often times, learners feel overwhelmed with the abundance of material they have to master in their French class.
Learning Goals

Our study aims to determine the most effective way to impart essential vocabulary, grammar and syntax rules to high school students of 1st year French 101 classes. We will focus our study on learning grammar and vocabulary building blocks in 1st year French classes in an American high school. We will observe how classes are taught in order to determine the path to developing the higher order skill of successful French grammar usage.

Design principle

Our proposed study is based on the following principle of behaviorist learning theory, as documented in Greeno, et al.

“Clear goals, feedback, and reinforcement. For routine learning, it is advantageous to have explicit instructional goals, to present instructions that specify the procedures and information to be learned and the way that learning materials are organized, to ensure that students have learned prerequisites for each new component, to provide opportunities for students to respond correctly, to give detailed feedback to inform students which items they have learned and which they still need to work on, and to provide reinforcement for learning that satisfies students’ motivations.” (Greeno, et al, 27)

Gagne feels instructional designers of foreign language learning need to focus on the “necessity for devoting considerable attention to the early parts of language learning”. (Gagne, 265) Once basic skills such as language syntax, grammar and vocabulary are mastered, the learner can move onto developing advanced levels of French learning. To ensure the students of French 101 receive adequate instruction such that they are able to master French grammar and vocabulary needed to tackle more advanced features of
learning the foreign language, the instructional designers need to be aware of the environment where the learning occurs. It is imperative that the environment be conducive to bringing about the desired successful acts of learning and capabilities; in our case, successful knowledge of French grammar and vocabulary. We feel that incorporating explicit learning goals, constructive critiquing and regular feedback into the sequences of instruction will assist the students in learning the grammar and vocabulary needed in this course.

**Proposed Study:**
Students are expected to master the successful use of basic grammar by the end of French 101. Successful use of grammar is required in order to later allow for problem-solving skills in the higher-level courses. In our study, we are going to observe five 1st year French (101) classes to determine what pre-requisite skills students are bringing to the classes, which component skills students are learning, and the order in which these skills are taught.

**Methodology:**
We are going to observe the 5 classrooms throughout the 1st year French 101 course. Each class consists of approximately 15 students. Before the study, we will conduct a survey in each class to determine the pre-requisite skills students are bringing to the classroom. These survey questions will include if they are familiar with the French accent or do they currently know any French words?

While observing each class, observers will pay particular attention to:

- Component skills taught in the class (e.g. pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar rules)
- The order in which the component skills are introduced, taught, and related to the previous skills
- Frequency and form of feedback students receive from the teacher
• Methods of reinforcement teacher exercises to teach the component skills (e.g. daily quiz, homework, drill and practice, etc.)

At the end of the study, we will conduct an achievement test consisting of multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank grammar lessons, and simple English-French translation. We are also going to test the students on their pronunciation skills by asking them to read simple sentences. From these tests we aim to gauge students’ skills in basic French grammar and their comfort in exercising their new knowledge.

**Findings:**

We found that the scores of the achievement tests were much higher for three of the classes. The students in all three of these classes were taught the same component skills and in the same order. The lessons consisted of instructional lessons and quizzes of:

1. Phonetics and pronunciation of the French alphabet, including accents (e.g., à vs. a and è vs. e).
2. Parts of speech including adjectives, articles, nouns (gender and agreement), pronouns, adverbs, prepositions and verbs.
3. Conjugation of verbs and tenses (past, present, future, past perfect etc.)
4. Sentence structure and writing brief essays.

The tasks that were successful incorporated repetition, memorization of vocabulary lists covering nouns, adjectives and verbs (parts of speech) and grammar skills/sentence structure lesson plans. The classroom support involved integrating tasks into lessons that flowed logically from the instructional sequence. The teachers provided patience and repetition to solidify the new language concepts or skills of grammar and vocabulary.
Classroom activities focused on reinforcement of vocabulary and grammar skills. The teacher gave students daily homework consisting of vocabulary memorization and repetitive word writing. In the beginning of every class, students took a short quiz consisting of fill in the blank grammar lessons, vocabulary word matching to definition, verb tenses and conjugation (forming distinctions for number, person, voice, and mood). These homework assignments and quizzes helped students to pace their studies toward the mid-term and final exams. Therefore, not only did the homework and quizzes reinforce students’ learning, but they also motivated the students to do well since they did not have to “cram” for the final exam with too much new information.

Since the component skills that were initially introduced in these classes started from the basics, we found that students that had listed pre-requisite skills on our pre-study survey, did not score higher on the achievement tests. Differences in scores for students that knew a few basic French words like “monsieur” or “bonjour” before the class started were negligible.

We observed that the two classes that did not produce the highest test scores were taught both slightly differing skills and in a different manner than the other three that were successful at grammar skills mastery. Unlike the three successful classes, for these two classes the students were not given clear goals of what they were expected to learn by the end of the course. The curriculum was loosely structured and conversational skills were taught as the initial component of learning French grammar skills. Students were found to confuse the use of masculine and feminine articles for nouns and seemed to have little basis of understanding or knowledge of when to use which articles. Students also generally showed poor pronunciation skills and did not seem to understand how certain accents on individual letters changed the sound of words. Teachers in these two classes did not continually provide the necessary feedback and correct the students when displaying poor pronunciation skills. There was also less of a focus on building
vocabulary skills and learning the individual components of each grammar rule in these two classes. The students in these two classes generally did not appear to achieve a command of French grammar and did not perform well on the end-of-year achievement test.

**Proposed Design Solution:**

Based on our findings, we determined the specific component skills, how these skills were taught and in what order they were best taught to produce the most successful use of grammar amongst students. We determined that in order to achieve the higher order skill of successful use of grammar, the following component skills should be taught to first-year French students. First there should be a focus on teaching phonetics and pronunciation, which involves the stimulus-response learning type. Adults begin learning to pronounce a new foreign word with “approximate capability” that is already established. (Gagne, 41). Because of this, teachers should focus on a narrow range of acceptance of this pronunciation since adults are already coming into the class with some basic capabilities (more so than children) and need to focus on distinction. Reinforcement should be emphasized in this area. Once achievement in basic pronunciation skills is established, teachers should instruct students in parts of speech including adjectives, articles, nouns (gender and agreement), pronouns, adverbs, prepositions and verbs. After mastery of basics in these areas is shown through testing, conjugation of verbs and tenses (past, present, future, past perfect etc.) can be introduced. The next order of component skills involves the establishment of basic sentence structure writing. This requires learning through chaining and the ability to connect some of the previously learned component skills including vocabulary, nouns, articles and verbs.

Our proposed curriculum employs a learning hierarchy that includes clear goals, reinforcement and repetition of basic foundations of the French grammar skills. By setting a goal (reward for scoring high on tests or recognized achievement on tests) the
students will be provided with the necessary motivation to master the necessary first-year grammar skills. As discussed by Gagne, "…if the subordinate skill has not been previously mastered, there will be no facilitation of the learning of the higher-level skill." (239). Hence, these students should be taught in a way to master the fundamentals of grammar and vocabulary skills before moving into conversation and reading/writing comprehension skills. Frequent quizzes and testing will provide the reinforcement and feedback necessary for students to gauge their skills at any one point and provide motivation for them to improve upon their skills.

**Conclusion:**

The learning environment of French 101 needs to be designed to infuse in the students a thorough understanding of vocabulary and grammar skills. They will use these basic skills to then build on the higher order skill of successful grammar usage. To bring this about, we feel learners should be provided with explicit goals of what they are expected to achieve by the end of the class, should be given adequate feedback to improve their performance, and reinforcement as a source of motivation. A successful class should be modeled to include essential components of learning that are sequenced correctly to maximize the learner’s output.
References:

