

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 242

FL 023 554

AUTHOR Rees, Pat
 TITLE Reading in French-GCSE to A Level.
 PUB DATE 92
 NOTE 23p.; In: Perspectives on Reading. CLE Working Papers 2. For complete volume, see FL 023 547. Research was part of Master's dissertation at Southampton University, England.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Foreign Countries; *French; Interviews; *National Competency Tests; *National Norms; Questionnaires; *Reading Habits; *Reading Material Selection; Reading Strategies; Secondary Education; Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes
 IDENTIFIERS Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the reading habits of a group of students who moved from GCSE French to A Level French in the British school system; they were the second intake of A Level students with a GCSE background. Data was gathered using questionnaires and group interviews at three points during the students learning. Eleven students participated in the group discussions. Findings suggest that students need a wide variety of text types during the very early stages of A-Level course, with a staged progression in text length, and that reading skills strategies should be covered early in the A-Level course. Readers were preferred by the students over snippets and full-length books. Overall findings indicate a need for extensive reading over intensive, select text study and increased early emphasis on the learning of reading skills. (Contains 14 references.) (NAV)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

Reading in French-GCSE to A Level

Pat Rees

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. J. Brumfit

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Reading in French - GCSE to A Level

Pat Rees

Introduction

(This paper reports on research which I carried out at Taunton's (Sixth Form) College, Southampton in 1990. It formed part of my MA (Ed) dissertation for Southampton University under the supervision of Dr Rosamond Mitchell.)

I have long been intrigued by the process of reading which plays such a key part in learning, using, teaching and examining a foreign language. This study explores these issues via a profile of the reading experience of a group of students who had moved on from GCSE French to A Level French. They were the second intake of A Level students with a GCSE background.

My aim was to find out what they had actually read in French and also to compare theory with practice. How did the students' experiences correlate with the requirements of the Examination Boards? What could I learn about the interface between CCSE and A Level with regard to reading in French? Also, how could we best help them and their successors to read in a foreign language? I was therefore interested in their experience of study skills and reading strategies.

By means of Questionnaire and Group Interviews I took soundings concerning three stages in the development of a year group of A Level French students: retrospectively, with reference first to GCSE and then to the transitional point at the start of their A Level Course, and, thirdly, with reference to the present - at the end of their first A Level year.

The students surveyed came from four sets with three different teachers, following two separate A Level syllabuses in French; one set was studying for the London A Syllabus, with a Literature Paper on Set Texts, the other three were preparing for the SUJB/Cambridge Syllabus B, with an Individual Study on an aspect of France. Instead of a Literature Paper the

latter had a Reading Programme of 10-12 books in French examined at the Oral only and allowing scope for student and staff choice.

The questionnaire study

Fifty Questionnaires were distributed to First Year A Level students in early July, at the end of the third term of their course. Thirty-five were completed by respondents who had attended eleven different secondary schools.

The place of reading

As a starting point I wanted to ascertain how the students had perceived the relative importance of reading French in their secondary schools, bearing in mind that all four communicative skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing - are weighted equally at GCSE, each being allocated 25% of the total mark. It emerged that, viewed from the students' perspective, Reading had occupied second place in the hierarchy of skills, closely followed by Listening, with Speaking last. The front runner by far was Writing.

What students had read

The questions on Reading Materials were broken down into sub-sections on Coursebooks, Past Papers, Photocopied Texts, Magazines and Newspapers, Readers in French, Books in French (complete books as distinct from Readers or books of extracts) and French Poetry.

Coursebooks I found that Coursebooks had filled the foreground of the students' French reading experience. *Tricolore* predominated, with 24 users. Fewer than five had used any other. A small proportion had used ancillary books based on one or more discrete communicative skills alongside or instead, with an even tinier proportion using more than one.

Past papers Past papers are very special animals, being by definition a medium for testing. They are specially selected and often "doctored" to that end. Of the 26 students who had used Past Papers to practise Reading Comprehension skills in French, 12 had used between four and five of

them. This is probably an adequate number to prepare for the examination if used alongside other reading materials.

Six students denied using past papers, and a further three did not know or were not sure, so nine of the 35 could not say they had used them, about one quarter of the total. It is doubtful if this is adequate preparation for the examination room, but at the other extreme the two students who worked on 15 and 20 past papers respectively may well have suffered from a chronic surfeit of a limited diet of text and question types.

Photocopied texts Photocopied texts or passages for reading in French were used by 27 respondents. 21 found them useful; about half (14) enjoyed them. A common thread in responses was that they offered a welcome variety in terms of relevance, topics, styles and vocabulary extending beyond coursebooks.

Magazines and newspapers Only six students claimed to have read any magazines or newspapers in French. Only three could supply any names - mostly of purpose-built products from educational publishing houses.

Readers in French Several students did not know the term "Reader" and requested clarification. Nine out of the 35 students were certain that they had used Readers, which suggests that up to 26 had not. Surprisingly, eight Readers were used during class time, while only three were used for private study or homework, despite their suitability for these purposes. Perhaps the reason was a shortage of books, or a fear that they would be lost if taken home.

The nine students' overall impressions of their Readers came across as very favourable, not only because they felt them to be an extension of their reading skills but also because they perceived them as a confidence-booster, providing confirmation of skills already acquired.

"Complete books" in French The readership of "complete books" in French other than Readers was extremely low. Only three out of 35 students had read any, and then only one apiece. They were estimated by them to be between 100 and 287 pages in length, with two of the three students reading them to the end. All found them useful, while two out of the three found them enjoyable - the ones who also finished them!

French poetry Six of the 35 students had read a very small amount of poetry. Only La Fontaine and Prevert were named. All enjoyed the poems they read, explaining why eloquently. This was unexpected, in view of the widespread belief that poetry fails to fire the modern 16-year old, but there seems to be a rich vein of personal fulfilment to be tapped through this genre of imaginative writing, if texts are well chosen.

Text length

The respondents' experience of text length proved highly revealing. The length of texts in GCSE Coursebooks mirrors the length of texts in GCSE Reading Tests. Aside from the three students who tackled whole books of up to 287 pages, the single student who read a magazine of 50 pages, the three who read similar materials of about 20 pages and the handful who read Readers of about 25 pages - and some of the students came within more than one of these categories - a clear majority of these post-GCSE students had read nothing longer than, at best, four or five paragraphs of continuous text in French. Two to three paragraphs had been more usual. In other words their experience did not exceed the length of the Reading Comprehension questions in the GCSE Examination Papers. Unsurprisingly, students who continue on to A Level courses find the longer texts there difficult to handle.

Training in reading skills

Students were asked whether they had received any kind of Reading Skills training in their secondary schools. Five students, one seventh of the total sample, claimed to have followed a Reading Skills Course. In no case had it been linked with French. It had formed part of normal lessons in English or History; four of the five had found it helpful.

Students were also asked about the role played by their French teacher in providing advice on tackling reading assignments in French. Only one fifth of them could recall specific advice. They were asked too whether their coursebooks had contained hints on reading strategies and, if so, whether these hints had been useful. Four only, one in nine, recalled advice in coursebooks, but only one of the four could name this advice.

In response to a direct question 22 of our 35 respondents said they would have welcomed a Reading Skills Course in French; eleven did not reply; some gave as their reason that they would then be more effective as readers of French at A Level.

Guidance on reading from the Boards

A syllabus is a public document. Students were questioned on their access to their Boards' French syllabus and on their awareness of advice from the Boards on tackling the examination.

The NEA French syllabus is distinctive in printing extensive advice on reading skills in French (Section 6, "Communication Strategies", pp.29-33). Although not actually advocating that the "Communication Strategies" section of the syllabus should be placed in the students' hands in its neat form, the Board nevertheless expects them to be familiar enough with its contents to apply them to language in context:

Candidates cannot be expected to have met and mastered all the linguistic elements they will meet when reading and listening to authentic French. This leads to the need to develop communication strategies that can be used to cope successfully with unknown words.... These strategies will greatly increase the candidates' ability to cope when they meet, or need, language which they have not previously met or have forgotten. (p.29)

Recommended strategies include ignoring words not needed for successful completion of the task set, using the visual and verbal context, grammatical markers and categories, social and cultural context and common elements which English shares with French such as prefixes and suffixes, recognising and understanding characteristic noun endings, diminutives, etc., cognates and near-cognates. A list of 23 rules also helps in understanding thousands of words in French which are neither cognates nor near-cognates.

Had, therefore, the 23 out of 35 respondents who had taken the NEA French papers at GCSE become acquainted with these hints on reading strategies, either through self-study or via the teacher? Although 14 said they had seen a copy of the Board's syllabus, only one claimed to have read

and found useful the hints on Reading Skills printed there. The possibility exists of defective recall. Maybe, too, these hints on reading strategies were conveyed to the students indirectly or in diluted form within the classroom only as they applied to individual texts. The fact remains that the students had not been conscious of assistance from the Examination Board in developing text-attack skills. Isn't it important, though, for students to see not only the particular, but also patterns taking them from the particular to the general, and vice-versa? How far is this done at present with GCSE?

The follow-up interviews

The Questionnaire established that the vast majority of the respondents had never read texts consisting of more than three paragraphs of continuous prose nor any imaginative writing in French before taking their GCSE. Follow-up Group Interviews, my second small-scale study, were designed to discover the same students' experience of the transition from GCSE to A Level.

The Interview was chosen for its flexibility as a medium. I could go on a "fishing" expedition, to borrow the analogy coined by Wiseman and Aron (quoted by Bell 1987 p.70), and I could follow up points made, pick up cues and probe replies, "put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses", to quote Judith Bell (*loc. cit.*). I wanted a group dynamic, to let the students bounce ideas off each other, to let thought associations flow. Also it would be reassuring after the highly structured and fairly lengthy Questionnaire. Our dialogues were less like interviews than informal conversations on tape, part way along what Gebenek and Moser term "a continuum of formality" (Bell, p.71). I opted for recording so as to capture the students' tone of voice and to follow and take part in the dialogue as required, without the constraint of taking notes. A cassette recorder was placed on the table between us and left to run throughout.

The interviews took place during the third week of July, about ten days after the Questionnaire had been completed, the timing providing a space for further thoughts and even afterthoughts. A day or so in advance I outlined the areas for discussion, but I did not ask them to prepare their answers. I repeated these explanations just before the interviews. The

wording of the questions was not scripted. I worked from a sheet of rough notes, giving the areas to be covered in the interviews. The total length of the recordings was about one and a half hours.

The eleven students participating in the group discussions were all volunteers from among the respondents to the Questionnaire, from eight different contributory schools, seven State and one private sector, representing just over one fifth of the Year Group, three from Syllabus A and eight from Syllabus B. These proportions closely reflected those on the courses in the College. However males were slightly over-represented among the interviewees. To preserve anonymity I have given the students invented first names according to their sex. Their comments are actual quotations transcribed from the tape.

Analysis of group discussions

There was consensus that the early weeks, even months, of the transition were a shock.

The Syllabus A students

The growing pains were particularly acute for the three studying for the A Level with Literature. Typical comments were:

We didn't do much reading at GCSE at my last school so I found it quite difficult at A Level. It was a really big change. (Mary)

It was a huge jump. (Jane)

I don't think I was given anything to read, about half a page perhaps, newspaper articles about tourist attractions in the South of France, things like that, things which were relevant to GCSE. (Jane)

Yes. They actually said, didn't they, that, you know, that they were just going to give you what you needed to pass the GCSE and nothing more really... and GCSE's just so different to A Level." (Mary)

The new (transitional) Coursebook, *Orientalisms* (1985), at the start of the College year had proved "something of a shock", despite its selection as a bridging text. The students focussed on vocabulary, reading speed and text length:

Vocabulary "We were presented with this book full of new vocabulary ... something which we hadn't really been used to up until then.", from Peter, who added reflectively, "But the more you actually take in of vocabulary, the more you can cope with other reading material ... in the end, you can only benefit, can't you?"

Mary, who found problems with structures and vocabulary, "everything really", appreciated the Coursebook for having the vocabulary on the page:

...because if you're reading something and then you have to go and look a word up, then you forget what you were reading anyway by the time you've found it and it just sort of seems like, you know, thousands of words that you just keep translating. It doesn't seem like it's building up and making anything.

Text length This Group's discussion of reading was dominated by the problem of coping with their first set text, *Elise ou la vraie vie* by Claire Etcherelli. All three students agreed that they couldn't have started to cope with this, or with reading a whole book, in their first month in College. As Jane put it, pleased, nevertheless, with her progress:

You move from reading a paragraph, which is about five lines in GCSE, and then in a year you're having to read a book, which you don't think is possible at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year you think, "I don't know how I've done it".

Translation The students themselves raised the issue of translation versus reading comprehension as a means of tackling their set text, commenting on the difficulty they had experienced in reading it, but disagreeing among themselves over whether it should be translated. Peter and Mary wanted to translate it all; Jane felt there was not time for this, admitting frankly that she didn't look forward to reading it because "A page takes about half an hour to read in French".

Mary, who really liked *Elise*, found it "so difficult to read at home on my own because it just takes so long ... in places I just get really lost if we don't translate it bit by bit." They all regretted the absence of vocabulary at the back of the book.

Cultural context Jane drew attention to cultural factors as a block to effective reading by stating that the notes after the text were very welcome because they explained cultural features that, not being French, they wouldn't know about otherwise.

All agreed that after one year problems of vocabulary, structure, and cultural differences remained. Jane said that she and other students had found the transition between GCSE and A Level much harder than with English:

English A Level is more, sort of, a continuation of GCSE, whereas French A Level is completely different to French GCSE..., it's like a transition from reading something like Play School Books to something like Thomas Hardy. It's sort of like that, isn't it? The jump is huge.... It's like jumping into a huge river when it should have been a stream.

All three felt more confident in relation to reading in French after a year, two with reservations. Mary added, "You don't learn anything at all about the foundations in GCSE. I think they missed that bit out."

Easing the transition The Group was fertile in ideas about how to ease the transition from GCSE to A Level in relation to reading:

As soon as you come in, you could start off with an Easy Reader (e.g. a "baby" Simenon). (Peter)

Something which is perhaps designed for a French child of perhaps eleven or twelve, something like that. (Jane)

Something that you get the satisfaction of saying, "I've read a book in French", even though it's not a particularly good book in French. (Jane)

The students were unclear what a "Reading Course" entailed. Jane felt she needed grammar before reading; she didn't know how it could be done. All three students wanted to read the text in translation (a controversial aspect of language teaching policy). The point of reading the book in translation first was: to get the main idea (Peter); so as not to get the wrong idea and go off at a tangent (Jane and Mary). Mary, who would have liked

to work with the text and the translation side by side, also, interestingly, reasoned "so that I can see how the sentences are constructed, how they work out", in other words for syntactical, language-learning reasons too.

Discussion then centred on other aids to reading. Jane said that perhaps what they needed was, "just a paragraph for each chapter, saying roughly what's happened, something like that". Mary suggested a paragraph in simpler French, just giving the main ideas. They agreed that they meant a Reading Key or, instead, a Summary of the theme. I proposed a Reader's Guide, with structuring questions on the text serving as signposts, so that the students would know they were going to cross a certain kind of terrain but would have to identify the actual landmarks for themselves. Only Jane felt she would still be unable to arrive at the answers. Mary added:

Yes. You need something to make you focus on certain points of the book ... otherwise ... it goes over your head.... if you look at certain bits in more detail, you understand it better and take more in.

All three agreed that their set book would be easier in Term 5 than in Terms 2 and 3 because they would know more structures. The format of a set text was discussed. They liked the idea of a layout with vocabulary on the page itself, as with their Coursebook. They felt it would be helpful to have structures picked out on the page too beside the text. This would spoil the story less than looking them up themselves elsewhere.

With reference to a Reading Skills Course, two students found help with "faux amis" useful, though the third thought it made her over-cautious. They agreed that they looked for key words when reading. Looking at word roots, the use of prefixes, breaking words down into their component parts, etc. was felt to be useful, though the only student to have done any Latin felt it had never helped. These three activities seemed new to the students after their GCSE, although they feature prominently in the "Communication Strategies" section of the NEA Syllabus.

The Syllabus B students

In this account I have conflated groups 2, 3 and 4 consisting of eight students in all. These students agonised less over the adaptation to A Level

reading than those with prescribed literature texts, but still felt, in Mark's words, that : "in general terms the actual gap between GCSE and A Level is quite large."

All owned to difficulties with the length of texts and the quantity of new vocabulary. They summed up their feelings as follows:

GCSE doesn't prepare you at all. (Susan)

Reading is so important for A Level. Such an important part of the course. (Luke)

Text length Students were eloquent on their previous experience of text length: "Just little paragraphs and things." (Martin); "Just little passages, about two paragraphs long. Now we do whole books....we do the whole story" (Ann). Carol had only read comic books at GCSE with very simple vocabulary. Mark, whose reading experience for GCSE had only been through textbook exercises, thought at first:

The idea of reading literature was a bit frightening in some ways, but now that we've done some and sort of over the year getting introduced to it slowly, the idea of doing it is not such a problem any more.

Vocabulary All noted the volume of new vocabulary that came with A Level. For John the most daunting thing was all the consultations of the Dictionary which were now necessary; the problem would have been even greater with a different textbook and they were grateful for having vocabulary on the page. John was preoccupied with idiomatic French, which he found difficult. He felt that he had been kept away from idiom at GCSE. Others picked up on this point: the language at GCSE, they felt, didn't go beyond how to handle practical situations, and had been lacking in images as well as idioms.

Susan pinpointed the transition in relation to *Orientations*: she found coping with its vocabulary a shock, despite certain similarities to her previous GCSE textbook. Texts were longer and the vocabulary much more extensive. On starting A Level she knew hardly any vocabulary. Her GCSE class hadn't read any books or poems.

Subject matter Carol found *Orientalisms* unfamiliar at first; she quite liked it, however, because of its contemporary texts. In general, the students regarded it as a good transition. They liked the serial, the "feuilleton", "Une Française d'aujourd'hui", which, as Mark put it, "eased you into new things". John said it was, "Corny, but fun because of that and you could go through it progressively; there were lots of useful idiomatic sentences in it." Carol was pleased that topics were now more controversial, while John was delighted that they were more profound and wider-ranging, with themes such as nature, animals and conservation.

Understanding the text Another new aspect for Mark was forming opinions about the French text they read. Working out what the author was trying to say was quite difficult to start off with, but that seemed to be better now. Gordon also referred to his difficulties, his "uncertainty how to pronounce things, what things meant and how the sentences went together, how you were supposed to read them together ... to make something that was sensible, so you would guess.... I got very thrown by the structures and you get very confused by the way they were worded, and you'd end up with the wrong meaning". It had been a matter of reducing and eliminating the guesswork. He had found that the most helpful thing had been his teacher, "just talking us through the difficulties".

Structures had not appeared to create many problems for Syllabus B students, however. I pointed out that *Orientalisms* did ease you into this aspect of the course, while simultaneously introducing much new vocabulary. The group that had read Roger Vailland's *325000 Francs* as the first book on their Reading Programme, starting in the Spring, felt it would have been impossible at the beginning of the first term. Carol stated that not having learnt the Past Historic yet would have been quite confusing. Susan's alarm on first having the Vailland novel in her hands had abated. Gordon wouldn't have been able to cope with his first whole book in French, *L'Étranger* by Camus, at the start of Term 1, but felt much happier with reading in French after a year:

I'm not so worried about it now, so that I can enjoy it and I can learn things from it as well ... it's quite satisfying to be able to read a

magazine and to know that you can actually understand what they are writing about, to understand perhaps a current affairs issue or something and it's about France and that you wouldn't hear in England and you can understand it from a French magazine.

Which syllabus? Mark had opted for the Syllabus without a Literature Paper, wanting French for everyday situations in the French-speaking world. He was also more interested in learning about life in France than analysing books and their writers. Four students were adamant that they had chosen the A Level without Literature because their Syllabus, the B, is more "relevant" nowadays. Carol felt too that with this Syllabus: "It's more reading for pleasure. You can choose what sort of area interests you."

These B Syllabus students, certain they had progressed, now had no qualms about tackling their Reading Programme. Mark said:

We've been given an insight into what we're going to be doing for our Reading Programme. Having learned so much vocabulary over the first year, it will be a lot easier to read the books.

John thought that via the book he had expanded not only his vocabulary but also his understanding of grammar. He had had difficulty in learning the latter in a set piece lesson, finding it easier to grasp in the context of a text, such as a story. Carol felt that although there are more structures, grammar and vocabulary to cope with than before, "It will come as I go along". Gordon said:

So far on the reading side I think I've had a good foundation ... to carry on to do the rest of the books [the Reading Programme] I've got to do and to carry on learning.

Easing the transition All three in one group found the Reader they had been given earlier in the year helpful. It was a simplified version of a Simenon story taken from an old O Level book cupboard. Should they have had such a book for GCSE? They said that it could perhaps have provided some psychological benefit, but was not significant for GCSE itself.

Carol voiced the view that reading problems came from the way that GCSE was taught. Their ideas on assistance with reading included giving prior

insight into the nature of the subject (Mark), long articles (Gordon), vocabulary on the same page as the text (several students) and a unanimous recommendation of a little story, an Easy Reader with a vocabulary at the back to start with. They liked discussion to make sure they had understood. One student praised from personal experience a simplified version of Maupassant short stories in the TFF (Textes en français facile) series.

Sixth Form teachers would strongly endorse Gordon's comment that anyone starting A Level French should keep the reading going once GCSE is over, and read something in French, anything, in the holidays. Brief and fairly unfocussed discussion of a potential Reading Course encompassed hints on how to read effectively, introductory pointers for reading a book (Carol), "cracking words up into bits" (John), the need for study aids such as a good dictionary, reading chiefly non-fictional materials on current affairs and similar topics. Four students wanted more long(er) extracts from magazines and papers from France and Belgium and texts on controversies as recent as the previous week. Three of the four would like to do more plays in class, each taking parts. They were avid for a wide variety of subject matter and styles.

Language awareness activities such as the above-mentioned "word cracking" were also considered. One student remembered having done some at the College in class, but another from the same group could not recall this and asked what it was. Gordon had noticed that it could be helpful to look at words and work them out by the way they are made up.

Other forms of vocabulary acquisition were also discussed. Susan thought vocabulary tests make you learn it. Might there be other ways of retaining vocabulary? Martin and Luke felt that because you enjoy doing A Level, which is a two-year course, some of it recurs anyway, and also, as Luke put it, "You learn it because you want to speak the language and be coherent in the language and to have the vocabulary to do it".

Synthesis of findings

I was delighted and impressed by the students' relaxed manner, their fluent responses and their reflectiveness on the subject of their own

learning processes. Our first-year A Level students knew what reading in French meant to them. It signified practical skills of decoding the text, grasping meaning (rather than creating meanings as they read) and reducing guesswork. It involved grappling with vocabulary and structures. The students were acutely aware when the extraction of meaning was hampered by ignorance of lexical or grammatical items. They were also aware that these needed to be acquired for effective deciphering to proceed, whatever reading purposes they might otherwise have had. Some of the students gave reading in order to acquire language - increasing vocabulary and internalizing new linguistic patterns - as a valid, and sometimes major, reading purpose in its own right.

Without exception our students found the transition from GCSE to A Level difficult at the beginning of the year. This was true of all four GCSE skills. With reference to reading they were shocked at being confronted with longer texts, a wider variety of styles and registers and a massive increase in vocabulary. Their reaction tallied absolutely with my own findings on the areas of mismatch between GCSE and the present A Level objectives. They arrived armed with good GCSE grades, able to cope well with gist comprehension, usually impressively fluent orally in relation to the old O Level norm, and bubbling with enthusiasm and confidence. But they also came (and even more so than the first GCSE intake the previous year) with a more limited command of structure. For instance, the Future, Conditional and Pluperfect Tenses had to be taught from scratch before one could begin the A Level Course proper. If structures such as tenses are not known, they cannot be recognised in reading except on the rare occasion when context assists in leading the reader from the surface meaning into the deeper meaning.

The students' interview comments reveal that even the bridging course came as a shock. I was surprised myself that they found texts a page or a page and a half long - which is all they were given for several weeks - quite so taxing. But this is two or three times longer than the longest reading assignment experienced before GCSE. Our practice of mixed mode, rather than discrete skill, exploitation in class may have proved disconcerting to some. In any event the props of the GCSE Defined Content Syllabus with

its stress on a delimited and hence circumscribed vocabulary had now been kicked away. At A Level the students could in principle be expected to handle any structure or vocabulary item that was not - by general unwritten consensus among the A Level Boards - regarded as too outlandish to be placed before the candidates.

After a year all the B syllabus students found idioms easier to handle and they were adjusting to the massive increase in vocabulary and text length. They were also happier about extensive reading in French. Topics too were clearly a spur to reading. While their comments with reference to vocabulary and text length echoed those of A Syllabus students with a Literature Paper, they were much less perturbed over difficulties with structures. My own subjective impression was that productive use lagged far behind their receptive skills in this area, however. I was not sure myself whether they had faced up yet to the much greater complexity of structures, but they did not seem unduly worried about these in relation to their reading activity. It should also be recalled that the demands on intensive reading were fewer for their Reading Programme than for the other syllabus with set texts prescribed for literary criticism.

These three B Syllabus groups certainly seemed to be taking the reading demands of A Level French much more in their stride, despite some transitional difficulties, than those from the Literature set, who agonised over the more taxing intensive reading required by their Literature paper. For this very reason their comments on their reading needs were more acute. Their reading purposes were multiple and complex, and so much hinged on "getting it right" for their examinations.

Conclusion

To sum up, the results of my enquiries among the students inevitably lead me towards certain recommendations. During the very early stages of the A Level Course a wide variety of text types is necessary, to provide stimulus and intellectual challenge, and a broad experience of themes, styles and vocabulary. A staged progression in text length is important. Texts should gradually be lengthened from the habitual two to three paragraphs of GCSE to a whole page, thence to two or three pages, then

five to ten, then mini-books or Readers, and finally "whole" books. Various kinds of landmarks should be supplied such as breaks in the text, pointers, guiding questions, vocabulary lists and highlighted structures. Reading purposes and reading outcomes should be clearly defined and known to the students before they read.

Readers, which were so positively liked by those students to whom they were issued, and were unanimously recommended by my respondents, represent a reassuring half-way house between the snippet, the short text and the daunting full-length or "whole" book. Some of the old O Level ones are not too superannuated. I hope that they are still lurking in stock cupboards, and, provided their readability is high and they are appropriate to the age, aptitude and tastes of the learner, they can be dusted down and brought out again. Ideally Readers should not be "cooked" text, manufactured expressly for language-teaching purposes. Possibilities include texts intended for young French people or published in France for early learners of French as a Second Language; abridged or simplified versions of classics or other full-length books, perhaps with simple monolingual all-French notes and definitions and with the support of glossaries, readers' guides and other study aids. The "Story" offers many attractions: a continuous narrative is important for reading fluency; a human interest angle, suspense, nourishment for the imagination and the sensibilities all motivate the reader. Informative non-fiction books of an appropriate length and level are suitable too, however.

Reading skills strategies should be covered early in the A Level course, starting with (revision of) "Communication Strategies", Section 6 of the NEA GCSE French syllabus, of which, disappointingly, so little use had seemingly been made. Since it is advertised as underpinning the marking scheme for the GCSE Reading Papers, notably at Higher Level, there is considerable incentive to pay it close attention. Students should be trained in effective "text-attack" skills (Grellet 1981; Nuttall 1982). This aggressive term signals the active role of the reader, essential for both learner and teacher to acknowledge if effective reading is to occur.

My findings concerning the students on the two different A Level syllabuses support the concept of an Extensive Reading Programme as against the intensive study of a very few "set texts". However, this programme should be implemented only after the preparatory transitional work on reading skills outlined above.

While a few areas of the mismatch between GCSE and A level came from variations in practices between schools, most stemmed from the differences between the aims and objectives of the two examination systems. Nobody would dispute that their planning was not satisfactorily coordinated by policy makers. A Levels are currently and belatedly being modified to take account of this. Some of the newer ones, such as the new Oxford Syllabus, and those still on the stocks should help to alleviate the problems encountered at this transitional point.

The National Curriculum also attempts to redress the balance in relation to reading. It recommends for the students at GCSE level a richer diet of reading materials in the foreign language. The Report rehabilitates imaginative writing. By Level 10 the pupil should be able to "read with confidence a selected range of fiction, poetry and drama using a dictionary or other reference material as necessary" (National Curriculum Initial Advice 1990, p.74). Private reading in lesson time is recommended, and learners are encouraged increasingly to choose what they read (Initial Advice, pp. 132-3). There is also increased emphasis in the National Curriculum on the development of study skills, with particular reference to reading strategies. Attainment Target 3 is "the ability to read, understand and respond appropriately to written language of various kinds, and to use a variety of reading strategies and information sources" (Initial Advice, p. 60).

Some, but not all, A Level students of French continue the language at University or Polytechnic in some combination or other of subjects, but fewer every year pursue literary studies in French. A Level does not exist purely as a prelude to Degree work, but there needs to be coordination between the two sectors. Concern is expressed, especially in the Universities, about the reading skills of the A Level Product. It is alleged that the fit

between 18+ and Higher Education is not smooth enough. Educators in Advanced Further Education are currently meeting their first post-GCSE A Level intake: this experience will probably reinforce such criticisms.

In "From School to University" Bagguley states that post-A Level students of French are ill-prepared by schools for reading (Bagguley 1990). Some criticism relates to inability to handle literary texts, but his main point is that first-year undergraduates should already have received "special instruction in independent and guided non-literary reading" (p.5), and that "wider reading and more language work are required before entry to HE" (p.6), with undergraduates wishing they had had "more practice at finding information for oneself" (p.6).

Anthony Lodge (1988) in "Beyond GCSE in French - A University View" says this:

The literary syllabuses obliged pupils to read texts of reasonable length in the foreign language. Are critical reading skills being developed to the same level in the new A-levels? Are suitable texts available? (p.144)

Teachers in higher education are understandably exercised by the degree of preparedness of students on arrival at their institutions. This may sometimes lead to a neglect of the interests of those in post-16 education who will not be going on to further academic study. Nevertheless, these questions are also relevant to the needs of the latter. Indeed, all the points in the last two paragraphs are extrapolations of issues that I addressed in this study with reference to the earlier transition between GCSE and A Level.

Reading in a foreign language is both a language problem and a reading problem. It was amply demonstrated that my students had acute difficulties with lexis and structure in effecting the transition in reading from GCSE to A Level. How to cope with acquiring these needs to be addressed both in the lead-up to GCSE and also within the A Level course. It should moreover also form part of the student's total foreign language experience, and not be limited to reading alone. I would not argue that A Level language students' problems are those of the early reader; nevertheless

there are features of reading skills training which benefit both the foreign language reader and the mother tongue reader. Foreign language readers have less time, are subject to a great deal of what Frank Smith termed "noise" and are consequently in need of any effective help that is available to enable them to find their bearings.

It is fitting to conclude with a quotation from Michael Salter, the retiring Staff Inspector, at the JCLA Conference in 1987:

Reading in the foreign language remains an underestimated skill. Quite apart from any benefits which it brings to other aspects of language learning, it can be a source of pleasure and achievement in itself and remain so throughout adult life. For this to happen, pupils need to acquire rapid reading skills at as early a stage as possible. This can enable them, according to their abilities, to read stories, articles and books in the foreign language at their own rate. (Peck 1988, p.154)

References

- Aplin R, A Miller and H Starkey (1985) *Orientations, Pupil's Book*, London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Bagguley P (1990) "From school to university - 'Rites de passage'", *Francophonie* 1, pp. 4-7
- Bell J (1987) *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers in Education and Social Science*, Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press
- Department of Education and Science (1990) *National Curriculum Initial Advice*, The Modern Foreign Languages Working Group.
- Etcherelli C (1967) *Elise ou la vraie vie*, Paris: Denoël. The critical edition used here is by J Roach (1985) London: Methuen (Routledge)
- Grellet F (1981) *Developing Reading Skills*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lodge A. (1988) "Beyond GCSE in French - A University View", *Modern Languages*, 70.3, pp.141-144

- Marks W T (Ed.) (1949) *Le Temoignage de l'Enfant de Choeur* by Georges Simenon, London: Harrap
- Nott D O (Ed.) (1975) *325000 Francs* by Roger Vailland (1955), The English Universities Press
- Nuttall C (1982) *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, London: Heinemann
- Peck A (1988) "Future Reforms at Sixth-Form Level", in D Phillips (Ed.) *Languages in Schools: From Complacency to Conviction*, London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research
- Smith F (1971) *Understanding Reading - A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston
- The Northern Examining Association (no date) *General Certificate of Secondary Education: FRENCH : Syllabus for the 1991 Examination*
- The Southern Universities' Joint Board for School Examinations (1988) *Regulations and Syllabuses General Certificate of Education 1990 Advanced Level and Advanced Supplementary Level*