AN EXPERIMENT IN DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT FOR FRENCH

Remarks elicited by Julie ROBERGE, teacher of French at Cégep André-Laurendeau and a member of the Editorial Board of *Pédagogie collégiale.*

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Since the fall of 2008, the French Department at Cégep André-Laurendeau has been implementing "measures for support and follow-up for students in French courses". These measures use a variety of means to enable students to pass their general education French courses and the standardized French exam (*épreuve uniforme de français*, or EUF). In keeping with the theme of this issue and to find out how this support is put into practice, Julie Roberge, a member of the Editorial Board of *Pedagogie collégiale*, met with Marie-Pier POULIN, a teacher in the department, and Jean-Paul Roger, the departmental coordinator.

JULIE ROBERGE:

Can you talk to us about what you call "measures of support and follow-up for students in French courses"?

JEAN-PAUL ROGER:

All the students enrolled in the first three French courses (601-101, 601-102, and 601-103) benefit from this support. In practical terms, over the last three years we have added one hour of French support to every student's schedule, established a two-component-pass requirement, moved the remedial French course (*cours de mise à niveau*, or MAN) so that a student takes it following failure in the language section of a course, designed shared materials, and produced statistics on pass rates in French courses and the Ministry's standardized French exam. In short, this is a major project on which the department has worked very hard.

Since we know that failures in French courses are mainly due to students' inadequate mastery of the written language, the project has targeted improvement in this competency with a view to significantly increasing students' pass rates in their French courses and the EUF. Passing the EUF is a requirement for graduating. The way we chose to

accomplish this was by setting up departmental structures for support and follow-up for students taking the first three French courses.

This project also allows teachers to teach students how to revise and correct their written work and then to assess this competency. All of this constitutes a departmental project which stems from one of our CEGEP's orientations, and teachers have no choice but to participate.

What is this "two-component-pass requirement" that you have implemented?

jpr   To pass a course, students must obtain 60% at the end of the term. For French, we've grouped the relevant competencies into two component parts: the literature component, which relates to having an understanding of the work under study and being able to summarize it in a coherent text; and the language component, which relates to being able to write in a French that is acceptable for a student at the college level. To establish a two-component-pass requirement, we used the Ministry's assessment instrument for the EUF as a model.

That instrument has three distinct categories of criteria: content, textual structure, and language. To pass the Ministry exam, students must obtain 60% for each set of criteria.

In our case, the passing grade is set at 60% for each component, both literature and language. This means that students must obtain a minimum grade of 60% in literature and language at the same time: the grade obtained for one component cannot "offset" the grade in the other in the event of failure in the latter. Since 70% of the final grade is assigned to literature and 30% to language, before the implementation of the two-component-pass requirement, students could obtain 55 (out of 70) for literature and 8 (out of 30) for language and thus pass the course with a total of 63. With the new requirement for passing grades in both components, students with those results would fail the course because they would not have obtained at least 60% in each of the literature and language components. They may indeed

have obtained 78% in literature (55 out of 70), but with only 26% in language (8 out of 30) that translates into a failure for the course as a whole. Furthermore, from now on students can't make more than one mistake per 30 words. This pass requirement in language means that, in order to pass 601-101, students must not make more than 24 mistakes in a 700-word text. For 601-102, it's a maximum of 27 mistakes in an 800-word text. And for 601-103, the maximum is 30 mistakes per 900 words. This is approximately the same as the EUF standard.

What is the impact of the two-component-pass requirement on a student's academic progress?

jpr   To reiterate: students must obtain at least 60% in literature and 60% in language. If they fail the literature component of their French course, they must repeat the course the next term. If on the other hand they fail the language component of the course but they pass the literature component, then the comment "Temporary Incomplete" appears on their report card and they are enrolled in the remedial course for the next term. If the students then pass the remedial course, we modify the mark for the course they failed the previous term and they are now considered to have passed that course. The College Education Regulations allow, in the case of specific projects linked to a pass, for transmitting a new grade to the Dean of Studies more than 30 days after the end of the term in question. We did not quite anticipate all the implications at the start, and we must now offer 601-102 and 601-103 as summer

courses so that students do not fall too far behind in their education.

You mentioned earlier having developed common work tools. What are they?

jpr   Teachers have a degree of latitude in the choice of texts to be studied: they can choose what they want, as long as they respect the guidelines we have established in our framework plans. The teachers worked in teams a good deal, in order to ensure a degree of fairness and equivalency between French courses. For example, teachers who offer the same course meet to devise a common assessment procedure in Week 16 so that this test will be at the same level of difficulty regardless of teacher. But what is most important is that they have developed a common list of codes for identifying language errors in all the French courses. They have also created common assessment instruments for different kinds of essay.

MARIE-PIER POULIN:

It was not too difficult to implement the correction codes for language: they are sound and they are easy for both teachers and students to remember. On the other hand, the common instrument for assessing the content and structure of essays was a bit more difficult to implement: each of us manages to do our work objectively because our criteria are precise; but we have to communicate more often to ensure we don't diverge in our interpretations of these criteria.

We also have shared materials to give students. We have created a Language Correction Guide that lists all the codes we use to identify language errors and also provides concise grammar rules to help students find their way around. It is like a mini-grammar book specifically

adapted to our list of codes. If students want more information, they are directed to other more extensive tools like those of the Centre collégial de développement de matériel didactique (CCDMD), such as *La plume et le portable* ("The Pen and the Laptop") and *Le détecteur de fautes* ("The Mistake Detector"). We also offer them a chart for drawing up an list of the kinds of mistakes they make.

How is the support organized, in practice?

jpr   The students have their four hours of French courses per week, as they did before. To these four hours we have added one hour that we call "support hour for language and literature". So the students have five hours of French per week. The addition of the fifth hour means all the students in a given group and their teacher are available at the same time; this allows for much more focussed follow-up, whether in the form of one-on-one meetings or group meetings. Since this is a support hour, it is not viewed as a fifth class hour. It's mainly dedicated to helping students work on the quality of their written French.

How does this fifth hour count in the teacher's workload?

jpr   Since 2006, the annual individual workload, or charge individuelle (CI), for CEGEP teachers of French has been at around 84. It was thus impossible to add any time without exceeding the maximum CI. In order to make room for the support hour, and, given that the increase would have an impact on other courses, in order to lighten the workload in French an agreement was reached by the labour relations committee (*comité des relations de travail : CRT*) making it possible to adjust the workloads of those

French teachers who were taking on the support hour. Under the agreement, teachers of 601-101, 601-102, and 601-103 went from four to three groups per term, that is, from 16 to twelve hours of course time; to this was added three hours of support time. This was a choice made by the CEGEP to demonstrate that it considers the quality of students' written language to be important and that it is concerned about students' success in French.

How does this language support for students play out in the common French general education courses?

mpp In 601-101, as of the second week of term, students are asked to write a 250-word text. It is by means of this essay that we identify students who appear to need more assistance to pass the language component. In this way we can quickly point some students towards sources of support other than courses, such as the Service d'aide en français écrit (SAFE). For 601-102 and 601-103, the final essay of the previous course is used as a screening tool. Regardless of the course, we give students a precise indicator right from the start: if they do not make the effort to improve their written language they are headed directly for failure and their problems will persist in all their courses. In 601-101 in particular, this screening process is especially important as a way of letting students know they have now entered the world of college, high school is over. The students in question are alerted right from the start that there is a problem. Thus the problem will not come as a surprise at the end of the term. The support hour is there to help

students take responsibility for their language problems. Placed face-to-face with these problems, thy work on them during the support hour and some students also decide to enrol in SAFE. All of that is part of their responsibility.

What do you do concretely to help students in class and during the support hour?

mpp Over the years, teachers have experimented with all kinds of ways of working; however the one that is the most widespread and that provides the best results, in my view, is "postcorrection". It requires students to draw up a list of their mistakes and understand them. Having indicated language errors using codes, we require students to correct a certain number of these mistakes. Students must identify the nature of the mistakes; they must consult a reference work such as our Correction Guide; they must transcribe the passages containing the mistakes; and they must apply the relevant grammar rules in the context of the errors. Thus they do not simply copy out a rule "in the abstract": rather, they must describe how the rule applies in a specific context. For example, "This adjective in my sentence must agree with this word that is feminine plural." Then, if the teacher so requires, the students rewrite the sentences correctly and have their corrections checked. This is what we call "justified correction". Before the implementation of the support project, this postcorrection process could take place outside class hours, but obviously we didn't manage to do adequate follow-up because the workload

was too heavy for teachers. Now we do the postcorrection work during the support hour and the students take it quite seriously. They realize fully how the work could make a really big difference to passing the course. Moreover, the support hour allows us to take students pretty soon, early in the term, to a computer lab where they are introduced to *La plume et le portable* on the CCDMD website. All through the term, students will use these extra exercises, whether during the support hour our outside it, to fill in their gaps.

> *This project also allows teachers to teach students how to revise and correct their written work and then to assess this competency.*

You say that students must correct "a certain number of mistakes". Why do they not correct all of them?

mpp This can vary from teacher to teacher. At the beginning I used to have students correct all their mistakes; but I realized that students who have 40, 50, or 60 mistakes are totally discouraged when faced with this task; and that is exactly what I want to avoid. I would rather the students understand certain mistakes so that they do not make them again. I have therefore reduced to 20 the number of mistakes to be corrected. Some of my colleagues make them correct all their mistakes.

How much time does it take for students to correct their mistakes?

mpp It's very long. For my part, I allow at least three one-hour meetings for it. I have tried several approaches since we began this type of support,

but what I find to be most effective is to ask the students, at the end of each support period, to give me the portion of their postcorrection that they have completed. If they have only had time to correct seven mistakes, then I collect seven.

This way of proceeding allows me to make comments on the postcorrection: "G" for good and "?" if something is incomplete or the mistakes are not well explained or not properly corrected. In the next class, students receive their postcorrection sheets with comments on them, and they can come and ask questions about them during the support hour. Some of my colleagues take a different approach, but the principle of postcorrection remains the same. What needs to be properly understood is that the support hour is not a class hour, but an hour of consultation and individual work.

What do you do with students who have only four mistakes in a 700-word text? Do they still come for the support hour?

mpp Yes, but don't forget that this hour helps students improve on the language front. As soon as students are good enough, their postcorrection goes more quickly; but that's no reason to drop postcorrection.

Are marks given for postcorrection?

mpp In my group, yes, but I know it is not the same for all the teachers. The department's framework plans stipulate that 80% of the final grade is for essays, while the teacher chooses which other activities will count for the remaining 20%. In my case, the postcorrection marks count towards the twenty marks allocated to a portfolio that students put together over the course of the term. Into this portfolio, students must put all the essays for which they have completed the postcorrections in the required time.

Are there other ways of proceeding during the support hour?

mpp Rather than repeat the same linguistic concept to 35 students individually, one can give the group a short theoretical explanation of a particular subject. For example, I can explain one or two punctuation rules to the students and then ask them to correct their own punctuation errors. But this activity is not the most important one. The accent is really on individual work.

What has changed for the students since you added this support hour?

mpp What has mostly changed is their relationship with the language. When they write a text, they know that they will have to postcorrect their mistakes; the more mistakes they make, the more postcorrection they will have to do. Some of them get this really fast! So there's proof that they have a knowledge base that they do not always use. I find that doing the postcorrection the way I do is very demanding for me. But when I see the results, I believe in it. When I get to the end term, I always tell myself that it was worth it because I can see the difference. I believe the same is true for all my colleagues.

Does the support take the same form, no matter what the course?

mpp In 601-101 and 601-102, the support focuses exclusively on language. If students have assimilated postcorrection thoroughly in 601-101, things run smoothly in 601-102, even though at that stage we introduce more complex concepts about syntax or sentence and paragraph structure. The students understand that the same approach applies and it goes without saying.

For 601-103, the support provided is not the same. That course serves primarily as preparation for the EUF. The teachers tease out all the stages leading to the writing and revision of a critical essay, putting a little less emphasis on language. We realized that a third course with the same approach to language was not as useful as the first two; hence the department's decision to focus the work more on the EUF.

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How is the remedial course set up, seeing that it is given following a failure in the language component of a course?

jpr The remedial course is focused not on declarative knowledge, but rather on applying that knowledge. This is where students learn to write. The approach is very pragmatic and aims to reduce the number of students' mistakes. This is why teachers in remedial courses now give fewer and fewer exercises on out-of-context sentences: students work primarily with the authors' and students' texts. They must learn to spot mistakes. The CEGEP opted to shift the remedial course so that it's taken following a student's failure in the language section of 601-101, 601-102, or 601-103. We believe that students feel less "labelled" from the outset

if they are in 601-101 despite their high school French results; we believe this may nudge them towards recognizing the importance of language. If they must take the remedial course afterwards, they know that passing it will also lead to passing the course in which they failed the language section, and that encourages them. Thus the remedial course is not disconnected from the other courses and the students understand its usefulness.

Has the implementation of the project been demanding?

mpp The department believes in it and the Dean of Studies supports it. We are held accountable, of course, since this support measure is expensive; but we also have the impression that we have to justify it every year, that we must demonstrate each year that the project is productive; and in the end this is exhausting. Add to this the fact that an hour of support demands more energy than a regular classroom hour. In the final analysis, it is a project that requires a big investment on our part.

Today, after three years of the project, what could be done to improve or enhance it?

mpp There should be a little more consistency in what we are doing during the support hour in 601-101 and 601-102. Even though over the past three years we have talked to each other a good deal within the department in order to harmonize our practices, and even though the process is already well established, we still have work to do on this score. Furthermore, each group is different, each student is different, and what works for one is not necessarily effective for another.

This too is something we need to take into account in order to achieve a degree of consistency.

jpr Support for students in 601-101 and 601-103 in the winter term and 601-102 in the fall term, i.e., students not following the regular academic path, is less effective. This may be because those students do essentially the same activities that prevented them from passing the course the first time. It's not enough to have this particular target group do justified postcorrection for them to truly improve their language mastery. We might need to come up with a "support plus" component for these students. For the time being, we have not reached that stage of development in the project.

In conclusion, what would you consider the biggest strong point of these "measures for support and follow-up for students in French courses"?

mpp Students who have taken the remedial course and worked hard improve significantly. They do not all pass the language component afterwards, but we can tell there has been significant improvement. The remedial course teacher says that more and more students are concerned about the image they project to others based on the quality of their language. They leave behind their adolescent language somewhat and adopt adult language.

jpr The support and follow-up measures for students in all the courses have enabled us to achieve the objectives of the department's plan for success. Prior to the implementation of the project, the pass rate for our students was lower than that of the Service régional des admissions du Montréal

métropolitain (SRAM); now, with two cohorts, we see that our rates are higher than theirs. I have to say that the two-component-pass requirement that we introduced has obliged students to take their language skills very seriously. Students who are weaker in French, those who got less than 65% on their single Secondary V exam or had a general average of less than 75% in high school, can picture themselves improving their French skills sufficiently to pass the three common general education French courses within the prescribed time.

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mpp But the project's greatest strength is without a doubt that students' relationship to language changes completely. When I think about what we used to do, I find it made no sense! We corrected the students' papers, we deducted marks, but we never explained the language to students. We kept telling ourselves that they should have learned all that in high school, but they obviously hadn't. Even when we took 30% off for language mistakes, we didn't offer the students any support. There was no place for language in our courses, and we were assessing something that we weren't teaching!

Now we give students the tools they need to improve and it's up to them use them: we empower them. ◗