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Grammar Project

Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages
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Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages
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Part 1: Systematized Grammatical Knowledge of Direct and Indirect Pronouns Based on a
French Textbook¹

Novice: Text type is fragments only and therefore the speaker has no real knowledge of or context in which to use direct or indirect object pronouns. Communication is uncomplicated and direct.

Intermediate Low: Text type is short sentences and memorized phrases. Lexicon is limited to familiar vocabulary used for exchanging basic personal information. Grammar is often inaccurate.

Students are introduced to direct object pronouns (*me, te, le, la, nous, vous, les*) and are also introduced to the basic verbs that take the direct object pronoun.

Indirect object pronouns (*me, te, lui, nous, vous, leur*) are introduced one chapter later. Students are introduced to a basic list of verbs that take the indirect object pronoun.

Intermediate Mid: Text type is sentences or strings of sentences. Speakers have broader vocabulary than at the Intermediate Low level, but are still limited. Speakers have better grammatical accuracy in basic constructions, but still make frequent grammatical errors.

Speakers at this level are introduced to pronouns *y* and *en*. At this point, the textbook explains the relation between *en* and expressions of quantity, and the relation between *y* and prepositions of place.

The textbook then introduces the order of double object pronoun replacement and touches on agreement of the past participle with the preceding direct object pronoun.

¹ Valette, Jean-Paul and Rebecca M. Valette. Contacts: Langue et Culture Française. 5th Ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993

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Two pages later, the order of the pronouns *y* and *en* is given.

The next chapter introduces, in this order, the relative pronouns *lequel(s)* and *laquelle(s)*, and all other forms of the “*quel*” family, and the pronoun *dont*.

Part 2: Learner's Actual Acquisition or Communicative Competence of Direct and Indirect Pronouns²

Intermediate High: Text type is clusters of sentences or paragraphs. Grammar is still frequently inaccurate, but learner understands and uses more complex grammar and syntactical structures.

Although students are introduced to direct and indirect pronouns at the Intermediate Low stage, actual spoken acquisition probably does not begin until the Intermediate High level. At this level, learners are able to use direct object pronouns (*me, te, le, la, nous, vous, les*) and some indirect object pronouns (*me, te, lui, nous, vous, leur*), and are able to distinguish the gender of the nouns being replaced and whether they are singular or plural. Syntax is still sometimes a problem. Learners are armed with a basic knowledge of the verbs which take direct or indirect pronouns (i.e. verbs ending with *à, de,* or nothing), but can still mistake them.

The relative pronouns *qui* and *que* are acquired at this level³, although there is still some confusion between the two. Learners are able to form basic sentences using these pronouns: *J'aime la maison qui est moderne. La maison que j'aime est la-bas.* These pronouns are relatively easy to acquire (especially for a native English speaker we think) since they are used in basic, everyday spoken English: I like the house that is modern.

² Used ACTFL Guidelines to assist us in determining acquisition.

³ The ACTFL Guidelines place the acquisition of these pronouns at the Advanced Low level, but we believe that the learners are beginning to acquire this grammar element before the Advanced Low level.

The house that I like is over there.

Learners are beginning to acquire and use the pronouns *y* and *en*, but still make mistakes. Learners have not yet grasped proper usage of all pronoun replacement and may incorrectly use object pronouns. Students may still not have a complete understanding that *y* replaces places and *en* replaces expressions of quantity. Although learners are at the start of implementing *y* and *en*, more regular acquisition of these pronouns will take place at the Advanced Low level.

Advanced Low: Text type is paragraph length discourse. Speaker can communicate in all major time frames yet grammatical errors are still evident. Lexicon is still somewhat generic, but the topics about which they can communicate have broadened from personal to public interests.

Learners at this time have some knowledge of prepositions that follow verbs, and are therefore beginning to implement the relative pronouns *lequel* and *laquelle* with the correct prepositions (e.g. *pour laquelle*, *avec lequel*, *auquel*, *desquels*, *sur lesquelles*). (We decided to name this the “*Quel* Family Tree”). Although students at this level have learned and began to implement the *quel* pronouns, there are still many errors. The problem is not only one of the grammatical structure in French, but also the fact that in regular spoken English we do not use this high grammatical structure concerning pronoun replacement. Example in French: *Je vais au supermarché avec Claire.* = *La fille avec laquelle je vais au supermarché.* Example in English: I am going to the supermarket with Claire. = The girl that I’m going to the supermarket with. (The grammatically high pronoun replacement would be “The girl with whom I am going to the supermarket.”)

Pronoun replacement can be difficult to acquire in French because, in spoken English it has become very common to end sentences with prepositions. ^{which means they aren't really prepositions} Whereas in French, this is not an option. Therefore, the problem is of a cognitive nature, since at this level the structure of the dominant language is still evident. In order to implement the *quel* pronouns correctly at all times, the students would be required to know the prepositional endings for all verbs. ^{or why?!!} **This is the reason that** the student is still making many faults with this grammatical element. (**This is the reason for which** the student is still making many faults with this grammatical element.) Now you see what we mean. :)

At the Advanced Low level, learners are using the pronoun *dont* in memorized phrases only. These phrases are usually constructed using the idiomatic expression *avoir besoin de*, such as, *J'ai besoin d'un livre. = Voila le livre dont j'ai besoin.* (See next section for further acquisition of *dont*.)

Advanced Mid: Lexicon is fairly extensive yet still generic, except in the case of the learner's "hothouse" topic(s). Text type is paragraph length. Most major grammatical structures are intact, but may fall away in extended discourse.

Generally since the *quel* pronouns are less abstract than the pronoun *dont*, learners acquire this first: the *quel* pronouns are used in conjunction with preposition and noun replacement, they are therefore more concrete. Whereas *dont* is used only to replace verbs followed by *de* plus the idea of a thing or person. This is abstract for the learner since it does not exist in English. An example: *Voila le livre dont j'ai besoin.* Here is the book **that** I need. But: *Voici le gateau que je veux.* Here is the cake **that** I want. At this level, learner's ^{!!} are using *dont* regularly, although not always correctly. This is possible

since the learner's dominant language discourse structures are starting to fall away.

Part 3: Project Evolution (non-fiction)

Meeting 1: We sat in a coffee shop for three hours gossiping about the French department, getting loaded on caffeine, eating lunch, and talking a lot about how we should start our project. We finally decided to discuss potential, preliminary, and possible plans for the project. After being struck by a bolt of grammar lightning, the lights went on! We decided on our grammar element: direct and indirect pronouns! Coming off of our caffeine high we resolved to meet the following Sunday and do some “real” work.

Meeting 2: We put the moves on our textbooks. But seriously, we compared, contrasted, and discussed two different first year French books. We also laid out our plan of action for the project. We determined that before our next meeting, we would work individually on different parts of the project: Kim would focus on the grammar knowledge map, Erin would focus on the acquisition map. We would both keep notes on our experiences and thoughts to share with one another. We left with a more specific idea about our project focus.

Meeting 3: After admitting that we did not individually reach a comprehensive outline of our maps, we joined powers to restructure them. We chose, in our opinion, the better of the two textbooks (textbook reviews can be found on the last page of this project), and got busy finalizing the systematized knowledge map. We marveled at how every pronoun in the French language, according to these textbooks, are all taught by the end of the Intermediate Mid Level, realizing that actual acquisition would be a different story. We laughed about how impossible it would actually be to acquire full communicative

competence of this grammar element at this level, although we realized that is it important to at least introduce all pronouns so that learners will be familiar with them later on.

well - depends on what "introduce" + "all" mean

Meeting 4: We revised and typed the systematized knowledge map and then started the acquisition map. While working on the acquisition map, we realized that it required far more grammatical analysis than we had expected. We made a lot of progress with the pronouns that are acquired earlier, but we got stuck on *don't* and the pronouns that follow, realizing that we were not even aware ourselves of their full grammatical function, let alone how to explain it. Although each of us uses these pronouns in spoken French, we realized that we ourselves did not understand the grammatical rules that dictate how to use them correctly. Being brain cramped at this point, we decided to reflect and research individually before finishing this map.

Meeting 5: After having spent a week further reviewing advanced French grammar structure we were ready to complete the map. After finishing the acquisition map we completed the other parts of the project and bid each other *adieu*.

adieu

whoops - how about the reflexive pronouns?

Part 4: Conclusion and Textbook Review

At first this project seemed like a very daunting task, and it was difficult to know where to begin. But once we started it became clear that language learning and actual acquisition are at different ends of the spectrum. The project was not as simple as just mapping a grammatical element onto a chart and agreeing that students acquire X amount of knowledge when they are first introduced to it. Making two maps (learning and acquisition) made it very clear that acquisition comes at a much later time. A first year textbook introduces almost all grammatical elements, and students are required to know it for testing and whatnot, but actual speaking knowledge does not come until later. (No wonder 2nd year is basically 1st year review!!) I discovered that students are introduced to all of these grammatical elements in first year, but the student proficiency really only progresses from the Novice to Intermediate Mid levels (according to the ACTFL guidelines). Actual acquisition, however, really begins at the Intermediate High level and continues to the Advanced Mid level. This shows the large gap in what students are supposedly learning and their actual spoken acquisition. Even though there is this huge “funnel” effect, I still believe it is important to introduce students to more difficult elements so that they will recognize them at a later time.

Mapping our grammar element was similar to putting a puzzle together. Certain elements could only follow others; pre-requisite knowledge of some elements was essential for continuing to the next. The biggest challenge was remembering in what order I acquired such elements and knowing *how* I knew them (at what level I actually

successfully used pronouns and why/how I *knew* how to use them).

I started this project with a different textbook than my partner Kim. I chose Entre Amis⁴. My first impression was that I am so glad that PSU uses a different text! Although the table of contents clearly established the grammar to be taught and its function, as well as cultural information, the index was very difficult to use. While I did appreciate the focus on basic greeting and classroom commands, etc., the book expects that the reader will understand all of the text and instructions without any explanation. The learners are expected to learn from the models and communicate following the short dialogues. The vocabulary lists do not always provide definitions (but will give examples or pictures), but a larger multi-paged vocabulary list at the end of the chapter provides all of the new definitions learned in the chapter. This is a nice reference for the students and allows them to learn the words in context. Sections on pronunciation are also interesting and could be helpful, but would definitely be stronger with an accompanying tape or CD, or even replaced by such technology. The "*Il y a un geste*" sections which show cultural "gestes" are interesting as are the pages on cultural differences.

However, these practical and well-done areas of the text do not make up for the "backwards" feel of the book. Students are expected to know a lot in order to understand. Personally, I can not imagine waiting until page 161 to learn "*le matin, l'après-midi, and le soir*". Verbs ending in -re are introduced near the end of the book with the *passé composé*. This book is also lacking in realia, or actual photos of anything French. At

⁴ Oates, Michael D. and Larbi Oukada. Entre Amis. 2nd Ed. Houghton: Boston, 1994.

times there are many pages in a row that are nothing but black text on white paper.

While this text does have usable features, it is a minimal amount and this text would be difficult and frustrating to use. I think it is important to teach up to the students, but this book does it too much. The majority of large grammar elements and structures are used without any sort of explanation. To a first year student this would be extremely frustrating and would most likely hinder performance.