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Second language learning and cultural identity: Reconceptualizing the French curriculum in Louisiana colleges and universities

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ABSTRACT
The importance of the teaching of Louisiana Regional French language and culture as an academic subject has been debated by many scholars for decades. While some see it as a necessary dimension of a French course offered in the state of Louisiana, others see the dialect and culture as unreal, non-existent, and less prestigious than Parisian French. This article presents a rationale for offering Louisiana Regional French courses as equivalents to Parisian French in the post-secondary core curriculum in Louisiana colleges and universities.

KEYWORDS
Louisiana regional French; curriculum studies; foreign language education; second language learning; biculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

Curricula for French as a foreign language in academic spaces (K-12 and post-secondary education) have traditionally been geared toward the teaching of Parisian French with the purpose of traveling to France (Lindner, 2008; 2013). Although the Parisian dialect of French is seen as a type of de-facto lingua franca for visiting all French-speaking territories, curriculum and place are closely linked (Pinar, 1975;1991; 2004). It is therefore more beneficial to teach students a mutually intelligible dialect of any second language that values the place in which the language is learned but can still be used to converse with other speakers around the world (Auger & Valdman, 1999). The question of what dialect of French to teach in Louisiana

classrooms has been debated by scholars for decades (Ancelet, 1988; 2007; Lindner, 2008; 2013; Westerman, 2012). This article seeks to contribute to this scholarly discussion by suggesting Louisiana Regional French as the dialect of choice in college and university French departments throughout the state.

French in Louisiana

To argue the value of offering Louisiana Regional French as an option throughout all Louisiana colleges and universities, a clear understanding of the history of Louisiana French must be established. The French language first came to North America in 1604 with the French citizens who moved to what became Acadie (Acadia) in Canada. (Ancelet, 1988; 2007; Brasseaux, 2005; Klingler, 2003). For these settlers, life in this territory was hard. They were not adequately prepared for the hard winters nor to grow and to hunt their own food. Eventually, they were forced to return back to France.

Another group of French settlers returned in 1632 to Acadie and attempted to establish a settlement. By 1755, the British had taken control of the territory after the French and Indian War. They arrested and deported all of the Acadians who would not convert to Protestantism. While some Acadians went back to France, some went down into the New England area, and some went to Louisiana because of the religious freedom offered by the Spanish who controlled the territory at the time. These settlers become known as the Cajuns. Upon their arrival, the Cajuns settled in southern Louisiana. As they built communities, they adjusted to the land and started to grow, trap, and hunt their food for survival.

French-speaking Louisiana developed throughout the nineteenth century. During this time period, there were consistent linguistic and cultural connections and influences from the Creole islands of the Antilles as a result of the Haitian Revolution (Ancelet, 2007; Brasseaux, 2005). During this time there were also four distinct cultural groups that emerged: white Creoles, black Creoles, French-speaking Indians, and Acadians/Cajuns (Trépanier, 1991). Interestingly, the term Cajun came to compromise the Italian, Spanish, German, and Scots-Irish who lived in Louisiana at the time as well. Southern Louisiana over time became known for its mixture of Colonial, Creole, and Cajun French dialects which still persist today. The term “Louisiana Regional French” eventually came to be used mainly by academics to describe the dialect of French that surfaced (Lindner, 2008; 2013; Trépanier, 1991).

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a transition to the usage of English in virtually every part of the state except for the Black, creole societies and the poorer, Cajun communities (Ancelet, 2007; 1988; Brasseaux, 2005; Klingler, 2003). In the aftermath of the of the Civil War, the English-speakers started to assimilate the French-speakers of Louisiana into mainstream society. The black French speakers or gens de couleurs libres where viewed just as other African Americans. Individuals who identified as Cajun were viewed as white. Mandatory

English language only education began in 1916 which further pushed the assimilation of French-speaking children (both black and white) into mainstream English-speaking culture. Those who did speak French at schools were punished which further stigmatized any association with the language.

By the end of World War II, there was a cultural shift as the result of the young soldiers returning from France (Ancelet, 1988; 2007). A large revitalization effort known as the "Cajun Renaissance" had started and Cajuns and Creoles alike started to take pride in their language and cultural heritage. In 1968, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was created (Ancelet, 2007; Council, 2019; Lindner, 2008; Trépanier, 1991). The mission, as established by its organizers, was to make Louisiana Regional French mainstream again. Its organizers started to bring in teachers from Canada, France, Belgium, Senegal and later Haiti and other territories, to teach thirty-minute French lessons. The issue was that the children were learning standard, international French while their parents and other relatives only spoke the Louisiana Regional dialects (Cajun, Creole, or Colonial).

Klingler (2003) suggested that the three dialects rested on a continuum. First there is "Colonial French". This is a variety that differs from Standard Parisian/International French in syntax and morphology and sometimes phonologically and lexically depending on the speaker. The dialect did not emerge until after French and Spanish colonialism. The term "Plantation Society French" therefore became a more accurate descriptor because the dialect was mostly used on plantations. "Cajun French" this is the dialect spoken by the Acadians that came to Louisiana after being expelled from Novia Scotia in 1755 by the British. "Louisiana Creole French" is the term used to describe the language that was spoken by the enslaved Africans that came into contact with French-speakers throughout southern Louisiana. It has a strong connection to the French creoles of the Caribbean and the Indian ocean.

In contemporary southern Louisiana, there was a steady shift in the transmission and usage of Louisiana Regional French among families (Lindner, 2008; 2013). Even though CODOFIL started its work back in 1968, as time progressed more and more of the younger generation become monolingual in English and the dialect has thus being diminishing in the number of speakers for decades. Louisiana has tried to legally preserve the usage of the language, on and off, for centuries throughout its legislature (Ward, 1997). CODOFIL also still works to nourish and increase efforts in teaching French in the K-12 system with the importing of teachers and the establishment of immersion programs throughout the state.

While French education is in a constant state of growth in Louisiana, leaders in post-secondary education (community colleges and four-year universities) must develop curricula that will ensure longevity of the programs and the language and culture. Reconceptualizing the relationship of curriculum to place in post-secondary education provides one resolution. From

this perspective, curriculum becomes a tool for French educators in Louisiana to transmit and preserve the language, heritage, and culture.

Why curriculum?

In the context of this article, curriculum is understood to be the intellectual and organizational center of education (Pinar, 2004). There exists a direct relationship between curriculum and the place in which it is being experienced. Curricula in western universities are usually composed and further validated with content produced by men from Italy, France, England, Germany, and the United States of America because of their colonial past (Grosfoguel, 2013). Curriculum has long been subject to issues of power because of the tendency of the group being dominated to interiorize their inferiority. Consequently, it is naturally assumed that knowledge produced in these geographical regions is sufficient to explain the social and historical realities of the rest of the world (Grosfoguel, 2013; Valenzuela, 2019). The teaching and learning process in contemporary western universities is thus reduced down to the learning, re-learning, and replication of knowledge from these regions with an adaptation to space and time.

To decolonize the structure of what is deemed valid knowledge in the westernized university requires diversity in the curriculum (Valenzuela, 2019). Such diversity creates a pluri-verse of meanings and concepts instead of furthering the tradition of re-definitions of old ones. Likewise, diversity in knowledge creates new pluri-versal concepts with “the many defining for the many” instead of “one for the rest” (uni-verse).

Part of the decolonizing process is understanding that education is driven by the place in which the educating happens, and curriculum provides a roadmap (Grosfoguel, 2013; Pinar, 2004; Valenzuela, 2019). In other words, the educational experiences of students and the place in which the students experience them are intertwined—a causes b and b causes a (Pinar, 2004; Schmidt, 2011). This theory is well-known by scholars in various academic disciplines such as history and geography; however, this is an emerging concept as a curriculum approach in the field of foreign language education.

Because change is so rapid from generation to generation in American culture, there is never enough time from a curricular model in any field to be created, thoroughly developed, and validated for long-term replicability in various classrooms before a change is made (Taba, 1962). This results in students who are pushed to constantly adapt to changing social conditions via their usage of critical thinking skills, creativity, discovery, and experimentation with ideas. In foreign language education, this all translates to teaching practices that focus on a deep understanding of grammar and vocabulary because they are standardized and less emphasis on culture which is ever-changing. Likewise, students are taught grammar rules and expected to

“figure it out” as it relates to usage rather than a deep focus on building reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills through learning experiences based on their daily lives.

Foreign language educators are well aware of the fact that there is a relationship between where a student learns a language and his or her ability to speak the language. This is the rationale behind study abroad and other foreign exchange programs. Moreover, scholars (Auger & Valdman, 1999) have argued that there is value in exposing students to deep in-depth study of various dialects of languages within academic spaces if that dialect is relevant to students. Such is the case for teaching Canadian students and those close to the Canadian border the Canadian French dialect, also known as Joual. Joual is suggested to be more beneficial to these students than modern standard Parisian French but is also a mutually intelligible dialect of French that can be understood throughout the French-speaking world. By teaching joual in the French classroom, Canadian teachers are further validating the French historical past and present influence in Canada and connecting the language to the reality of those living there. Just as with K-12 immersion schools in Canada, this serves as an excellent model of teaching and learning French as a second language.

Louisiana Regional French and the Curriculum of Identity Formation

Teaching practices affect the formation of identities and how students construct the value of a place (Pinar, 2004). Curriculum is indeed embedded within cultures and that is most apparent throughout the Deep South. The American south as a whole is a “place” with a unique history, culture groups, and societal problems. This is additionally true for the distinctive French culture that has developed in Louisiana since the 1600’s. Because of the increasing human need for spaces to live, consume, and produce change, the value and perspectives on the French language and specifically the Louisiana Regional dialect there have shifted across centuries. Interestingly, there has been a gradual decrease in the perceived value of fluency in the language as a whole while identity formation, as being Cajun and Creole, is still strong throughout the state (Schmidt, 2011).

There is a direct connection between identity formation and education which every educator must address via the usage of cultural sustaining teaching practices as appropriate to his/her discipline (Charles, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Pinar, 1991). The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, ethnicity, sex, class, and other aspects of identity is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable and that emotions will not be contained (Hooks, 1994). However, it is more beneficial to students to experience an education where their cultural and/or linguistic competency is validated and they are also allowed access to those of the dominate culture (Paris, 2012).

Students' academic success for many decades has been valued over their cultural and psychological well-being (Pinar, 1991). In the foreign language classroom, this is manifested in the teaching of Parisian French over other dialects from across the French-speaking world because of its standardization via L'Académie Française and the ease of replicability in teaching practices (Auger & Valdman, 1999). As argued by Pinar (1991):

If what we know about ourselves, our history, our culture, and our national identity is deformed by absences, denialism and incompleteness, then our identity both as individuals and as Americans is fractured. This fractured self is a repressed self. Such a self lacks access both to itself and to the world. Repressed, the self's capacity for intelligence, for informed action, even for simple function competence, is impaired. Its sense of history, gender, and politics is incomplete and distorted. (p. 9)

Language is an aspect of cultural and is issued among other things for either inclusion or exclusion of a cultural group within a society (Parker, 2019). A large number of young adults living in south Louisiana identify as Cajun or Creole even if they do not speak either dialect (Lindner, 2008; 2013). There also exists a variance in what is understood as Cajun and Creole heritage. However, in the 21st century, students taking French courses in Louisiana universities view French not just as a means of communication with those living abroad. It is one of the many languages and aspects of culture engrained in their everyday surroundings via various aspects of culture (Thiery, 2018).

Lindner (2008; 2013), in surveying students in thirteen high schools in the Acadian region, namely Evangeline, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, and Vermillion parishes, found that students, mainly identified themselves as Cajun, had only taken French in only high school, had one or more family members that spoke French, and the majority of the family members spoke specifically Cajun French. Additionally, she found that the majority of south Louisiana students agreed that students in Louisiana should learn French. The majority of respondents also agreed that students should specifically learn Standard French and/or Cajun French. Likewise, the majority agreed that if given the choice they would take a course in Cajun French at the university level. Louisiana students are eager to learn more about their heritage once they get to college. Although there is support among students, for the Louisiana Regional French dialect, history, and heritage to move forward, the knowledge must be normalized and then standardized into the university French course curriculum.

Normalizing a Louisiana Regional French Curriculum

Speculations on the future of French education in the state of Louisiana range from pure optimism to overt pessimism. Some citizens feel that all of the recent efforts to save the language are simply too late. Even the most zealous Louisiana Regional French activists admit that the French-speaking population continues to decline at an alarming rate and that

preserving Louisiana Regional French as a native or second language is a far-fetched dream (Ancelet, 1988; Thiery, 2018). With enough money and enlightened leadership, any community can learn a second language. In Louisiana, the presence of a culturally and historically appropriate context only increases the possibility for French education to thrive.

It is the work of the university to train French teachers, majors and minors in the Louisiana Regional French dialect (Westerman, 2012). The traditional teaching of Louisiana Regional French has been polarized mainly into Ethnic Studies courses on Cajun and Creole language and culture rather than bringing them together as reflective in society. Offering Cajun and Creole French as separate courses in the curriculum beyond the traditional introductory curriculum furthers willful ignorance and aggression towards Louisiana Regional French and culture in the international perspective (Ancelet, 1988; Pinar, 1991).The normalizing of the teaching of Louisiana Regional French as a course offering in Louisiana universities can only happen if the proper social forces are enacted. French is not a foreign language in Louisiana and should be not treated nor taught as such. Incorporating Louisiana Regional French into the core university French curriculum legitimizes the Francophone culture of the area and validates the history and culture of those who identify as Cajun, Creole, or of French heritage. Without knowledge of the value of the Louisiana Regional French linguistic and cultural heritage, future generations will never understand themselves. Phrases like Laissez les bon temps rouler, Lâche pas (la patate), and "To make groceries" will no longer make sense.

Standardizing the curriculum

To reconceptualize, normalize, and create a standard Louisiana Regional French curriculum will require linguists, curriculum theorists, and those from Ethnic and Cultural Studies to enter into conversation (Pinar, 2004). Curriculum itself is a complicated conversation driven by politics, bureaucracy, and human knowledge and experience. The refusal to incorporate Louisiana Regional French into the mainstream university French curriculum is psychoanalytic as well as a political process of repression. This repression stems from the stigma associated with the dialect during the early and mid-20th century. Likewise, the study of French in Louisiana is even more of a complex, emotional experiment which has captured the attention of many (Ancelet, 1988).

In traditional French courses faculty actively integrate aspects of Louisiana French language and culture into their introductory courses whenever possible (Parker, 2019; Atran-Fresco, 2014) thus there is little validity in arguments against such a curriculum that can be based around non-feasibility. Further, Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge (LSU-BR) has implemented course offerings of Cajun French as the curricular equivalent to traditional pre-requisite Parisian French courses at the elementary and intermediate levels for decades (Cajun

French, 2018; Thiery, 2018). The longevity of this program further suggests Louisiana Regional French courses can be implemented, replicated, and sustained at other Louisiana universities.

As curriculum leaders in Louisiana universities start to development and expand their curricular offers to fit with the needs of the technology-driven classroom, it is highly important that they reconceptualize the curriculum as place rather than from the traditional content-based perspective. There needs to be an infusion of Louisiana Regional French into the core curriculum of course offerings to truly validate its necessity.

CONCLUSION

Foreign languages are one of the oldest academic subjects in the world. For years, American universities and colleges have produced students at the undergraduate and graduate level will skills in a second languages. Although textbooks, their writers, and their publishers are often blamed for what we teach and how we teach it, the truth is that curricula are the result of social reproduction (Auger & Valdman, 1999; Stinchcomb, 2007). Curricula reflect the knowledge that the dominate group in society wants to present to students (Pinar, 1991).

Auger and Valdman (1999) argued the lack of standardization of dialects of French leads many faculty members to revert back to teaching the Parisian dialect of French because of its simplicity. However, all dialects of the francophone world should be embraced by French language educators. For decades students of French have studied the Parisian dialect and cultural norms with the aim of the course being to go to Paris. With the growth in technology, American students now better understand that Paris is not the only French-speaking territory in the world

Standardizing Louisiana Regional French in the post-secondary core curricular offers would further boost efforts across the state to preserve and grow the language and normalize it. The normalization of Louisiana Regional French is just one contributing factor to the larger fight in the field of foreign language education to make bilingualism and biculturalism a typical aspect of American life. Just as language revitalization in Quebec, Canada has increased the study of Canadian French, the effort in Louisiana must start at the local level and work outward. It is through the curriculum of colleges and universities that the biggest impact can be made.

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