Pesky Pronouns: Helping Students of French with Object Pronouns

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Introduction and Rationale

Pronouns – what a dry subject! Why decide to indulge in research on this and not something more inherently attractive, something that might have a hope of making students motivated to learn a foreign language? There are so many wonderful activities for students, so much new technology, yet the fundamental fact remains: the students of a foreign language are learning about structure, vocabulary and culture, and inevitably, in all languages, there are aspects of the second language that will cause problems. Thrilling classroom activities can only take a student so far. Students experience immense frustration and loss of confidence when confronted with difficulties in a language if they are not given the wherewithal to tackle the difficulties and advance. Loss of confidence can often lead to students reverting to previous lower levels of language as they, jugglers of the new language, drop the extra ball they have been thrown putting their whole juggling routine at risk.

I teach French levels one through five, the latter being a preparation for the College Board French Language Advanced Placement Test. Once students have grasped the idea of verb conjugation in level one, their progress is relatively smooth. There may be the odd hiccup along the way as students realize that they have not quite understood a previous link in the chain, or that they have not practiced sufficiently. Generally, however, motivated students progress quite nicely until they come face to face with object pronouns. Every year I witness many students – even students with excellent meta-linguistic knowledge – feel overwhelmed by object pronouns. Structures that were previously causing no problems suddenly start falling apart and students feel more than a little betrayed. Their comfortable assumptions about their own progress and prowess in French are challenged. Present tense verbs suddenly no longer agree with their subjects; the difficulties inherent in *passé composé* verbs with their two parts, the choice between *avoir* and *être* as auxiliary verb, the formation of the correct past participle, the decision to make the past participle agree and if so with what – all this is challenged by the addition of the extra ball – or balls if more than one object pronoun is used in the sentence. The juggler's act is in peril, and the juggler is aware that he may be left standing in the center of the stage, dropping the juggling balls one by one, in front of a disappointed or critical public. Speaking a foreign language is a performance, and there is a public. Worse still, adolescents have not only the teacher as their public (who may or may not rate highly in their consideration!) but also their peers – the rest of the class. Adolescents are in the tender process of creating their image, the persona they present to the world. It is sometimes much easier to give up, pretend not to care, than to look stupid in front of one's peer group.

Too dramatic? Perhaps. The fact remains, however, that pronouns put students "through a loop." As a teacher who cares about her students, I find myself adding little touches here and there every year in an attempt to facilitate students' understanding of object pronouns, how they work and where they are placed in the sentence. I have always been convinced that the road to

understanding comes through hands-on demonstrations – a ball being thrown **to** a student (we don't throw the student, right?), demonstrations with toys, puppets – anything to make the concepts clearer. There then remains the problem of going beyond understanding to the point where the student feels able to use pronouns – with the present tense, with verbs used with an infinitive, with the *passé composé*, with negation in all of the above.

In short, as a teacher, I often feel a sense of dread when I see the necessity for teaching or reviewing pronouns up ahead in my curriculum. Often – as pronouns come after the study of verb tenses in the curriculum each year – I am faced with preparing instruction on pronouns for several different levels of French at the same time. I find this a dry, intellectual, mathematical area of my curriculum. I feel that I am not making my class a welcoming place, a place where students are at ease and speak and interact and use French, rather than learn French, where activities are natural and communicative. I feel torn between my feeling that I have to teach this grammar explicitly, and a concurrent feeling that I am not doing a good job as a language teacher as I "preach pronouns" at my students who are "wriggling in their pews" and who would doubtless rather be elsewhere.

My students' motivations to learn a foreign language vary. Many are not inspired by a love of the language, rather the need for a foreign language on their college résumé. Some are in the class because it was the only class that fits in their schedule. Some may feel that a language class is an elective rather than a core subject and therefore should be easy and should not require much effort or attention. Grammatical difficulties may be the point where students often feel that "languages are not for them." Giving up and acting out is often easier than losing face in front of classmates by pronouncing badly or answering incorrectly. It is therefore incumbent on teachers to provide a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable. Light-hearted, engaging activities must temper the rigorous demands of learning a foreign language.

I saw taking part in a seminar on language acquisition as a way to investigate the problems caused by pronouns in French – and in other Romance languages. With a deeper understanding of the problem, I would perhaps be able to look at different theories of language acquisition and see if there were tools I could use to help my students. My focus was entirely practical: I was not interested in declaring my belief for one or other of the theories, rather to pick and choose perspectives and elaborate activities which my experience as a teacher told me would work. Textbooks and teacher training courses lag necessarily behind the research on the subject.   All too often the research is couched in such specialist terms as to render it all but unintelligible to the uninitiated – me included. This unit is a humble and practical attempt to grasp what I can and use it for the good of students.

Theories of first language acquisition

I start with a quick review of different theories of language acquisition. This draws predominantly on Lightbown and Spada's work, *How Languages are Learned*. It is a self-evident fact that when children are born, they cannot speak. There is, however, research that suggests that infants have the ability to produce language much earlier than previously thought. "In their first few days, French and German babies cry differently. The former tend to have a rising melody contour, while the latter have falling contours, reflecting the different intonation

patterns in the two languages." This suggests interesting research in the future but does not alter the fact that children progress from this initial stage to having the ability to speak and that this is a remarkable process. The process itself is well documented, however our understanding of how it happens is much less clear. Theorists propose different ways to explain the development. Behaviorists, including B.F. Skinner, hypothesize that children learn by imitating adults. When their utterances are correct, they receive positive reinforcement and are encouraged to continue to practice and use the same language. At first glance, this seems a very reasonable theory as children do – demonstrably – imitate adults. However, as children go on to create their utterances and those who did not imitate adults much seem to speak as well as those who did, many theorists feel that "behaviorism is not a satisfactory explanation for the acquisition of the more complex grammar that children acquire." If language is learned through imitation and habit, this suggests that second languages, too, should be learned by repeating and imitating. The audio-lingual movement emphasized "learning by heart." Students of a second language come to instruction with the habits of their first language. Repetition would allow them to acquire new habits and speak the second language. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis maintains that any aspects of the second language that were similar to the first language would be learned easily, and that those which were not would be more difficult. Researchers discovered, however, that the learners' errors were not always predictable by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and the theory was thus an inadequate explanation.

In contrast to behaviorists, Noam Chomsky proposes that language develops in children in the same way as other aspects of their biological development like sitting and walking. Children arrive already programmed for language with an ability to work out the rules of the language that surrounds them. They possess a "Universal Grammar" which provides them with the basic principles they need. The Critical Period Hypothesis further substantiates this innatist position by suggesting that children are programmed to acquire different skills at specific points of their development. Most second language acquisition takes place outside the presumed "critical period" of childhood where most language develops, creating difficulties for the learner. Theorists are divided about the application of this theory for second language learning. Some dismiss it as adult learners are no longer in the "critical period" for learning language. Others maintain that second language learning still progresses in a logical pattern, with learners sometimes knowing more about the language than their input would have allowed. Theorists including Lydia White feel that second language learners have access to Universal Grammar but that their knowledge is altered by their first language. These theories propose that adult learners sometimes need grammar instruction to point out differences from their own language. Stephen Krashen differentiates acquisition of a language (*unconsciously* "picking it up") from learning (looking at the form and *consciously* learning rules). Acquisition allows people to speak spontaneously and the rules they have learned allow them to edit and correct utterances (monitor hypothesis). He posits that people learn second language in predictable sequences and that they learn best when they are in an environment where language is slightly above their level

(comprehensible input). Students who do not learn under these conditions do not do so because they put up barriers (boredom, anger, emotional states) – in other words, an "affective filter." Although they date back to the early 1980s, Krashen's theories continue to influence current practices of communicative language teaching, immersion in foreign languages and content-based instruction.

The interactionists suggested that children learn through interaction with the people around them. The environment around them is very important for their general cognitive development as well as their language acquisition. Children are introduced to language that is at their level of understanding as people who are speaking to them modify their speech and may paraphrase or repeat what they have said to facilitate understanding.

Unlike Chomsky, connectionists feel that language is learned in the same way that everything else is learned. Children link words or "chunks" of language to contexts in their minds and later are able to generalize. Over-generalizations are then "pruned" back. Learning happens gradually as the child builds links. Proponents of the Competition Model postulate that languages have particular and different "cues." Cues help figure out meaning. In English, the most important cue is that of word order – Subject-Verb-Object. Grammatical markers are not so important. In French and other Romance languages, word order is more flexible and people who speak these languages focus more on grammatical markers like agreements and cases. This immediately suggests that one of the difficulties for an Anglophone to learn French is the relative unimportance of grammatical markers in English. We are simply not mentally geared to absorb and react to grammatical markers like verb endings and past participle agreements.

The bottom line seems to be that students can learn a lot from comprehensible input but "may reach a point from which they fail to make further progress on some features of the second language unless they also have access to guided instruction." Some of my feelings of guilt inspired by teaching pronouns from a grammatical perspective, rather than in a communicative and content-based way, start to subside in the light of this knowledge.

Other theorists – the cognitivists and developmentalists - see language acquisition in terms of information processing. Learners cannot pay attention to everything in a language as there is a limit to what they can focus on at any one time. Some developments in language do not seem to support the idea that frequent practice will gradually increase fluency. Sometimes learners seem to backslide or make sudden leaps in their progress. This "restructuring" is considered to happen when learners integrate new knowledge into a general pattern. Conversation is necessary to acquire language because speakers have to work together to understand one another. Whilst doing so, they modify the way they are using language.

There are several ideas of particular interest to the problem of learning French object pronouns. VanPatten maintains that learners cannot process everything as they have limited capacity. Therefore they will give priority to meaning over form. Pienemann feels that the order in which different aspects of language are acquired is dependent on their position in a sentence. If a structure occurs at the beginning or at the end of a sentence, it is easier to process. French object pronouns are placed after the subject and before the verb – hence in the middle of sentences.

This suggests to me that activities where learners' attention is deliberately drawn to the pronouns would be helpful.

Vygotsky feels that "learners co-construct knowledge based on their interaction with their interlocutor or in private speech." Knowledge is internalized during social activity and speech. Swain proposed the "Comprehensible Output Hypothesis" which maintains that learners need to produce language in order to process it at a deeper level. If I pay attention to this theory, my students should be engaged in producing pronouns – writing, using pronouns in speech, producing sketches.

Existing research on French object pronouns and pronoun acquisition

Clitic pronouns – pronouns that come before the verb – are not only a problem for students of French, but also for language theorists. Pieter Seuren notes that "it has so far proved impossible to give a precise definition of what clitics actually are" and quotes Arnold Zwicky: "clitics are elements that have some characteristics of independent words and some of affixes within words." What we do know is that they cannot stand on their own, that they are unstressed or merge with the verb into one phonological unit. The word *clitic* comes from the Greek *klitikón* meaning "leaning." The word *ne* used in formation of the French negative is also a clitic – an adverbial clitic.

In a study of L2 learners of French in Canada, Valerie Wust calls object pronouns which come before the verb "particularly fragile grammatical elements whose usage L2 learners fails to master, despite their ubiquity in both spoken and written language." She goes on to note that learners make little use of these forms and, when they do use them, they struggle with gender, number, person, word order and verb structure. She points out that there are competing weak and strong pronouns patterns in French: *me* (direct object), *me* (indirect object) and the strong pronoun *moi* in the singular; *les* (direct object), *leur* (indirect object) and *eux/elles* (strong pronouns) in the plural. Strong pronouns are not considered structurally deficient and can stand alone in the sentence. They are therefore placed after the verb in the same position in the sentence as the nouns they are replacing. This is also a more intuitive position for Anglophones who are learning French. Clitic (weak) pronouns are considered to be structurally deficient and therefore need a verb to host them in the sentence. They are placed before their host verb and are forms that cannot stand apart from this verb. "French object clitics cannot be modified, conjoined, stressed, or separated from their verbal hosts." She adds that, to compound this difficulty, VanPatten's research would indicate that "object clitics are poor candidates for processing, given their sentence-medial placement." According to research on acquisition of pronominalization in French, object clitics (weak pronouns) do not appear early on in language acquisition. Subject pronouns often get overgeneralized to object contexts and students have difficulty with verb structure and using double object pronouns. They also tend to use subject pronouns, strong pronouns and lexical objects in the place of an object pronoun. Word order is also a major problem, with learners placing weak object pronouns after the verb. Wust tested the hypothesis that learners were perhaps unable to parse (notice and process) the object pronouns

and therefore absorb them into their knowledge base. She uses the pronouns *y* and *en* in her study. Her conclusions are that "many learners recognized that the target verbs were complement taking but, at the same time, either missed, ignored, or failed to process the actual complements." She hypothesizes that the learners relied too heavily on context, processed the forms inaccurately, and chose, for example, to produce strong pronouns or nouns. Wust conjectures that students – particularly Anglophone students – listen for object pronouns in the wrong place – after the verb instead of before it. Or they perhaps do not listen for them at all because they are listening for meaning. She adds that textbooks should, after explaining pronouns, provide mechanical exercises on their use, then expand practice to include activities that "sensitize students to the phonological forms of object clitics and (…) train them to listen for these forms pre-verbally to facilitate auditory detection." This is akin to VanPatten's proposal to "manipulate learner attention during IP (Input Processing) and/or manipulate input data so that more and better form-meaning connections are made."

Knowledge gained from Input Processing has lead to the development of PI (*processing instruction*). This is a type of grammar instruction that has been developed from the knowledge gained about Input Processing. It is a focus on form or input enhancement. Learners do not produce the target form during this time period as their role is to process sentences and interpret them and notice their form. During PI, learners are first given some information about the target form. They are then told of any Input Processing strategy in L1 which may hinder or prevent them understanding this form. Learners are then pushed to process the target form through activities with a structured input which draws learners' attention to the target form rather than permitting them to rely on other, more natural ways of processing the material (listening for meaning, listening for the subject and the verb, etc.).

A study by Simard discusses the effect of grammatical elements on learning of the French language. It assigns different values to various grammatical forms according to their linguistic and cognitive difficulty and their communicative value. Placement of object pronouns is considered difficult linguistically as they are placed before the verb and not after. The pronouns can take different forms and need consideration of several rules before arrival at the correct form. Object pronouns are also considered an abstract concept – hence difficult. Their communicative value is also weak as changing their position would not totally change the sense of the sentence. Research on children's acquisition of object pronouns when they are growing up learning the language shows that children early on make little use of object pronouns and only do so later when they acquire independent knowledge. Müller, Crysmann and Kaiser postulate that children make use of a Universal-Grammar-constrained intermediate grammar in which pronouns are not used. This is gradually replaced by grammar usage like that of a French-speaking adult. This is caused by the child developing the so-called Complementizer System in French. The innatist perspective would suggest that language acquisition was taking place during the Critical Period for language acquisition. With adult second language learners, Input Processing suggests that a helping hand is needed to push the development of a Complementizer System for French as learning is taking place outside the Critical Period. Some theorists postulate that "cliticization is

favoured by children since it reduces structure (attaching clitic heads to V-T), whereas adults prefer categorial uniformity." In other words, adults want pronouns to come after the verb in their more usual spot. Grüter notes that French children do not ever place clitic object pronouns mistakenly after the verb. She points out that children would be expected to overgeneralize the subject-verb-object word order rule and proposes that, as they do not do so, object clitics are inflectional markers rather than part of the argument of the sentence. Children may feel that they are allowed to completely drop the object as it is already inferred.

The idea that adult L2 learners' language acquisition is assisted by up-front instruction on the target grammar form is further backed up by a study by Erlam that gave results indicating that object pronouns are better taught deductively (the rule is explained by the teacher before students practice) rather than inductively (students notice particular forms and try to arrive at metalinguistic generalizations on their own).

In another study, Leeser examines the effect of learners' production (pushed output) on acquisition of the Spanish past tenses. After an initial grammatical explanation, students listened to a text which contained many examples of past tenses. Students then either had to reconstruct the text or answer comprehension questions on the text. Results indicated that students who were required to reconstruct the text had engaged in syntactic processing (grammar point) and a deeper semantic processing (meaning). Leeser's findings suggest that "text reconstruction tasks are one way in which learners can be pushed to direct their attention to form and meaning in L2 content-based classrooms, thereby potentially facilitating development of L2 morphosyntax."

Object pronouns and the *passé composé*

Problems with object pronouns are further compounded by use with the *passé composé*. In this tense, the past participle must agree with a preceding direct object as in the example: *Anne? Je l'ai vue hier*. In this example, the past participle *vu* must add the letter *e* to make an agreement with the preceding direct object *la* (here *l'* caused by elision). The direct object represents *Anne* and is therefore feminine. One study notes that "while adjective agreement and subject-verb agreement are correctly selected by children and adults, agreeing past participles are much more rarely selected." It is noted that by age 5, children are nearly as proficient as adults in making past participle agreements (although adults only do so 60% of the time). The study goes on to draw the conclusion that "the manner in which francophone children react to PPA (past participle agreement) developmentally and the vast individual variation point towards PPA as a marginal feature in the early grammar."

Laurent Dekydtspotter and Claire Renaud add that "past participle agreement [with moved objects] is optional in spoken French (…) and is overtly realized with only a restricted number of verbs." Citing classroom studies, they observe that "four fourth-semester class periods, totaling 250 minutes of instruction, included 382 occurrences with 37.43% in agreement-triggering structures but produced only three overt agreements." Past participle agreements with preceding direct objects are required in writing, but oral input does not give students many examples of

agreement at work. Many agreements that are present in written French cannot be heard in spoken French because they are not pronounced distinctly (overt). Therefore, learners have few examples that can teach them how past participle agreements with preceding direct objects work.

Some conclusions
It would appear from the research I consulted, that my students' difficulties with object pronouns in French are natural. Object pronouns are grammar forms that easily pass below students' radars because of their position in the middle of sentences and because of their relative lack of importance to the overall understanding of texts. English speakers' reliance on the word order – subject + verb + object – also poses problems as French clitic pronouns are placed before the verb. Object pronouns cause particular problems with the *passé composé* as agreements that are required in writing are often not perceptible in speech.

    The big question is: "What can *we* do to improve student learning of pronouns?" Studies would indicate that it is a sound pedagogical strategy to introduce a short text with object pronouns, sensitize students by asking them to identify that which seems "strange" to them, and then follow up with a meta-linguistic explanation. In my research, I did not find any discussion of methods to teach pronouns. It would seem useful to point out the particular difficulties that learners will probably face prior to teaching, then teach the form so that students are focused on it. The next step is to provide substantial meaningful input followed by forced output. My activities therefore take this four-pronged approach. They are also intended to have a light-hearted vein. Pronouns are a dry topic indeed, and part of focusing high-school students' attention on a grammar point is providing some kind of interesting "hook." Students remember more when their sense of humor is appealed to, and this also puts down any affective shield that may go up at the prospect of dealing with object pronouns. Grammar instruction draws attention to the pronouns and their difficulties. This follows the cognitivists' and developmentalists' concept that adolescent and adult learners need to have their attention drawn to new and problematic structures as their attention will otherwise be on content and meaning rather than form. Structured and meaningful input followed by forced output though an amusing story about grammar and a French poem written in "Dr. Seuss" fashion. Students will read the poem in pairs and together highlight the pronouns and write down the noun referred back to by each pronoun used. Students will then perform the poem. For use of pronouns with the *passé composé*, students will write rhyming poems using past participles with agreements. Students will be encouraged to play with the sounds to comic effect. During this process, they will process the agreements in writing and practice them orally in performance. Their attention will thus be drawn to this intractable problem and their understanding improved. The repetitive nature of the "Dr. Seuss" style, will provide students with plenty of repetition. This will also give students the experiences that behaviorists (and proponents of the audio-lingual approach) deem necessary – imitation and repetition. Through making conscious use of strategies deemed to help language acquisition, it is hoped that students will find it easier and more pleasant to learn about pronouns.

The intention is not to favor any one theory or theorist, rather to aim for a mixture of form-based and meaning-based instruction and create a manageable and enjoyable unit of study.

Activities

Activity One

The first activity includes a consideration of the use of grammar in general, and of the roles of the different parts of speech. Inspiration for this comes from a remarkable "tongue in cheek" tale with all the flavor of *Le Petit Prince* by St. Exupéry. This is written in defense of the French language and all the threats to its beauty as perceived by the author, Erik Orsenna, a member of the prestigious Académie Française. In this tale – *La grammaire est une chanson douce* - Orsenna describes the progressive erosion of French vocabulary by people who do not read enough to use a varied vocabulary, the uninspired, awkward and dry school-authority controlled explanations of literature forced on young children in school and the ever-looming threat of the English language. In the tale, two children find themselves language-less after a storm at sea. They are on a strange and magical island in miniature town called *La ville des mots*. In this town, all the parts of speech know what they have to do: "Les mots s'organisent en tribus, comme les humains. Et chaque tribu a son métier." They are freed from control by humans, and are free to follow the rules and plan assigned to them. Nouns are the most numerous and are charged with labeling everything, giving everything in the world a name. Articles walk in front of the nouns ringing bells to draw attention to their gender. Their favorite occupation is to clothe and disguise themselves. This they do by "shopping" at the stores run by adjectives and trying out different adjectives. Adjectives gracefully agree with their nouns only to be rejected as nouns decide to try on a different disguise, a different adjective. Verbs are posted into clocks that give them a time and a conjugation. The role of pronouns is to jump on nouns periodically and swallow them up so that they can replace them: "*les pronoms ne sont pas seulement prétentieux. Ils peuvent se montrer violents.*"

    In this activity, students will read a simplified and abbreviated version of Orsenna's description of this world. They will discuss the use of grammar to bring words into a harmonious order where each word has a role and all the words complement one another. Students will be asked which word they want to be. They will explain their choice and think about what their lives as these words would be like? What would they be able to do, what not? Whom would they like, whom not?

Activity Two

Students will receive instruction on object pronouns – direct object pronouns, indirect object pronouns, *y* and *en*. Their role will be explained and students' attention drawn to the difficulties they pose to Anglophone students. There will be traditional practice with worksheets to practice choice and placement of pronouns (see appendices for example worksheets and placement templates that are easy to remember). Students will be directed to think of clitic pronouns as being like prefixes to their verb. This helps considerably to understand that, although noun

objects are placed after the verb, weak (clitic) object pronouns are placed before the verb.

Activity Three

Students will be reminded of the Orsenna grammar story and be told that they will now be the ones to bring words into harmonious sentences. Students will be divided into groups. Groups will be given sentences each including a noun subject preceded by its article, a verb (tense may be present, immediate future or passé composé – each of the latter two tenses involving two students, one for each part of the verb) an adjective and a noun or a preposition followed by an article and a noun. Team members will make clear card signs bearing their words. They will carry these. On their backs, they will have large labels displaying their part of speech (in French) – *nom, préposition, verbe, article*. Students will stand in no particular order, their backs to the rest of the room. Other class members will volunteer to indicate the part of speech that should line up and turn around. It is to be noted that this will require reordering of the nouns and the articles as it is impossible to tell which noun is the subject merely from the label "*nom.*" All possible subject and object pronouns will have previously been written on card and displayed on the whiteboard, held in place by magnets. The second task is to replace all nouns, articles (and prepositions if necessary) with pronouns. Other members of the class will put up their hands if they think they know the pronouns that will be required. If they are correct, they will take the pronoun from the board, don a beret and take hold of a French baguette "sword" (a dry baguette). They will then tap the parts of the sentence to be replaced. These will leave and the students carrying the pronouns will stand in their place. The word order will not be correct. Students will place words correctly by tapping the pronouns with the baguette and moving them in front of their verbs in the line-up as it is read from left to right. The "student pronoun" is then given a cushion and will "lean" on the "student verb" thus making physical illustration of the pronoun's situational dependence on its verb. When the sentences are in *passé composé*, other students will take cards with extra letters required to make agreements from the board. They will then stand holding them in the correct place. As an extension, the "sentence" can be photographed and subsequently displayed via the computer and USB projector on a screen so that all students (including those involved in the line-up) can see it and copy it. Pictures of "student sentences" can be displayed in the classroom to remind students of word order.

This activity requires the students to physically interact with words and sentences and gives students a different kind of Leeser's "forced output." Their manipulation of the words into a coherent sentence makes the activity memorable, and the associations built between different students and their part of speech also make the word order more memorable, more personalized. This activity can also be easily repeated throughout the year to refresh students' memories. It should not, however, be "done to death" or it will lose its effect.

Activity Four

Students will be asked about Dr. Seuss books and what they remember about the stories they tell. They will be directed that this is an activity to play with words, just as in the book *Green Eggs and Ham*. Students will receive copies of a poem I have written in the style of Dr. Seuss (see

Appendix B). The class will be divided into pairs. First the class will read the poem together – half the class being Louis and half taking the other role.

In pairs, students will identify and highlight the pronouns and write the nouns they are replacing in the margin at the side of the page.
Students will then recite the poem, each taking one of the roles. Subsequently, students may be split into teams of six or eight and assigned different parts of the poem to memorize and present. The two different characters may be represented by the wearing of a black or a red hat that students pass on as new students continue the narration.

Activity Five
Students will be reminded of past participle agreements with preceding direct objects – including pronouns. Students will read and repeat the poem *Déjeuner du matin* by Jacques Prévert. This poem is a simple narration of a series of past tense activities describing a morning scene between a couple whose relationship has gone sour. After general discussion of the poem, students will transcribe it using object pronouns wherever possible and making the correct past participle agreements. Students will then be directed to the verb tables at the end of their textbooks and asked to find and list past participles which allow one to hear that there is an agreement with a feminine preceding direct objects. Examples would be: *mis - mise/ ouvert – ouverte*.

After reviewing the lists, students will then be directed to include as many of them as possible in their next assignment. This is to write a short poem describing an item they bought that caused them problems (to unwrap it, to eat it, to make it work, for example). The item must be a feminine noun in French so that past participle agreements are caused. The poem should be witty and may use repetition to comic effect as in the Dr. Seuss poem. It should rhyme wherever possible. This is a relatively easy proposition given that many past participles rhyme. Students should be encouraged to enjoy the sounds and to play with them. The following is an example of how a poem may start. I have highlighted the clauses containing object pronouns and past participle agreements.

J'ai acheté une pomme
Une pomme pour un homme
Une pomme délicieuse
Mais quand même affreuse
Parce qu'elle était dure, dure,
Affreusement dure.
*Avec ma main **je l'ai prise**,*
*Avec ma main **je l'ai mise***
…

Students will accompany the poems with illustrations and present them to the class. As they are intended to be quite short, this should not be too time consuming. Students may help one another to find ideas and rhymes, and the teacher may also give input. The idea is to be

constantly repeating these irregular past participles with agreements so that they are memorized and the idea of agreement with preceding direct object is internalized. This "forced output" should facilitate remembering the rule and subsequently applying it to past participles with agreements that cannot be heard – for example: *Je l'ai vue*. This involves an irregular past participle, but one cannot hear the "e" which has been added.

Notes

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