

# Comprehending Foreign Linguistics

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## Introduction

For my research, I compared two high schools, Yukon High School in Yukon, Oklahoma and Lycée de Jean Monnet in Crépy-en-Valois, France. During my two week stay in Crépy, I attended classes at Jean Monnet. The primary focal points of my research project were the differences and similarities between how French students and American students learn foreign languages through different teaching styles and their efficiency, while also comparing the student's attitude towards their foreign language they're learning. Through my research and observations, I was able to gather a bundle of pragmatic data for my project.

My basis for choosing to research foreign language is because it is something I am extremely passionate about. As I am a senior at the moment, I have taken four years of Spanish, and am in my fourth and final year of French. Throughout my high school career, I realized how passionate I am about foreign languages and cannot wait to continue my progress in both of these languages while adding more later on. With learning foreign languages, I believe they open people's eyes to the world around them and can illustrate how the world is not as small as some believe it to be. But more importantly, it gives people the opportunity to travel and experience different cultures through their own eyes instead of on the pages of a textbook or from second hand knowledge. As my progression continued, I began to speculate if the teaching styles we have always used were the most effective way to teach another language to students or if a different approach, such as teaching

languages to children would work better. All of these questions played a significant role in my research project and here are my findings.

## **Teaching Techniques in France v. the United States**

One of the bigger differences between French lycées and American high schools is their standards for foreign languages and the requirements needed. In Oklahoma, students have the option to take two years of any foreign language offered, or to take two years of computer classes. In France, it is quite the opposite. French students are required to take English throughout middle school and high school; some even start in elementary school, as I witnessed first-hand. But on average, most French students begin their rigorous English learning in sixth grade. But, on top of their English, in the eighth grade students usually begin to take a second required foreign language. Some students even continue to take three foreign languages, as some universities require it. Compared to students in Oklahoma who take a maximum of one foreign language, French students effortlessly surpass Americans with their requirement of two foreign languages.

Also, at the Lycée de Jean Monnet, there are as many as fifteen to thirty foreign language teachers. Compared to Yukon High School, where we have a total of seven foreign language teachers, Jean Monnet is better equipped in catering to the obligations needed when learning another language, and aiding in providing the students with the necessary requirements to reach fluency. Jean Monnet, also,

offers a wider variety of foreign languages from English, Spanish, German, Italian, and Latin, while some students take personalized classes to learn other languages like Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese. However, Yukon does not have, the extent of our language classes are French and Spanish. But, even with that our classes are not structured enough to help the students” reach mastery in their target language. Sorry to say this, but even generalized opinion in our high school personally, is if you want to actually learn a language, take French, if you don’t care, and are only getting the requirements to graduate, take Spanish. Since I have taken both, I am able to look at both view points, yes, the first two years of Spanish are very laid back since that seems to be the most popular choice with first language learners, but in the end, this impairs the students ability to learn the basics of the language, because if the student decides to continue their language learning, Spanish three thoroughly kicks the students butt since it is building on the materials that the student should of already learned in their previous two years.

The differences between teaching styles of French teachers and American teachers are quite apparent. At Yukon, foreign languages are very grammar-based. Verb conjugations are one of the main focuses first ingrained into a student’s memory. Oklahoma schools place tremendous emphasis on learning and memorizing parts of speech and verb endings. French teachings are certainly contradictory to these American teachings. I have found that the French use a method that is based on immersion, reading analysis, and using what they know to converse. Students are not tasked with constant memorization of grammar rules;

instead, the students build their grammar knowledge from using context clues in various texts, while analyzing them, generally from reading real world events that are through newspaper articles or watching American documentaries. Teachers do not teach verb conjugation in sets to be memorized. Rather, they expect students to gradually pick up on the key grammar points through reading and looking at different written articles. One of the English teachers at Jean Monnet explained to me that French teachers are discouraged by the French Government from focusing on grammar too much; they prefer that students learn to comprehend and communicate better.

Another major difference is the actual amount of foreign language that is spoken during a single class time. At Yukon, French is generally only spoken by the teacher, but the students might only talk in French for about twenty to thirty percent of the period. While at Jean Monnet, English is spoken in an English class the entire hour. Even in a Spanish class I had the opportunity of observing, the teacher basically pretended not to know French at all, forcing the students to only communicate in Spanish, if French were to be spoken, they would be moved from the person they were talking to, or docked points for that day. One reason that English classes at this lycée spend more time speaking in English is because of the fact that most of the students have been taking English classes consistently since the third grade. Teachers believe in immersing the students in English speaking in order to increase their exposure to the language, thereby allowing them to better improve comprehension and listening skills. French students have very good

comprehension skills when it comes to understanding the teacher or listening to audio of English, since their entire curriculum is set around listening and comprehending different English dialects and listening to them at a native level. However, when it comes to speaking, French students and American students share the same shyness of speaking in a foreign language, because the fear of messing up or being made fun of always in the back of their mind.

French students and American students are taught with very different objectives in mind. Most of the time French students are focused on analyzing articles and interpreting information. This is because of their baccalauréate test, which requires them to be able to discuss a picture or to infer information from an article and summarize what they believe the text to be about. American students' aims are more focused on the grammar functions and how to successfully write in the target language. Although American students are also expected to be able to analyze articles and write essays, they are not as heavily focused on conversing and communication as the French are expected to do.

During a class that I observed, the teacher was discussing the effects of global warming in the world. Although it was an English class, the subject of this lesson was very focused on the causes and reasoning's behind global warming and what can be done to prevent it. The discussion was structured around a set of vocabulary words from the textbook and allowed the students to better express their ideas about the topic using these key words, while picking up new ones as the teacher continued her discussion and played a news video for them to watch.

In France, a large portion of a student's grade comes from participation during the class period. I was explained that students were given marks according to how much they contributed to the lecture of the day. Some students were more willing to speak aloud in than others, just like American students, so their scores seemed to be higher than the average. In one of the Spanish classes I attended, a student was asked to discuss a poem that the class had been looking at in a previous class period, during his monologue, the student was graded on how long he spoke, his knowledge of the topic, and his overall grammar usage. This is a very common grading style in France, and I have even seen it in Oklahoma a bit, but here, students are given homework regularly and expected to complete it. The majority of grade in Oklahoma come from homework and all the test and quizzes students must take to show their knowledge of the topic. But in France, tests are not as frequent as they are in the United States. They are given, but when they are, it is very important to students pass them. Since homework in France is more of a choice, so the students can spend their own time going over their notes and work on their own pace. Teacher and students alike are not so rushed to cover this amount of information in this given amount of time, then immediately test over it; so this gives them a chance to change their focus, such in foreign languages on helping the students reach a mastery level instead of memorizing this set of vocabulary and showing the teachers that they went home and learned a select few, that they may use one day.

## **Means of Receiving my Data**

Though most of what I have already discussed came from my observations and questions to the teachers, as well as the students, my main course of receiving my data was through surveys that I had made. I had specific questions for the teachers, and a whole different set of questions for the students. Though the questions weren't looking for yes and no responses, the teachers and student's answers were very similar, so accumulating a synopsis of the data was quite easy. For the teachers I focused more on what teaching styles and techniques they believed to help the students the most in class to reach such an efficient level in their target language, as well as questions relating to what they believed the focus should be on when learning a new language. The responses ranged from having the students play games, to watching and analyzing videos or texts, to simply just speaking regularly. Since the main goal is to be able to communicate, the majority responded with less focus on grammar rules, but instead on familiarizing the students with them so they know how to use them when speaking.

For the students, I asked questions relating to what they did outside of their classrooms to practice their languages, and again, I got almost the same answers. The number one answer was to travel or they want to travel later on, so learning the language now would help to communicate with the locals and experience their trip as if they were one. But the responses also ranged from watching tv shows and movies through VOSTFR, which is where the French Government doesn't dub the tv shows with French voiceovers, but merely leaves them in the language they were actually filmed in, to watching the news, and even just listening to music. Their responses were quite simple, and the majority wanted to inform me that their main goals for doing this, was

to eventually be able to have friends from all over the world, who they can communicate with and create new experiences with.

## **Conclusion**

I personally believe that it is the utmost importance for everyone to attempt to learn a foreign language because of the rapid globalization that is taking place. These days, with social media, news, internet, and other components linking the world together like never before, it is more important than ever to be able to communicate with different people from all around the world. Through this research project, I have learned so much about different systems of education and how well they work to better prepare students for a growing global culture. But, even with this knowledge, I have come to the realization that learning a new language gives people the chance to travel, and explore new cultures while the whole time making themselves more open-minded and creating experiences that are everlasting.