

How can I make the learning of French as a Second Language more appealing to students and create a positive environment where students are comfortable, engaged, taking risks, and learning because it is fun?

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Biography

Geraldine has been teaching French (and various other subjects) for the last eighteen years. She started her career in 1985, teaching French and Music at Sacred Heart Elementary School in her hometown of Marystown, Newfoundland. After four years there, Geraldine spent a year working part-time, teaching English as a Second Language at the Ministry of Health, while attending Laval University in Québec City. Finally, she moved to Ontario, where she has taught French Immersion and Core French for the last 14 years. Geraldine is currently teaching Core French in Grades 5-8 at Brier Park School in Brantford.

The Concern:

Having fun, in French class, is that really possible? I, personally, have always thought so, although, there have been times when I began to wonder. All in all, I would have to say that I have always enjoyed teaching French. However, for some strange reason, there seemed to be an attitude from both students, and often (unfortunately) parents alike, that, “well it’s not really important, it’s only French” which, I have to say, I have never quite understood. Anyway, in spite of that, I always seem to have had a good rapport with my students and have generally had good results with most. However, as with most things, there were always the exceptions.

So, I discovered there were several “types” of students. Inevitably, there were the “keeners” who really liked French anyway (yes, there were some), those who listened because they wanted to get good marks, and those who did it because they had to and struggled through. There were those who didn’t really find it interesting at all and didn’t “get it” for whatever reason and just found it really difficult. There were also those who felt genuinely uncomfortable and embarrassed trying to learn a second language so it turned them off. Last, but certainly not least, of course, there were those who didn’t want to do it (arms folded, slouched in their seats) and could care less if they passed or failed because it was “only French” anyway so it didn’t really matter.

So, I guess, my concern was mostly with the last few groups, that is, with any student who was struggling, didn’t get it, or just didn’t like French. For some strange reason, teaching intermediate grades for the last eleven years, there were lots in the last few groups. Once they got past the first year (or so) of fun and the novelty wore off, they were bored with it and didn’t retain their interest. I hadn’t quite figured out exactly why, though I had lots of theories.

Why didn’t they like French? Why did it lose its appeal? What was it that made it so “uninteresting”? Why didn’t they care? How could I change that? How could I make them like French? How could I make them see the value? How could I make them take it just as seriously as other subjects? How could I take away the fear and make it less scary? How could I make them realize it wasn’t really so difficult? How could I make it fun? How could I make

them want to learn and be proud of what they were learning? How could I make them love it like and see the value like I did? Why did it have to be so hard?

I wanted them to enjoy French class, to have a positive attitude, to feel comfortable to take risks, to participate and have positive experiences. I wanted them to speak French voluntarily, maybe even outside of class. (Could that happen?) I wanted them to want to learn. That would certainly make the teaching a whole lot easier.

The Reflection:

Well, over the years, I had always managed to establish pretty good routines and expectations in my classes, so the classroom management part was under control. I always tried to do lots of fun projects on each of the theme units that we did to make it interesting. I also used music to make it fun for the kids. Obviously, different things worked in different grades, but one thing seemed to be consistent with all students (even intermediate students), was that they loved anything that involved moving around, talking, or laughing. Of course, all audiences love to laugh. Jumping around the room like a fool to try and convey the latest vocabulary is always good for a few laughs and whenever they get a chance to do something silly, like sing dance or act something out, that's always a hit. Hmmm, interesting! So, as I said in the beginning, it was going fairly well. In fact, it was probably going as well as could be expected "for French class", right? Couldn't be better. Or could it??

The Awakening:

Then, one day, I went to an after school workshop on "The Gesture Approach" with Wendy Maxwell. I had no idea what I was in for. My eyes were opened to a whole new world. Of course, it made so much sense; I couldn't believe I wasn't already doing it. In fact, I kind of was doing it (in theory) but just not to the extent of using it "all the time" and giving it a name. Of course, as a second language teacher you are always pointing and doing little actions to get across your point, but this was different. It took a simple idea and turned it into a whole way of learning.

This approach attached an action to every single word (verbs, nouns, prepositions, everything!!) so that when you spoke, you were constantly moving your hands. Well, this was great! Those kids who are always moving would have something constructive to do with their hands! What a revelation! So, back I went to my classrooms the very next day and started gesturing everything in sight, using the few gestures I had learned at the workshop and making up the ones I didn't know. I couldn't stop myself. I was so excited. Well, the kids loved it! All of them! They all perked up in their seats immediately, they were signing with me and everyone was talking at the same time (This was a good thing!). Yes, they were talking, in French, and they knew what they were saying! There's a treat. I continued this method for a few weeks and every time I would meet a kid in the halls they would say: "Hey Madame, are we going to do those actions today?" Well, I was so excited that I immediately emailed my French consultant and told her about the metamorphosis that had been occurring in my classroom. It was then that she suggested doing an action research project on this topic. Well, to be honest, I wasn't really sure what that was, but I was really excited. So, after going to another workshop at the Ontario Modern Languages Conference and seeing "The Gesture Approach" in action, I was hooked. I watched in awe as two Core French teachers stood in front of their students and had them gesturing an entire story and reciting it in French with great ease. (Yes, Core French students.) They were functioning like French Immersion kids. They were all speaking French, gesturing and smiling. What more could a teacher ask for? It was fantastic.

The Philosophy:

The premise of “The Gesture Approach” is that you take a basic list of some of the most commonly used words and assign them gestures. Then you teach this set of basic gestures to the second language learner for everyday use. Unlike many French (or other Second Language) programs, which are theme based and teach vocabulary based on a list of nouns, this program is more “verb based”, so that kids are using words that are useful, that is words that get them creating sentences. This enables the student to communicate and comprehend the basics to get along every day in the second language. Evan, a Grade 5 student, put it very eloquently when he said, “The hand signals are way better because if you keep on doing the gestures you know what the words mean. Just saying the words doesn’t help me at all. It’s like trying to build a work bench without having pictures in the instructions.” Wow, that says it all, doesn’t it? In addition to this, students are taught the gestures in conjunction with plays, most of which are fairy tales with which the students are already familiar. So the students learn to gesture the entire play and eventually act it out (from memory) because now they know it so well. Sounds promising!

The Project:

So, in September of the following year, (this year, 2003-04) I began my Action Research Project (although I still wasn’t quite sure about what that meant). In fact, I wasn’t sure about too much in this whole Action Research stuff. One thing I was sure of was that I was really excited about getting the kids to try out this approach. So I decided to start with the Grade 5 class. I told them that we were going to try something new; we were going to do a play. Well, as soon as I said the word “play” every kid in the room gave a gasp (of joy) and they broke out in a round of applause. Wow, how about that? Well, that was worth it right there. How often do you get a round of applause from your class without announcing that the school is closing or that you are handing out chocolate? Right away, they were all in a positive mood. Wow! That’s half the battle there. If you have their interest, they are just little sponges sitting there, waiting to soak it all up.

The next day, I started the play (and soak it up they did) and they were all smiling and participating and actively doing the gestures and reciting the vocabulary. They thought some of the gestures were quite funny, which I think helped to reinforce it even more. In fact, when I did a little survey with them later, one of the comments was, “I absolutely love it when you make a fool of yourself (no offense) and look really funny, and I think I actually learn and remember all of these actions.” Well, in the name of education, if that’s what it takes! I guess I must have been doing something right, because the next day when I came back, almost all students remembered everything we had done the day before. They were joining in the gestures and repeating and smiling. Yes! They were speaking French and they liked it! I’m almost afraid to say it. What an accomplishment, in such a short time! Needless to say, I was ecstatic. The kids were learning and they were having fun. I was in my glory?

The nice thing about the plays in this program is that they are mostly fairy tales. This is a definite advantage because as soon as they hear the title, there is anticipation. The kids know what to expect and can figure out a lot of the vocabulary on their own for just that reason. I really don’t think it would have been as successful with unfamiliar stories because, right away, the fairy tales created a comfort zone for every kid in the room and that’s not easy to do. Bringing prior knowledge and/or personal experiences into the classroom gives the child a connection. “The importance of including a student’s home culture in the classroom is a well documented, fundamental concept in the instruction of English language learners.” (Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal and Tharp 2003) “Using a student’s native language can be an important way to access his or her previous knowledge.” (Marzano, Gaddy & Dean, 2000) “All students, regardless of their proficiency in English, come to school with a valuable background of experience and

knowledge on which teachers can capitalize.” (Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal and Tharp, 2003) So, it only makes sense that the same can be said of second language learning as well. Why try to reinvent the wheel? If there is a base of knowledge there that can be used, we should be using it. Building on prior knowledge is much easier than starting from scratch. So, by using these fairy tales as a springboard from which to start building vocabulary, students are already starting by being familiar with what you are teaching. In turn, they are more comfortable and hopefully more receptive to what comes next.

Low and Behold:

So, after becoming fairly familiar with the play, I started introducing some basic gestures that could be used in every day conversation. Students continued to be fascinated and to enjoy the gestures. It seemed that the stranger or funnier the gesture was, the more likely they were to remember it. One student said: “My favorite gesture was “veut” because you would yell out the word ‘Stella’ and you would yell it so loud and funny. It makes me laugh just thinking about it and I love to laugh, so it is my favorite.” Brynlea said, “It (the gestures) has helped me because I could never speak this much before. I have been able to speak French at school and at home. Hand gestures have been a great help because you remember all of the words.” When the homeroom teacher came back a little early one day, she was amazed by the amount of French she was hearing and she said, “I think I just heard them speak more French than they have spoken in all of grade 4 and 5 combined. This is great”. That was a nice booster. Students were enjoying the whole experience and it was obvious to anyone who saw them.

The gestures combined with the plays were an ideal combination because they were combining what they know with what they like. This definitely sets the stage for enjoyable learning, feeling positive, risk taking, wanting to learn, all of the things I had hoped to accomplish in the beginning. Best of all, I even had kids coming up to me on the playground and gesturing and speaking because they were enjoying it so much. Yes, it really happened. Wow, authentic use of the language, now that’s every French teachers dream. It doesn’t get much better than that.

And Much More:

Another positive feature of the gestures is that it gives students a crutch. When they realize they can use it to help them when they are stuck, they are more likely to go out on a limb and try to speak French. For example, I now often have kids who will come up to me and say part of a sentence (in French) and gesture another part. So without having to resort to English, they have made a genuine attempt to speak completely in French. This, again, leads me back to one of my main focuses, and that is to have the kids enjoy French and feel comfortable to take risks. It also works in reverse. When a student asks me a question I can help them figure it out by using the gestures, because sometimes they might not remember the word in French, but they might remember the gesture.

Even if it was a new word, giving the gesture instead of the direct translation would always turn on a light bulb and make them quite proud that they had figured it out without using any English. Sometimes, when they come up to me and speak English, I will answer them using French combined with gestures and they light up and almost immediately try and respond in some kind of broken French combined with gestures. I love this! It is so empowering for the kids. They feel so confident knowing they have this to depend on. Not that they couldn’t use gestures before, but it probably didn’t occur to them. And now, it’s part of the program and everyone is doing it so it must be okay.

I Speak, Therefore I Write?

So after all of this excitement and success, what does every teacher feel the need to do? You guessed it...give a test. Well, they had been gesturing so well, and reciting the story so well and speaking so well, I just assumed (Don't ever do that!) that since they understood the play, could recite the play and talk about the play, they should be able to ace a little reading comprehension test. Right? Not! Wasn't I in for a rude awakening? While many students did "okay", it wasn't the earth shattering, fabulous results I was anticipating. What did I do wrong? I had to sit back and think about this.

So, guess what? Oral proficiency doesn't automatically guarantee reading comprehension and writing competency. Go figure. Here's where I hit my first roadblock. I realized that if I am going to test reading and writing, I should probably concentrate on that very thing first. Seems like common sense. So, I backtracked and spent some more time on the written play. I realized that after they had read the play a few times and gotten to know all of the gestures, they stopped looking at it altogether. They were so comfortable with the play that they were just looking at me, while gesturing and reciting rather than looking at the words. So, naturally when they were given written questions on the story, they didn't recognize some of the words because they hadn't spent enough time looking at them initially. In addition to this, their writing skills were weak and they needed some instruction on how to decode questions as well as accurately answer in a complete sentence. So, I spent some more time on writing and how to answer questions in complete sentences.

I used the "questions totales", that were part of the program, to reinforce vocabulary and writing structures. Suddenly, I realized how very important that component was! The fact that there were so many of them (questions) and that they were all formulated in a similar way made it much easier for the kids. With all of the repetition of both gesturing and writing the questions, they were becoming even more comfortable with the language and with how an answer should look and sound. So, as a result, students were answering (in written and oral form) better, more accurately and more comfortably. As I circulated in the room and looked at notebooks, I could see the difference with my own eyes. I was eventually seeing full sentence answers and I was also seeing kids writing confidently and comfortably. Yah, mission accomplished!

Aha!!

In the midst of all of this, I guess you could say I had my first "Aha" moment. Even though I had to backtrack a little bit, (two steps forward, three steps back) I had learned something very valuable about "The Gesture Approach" and how kids acquire language using this method. It all became so clear. I felt like jumping up and yelling "Hallelujah"! I came to the realization that students were, inadvertently (through this method), learning French in the same way they did their *first* language. This was actually a GOOD thing. And THAT worked (the first language learning, that is), so it must be a very good thing.

When we learn our first language, we learn the oral first, mixed in with some actions, don't we? A young child learns to speak by listening to the language being spoken around him or her and following directions (for a few years) and then eventually orally producing bits and pieces with a little help from their parents. They don't start writing right away! That comes much later. Only when the oral production and comprehension have been mastered to a certain degree are they ready to start looking at the written text. You don't read a three-year-old child a fairy tale and then hand them a set of questions to answer. Well, it only makes sense that you shouldn't do the same thing in a second language either. I am starting to see that simulation of the first language learning process might be the way to go, even in Core French, because the other way isn't natural. Four-year-old children are generally quite capable of

orally communicating in their first language, but they are nowhere near being ready to read and write (with a few rare exceptions). Why should we expect any different from a second language learner?

This is a natural, and enjoyable way for kids to learn the language. Where it may take ages to explain the grammatical theory behind verb tenses and adjective endings (which is what we are doing in Core French), kids will pick up language in its natural state easily. When we are toddlers, we are not taught verb tenses and grammar rules, we just acquire the language by being immersed in it, first orally and then by experimenting, speaking and formulating our own rules.

Ideally, this approach would be taught in primary school where the oral component could be concentrated on from Grades 1-3 and then, by Grade 4, they would be ready to confidently tackle the reading and writing that goes along with it. By this point, students would be so familiar with the language and vocabulary that the next step would only come naturally, just as it does (for the most part) in the first language. A strong oral base can only enhance reading and writing performance.

So, then the good thing about “The Gesture Approach” is that the process mimics first language learning and that, I believe, is ideal. I think that is one of the reasons why kids enjoy it so much.

Moving “Write” Along and Reading Between the Lines:

So after all of our work on the writing process, as I stated above, it seemed like everything was falling into place. I gave another reading comprehension test and the results were much better. They were more in keeping with the results I was seeing orally. Finally, there was some transfer of skills. Students were accurately answering comprehension questions and they were writing in complete sentences. So, I had, in a relatively short time, achieved what I had set out to do, and more. While my initial focus was to get kids engaged and enjoying French, it was equally important that they retain the material and learn the grammatical structures. As I thought, and have seen, the two go hand in hand. As soon as the kids are enjoying themselves and engaged, the learning just happens. The teaching becomes the easy part.

I was enjoying this project so much and was so pleased with what I was seeing in this class, that I decided to take it into my Grade 6, 7 and 8 classrooms as well. I thought, well, if it works, it works, and it did! I was pleasantly surprised, no, amazed at how receptive the older kids were to this approach. Every kid was trying to speak French and they were all engaged and eager (yes, eager... in French class) to participate and do the gestures. They got a big kick out of the funny gestures. Most students commented that they liked the gestures because they were funny. One student said, “The fact that it was funny helped me remember what it means.”

In Grade 8, we did one of the plays in conjunction with some of the gestures, and it was, without a doubt, the best thing I have ever experienced in a Grade 8 French class. Kids were enjoying themselves and learning French. The final productions were a definite hit and were performed for the whole school. Wow, what an experience!

So, there you have it, kids having fun while learning French. Who would have thought? The one thing that really sticks out in my mind about “The Gesture Approach” is that kids are always smiling when they are doing the gestures. Right away the positive emotion is linked to the new learning and this can only help retention. They are participating because they want to and they like it. It can only get better from here!

Alors, on s’amuse, puis on apprend. Oui, c’est possible!

.....à suivre

(Constantineau, Krista [A Sign of the Times](#) (Integrating gestures and drama into Havergal's French programs garners impressive results from students)

(Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal and Tharp 2003/ from the article "[General Principles for Teaching ELL Students](#)"...URL: www.wrel.org/request/2003may/general.html)

Susanne Hiller (National Post)/ [Speaking French With Their Bare Hands](#)/ Award-winning teacher Wendy Maxwell has found that simple gestures help students learn