

# Teaching Attentive Literature Reading in Higher Education French as a Foreign Language: A Pilot Study of a Flipped Classroom Teaching Model

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**Abstract**—Teaching French as a foreign language usually implies teaching French literature, especially in higher education. Training university students in literary reading in a foreign language requires addressing several aspects at the same time: the (foreign) language, the poetic language, the aesthetic aspects of the studied works, and various interpretations of them. A pilot study sought to test a teaching model that would support students in learning to perform competent readings and short analyses of French literary works, in a rather independent manner. This shared practice paper describes the use of a flipped classroom method in two French literature courses, a campus course and an online course, and suggests that the teaching model may provide efficient tools for teaching literary reading and analysis in a foreign language. The teaching model builds on a high level of student activity and focuses on attentive reading, meta-perspectives such as theoretical concepts, individual analyses by students where said concepts are applied, and group discussions of the studied texts and of possible interpretations.

**Keywords**—Shared practice, flipped classroom, literature in foreign language studies, teaching literature analysis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

FRENCH is taught as a foreign language in Sweden, starting in secondary school (ages 12-15) and continuing or starting in upper secondary school (ages 16-18). Pupils having chosen French as a second language in secondary school will have studied French for 6 years when they graduate from tertiary school, granted they choose to continue with French. Pupils having chosen to take French in either secondary or tertiary school will graduate with 3 years of French studies. University students of French thus arrive to their first term with varying levels of previous knowledge. Furthermore, it is not unusual in Sweden to see older students among the freshly received Baccalaureates, which means the variations in life experience; literary experiences, language skills etc. can be fairly wide.

Regardless of students' previous knowledge, the first term of French aims at training them in language skills (grammar, linguistics, phonetics), oral and written proficiency, cultural orientation, and also in reading literature, or "French (and Francophone) literature" as that kind of course is often called. Given that the reading habits of students differ greatly – some are experienced readers while others have hardly finished one single novel in their whole life – it is a challenge to design a

literature course so as to help students reach complex text literacy in a foreign language and become analytical and interpretive readers. Furthermore, the much discussed question whether literature studies are of any use within foreign language studies, where students may expect an exclusive focus on language, should ideally find answers.

Drawing on scholars like Nussbaum [1], Linkon [2], and Riffaterre [5], as well as on shared practices from colleagues in Scandinavia, a pilot study was conducted in two groups of first-term students of French literature at a Swedish university. One group met on campus for traditional classroom seminars, the other followed an online course where the discussion seminars took place in videoconferences. Both groups had the same curriculum and thus the same reading list, the same tasks to perform and the same kind of examination. The pilot study was conducted in 2018-19.

## II. PILOT STUDY: BACKGROUND

Motivation is key to learning, and even higher education students demand to know why certain courses are included in their French curriculum – literature, for instance. What purpose literature courses serve in foreign language teaching is an old and persistent question with no single and simple answer. Experienced readers know how fulfilling, challenging, enriching, amusing or deeply touching a reading experience can be. The fact that literature reading is also useful, in the sense that it helps develop highly useful skills, is perhaps not the first thing students think about. Yet, entering other worlds through literature, and seeing things from other perspectives, is one of the affordances of literature that makes it a powerful tool for "cultivating humanity", as Nussbaum explains [1]. Partaking in various kinds of narratives of various origins may help us understand more about other cultures and see other people as fellow human beings in a global world, according to Nussbaum. Exploring cultural variety is especially important in higher education, she writes, as earlier levels of schooling will probably have needed to focus on the own language and culture. Here, Nussbaum stresses, "cultural variety" is easily encountered in "myths and stories that invite identification with people whose form of life is different from one's own" [1, p.11]. Experiencing such cultural variety is of course particularly important for foreign language students who need to acquire some intercultural understanding.

Novice readers or foreign language readers may struggle with language and comprehension in general, and not reach any greater depths of identification, interpretation or

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appreciation of aesthetic features in literary texts. Scaffolding of some kind is therefore needed. Aside from providing tools to help understand the text on a linguistic level – dictionaries, vocabulary lists, etc. – it is important to develop strategies for reading literary texts. Linkon presents a number of such strategies based on how expert readers approach literary texts, stressing that “[f]irst, expert reading is attentive to the text itself” [2], i.e. to language meaning and use, to rhetoric figures and style. Students approaching literary texts in a foreign language will need to start by understanding the language itself which means that an attentive reading focusing on language is necessary. This first step might then be a natural way in to literary reading, emulating the expert’s first approach to a text. Further, Linkon notes that “[e]xpert readers also recognize and know how to use a variety of literary concepts in interpreting a text. These include allusions, point of view, irony, and a wide array of formal elements” [3, p.17]. Providing students with a range of literary concepts and explaining their use thus seems like a productive meta-perspective. Switching between different levels, from close reading to analytical meta-perspective to the literary or societal context to the story thread of the plot, and back again, is a third mode of reading that Linkon identifies in experts: a “recursive reading” in her terminology [3, p.20]. Training students in making connections between various levels of reading – zooming in, zooming out – would then also be a task for foreign language professors. Moreover, adapting the choice of texts to a reasonable level, and also to a progression over time is central to literature courses, starting with short, easier texts and moving on to longer and more complex ones. At the same time, university students should encounter themes and topics that are at their level of maturity, which is to say that the choice of works to read requires careful attention.

### III. FRAMEWORK

Clearly presenting the goals and the learning outcomes of the course is an important element of scaffolding. The students in the pilot study had easy access to their curriculum via their online learning platform, and they got a reminder of the learning goals connected to the literature module in connection to each assignment. The learning outcomes stipulated by the curriculum are: knowledge of literary terminology; application of concepts in practice; reading and discussing literary texts in French from linguistic, literary, and cultural perspectives; presenting and discussing one’s own opinion or interpretation and evaluating others’ arguments; writing texts in relatively correct French [3], [4] (our translation from Swedish). The over-arching goal as a teacher was to help the students become independent, analytical readers, able to present oral or written analyses of literary texts. Here, “independent” means that by the end of the course they should be able to perform a literary analysis with little or no help from their teacher.

The teaching model tested in 2018-19 implied a high level of student activity, both written and oral, systematic use of methods and concepts from literary analysis, and regular teacher-led seminars where the students’ observations and

interpretations were at the center of the discussions. The ideas at the basis of this teaching (and learning) model are Linkon’s three reading strategies presented above, and Riffaterre’s three-fold division of reading: an introductory, *heuristic* stage where the emphasis lies on comprehension of literary meaning and stylistic finesse; where “a word or a phrase does not make literal sense” [5]. The second stage is the proper *hermeneutic* reading, where the reader goes back and interprets the read text, in what Riffaterre calls *retroactive reading*. Riffaterre’s model is thus compatible with Linkon’s; in fact his model resonates in hers. The literature course began with exercises in close reading, in trying to understand what is being narrated and at the same time pay attention to various formal and aesthetic aspects; a *heuristic* reading.

The course design resembles the flipped classroom model. The teacher gives a brief introductory lecture on the text and the author to be studied, and introduces the literary concepts that are of interest in relation to the studied text. The students then work on the text at home: they read it (in French) and write a short (300-500 words) analytical text using the concepts in question; metaphor, narrative perspective, symbol, etc. They hand their assignment in before the seminar where the literary work is discussed. The seminar starts with presentations of the students’ observations and analyses, which are completed and deepened by the teacher and/or other students through questions or additional explanations. A hermeneutic reading mode dominates these discussions.

A study of literature teaching in higher education in Sweden, by Alvstad and Castro, claims that Swedish universities need to focus more clearly on aesthetic aspects of literature reading and not limit themselves to language and culture studies through literature [6]. They point out, among other things, that “[r]eflecting on and talking about how texts are read at different junctures and what the aim of each reading is (e.g., heuristic or hermeneutic), can help students develop an awareness of the process of reading literature as a complex one that trains more competences than the merely linguistic.” Combining individual reflection and analysis with group discussions is one way of reaching the awareness of the literature reading process that Alvstad and Castro talk about; a metalevel of comprehension.

After the discussion seminar, the students hand in a second version of their assignment which includes insights from the seminar and modifications according to teacher comments. This revised analysis can be considered *retroactive reading* in the pilot study aimed.

Swedish schools focus less on literary readings and more on personal readings and interpretation, Johansson shows in her comparative study of students’ literary analyses in Swedish and French high schools. Her concluding suggestion is “to combine close reading aiming at microinterpretations in order to understand an intrigue with a critical macrointerpretation reaching beyond the series of events” [7, my translation]. In a similar vein, the pilot study aimed at including literary content and interpretation as well as formal analysis including some key concepts, thus making room for the aesthetic alongside the subjective, intercultural and linguistic aspects of literature

study in a foreign language.

#### IV. PILOT STUDY: PRACTICE

The pilot study consisted of two small groups, one studying on campus (5 students), the other online (10 students). The literature module had the same content for both groups but the online course spanned over two terms rather than one. Both groups thus read 5 works in French, ranging from brief short stories to a full novel, via 3 short stories, a play, and a children's book.<sup>1</sup> In all, the reading list comprises approx. 500 pages. Both groups had the same course design, except for the format of the discussion seminars: either on campus, in classrooms, or online in videoconferences.

The learning goals, as expressed in the course curriculum, relate to literary concepts and theories, to the ability to discuss literary texts from three given perspectives, and to being able to argue for or evaluate different interpretations. The kind of literary reading that is predominant in Swedish schools according to Johansson [7], reading beyond the text, is thus not part of the objectives of the course. Students who enter university with a Baccalaureat from a Swedish school are therefore likely to encounter new methods.

The curriculum does not specify which teaching methods should be used, but explains that compulsory seminars are the form, and the examination mainly consists of written assignments. Thereby, written proficiency can also be tested, aside from the primary interest: literary analysis. On the whole, the learning goals are receptive and productive as well as interactive, which is probably often the case in foreign language teaching.

Before starting to work on their own, the students attend an introductory lesson which ends with group tasks. The course design and plan are explained, as is the first requirement: read the first literary text and hand in an assignment before the next discussion seminar. The teacher explains the basic method to use for the literature analyses: *What? – How? – Which effect?* That is: the reader observes some feature of a text (what?), describes the observation with references to the text (how?), and discusses which effect(s) the observed feature may have. Then, in order to make the students aware of how attentive reading works – how many competencies are activated, how many associations are evoked, how much readers can understand from even very little text – the teacher leads them in group exercises where the task is to read one sentence at a time from a literary work and deduce as much information as possible from them. Several different deductions and observations usually arise, which makes students conscious of the fact that readings are subjective and that literary texts are open for many interpretations – a metaperspective that is helpful within literature learning. These exercises also give the opportunity to practice combining observations with references, i.e. concrete examples from the literary texts.

Having firmly anchored the course in close and attentive

reading as the primary method, the teacher has stressed the importance of starting with the text itself: to read it carefully, make sure one understands it, before jumping to interpretations or personal associations. Granted, readers can and will read between as well as beyond the lines, but the attentive reading *on* the lines, understanding the words, the sense, the stylistic figures etc., must come first.

##### A. Individual work

The first assignment combines comprehension and formal observation: the students are instructed to write a brief description (300 words) of the story they have read (“what is it about?”) and add one observation about form. The teacher explains what formal aspects can be and gives guidelines for the assignment text pertaining to length, style, and structure. Examples or quotations from the studied text must be included and provided with proper references. All students, on campus or online, hand in their assignments via the learning platform two days ahead of the discussion seminar.

This introductory emphasis on text comprehension further stresses the importance of close and attentive reading, i.e. the first, important reading strategy identified by Linkon [2]. According to Parkinson and Thomas, this is “linguistic analysis” which is a method they recommend within literature studies in foreign languages [8]. According to these scholars, this method has the great advantage that it can actually be taught, as it builds on concrete, linguistic details rather than some kind of “taste or sensibility” that experienced readers already have. Linguistic analysis of literary texts zooms in on the language and studies aspects such as “deviance, regularity, polysemy and mimesis, and also features of discourse organisation or narrative structure [...] All this is normally combined with some comment on or speculation about the purpose, effect or meaning of such features” [8]. This kind of combination of linguistic and formal analysis on the one hand, with discussions of content and (aesthetic) effects is precisely what the tested teaching and learning model wanted to offer the students.

##### B. Seminars

Discussion seminars are the next step of the model. As the students have already handed in their short analyses they have at least a couple of observations about the text to bring to the discussion. They may feel prepared and thereby also more willing to speak French, which is an unusual conversation language for most of the students (although the group may include students whose first language is French). The idea is that the students talk more than the teacher during these seminars. They present their individual observations and possibly also their interpretations. Group discussions ensue, and both students and teacher may ask questions.

Explaining ones' interpretations and relating them to the text is part of the task, as is posing questions about the other students' interpretations. Yet again, it becomes clear that several different readings are possible. This realization is crucial, according to Alvstad and Castro who claim: “we consider the development of knowledge and awareness about how texts are read to be of the utmost importance, which, in

<sup>1</sup> Delerm, *La première gorgée de bière*; Gavalda, *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part*; Ndiaye, *Papa doit manger*; St Exupéry, *Le petit prince*; Kristof, *Le grand cahier*.

turn, fosters awareness of the idea that different ways of reading may lead to different kinds of learning" [7, p.181]. Motivating their readings both in text and in discussions can provide students with that type of awareness; a metaperspective on reading and learning, in other words. The teacher's role is to help the conversation along when needed, to tie topics together or provide context, and to tie back to the *what- how- which effect* method. The teacher also provides contextualization and theoretical perspectives to help create a larger view, connecting a range of components that place the individual works in a larger context.

The online seminar is conducted in two different ways; one of them resembles that of the campus group, the other not. Three of the five studied texts were discussed in a videoconference setting (Zoom). The students spoke French, as in the campus group, and presented their individual analyses which were then discussed by everyone. The teacher's role is the same, with the exception that an online discussion needs to be managed much more clearly, the teacher explicitly hands the word to one student at a time (rather than students having a natural conversation with turn-taking). Chairing the seminar in such a manner makes the discussion less fluent, but allows for every student to speak roughly an equal amount of time. As videoconference classes are supposed to be more cognitively challenging than classroom lectures, the online seminars were set to a maximum of 45 minutes whereas the campus group had 90 minute sessions.

The other variety of online seminar was an asynchronous literature discussion in the web-based tool Voicethread where participants can record voice posts, listen to each other's posts and comment on them. Students were asked to record one analytical observation about the studied text, listen to their peers, and leave at least two comments to two different people. The choice of asynchronous seminars alongside Zoom seminars relates to the fact that most students in the online course were working full or part time. All faculty involved in the course therefore judged it necessary to give the students reasonable chances to attend seminars. The videoconference seminars tried to meet this requirement by clever scheduling, and making seminar dates and times known from the beginning. The asynchronous seminars could be "attended" anytime, up till the deadline date.

### C. Processes

Third step: the students get feedback on their analyses from the teacher. The comments are formative and focus mainly on the content, the literature analysis. Short comments on language also feature. Taking these comments into account, the students write a new, modified version where they also include insights from the seminar discussions. Version 2 of the text receives global, summative comments and evaluations. Thereby the work on the assignment is finished. Although literature and literary analysis is the main interest of the course, the model aims at supporting and developing the students' French language skills, oral and written proficiency.

The tested model is, then, process-driven. From an

understanding and application of certain analytical tools in a written analysis the students go to presenting and discussing observations and interpretations in group. Thereafter, the written analyses are re-worked (and, hopefully, re-thought to some extent). The choice of literary text also builds on a progression: from very brief short stories to a play, short stories, a children's book to, finally, a full novel (not an easy reader). Similarly, the assignments go from the rather simple, descriptive task described above to more advanced analytic tasks. For assignment no 2, students are asked to analyse the narrative perspective in one of the studied short stories. They may write a maximum of 300 words. The third assignment is a thematic analysis that must incorporate the opinions of a literary critic (max 500 words). Proper referencing is required. Literary symbols are the topic of the fourth assignment: metaphor, allegory, or symbol. The students choose which figure they analyze in an assignment of maximum 500 words. The final assignment focuses on the correspondence between form and content, for instance between themes and style. Again, the reasoning of a literary critic must be included and properly referenced in the 700 word assignment.

As Alvstad and Castro suggest, literature courses benefit from formulating "more specifically literary or aesthetic objectives that take into account the poetic dimensions of literature and hence differ from the ones of the language course as a whole" and that such learning goals require "focus on learning as a process (in which a certain degree of distancing from the material is required) rather than on knowledge as a product" [7, p.181]. The knowledge that students in the pilot study acquire as a "product" is mainly literary concepts and facts about authors and their socio-historical context. Applying the concepts in literary analysis and presenting interpretations of the works has more to do with skills like attentive reading, creativity, and relating to personal experiences, to other works, to the world outside of literature.

### V. OUTCOMES: EXPERIENCES AND NOTES

The aim of the pilot study was to test a teaching and learning design that would train students in literature reading and analysis, provide them with some metaknowledge of literature study and let them develop the skills to perform short analyses in French of French literary works, using given analytical perspectives and concepts. It is a limited pilot study, including only two small groups of first-term students of French (a total of 15 students) and as such it cannot show any conclusive results. Rather, in lieu of a conclusion to this shared practice paper, this section will present a discussion of some noteworthy experiences and tendencies noted during the pilot literature course.

Firstly, there was one clear difference between the pilot course and the author's previous 25-years or so of literature courses which tended to be based on lectures and teacher-led close readings, guided for instance by a set of questions presented by the teacher. In the pilot study, the seminar discussions were livelier; they touched upon a richer variety of formal aspects as well as deep and rather complex

interpretations. The students came well prepared; not only to present their own observations and analyses but also to listen to their peers, ask questions about their presentations and to exchange ideas. Pre-teaching expectations were that the online seminars would be quieter, with less of a flow than the face-to-face ones. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to see the students engaged in lively discussions, even though the medium required more of a formal turn-taking, the teacher “chairing” the discussions.

The asynchronous version of online discussions shows that the students listened to and related to each other’s observations and opinions, which were main objectives, but the forum permitted no further exchange beyond the proposition-and-comment model. Ideas on literature were exchanged, however, and that is of course the core of such a seminar. It is noteworthy that students, who experienced difficulties expressing their ideas in direct communication, where questions and answers are expected to follow directly upon each other, often expressed more and richer ideas in the asynchronous forum. It is obviously a great advantage if all students can make their voices heard and therefore it might be valuable to use more than one format and medium for the literature discussions.

Secondly, it was clear that the instructions to focus on formal aspects and to stay close to the text when interpreting did not preclude personal associations and reflections during the discussion seminars – on the contrary. Although many scholars of literature teaching and learning argue for methods that are based, strictly or loosely, on Brooks’ idea of “reading for the plot” [9] as a teaching guideline, we would argue that in the foreign language classroom it is important to read for comprehension first. As an attentive close reading allows for stopping to look up words or expressions, it is a useful method for students reading in a not so familiar language. Attentive close reading is, after all, the ground upon which expert readers build, as Linkon, among others, has pointed out [2]. From the careful close reading the attention shifts to personal associations, to aesthetic aspects of the text, or to context and interpretation, and possibly even to immersion in the story. The engagement on a personal level of my students suggests there is no absolute obstacle to diving into a fictional world in French (as a third or foreign language).

A possible modification of the course design would be to ask the students to prepare a few questions to each text and bring them to the seminar. That way, they would come prepared not only to present an analysis but also to ask questions to their peers about aspects they themselves have found noteworthy. Such preparations might provide further scaffolding, especially for students who find it difficult to express themselves in direct conversation in French.

Thirdly, the students’ written proficiency improved over the course (which extended over one term for the campus group, two terms for the online course). Sole exceptions were two students whose first language is French and who both had good writing skills from the outset. The proscribed format of *introduction–observation with examples–discussion* was used by all students but one at the end of the course (final

assignment). The number of French errors diminished, and most students learned how to correct their own mistakes, prompted only by color codes made by the teacher and which signaled basic errors (wrong spelling, gender, numeral, conjugation). The literature module is of course not the only one where students practice their written proficiency; most other modules do as well. The students’ progress should thus not be surprising. As the main objective of the literature assignments was literary analysis, the assignments were evaluated on the basis of content criteria, i.e. finding, describing, exemplifying and discussing the effects of a given literary aspect and, in two cases, include the opinions of a secondary source in the analysis. Reworking the assignment texts in accordance with teacher comments and peer discussions improved the student texts linguistically. In most cases the content also improved, although not as clearly.

Fourthly, the literary concepts introduced during the course were incorporated by the students and used both in written and oral analyses and discussions. Concepts such as plot, narrative chronology, style, narrative perspective, narrator, focalizer, theme, metaphor, allegory, symbol were successfully applied. The students used the analytical method presented at the beginning of the course (What? How? Which effect?) in the first 2-3 assignments, and in the last two some students veered off into other models. If the teacher deems it important that students stick to one specific method, s/he needs to remind the students of it during the course. There are however several ways to reach the same objective, so it is debatable whether the same method should at all costs be applied by all students for all assignments.

## VI. FINAL REMARKS

The greatest advantage of the tested course design is that it provides instruction and tools for both close reading and literary analysis, in combination with ample opportunity to put both into practice in writing as well as discussions in French. Thus, even the not so experienced readers of foreign language literature may find ways into literary literacy – not only those students who are already good readers, equipped with the literary “taste or sensibility” that Parkinson and Thomas write about [8].

In a flipped classroom like the one in the pilot study, the teacher may experience some loss of control: what if the students do not see or grasp the important aspects of the text they are studying? They have no specific questions or other teacher guidance leading them to the details they should note. The teacher does however have the leading role at the seminars which provides opportunities to direct the students’ attention to key features or add facts and perspectives to the discussion. A flipped classroom lets students apply their knowledge and practice the skills of literary analysis, in combination with writing proficiency in French. Working with explicit models for close reading and literary analysis, selecting a number of concepts for the students to use, and discussing individual interpretations of a common text seems like a good path towards shaping analytical and fairly independent, attentive readers of foreign language literature.

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