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ABSTRACT

It is possible to change negative or biased attitudes of American secondary and college students studying French by using "cognitive dissonance" to infuse conflicting ideas or cognitions into the curriculum and help students resolve the resulting anxiety. Students will then become aware of the diversity of ideas and cultural practices, and Francophone traits will be rendered less stereotypic. The most useful classroom techniques using cognitive dissonance involve (1) offering students nonjudgmental information over a sustained period; (2) group task assignments such as listing positive attributes of the French, finding French-made items, or finding local businesses with French clients overseas; (3) exploratory, small-group discussions on attitudes toward the French; (4) skillful interrogation allowing students to reveal biases against the French; (5) values clarification requiring students to list values, assign priorities, make choices, and respond to hypothetical situations; and (6) counter-attitude advocacy, having students support a position and attitude that is the opposite of the one they actually hold. The more effort and time students spend on these activities, the more likely that their attitudes will change. (MSE).

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COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AS ACTIVITIES
IN TEACHING FRENCH VALUES
AND CULTURE

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Problem and Need

Preference for his or her own culture cause the typical American secondary and/or university student to pre-judge the Francophone negatively and thus their value system and their language are rejected as unfit for American consumption or consideration. Cultural prejudice or ethnocentrism allow Americans to overlook the fact that their view of the world is not universally acceptable. Visible and subtle French traits become stereotypic and cognitively unbelievable. Furthermore, if the French language is a manifestation of this culture, it becomes equally susceptible to negative judgement. Thus, language study and cultural studies decline.

With the aforementioned statements, another problem manifests itself: few materials and activities are shared with colleagues that treat the problem of attitude change in our student population. Unfortunately, French textbooks have also proven less than helpful in this area. Wittich (1970) found that the nine introductory French textbooks used in her study are: (1) poor in social situations; (2) narrow in focus; (3) poor in rationale; and (4) superficial in their treatment of similarities and differences between the two cultures. Fowler (1954) and Lewis (1956) cite also the general chaos in inter-cultural studies and

the ethnocentric attitude in American authors of literary anthologies. Condon (1969) maintains that the chief obstacles to teaching French values are: (1) general confusion in the field; (2) unavailable information; and (3) indifference concerning cultural matters. A coherent description of the Francophone cannot be learned without proper documents and activities. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the teacher to try to clarify some of legitimate descriptions of the Francophone, and to persuade the student that an attitude change is also required before a successful study of the French language can proceed. I offer the theory of cognitive dissonance as an underlying theory of attitude change.

With these preliminary understandings, let's turn to the theory to see what applications can be formulated.

Cognitive Dissonance as a Theory

Cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger (1957), is a theory that declares that our mental world consists of a series of many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Some of these cognitions are important and others are not. At any time when two or more cognitions are contrasted, one of them has precedent. If there is no conflict, we are in a state of consonance, but if several cognitions are in conflict, we are in a state of dissonance. The anxiety and stress that follow from dissonance cause humans to return to a state of equilibrium or consonance. Furthermore, it is

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through the introduction of dissonance and its resulting discomfort that negative attitudes can be dispelled. In this theory the student is held responsible for the conditions that bring about his or her own dissonance and thus a greater degree of dissonance occurs, and a greater striving for consonance (Davis and Jones, 1960).

Cognitive Dissonance as Activities in Teaching French Values

The theory of cognitive dissonance opens up many possibilities in terms of activities and techniques. The most rewarding techniques are: non-judgmental information, task assigned group work, exploratory discussions, skillful questioning, values clarification, and counter attitude advocacy.

The first technique is to offer the French student non-judgmental information and evidence of the value of knowing French and its culture. This approach is subtle and requires a flow of information over a long period of time so that the worth of a student's French study is maintained. The student is inoculated with greater and greater doses of facts to counterbalance the misconceptions that he or she has built up prior to taking a foreign language. An interesting way of using this idea is to elicit student interests. For example, science students marvel at the long series of famous French scientists and their contributions to Western technology. Advanced classes can even read simple scientific papers in engineering, chemistry, and mathematics. This examination of

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French accomplishments destroys the notion that French is worthless in science-mathematics curricula. This technique has general applicability in literature, music, social studies, and business.

The second approach is task assigned group work. The teacher can have a group make a list of positive attributes of the French. Each group could list attributes in general or according to broad, but basic characteristics using topics such as individualism, intellect, family, religion, justice, country, and reality (Nostrand, 1967; Ladu, 1968; Wylie, 1970; Paoletti and Steele, 1983). Each group can also go on scavenger hunts to find French-made items or locate international businesses in the community that have French-speaking clients overseas. Students can learn to deduce the inappropriateness of ethnocentrism by progressing from apprehension of, to acceptance of cultural differences (Knop, 1976).

The third approach is the use of exploratory discussions in small groups. Encounter groups can be formed within the classroom allowing each group to air his or her feelings, and to evaluate the feelings of others. Force field analysis is a likely approach: participants look at the forces working for or against their achievement of a more tolerant attitude toward Francophones.

The fourth approach is skillful interrogation. This approach involves a series of probing questions that cause

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the students to reveal their conflicts with the French language and Francophonic customs. This technique is allied to inquiry training in which students explore facts and probe deeply into various "why." A set of six programmed culture assimilators followed by multiple-choice questions and explanatory paragraphs exist for this purpose (LaPeyre, 1973). The teacher creates an atmosphere of doubt and through skillful cultural assimilators, the student develops a new set of concepts about French customs.

The fifth approach is values clarification. This approach requires the student to list values, assign priorities, make choices, and respond to hypothetical situations (Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972). Brehm and Cohen (1959) and Rath, Harmin, and Simon (1966) insist that no one really values anything unless he or she chooses it freely for valuing; unless he or she has chosen among the alternatives after due reflection and is willing to affirm it publicly. Activities that French classes might consider are: role-playing, reaction papers, image testing, simulated interviews, and the semantic differential.

The final approach is counter attitude advocacy. In this activity, the student supports a position and an attitude that is opposite to the one he or she actually holds (Culbertson, 1957). In terms of the cognitive dissonance theory, a student recognizes that his or her cognitions are in conflict and rapidly seeks to regain his

or her equilibrium. Any public affirmation of discrepant behavior makes the process twice as effective (Brock and Buss, 1962). Some activities for French classes are: simulation games in which the students have an opportunity for role-playing--"French and American" or Bafa-Bafa (Gary Shirts, n.d.). As I envision another activity, the class would be assigned to act out the characteristics from one of two lists. The activity has these descriptors listed in two columns:

THE FRENCH ARE

negative

unhappy

simple

dishonest

mysterious

dull

non-religious

poor

uncooperative

bad

cruel

warlike

powerless

uneducated

untrustworthy

positive

happy

complex

honest

familiar

exciting

religious

rich

cooperative

good

kind

peaceful

powerful

educated

trustworthy

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The discussion that concludes this activity can focus on the answers to these statements:

1. Can you make judgments about an ethnic group based upon insufficient information?
2. What actions given by the participants provide information about their pre-judgments?
3. Did the participants stereotype Francophones?
4. Have you ever projected your own attitudes and expectations onto others?
5. Do you make unconscious assumptions about French-speaking peoples and assume their validity?

The more effort a student devotes to this project and the longer he or she is engaged in it, the greater the probability that an attitude change will occur.

In conclusion, it is possible to change the attitudes of American secondary and university students studying French. It is possible to change the attitudes of students who covertly or overtly accept the view that the American way is the only way. Through the concept of cognitive dissonance, that is, the infusion of conflicting ideas or cognitions, students will become aware of the diversity of ideas and practices that make the Francophonic believable. If a student subjectively feels that a subject matter is relevant and understandable, he or she will attend to and appreciate its study.

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