

“How do you say “is” in French?” or Improving the application of language knowledge among my FSL students through music and gestures.

Jacqueline Smith

Biography



Jacqueline Smith has been a French as a Second Language teacher of Grades 4-8 for fifteen years with the former Haldimand Board of Education and the Grand Erie District School Board. She currently teaches at Oneida Central Public School. This is Jacqueline’s first action research project.

Abstract

Core French teachers are faced with many unique challenges. The greatest challenge, in my opinion, is to improve my students’ communicative competence in French. Not an easy task when you consider that their exposure to the language begins at the age of nine, and is confined to 40 minutes per day. I have used French songs for many years with my students to enhance their second language knowledge. In this action research project, I evaluate my practice of songs when teaching, and reflect upon ways to make song use more successful. Inspired by the work of my co-researchers, I decided to implement gestures with songs. The results of this “merger” form the basis of my paper.

Identify a problem:

For many years now, I have been an advocate of using French songs in my classroom. I remember once reading in an article that singing allows children to “play” with language. So, each week, with lyrics displayed on chart paper, the students and I sing along to the *chanson de la semaine* (song of the week) which (usually) reinforces the concept I am teaching that grade. Songs by Jacquot, Gregg LeRock and Étienne are very familiar to my students due to their pedagogical content.

For many students, singing these songs proves beneficial in the acquisition of language conventions. Here are a few examples that highlight their effectiveness.

- Last year, my Grade 8 class was writing a test on the *passé composé*. I noticed a few students singing Étienne’s *Avoir* song to themselves while jotting down the conjugation of the verb on their test paper.
- This year, two former students who had recently completed their Grade 9 French credit approached me on different occasions with some interesting feedback:
L.: “Those songs really helped me this semester. Tell your students to pay attention to them.”
C.: Our (Grade 9 French) teacher was doing a lesson on reflexive verbs. I looked over at L. and we both started to mouth the words “me, te, se, me, te, se, nous, vous, se”. (This is the refrain to Étienne’s song *Verbes Pronominaux*.)

While singing along to pedagogically-based French songs was making a positive impact on some students, others were not benefiting as much. Earlier this academic year, my grade 5 French class sang the song *Être* (which reinforces the conjugation of the French verb “to be”). The following week, these same students were writing a quiz

on être. During the quiz, R. raised his hand and asked, “How do you say “is” in French? I can’t find it in my dictionary.”

I would like to say that incidents like this were few and far between, but that would be untrue. While R. could belt out the song by heart, he (like many other students) was unable to transfer the concept from song to application. It was from this realization where my action research question emerged, “How can I help my students to transfer French concepts from songs to application in oral, reading and writing skills?”

Imagine a solution

In the Fall of 2003, FSL teachers from GEDSB had the chance to attend a workshop presented by renowned French singer, Jacquot. I was excited about this opportunity for two reasons: 1) I often use Jacquot’s songs with my students. And 2) Jacquot teamed up with Dr. Cher Harvey, a French professor at Nipissing University, to develop a program where students learn French through music. (How timely and à propos can you get?)

During his workshop, Jacquot made three statements that particularly made an impact on me: 1) “Songs are the most effective pedagogical tools to teach a second language. Simple, repetitive songs increase students’ awareness of a second language’s sentence structure.” This was a tremendous source of reassurance for me. All the precious time I allot for music in my classes was not in vain. 2) “By doing gestures, the brain’s ability to recall is accelerated.” And 3) “Gardner’s “brain-based” learning theory states that the more senses involved, the more learning.”

A light bulb turned on in my head that afternoon. That’s it! That’s the solution! I’ll incorporate gestures into my songs.

Now that I had an idea for a solution, I had to figure out how to implement it. Eager to try out my new approach, I sat down with a song and tried my hand at creating gestures for it. The result was frustration, although an onlooker would have found the scenario comical. I determined that the gestures had to be simple, relevant to the students and consistent throughout all the grade levels. My initial attempts were definitely not adhering to the first two criteria. I was hesitant to try my “song & gesture approach” (s. & g. approach) for fear that I would confuse rather than enlighten my students.

Timing was on my side once again. The following week, our action research group met. Many of my FSL colleagues from the group were basing their action research project on Wendy Maxwell’s gesture approach. Given my new focus, I listened to their discussions with increasing interest. One teacher had Wendy Maxwell’s video in her possession, so we watched a ten-minute segment of the gesture approach in action. (Sigh of relief.) I had found the tool to help me implement simple, relevant and consistent gestures into songs.

Implement the solution

I decided to test out my “song & gesture approach” on my Grade 7 French class. My mission was to teach them double-verb construction using vouloir (to want), pouvoir (to be able) and devoir (to have to). Step one was to keep these three verbs straight and to master their irregular conjugations. Étienne’s song Vouloir, c’est pouvoir reinforced the conjugation component well. However, even with the song, many students traditionally confused the meanings of the verbs. So, when I played the song for the first time, I incorporated the gestures (as proposed in Wendy Maxwell’s video) for vouloir, pouvoir and devoir, as well as for the pronouns which precede them. The students looked at me as though I had sprouted an additional head. They were not accustomed to this. K. inquired, “Are you doing sign language, Madame?” “Sort of,” I responded. I explained that they were my “guinea pigs” and that we were experimenting with gestures in songs with the goal to improve understanding of French concepts. Surprisingly

enough, the idea of being “experimented on” appealed to them, and most followed along with the words and gestures the second time through the song.

By Wednesday of that week, I wondered what effect (if any) the “s. & g. approach” was having on my class. I chose the following activity to assess as many students as possible; I gesture a “pronoun + vouloir, pouvoir or devoir” expression and a student repeats the gesture while verbalizing the expression. I noted a high success rate in verb conjugation and an even higher success rate in comprehension. Obviously, gestures were helping my students to differentiate between to want, to be able and to have to. I considered this a coup.

Step two was establishing a memory bank of French verb infinitives. To my knowledge, there was no song that addressed infinitives, so I strictly used gestures to reinforce this concept. This also met with great results. Most of the class could identify the 30+ infinitives when I gestured them.

The final step was creating double-verb constructions by combining vouloir, pouvoir and devoir with infinitives. I simultaneously used gestures while asking questions with double-verb constructions, and encouraged students to respond doing the same. With practice, they were able to apply this concept to oral activities with improved competence. Eventually, some students did not even require visual cues (ie. gestures) to comprehend and respond to questions.

It was time to assess their competence in written activities. I used an activity where my students were required to write down the “double-verb construction” expressions that I gestured. I noted slightly better results in spelling, but more importantly, significantly better results in comprehension.

Implement the solution (The sequel)

Given the success of the “s. & g. approach” with double-verb construction, I was anxious to try it out on another group – my Grade 4 class. This grade level has traditionally been a source of both pleasure and pain for me. “Pleasure” because it is their first year of French instruction and they arrive enthusiastic about learning the language. “Pain” because it is their first year of French instruction and they arrive knowing nothing (or very little) of the language.

In Grade 4, one of the first verbs I teach is aimer (to like). Initially, things go very smoothly. They can communicate that they like dogs, ice cream, erasers and any other noun you throw their way. Eventually, though, it is necessary to expand their verb repertoire to include others like détester (to dislike), avoir (to have), vouloir (to want) and être (to be), and to use these verbs with pronouns other than je (I). This is when the “bilingual honeymoon” ends and confusion sets in. For example, one day last October, I asked W., “Est-ce que tu as une grenouille?” (Do you have a frog?) W. responded, “Oui, je suis une grenouille.” (Yes, I am a frog.) Despite weeks of practice, W., like other students in his class, could not differentiate between verb meanings. Could gestures save the day again?

Firstly, the students needed to learn the French pronouns, so I combined Étienne’s song Les Pronoms with Maxwell’s gestures for je (I), tu (you), il (he), etc. This combination worked well. Compared to previous years when only the song was used, a greater number of students could demonstrate (via oral drills) comprehension of the pronouns.

Secondly, they needed to learn the conjugations of détester, avoir, vouloir and être with the pronouns. I relied solely on gestures for these verbs, as there were no available songs to meet this need. The results were amazing. Within a week, the majority of the Grade 4’s could respond accurately to oral questions accompanied with gestures.

Months later, when I revisit these verbs, I do so without gestures. To my delight, several are able to understand and respond without the non-verbal cues. The kinetics inherent in gestures provided them with the “hook” to remember what they learned.

In conclusion (or should I say, “just beginning”)

“Conclusion” is definitely not the word that comes to mind at this point. Au contraire, the use of the “s. & g. approach” with my students has just begun. Now that I found a successful method, as witnessed in my Grade 4 class, I have a responsibility to continue it and explore ways to improve upon it.

I wish to close with some third-party positive feedback I received. In the Spring of 2004, I had the opportunity to work with a student teacher during her fourth and final practice-teaching placement. One day, she remarked how impressed she was with my Grade 4’s speaking skills; that they exceeded those of other Grade 4 Core French classes she had observed. Reaffirmed by her comments, I proceeded to tell her about my action research project. She seemed intrigued with the concept, or perhaps with my enthusiasm regarding the concept. More importantly, I hope I impressed upon her, as this action research project impressed upon me, that teaching is not a destination, but rather a continuous quest to better one’s practice.