South Louisiana Students Go Home to Teach French

LAFAYETTE, La. (AP) — Crowds of six-year-olds headed home from school in this south Louisiana city Monday to teach their parents French.

Granteed, most of the new words concern articles of clothing or expressions of greeting, but it's something they didn't know before.

"It was a wonderful day," says 25-year-old Brigitte LeSaint, one of 160 French teachers imported into Louisiana to help preserve the French heritage of the south Louisiana Acadians — or Cajuns.

Miss LeSaint, a native of Rennes in western France, speaks only a little English but has an interpreter on hand in the classroom at Plantation Elementary School.

After a week of preparation, she began the French lessons Monday.

"Less than five per cent of the students actually understood any French before we started," she said. "Their reaction was very good."

The transfer of the French teachers was worked out last spring when a delegation led by the chairman of the Council of the Development of French in Louisiana, James Domengeaux, visited Paris and pleaded with President Georges Pompidou to loan them a contingent of instructors.

"There had been no certified teacher of French in this area for 40 or 50 years," Domengeaux said. "So there will be no displacement of Louisiana teachers.

"We had to save our language."

The French government, in conjunction with CODOFIL and the state of Louisiana, agreed to allow certified male French teachers to spend two years in Cajun schools as a means of fulfilling their military obligations.

Certified Frenchwomen were also recruited to spend a year in Louisiana.

"I thought I would spend only one year here," Miss LeSaint said, "but I think now I would have to spend two years here. To do the experience right, it is better."

Of course, not all of the experience is academic.

"We're also learning to speak French," says Joe McSpadden, with whose family Miss LeSaint is living. "And we're teaching her English, although I must say that she's picking up the English very rapidly — much more rapidly than we're picking up French."