

## Language teaching lessons from the past: a footnote to Robin Adamson's *SUFLRP Saga*

*James A. Coleman*  
*The Open University*

Robin Adamson's *The SUFLRP Saga* (Adamson 2007) recalled many memories of collaboration in the Scottish University French Departments in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, we have seen first an expansion of numbers and curricula in French across British Higher Education, and then a contraction which has decimated all but the most prestigious departments, ironically preserving above all the traditional literary courses, though enhanced these days with insights from cultural, area and applied language studies, and with a more contemporary focus which also embraces film and other media. Robin Adamson described many of the innovations exemplified by *Le Français en Faculté* (Adamson *et al.* 1980) and its experimental successors, including a needs-based curriculum, authentic inputs, communicative objectives, target language classroom management, and structured independent learning. However, there exists one thread of influence from those days which she has not traced, and which is very much alive.

*Lyon à la Une* (Walker 1984, Walker *et al.* 1986) was a second-year French course built around authentic video materials – a very rare commodity in pre-satellite days. Two key Edinburgh members of the team, Bill McDowall and Hélène Mulphin, had already by 1981 developed a pioneering approach to using video as an input for language learning. Once they had trained the rest of us in the use of the heavy and cumbersome Betamax professional equipment, the team refined this approach during a hectic three weeks' filming in Lyon in summer 1983, and during subsequent transcription, selection and editing. We deliberately avoided the artificial, scripted dialogue of the BBC language courses of the day in order to capture interactions that were as authentic as possible. Wherever we could, we targeted certain linguistic functions, and then identified situations which would occur whether or not the cameras were present – an editorial meeting at the newspaper *Lyon Matin*, the mayor of Vénissieux addressing his constituents, a training session in a chainstore – or else set up interactions whose content was unpredictable. We used a few interviews, but the linguistic corpus from which *Lyon à la Une* selected was closer to real French than anything used previously for advanced language teaching. In both filming and editing, we consciously eschewed the norms of broadcast television: learners find voice-overs, cut-aways and background music obtrusive, and can actually benefit from watching talking heads.

This documentary approach, providing both linguistic models and cultural insights, has since become widespread. In the 1990s, H el ene Mulphin brought her expertise in creating video resources for language learning to the Open University, whose pioneering efforts in the distance teaching of languages were then at an early stage, but where the same team ethos governed materials creation. In the very first course, L120 *Ouverture*, H el ene obliged the BBC teams with whom the OU then collaborated to change their ways when filming for language learners. The approach spread to the German and Spanish courses, and thus to a much wider audience – OU language courses (although not all contain video) are now followed by over 8,000 students a year. In these days when high-quality video recording requires one hand rather than a team of four people with strong shoulders, and when the internet offers unlimited authentic video, it is worth remembering the role that Bill and H el ene, both sadly lost to cancer in the intervening years, played in spreading good practice and adding a tailor-made visual element to the learning of foreign languages.

## Bibliography

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