

# Using a Literacy-Based Approach to Elicit and Examine Forms of Attention

MARGOT SZARKE

University of California, Berkeley  
Email: [margotwagner@berkeley.edu](mailto:margotwagner@berkeley.edu)

---

Many thanks to the Berkeley Language Center and the L2 Journal for hosting this roundtable where we can discuss the ways in which our foreign language teaching as well as our students' engagement with course materials are being stretched in multiple new directions. The question of how instructors effectively draw from various fields of study to enhance our pedagogy raises other questions relating to the students' perspective: what, exactly, are we offering language learners at this juncture and why? What kinds of skills and experiences are we providing or modeling for our students?

As foreign language teachers, some of our responsibilities include directing, if not fully designing, forms of attentiveness. The current pandemic, by shifting teaching and learning online, has highlighted further the question of attention management in the classroom. My interest in how students pay attention to cultural-linguistic features stems from my doctoral research, which engaged with phenomenology, cognitive literary studies, affect theory, and cultural/literary studies. I am interested in literature's ability to not only depict forms of sentience and cognition, but also its capacity to reorganize, and even diversify, the reader's perceptions. Within literary studies, scholars have considered written texts as cognitive artifacts, modes of attention, and ecologies of responsiveness.<sup>1</sup> How does this scholarship translate into my language teaching? For one thing, I find a literacy-based approach practical. (For more on this approach, see the L2 journal's special issue from 2018, *Living Literacies*). Reading and writing activities enable students to achieve a level of fluency in the target language, and they open cross-cultural awareness. More crucially, they incite forms of meta-cognition and meta-literacy. By experimenting with different reading and writing practices in a foreign language, students gain a unique intellectual experience precisely because the process of making sense is exposed. Alongside literacy-based activities, I aim to make students aware of thought processes and cognitive strategies that are solicited and performed in the language classroom.

When I started teaching as a graduate student, I did not have a clear 'knowledge base' in L2 acquisition. It was something I acquired (and continue to acquire) over time. I took pedagogy courses and developed a strong use of the communicative method. In terms of integrating other approaches, I mostly included a cultural studies element to supplement course materials, often presenting a francophone object (i.e., a song, a traditional recipe, a poster from mai 68, etc.) to enliven the class period and excite students about completing

menial tasks, like memorizing verb conjugations. There was not much coherence in how I first used supplementary materials. My point here is that an instructor’s ‘knowledge base’ expands and morphs through experience, and with this growth there emerges more strategic uses of cultural-linguistic materials. Insights come from listening to students and noticing how they make meaning. I discovered that the more exciting and productive moments occur when students are encouraged not only to interpret the cultural object at hand, but in addition, to enhance its meaning by producing a similar object of their own.

I will walk through some literacy-based activities where students create meaning through genre writing. These exercises also encourage students to be cognizant of how writing orients the reader’s focus. With these examples I want to highlight, on the one hand, that the traditional divide between language levels – where lower division courses do not linger on textual production or analysis, whereas more advanced courses focus on deep readings and critical writing – does not need to exist. On the other hand, I want to emphasize that carefully curated reading and writing activities engage a diversity of attentions. Texts and their contexts generate conditions of imagining the world. They provoke different rhythms of focus.

### EXAMPLE FROM FRENCH 1: MARKETING

About two-thirds through our first-semester French course, we have a chapter on food, French cuisine, and grocery shopping. My students find images of packaged goods from French grocery-store websites and read the labels. A consideration of product packaging helps students work with the chapter’s vocabulary while also getting them to think about advertisement and word choice. Organic products work particularly well because companies often define their ethical practice and insist on the quality of their ingredients. These are features students notice, even at an introductory French 1 level. Together, we carefully read the back of a chip bag, examining its message (see Figure 1: the mantra “être ensemble, rien de plus, rien de moins”; the detailed health benefits “pourquoi est-ce bon pour vous?”). Next, students create a short blurb in French for the back of a cereal box or for a bag of chips or candy.



Figure 1. *A & O Organic Lentil Chips*

## EXAMPLE FROM FRENCH 2: COLLABORATIVE POETRY

In French 2, students learn to talk about the weather and seasons (see Figure 2). We additionally study a poem by Verlaine in which the melancholic narrator describes how his emotions and atmospheric conditions parallel one another – “Il pleure dans mon coeur// Comme il pleut sur la ville.” In small groups, students compose short poems. I assign each group a feeling/weather combination. Some are cliché (lonely/cloudy; angry/hot and humid) while others are not as obvious (bored/windy; sad/blue skies; joyful/icy blizzard). I tell students to be mindful of how their descriptions of weather give shape to an emotional atmosphere. After they are done writing, we have a poetry session where each group reads their poem and others guess the feeling/weather combination.

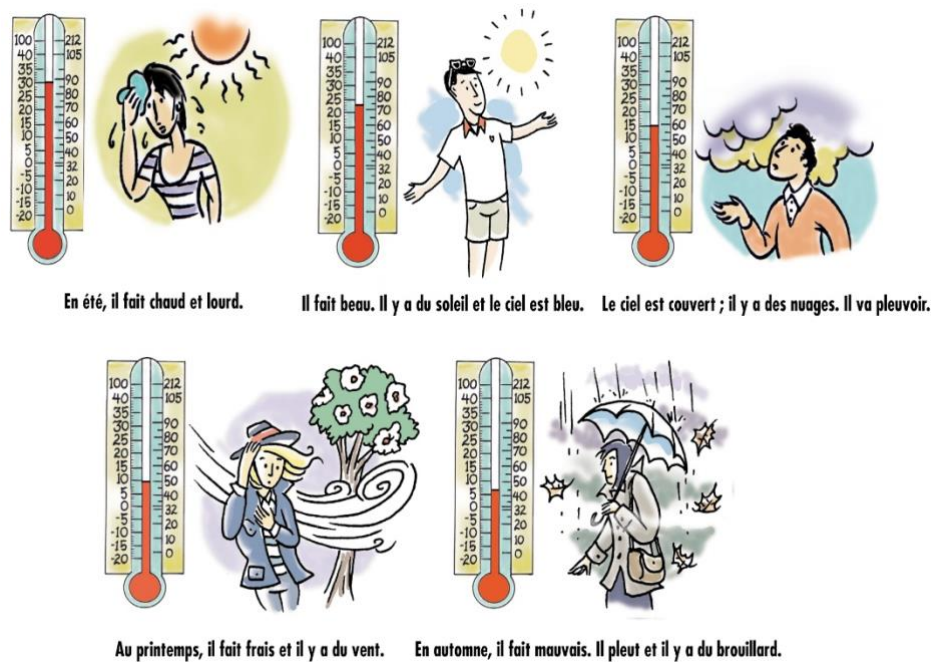


Figure 2. Images from *Chez Nous* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition

## EXAMPLE FROM FRENCH 4: EKPHRASIS

In the advanced intermediate course French 4, we read *Oscar et Erick*, a story by Marcel Aymé about a talented painter who, after incorporating surrealistic elements into his art, is shunned by his community. The text has many moments of ekphrasis, including accounts of both realist and surrealist paintings. The descriptions of paintings importantly reveal characters' reactions to the stylistically divergent artforms. The last time I taught this text, in Fall 2019, there was a surrealism exposition at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive called ‘Strange’ (Figure 3). I organized a class tour of the exposition. Students brought their journals and were instructed to select a work of art, sit down, and describe it from two points of view: 1) as if the art were beautiful and completely understandable, and 2) as if it were hideous and incom-

prehensible. Students thus replicated the kinds of ekphrastic writing found in the text we were studying. Later, back in the classroom, we discussed how textual representations of artwork arrange visual perceptions and evoke affective responses.

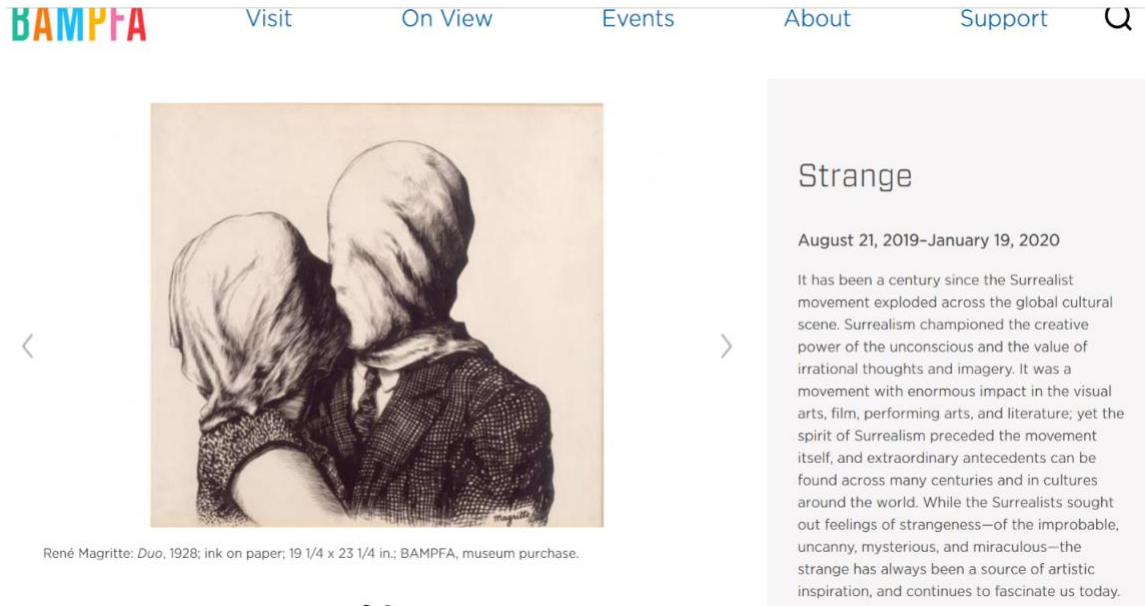


Figure 3. The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive's Exhibit on Surrealism<sup>ii</sup>

I strive to have my students consider how they are thinking with and through language. One way to do this is to make transparent the ways in which reading and writing tasks in a foreign language ask students to think differently.<sup>iii</sup> I believe it is important to underscore the range of intellectual and cognitive approaches summoned for a given reading/writing activity. For instance, slow reading, deep reading, surface reading, close reading, or what some call symptomatic reading, involve distinct attentional processes. Even formulaic writing gestures, like the *explication de texte*, elicit critical thought and test students on a certain francophone identity related to reading and writing practices. A literacy-based approach allows students to work meaningfully with cultural-linguistic features while exploring and adopting modes of attentiveness.

<sup>i</sup> There are many scholars who could be referenced here, going back to Walter Ong and his seminal essay *Writing Restructures Consciousness*, and continuing with contemporary work by Nicolas Carr, Terrence Cave, Robert Luham, Alan Richardson, Yves Citton, N. Katherine Hayles, and Lucy Alford, to name but a few.

<sup>ii</sup> The exhibit can be found at this link:

<https://bampfa.org/program/strange#:~:text=August%2021%2C%202019%E2%80%93January%2019,as%20sources%20of%20artistic%20inspiration.>

<sup>iii</sup> I gave a 2015 BLC lecture on this topic: *“Thinking about Writing: The Challenge of Writing Assignments at the Intermediate FL Level”*