

Regional

Mann studies French and French culture in the modern world

Only a few decades ago French was the popular choice of American high school students studying foreign languages. This has changed. Spanish is the new choice for most students. But does this fact mean that French has lost its relevance in today's world? Someone who thinks not is Debbie Mann, a professor in the department of foreign languages and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Lakeland, Fla., Mann earned her bachelor's degree in French at Berry College in Georgia, and her master's and doctorate from the University of Florida. For someone who grew up in a part of the United States where very few people speak French, she showed an early interest in the language.

"I think you just find a subject and a culture that speaks to you and for some reason that was France, and that has now extended to Quebec," Mann said. "I started studying French in high school and you don't have to grow up in a French-speaking household or have any other links except that the language was interesting to you and you find the culture congenial and interesting."

French is one of the most widespread languages in the world, spoken in over 50 countries. It is the official language in 32 of them. In this country, according to Mann, French is holding its own due in large part to the efforts of teachers.

"The American Association of Teachers of French has an enormous advocacy program going in order to make sure that French doesn't lose its place," Mann explained. "It has the undeserved reputation of being difficult, but in fact a person who has never studied French already knows about 15,000 words of French because of William the Conqueror and

the amount of French – which must have been around 10,000 words – that went into the English language with the Norman Conquest. It is probably not going to take that much longer to learn than another romance language, about 720 to 750 hours of instruction to get to a fairly advanced level."

During her career, Mann has shown a particular interest in Quebec, the epicenter of French culture in Canada. "It is a culture that combines the best of the European French mentality and the very familiar North American lifestyle. So it is impossible not to fall in love with it while you are there and feel comfortable and yet feel that you are truly abroad," she said.

One of the authors Mann has studied extensively is Andrée Chédid, a French poet and novelist of Lebanese descent who was born in Cairo and of whom few people really know much about.

"The style of this author is extremely interesting since she has a very simple on the surface way of writing, but at the same time if you look at her technique a little more closely you see that she is a great stylist in terms of being able to tell the story in different ways with some fairly innovative techniques for the time."

Chédid and her husband moved to France after he completed his medical studies in Lebanon. She lived in France from 1942 until her death last year at the age of 90. "She saw cultures that had to coexist and was very much moved by the Lebanese Civil War and so wrote stories that in different ways promote that idea that people don't need to be the same and they don't need to agree, but they can still coexist and try at least to have some kind of bridge of communication," Mann said.

Mann's research has also engaged

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language and culture in broader terms, including writing an article questioning whether music really is the "international language."

"The paper was dealing with something I found interesting at the time and I still do, and that is listening to French radio and hearing a song that you know is an American song and was given French lyrics. Most people in France just assume that it is a French song," Mann said. "And so I started studying how the songs got transferred into French and whether they changed drastically or whether they basically remained the same and to what extent there is a change in the message as the song goes from one language to another."

Mann is unequivocal about her faith in the future of French in this country. "I think if you take people on a study abroad to France or Quebec they become your best ambassadors," she said. "So I think you start in the classroom and try to expand beyond the classroom and have people find something that corresponds to a center of interest they might have, and then you make sure you get them immersed in the culture and after that you don't have to do anything. You are done!"

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu. Mann studies French and French culture in the modern world.



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Dr. Debbie Mann at work.