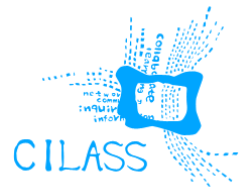


# ***Inquiry-based Learning Design Overview***

## History of the French Language



1. *The students and the curriculum*
2. *The teaching and learning aims*
3. *The inquiry/ inquiries*
4. *The assessment*
5. *The 'process support'*
6. *The information resources and strategies*
7. *The tutoring/facilitation approach*
8. *The learning technology*
9. *The learning spaces*
10. *What really worked*
11. *Things to build on and/or do differently next time around*
12. *Advice to others doing a similar project*
13. *Further comments*

### ***1. The students and the curriculum***

Module: History of the Language 2

Level: 2

Semester: 2

Credits: 10

Department: French

Numbers: The History of the Language module was taught to 29 students in 2005-06 and 37 students in 2006-07

### ***2. The teaching and learning aims***

The course as a whole examines aspects of the development of the French language from its origins to the present day. This includes a basic introduction to phonetics, French morphology, syntax and orthography, and some of the principles of historical linguistics. This is combined with more detailed study of the early development of French and the history of French vocabulary. Historical developments are viewed in relation to present-day usage, in order to encourage students to adopt a more analytical approach to their language studies. There is an opportunity to acquire transferable skills through small group project work.

The collaborative inquiry-based project part of the module was intended to help students build the following skills, knowledge and understanding:

- **Enhance students' understanding of the process of research and knowledge creation, their research skills:**
  - Students appreciate that their contribution to knowledge is as valuable as the material given to them by the teacher
  - Students have an enhanced understanding of the processes of formulating appropriate research questions and collecting data
  - Students take a critical distance to the research process
  - Student work is more sophisticated and more interesting to read
  - Student performance in this difficult subject area is improved and builds the students' self-esteem
- **Enhance students' group working skills**
  - Students understand the processes and dynamics of group work and develop group-related skills, such as negotiation skills.
  - Students understand what they have contributed.
  - Increase students' sensitivity to others' working styles and their understanding of group processes and dynamics.
  - Develop students' negotiation skills.

- **Improve students' appreciation of their curriculum, inquiry-based learning and the transferable skills it provides them with, enhancing their learning experience**
  - Students' increased understanding of the process of learning provides them with a more rewarding and enjoyable learning experience.
  - Students understand learning as an active, self-directed process.
  - Students understand the importance of gaining an explicit understanding of, and reflecting on, the learning experience.
  - Student perceptions of PDP are improved.
  - Students' time management improves.

### *3. The inquiry/ inquiries*

The first semester module, History of the Language 1 (Level 2, 10 credits), relied on a more traditional, lecture-based approach, equipping the students with the practical and theoretical tools for understanding language change and the early development of the French language, as well as an introduction to the study of etymology and the development of French vocabulary. In the second semester module, students undertook collaborative projects which involved open-ended inquiry into different areas of French vocabulary, for example, words relating to food and drink, transport, animals, plants or place names. Students worked in small, staff-selected groups of four, each group pursuing a different one of these pre-set research areas allocated by staff. After carrying out initial data collection to a specified corpus size of 100 words and checking the language of origin and date of attestation of each word, students had specify their own focus, identify avenues of research, conduct the research, and produce an 8-10 page report for assessment.

This enabled them to learn about the process of inquiry-based learning and research in the context of their discipline. The student groups were expected to take an independent IBL approach to developing their mini-research project. They engaged in activities that helped them to learn how to formulate research questions, determine what data to collect for their research project and choose appropriate data collection and analysis methodologies. They actively engaged in group work to provide peer support to each other. To ensure student commitment to the collaborative work, student were required to sign a declaration of commitment

### *4. The assessment*

The project constituted 50% of the assessment for the second semester. The projects were given an overall grade, with individual students in the group all receiving that same mark; however, where a group member had made significantly less contribution, students were asked to indicate this on the project cover sheet and agree the proportion by which an individual's mark should be reduced to reflect this.

### *5. The 'process support'*

A range of process support activities and resources were introduced into the module in response to student evaluation data and other feedback. Further support for the group project was thus focused upon two areas:

- enabling students to formulate and use research questions to direct their inquiries;
- enhancing the preparation offered for the experience of group working and giving the students a framework within which to identify the transferable skills acquired from the experience.

Support for the student learning process was initially based upon the following activities and resources:

- An 'introduction to group working' session.
- Student engagement in a 'dummy project' to raise awareness of the processes required in developing research questions.
- Individual meetings with research project groups to discuss and reflect on the groups' approaches to data collection and data analysis methodologies.

Later, some minor adjustments were made to the project protocols. These included:

- More explicit guidance on the size of corpus that students should aim for in their data collection, and some clarification of the scope of certain projects. However, it was decided that the protocols should continue to keep the enquiry as open-ended as possible.

- A new section on ‘what are research questions?’ was created for distribution to the project teams and a ‘dummy’ project, featuring a project brief and possible corpus of data on the lexis of chocolate and confectionary was produced for use in the initial preparation session for the projects in semester 2.
- A further support session, outside the normal teaching time, was also planned, for trial in semester 2. Previous experience showed that project groups almost invariably hit a difficult patch after they had collected data, but found that they could not ‘step back’ from their corpus to see what kinds of further lines of enquiry they could pursue; this often led to them seeking advice from the course tutor, although some groups struggled on (often in vain, leading to a less successful project).
- We decided to formalise the consultation, requiring all groups to present their ‘state of play’ to the teacher in weeks 5-6 of semester 2, focusing in particular on their preliminary research questions and their methodology for data collection.
- Finally, a support session on group working was planned for early in semester 2.

These additional sessions meant that some revision of the material covered elsewhere in the course was necessary. We took this opportunity to review the approach to assessment of the lecture material that runs alongside the project work in semester 2, with a move towards more choice on the question paper, and some longer answers alongside the short questions used hitherto. It was hoped that reducing the lecture burden slightly and allowing some more freedom on the question paper could address the perception from students in previous iterations that they were being overloaded and that the project took up a disproportionate amount of time.

#### *6. The information resources and strategies*

Students are provided with subject information via lectures and independent collaborative and individual learning.

The course begins with a survey of the breakdown of the Classical Latin and Old French case system and its consequences for word order and sentence construction. This is followed by an introduction to the restructuring of the Latin conjugation system, the shift from inflected to analytical verb forms and changing patterns of usage of particular tenses and moods in Old and Modern French. Finally, the history of French orthography is studied in some detail, with a view to illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of the spelling of Modern French.

#### *7. The tutoring/facilitation approach*

Students are taught via a combination of lectures (10 hours in total), and self-correction exercises, using computer-based materials and project work.

The inquiry-based learning component of the module is mainly based around independent individual and collaborative research to create a collaborative project report, supported by a number of opportunities for contact with staff (see section 5 on process support, above).

#### *8. The learning technology*

#### *9. The learning spaces*

#### *10. What really worked*

The project has been successful in creating a project component that is much better adapted to the learning needs of students compared with those 10 years ago when group project work was originally introduced into the course. Over that time, the need for support and scaffolding of the student learning experience in this kind of activity has grown exponentially as the culture of secondary schools prepares students less and less for independent learning characteristic of HE and of IBL in particular. We are not necessarily convinced we have got the mixture right, but the CILASS project experience has provided us with many of the tools for continuing to refine this exercise and achieve a better balance. Face to face support at a critical point in the project process has proved successful. With the introduction of our new project support materials, students

now have a resource that enables them to begin to understand the process of inquiry and therefore to address project-based tasks more effectively. This is a key step if the department is to incorporate more IBL into the curriculum.

The students who have completed the History of the Language course will all be undertaking an individual research project on their year abroad and we will be able to see if they have been able to apply new skills to this task. One small example of a student already using skills in formulating research questions comes from one student who had to carry out a mini-project on another course this year and who produced easily the best set of research questions to frame his inquiry.

**Student feedback:**

- “I found that the collaborative research project improved my group work skills, I learnt new writing styles from other members of the group, the importance of teamwork and how to research the history of French. Furthermore, I learnt that I am confident and organised enough to manage the group and provide group members with the help that they need.”
- “They [fellow group members] helped me to see things from an alternative perspective and to open my mind to new ideas and opinions.”
- “They [fellow group members] thought of things from different angles to those I had considered which made me see things in new ways”

**11. Things to build on and/or do differently next time around**

We have experimented with paper-based, class based and face to face support activities for students engaged on their projects. We are trying to find ways of overcoming the problem of students arriving at the start of their project activity with a previous set of experiences based on much more didactic lecturing methods and consequently finding it difficult to engage in the more open-ended, creative learning we are hoping to foster.

- We initially thought that running a ‘dummy’ project protocol with the students at the start of the project process would enable them to gain understanding of the research/inquiry process and the importance of articulating research questions. So far we have not managed to get the level of engagement we would like, but we think this is probably to do with the management of that session.
- We still need to find the best ways to enable students to deal with difficulties with group dynamics. This has proved the most difficult aspect of the project to get right – we are still working at improving our approach and will continue to fine-tune the support we provide.
- The most important activity or process for us has been that students engage in the collaborative mini-research projects to learn about IBL processes, which required a significant number of sub-activities on their part. We are still finding that students are engaging with the research project as a piece of assessment, rather than as a research process, i.e. they focus quite strongly on ‘what are we supposed to do?’ (which they want staff to specify for them), rather than feeling able to step back and see the process itself as valid, and see that it is a process where learners can/must work out for themselves what it is best to do.

At the end of the first year of the project, we ran the usual departmental module evaluation process and this did reveal some interesting qualitative data about the students’ experience of the module as a whole, and of the role of the project within it.

- The main themes that emerged from this evaluation in 05-06 were that students had found the processes of the group project challenging. They were uncomfortable working in groups with students they did not know, and, where there were problems with individuals not contributing as well as they should, they found it difficult to manage this and did not like having to report a low contribution on the final mark allocation sheet. Thus it seems that the collaborative process features highly in their experience of the project.
  - *Student feedback:* “I felt as though we needed more staff support, and I would have liked to have the opportunity for more group meetings with the tutor. Although staff support was reasonable, the advice given could have been more helpful.”

- The second main theme that emerged in 05-06, and which seems to be supported out by the 06-07 module evaluation, is that students feel that, in terms of weighting, they are not being sufficiently rewarded for the effort that they put in to their project. At present it is effectively worth 5 out of 20 credits for the course; student groups who do put a lot of effort in feel they should gain more credits. We need to look at how it might be possible to work within the constraints of the modular structure to modify this balance.

In Spring 2006 new support sessions were introduced. Informal feedback and reflection on the changes made suggest that:

- the initial support session and use of a 'dummy' project needs refinement; students did not have sufficient time in the session to engage thoroughly with the material and to develop useful strategies for identifying research themes and formulating research questions;
- the session on group working was helpful for the students; however, the format might be reviewed to make it less like a lecture session.
- It was noticeable that the students found that this material was very different from what they normally encounter in 'academic' courses, and they may need more time to develop the kind of reflective skills needed to get the best out of it.
- The opportunity for a formal discussion about their progress was received positively by the students and tended to act as reassurance that they were 'on the right lines'.

#### *12. Advice to others doing a similar project*

Students encountering the History of the Language project are confronted by a considerable challenge in terms of the type of exercise and the mode of working which it represents. There is thus a fine balancing act to be carried out in terms of providing adequate, appropriate and timely support, whilst also letting the students experience the challenge and have the opportunity to solve problems for themselves without the intervention of staff. This will inevitably mean that grumbles and negative comments arise in standard departmental module evaluation forms, which are distributed to the students just at that most stressful moment when they are reaching the hand-in date for their projects. We would really like to be able to get at what they think 18-24 months further down the line.

The project work has been designed to achieve some changes in student learning which are likely to be perceptible to those students only after some time has elapsed and they have had further opportunities to exercise inquiry or collaborative skills at a later point in their course. This needs to be taken into account when planning impact evaluation (especially in the longer-term).

#### *13. Further comments*

In terms of the impact of the project on wider departmental practice, we have seen two unexpected outcomes:

1. the value of inquiry-based approaches has been recognised by other colleagues who are redesigning a core level 2 module which is taught to every student;
2. a commitment to IBL as one of the guiding principles of curriculum design in the French department has been made and now forms part of the department's Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy.