Gatekeepers of Literature: Student Perceptions of Native Readers of French Literature

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The study of literature still makes up a substantial component of the course work required of foreign language majors at most American universities. Moreover, the inclusion of literary texts in beginning and intermediate language courses has become increasingly popular within the last thirty years. Even in foreign language departments that offer options in business or civilization, the study of foreign language literature is often a requirement for graduation. Many reasons are given for the continued primacy of literature study in the curriculum, including literature's function as a vehicle for language acquisition and increased language awareness (Birckbichler & Muyskens, 1980; Castañeda, 1977; Cipolla, 1987; Collie & Slater, 1987; Davis, 1989; Elliott, 1990; Henning, 1993; Lazar, 1993; Muyskens, 1983), its potential to inspire critical thinking and multiple levels of textual interpretation (Cipolla, 1987; Collie & Slater, 1987; Elliott, 1990; Henning, 1993; Lazar, 1993), and its capacity for increasing students' knowledge of other cultures and peoples (Castañeda, 1977; Collie & Slater, 1987; Davis, 1989; Henning, 1993; Lazar, 1993; Muyskens, 1983). Over and around these explicit statements of the role that the study of a foreign language literature plays in educating students is the assumption that studying literature also socializes students into a particular reader community. It is assumed that once students have completed the literature requirements of their foreign language study, they will be able to discuss in some detail the major works, authors, and movements of the foreign language literary canon with other readers of that literature—including native readers (see Henning, 1993).[1]

Ramírez (1994) affirms that reading and writing, in general, "are essentially social acts involving a relationship between the self and society…" (p. 93); he indicates that "[i]ndividuals may become literate in L2 for… integrative motives (personal desire to relate/interact with the people of the target culture)" (p. 93). Recent discussions on the evolving concept of "literacy" clarify and re-center the study of foreign language written texts, along with spoken and multimedia ones, as invaluable sources for developing increased sensitivity to cultural identity and practices—desirable, if not necessary, for effecting intercultural communication. As Kern (2000) points out,

> [A]cademic language teaching must foster literacy, not only in terms of basic reading and writing skills, but also in terms of a broader discourse competence that involves the ability to interpret and critically evaluate a wide variety of written and spoken texts. Preparing students to communicate in multiple cultural contexts, both at home and abroad, means sensitizing them to discourse practices in other societies and to the ways those discourse practices both reflect and create cultural norms (p. 2).

These discourse practices include those employed by readers who understand and value foreign language literature. Kern calls for a pedagogical shift in foreign language instruction "from 'what texts mean' in some absolute sense, to what people mean *by texts*, and what texts mean *to people* who belong to different discourse communities…" (p. 2). The goal is learners who are able to negotiate meaning effectively with people of different discourse communities through a critical understanding of their various texts—including their literature.

The aim of the present research is to begin to look at the role that French literature study plays in helping students develop a critical understanding of the discourse community made up of native readers of French literature, and how French literary works act as a vehicle by which learners can access this discourse community. In this study, I intend to begin a dialogue on the role French literature and its instruction play in creating in foreign language learners a feeling of solidarity with, or alienation from, the native discourse community. My goal in the present study is to answer the following questions: (1) what are students' perceptions of the discourse community of native readers of French literature? (2) how do these students define themselves with regard to their own perceived access to and/or communication with this discourse community? and (3) how do the students' perceptions of native readers of French literature influence their perceptions of learning in the French literature classroom?

Methodology

I conducted the present study using a qualitative research methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Wolcott, 1995; Woods, 1986). The choice to do so is consistent with the limits of the current dialogue on second language literature study, the research questions set forth above, and my own ontological assumptions as a researcher. First, because so little research has been done on the perceptions of students engaged in second language literature study, an approach conducive to exploratory investigation is preferable. Second, one of the interests of qualitative research is the way people make meaning of their lives and experiences (see Creswell, 1994). A qualitative methodology is thus appropriate since I aim to discover how some students make meaning of their second language literature experiences, and how that meaning positions them vis-à-vis a native reader discourse community. Third, as a researcher I hold to the belief that reality is subjective and multiple, as viewed by different individuals. This reality evolves in a particular context and also interacts with it. Qualitative research methods allow the individuals' stories to be told, giving validation to each voice.

The "voices" in the present study belong to four undergraduate female students who were enrolled in an Introduction to French Literature course during the spring 1995 semester at a large land-grant research university located in the eastern United States. Their professor, a male, tenured, associate professor of French who is also a native speaker of French, permitted me to solicit volunteers from among his students for participation in the study. Before my first classroom visit, he provided me with the syllabus he had prepared for the course and a blank copy of the first mid-term exam. During the eighth week of the fifteen-week semester, I visited his class and solicited volunteers. At the professor's suggestion, students were offered extra credit for participating in the study.[2] As each student volunteered to participate, I met with her to explain the study in more detail, answer any questions she had, and ask her to sign an informed consent form. At that time I also asked each participant to fill out a 15-item questionnaire that asked for autobiographical information, reading background, and university French courses taken. (See Appendix A.)

Once the volunteers had signed the informed consent forms and received their questionnaires, I began collecting observational data in two different settings: (1) the Introduction to French Literature classroom, and (2) the partici-

pants' regular study areas. My purposes in observing the participants in these two settings were (1) to understand the natural contexts for student behaviors vis-à-vis their second language literary experiences; (2) to describe how they interacted with their professor who was a native reader of French literature texts; (3) to focus on behaviors that may have been taken for granted by the professor and the students, but not readily understood by them; (4) to create interview questions about observed phenomena and then to compare interview data with observational data as a means of triangulation (see Denzin, 1978; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990); and (5) to provide another perspective on events besides that reported by the participants in interviews. (See Patton, 1996, pp. 203-205 for additional advantages of observational data.)

The class met on Mondays and Wednesdays for 75 minutes each day. During the period covering the 10th through the 12th weeks of the 15-week semester, I attended the class on five separate occasions. I did not participate in class activities during these visits but maintained my role as an observer only. I usually sat apart from the students and the professor and tried to place myself in a different location each of the five days so that I could observe the expressions and behaviors of each participant. I took a large notepad with me to the class and used it to sketch the layout of the classroom, including the students' seating arrangement, and to record some of the students' and the professor's conversations. The classroom discussions were neither video-taped nor audio-taped because I believed that the novelty of recording equipment (in addition to my presence) would interfere with classroom dynamics.

In addition to the classroom observations, I observed each participant studying for her French literature course. These observations lasted between 20 and 50 minutes depending on the length and difficulty of the reading assignment, and on the scheduling constraints of both the students and myself. We scheduled each homework observation to coincide with the usual time and place the participant would study for her class. I used the same strategies for data collection in the homework study areas as I did in the classroom: I sketched out the study area and the participants' placement in it, and I wrote down each participants' behaviors including, for example, how often she referred to a French-English dictionary, and when and where she wrote things down.

Even though the observations allow a glimpse into the contexts of second language literature study, they have some limitations. Patton (1990) discusses some of the limitations of observations including the impact of the observer's presence on the participants' behavior. He says that people "may behave in some atypical fashion when they know they are being observed; and the selective perception of the observer may distort the data" (p. 244). Moreover, he notes that observations do not provide the researcher access to the participants' meaning-making processes (pp. 244-245). Because I was interested in reporting the students' perceptions of their experiences with French literature and their views toward native readers of French literature, I needed another method of collecting data that would allow me "inside their heads." For this purpose, I arranged to meet with each student individually for three half-hour interviews during the 10th through the 13th weeks of the semester.[3] I used a written guide of the topics and questions I wanted to cover during each interview. (See Appendix B for a sample interview outline.) However, I remained flexible enough to ask probing questions and explore unanticipated, interesting lines of inquiry that surfaced during our conversations. Each interview was audio-tape recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. (The calendar in Appendix C shows the distribution of the observations and interviews.)

As a final source of data, I asked each student (during our second interview) to make two sketches. Based on the research of Jacobsen, who used line drawings from her L1 students to explore their mental representations of themselves in relation to the literary works they were studying, I was interested in discovering the differences and/or similarities between the students' mental representations of themselves as readers of a French literary work, and their representation of a French person as a reader of the same work.

In sum, I collected data from five different sources: (1) course documents provided by the professor, (2) background questionnaires completed by the participants, (3) observations conducted both in the French literature classroom and in each participant's regular study area, (4) guided interviews, and (5) line drawings by the participants collected during the second interview.[4] These data allowed me to arrive at a fuller understanding of the participants' perception of (1) the native readers of French literature, (2) their own placement in regards to a native reader community of French literature, and (3) the link between their perceptions of native readers and their learning experiences in the French literature classroom.

Before moving on to a discussion of the participants' perceptions of native readers of French literature, I must clarify my own stance as researcher. Inevitably, the researcher brings a certain amount of bias into the qualitative study because she is the instrument of data collection. Naturally, the things she attends to in her data, how she goes about data collection and analysis, and how she eventually interprets these findings are determined in part by her experiences. However, the goal of qualitative research is not to eradicate bias, but rather to acknowledge it, to understand its influence on data collection, analysis and research conclusions, and to reveal it to the reader.

My experiences as a student of literature, both in English (my L1) as my undergraduate minor and in French (my L2) as my undergraduate major, have influenced the way I perceive literature study and its role in stimulating the clear and critical thinking that is a hallmark of literacy. In most of my literature courses, professors approached the text as the only source for interpretation. Handouts with lists of guiding questions and class lectures drew attention to textual features considered important by professors. As a reader, I perceived that the number of possible interpretations of a text was limited. I was frustrated when professors did little to explain why some of my interpretations were "wrong." When I began my study of French literature, the academic advantage I had enjoyed in my language classes was lost as I found myself competing linguistically with students who had spent considerable time living abroad in Francophone countries. The French literature course was a bewildering place for me as I struggled to comprehend the works and the subsequent class discussions. Consequently, I tend to sympathize with other students of French literature who express these same frustrations, and I need to guard against a negative bias toward traditional literature instruction.

As a result of my experiences and research, I see literature study as an important part of undergraduate education that should recognize the reader's role in creating meaning with the literary text, and the text's role in developing readers who can effectively negotiate intercultural understanding. I believe that there needs to be a consistent effort in undergraduate foreign language literature instruction to understand these processes and to develop instructional activities that build from them. Therefore, the focus of this study will be on the students' point of view.

Student Perceptions of Native Readers

"I just think that the French people sort of read everything. They've seen every French movie, they can discuss anything,

and they know everything about fashion in the world!" Stacie laughed during our third interview. Stacie's ideas about the French were representative of those expressed by the other participants in the study. For them, the typical French person "outranks" the typical American in style, decorum, and intellect. From the way they dress to the way they think, the French are an elite group, superior to their American counterparts. In other words, these American students of French literature perceived an unequal relationship between themselves and native readers of French literature.

To illustrate how the French were elevated in the eyes of these participants, I refer to their descriptions of a typical French person. At the beginning of the second interview, I reminded the participants of an incident that had occurred during the third classroom observation. To illustrate a point, their professor had referred to a typical French person as someone riding a bicycle with a baguette tucked under his arm. I asked the participants if this was how they envisioned the typical French person. Only Elizabeth admitted that she did. On the other hand, Stacie completely disagreed with this visual image. She described the French as "stylish" and "having this air about them that just cannot be emulated here!" Renae, who had visited Paris, went into detail about the appearance and deportment of the French:

> They're all very well dressed. Maybe not necessarily expensively dressed? But just very, they have a certain appearance. Like they take pride, I guess, in the way they look. . . They just have such a style. (*laughs*). . . And um you can always tell an American walking down the street and a French person walking down the street, 'cause the French are very, they can hold themselves very refinely, and the Americans don't—wobbling all over everywhere! And just um they're very good-looking, even if they're not conventionally beautiful, I guess. It's just their whole style and attitude. Makes them very interesting to look at. (*laughs*)

Terri echoed Renae's assessment of the French with, "not exactly the same as I'd picture an American. Sort of a little nicer dressed." Although Renae was the only participant who had visited France, both Stacie and Terri shared her perception of a nation of people who looked better and carried themselves more gracefully than typical Americans.[5]

More than perceived differences in appearance and behavior separated these students from native readers. As I mentioned earlier, Stacie referred to the French as intellectuals who constantly discussed books, movies, and fashion. For all of the participants (including Elizabeth who did not like to read literature, even in English), the idea that French people would read French literature for their own enjoyment was not surprising. In fact, for Elizabeth, reading French literature was simply part of being French. In the second interview, we discussed Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Elizabeth's professor had assigned the class to read excerpts from the novel included in their anthology. On the second day that the class discussed these excerpts, the professor showed the students segments from two movies based on Flaubert's novel. I asked Elizabeth if she thought that she might read the entire novel on her own, to which she replied, "Nah," and explained that she had already seen the movie and found it boring. When I asked her if a French person would read *Madame Bovary*, her answer was an emphatic "Sure!" because this person might not have seen the movie and would have preferred reading the book. Later, I asked her to imagine this French person reading *Madame Bovary* and asked her why he would be reading it. Her response, "Well, because it's French," may reveal the assumption that there exists a particular essence to "Frenchness" involving familiarity with a core of texts. This notion is supported by her contention in the third interview that a French person reading French literature would be considered "natural" by his family and peers. Elizabeth was not the only participant who saw the activity of reading French literature as part of the French identity. Both Renae and Stacie believed that a French person would have read *Madame Bovary* in high school as part of an assignment to learn about the literature of his country. But Stacie also admitted that the French might read the book because it is "public domain" and "mainstream," reinforcing again the idea that there is a core of literature that one reads because one is French.

When I narrowed the identity of the native reader by asking the participants to describe a French person who loves the work of the French poet Baudelaire (the poet that the class was studying during the first week of classroom observations), they emphasized the intellectual qualities of such an individual. They said:

> …very intelligent-looking… an older person… older than me… a professor… [someone who conducts himself] very sophisticatedly… (Elizabeth)

> …very animated and just interested in the work and wanting to talk about it and just delve deeper and deeper into, like, different meanings… immediately, I thought older… (Terri)

> …probably dressed like very, like, GAP… but in a sport jacket kind of thing… I imagine with glasses… sophisticated but not nerdy… a very interesting person… not, like, nerdy or boring, but very interesting, very willing to share his thoughts… (Renae)

This native reader is thus someone older, a professor, and sophisticated. Although their words convey a sense of respect and admiration for this person, they also widen the gap between themselves and native readers.

The participants' drawings also reflect this perceived gap. (See Appendix D.) In addition, they reinforce the argument that reading French literature is part of the French national identity. Figures 1 through 8 show the sketches that the participants made when I asked them to picture first themselves and then a French person reading the complete novel *Madame Bovary*. Their drawings show differences between their own postures and placement and those of the French readers I asked them to imagine. In Stacie's (Fig. 1) and Elizabeth's (Fig. 3) self-portrait both women are lying or sitting on their beds with a copy of the novel and a large French-English dictionary next to them. Neither woman imagined that the experience would be a pleasurable one. Elizabeth's reasons for reading the novel, "Because it's French . . . because it's my major," and "I guess I would also want to know if I would be able to read it in French," associate the activity with work or challenge rather than pleasure. Stacie's comment is even more telling: "It wouldn't be like pleasure reading; this would be like, I'm *expanding* my vocabulary and my mind, which is not like a pleasure reading kind of thing!"

These two participants chose to place themselves at home, reading in private. This is in marked contrast to their placement of the French reader in a public setting. Stacie's drawing depicts a French woman reading *Madame Bovary* at a café, seated outdoors at a small table (Fig. 2). A martini sits on the table. The Eiffel Tower and the *Arc de Triomphe* hover in the background. Besides Stacie's perception of the French café as a hangout for intellectuals, the outdoor venue may connote a public affirmation that reading French literature is a very "French" thing to do. Although reading in public could be perceived as a way to cut oneself off from others, in the context of Stacie's comments, it offers a sign of solidarity with *all* French people. In other words, since Stacie perceived all the French as being able to discuss literature, movies, and fashion, the choice to read in a public setting may be interpreted as an invitation for discussion of the text.

According to Elizabeth, her French reader is in a public place as well—the library at Elizabeth's university (Fig. 4). The choice of a library in the United States seems an unusual locale for a French person to read *Madame Bovary*, but it reinforces the perception that the kind of native reader who reads French literature is associated with an academic setting.[6] In like manner, Renae's French reader is in a library, but she explained that this library is in France (Fig. 5). Renae placed herself in a library in France—somewhere, she said, where she could feel the "culture"—but the setting is different from that of her imagined French reader (Fig. 6). Renae's self-portrait continues the "lounging" theme introduced by Stacie's and Elizabeth's self-portraits. Like them, Renae seeks a physically comfortable place to read. The fact that both she and the native reader are depicted in a French library shows the beginnings of a rapprochement between the two. Still, the differences in facial expressions and surroundings support the view that Renae's reading does not make her part of a larger reader community, while the books that surround her French reader support the notion that he is.

Finally, Terri's two drawings show the greatest degree of solidarity between a participant and an imagined French reader (Fig. 7 & 8). Both are at home, in comfortable furniture, reading *Madame Bovary*. However, in her explanation of her situation, Terri admitted that she would need to have her French-English dictionary nearby. She surmised that her French reader would be able to read anywhere, including the subway—another public venue—underlining a public "reader solidarity" with other native readers of *Madame Bovary*.

The postures and placement of the native readers depicted in these drawings illustrate the same kinds of perceptions of native readers that the participants had talked about during our interviews: (1) reading French literature is an intellectual or academic activity, and (2) it is part of a national identity that is both individual and shared; public reading of French literature reinforces the perception of a nation of readers united in their experiences of a national literature.

I have shown how the participants perceived native readers of French literature *from afar*: as superiors, intellectuals, elevated in the eyes of these participants. Although the students' conclusions about the role of literature as part of the French national identity suggest a step toward understanding what literature means to the French (what Kern, 2000, says one of the goals of literature study should be), they are not taking a critical look at these conclusions to discover why the French are "different"—why their literature is so important to them. This lacuna is important in explaining their perceptions of the native reader community of French literature and their placement vis-à-vis this community. It also helps us understand some of their responses to their French literature experiences and to their French professor.

So far, the perceptions I have looked at have not taken into account the participants' interactions (real or imagined) with French readers. As I will show, they interpreted subtle messages from their professor to indicate that the "meaning" is in the text, that anyone can "get" this meaning if they read the text correctly, and that there are certain "gatekeepers" who unlock the door to correct literary interpretation. These messages correlated with the students' sense of access to a discourse community based on French literary texts.

Perceived Interactions with Native Readers

Until that spring 1995 semester, the participants had had little contact with native speakers of French. Only Renae had been to France (a two-week visit with her high school class). Situated now in this Introduction to French Literature course, the participants experienced twice a week the society of a native reader of French literature—their professor. On my first day in their class, I observed this experience. Two long conference tables placed side by side sat toward one end of the French Department's seminar room. Nine students (eight female and one male) sat around three sides of the table arrangement, while the professor sat at one end by himself. The day's assignment was listed in the syllabus as

> ***Lundi 20 mars:*** Charles Baudelaire (pp. 170-171). Lisez l'ensemble des textes de Baudelaire (pp. 172-182) et, en équipe (ou seul), choisissez <u>deux textes</u> que vous présenterez/expliquerez à l'ensemble de la classe.
>
> [***Monday, March 20:*** *Charles Baudelaire (pp. 170-171). Read all of the excerpts by Baudelaire (pp. 172-182) and, as a team (or individually), choose two excerpts that you will present/explain to the rest of the class.*]

Pairs of students presented/explained their poems. After each presentation the professor corrected their pronunciation and asked questions about their opinions and about symbols. About a half an hour into the 75-minute class period, he announced to the entire class, "Ce que je corrige, c'est des fautes de lecture. On est libre d'avoir son interpretation." [*What I am correcting are misreadings. Each person is free to have his/her own interpretation.*] Then he proceeded to question the students on Baudelaire's poem "L'ennemi" with questions like "Comment nous est présenté l'ennemi? Qu'est-ce qu'on voit de l'ennemi? Comment est-ce qu'on sait qu'il y a un ennemi?" [*How is the enemy presented to us? What do we see of the enemy? How do we know there is an enemy?*] After Terri's attempt to respond to the last question, the professor cautioned, "Attention! Répondez à la question. Nous voyons les actions de l'ennemi." [*Careful! Answer the question. We see the enemy's actions.*]

The participants often viewed this classroom activity, where the professor asked the students questions requiring specific answers about the texts, as a frustrating guessing game. "Well, like, he has very specific things that he wants us to say about the texts and sometimes they're hard to get out of us," Stacie remarked. All of the participants perceived a certain intractability on the part of their professor. Elizabeth stated, "With him I feel as though if, ya—I don't, I don't wanna be *mean* or anything—but if *we* don't think the way he does then it's wrong." As a French native reader and as their professor, he was perceived as holding the *key* to the gate of the poem's (or text's) interpretation, and it was up to them to give the correct password.

A related incident occurred on the second day I observed the class. The discussion centered on "L'invitation au voyage," another poem by Baudelaire. Terri read the poem aloud for the class, then the professor played a tape recording of a native speaker reading the poem. The professor asked the class what the narrator of the poem saw. The students offered three suggestions, and each one was rejected by the professor. Finally, he told them, "Moi, je vais expliquer. Autrement cela va prendre trop longtemps." [*I will explain. Otherwise, this will take too too long.*]

Terri appreciated her professor's knowledge of French literature, but admitted that trying to get the "right answer" could be discouraging:

> He knows what he's doing. And sometimes it's frustrating 'cause I'm like, oh, he means *this*! And, no. um Maybe he means this? No. Well when you finally get it, it just kinda comes together… One time I think it was, I was starting to get a migraine, and I tried to answer it like three times. And he said, no. I'm like, *fine*! So I just sit there and I *sulked* for the rest of the class. And I was like, oh, give it up! 'Cause I finally

> got one thing towards the end of the class… So, it's frustrating, but I know it's part of the learning process.

Perhaps the answers Terri offered were implausible, but she found it difficult—given her professor's reaction to her "implausible" answers—to find her way to an acceptable interpretation. She did not examine why her interpretation was "wrong," nor was she encouraged to do so. Her comment, "It's frustrating, but I know it's part of the learning process," focused on the academic aspect of her French literature experience. Despite the professor's commitment to individual interpretations, which are valued presumably because they provide opportunities for discussion, reflection, and the development of literate practices, Terri was not engaged in negotiated communication—or, what Kern (2000) sees as "what people mean *by texts*, and what tests mean *to people* who belong to different discourse communities" (p. 2).

My concern over the disparity between the professor's affirmation, "On est libre d'avoir son interpretation" [*Each person is free to have his/her own interpretation*], and the participants' perceptions that this was not practiced in the class, led me to investigate the professor's motivations. In a follow-up interview, he explained to me what he meant by his statement, "Ce que je corrige, c'est des fautes de lecture" [*What I am correcting are misreadings*]. For him, there are two kinds of mistakes that students make when reading texts. The first kind of mistake occurs when the students misunderstand a term. The second kind of mistake occurs when they do not pay attention to the "totality" of the text. He said that students often focus on one term or one part of a text and ignore the rest when they develop their interpretations. By asking questions with specific answers, he tries to get the students to reconsider the parts of the text that they had ignored. "That's my problem," he shared. "I am perceived as someone who asks a lot of questions, and as someone who is not always open to the students' answers." He agreed that this could be seen negatively, that instead of encouraging the students, the precise answers that he required intimidated and discouraged them from participating.

By directing the classroom discussion in this way, the professor assumed the role of *guardian* or *gatekeeper* of interpretations in the eyes of these participants. "I *am* a gatekeeper," he confided to me during the follow-up interview. "Literature is like Paradise. I would like to be the Saint Peter of literature." As someone who had made the study of literature his life's work, he doubted that his undergraduate students could have a better interpretation or a more complete interpretation than his own.

Viewing their professor as a gatekeeper of interpretation probably had an effect on the participants' perception of other native readers of French literature. Consider Stacie's assessment of the imagined French person who loves Baudelaire: "I'm sure that they'd, well, they'd probably be interested in, like, what I thought about it probably, 'cause we're coming from two different perspectives. But I probably think that they would think that they were right!" Although there might be an attempt to begin a dialogue on French literature, it would never be realized because the native reader would not be open to modifying his ideas about the text. Stacie hoped the Baudelaire part of their conversation would be brief and "would be quickly dismissed" so that they could discuss other topics more comfortable for her. Although I asked Stacie and the other participants to describe a French person who "loves Baudelaire," rather than an "expert" on Baudelaire's texts, they all perceived this native reader as an expert and as someone who would pass judgment. Renae predicted that the French native reader would "probably, ya know, disagree with what I think, but that doesn't matter." Terri said she would like to get "feedback" from the French native reader on her ideas about Baudelaire's poems. For these participants, native readers of French literature are gatekeepers.

The participants' perception of the native reader of French literature as gatekeeper of information coincided with their perception that the flow of information in the classroom was one-way. The professor admitted that sometimes his questions in the classroom are "a trick to support my own views, a way of implementing my own readings." Although the students may have answered questions correctly from time to time, it is not clear that they really learned why an answer was correct—other than simply because the professor said it was. He disagreed with this assessment, saying that the act of sharing his interpretations with the students helps them understand how to arrive at an interpretation; however, without an investigation into their meaning-making processes both before and after the class, it is difficult to say whether this really happened.[7]

In their L1 reader communities, the participants were used to being able to contribute to the discourse community, shaping it as it shaped them. They found that this was not as easily accomplished in the discourse community of the French literature classroom. Stacie often referred to past literature courses she had taken in English. In her opinion, the literature class was supposed to be an opportunity to talk about readings:

> This is totally frustrating. I'm used to coming into a literature class and totally dominating because I always, like, see a lot more in the text than maybe other people in the class do… I mean, I always read a lot into things. I want to *discuss*! But in this class it's too frustrating.
>
> I've told him, yeah, I'm like, ya know, this is really, ya know, a very frustrating class for me because I'm used to, like, not dominating, at least being able to speak intelligently on texts. Because reading is very important to me. And to be able to, like, discuss and debate my ideas is an important part of being in a class where there's books to read!

Stacie admitted that part of her frustration was due to her proficiency level in French. She realized that she had difficulties comprehending the readings sometimes, and on occasion went to class having misunderstood vocabulary items. She also found it difficult to speak spontaneously in French during class, complaining about her imperfect grammar. But she found a certain hostility toward her linguistic struggles that she expressed this way: "I don't wanna talk! I don't wanna speak French in classes anymore! (*laughs*) Especially not to real French people, 'cause they get so mad!" For Stacie, there was very little chance to be able to contribute to a dialogue on the texts because of the "French rule" of the classroom. With this rule in place, information could flow in only one direction—towards her. She wanted to share her own opinions, but found herself flustered when the professor asked her to justify them. Limited in her means to communicate, she developed strategies to avoid any conflict of opinion with her French professor.

Elizabeth, too, expressed reservations about speaking in class. This was confirmed by my observations during the classroom visits. Elizabeth's answers to questions were brief and most often solicited by the professor. She, like Stacie, feared that her French was not good enough to convey her opinions accurately, and she wanted others to understand her. Even though she said during our first interview that she had a different interpretation of one of the Baudelaire poems than her professor, she did not share it with the class. Moreover, her perception of the professor as someone who helps her to see things that she missed in the text conveys the expectation that the professor fill in the

gaps. Nothing suggests a belief that she could fill any interpretational blanks for him. This lopsided relationship is reflected in her imagined interaction with the native reader of Baudelaire's poetry:

> I:[8] …What do you think that your interaction with this person would be like?…
>
> E: A challenge! (*laughs*)
>
> I: …Why do you say that?
>
> E: Oh! Because, well (*laughs*) I don't know! (*laughs*) …Just because I don't know much about literature, and even though I have studied Baudelaire, I probably wouldn't really know, ya know, what exactly he was trying to say in certain works.

She did not consider that what she had to say about literature would be worth contributing to a conversation. Here, however, she was not interested in having the native reader fill in any gaps for her, as in the classroom context. Her perception of the interaction was that it should allow both parties to contribute on an equal basis. Because she would not be able to contribute much about literature, she would prefer another topic.

Terri and Renae expressed confidence in their ability to add to the dialogue on a literary text, but they did not perceive their French professor to be accepting of their opinions and interpretations. As the gatekeeper of textual interpretation and a representative of the native reader community, their professor would allow only a few opinions in—those that were like his. Interestingly, this stance sometimes led to subversive behavior by his students. Terri recognized that texts and readers make connections that are sometimes very personal and that in those cases it is important for individuals to be able to share their insight with others, hoping to find validation:

> It's like, kind of exciting, 'cause you wanna share that with people. And when nobody else gets it you're like, oh, oh well. So sometimes I do feel like it's being corrected and kinda wiped off the book, that your answer isn't right.

Her strategy for dealing with a negative reaction was not always to give up and try again. The subversive behavior manifested itself in this way: "Sometimes I've felt like, oh, this is right. Oh, maybe not. Ya know? But I still keep it with me, 'cause I think, it *could* be this way too! (*laughs*)" Even though her interpretation may not have met with a native reader's approval, she secretly adhered to it, perhaps waiting for another opportunity to share it, or for more evidence to prove its applicability, or simply for her sense of ownership—she had come up with an original interpretation.

Renae's subversive behavior was more obvious: "I like disagreeing. Ya know? I like trying to find the opposite of what he tells us. (*laughs*) I don't know why." She seemed more prone to disagree openly with the professor about interpretations than the other participants. She told me that the paper she had handed in on a poem by Rimbaud, "Le dormeur du val," disputed the interpretation her professor had given in class.

> He [the French professor] talked about, like, nature being indifferent and not caring. But I got a totally different reaction from it. … I had written down in my notes what he said, and I'm like, no, yeah, I don't think this is true because it mentioned, it said like proud mountain? And he [the professor] was saying that nature is indifferent to this guy. Ya know. It doesn't really care if he is here. He's just gonna die and whatever. And I thought, like, it talked about nature, like, kind of rocking him?… And I just, I disagreed.

When I asked her what she thought her professor would think of her paper, she was unconcerned. She said, "I mean, it's just like, you know, he's right in his opinion. And, ya know, I think that I proved my point pretty okay enough." Even though she took the opportunity to share her interpretation, she did not perceive him to be open enough to change his own. She might receive a good grade because she was able to support her thesis, but she would not be filling in any textual gaps for the professor. In other words, the disagreements would not lead to any negotiated meaning-making.

Even Renae's imagined native reader would disagree with her over the poem's interpretation; nevertheless, she imagined getting more out of the poem: "I don't think they would have gotten out of it as much as I believe I had." Terri's native reader would be open to talking about the poem, but she would still expect to get feedback from him on her ideas. She did not mention anything about giving the native reader feedback on his ideas.

As a native speaker of French, the professor's presence in the classroom allowed his students the opportunity to observe and talk to a member of the reader community. It is no wonder that their perceptions of their French professor and their perceptions of the native reader community were so similar. What is disturbing is their perception that a negotiated interpretation of French literature is not possible with a native reader either in the classroom or in a less formal setting. The freedom to have one's own interpretation is perceived to have certain constraints. For some, this freedom is more akin to an underground operation in opposition to the authoritative control of the professor.[9]

Implications and Conclusions

Before I consider the implications of this study, I will discuss its limitations. First, although the small number of participants involved in this study allowed me to collect many different kinds of data to contextualize my findings, it does not allow me to make generalizations for a larger student population in the same way that studies using controlled experiments do. However, this does not mean that the findings from the present interpretive study have no application. In fact, Erickson (1991) argues for a reassessment of the way that generalization is determined for interpretive studies. According to him,

> Another way to think about generalization is to consider it as an empirical problem rather than one of formal matters of experimental design, sampling, and statistical inference. This is to place the determination of generalization in the hands of the reader of a research study rather than in that of the writer… (p. 351).

Firestone (1993) agrees and argues that the extremely data-rich contextualization of an interpretive study allows the reader to decide how closely its setting and its actors match those within the realm of the reader's experience. From there, the reader can decide how far the writer's findings may be generalized.

Second, I was involved with the class for a period of only three weeks; consequently, this study provides just a glimpse of student perceptions at a particular point in the semester. In order to discover how these perceptions evolve, more time should be spent over the course of a semester observing and talking with students.

Third, all of the students who volunteered to participate in this study were women. The absence of a male perspective may contribute to a lopsided representation of student perceptions of native readers of French literature, especially given that the professor was a man and the researcher was a woman.

Fourth, I carried out this study with the specific purpose of investigating these students' perceptions of native readers of French literature, yet it became clear dur-

ing data analysis how important their professor was in providing a role model of the native reader. For fairness sake, I sought to present his response to some of the harsher criticisms made by these students; however, time and space constraints do not allow me to address fully his perception of the issues raised here. An investigation into his perception of the pedagogical practices he uses in the French literature classroom would make an interesting follow-up study, as would a look at his opinions regarding students' access to participation in a discourse community made up of native readers of French literature.

In light of these limitations, I will now return to my research questions and discuss pedagogical implications. As noted above, these implications may not apply to different populations of students. In answer to the first question, "What are the students' perceptions of the discourse community of native readers of French literature?" I found that the participants in this study defined native readers as intellectuals, inherently able to analyze and discuss French literature. According to these students, the French are experts who hold the key to interpretation and who see themselves as gatekeepers of the French literature discourse community. In answer to the second question "How do these students define themselves with regard to their own perceived access to and/or communication with this discourse community?" I found that the students perceived that interaction with this community is one way. The gatekeeper image that these students had of the native reader meant that unless their interpretations were in strict agreement with the native reader's, the literary discourse community would not consider them. What the students perceived to be new and personally interesting interpretations of the texts received either an outright rejection by a native reader or a polite nod, but no serious consideration. And, in answer to the third question, "How do the students' perceptions of native readers of French literature influence their perceptions of learning in the French literature classroom?" the students agreed that they could learn a lot about their French literature texts from native readers; however, they perceived their own contributions as having little impact on the discourse community. Consequently, this perception kept some of them from sharing their own thoughts or differences of opinion in the class, and thus inhibited them from participating.

Returning to the issues of literacy and foreign language literature pedagogy, many, like Kern (2000) and Kramsch (1993), criticize the standard of native speaker/reader that is still often applied to foreign language students. Such a standard is unrealistic. All non-native speaker students of foreign language literatures bring their own experiences to their readings and communications. In fact, the New London Group (1996) acknowledges that an "outsider's" view can be an advantage—outsiders see things that the native reader cannot because of his or her close proximity to the cultural context of the literary text. While pedagogies that seek to help students understand a native French interpretation of literature (like that adopted by the French professor in this paper) are helpful in developing an understanding of what literary texts mean to the native discourse community, unless they are self-reflective, students may miss the opportunity to find out why or what the discourse community means "*by texts*" (Kern, 2000, p. 2). In an attempt to develop literacy, students' different perspectives could reveal diverse facets of meaning. As noted earlier in this article, current L2 views of literacy (Kern, 2000; Kline, 1993; Kramsch, 1993) call for dialogue, negotiation, reflection, and opportunities to create, critique, and re-create meaning.

It is important to note that the students appreciated their French professor's expertise and admitted that they learned a lot from him. It is possible that their experience would have been more positive if they had discussed their assumptions about literature and literature study with him. An introduction to the concept of discourse communities might have invited the students to participate in a dialogue with the professor about the role of French literature in the life of native readers. Moreover, contact with other native readers of French literature, including those of similar age and vocation, might have helped to dispel any exaggerated notions of their literary habits, interests, and identity (see Kline, 1993). Such contact could be facilitated by the technology available to most university students, namely, access to the Internet, e-mail, and chat rooms. Some universities also have videoconference facilities that could be used to establish real-time visual and audio contact between readers of French literature living in and experiencing different cultures. After these kinds of interactions, students could write their observations of, and reactions to, native readers in journals, adding insights into new and different ways of interpreting literature.

If the participants in this study had been allowed to respond to the French literary texts according to their own non-native reader identities, their feelings of being competent literature readers might have been reinforced. The professor realized that his approach to questions was a source of frustration to his students. He asked them to justify their interpretations, but this proved difficult in light of their linguistic limitations. Moreover, it is possible that they were not sure how to go about doing so in the context of the discourse community that he represented. They might have benefited from an introduction to that kind of discourse. Smith (1988) talks about L1 literacy "clubs" and how certain behaviors, like discussion and debate based on literary texts, need to be modeled for junior members of a discourse community before they can be expected to know how to participate in them. Following Smith's suggestion, it might be advisable to invite other members of the French literature discourse community to the French literature class to discuss a text with the professor. As the professor and other senior members of the discourse community are engaged in discussion about a literary text—preferably debating different opinions about a text—the students can observe the discourse patterns of the discussion, including how the participants both show disagreement and support differing points of view. Afterwards, they may be invited to practice similar discussions with each other, thus receiving an initiation into the requirements of a literary discussion in French.

Finally, I suggest that multiple ways of evaluating interpretations be used. For example, in addition to the current scenario where students' interpretations are judged by an experienced professor, students could also be given an opportunity to put their opinions to the test of judgment by their peers, through discussion both within and outside the classroom, or through peer review of written assignments. (See Schultz, 1996, for activities with poetry.) In this way, they may gain confidence in their ability to determine what is a valid interpretation. These activities can help build a sense of community and, in doing so, allow the students to find their own "voice" in the French literature classroom.

This article looks at only one of the themes that emerged from the data I collected, namely, the students' perceptions of native readers of French literature. More themes suggested by the data should be explored in further research, such as

- The match (or mismatch) between pedagogical and learning styles in an L2 literature course—especially where either professor or students are native speakers. What do professors do to promote literate practices in the L2 literature classroom?

- The effects of past L1 literary study on L2 literary study—do L1 literate identities transfer to L2 literary study?
- The ways students figure out what is (really) expected of them in L2 literature courses and how this affects their experiences with L2 literary works.
- The way students perceive non-native readers of French literary works, including those within an academic setting and those outside.
- The way *gatekeeper* identities are shaped. Can students be gatekeepers of L2 literature?

More research is needed on the nature of students' individualities and how they interact with people, events, and environments in French literature study. Such research could help us to understand better what these students perceive themselves to be, and how these identities contribute to their development as competent meaning-makers of French literature and confident participants in the French literature discourse community.[10]

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APPENDIX A

Background Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Male or Female:
3. Ethnic background:
4. Age:
5. Semester standing:
6. How much French have you studied? When? Where?

7. List the French courses you've had at the university and give a brief description of each.
8. Have you spent any travel or study time in France or another Francophone country? Where? For how long? For what purpose?
9. What is your native language? Is this language spoken in the home you grew up in?
10. List other languages studied or spoken:
11. What types of reading materials do you have around your apartment? (magazines, books, newspapers, textbooks, the Bible, TV Guide, "how-to" books) In your particular study area?
12. How much time a week do you spend reading in your native language? (include things like magazines, newspapers, textbooks, novels, poetry)
13. How much time a week do you spend reading in French? What do you read?
14. When do you study in general? Where?
15. When do you study for your French course? Where?

APPENDIX B

Interview Outline for Interview #1

I have a couple of questions about some of your responses on the background questionnaire.

You have listed that you spend about 15 hours a week reading in English. Could you break that down for me? How much time is for school, how much time is for other reading?

You have listed that you spend about 5 hours a week reading in French for two classes. How much of that time do you spend for this class? How often? Every day?

Let's talk about Monday's class.

I noticed that you worked in pairs to discuss some of Baudelaire's poems. Could you tell me about that assignment? What were the instructions your professor gave?

You chose "L'albatros." What influenced you to choose this poem?

Think back to when you were reading this poem for the first time. Can you remember where you were, whom you were with, what you were doing?

Can you remember how you felt? What you thought of? Did you picture what was going on in the poem? What did you see?

Do you think your reaction to the poem would be different now after you've discussed it in class? (If so, why?)

Now, I'd like you to imagine that you're at a dinner party and you meet a French person. Let's say this person loves Baudelaire and has found out that you have studied some of his poetry.

What would this person be like?

What would your interaction be like? What kinds of things would this person ask you? What would you ask?

What would they tell you about their feelings toward Baudelaire? How about toward "L'albatros"?

APPENDIX C

Observation and Interview Schedule

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	CO #1		**CO #2** S (I #1)	E (I #1)	T (I #1)	
	CO #3 R (I #1)			E (I #2) S (I #2)	R (I #2)	
	CO #4 R (HO)		**CO #5** S (HO)	S (I #3)	T (I #2) E (I #3)	
T (HO)	E (HO)		T (I #3)			

CO = Classroom Observation; E = Elizabeth, R = Renae, S = Stacie, T = Terri;
I #1 = Interview #1 (I #2 = Interview #2, etc.); HO = Homework Observation

APPENDIX D

Fig. 1. Stacie: Self-portrait, reading *Madame Bovary*.

Fig. 2. Stacie: Portrait of a French person reading *Madame Bovary*.

APPENDIX D *continued*

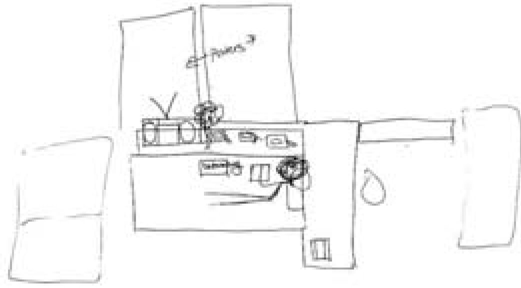

Fig. 3. Elizabeth: Self-portrait, reading *Madame Bovary*.

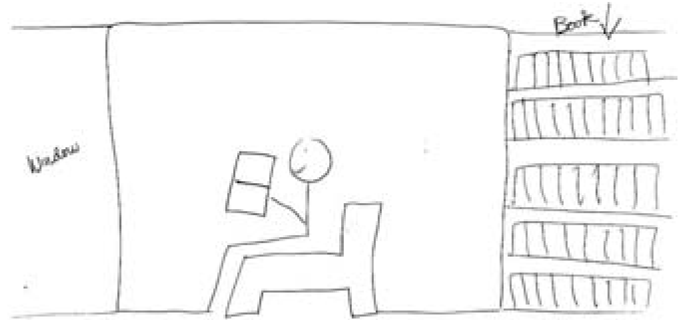

Fig. 4. Elizabeth: Portrait of a French person reading *Madame Bovary*.

Fig. 5. Renae: Self-portrait, reading *Madame Bovary*.

Fig. 6. Renae: Portrait of a French person reading *Madame Bovary*.

Fig. 7. Terri: Self-portrait, reading *Madame Bovary*.

Fig. 8. Terri: Portrait of a French person reading *Madame Bovary*.

ENDNOTES

1 James (2001) reports that this assumption was held by some of the American college students she interviewed who were enrolled in an introductory survey course of French literature.

2 Students not interested in participating in the research were offered the same amount of extra credit for writing an extra composition.

3 One of the students was not interviewed a third time.

4 Patton (1990) emphasizes the value of this approach to data collection: "By using a variety of sources and resources, the evaluator-observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach. A multi-method, triangulation approach to fieldwork increases both the validity and the reliability of evaluation data" (p. 245).

5 However, it is not clear from their statements whether they considered themselves to be typical Americans. After all, they were studying French at a level beyond that required of most of their peers at the university. They had already made some effort to approach the French community, and all were planning to spend a semester or two abroad in France.

6 It may also be that because Elizabeth had never been to France, she chose a library setting with which she was familiar.

7 See James (2001) for a discussion of meaning-making among American students enrolled in French literature courses.

8 Explanation of transcription: I = Interviewer; E = Elizabeth

9 For discussions of the various forms of resistance that occur in the educational setting, see the work of Apple (1986), Bourdieu & Passeron (1964), and Giroux (1997).

10 I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Kline, Dr. Janet Zepernick, Joseph Tew, and three anonymous reviewers for their help in preparing this article.