Advisory Board Drops Cajun Text’s Approval

By United Press International

Fearing teachers would reject standard French lessons in favor of a dialect that died out in France 200 years ago, an education advisory board Wednesday removed a phonetic guide to Cajun French from a list of textbooks approved for classroom teaching.

James Faulk, a former French teacher and author of “Cajun French I,” said the decision will force “a foreign language” on thousands of Cajun children whose grandparents and parents speak the dialect, but cannot understand standard French.

“A lot of people don’t know their hard-earned tax dollars are being used to destroy our own language,” Faulk said. “They are imposing a foreign language on us.”

In an emotional three-hour meeting, members of the Textbook Advisory Committee voted 5-3 to remove “Cajun French I” from a list of approved books, fearing the text would allow teachers to abandon standard French. The decision still must be ratified by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

M.C. Perry, chairman of the advisory committee, voted to keep the book on the list and said the vote should not be construed as sentiment against the Cajun culture.

“The council feels there is the possibility as long as the book is listed that somewhere they would put (Cajun French) in as a basic program,” he said. “Certainly we are not voting against the Cajuns, the Cajun folklore or Mr. Faulk.”

The battle of the tongues started when a French Textbook Evaluation Committee of the state Textbook and Media Advisory Council recommended the book as a supplementary text for use by teachers. But once on the approved lists, the book could be purchased by parish school boards for use as a primary text.

James Domengeaux, director of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, said the phonetic text was a “a bunch of chicken scratchings” that would teach students sounds understood only “by a goose or a donkey.”

He said the book would destroy the 10-year efforts of CODOFIL to save the French language in Louisiana, which was dying out because school teachers and the English-speaking majority frowned on its use.

The Cajun dialect developed when French Acadians were exiled from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755. Many settled in the swampy bayou country of South Louisiana. With the settlers cut off from the French in New Orleans and the growing English population, the language was supplemented with Indian, Spanish and English words.

“To recommend both (languages) constitutes educational immaturity,” Domengeaux said. “You would be a functional illiterate after reading this book. We’ll wake up in 10 years speaking worse French than we are speaking today.”

But Barry Ancelet, director of the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, denied Cajun French was a separate language and he said it could be taught as part of standard French courses without the need of special texts.

“When well-spoken, the French language spoken by Cajuns does not differ substantially from standard French any more than other regional variations of the French language throughout the French speaking world,” he said. “Thus the speaker of the Louisiana Cajun French shares in the literature and history of the French language as much as the Belgian, the Swiss, the Marseillais, the Bordelais, the Quebeccois or the Parisian for that matter.”

He said Cajun culture should be infused in standard French classes to teach the language.

“The standard French student does not need to learn only of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc De Triomphe,” he said. “But they can learn of Bayou Teche, the Mardi Gras and the boucheries.”

He said using Faulk’s book would “further isolate an already isolated people,” but “there is no reason why a Louisiana French student should sound like he grew up in Paris.”