

On reading Harry Potter in French

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Jeff McQuillan offers case studies of intermediate level language learners who read young adult and adult fiction successfully as an argument against explicit vocabulary instruction. Case studies, as we noted in our joint response, provide useful insights into whatever is being investigated but may not always be generalizable. Uden, Schmitt, and Schmitt (2014), for example, qualified their findings by stressing their 4 participants were “highly motivated” (p. 19) while noting that, even so, one participant found the shift to ungraded novel reading “difficult”. These, it is worth noting, were Uden et al.’s conclusions, not ours. It is also worth noting that they were not suggesting *all* intermediate language learners could do this.

However, McQuillan’s reference to case studies has made me reflect on my own experience of reading in a foreign language, and I offer these reflections as a way of adding to the case study literature, and as a further response to some of the points McQuillan raises.

Language learning background

I began learning French rather a long time ago, at intermediate school, and had a total of 7 years of formal instruction in the language. In the last year we had a teacher who actually spoke to us in French, and expected us to speak in return. After 6 years of grammar-translation, this was a terrifying experience. I felt lost and often skipped the class. That year I was lucky to scrape a pass on the final examination, but remained something of a Francophile despite all.

Since then I have had occasional opportunity to use French while on holiday, and for a period in Cambodia French was the language of my workplace. In more recent years, with a holiday-related desire to maintain and practice the language, I have engaged with language learning apps (which I discussed in Macalister, 2017) and for the past 2 or 3 years have also been reading “for pleasure” in French, mainly the *Harry Potter* books.

One day, perhaps, I might take a proficiency test. But until that day, if I had to evaluate myself as a French speaker, I would probably plump for intermediate level. Of the 4 macro-skills, reading and speaking are the strongest, writing the weakest.

Potterverse background

In the interests of full disclosure, I confess that I did not come to *Harry Potter* in French as a *tabula rasa*. I had read the books in English when they first appeared, and seen all 8 of the movies. Thus, while not exactly a Potterhead, I did come to this reading in French with a reasonably well-formed content schemata. Although I quickly found that a lot of details had been forgotten, to the extent that at times it was like reading the books for the first time, I certainly had a head-start with comprehension.

The reading experience

Not unexpectedly, there was unknown vocabulary. Some items were unknown but not difficult. It was easy to guess that *un sort* was a spell in *jeter un sort*, or that *un balai* was a broomstick as they learned to fly. My knowledge of the story, and the immediate textual context, meant words such as these posed no problem to understanding.

Other words were more challenging. I had no idea what were *limaces* and *perceuses*; context was no help, and my recollection from earlier reading in English certainly did not extend to such detail. However, the words were repeated sufficiently often that I wanted to know what they meant. Here I had recourse to a dictionary, to find that Uncle Vernon works with drills (*perceuses*) and that J. K. Rowling seems to mention slugs (*limaces*) surprisingly often.

With other repeated words, a different process went on. An example is *en revanche* (on the other hand), which I began by ignoring as I would with almost any unknown word on first meeting it. However, it was repeated often enough that I had to notice it, and begin to guess what it might mean. Finally, once the guess had been tested a few times, I made a confirmatory check and was pleased that I had been able to work out the meaning from context.

This example brings me to the challenge sometimes posed by multi-word units. The challenge lies in the fact that a known element is not automatically connected with an unknown element. Most beginner learners of French will know that *j'ai* means *I have*, but recognising that *j'ai envie de* (I want to) is not a case of possessing envy demands rather more of the reader. Similarly, 2 or more known elements may combine to produce something new; *ma petite amie* is not *my little friend* but *my girlfriend*.

From multi-word units it is only a short step to the challenge to understanding that syntax, or grammar, can cause. A simple example occurred when I paused to wonder whether *le professeur Chourave* was female or male (the answer is female). Another simple example might be the priming to expect *not* when encountering *ne*, an expectation based on the *ne ... pas* pattern. And yet *un loup-garou ne représente un danger que pour les humains* is telling the reader that a werewolf represents a danger only to humans, not *not only* to humans. These couple of examples are sufficient to give an idea of the potential problem. Occasionally I would find myself puzzling over long sentences; every word might be known individually, but the meaning of the sentence would escape me as I struggled to make meaningful connections between the words.

Reflections

It is probably clear that my background in applied linguistics and TESOL influenced my reading of *Harry Potter*. I am sure, for instance, that at some level Patsy Lightbown's account (2014, p. 90) of her son thinking a story was about 2 boys, not having noticed that it was actually a story of a boy and a girl, triggered my wondering about Professor Chourave's gender. It is absolutely the case that my approach to unknown words was based on familiarity with the guessing from context strategy. I knew that I could read and understand without knowing every single word on a page.

This background also has me wondering about the nature of the reading. That is why I placed "for pleasure" inside inverted commas earlier. I was reading for pleasure, because I knew I would enjoy the books, but at the same time I was reading them for language learning reasons. Perhaps it was extensive reading as meaning-focused input, rather than fluency development, although at times fluency development was definitely to the fore. Or perhaps, given that I was reading a single series by a single author, this was an exercise in narrow reading. To call it free voluntary reading may avoid these definitional complications. But in the end I am not sure the labelling matters. And leaves us with the perennial question as to what "pleasure" means when reading in a foreign language.

All the same, I can draw some insights from this self-study. The first is to highlight the importance of motivation. This is one point on which researchers tend to agree. Motivation plays a crucial role in successful reading for pleasure, or ER, whether the reading be of graded or "authentic" material. In my own case there was also a degree of integrative motivation for I held "favourable attitudes to the language, [and] to users of the language" (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 39), despite that final year of schooling experience.

A second insight has to do with the importance of language learning strategies, such as knowing when to ignore an unknown word and when to try guessing from the context, when to use a dictionary and how to approach deliberate learning. Almost always with words and phrases that seemed high frequency in the novels I would create a flash card for it on the app Quizlet, but I never interrupted my reading to do this. It was more in the nature of a follow-up, a postreading activity.

What I have, as a result, is a wordlist of high frequency *Harry Potter* vocabulary. If this list had been available to me before reading, if I had had explicit instruction in this vocabulary, it would have boosted my understanding, and have aided fluent reading. This is the third insight, and the key point. This is the benefit of identifying high frequency vocabulary in a specific genre; knowledge of that vocabulary contributes to successful reading. That is precisely why we proposed a high frequency list in writing for children (Macalister & Webb, 2019).

This third insight, and the earlier mention of language learning strategies, also reminds us of the important role a teacher can play. It goes beyond vocabulary and strategy instruction, however. If I felt one true lack in my reading, it was the lack of someone to help me tease out the syntax. Attention to grammar features in the text should be part of intensive reading (Nation, 2009, p. 40

ff.). In class, the teacher can guide learners to extract meaning from text; independently, through reading, learners can practice extracting meaning.

My final insight is that there is a role for output. I found that I often enjoyed a mental version of looping or loopwriting (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 47). This allowed me to review just-read content and to recall language. Again, this practice no doubt stems from my professional and academic background, but it was another insight into what worked ... at least for me.

Last word

I do not doubt that there are intermediate, and even elementary level (Hedstrom, 2005), language learners who can read young adult and adult fiction successfully—if with considerable effort. What they share, however, is a high degree of motivation. Sadly, not all language learners are motivated. My own awareness through reading *Harry Potter* in French is that explicit instruction—not just of vocabulary but also of learning strategies and grammar features—would enhance the reading experience. My entry into the French Potterverse also makes me feel I understand better what language learners go through when we ask them to read “for pleasure”, and the support that teachers can usefully provide. Part of that support remains the explicit instruction of appropriate high frequency vocabulary.

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