The perception of French people by English Students: Findings from the Durham cultural Studies project

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THE PERCEPTION OF FRENCH PEOPLE BY ENGLISH STUDENTS: FINDINGS FROM THE DURHAM CULTURAL STUDIES PROJECT[1]

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Abstract The paper presents preliminary results of a research project on the effect of language teaching on young people's perceptions of other cultures. Interview data on the alleged appearance of French people are presented and discussed under the headings (1) physical appearance, (2) facial expressions and behaviour, and (3) dress. Some correlates of general attitude are also reported. Girls generally have a more positive attitude towards the French than boys, and the attitudes of younger students tend to be more extreme and stereotyped than the attitudes of older pupils. School and class variables, including the teacher, appear to be of considerable importance, although achievement in French does not correlate with positive attitude. It is argued that the educational strategy of reaffirming the basic similarity of all peoples, however well-intentioned as a counter to prejudice and stereotypes, is not an effective basis for a programme of Cultural Studies. Differences must be recognised and situated in a coherent description of the foreign people and their culture.

The Significance of Cultural Studies

Although the United States now has a well-established tradition of 'teaching culture' — to borrow Seelye's (1984) title — it has had little impact on language teaching debates in the United Kingdom. A similarly significant tradition also exists in Germany (Buttjes, 1982; Byram, 1986) and other European countries (Buttjes and Byram, in press) but in Britain there has until now existed only the term *Background Studies*, at least as far as secondary schools are concerned. The term itself reveals the lack of interest in the issues and it is for that reason that we have introduced the term *Cultural Studies*.

In some respects cultural studies have always been present in foreign language teaching but seldom in the focus of teachers' and theorists' interest. Recent developments in language teaching can be traced either by a history of methods or by an analysis of aims and philosophy. In the latter perspective a general division can be drawn between the period until the Second World War and the period since. In the first period the dominant aim was to teach foreign languages to allow learners access to the significant intellectual artefacts of another people,

country, culture; literature, philosophy, art and so on. Gradually this aim gave way; in the context of important social and international changes, to the teaching of language to enable learners to visit other cultures themselves and communicate directly with speakers of other languages. This coincided with and created the context for well-known methodological developments such as audio-visual and communicative language teaching.

Of course the change was not abrupt or complete. And in fact in both periods there was a common approach to cultural or background studies. This was based on the view that knowledge and understanding of aspects of the culture were important insofar as they served the stated linguistic aims. Inevitably this led to bias: on the one hand towards information about writers and other intellectuals and their environment as far as it impinged on their work; on the other hand towards information necessary for survival in a strange environment as a visitor or tourist. Yet at the same time, teachers and others have claimed some more general educational value for language learning, typically that it 'broadens learners' horizons'. Most recently in England, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education have clarified the point by suggesting a distinction between 'literary and linguistic' aims on the one hand and 'human and social' on the other. The latter, they say, means that foreign language learning helps to 'increase social competence'; to 'foster positive attitudes towards other countries' and peoples, to 'awaken an interest in foreign cultures and lifestyles' and so on (HMI, 1987).

The problem still remains however in the dominance in practice of linguistic learning. The possibility that some 'insight' and 'tolerance' might develop as a consequence, to quote another recent British document (DES: 1985), is expressed only as a hope. This is certainly the view expressed by HMI who claimed that such things happen as a consequence of 'mastering linguistic objectives' and thereafter concentrate exclusively on the latter. In a sense this is not surprising, in view of the lack of debate in Britain on the theory and practice of cultural studies and of the absence of any empirical study.

These are some of the reasons for the empirical research to be described below. If language teaching is to claim its just place in the education of children both by giving them a useful key to other countries and peoples, and by expanding their understanding of foreign people by affording them insight and tolerance then we need to know how the claim is currently being fulfilled and what improvements might be necessary.

The Perception of French People by English Students: The Durham Project

The project is a case-study of French teaching, in two secondary Durham schools, for children aged 11 to 14, i.e. the minimal period of compulsory foreign language learning usual in English schools. A case study was chosen partly because of the intensity of the research methods needed and partly because of the exploratory nature of the project. Part of the work of the project is to clarify concepts and identify problems for further research.

The claim which the project investigates might be put as follows: that foreign

language teaching (in this case French) gives learners insights into the French way of life and makes them more tolerant of French people. It can also be formulated in terms of foreign language teaching influencing learners' attitudes positively and giving them more differentiated perceptions of the French way of life. This means that it is necessary to investigate attitudes, perceptions and the factors that influence them, and to define them in such a way that they can be measured in the real world. The notion of change in attitudes and perceptions, is linked to the passage of time and comparison between attitudes before and after learning a foreign language. For pragmatic reasons a cohort study was chosen as an approach to this and two comparable groups were investigated, one which had not yet begun to learn a foreign language (age 11 years) and one at the end of their third year of learning French in secondary school (age 14 years).
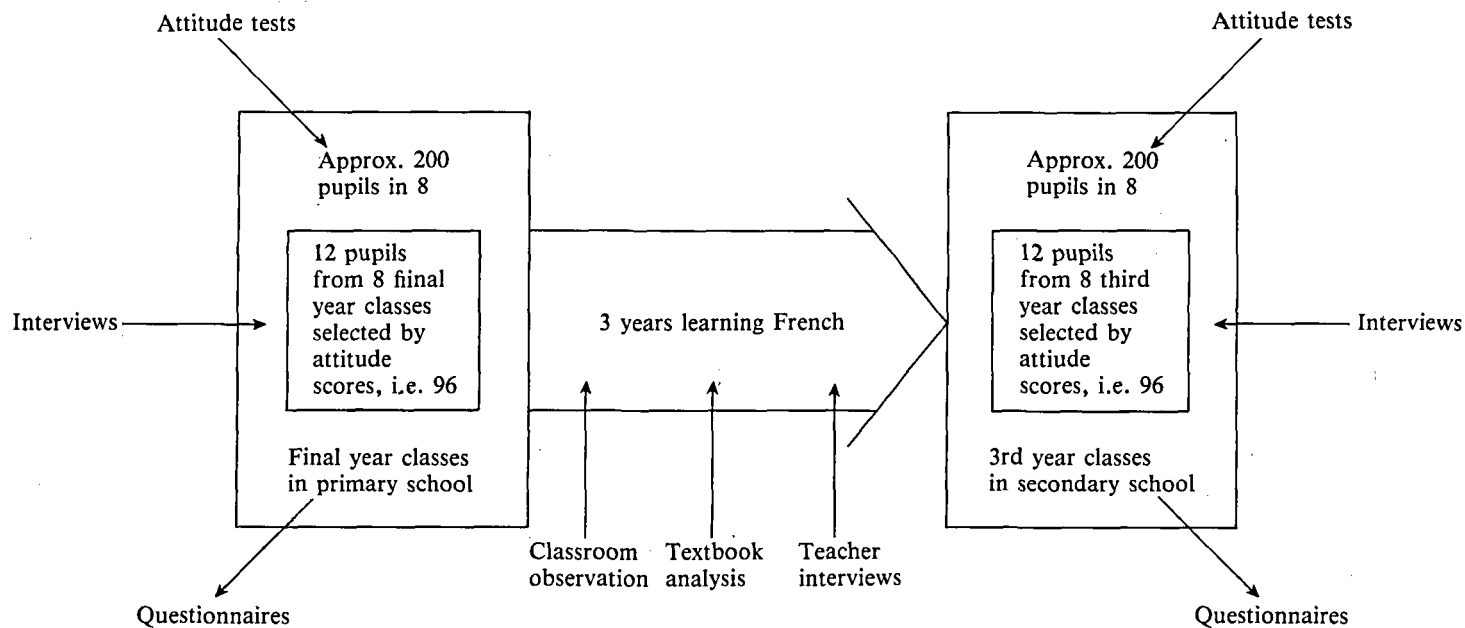
Data

Attitudes were measured by a test based on Osgood's semantic differential (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957). As a check on the validity of the test as well as an interesting study in its own right, attitudes were also elicited during informal interviews with selected pupils. The main purpose of the interviews, however, was to establish pupils' perceptions of the foreign country and people and the extent of their knowledge, and to ask their views on how they acquired these perceptions and knowledge. This latter was part of the investigation of influences on pupils' attitudes and perceptions.

Two further means were used to determine influences on student perceptions. First, since it was anticipated that there would be influential factors outside school, information on their links with foreign countries was obtained using a questionnaire. This included questions on the number of visits to other countries, whether parents and siblings had learned foreign languages, whether there were any family relations living abroad, and others. The influences in school, above all in the foreign language classroom, were observed by ethnographic techniques over a period of 8 months. This included classroom observation, textbook analysis and interviews with teachers.

A summary of the design for the full study is given in Figure 1. Four kinds of data have been gathered to date, (1) attitude scores, (2) questionnaire information on pupils' personal experiences, (3) ethnographic descriptions of the teaching process, and (4) informal interviews on pupils' perceptions, attitudes and views of sources of their knowledge. Three kinds of analysis have been carried out: (1) statistical analysis relating attitude scores to factors such as age, sex, experience of foreign countries, and learning French; (2) textual analysis of interview transcripts; and (3) ethnographic analysis of the images of the foreign country and people conveyed in through the teaching of French.

Results

In the present report we will confine ourselves primarily to the data from the textual analysis of the pupil interviews. Our objective is to describe the perception of French people in the population of pupils, and the attitudes associated

Attitude tests

Attitude tests

Approx. 200
pupils in 8

12 pupils
from 8 fiinal
year classes
selected by
attiude
scores, i.e. 96

Interviews

3 years learning French

Approx. 200
pupils in 8

12 pupils
from 8 third
year classes
selected by
attiude
scores, i.e. 96

Interviews

Final year classes
in primary school

3rd year classes
in secondary school

Classroom
observation

Textbook
analysis

Teacher
interviews

Questionnaires

Questionnaires

Figure 1

with that perception. First, however, we present some correlations of attitudinal data with background measures.

General attitudes: Correlates

The independent variables found to be most strongly associated with attitudes tended to be those measuring pupil background rather than experience of other countries and languages. Gender, membership of a particular school class, age and socio-economic status are more significantly related to attitudes than are experental variables, such as having foreign relatives, language learning experience in the family, or personal experience of visiting other countries.

Whether in primary or secondary schools, girls have a more positive attitude towards French people than boys. Of three groups, the French, the Germans and the Americans, only the latter are mainly positively perceived by boys. Given the preponderance of girls studying languages in Britain, the fact that girls have positive attitudes towards foreign peoples before they start learning a foreign language is particularly interesting.

Being in a particular class at school, whether primary or secondary, appears to associate significantly with attitudes. Since school class serves both as a descriptor of a collection of pupils receiving similar teaching and as a descriptor of an aggregate of individuals having a variety of backgrounds and experience, interaction amongst factors is likely to be present. Gender is one factor to be considered, as is foreign travel. Two secondary classes with the highest positions in the rank listing of attitudes both have high proportions of girls in them. Further, classes rated highest in achievement in French are highest in their regard for the French, although in general individual pupils' achievement in French does *not* covary with attitude to the French.

With respect to age, the younger age group, both boys and girls, showed generally more negative attitudes towards one people, the Germans. The corollary of this was that the younger age group perceived the Americans, who of course have a similar linguistic background, even more favourably than did the older age-group. It is evident, however, that the relations between age, school class and gender are so complex that no firm conclusion as to the significance of French teaching can be drawn from statistical analysis alone. The latter simply suggests ways in which the analysis of interview transcripts and field notes might be best pursued.

The majority of pupils interviewed were asked about their attitudes towards French people. For both age groups the correspondence between scores on the semantic differential test and attitudes expressed in interview was reasonably clear. The greatest correspondence was found amongst those categorised as *non-ethnocentric*. In the other two groups, *ethnocentric* and *medium ethnocentric*, pupils expressed both positive and negative views about the French, but where extremely negative and hostile attitudes were expressed, these came exclusively from those in the ethnocentric group. An illustration of the latter point in a most

vehement form is the following:

> Have you met any French people over here or when you were in Spain?

> I didn't meet any when I was in Spain but when I was in ... when some of the French people came over here they all like walked around the school, lashing out with dirty looks and everything. I just don't like the way they look at you, they look at you as to say what are you looking at ... I don't like them.

On the other hand, the range of views within the ethnocentric group is represented in the following two quotations:

> The people, they are not very polite, not very sociable.

> When you say they are not very polite, how do you mean?

> Like when I was in Boulogne we went into a café and asked if we could go to the toilet and they snapped at us and told us that we couldn't go in because with it being a cafe and that. It wouldn't have been so bad if they had told us politely we couldn't go but they snapped at us and we had to go out.

This incident contrasts with another from a school trip. The pupil here had a different view of what had been interpreted as harassment by others. He also noted the use of trying to make verbal contact:

> All he (a French boy) wanted to do was see who they were because they were English, they were different and sort of he started talking as we walked past because we were lost and told us where the hostel was and took us back to the hostel, all helpful. Just if you talk to them not if you sort of shout at them in a loud voice and try and get over in English they ignore you but if you try to talk to them in French they'll help you as much as they can.

Sometimes the factors influencing the attitudes of the pupils were revealed in the interviews. Television, for example, in the following extract.

> I like the French. I think the food might be OK. I've never ever tasted it before but I think they're good cooks. They know how to cook better than what the Spanish do.

> You've heard that have you, that they're good cooks?

> Yes, (be)cause like if you turned on BBC2 sometimes on Sundays, you might watch them, and all that.

The influence of the French teacher on pupil attitudes was also described in the interviews.

> I probably learn a lot more from the teacher than I do from the textbook because they've usually had, like, more experience and that. And they're easier to understand than just reading it, because if somebody tells you it sticks in your mind, than just reading it.

How exactly this influence operates, however, is a question that will have to await detailed ethnographic analysis of the observational data gathered in the classroom.

Perceptions: (1) Physical appearance

While physical appearance and dress do not feature largely as topics included in the *Cultural Studies* or *Background Studies* components of language courses in British schools, questions about them were included as it was thought possible from research carried out into both person perception and prejudice that some pupils might construe differences among peoples partly in terms of dress and physical appearance. In the USA Katz (1983), working in the related field of the development of racial awareness, has argued that understanding of nationality and religion can only develop long after that of gender and race. Some of the findings from racial awareness research are applicable to research into nationality awareness. Thus Katz reports that young children, in their pre-school years, make use of a wide variety of visual cues when categorising others, such as facial features and hair types or styles, and do not confine themselves solely, for example, to skin colour.

It soon became apparent that many pupils in our sample held opinions on how they would recognise members of other nationalities. When asked how they would recognise French people, many referred to details of both physical appearance and dress. To take physical appearance first the following features were cited as indicators of French nationality, in descending order of frequency:

> facial features;
> skin colour and suntan;
> facial expression
> hair styles;
> behaviour and movement;
> hair colour;
> height.

While the number of differences cited by individual pupils differed widely, over two-thirds of those interviewed perceived the French as different according to *some* physical criteria.

As with the perception of dress differences, to be reported below, certain details of a stereotyped image of French men tended to be cited without qualification. A primary pupil stated that he would look for the following features:

I'd look for their hair styles and the way their eyes formed. If it was a man, his eyes are always open.

Wide open?

Yes. And if ... it's an Englishman his eyes are like half shut, not wide.

Oh, that's interesting. Anything else you'd look for?

No, French people usually have moustaches and if they have one it usually comes down to about here. (Indicating length)

Secondary pupils tended to cite similar features:

They don't go bald as much and they've got like different mouths, like they are more rounded, and they have bigger noses and the eyes are more distinctive.

Although the same aspects of physical appearance were often singled out, opinions might differ as to the exact difference.

The lips again, the mouth and the eyes look always half shut.

References to the putative effect of the sun were frequent. A typical response is quoted from an eleven-year-old:

I think that the fact that they have more sun and they are a bit browner makes them look different.

Just browner? Is there anything else that makes them look different?

Their hair makes them look different because most people have black hair in France.

Hair styles, as distinct from colour, were mentioned by several pupils, all girls. These were often given in conjunction with styles of dress thought to be outdated, as they were seen as 'hippy' which, by the time of interviewing, was a term indicative of anathema amongst fashion-conscious British youth. The following were two such examples:

Their hair because they are always sort of scruffy.

and

I don't like the way they have their hair because nearly all of them look like hippies the way they have their hair.

Yes? How do you mean?

Like it's always long and they don't have any slides in or anything, they haven't got a fringe, it's just all hanging down over the face.

Perceptions: (2) Facial expressions and behaviour

Several pupils of both age groups referred to differences in facial expression. Whilst the following examples are fortunately not representative they are quoted in order to illustrate how intercultural perception can result in extremely negative images, of which teachers should be aware. The following is from a girl in primary school who generally regarded the French favourably.

> They look — some of them — they seem to look suspicious like, they seem to be talking nice to you but like as if they have the 'evil eye'.

> Yes? Is that from people you've seen or something your sister's said or ...?

> Yes, Jill — she was saying like when they went in this restaurant once they were talking nice and they seem to have that awful eye, a little suspicious as if to say 'What do you want?'. Something like that.

And from a girl in secondary school who was generally hostile towards the French and also towards learning French:

> Well, they're always lashing dirty looks and everything. I hate people, like, giving me the run around.

Other pupils referred to facial expressions also, but not in virulent terms. Sometimes they could be seen to be rationalising from their perception of their own local circumstances.

> How they look and that, their expressions.

> That's interesting. What sort of expressions do you think they would have?

> Just happier.

> Do you think they would look happier? Why do you think they would look happier than English people?

> Because they have jobs and that,

> On the whole you think they would look happier. Do English people look miserable?

> No, it's just French people, like, laugh a lot and that.

Some pupils construed behaviour as different:

> They have a different way of acting like, they show their feelings more. (They) talk loudly and shout a lot.

> I think they seem to talk more than we do, they seem to — like we're more silent than them I think.

To some, such differences made the French appear 'friendly'. More general differences in kinesics were also offered occasionally, even by primary school pupils.

> Sometimes they walk different to us. Sometimes move a bit more and look a lot more athletic and things.

Perceptions: (3) Dress

More observations were made of differences in dress than in physical appearance. However, many of those made by primary pupils were stereotyped and derived from images presented in the media, for instance in current comedy series. The most common response of this type was that the French wear 'stripey tee-shirts and carry strings of onions around their necks'. In giving this type of response few pupils restricted this apparel to any particular age group, region or occupation.

Most secondary pupils rejected such stereotypes, having the benefit of more experience of France and of French lessons.

> I thought there'd be, like people riding bikes with onions and that but it was all different, like just like over here... But like they talk different and that.

A small proportion of primary pupils had visited France (15% of the two hundred in the sample). Some recalled this experience when considering modes of dress but still judged from an English perspective:

> Most people say they wear berets and go around — most of them do wear berets, but people think they go round in striped tee-shirts selling onions but they don't really do that and they wear normal clothes but they always wear a beret, always do, you can always tell a Frenchman.

Many pupils reasoned from their knowledge of climatic differences as in the following primary pupil example, in which the evaluation of the English mode of dress as 'normal' is further refined:

> You would probably see the French and German not as fully dressed as the English. We live in a colder country than France and Germany because they are lower down, so you could probably tell by the dressing. An Englishman would be all — you can tell he was English — dressed properly with pullovers and that on, while French you would probably see in a tee-shirt or something.

Many observations of differences noted were based upon quite detailed recall of clothes seen, particularly those worn by teenagers. More girls reported differences in dress and made evaluative comments upon them than did boys. Observations included many differences in style and colour. At the time of inter-

viewing (Summer—Autumn 1986) fashion for young people in England emphasised a somewhat streamlined look, which accompanied the short hair-cuts favoured by both sexes. An oft-used epithet was, therefore, 'baggy'. Styles of trousers suffered the most opprobrious evaluation, for example from this secondary girl:

> What about the people and the way they dress?
>
> Dead old-fashioned
>
> Sorry?
>
> Very old-fashioned, they still wear flares, most of them wear flares and dead big collars and that.

Another secondary girl differentiated amongst the age-groups thus:

> I like the early twenties to the late twenties but as soon as they get past thirty-five they start going down and wearing flares and flower-power and all that stuff.

Wearing colours to which this sample was not accustomed was similarly judged:

> They just wear weird clothes and that I think to England.
>
> What, they wear different sorts of clothes?
>
> Yes.
>
> What sort of clothes do you think they wear?
>
> Ones that I don't like.
>
> How do you mean? What sort of — colours or styles?
>
> Mainly colours. They wear bright gaudy colours and that.

Sometimes it appeared that pupils were not acquainted with customs of dress, such as the wearing of dark clothes by widows in some sections of the population and concluded from this that old people were poorly looked after. Some pupils referred to a more *chic* image. It should be noted, however, that the following example came from a secondary pupil who had not visited France

> You tend to be able to pick out, like, continental people, like French people by the way they dress, because those are more colourful and sort of more dressy than we are. I don't know — the women have a scent about them like perfume and everything that you can pick out.

A similar example was given by a secondary pupil who had not visited France but based her observations on seeing French pupils in England on an exchange visit:

They're dead fashionable and nicely dressed and clean and tidy and they wear nice fashionable clothes and they've got a lot of style.

How does it compare with ours?

Like *Vogue* (magazine) and that, because a lot of English people don't buy so many stylish clothes like the French because most of them can't afford. I suppose that in France, like, there's lots of snazzy dressers.

But more pupils saw the French as 'old-fashioned' in their dress than modern. But this might have been a result of their selective perception or lack of experience of groups other than teenagers. Few had any knowledge of France as an important centre of high fashion.

Discussion

We have attempted to describe the kinds of methods by which English pupils distinguish their geographically near neighbours, the French. It may be argued that the details described are merely a function of the interviewing method. There is, however, enough coherence amongst the response to allow one to conclude that these responses are indicative of the way in which pupils in the sample do construe the appearance of the French. It may also be argued that the recognition of such differences is merely superficial. However, it was apparent that evaluations were made of these differences, and it was not at all clear that pupils were equipped with a framework sufficient to cope with cultural differences. Even secondary pupils were judging largely from an English norm and there were few attempts to adopt a more relativistic stance.

There was a sizeable minority who concluded that the French were similar to the English in physical appearance or dress, or both. In some cases pupils did not appear to display much visual acuity and argued also, for example, that French buildings looked 'the same' as English ones. More typically, however, it appeared that pupils had moved beyond the stage, often associated with the primary school years, of being particularly aware of differences in other groups, to adopting a quasi-moral stance of not wishing to report having noticed any differences in another culture. Some actually reported having teachers who made a point of telling pupils that other cultures or peoples are 'just the same' as the English. This kind of argument was probably employed in a sincere attempt to counteract prejudice.

But there was evidence from the exploration of other issues in the course of interviewing that this approach was not always effective. Pupils were struck by the differences in any event, even though they had been led to expect French people to be 'the same'. It should be argued that pupils need to be helped to acquire tolerance of differences, rather than to be fed with bland assertions that all cultures are similar. The difficulty is that most French courses in English now make use of a 'survival' ethos, aiming to equip their pupils with information which would benefit the tourist. But it is possible that if teachers wish seriously to incorporate *Cultural Studies* as a dimension worthy of inclusion in its own

right, and not merely as a help to solving some linguistic tasks, then a different approach may have to be attempted.

One such approach could be the use of insights from anthropology, both in the introduction of courses and throughout their duration (Cf. Byram, 1988; Murphy, 1988; Neuner, 1986; Zarate, 1986). In England primary schools, until recently, made use of the course titled 'Man' (MaCos, 1968–70) with success. It was found that pupils were not only able to cope with the concepts employed but actually enjoyed doing so. If such an approach were now to be implemented in the secondary school, pupils would become acquainted not only with a useful framework for understanding others, but would also become acquainted with more ways of understanding their own society and themselves.

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