

## How can I help students to feel more confident to speak French in the Core French classroom?

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### Biography



Chris has taught French as a Second Language (FSL) from Grades 1 through 8 for 13 years. The bulk of her experience has been in the junior division. She is presently teaching Grade 4 and 5 FSL at Walsh Public School. Her goal has always been to teach students that learning French can be rewarding and fun.

### Abstract

This is an account of a Core French Teacher using gestures to add the kinesthetic aspect to the learning of French. Applying Wendy Maxwell's "Accelerative Integrated Method" (AIM), improved the students' learning in Core French. Comments by students and teacher observations as recorded in a journal, provide the evidence for the improvement.

### Background

In March of 2002, Wendy Maxwell presented a workshop on the "Accelerative Integrated Method" at the Ontario Modern Languages Teachers' Association Conference that explained a way of teaching Core French that she had researched, developed and was using at the elementary school level. This method combines gestures, drama, and music to accelerate the acquisition of the second language.

Ms. Maxwell had aroused my interest at the very beginning of the workshop when she began to speak in a language that we were not able to understand. We became the students in our own classrooms. We felt the same frustration that our students must feel when not being able to understand. We may have been able to reproduce the vocabulary and the sentences but had no idea of the meaning. When Ms. Maxwell introduced the same vocabulary using gestures, we immediately understood, reproduced, and the vocabulary became embedded. The gesture was immediately associated with the word it represented. By the end of the workshop, we were speaking and she was only gesturing. I was so impressed by the shift from the teacher speaking to the students speaking, that I was anxious to try this approach in my Core French classrooms.

### Action Research Process: How did I get started?

Even though I was so excited to try this new method, I was still hesitant to present it in the classroom. It seemed so different from the way that I was accustomed to teaching. I was not ready to take that step. I was finally ready to give it a try a year later, when our French Consultant confronted me about doing an Action Research project on the AIM.

I attended a few more workshops presented by other French teachers that had used the AIM and who were very pleased with the results. I spent time in the summer, reading the manual and learning the gestures from a video. Finally, I was ready to present the approach to my students.

As Ms. Maxwell recommends, I started my first lesson using very physical gestures, gestures that are easily acted out and understood by the class. Before I knew it, I had students jumping, running, walking and opening and closing various objects in the classroom. The best thing was that they were also all speaking. Some were more enthusiastic and excited than others but they were all involved.

I found that the gesture approach also helped the students when they tried to form questions. My students often had difficulty forming questions because they were usually answering rather than asking the questions. With the gesture approach, I would only gesture the question and the entire class would be asking the question in unison. Strong students would be speaking very loudly, modeling correct pronunciation and sentence structure. As a result, the weaker students had models other than the teacher.

When it came to answering questions, I was very pleased with the confidence that many Grade 4 students already felt in September. They were giving more complex answers and were using gestures to help them form the sentences. “Ca va mal. J’ai froid et je suis fatigued.” N.B.

For students that had difficulty answering in complete sentences, I only needed to start them off by gesturing the beginning of the sentence and they could finish it off on their own. This approach allowed students to feel that they were speaking with very little teacher involvement. The same was true if a student was to ask a question in English. I simply needed to begin the question with gestures and the student was able to reproduce the question in French.

Wendy Maxwell also feels that it is very important that only French be spoken in the classroom in order for the method to work well. I was a little disappointed with Brandon one day when he was not participating in gesture review. He then raised his hand and said: “J’ai mal.” I then asked him: “Est-ce que tu as mal a la tete?” Brandon answered: “Non, j’ai mal partout!” The conversation continued in French with gestures: “Est-ce que tu veux telephoner a ta mere?” Brandon answered: “Oui, s’il te plait.” Brandon’s sentences were very simple but he was communicating in French. I am hoping that as I feel more comfortable with the AIM, I will be able to inspire more students to use French more frequently to communicate in the classroom.

## The Play

Once I felt the students were comfortable with the first set of gestures, it was time to introduce the play. Wendy Maxwell’s first set of plays are based on familiar fairy tales. She has chosen fairy tales because the stories are already familiar with the students and they are very repetitive. They are also short which allows the students to memorize the entire play. I was a little concerned that students might feel that they were too old to be learning about the Three Little Pigs but instead they were quite proud of the fact that they understood the entire play and also were able to memorize it with the help of gestures.

Before introducing the play to the students, I went over the script and found the words that were unfamiliar to them. This vocabulary was taught to the class with gestures. The new vocabulary was immediately associated with the newly acquired gesture. The entire play was then introduced to the students with puppets and gestures. In this way, the students were able to recite the play with me. They were not repeating after me and they were not using a script. If the words are introduced orally first, it is more likely that pronunciation while reading will be more accurate. As the students became more comfortable with the script, I was able to only gesture the entire play as I listened to them recite it.

The students then received their scripts and were given parts. They made puppets for their character and started to work in groups. They first partnered up with a student that had the same role. One student would gesture the play as the other would say the words. They would then exchange roles. After they felt comfortable with their own lines, they moved into larger groups so that they could rehearse the entire play. Students were very excited to then use the puppet theater and also present their play to other classrooms.

When I asked the students how they felt about the puppet play, most of the class replied that they enjoyed making the puppets and had a lot of fun acting it out. Shy students replied that they liked being behind the puppet theater. “I enjoyed the puppet play because it was fun making the puppets and nobody could see me behind the theater. I wasn’t so nervous that I forgot my part.” A.S.

Students were also given the opportunity to present another play where they brought in costumes and were able to act out their part. This play obviously appealed to the more dramatic students in the class. “I prefer plays where you are acting because you can show more expression than when you are standing behind a puppet stand.” M.S.

“I prefer plays where you are acting it out yourself because it is fun to find a costume. Also, you can find different ways to move around to act out your part.” A.K.

## Theme-based Units

Although most of the class loved doing the plays, there were still students that preferred theme-based units. The repetitive nature of the plays helps students to be confident with activities that follow. However, some students had enough of the play before getting to the activities. I found that by doing a play and then a unit, it was much easier to keep the interest level high for most students.

I was still able to incorporate the gestures into the theme-based units. Since most nouns do not have a gesture, the class often worked together to make gestures for the unit vocabulary. As I previously mentioned, the gesture approach was useful to nonverbally encourage students to speak in complete sentences. By starting the sentence with gestures, the students were able to finish it on their own. The same was true for questioning. The students were speaking more and the teacher less. When asking questions based on the units, I was able to only gesture the question as the whole class asked the question in unison. The students were models for each other.

Although the gestures were not used as extensively in the units, they enhanced the unit by making the oral component stronger. The gestures provided me with what I was looking for to help the students feel more comfortable speaking. It was a less intimidating way to correct errors and allowed apprehensive students to feel confident.

## Why does it work?

I believe that the AIM works so well because it is a multi-sensory approach to teaching the language. The students learn by seeing, hearing, doing and feeling:

- Students see the gesture
- They hear the word associated with the gesture.
- They mirror the gesture and eventually perform plays.
- They understand many gestures because of the emotion demonstrated while performing the gesture. The plays then provide the students the opportunity to demonstrate emotion in a second language.

The AIM also takes into account the multiple intelligences in the classroom:

- Kinesthetic - the students learn by doing actions and performing plays. Linguistic - the program encourages the students to speak more and the teacher to speak less. Many reading and writing activities are also provided.
- Interpersonal - partner activities and plays provide students with cooperative learning opportunities.
- Visual/Spatial - students are able to see the gesture to help them understand the word.
- Musical/Rhythmic - many songs with actions are introduced. The repetition present in the plays allows for success for the rhythmic learner.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

Have I helped students to feel more confident to speak French in the Core French classroom? I found my answer when a student said to me: “I can’t speak French!” Without saying a word, I started gesturing that same sentence to him. I believe that he surprised himself when he told me in French that he was not able to speak the language.

Hearing my identified students asking to get a drink or go to the washroom in French without being prompted to do so demonstrates to me that they are feeling comfortable speaking the language. They also know that I can easily help them with a simple gesture.

I had students write in their journals telling me how they felt the gestures helped them. “The gestures help me form a sentence and speak French. I like when you use them because I can learn the words more easily and know them faster.” A.D. “I like gestures because they help me learn words and remember them. When I am stuck and ask you, you show me the gesture and I remember them.” R.B.

There have been many advantages to taking on this project. The approach has allowed for many, if not all of my students, to be actively involved in the lesson. They are speaking in complete sentences and are more easily producing questions.

Above all, I believe that the students have been having fun while learning a second language. The following are students’ comments written in their journals: “I liked doing the plays because we got to work with others. I think we learned a lot more and they were fun too! We got to make costumes and perform.” O.E. “I had fun learning to memorize the play. Best of all, I was in it and I like that.” C.B.

Getting my students to speak French in order to communicate in the classroom was one of my main objectives when taking on this Action Research project. I certainly feel that gains have been made in making my students feel more confident. It is now up to me to feel more confident with the gestures in order to use them more frequently and promote a French only atmosphere in my classroom. It will be an ongoing and certainly rewarding learning process for me as well as for my students.

## References

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