

12-25-2017

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10.18298/ijlet.2384

Doucet, C. & Kuuse, S. (2017). Learning French in Western Australia: A Hedonistic Journey. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, 5(4), 227-238.

<https://ijlet.com/DergiTamDetay.aspx?ID=2384>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

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International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching
Volume 5, Issue 4, December 2017, p. 227-238

Received	Reviewed	Published	Doi Number
29.11.2017	15.12.2017	25.12.2017	10.18298/ijlet.2384

Learning French in Western Australia: A Hedonistic Journey

*Céline DOUCET*¹ & *Sabine KUUSE*²

ABSTRACT

When learning a language, motivation and emotions are central to the learning process and have considerable importance in learning. In Australia, despite the growing economic impact of its Asian neighbours and the great physical distance to France, French remains one of the most taught languages in various educational settings at different levels, and it appeals to many Australians. This review focuses on the motivations of West Australian adult learners of French. The aim of this paper is to explore students' motivation and emotions towards their learning of French in Western Australia, teachers' perceptions of these feelings, and how they are reflected in their teaching practice. Applying a qualitative approach, fifty students and six teachers from two universities in Perth as well as the Alliance Française de Perth, completed questionnaires and participated in semi-structured interviews. This study shows that French is mostly learned for enjoyment, personal gratification and cultural appreciation, rather than for necessity or professional reasons. The analysis of the survey results clearly portrayed the intrinsic value most students perceived in learning French. Teachers are well aware of these positive emotions, and need to establish how best to harness this passion in their teaching practices in order to maximize learning outcomes.

Key Words: French language, motivation, emotions

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a qualitative approach to the process of learning French from the perspective of Australian adult learners. While Asia is on Australia's doorstep and France is located 15,000 kilometres away, the French language is still attractive to the Australian population. The geographical distance does not seem to be a demotivating factor for learning French. This study explores learners' motivation to learn French in Western Australia and how learners express their feelings towards the French language. It will also consider how the teachers perceive the learners' feelings and what the impacts are on their own teaching. The main question is if this interest in the French language is necessarily linked to the desire to acquire a linguistic competence. The choice to learn French by Australians seems to meet a cultural demand, and be for enjoyment and hedonistic purposes. This contribution will firstly give an overview of French as a second language in Western Australia. It will also focus on the methodological approach and the design of the research. Finally, this paper will analyse and discuss the data involved in this study.

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2. Background

2.1. Some numbers

In the metropolitan area of Perth, French is taught at all levels, to different publics, in different types of educational institutions. In the school system, French is included in the ranking of priority languages³, which gives it a privileged position when we consider that there were over 300 separately identified languages spoken in homes in Australia in 2016⁴. In 2015 in Western Australia, French as a foreign language was the most popular language subject⁵ for a Western Australian Certificate of Education⁶ (WACE):

1. French: 468 students
2. Italian: 328 students
3. Japanese: 285 students
4. Chinese: 60 students
5. Indonesian: 38 students
6. German: 34 students

At the University of Western Australia, French Studies, at all levels, had the highest number of students enrolled in a language course (2015).⁷

1. French: 1072 students
2. Japanese: 840 students
3. Italian: 696 students
4. Chinese: 584 students
5. German: 576 students
6. Korean: 400 students
7. Indonesian: 136 students

Another example of the interest in the French language in Western Australia is the regular numbers in attendance at classes at the *Alliance française de Perth*. In 2016 2,716 students were enrolled in French language classes (across all levels), compared to 2,411 in 2014.

These figures attest to the popularity of French chosen as a foreign language in various educational structures. Some historical links may explain this interest in the French language.

³ Including Aboriginal Languages of Australia, Chinese, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, and Interstate Languages such as Auslan (Australian Sign Language), Arabic, Hebrew, and Polish.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Cultural%20Diversity%20Article~20>

⁵ <http://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/school-comparison-statistics>

⁶ WACE is the diploma awarded to students who have completed secondary education in Western Australia.

⁷ Philippa Freegard, *Post Census Date Enrolment Figures 2015*, Arts Faculty, UWA

2.2. Relationship between France and Australia⁸

France and Australia have maintained certain ties since the end of the 18th century, notably with the scientific expeditions of French sailors, such as La Pérouse in 1785 and Nicolas Baudin in 1801. These expeditions have left French toponymic names along the coasts of Western Australia (such as Esperance, D'Entrecasteaux Point, Freycinet Cape, and Peron Point). Later, Australian soldiers fought in the First and Second World Wars on French territory. This involvement was celebrated during the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War in 2014 throughout Australia. On an economic level, a few large French companies are located in Western Australia, for example Total, Michelin, Renault, and Thalès.

The most relevant connection with France, and the French language particularly, is a long British tradition of teaching French in Australia. French was the first foreign language taught in the country; the beginning of the teaching of French is linked to the history of the first colony. The daughter of a Scottish governor stationed at Port Jackson (Sydney today) established the colony's first school, and French was included in the instruction. The settlers, largely Scottish, who had learned French in Britain would thus have continued to teach French in their new colony. This tradition continued until the Second World War, as Britons essentially populated Australia. It was with the Cold War and the arrival of immigrants that the teaching of foreign languages in the education system broadly diversified.

3. Problematic

Given their geographical proximity and some economic stakes with the countries of East Asia, Australians should have more opportunities to speak Asian languages than French. Calvet argues that some languages have a "market value" (2006, p. 2), some are a capital and some sell better than others. The representation of a language plays a certain role in influencing realities. We tend to learn languages as if we are appropriating objects, having a certain idea of their usefulness and the profit we are going to derive from them. In general, individuals learn a foreign language for functional reasons: for studies, to add a skill to their resume, and for professional and economic reasons. This is what language schools put forward as a selling point. Here are a few examples from the website of an English language school in Oxford⁹:

1. *English will open up more opportunities for you*
2. *English will make you more desirable to employers*
3. *English gives you access to some of the world's best universities*
4. *English allows you to attend international conferences and events*

These criteria for learning the English language are generally shared all over the world. However, it is interesting to note that this functional aspect is sometimes used for languages other than English. For example, the Goethe institute in Australia¹⁰ offers courses in German arguing, "German opens up an array of new opportunities to you" such as "business, the global career, opportunities to study/work, tourism and hospitality, and science and research."

⁸ Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770 and was a British colony from 1788 to 1901.

⁹ <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/reasons-learn-english.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.goethe.de/ins/au/en/spr/wdl.html>

While, on the website of the *Alliance française de Perth*¹¹, most of the reasons given for learning French are instrumental:

1. *A world language*
2. *A language for the job market*
3. *A language for travel*
4. *A language for higher education*
5. *The other language of international relations*

These examples show the relevance of language studying for practical factors. However, should learning a language necessarily serve a purpose? In the Australian context, Asian languages such as Japanese and Chinese are usually chosen for professional purposes or for trade. So, why do people in Australia learn French?

The main research questions for this study were:

- What are the purposes of learning French for Australians?
- What are their motivations?
- How do they express their motivations towards learning French?

Researchers were interested in both learners' and teachers' points of view.

4. Research Methodology

This research focuses on the reasons why Australian people learn French as a second language, and is based on both learners' and teachers' perspectives. Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study, as qualitative research involves an interpretative approach and attempts to make sense of the experience as a whole. Researchers used a variety of tools and methods, or triangulation, to develop a deep understanding of how people perceive their choices and actions. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) regard the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* and a quilt maker, and argue that, "the product of the interpretative bricoleur's labor is a complex quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage; a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations." (2011, p. 6). In this research, the personal reflections of the researchers constitute a significant factor in the interpretative research process, as they are lecturers in French Language. Qualitative data was collected through surveys and interviews over a period of one year.

4.1. Survey

The researchers designed the survey from their own experience as French teachers. The open-ended survey questions included the general experience of second language learning, the choice to learn and the goals of learning French as a second language, and the use of the French language in the future. This approach gave the respondents the freedom to say exactly what they feel about the matter in their own words.

¹¹ <https://www.afperth.com.au/french-courses-learn-french/why-learn-french/>

The participants were studying French at the *Alliance française de Perth*, the University of Western Australia, and Edith Cowan University. In total, fifty questionnaires were distributed during the classes.

The survey was a preliminary step in this study and gave an overview of the French learners' characteristics, in order to sharpen the questionnaire for the interviews. The researchers also analysed the results of a satisfaction survey undertaken by the *Alliance française de Perth*, which was a complementary tool for the research.

4.2. Interviews

The researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with French learners and French teachers at the *Alliance française de Perth*, the University of Western Australia, and Edith Cowan University. Interviews with all participants were recorded. The interviews with the learners took place before and after their classes. In total, twenty learners were interviewed as some participants decided not to be involved in the second part of the study, for various reasons such as lack of time or interest. The learners of French were asked about:

- their own experience of learning French as a second language
- their feelings towards the language and the learning process
- the teaching activities they like or dislike
- the language skill learning difficulties and eases they meet

The design of the questionnaire included semi-structured questions in order to gain a variety of more in-depth qualitative responses.

In total six French teachers and lecturers (three from the *Alliance Française de Perth* and three from the University of Western Australia) were interviewed in their workplace, or in a more casual place such as a café on the campus. The questions focused on their teaching philosophy in relation to the learners' feelings towards French as a language. They were asked:

- if and how they perceive the learners' feelings
- if they believe that the teaching activities and resources they use match these feelings
- how they fulfil the learner's demands

The aim of this qualitative study was not to collect numerical data, but to highlight the diversity of the learners' and teachers' discourse, to gain different perspectives, and to triangulate data in order to interpret it. However, this research has some limitations. As noted before, the researchers are French lecturers themselves and are involved in action-research. They are aware of the fact that some data could, therefore, be biased.

5. Results and analysis

5.1. Learners' motivation

This study was designed to understand the choice of learning French in the Australian context. As mentioned above, individuals usually learn a foreign language for functional purposes. However, the discourse of the learners we interviewed does not suggest this. According to a satisfaction survey conducted by the *Alliance Française de Perth*, learners chose to study the French language for personal interest (52%), for travel (31%), and for social and professional reasons (7% for these two criteria). Many participants answered the open-ended question *Why did you choose to learn French?* by giving hedonistic reasons. The answers are classified according to different categories with a few examples:

Learning French for leisure and fun:

- *For me, it's a hobby, it's an interest, it's like doing a sport.*
- *For fun.*
- *I have always enjoyed it.*

Learning French as an intellectual challenge:

- *Who knows? To expand my knowledge*
- *Because it makes my brain a more interesting place.*
- *Because it is good for personal growth and gives the person more character.*

Learning French for the love of France and its language:

- *I recently visited Paris and fell in love with the city and the people. I plan to return and would like to be able to communicate.*
- *I have always enjoyed it.*
- *Because I want to live in France and I love the language.*

Therefore, learning French is linked to an intrinsic motivation. In psychology, there are two kinds of motivation: motivation from inside the individual (intrinsic) or outside (extrinsic). Intrinsic motivation generally refers to a desire to participate in an activity for its own sake; it can be an enjoyable activity, or a challenge. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation induces actions carried out to obtain a good mark, a reward, or the recognition of others, or to avoid a punishment. Motivation plays a primary role in the educational process, but according to Williams (1994, p. 77),

There is no question that learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects. [...] The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner.

Noels et al (2003) developed the Language Learning Orientations Scale: Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation and Amotivation. Intrinsic motivation (IM) includes three subscales:

The first type of IM, IM-Knowledge, is the motivation for doing an activity for the feelings associated with exploring new ideas and developing knowledge. A second type, IM-Accomplishment, refers to the sensations related to attempting to master a task or achieve a goal. The third type, IM-Stimulation, relates to motivation based simply on the sensations stimulated by performing the task, such as aesthetic appreciation or fun and excitement. The common basis of these three subtypes is the pleasurable sensations experienced during the self-initiated and challenging activity. (2003, p. 38)

Gardner (1985, p.10) describes second language motivation as, “the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced by this activity.” The data from this study relates to an integrative orientation in French learning, driven by positive emotions without real practical utility. Gardner (1995) states that language motivation is a kind of central mental “engine” or “energy-centre” that contains effort, want/will and task-enjoyment (effect) and all three components belong together. There is an attachment to the French language without material interest for the *Alliance française de Perth’s* learners. Besse (2009) argues that, in this case, the activity of learning French is “disinterested”.

5.2. Learners’ emotions

In this study, the expression of emotions towards the French language and culture in the learning process emerged. While there is a direct link between learning and emotions (Vygotsky, 1978) and “emotions are the heart of the foreign language learning process” (Dewaele, 2015, p. 13), the emotional dimension has been laid aside in research into second and foreign language acquisition. The *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Longman, 2002) describes only *affect* and *language attitudes*:

Affect: a term referring to a number of emotional factors that may influence language learning and use, eg. enthusiasm, anxiety, boredom, apathy or elation. (p.16)

Language attitudes: expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language; it could be impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status etc. Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language learning. (p. 286)

Understanding the role of emotions and the expression of affective states during learning (Dewaele 2008, Lafortune et al. 2004, Kramsch 2006, Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000) sparks a new interest in research into second language learning. Dewaele & MacIntyre (2016) conducted an extensive global survey of more than 1,700 learners who responded to an online questionnaire about their most enjoyable experiences in foreign language learning. The authors thus describe two characteristics:

-Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which manifests itself in a combination of feelings of social apprehension, lack of confidence, anxiety to speak the foreign language with the teacher, and fear and shame concerning looking ridiculous in front of classmates.

- Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) includes two dimensions: FLE-social and FLE-private:

- FLE-social concerns positive feelings, pleasant teachers, fellow classmates and an encouraging environment. The activities proposed by the teachers which give the learners a certain freedom of expression are also a factor mentioned by the participants of the study. A positive atmosphere is crucial to produce pleasure in a foreign language class.
- FLE-private manifests itself in a sense of accomplishment, personal pride and success in the second language learning.

Dewaele & MacIntyre specify that FLE and FLCA do not position themselves at the ends of a continuum, in the sense that the absence of anxiety does not necessarily mean that enjoyment is present, and it is possible that enjoyment is accompanied by anxiety in the learning process.

The research undertaken within the Australian context shows that students enjoy learning French because they love the language or the positive representations they have of it. They also enjoy the feeling of enhancing the self: what Kramsch (2009) calls “the embodied self”.

Far from being perceived as primarily a tool for communication and exchange of information, the foreign language is first and foremost experienced physically, linguistically, emotionally, artistically (2009, p.60).

Participants express a love or even adoration for the French language and culture:

- I **feel in love** with the language.
- My **love** for the language has grown immensely.
- French has been the **only passion of mine**.
- I **fell in love** with the French culture, the food, the traditions, people and country.
- I decided to put all of my efforts towards learning the language I **adore** which of course is French.

The transcriptions of the interviews revealed the lexical field of love with the following expressions:

- Verbs of appreciation: to enjoy (n=6), to adore (n=2) and to fascinate (n=1)
- Adjectives: favourite, enjoyable, refreshing
- Vocabulary related to love: I love, I fell in love, love (as a noun, n= 2)
- Vocabulary linked to passion: passionate, passion
- Adverbs of intensity: thoroughly (n=2), immensely

The second point raised in the discourse of these students is the evocation of a long-term relationship, namely a long-term appropriation of the language:

- *I love the language and culture; it is something I want to remain **constant** in my life.*
- *Although I may not be the 'top' student in my class, I will **always** continue to study and appreciate the language.*
- *French has been the only passion of mine that I have envisioned resulting in a **career** that I will enjoy **long-term**.*

These testimonials resonate, like the passionate and everlasting relationship between the Japanese writer Mizubayashi and the French language. In this autobiographical book "Une langue venue d'ailleurs"¹², the author describes how his passion for French started when he was 18, and living in France.

Mais je me considérai comme mort quand je serai mort en français. Car je n'existerai plus alors en tant que ce que j'ai voulu être, par ma souveraine décision d'épouser la langue française¹³. (2011, p. 267)

5.3. Teachers' perspectives

The second part of this study was to gain the teachers' perspectives and to investigate if and how they perceive the learners' feelings. First of all, the answers relating to the learners' choice of French correlate with the students' previously mentioned comments. The same three main reasons emerged:

Learning French for leisure and fun:

- *They seek a leisure that combines the social and cultural side.*
- *They form a kind of community.*

Learning French as an intellectual challenge:

- *The pleasure of making progress, improving.*
- *Be stimulated intellectually.*
- *Learning a reputable language is challenging.*

Learning French for the love of France and its language:

- *It is a beautiful language, sophisticated, with a certain prestige.*
- *The values and symbols represented by France.*

Some indicators can measure the enjoyment expressed by the learners:

- The re-enrollment numbers show learners' satisfaction with the course. For example, at the University of Western Australia in semester one 2015, there were 28 students enrolled in French advanced 1, and 71% of them enrolled in the next unit the following semester.
- The positive outcomes of anonymous satisfaction surveys. Students' Unit Reflective Feedback of the same unit shows that 69 % of the students strongly agreed with the statement: "Overall, this unit was a good educational experience".

The students' attitude in the classroom is a valuable factor: *They are interested, they actively participate, they ask questions.* These comments are consistent with the Gliksmann, Gardner & Smythe study (1982) arguing that a learner with a strong motivation is more active in the classroom. Teachers noticed the

¹² A language from elsewhere

¹³ But I considered myself dead when I died in French. Because I will not exist then as what I wanted to be, by my sovereign decision to marry the French language.

learners' non-verbal communication: *they smile; they laugh heartily*. Dewaele & MacIntyre (2016) state that a positive environment and a good atmosphere in the classroom contribute to FLE-social.

The attitude of students outside the classroom: *They do their homework regularly, They prepare for the next class, They do additional research*.

Positive spontaneous returns, just after the class or by email, justify the enjoyment experienced in a class due to a particular activity or a good atmosphere. One student wrote: *Overall, it was a pleasant ending of three interesting and intellectually stimulating years of French studies*. (email received on the 26/11/2016)

As a result of their observations and the spontaneous comments of the learners, teachers are aware of the students' enjoyment in the learning process. In a second step, we focused on identifying the pedagogical implications put into place to respond to the positive emotions expressed by the learners. As a private institution, the *Alliance française de Perth* takes into account the desire of its students by offering many classes based more on the French culture than the acquisition of linguistic skills. Here are some examples:

- *Les actualités* is a class where learners analyse and speak about the French news
- *Français authentique* is a class based on authentic documents on all subjects, such as French culture, society, literature, current affairs, geography, and history
- *La petite histoire* includes historical facts based on amusing anecdotes
- *Conversation supérieure*: advanced conversation around a weekly theme
- *Cuisine*: cooking and food tasting
- *Théâtre*: drama class with reading, pronunciation, breathing techniques, and stage play

The course structure at both universities is less flexible than the *Alliance française de Perth's*. Students have to complete valid units and obtain substantial results to progress in the learning process. Course content is established with specific language objectives. Nevertheless, some courses are more flexible than others, and teachers have the freedom to adapt their pedagogical approaches to respond to learners' demands. While the three teachers interviewed agreed that it is necessary to listen to the students, they also have to follow specific teaching objectives. They expressed the challenge of finding a harmony between both teaching objectives and students' demands for less instrumental aspects of the language. Arnold suggests that teachers should give more attention to affect in classroom and offers strategies, among them to familiarise yourself with the learners' learning styles and to be more creative (2006 & 2011).

Language teachers may have to cover a specific syllabus but doing every exercise in the textbook is certainly not the only way to do so. Teachers have the advantage of knowing their own students and being able to find material that is relevant and interesting to them in order to reinforce what they need to teach. (Arnold, 2011, p. 16)

4. Conclusion

This study was designed to focus on the reasons why adults learn the French language in the Western Australian context. The results revealed that learners' motivations are based on hedonistic, rather than functional, reasons. The decision to engage in learning French is related to private choices that make learners happy. Positive emotions play an important role in the learning process and participants explicitly expressed their love of the French culture and language. As these feelings towards French are perceived by teachers, they are trying to adapt their teaching activities and support where possible. This research also raised the question of learning a language for functional purposes only and showed, on the contrary, that we can learn a language for its cultural aspect and for a private or social enjoyment. Linguistics competency is not always a goal by itself.

The next step of this study will focus on which classroom activities and particular tasks are enjoyable for learners. The research will invite participants to share a positive experience in their language learning in order to enhance pedagogical implications at the *Alliance française de Perth* and both universities offering French studies. This particular project focuses on Australian learners and could possibly be extended to a larger group of French language learners around the world.

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