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"Invitation au voyage": A multiliteracies approach to teaching genre

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"L'Invitation au voyage": A Multiliteracies Approach to Teaching Genre in an Advanced Writing Course

Heather Willis Allen and Kate Paesani

As has long been recognized, undergraduate students entering advanced-level foreign language courses in institutions of higher education in the United States do not always possess advanced-level language abilities. To overcome this problem, many scholars have underscored the importance of attending to linguistic development in conjunction with the teaching of literary-cultural content (Allen; Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris; Donato and Brooks; Ortega and Byrnes; Paesani; Polio and Zyzik). Yet integrating these foci is a complex undertaking: typically, the study of language forms is relegated to advanced courses focused on language (e.g., phonetics, composition, grammar), and the study of content to advanced courses focused on literature and culture. This language-content divide present in many collegiate language programs poses a number of pedagogical challenges (MLA Ad Hoc Committee) We address two here: understanding how we can encourage students to see connections between the study of language and literary-cultural content and determining what texts and pedagogical approaches might facilitate these connections. We argue that the multiliteracies framework is an appropriate pedagogical approach and that Baudelaire's prose and verse poetry are appropriate texts to simultaneously create connections between language and content and develop students' linguistic competencies in an advanced French writing course.

Writing Development in the Advanced Undergraduate Foreign Language Curriculum

A perusal of French course listings at universities in the United States reveals that advanced writing is often treated alongside other language-focused subjects such as grammar or conversation. Moreover, the tables of contents for textbooks typically used in such courses are focused more on the development of discrete-point knowledge of language than on connections between language and literary-cultural content or on students' interactions with foreign languages texts (e.g., Gerrard, Rusterholz, and Long; Loriot-Raymer, Vialet, and Muyskens). Yet as Elizabeth Bernhardt points out, a relatively small percentage of what learners need to understand foreign language texts is language oriented. Indeed, grammar and vocabulary make up only thirty percent of this knowledge; other sources are first-language literacy (twenty percent) and unexplained variance (fifty percent) such as background knowledge, motivation, or strategy use (140). When advanced writing textbooks do focus on connections between language and content through texts, literature plays little if any role (e.g., Oukada, Bertrand, and Solberg). One exception, *Tâches d'encre* (Siskin, Krueger, and Fauvel), presents literary texts in five of seven chapters as a basis for the study of language forms and stylistic devices that prepare students for writing in various genres.

Despite this exception, advanced French writing courses are typically not centered on literary texts and, moreover, do not always provide students the opportunity to engage in creative writing tasks. According to Richard Kern (referencing Flower), this minimal focus on literature and creative writing means that

> American students are trained primarily to recall and reproduce factual content, leading to a brand of literacy that emphasizes the consumption of information . . . [they] perform most adequately at straightforward informative writing tasks (factual reports, descriptions) and least adequately at persuasive and imaginative writing tasks. (*Literacy* 33)

As a result, the development of students' advanced foreign language competencies may be hindered because we do not expose them to a broad scope of writing tasks, nor do we make explicit that what they read may serve as a model for what they write. This dynamic makes it challenging for students in advanced-level courses to respond to the cultural and linguistic content of literature in a variety of ways (e.g., summarizing, analyzing, arguing) in the foreign language.

To address this problem, we describe below an advanced French writing course that has students create literature rather than write about it. Reading literature is therefore a gateway to authoring that allows students to develop advanced foreign language competencies (Kern, *Literacy*). In this course reading and writing are thus viewed as complementary rather than separate modalities, and students learn that "what you read and the ways you read it influence the ways you write and the resources you possess" (Allen 372). Baudelaire's poems offer fertile ground for

developing students' ability to be readers and authors of literature. Furthermore, the multiliteracies approach provides a framework for designing instructional activities that develop these abilities and highlight connections between language and literary-cultural content. In the remainder of this essay, we outline the multiliteracies approach and then demonstrate it through a pedagogical sequence treating three versions of Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage": the prose poem from *Le Spleen de Paris*, the verse poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and the animated poem by David Gautier.

Teaching Genre Using a Multiliteracies Approach

Recent research has advocated situating texts as the focal point of instruction across the foreign language curriculum; in particular, the construct of literacy has been proposed as an organizing principle for this kind of curricular reform (e.g., Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris; Kern and Schultz; Swaffar and Arens) and the multiliteracies approach as a pedagogical framework for teaching texts in foreign language classrooms (e.g., Allen; Allen and Paesani; Kern, *Literacy*). Within this scholarship, literacy is conceived of more broadly than reading and writing, which are often considered separate skills to be mastered. Instead, literacy entails

> the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use, and ideally, the ability to reflect critically on these relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge.
>
> (Kern, *Literacy* 16)

In addition to its focus on texts, key to this definition are its sociocultural, linguistic, and cognitive dimensions. Instead of seeing meaning as fixed, it is dependent on sociocultural contexts relative to specific communities, beliefs, or practices. Moreover, because of its focus on the interrelation of words, phrases, discourse, and the world, language is conceived of broadly rather than simply as sets of vocabulary words and structures. Finally, literacy and related acts of textual interpretation (reading) and creation (writing) involve cognitive processes such as critical thinking and analysis. As such, in addition to using language to express personal experiences and opinions, learners make form-meaning connections to build personal readings and writings of texts (Kern, *Literacy*).

By positing literacy development as an overarching goal of foreign language curriculum and instruction, we open the door to a different view of genre that moves beyond traditional types of literary production (e.g., prose, poetry, drama)

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to include a range of oral and written discourse forms. Janet Swaffar and Katherine Arens define genre as "an oral or written rhetorical practice that structures culturally embedded communicative situations in a highly predictable pattern, thereby creating horizons of expectations for its community of users" (99). Indeed, although genres are socioculturally variable, they are nonetheless characterized by certain norms of language use, style, and conventions that allow readers to "make connections between particular instances of discourse and others we have experienced previously" (Kern, *Literacy* 87). As learners interpret foreign language texts, they analyze rhetorical moves of a genre and gradually become aware of the norms and conventions that characterize it. This writing apprenticeship in turn helps learners understand the essential features of a genre and apply them in creative writing activities (Allen; Kern, *Literacy*; Hall).

Also related is intertextuality, which, in "draw[ing] attention to the potentially complex ways in which meanings (such as linguistic meaning) are constituted through relationships to other texts (real or imaginary)" (New London Group 82), underscores the links between texts and how textual resources have been repurposed to fit a new sociocultural context (Barthes; Kristeva). This conception of intertextuality makes clear connections between foreign language reading and writing that can contribute to improved student writing. Moreover, these connections provide "[p]erhaps the most advantageous route for learners to position themselves in the complex literate world of the language they are engaged in learning: learning to speak, read, understand, and write it a high levels of ability in order to convey content and knowledge that is meaningful to themselves and to others" (Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris 40).

The concepts of literacy, genre, and intertextuality can be translated into classroom practice through the multiliteracies framework (Cope and Kalantzis; Kern, *Literacy*; New London Group), a pedagogy that facilitates students' critical engagement with the linguistic, literary, and cultural content of foreign language texts and encourages "a discovery approach to genres in which students first become aware of the importance of genres in communication, and then are taught how to identify the characteristic features of genres by themselves" (Kern, *Literacy* 199). An important aspect of teaching genre within this framework is exposing students to multiple texts and identifying similarities and differences across them. This intertextual approach gives learners a multifaceted view of genre and of how common themes and linguistic conventions are expressed.

Key to multiliteracies pedagogy is the act of meaning design, which involves creating form-meaning connections through the related acts of textual interpretation (reading) and transformation (writing). Engaging in meaning design entails attending to the various Available Designs of a text, which include linguistic (writing system, vocabulary, syntax, coherence, cohesion) and schematic (organizational patterns, genre, style, background knowledge) resources for meaning making (Kern, *Literacy* 67). Because the process of meaning design draws on knowledge about language, conventions, genre, and culture to interpret, analyze, and reflect on the content of texts, form and meaning are viewed no longer as

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separate from one another but as closely intertwined. Textual interpretation is the act of moving beyond comprehension of surface-level facts to synthesize, explain, or analyze messages in a text and to reveal cultural perspectives and points of view. Textual transformation involves shaping and reworking meaning gleaned through interpretive activities to establish new connections among existing Available Designs. According to Kern, "this means creating new texts on the basis of existing ones, or reshaping texts to make them appropriate for contexts of communication other than those for which they were originally intended" (133–34).

In the context of an advanced French writing course, certain Available Designs necessary for textual interpretation and transformation, particularly those related to recalling and reproducing factual information through description or narration, may be more obvious to students given that they have been interacting with these resources throughout their foreign language studies. Less transparent may be the Available Designs necessary for interpreting and creating literature. One strategy for making these more overt is to have students engage in creative writing activities. In addition to expanding their language competencies, this kind of writing makes "it possible to create imagined worlds of their own design. Symbolic play, and the recombining of elements in fresh, inventive ways can be highly motivating and can help to prepare language students to read poetry and other forms of literary expression with greater sensitivity" (172).

Four pedagogical acts, or learning activities, serve to organize multiliteracies-based instruction and facilitate engagement in textual interpretation and transformation. *Situated practice* activities such as previewing a text or writing summary sentences focus on the act of experiencing; they provide learners the opportunity to immerse themselves in spontaneous use of appropriate Available Designs without explicit reflection. Learners build on Available Designs in *overt instruction* activities such as identifying stylistic or linguistic features in a text. Overt instruction entails the act of conceptualizing and encourages learners to analyze form-meaning connections found in texts. The resources identified in overt instruction can then be used to interpret or transform meaning in subsequent activities. *Critical framing*, or analysis, directs learners' attention to the relation of language use and meaning in various sociocultural contexts. Examples include instructional conversations related to an author or genre comparisons. Finally, *transformed practice* activities such as creative writing focus on the act of transforming; they engage learners in meaning design through creation of texts appropriate for different discourse contexts (Cope and Kalantzis; Kern, *Literacy*; New London Group).

Teaching "L'Invitation au voyage" in the Advanced French Writing Course

In keeping with the aims of the multiliteracies approach, the advanced French writing course described here was designed to emphasize the complementarity

of reading and writing as acts of meaning design. The course's primary objectives include sensitizing students to the relation of form and content, or why and how certain linguistic devices are used in particular textual genres; providing students with experience in creative writing in French for communicative purposes; and furthering students' abilities to speak in French at advanced levels.

The course is organized into four modules, each focused on a different author and textual genre. These include descriptive tales from Philippe Delerm's *La Première Gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules*, ethnotexts from Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*, prose and verse versions of Charles Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage," and short stories from Anna Gavalda's *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part*.[1] A previous version of the course used several excerpts from Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* to frame the third module, but, because of students' stated interest in poetry, *Exercices de style* was replaced with the Baudelaire texts. By so doing, the course incorporates a more varied selection of textual genres including the prose poem, a genre that is most likely unfamiliar to students and that can facilitate new understandings of what defines both prose and poetry.

For each module, after reading, analyzing, and discussing the thematic and stylistic content of several texts, students use the linguistic and schematic Available Designs of those texts as the starting point for creating written work. Over a period of several class sessions, these texts are drafted, discussed in peer review and individual conferences with the instructor, and compiled in a digital portfolio. Thus, a familiar progression from reading-focused to writing-focused activities occurs in each module, whereas the textual genres increase in complexity during the semester. We detail below the course module for "L'Invitation au voyage"; all instructional activities are conducted in French.

Stage 1: Situating the Author and "L'Invitation au voyage"

The instructional sequence begins with critical framing to sensitize students to contextual information related to Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Students are divided into three groups, and each group reads about and presents one element of the context of the texts. These elements are represented in a cultural reading (focused on elements of mid-nineteenth-century French life that informed the central themes of the two collections), a historical reading (a summary of political upheavals at the time "L'Invitation au voyage" was written and their influence on Parisian life), and a biographical reading (a chronological snapshot of Baudelaire's life and literary production) of one to two pages each. As they read at home, students complete a text matrix to map the reading's main themes to specific phrases wherein each theme is reflected (Swaffar and Arens 87). The instructor provides some of these themes in the matrix (e.g., political upheaval, literary influences, family life, *la bourgeoisie*); yet, as students read, they may list additional themes and accompanying textual support found in their assigned text.

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Next, students participate in a brief in-class oral comparison of the content of their matrix with that of other students who have read the same text. Whereas identification of appropriate citations related to themes provided by the instructor tends to be a simple matter, arriving at consensus on the textual themes students identified entails problem solving and collaboration. Each group of students, aided by their completed text matrix, then presents a summary of their reading to the other two groups, who write down major themes using a simplified version of the text matrix.

The final step in the activity involves a teacher-led instructional conversation, a technique aimed not only at conveying content but also at promoting students' communicative development through strategies such as questioning, modeling, feeding back, and explaining (Hall). The intent of this interactive discussion is to highlight connections among the cultural, historical, and biographical elements students presented and how those linkages relate specifically to the prose and verse versions of "L'Invitation au voyage."

Following this critical framing, the focus of the first class of the module shifts to situated practice and predicting the content of the first text students will read. This is accomplished by introducing a visual image, Henri Matisse's "Luxe, calme et volupté," inspired by a line from the verse version of "L'Invitation au voyage." Students are asked to silently reflect on the relation of what they see in the painting and its title, taking notes on their ideas before sharing them with peers and the instructor. Once students have shared their interpretations, they are asked to share their expectations of the content of the poem, given what they now know about the writer's biography, the historical and cultural context of his writing, and the images depicted in Matisse's painting.

The first class concludes by modeling a situated practice activity that students complete at home to prepare for discussing the thematic content of the prose version of "L'Invitation au voyage." Together, the instructor and students read and create a one-sentence summary of the text's first paragraph and then brainstorm useful expressions for beginning other summary phrases (e.g., "Dans ce paragraphe, il s'agit de . . . , Ensuite, on voit . . ." 'This paragraph is about . . . , Next, we see . . .'). As homework, students summarize each of the remaining eleven paragraphs of the text in one phrase and identify the "mots clés" ("keywords") for each to help them understand the main ideas and themes of the poem.

The critical framing and situated practice activities completed as part of the first class are designed to provide students with new schematic Available Designs (e.g., background knowledge) relevant to the poems they will be reading and with strategies for mapping their initial understandings of the prose text through a summarizing activity. Intertextuality plays a key role in these activities as students familiarize themselves with resources that may be meaningfully repurposed and thus connected to the poems they read. Furthermore, constant overlapping of reading or viewing texts, responding to texts through informal in-class writing, and sharing textual interpretations orally contribute to developing students' advanced language competencies.

Stage 2: Analyzing the Thematic Content of Two Versions of "L'Invitation au voyage"

The second class of the module begins with situated practice that builds on the reading summaries students completed at home. First, students work in pairs to further condense their summaries into five parts (paragraphs 1–2, 3–5, 6–7, 8–9, and 10–11) and identify key words in each; the instructor and students construct a summary sentence and select key words for the first part together, to model the activity. The purpose is to work from the poem's micropropositions to its macropropositions—that is, from its details to its main ideas (Swaffar and Arens 87). As follow-up, the teacher leads an instructional conversation to determine, in collaboration with students, the text's main themes and how those themes are developed from the text's start to its end.

After the thematic contours of the prose poem have been established, a second situated practice activity serves to preview the content of the verse version of "L'Invitation au voyage," which students will later read and compare with the prose version. Students examine an animated version of the verse poem (D. Gautier): a three-minute video in which the text is read aloud and accompanied by a series of color illustrations. As they first watch the video without sound, students predict the content of the verse poem and reflect on how this differs from the prose version. Once they have discussed their ideas with the instructor, they watch the video a second time with sound and share how their initial hypotheses regarding the text's content differed from the audio text. Finally, in preparation for comparing the two versions of "L'Invitation au voyage" during the next class, students are instructed to read the verse poem at home, write a one-phrase summary for each stanza of the text, and note key words in each, just as they had done for the prose poem.

The first half of the third class of the module focuses on similarities and differences between the content of the verse and prose versions of "L'Invitation au voyage." First, in a situated practice activity, students use their completed text summaries to facilitate a detailed comparison of primary themes of the prose poem, the verse poem, and themes shared by both texts using a Venn diagram. The instructor provides a possible starting point for students' reflections by suggesting a focus on the poet's aim in each text, the person who is being addressed, and in what terms. Reading, writing, and speaking overlap as students first work independently before sharing their interpretations with the class. The instructor then fills in a master Venn diagram with students' ideas. This situated practice activity moves students away from discussion of generalities related to the texts toward a more critical comparison of the two. This comparison is further developed in a follow-up critical framing activity in which students focus on the image of the woman and of the exotic country represented in both poems (Harrington 111) and made explicit in the lines "Au pays qui te ressemble" in the verse poem (*Fleurs* [Pichois] 53) and "Il est une contrée qui te ressemble" in the prose poem (*Spleen* [Pichois] 302) ("A land exists resembling you" [*Parisian Prowler* 37]).

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Students are thus led to consider final questions of interpretation such as which content in the two texts represents the place, the woman, or both and what is the relationship between the woman and the place in these texts.

Stage 3: Focusing on Form-Meaning Connections in "L'Invitation au voyage"

The transition from discussing thematic content in the verse and prose versions of "L'Invitation au voyage" to identifying key linguistic and schematic Available Designs and how they express meaning occurs during the second half of the third class period. The goal of the following overt instruction activities is for students to analyze how meaning is made within the texts under study and to become aware of new Available Designs for later use in creating their own prose poem.

To draw students' attention to certain Available Designs in the poems, the instructor gives a list of specific types of linguistic and stylistic features to focus on (e.g., pronoun choice, verb forms, repetition, metaphor, interrogative forms). Students are asked to find examples of each feature in both texts and relate them to themes of the place, the woman, or both. In addition, students must identify one other notable linguistic and stylistic feature in both texts and examples of each. After completing this activity alone, they compare their findings in small groups and then with the whole class to verify that all instances of targeted linguistic and stylistic devices have been found and understood. Once the list of textual features has been compiled, students consider the question of how specific linguistic or stylistic choices made by the poet affect meaning, particularly regarding how meaning shifts from one version of the poem to the other.

The second element of overt instruction turns attention to the preface of *Le Spleen de Paris*, in which Baudelaire wrote of aspiring to "une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience" 'a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and choppy enough to fit the soul's lyric movements, the undulations of reverie, the jolts of consciousness' (275–76; 129). Based on this description of the poet's aim, students find instances in the prose poem that correspond to being "musicale sans rythme et sans rime" 'musical without rhythm and without rhyme' and simultaneously "souple" 'supple' and "heurtée," 'choppy' [illegible]t individually and then with the whole class. Students then use these examples [illegible] decide if they agree or disagree with the poet's claim of his failure to meet his aims ("je restais bien loin de mon mystérieux et brillant modèle" 'I remain quite far from my mysterious and brilliant model' [276; 130]), justifying their opinion with references to the text.

At the close of the third class, the instructor prepares students to complete an at-home critical framing activity. Students must compile a list of ten essentials for writing a Baudelairean prose poem based on their personal understandings of "L'Invitation au voyage." In so doing, students synthesize the meanings they have

ascribed to the text and narrow down those linguistic and schematic Available Designs that they deem most consistent with the poem. To begin the fourth class period, the instructor synthesizes these ideas, particularly ones common across several students, as the final activity leading to their writing their own prose poem. This cycle of textual analysis, interpretation, and collaborative discussion sensitizes students to how meaning emerges through key Available Designs in both genres. Furthermore, given that the prose poem is a genre whose conventions are typically unknown to undergraduate students in the United States, these activities seek to make its associated Available Designs as transparent as possible to provide a smooth transition from reading-focused to writing-focused activities.

Stage 4: Moving from Interpretation to Creating a New Text

As a first step in creating their own prose poem, students complete a situated practice activity during the fourth class to map initial ideas using a graphic organizer. The focus is on generating content-related ideas about their version of "L'Invitation au voyage": the narrator and his or her aims, the place to which one travels, the person invited to this place, and key descriptive words associated with each. Because this is a creative writing assignment, students may opt to narrate the poem from their own viewpoint or someone else's and, likewise, may employ a register of French different from that in Baudelaire's poem, so long as it is consistent with the narrator's identity. After they have completed initial written brainstorming independently, students collaborate with a partner, using the graphic organizer to explain the main ideas of their poem. In turn, their partner poses questions, asks for clarifications, and makes suggestions related to these ideas. After collaborating on the content of the poem, students then discuss its form—that is, how they plan to tell the story of their poem using Available Designs to shape the text's meaning. They are advised to refer to both their list of ten essentials for writing a Baudelairean prose poem and their completed text matrix as tools to help them plan their poem's content.

At the close of the fourth class, students are ready to engage in the transformed practice activity of writing their own version of "L'Invitation au voyage." The instructor provides them with detailed instructions for the assignment and criteria for assessment, and they are asked to prepare an initial draft of the text for the fifth class. The rest of the module entails participation in peer review and individual writing conferences with the instructor to facilitate editing and revision of their poem over several class sessions. A *table ronde* completes the module, wherein each student makes an informal presentation of his or her text by briefly summarizing its focus and reading it aloud. Class members are invited to ask questions and make comments on their peers' texts.

This final stage of the instructional sequence culminates in students' "creat[ing] imagined worlds of their own design" through writing prose poems (Kern, *Literacy* 172). Yet this creative venture is also constrained in the sense that students

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are required to respect the conventions of the textual genre, which they now better understand given the previous stage's attention to form-meaning connections in "L'Invitation au voyage." The connection between reading and writing is further reinforced as students become readers and interpreters of their peers' writing and collaborate in refining one another's texts.

The four-stage model we have elaborated for teaching the prose and verse versions of the poem "L'Invitation au voyage" takes students beyond writing about literature to creating literature, based in large part on the knowledge they glean from textual analysis and interpretation. Although the instructional sequence described herein pertains to specific literary content and instructional goals, the pedagogy within the sequence can be tailored to a wide variety of courses or aims, including cultural studies courses, advanced language courses, or literature courses with a primary focus other than creative writing. In all these contexts, the multiliteracies approach provides ample opportunity for exploring the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural content of literary texts and for developing students' advanced-level language competencies.

NOTE

[1] A detailed description of the course's fourth module (Gavalda's short stories) is provided in Allen.