



# ONLINE READING STRATEGY GUIDANCE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

## FIVE CASE STUDIES IN FRENCH

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This paper reports on an online guided reading program designed and developed by the authors, and implemented in class conditions. The program allows students to read a short story from a computer screen and obtain immediate support, in the form of suggested problem-solving strategies designed to help them overcome the lexical and grammatical difficulties commonly encountered by intermediate language students, at local text level, during the reading process. Based on the analysis of case studies of readers, the chief objective of this study is to gauge the pedagogical relevance of the guided reading program and suggest that it facilitates intermediate language students' first encounters with literary texts.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature has often been a central component of university language studies. Today in Australia, despite the decline in the use of literary-based texts in secondary institutions, the study of literary texts still remains a significant feature of most undergraduate curricula in foreign language departments. It seeks to equip students with the basic analytical, synthetic and cultural knowledge necessary to promote intellectual reflection. However, it has been observed that learners' interest in the study of literary texts in the context of language learning at intermediate levels of university courses has been diminishing over the years (see e.g. Davis et al. 1992; Kramsch 1985; Lyman-Hager 2000; Schulz 1981).

Such a lack of enthusiasm for literary reading is due to a combination of attitudinal, linguistic and socio-cultural factors that may translate into reading difficulties experienced by a number of students at this level of proficiency. Typically, intermediate level language

learners (first-year students who have normally studied the language for five years at high school) have specific handicaps when it comes to dealing with literary texts: they have limited control of the language, limited experience of literary materials in the target language and limited literary training; and they may have practical motivations for studying the foreign language that exclude literary studies. Their lack of familiarity is likely to generate debilitating anxiety and lack of confidence during reading, reactions which may compel readers to adopt a narrow reading approach based on the extensive use of the dictionary and word-for-word translation (Kern 1994). These techniques are detrimental to cohesive processing of text and, therefore, hamper any attempt at critical reading.

Our project aims to illustrate how reading strategy instruction can be delivered to learners in the context of the literature classroom. Encouraged by positive findings from empirical studies that stress the importance of a metacognitive approach to Second and Foreign Language (L2/FL) reading, and by the possibilities afforded by hypertext technology, we have designed a simple Web-based guided reading courseware that supports L2/FL reading comprehension by introducing a strategic approach to lexical difficulties at word and sentence level, in a personalised and non-threatening environment. It is hoped that our computerised procedure will help learners overcome their tendencies to rely on the bilingual dictionary and/or to engage in word-for-word translation. By suggesting word-attack strategies in the form of hypertext annotations, our objective is to provide an enriched text-base that should 1) facilitate access to the meaning of unfamiliar words and expressions, thus freeing mental energy for higher-level processes; and 2) promote an inquisitive approach to reading by offering a variety of ways of analysing unfamiliar lexis and the context in which it occurs.

As the most pressing need of the target students was to increase their functional vocabulary in French, we opted to select a text which did not present unfamiliar ideas or settings, precisely so that we could concentrate on showing them how to improve their lexical skills. We envisage this particular type of strategic help as the first stage in the creation of hypertextual support for different types of text, and for different types of strategies, ranging from localised problem-solving strategies aiming at text clarification to global cohesive strategies requiring structural and contextual skills. We intend to proceed shortly to texts that require other types of help, such as the cultural information required for Albert Camus' short story *L'hôte*, in which the North African colonial context is very unfamiliar to the majority of Australian students, or the more sophisticated guidance needed for an appreciation of the subtle psychological shifts in Vercors' *Le silence de la mer*.

## READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, METACOGNITION AND READING INSTRUCTION

Reading is a complex process; it is visual, cognitive, linguistic, semantic, situational and social. Readers elaborate meaning by bringing knowledge, experience and emotions to the text. It is viewed here as *constructively responsive* (see Pressley and Afflerbach 1995, for details of their ‘constructively-responsive’ theory for L1 reading, and also Kern 1992 for a compatible L2 reading model). In such a perspective, reading is based on the interplay between three aspects: meaning construction processes, monitoring and evaluation. Predictions and hypotheses emerging from the reader’s progression through the text are stimulated by incoming meaning cues, syntactical cues and structural cues (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995). During smooth reading these processes are mostly placed on the level of automaticity.

In the context of non-expert L2/FL reading, however, learners must make a conscious effort to think about what they read. They must constantly evaluate textual characteristics against what they know and identify potential problems that may impede comprehension. In doing so, they place themselves in problem-solving situations, which involve the implementation of a range of strategies to solve comprehension problems at word, sentence or paragraph levels (e.g. consulting an external resource, using contextual clues to guess at words, translating strings of words or visualising a scene). When they occur too often, problem-solving situations may be energetically demanding, and much conscious mental activity may lead to text-boundness and over-reliance on the dictionary as a consequence. Systematic and compulsive L2/FL dictionary users ‘may be reluctant to make inferences, preferring the seemingly ‘safe’ route of piecing meaning together in a word by word fashion’ (Kern 1994, 312).

Baker and Brown (1984) point out that it is essential to make readers aware of the reading process in order to improve their reading skills. In particular, they should be instructed on ‘the importance of employing problem-solving, trouble-shooting routines to enhance understanding’ (p.376). Most studies found a positive correlation between metacognitive training and reading comprehension improvement (Barnett 1988; Hamp-Lyons 1985; Padrón and Waxman 1988), and between L2/FL reading proficiency and metacognitive awareness (Carrell et al. 1989). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggest that it is important for language skills to become ‘procedurised’ through instructional practice so that they can become automatised.

It is now generally accepted that direct instruction, such as learning vocabulary lists, does not result in long-term vocabulary acquisition. Most vocabulary is acquired through

‘meaningful interaction with text’ (Coady 1993, 18). Doubting the value of pre-teaching vocabulary instruction, Nation and Coady (1988) propose that L2 learners should practise guessing techniques and they suggest a strategy framework for ‘word attack’. According to Nation and Coady, readers should be encouraged to:

- find the part of speech of the unknown word;
- examine the immediate context;
- look at a wider context and examine the relationship between the clause containing the word and surrounding clauses;
- guess the meaning of the word;
- check the guess by looking at the morphology or by substituting a known synonym for the unknown word or by looking it up in the dictionary.

We feel that this methodology is very helpful for intermediate level learners and that it is particularly suitable for our hypertextual reading procedure.

## **READING IN A HYPERTEXTUAL ENVIRONMENT**

The written text is well suited to technological manipulations. Hypertext now offers instructional possibilities that may greatly enhance reading instruction because technology is able to create a personalised learner-centred environment.

In recent years, the development of computer assisted learning technology has prompted a number of researchers (e.g. Chun and Plass 1996; Davis and Lyman-Hager 1997; De Ridder 2002; Hulstijn 1993; Koren 1999; Lyman-Hager and Davis 1996; Lyman-Hager 2000; Lyman-Hager and Burnett 1999; Lomicka 1998; Martínez-Lage 1997) to investigate how readers comprehend text in hypertextual mode and how they can benefit from reading in such an environment. Results of these studies seem to indicate that hypermedia presentation of text that includes glossing may facilitate reading by assisting and promoting comprehension. Researchers have attributed several advantages to hypertextual reading: it is unobtrusive (Martínez-Lage 1997); it facilitates lexical retention (Chun and Plass 1996) and promotes deeper understanding (Lomicka 1998); and tracking capabilities enable researchers to collect data on learners’ reading behaviour (Lyman-Hager 2000). Hypertextual reading is also less likely to interrupt the reading process than printed text reading because readers do not need to go in and out of the text to consult external references such as a dictionary. The use of annotations therefore promotes interaction between the reader and the text as a result (Martínez-Lage 1997), which is more likely to result in the development of beneficial reading strategies.

Several researchers have devised computerised reading programs, all grounded in second language reading theory, with the aim of facilitating reading instruction as well as investigating reading in hypertextual environments. Well-known multimedia courseware such as *Une vie de boy: Interactive reading in French* by Davis and Lyman-Hager, *CyberBuch* by Chun and Plass, and *Textfun* by Koren, have been documented in published studies (Chun and Plass 1996; Lyman-Hager and Davis 1996; Koren 1999; Lomicka 1998). Moreover, studies such as De Ridder (2002) have featured on-screen reading procedures that permit the recording of words clicked by readers.

Davis and Lyman-Hager's *Une vie de boy* is based on the first 1754 words of Ferdinand Oyono's novel of the same title. It offers the student a choice of up to several clickable features that promote textual comprehension: *Pronunciation* (to listen to words read by native speakers), *English definition* and *French definition* (for direct access to the meaning of words), *Cultural reference* (to build up/activate cultural knowledge), *Grammar* (to provide grammatical explanations), *Relationships among characters* (to promote textual cohesion), and *Picture* (to illustrate and help visualise).

Koren's *Textfun* offers short texts for learners of professional and technical English. Each text is accompanied by a set of eight exercises, with correct responses available at the click of a button. The first exercise is the only one that offers help in understanding words that are presumed to be difficult. Two types of aid are proposed. Clicking on a word printed in blue gives a hint, often in the form of a question about the context, which encourages the reader to guess the meaning via the context. The second type of aid is a simple translation of the words highlighted in red.

Chun and Plass's *CyberBuch* is a multimedia reading comprehension software that features two German short stories. It provides previewing activities in the form of video-clips to promote comprehension at macro-level.<sup>1</sup> It also offers annotations in the form of text, graphics, video and sound, to support comprehension at word level, thus catering for differing cognitive styles and learning orientations. These annotations may be a definition of a word or expression, the pronunciation of a word, or an image/video-clip illustrating an action or a concept. *CyberBuch* also features several types of tests (refer to the *CyberBuch* website for more information<sup>2</sup>).

Following current reading theories, multimedia reading software programs (such as those that have been described above) promote reading in a second language as an active process, in which bottom-up and top-down operations interact by providing integrated text, sound and graphic annotations that assist global and local levels of comprehension. Despite the sophistication of their design and their pedagogical scope, we feel that these

packages are limited in the types of problem-solving options they offer. Word definitions, translations, and even questions that encourage the reader to guess the meaning of a word or expression via the context are available. However, the glosses do not necessarily provide the learner with any tools to aid specifically in the decipherment of words. The ambition of the present project is not to compete with commercial reading software in terms of scope and complexity. Through our program we wish to focus on teaching a range of problem-solving techniques implemented at local level that can be transferred through sustained training to other (similar) problem-solving situations present in other texts. The techniques we aim to introduce overtly to our learners are based on the constructivist perspective outlined in the previous section. They take the form of strategies commonly used by proficient L2 readers (often in a covert manner) and are detailed in the design section.

## **STUDY DESIGN**

The experimental reading during which data was collected was integrated into the first-year advanced literature program and was presented to the students as a reading activity to be performed in the language laboratory. Prior to the experimental reading they had not been exposed to reading strategy instruction, although reading difficulties associated with some of the prescribed texts had been briefly discussed in class.

Ten students from the Intermediate French class were selected and divided into two groups (the Conventional Reading Group and the Guided Reading Group), matched as far as possible for age and level of attainment. With one exception, all were aged between 18 and 22. A questionnaire concerning students' attitudes towards reading literature indicated that these students enjoyed reading fiction in English and wanted to be able to read French fiction as well. The number of students in the study was small, partly because the class size was small, partly because we could not include any student who failed to be present for one of the stages of the study (preliminary discussion and questionnaire, reading exercise, post-comprehension test and debriefing interview). We also wanted to select students who were comparable in age and experience. Given the size of the groups there was no question of carrying out a statistical study. We therefore opted to give our study a qualitative perspective, discussing each Guided Reading participant separately; but although the quantitative aspect of the study is of necessity secondary to the qualitative, we judged it of interest to provide the percentage marks awarded to each student in the written post-comprehension test. However, the emphasis on the qualitative aspect

allows us to look at the reactions of each student to the strategic support offered in this reading exercise.

The Guided Reading courseware consisted of a JavaScript Web Browser-based program designed to generate readers' logs by recording reading times, words, expressions and phrases clicked on by readers and time spent on annotations and accessing the glossary.<sup>3</sup>

TEXT PRESENTATION

The participants were required to read the text from a computer screen. They did not usually read literary texts in electronic form for class purposes, but comparison between the two groups of readers was only possible if all participants were placed under the same reading conditions. The aim of the present project was not to investigate the characteristics of on-screen reading *per se*. Rather it was to gauge the possible effect of online strategic guidance on comprehension of the chosen text. At the start of the experiment we were well aware that there might be differences between the ways electronic and printed documents were read (see Anderson 2003 and Kellogg 1999). By not using a printed reading medium for the Conventional Reading Group, we wanted to avoid introducing a methodological bias in the study design. The first paragraph of the reading exercise page is reproduced below:

LE PROVERBE: FRENCH ONLINE READING EXERCISE	
<p><b>Le Proverbe</b> (Marcel Aymé)</p> <p>Dans la lumière de <b>la suspension</b> qui <b>éclairait</b> la cuisine, M. Jacotin voyait d'ensemble la famille courbée sur la pâture et <b>témoignant</b>, par des regards obliques, qu'elle <b>redoutait l'humeur</b> du maître. La conscience profonde qu'il avait de son <b>dévouement</b> et de son abnégation, un souci étroit de justice domestique, le rendaient en effet injuste et tyrannique, et ses explosions d'homme <b>sanguin</b>, toujours <b>imprévisibles</b>, <b>entretenaient à son foyer</b> une atmosphère de <b>contrainte</b> qui n'était pas du reste sans l'irriter.</p>	<p><b>Contrainte</b> The addition of -s- before the first -t- gives the English equivalent.</p> <p><b>Dictionary</b></p>

(Available from:  
[http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/language/french/online/reading/leprov\\_ex/start2.htm](http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/language/french/online/reading/leprov_ex/start2.htm).)

## CHOICE OF TEXT

The guided hypertextual reading exercise was based on *Le Proverbe*, a short story by French writer Marcel Aymé. *Le Proverbe* is often a prescribed text in French for university students at this level of proficiency (Naturel 1995). It features a formal register (to which the students had not been exposed previously), multiple characters, alternation of descriptive and introspective modes, and humoristic and ironic dimensions. Moreover, the syntactical structures are not extremely complex, and the text is relatively short (approximately 5000 words in length).

During the design phase it was decided that reading the complete short story under experimental conditions would not only be impractical for organisational reasons but also had the potential to put the participants off the task, as it would have required several hours of their time in the language laboratory. It was therefore decided from the outset that the computerised reading exercise be limited to the first 1000 words of the text. The passage ends at what can be accepted as a natural break in the story.

## CHOICE OF WORDS TO BE ANNOTATED

The basic aim was to select words and expressions that needed to be known for an adequate appreciation of this text. We tried to avoid annotating words that are not at all frequent in modern French, as long as they did not seem to us necessary for an adequate comprehension of the story. All the words we annotated were highlighted in red in the text,<sup>4</sup> and the annotations accessed by a single click on the word. The English translation of the word could be accessed only through the annotation. Seventy of the approximately 425 nouns, adjectives and verbs in the passage were thus highlighted. The words and phrases to be annotated were chosen in the light of the researchers' experience of Australian students of French at this level, and of the coursebooks which most of the target students had used.

## CHOICE OF STRATEGIES

Our starting-point was the desire to provide clues to the meaning of a word without giving a translation or definition of it. We felt that this was the best way of giving learners tools that would help them to read without having to pause to consult a dictionary. A few of the notes provide information essential for the particular text chosen, and a translation of each word is available if the student cannot work out its meaning from the clue provided. Our preferred type of strategy for this text is that which encourages the reader to work out the probable meaning of the word from the context, but clues based on the proximity of English to French and on the existence of word families in



French are also extremely useful. The other categories – cultural information and explanation of grammatical structures – are less important here, though we expect the cultural element in the widest sense of the term to be the basis of the strategic help offered in other texts when the problems of vocabulary acquisition addressed in this text have been largely solved. The categories of annotations are:

#### POINTERS FROM THE CONTEXT TOWARDS THE PROBABLE MEANING OF THE WORD:

Example: *déçu*: Try to guess from the context how you think M. Jacotin would have reacted.

#### COMPARISON BETWEEN THE FRENCH WORD AND AN ENGLISH ONE:

This is one of the richest strategies available for English speakers learning French.

Example: *l'épouse*: Insert –s– before the –p– and you almost have the English equivalent.

#### COMPARISON WITH ANOTHER FRENCH WORD OR PART OF A FRENCH WORD:

The concept of word families is a useful one to develop, as is the division of words into meaningful segments.

Example: *détourner*: *dé–* often means ‘away from’.

#### CULTURAL INFORMATION:

Example: *ton jeudi*: When this story was written, French schoolchildren had no classes on Thursdays.

#### EXPLANATION OF A STRUCTURE:

This category is a small one. In the present text the only structure commented on in the notes is the literary form of the past conditional.

Example: *ce qui eût peut-être amené*: Literary equivalent of *ce qui aurait peut-être amené*.

Quite often, clues of more than one type can be given for a word or phrase.

Example: *la suspension*: A noun based on the verb *suspendre*, and related to an almost identical English verb. Here it can only be understood in the phrase *dans la lumière de la suspension*.

Sometimes we have not been able to think of a clue and have simply had to suggest that the word should be noted and looked up later. Although our glossary is available immediately, most students did not make use of it very often, as we shall show.

The translations offered in our glossary cover succinctly all major meanings of the word, so that the reader gets into the habit of selecting the appropriate one. We did not seek to give all the detail one would find in a dictionary, as we wanted the students to read the passage as efficiently as possible. So our glossary is a compromise between the English version of the meaning in the text, and the complete dictionary definition.

Example: *suspension*: 1. hanging, suspending; 2. suspension (auto-mobile); 3. light fitting

## CONDUCT OF THE EXPERIMENT

- The procedure was carried out in the language laboratory and lasted one hour.
- The Conventional Reading Group read the text on screen but with no guidance beyond being permitted to use a dictionary whenever they liked.
- The Guided Reading Group practised the procedure under instruction on screen by reading a short text with six annotations. Then they read the annotated experimental text.
- Immediately after reading the text all participants filled in a questionnaire that tested their comprehension of it (*Post-comprehension Test*). The questions on the content of the text were divided into two sections of equal value, each scored as a percentage: the facts of the story; and the reader's opinions on specific elements of it. Other questions asked them to rate their motivation for the task and their level of understanding on the 5-point Likert scale.
- All students then had a debriefing interview with one of the investigators.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The first stage of the analysis was to describe the way in which each participant used the strategies provided, comparing the reading profile thus obtained with the results of the comprehension test on the one hand and the participant's perceived degree of satisfaction, gauged during the post-test interview, on the other. The individual profiles and test results were then compared across the Guided Reading Group for similarities and differences. Finally, the resulting trends of the Guided Reading Group were compared with the results obtained from the Conventional Reading Group.

## GUIDED READING GROUP

**Marie:** Age: 19. She had never been to a French-speaking country.

*Attitude to fiction in French:* She was enrolled in a BEd. Her motivation to study French fictional texts was very high although she did not expect to use professionally the knowledge thus gained. She gave several reasons for studying fiction: to get to know French writers, to develop her writing skills, to improve her grammar and vocabulary, to read literature in the original and to learn about French culture. However, she did not find reading French fiction personally rewarding. She had had little or no previous exposure to reading French fiction in preparation for the final high school examination.

*Performance:* Marie said in the debriefing interview that she was not sure she had understood the text. In the questionnaire she rated her understanding as *poor*. She scored 50 per cent for her answers to both content and opinion questions. She spent 25 minutes working on the text.

*Use of annotations:* Marie checked eleven words and went to the glossary for all of them. They were spread throughout the text, with a little cluster towards the end, which suggests that she had not lost her enthusiasm and desire to understand. Marie was the only participant to check *souffles*, *tenir sa langue*, *entreprendre* and *remords*. She said that she would have liked more words to be annotated.

*Conclusion:* Marie said that she enjoyed the exercise and that her motivation was not affected by the difficulties of the text. She seemed to be a good example of a less proficient student who had a shrewd understanding of her level but was nevertheless interested enough to persist.

**Rosalie:** Age: 31. She had never been to a French-speaking country and had not studied French at school.

*Attitude to fiction in French:* She was enrolled in a BA. Her motivation to study French fictional texts was high, but she was neutral about most of the suggested reasons for reading French fiction, about reading French for professional purposes and about finding it personally rewarding.

*Performance:* She rated her understanding of the text as *quite good*, which was reflected in the score of 65 per cent for both content and opinion questions. She spent 25 minutes working on the text.

*Use of annotations:* She checked sixteen words, using the strategies for eleven and going on to the glossary for five. She reported in the interview that the strategies were very useful, and stressed that the rapidity of the method in contrast to the time it takes

to find a word in a traditional dictionary had helped her to keep the gist of the story in mind. She was the only participant to check *éclairait*, *imprévisible*, *entretenaient*, *les siens*, *faisant valoir*, *flamber* and *ton jeudi*.

Most interestingly, all of the words she checked are in the first half of the text, and most are in the first quarter; but her responses in the questionnaire, and in conversation, show that she had read to the end, so we may be able to conclude that the frequency with which she consulted the strategies and the glossary early on gave her a good grasp of the context and enabled her to continue without needing to understand every word.

*Conclusion:* Rosalie seemed to have felt that her motivation was somewhat affected by the difficulties of the text. The frequency of her recourse to the strategies and glossary suggest that she did not have a particularly advanced knowledge of French, but was anxious to learn more.

**Carole:** Age: 18. She had spent six weeks in France.

*Attitude to fiction in French:* Carole was enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies degree, and said that she did not expect to read French texts in her professional life. Her motivation to read fiction in French was high: she wanted to improve her classroom discussion and essay-writing skills and her knowledge of French language, writers and culture, and she wanted to be able to read French fiction in French for study or pleasure. She had used fiction and other texts in her preparation for the final high school examination. She found reading French fiction and other types of texts very rewarding.

*Performance:* In the questionnaire Carole scored only 30 per cent on the questions about the content (which was surprising given her proficiency and motivational profile). She obtained 80 per cent on questions seeking her opinion, which would not have been possible if she had not reached a good level of understanding of the text. Perhaps she found the content questions tedious or did not appreciate the importance of reporting details of what she understood. She was modest about her comprehension by rating it *quite good to moderate*. She spent 30 minutes working on the text, above the average for the group.

*Use of annotations:* In the post-test interview she was very enthusiastic about the annotations, even though her log revealed that she only consulted them seven times. All were words which one might well classify as difficult to guess: *témoignant*, *dévouement*, *tortillait*, *déchirer*, *effroi*, *se plaignit*, and a word for which she consulted the glossary: *je le moudrais*. She was never the only person to check a word.

*Conclusion:* Although Carole did not make much use of the annotations – to the extent that one can assume she was capable of understanding the text well enough without any external help – it is noteworthy that the words she did check were spread throughout the passage. She described her motivation as being at the mid-point of the scale, so perhaps she felt frustrated by the unnecessary help being offered.

**Janine:** Age: 18. She had spent two weeks in France.

*Attitude to fiction in French:* Janine was enrolled in the Bachelor of Creative Arts. She did not expect to use French in her professional life. She was bilingual in English and German. Her motivation to read fiction in French was very high: her chief aim was to learn more about French writers and literature and read French fiction in the original. She had used some French fiction in her preparation for the final high school examination. She found reading French fiction very rewarding and was able to read it for pleasure.

*Performance:* Her answers in the questionnaire were among the best in both the factual and the opinion sections: 80 per cent in both. Like Carole and Nathalie, Janine showed a real appreciation of the theme. She was highly motivated in her reading, which took only 15 minutes. However, she described her comprehension as only *moderate*.

*Use of annotations:* Janine checked 15 words, going to the glossary for only two of them. She was the only person to check *douleurs*, *mûrir*, *entraver*, *ému* and *témoin*, though it seems unlikely that all of the others knew all these words.

*Conclusion:* Given that the whole exercise took her only 15 minutes it seems clear that she read the text quickly and well, and wanted to understand everything. Indeed, in the discussion afterwards she said that while she enjoyed the exercise very much, she felt frustrated when she came across one of the few annotations that simply directed her to the glossary.

**Nathalie:** Age: 18. She had spent a year in France.

*Attitude to fiction in French:* Nathalie was enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies degree, and expected to use her ability to read French in her professional life. She found reading in English personally rewarding, but preferred light to literary fiction. She did not study French at school, but thanks to her year in France she found reading in French, both fiction and other texts, very rewarding. She described her motivation as extremely high, but she did not see herself primarily as a literature student.

*Performance:* Her answers to the questions on the text were the best: 100 per cent for the content, 80 per cent for her opinions, but she described her comprehension as *quite good*. She spent 30 minutes working on the text.

*Use of annotations:* Nathalie consulted the strategies for 14 words, but only once did she go on to the glossary (for *sanguin*). The words checked are spread throughout the text, though most of them occur in the first two thirds of the passage. She was the only person to check *épouse*, *son tablier noir d'écolier* and *soupçons*.

*Conclusion:* Given the excellence of her understanding of the passage it seems reasonable to assume that unlike Rosalie (who checked 16 words) but like Janine (15 words checked), she had a satisfactory global understanding and was tending to use the strategies to perfect her comprehension. She said during the post-test interview that she enjoyed the exercise, finding it easier to consult the strategies online than using a conventional dictionary. Because of it her motivation for reading the text remained intact.

## USE MADE OF STRATEGIES

Interestingly, some students looked up nearly all the words that were glossed in the first paragraph. As the passage progressed, although we had continued to gloss whatever words we deemed necessary, most participants looked up fewer and fewer of them. There was a clear drop in frequency after the first third of the text, perhaps not coincidentally at the point where two of the characters started engaging in a lively conversation and one could see more easily the direction in which the passage was leading. By the last paragraph, of 17 words glossed, nine were not checked by anyone, and five by only one student. There are two obvious possibilities as to why this was so: some participants could have become tired of looking up words; others may have been so engrossed in the action that they felt no need to do so. On the other hand, Janine and Nathalie, both very proficient learners according to their profiles, seemed to have wanted to make sure they understood every word.

What use, then, did the Guided Reading Group make of the strategies? They clicked on 37 of the 70 words, with a fair overlap, as the total number of clicks was 63. We have noted in each case study the words which only that individual checked, while admitting that no conclusions can be drawn as to why no one else felt the need to consult the strategies for some very unusual words. In 43 of the instances of checking the students went no further than the strategy; in the remaining 20 they went on to the glossary, but Marie was responsible for eleven of these and Rosalie for five, leaving only four references to the glossary for the other three students. This could mean that the strategy was regarded as satisfactory by most of the students, most of the time.

## CONVENTIONAL READING GROUP, COMPARED WITH GUIDED READING GROUP

From a collegial viewpoint, the Conventional Reading Group had much the same range of attitudes towards fiction in French as the Guided Reading Group, the main discernible difference being that more of them saw a use for the ability to read French in their future professional life. Their motivation, reading *Le Proverbe* in the conventional way, with free access to a dictionary, was affected by the omnipresence of the dictionary.

The Conventional Reading Group participants spent an average of 40.4 minutes on the exercise (30–40–40–45–47) against 25 minutes for the Guided Reading Group (25–25–30–15–30). The scores obtained by the Conventional Reading Group in the *Post-comprehension Test* were not quite as good as those attributed to the Guided Reading group (63.5 per cent against 68 per cent on average), but with a similar spread.<sup>5</sup> The analysis of the answers to the factual questions in the test revealed that the Conventional Reading Group had more gaps in their understanding of details,<sup>6</sup> and indeed rated themselves (with one exception) as not having followed the story well. However, there was very little difference between the groups in the quality of the responses to the opinion-seeking questions.<sup>7</sup>

During the post-reading interviews with the Conventional Reading Group the need to consult the dictionary loomed large: two participants said they had to look up words frequently and two said they had to look up words *too* frequently, while the student who had spent a year in France said she had not needed the dictionary. The investigators' impression from these interviews was that the Conventional Reading Group participants found it tedious to have to use a dictionary to understand an otherwise interesting text, but saw no alternative. They were resigned to it because that was the only way of reading a French text they had ever experienced.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have presented a FL reading computerised procedure developed by the authors to support comprehension through access to a range of problem-solving strategies associated with the lexical difficulties of a literary text in French. The objective of the study has been to gauge the pedagogical relevance of the program to learners of differing proficiencies and see if the program could facilitate intermediate language students' first encounters with literary texts. To achieve this we subjected a group of learners to reading in guided reading mode while another group of learners read in conventional mode.

The analysis of the reading of five participants has given us a qualitative insight into the relationship between language proficiency, reading experience and strategic choices

made at individual level by language learners while reading. Furthermore, we have been able to compare both groups of readers directly on their motivation while carrying out the task, the time taken for the exercise, their understanding and appreciation of the text, and their perception of their degree of understanding. On all these criteria the Conventional Reading Group had poorer outcomes, although they were not, as individuals and as a group, weaker students.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the frank enthusiasm for the reading activity reported by the Guided Reading readers was clearly missing in the interviews of the Conventional Reading Group members. In particular, it appears that the latter group accepted the omnipresence of the dictionary as a necessary evil at this stage of their studies. It is possible that although objectively, to judge from their responses, they did not differ substantially in level of understanding, they may have felt somewhat demoralised by the constant recourse to the dictionary.

The courseware presented in this article does not claim to compete with commercial multimedia reading software, because as a homemade prototype it has limitations inherent to certain technical constraints. Moreover, as it stands the exercise is limited to one single text, and therefore does not provide adequate longitudinal strategy training indispensable to the acquisition of durable metacognitive reflexes.

The study reported here has demonstrated the relevance, with a limited group, of strategy training at word, phrase or expression level. We hope to be able to replicate this study across two or three universities, with students who may well differ from our own. The larger number of participants would permit us to make a statistical analysis of the results and formally assess the validity of our approach. We also recognise that the support we have offered is localised and does not account, at least in an explicit manner, for higher-level strategic processes relating to text structure, for example, and we therefore propose to extend the study to other types of literary texts, requiring other strategic approaches. We remain convinced, however, that it is essential to begin by enabling learners to expand their vocabulary rapidly and to decipher unfamiliar words with minimal recourse to a dictionary. An extended version of the guided reading program, over a number of texts each targeting specific skills, would provide support through text cohesion strategies (such as identifying macroframe and key episodes of the text, keeping the gist of the story in mind, predicting what could come next, visualising scenes, inferring cultural background knowledge) and comprehension monitoring strategies (evaluating text difficulty, identifying comprehension problems, implementing adequate problem-solving strategies, verifying difficulty resolution, evaluating comprehension at all levels). The final stage of the project should be a comparative study of the final-year reading competence



of students who had participated in the whole program with others who had not been exposed to it.

Despite the limitations outlined above, the design and trial of the guided reading exercise provided a very valuable pedagogical experience as it gave us the opportunity to look into reading in a foreign language from individual and collegial perspectives. Believing strongly that reading literary texts should have some elements of challenge but, all in all, also be a satisfying activity, we have no hesitation in saying that the pleasure all the Guided Reading participants derived from reading the text with the help of the strategies we offered was the best reward imaginable for our efforts.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 See <http://www.gss.ucsb.edu/faculty/dmchun/cyberbuch/Links.html>.
- 2 Cyberbuch website: <http://www.gss.ucsb.edu/faculty/dmchun/cyberbuch/>.
- 3 A partly functional demonstration version of the program can be viewed at <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/language/french/online/reading/>.
- 4 According to some studies, the presence of highlighted hyperlinks does not seem to have any negative incidence on reading comprehension. For a discussion of this issue refer to De Ridder (2002) and Nikolova (2004).
- 5 50%–57.5%–60%–65%–85%. The mark of 60% was the only one where the responses to the factual questions (40%) had a very different quality from the opinions (80%). This is similar to Carole's mark distribution. Guided Reading Group: 50%–55%–65%–80%–90%.
- 6 Conventional Reading Group: 40%–40%–50%–60%–90%; Guided Reading Group: 30%–50%–60%–80%–100%.
- 7 Conventional Reading Group: 60%–65%–70%–80%–80%; Guided Reading Group: 50%–70%–80%–80%–80%.
- 8 As our French section is a small one, they and their work are well known to a small group of instructors.

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## CYBERBUCH WEBSITE

*CyberBuch* demonstration website. Accessed February 3 2006:  
<http://www.gss.ucsb.edu/faculty/dmchun/cyberbuch/>.

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