

**PLAYING WITH POSSIBILITIES:
DRAMA IN THE ELEMENTARY CORE FRENCH CLASSROOM**

by

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Abstract

French as a Second Language (core French) is not often a popular subject among Canadian elementary and high school students. Negative attitudes and low motivation for learning French contribute to attrition at the high school level. In this thesis, an alternative teaching approach is applied to the core French context. This action research study investigates the outcomes of using a drama-based approach to instruct core French to elementary school students. Ten students received core French instruction twice a week over a six-week period. They worked together with a teacher/researcher using drama strategies and improvisational activities to practice and improve their French language and literacy skills.

The use of drama strategies proved motivational for the students who participated with enthusiasm and expressed a desire to continue learning French through drama strategies. The use of improvisational activities encouraged students to build an understanding of vocabulary and syntax and reduced their fear of making mistakes in the target language. It also increased self-confidence and motivation for continuing to learn and use French.

The action research approach combined with the use of drama strategies allowed the students a greater degree of autonomy – their input and feedback was constantly requested and was used to develop content and lesson plans. This engagement in their own learning contributed to improved student attitudes towards attending French class. Overall students expressed enthusiasm for learning French actively, without having to sit at desks or repeat after the teacher throughout the lesson. Ways of implementing this teaching approach in regular classrooms need to be the subject of future research.

Preface

The research in this thesis involved data collection at an elementary school in British Columbia. The ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board, under the certificate number H07 - 01098.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Preface	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Abbreviations	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication	viii
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
The Role(s) of Drama in Education	3
Site and Sample Selection	6
Role of the Teacher/Researcher: “when it's fun you remember”	9
Review of the Literature	9
Drama in Education.....	10
Drama in Additional/Second/Foreign Language Learning	13
Drama as “Real-world” Immersion.....	21
Weaving the Threads.....	22
Chapter 2 – Research Design	25
Action Research: “What Happens When...?”	25
Research Question.....	26
Framing the Scene.....	26
Research Design.....	28
Implementation of Research Design	29
Looking Through a Sociocultural Lens.....	38
Chapter 3 – Results	42
Puzzling Together the Pieces	42
Data Collection	44
Data Analysis	48
Focus Group Interviews	50
Limitations of Study.....	54
Drama is Fun.....	55
Chapter 4 – Analysis and Discussion	56

Getting Creative	56
Discussion.....	63
Looking Through a Dramatic Lens	63
Looking Back.....	66
Chapter 5 – Conclusion.....	70
Drama Matters	70
Looking Forward.....	72
Future Directions: Widening the Lens	75
Completing the Circle	76
References	79
Appendices	88
A: Writing Samples – Sami à la mer.....	88
B: Written Responses	90
C: French Skills Part 1.....	95
D: French Skills Part 2	97

List of Abbreviations

FSL – French as a Second Language

ESL – English as a Second Language

FL – Foreign Language

L2 – Second Language

FI – French immersion

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What happens when drama strategies are used to teach core French to a group of elementary school students?

fearless.

free-flying.

a stuffed tiger sails through the air.

from child to child,

racing to remembered vocabulary,

strange new sounds, strange new language, strange new game -

hold on tight!

it's a roller-coaster ride.

fearlessly *Français*.

what happens when our connection between what we imagined as
the real world (with all its known and unknown moments) and
the not yet real world (a pretend-world imagined into play)
is interrupted, snapped ... ? (Fels, 1999, p. 12)

Chapter 1 – Introduction

“I remember games more than textbooks, so it's a more fun way of learning and when it's fun you remember.”

(Maria¹, grade six student, Cedar Springs Elementary, interview June 2010)

Learning French is often unpopular among non-Francophone Canadian elementary and high school students enrolled in French as a Second Language programs (Lapkin et al., 2009). The majority of Canadian elementary and high school students are enrolled in the core French program, a mandatory part of the curriculum from grade 4 through 8. “[Core French] concentrates on speaking, listening, reading, and writing in French. It teaches these language skills through themes designed to spark student interest” (Turnbull, 2000, p. 2). Unfortunately, core French at the elementary level is not taught with enough regularity², often only once or twice a week, sometimes during only one semester - and it is often the first subject to be dropped when something more important comes up (Carr, 2006; Lapkin et al., 2009).

As in the rest of the country, core French is not returning the desired results in the province of British Columbia and some studies suggest the program requires reorganizing and more effective instruction (Lapkin et al., 2009; Carr, 2007) while others suggest parts of the program should be eliminated completely (Lapkin, 2008). In British Columbia, core French is the default French as a

¹ Pseudonyms have been used for all names (people and institutions) throughout this thesis.

² A 2001 British Columbia Ministry of Education handbook includes tips for implementing additional core French in the elementary classroom. It suggests that teachers “consistently conduct certain classroom routines in French (e.g., calendar activities, instructions for handing out supplies, or moving around the class or gym)” in order to improve “the effectiveness of two or three periods of French-language instruction per week” (BC Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 25).

Second Language (FSL) program, and it is a part of the regular elementary and high school curriculum from grade 4 through 12. Mandatory instruction ends after grade 8. Although many districts mandate a minimum of 80–90 minutes of core French instruction per week at the elementary school level (Carr, 2006), the allocation of time spent teaching core French is often at the discretion of the school, or even of the teacher. Not all teachers feel comfortable teaching core French and some choose instead to teach a component on Francophone culture or music (BC Ministry of Education, 2001), while others schedule French so that it never actually gets taught (Carr, 2007).

Studies show that despite years of French instruction, the majority of students leave high school without being able to speak French fluently or even functionally (MacFarlane, 2001; 2003). In their review of the research literature on core French, Lapkin et al. consider various contextual factors which heavily influence the impact and effectiveness of core French programs across Canada. They state that community attitudes towards French as an additional language are often negative and frequently manifest themselves in school, where core French programs are often marginalized. Another contributing factor is the disillusionment of core French teachers who find themselves dissatisfied with their teaching assignments and who contemplate leaving core French teaching (Lapkin et al., 2009).

A third consideration raised by Lapkin et al. is the general dissatisfaction with the results of core French programs, which are experiencing attrition across the country. According to a 2008 Ontario Canadian Parents for French survey, only three percent of Grade 9 core French students stay in the program through to the end of Grade 12 (qtd in Lapkin et al., 2009). This is not an isolated phenomenon, core French classes in British Columbian high schools are also experiencing student

attrition after mandatory instruction ends in grade 8 (Lapkin, 2008; Lapkin, n.d.). According to Early and Yeung, the results of a 2005 report by the Canadian Parents for French of Newfoundland and Labrador show that “nearly 90% of all students studying core French in Grade 4 in 1996-1997 were not enrolled in the program when they reached Grade 12 in 2004-2005” (qtd in Early & Yeung, 2009, p. 319).

The biggest obstacle to effective learning appears to be a lack of engagement with the French language, due to lack of time and intensity in classroom instruction (Carr, 2007; Netten & Germain, 2008). Building upon the need for a more rich core French language learning experience, my interest lies in examining ways to address this lack of time and intensity. Over the course of six weeks, I engaged in an action research study where I took on the role of teacher/researcher, working with a small group of elementary school students (ages 11 and 12) to explore the integration of drama strategies and core French instruction, based on the work of Heathcote & Bolton (1995) and Wagner (1998).

The Role(s) of Drama in Education

The idea of using drama strategies as a teaching approach is not new, drama has been -and is being- successfully used in classrooms around the world to teach subjects as diverse as social studies, literacy, history and science³. The work of Dorothy Heathcote through her *mantle of the expert* approach to education has influenced generations of educators and scholars. Her approach is applicable to any subject and can be used by all manner of teachers and learners, with the explicit

³ Examples can be found in Fels & Belliveau, 2008.

understanding that all knowledge is interconnected (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995).

Participants in mantle of the expert are *framed* as servicers committed to an enterprise. This frame fundamentally affects their relationship with knowledge. They can never be mere receivers “told” about knowledge. They can only engage with it as people with a *responsibility*. ... This is an *active, urgent, purposeful* view of learning, in which knowledge is to be *operated on*, not merely to be taken in. (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 32)

My own work is strongly influenced by the need to *actively* and *purposefully* connect the learner to the subject matter at hand, which in the case of my study is core French. Language students must be able to apply their language skills in context. Rather than reciting phrases from a textbook by rote, drama strategies offer learners a chance to experiment with new words and phrases, making them their own.

Fels and Belliveau state: “drama is not about standing ovations or becoming a great actor. Drama in education is about exploring ideas, issues, and relationships through imaginary, metaphorical, symbolic, creative play” (2008, p. 60). In this thesis I will closely examine the role of drama in education⁴ in an additional/second/foreign language context – the core French classroom. *Drama in education* is a term referring to the use of drama strategies to support classroom learning (Andersen, 2004). Drama strategies encompass numerous techniques that include visualization (using words to paint a mental picture), improvisation (spontaneous dialogue and play centred around a theme) and hot-seating, an activity in which a student, in role, is put on the “hot seat” and questioned. Hot-seating is a

⁴ In this thesis, I discuss drama in education (DiE), which is distinct from theatre in education (TiE). While theatre tends to focus on the final product (the “show”) educational drama tends to focus primarily on process, emphasizing the journey rather than the destination: “In a staged theatre production, there is often more of a focus on rehearsal as a means to an end (that end being the performance). In drama in education, the process is the end in itself. The learning emerges out of the choices and decisions made during the development or improvisation” (Andersen, 2004, p. 282).

particularly popular technique as it allows the class to jointly develop a character, exploring her background, her motivations, her emotions; getting to know her story. Other commonly used strategies include tableau work, during which students create images of an event or a moment with their bodies, and tap-ins, where students “tap-in” to the thoughts of someone doing tableau work. Drama strategies can also actively involve the teacher, often in role as a character in the drama. This approach allows the teacher to guide the students to step into the drama “in order to look at a situation, an issue, a problem, or a question through the embodied experience of performance and reflection” (Fels & Belliveau, 2008, p. 61). It allows learners to step into a new role in order to address issues and make decisions from new perspectives and in different contexts.

In the study discussed in this thesis, I began with a series of introductory activities before moving to more complex drama strategies. Some of the introductory activities included name games, trust building games, pantomime, charades and improvisational games. Once the class was familiar with these activities we added tableau work to our repertoire, including variations thereof, such as tap-ins, visualization and collectively (orally) writing in role. (This was done as a group exercise in which we collectively created variations of a story we had read in class, fleshing out characters and further developing the story). We did not progress as far as role drama or process drama, which would be the next step if the scope of this study were to be extended. Woven in with the drama work were basic French language lessons focusing on expressing one's thoughts and feelings in every day conversational contexts. The goal was to encourage the students to engage in small talk about topics such as food, sports, and hobbies. We worked with vocabulary lists of their choosing and with a few basic verbs (to have, to be, to like, to dislike). We also worked extensively with the storybook *Sami à*

*la mer*⁵ (2008) – reading it aloud and using drama strategies to explore both the story as well as the language used in the book. The storybook then became a starting point for storytelling and writing exercises.

Site and Sample Selection

In this thesis, I explore the power of drama in the elementary core French classroom; examining the possibilities drama strategies open up in the additional/second/foreign language-learning context. I observed a group of grade 5 and 6 students using drama – experimenting with words and creating imaginary worlds. I selected my students according to the following criteria: I wanted to work with the grade 6 students, because they had more previous core French instruction than the younger grades, and I was interested to see how they compared their experiences of learning French through drama to previous French language instruction. I conducted my study with eight grade 6 and two grade 5 students.

During my study I observed and reflected on the process of their dramatic and linguistic engagement to see if the benefits of drama shown in other content areas are carried over into language learning where they may serve to engage students more deeply in French language learning. During my study I asked “what happens when drama strategies are used to teach core French to a group of elementary school students?”

To explore this question I set up an action research study in which I was given permission to

⁵ *Sami at the Seaside*

teach core French to a group of eight grade 6 and two grade 5 students at a Montessori elementary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. Montessori differs from other programs offered in Vancouver public schools in that its philosophy embraces multi-age/grade classes in order to encourage cooperative learning among older and younger students. Assessment does not include grades, although the program at Cedar Springs Elementary follows the British Columbia Ministry of Education's curriculum and regular reports are sent home. Learning is rarely teacher-centred and students are encouraged to be self-motivated learners, respectful of others and of their environment. This positive, respectful environment was ideal for exploring the possibilities of drama strategies as a teaching approach.

The regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, was very supportive of my work, giving me free reign as to content⁶ and teaching methods. She professed to be glad to have me teach French as she herself did not teach the subject, choosing instead to invite French speakers into her 4/5/6 combined classroom to teach in her stead. In the first term a parent volunteer came in to teach and in the second term I volunteered to teach French while conducting my study. Mrs. Black told me she felt uncomfortable teaching a language she did not speak well. I elected to work with the grade 6 students, and Mrs. Black asked me to include two of her grade 5 students who were transferring to late French immersion programs the following year. I chose to teach my French class outside of the students' regular classroom, so that we would have more space for our drama activities. I wanted the freedom to play⁷ in a space of our own, without worrying about disrupting the rest of the class. We therefore set up a

⁶ I based my content loosely on the IRPs for grades 5 and 6.

⁷ I use the word *play* deliberately as my participants played with the French language as well as within the world we created jointly: a world of stories and of possibilities - a world where French was fun.

temporary French classroom in the staff room just down the hall from the students' regular classroom. We met regularly, usually 2 – 3 times a week (on Tuesdays and Thursdays and sometimes on Fridays) for an hour and a quarter between recess and lunch, over a period of six weeks. With the exception of two students, my participants had little to no previous French instruction.

I began the study primarily interested in observing whether and in what ways student attitudes toward learning French would change if exposed to the creative environment that drama offers. Does engaging in dramatic play in the core French classroom foster student interest in continuing to learn French as an additional language? Can drama strategies be used to increase student engagement and motivation? How do students respond to learning core French through a variety of drama approaches rather than via traditional methods such as working from a textbook or worksheets? I was also interested in observing the kinds of learning that would emerge: what kinds of hands-on language and literacy skills would the students take away from this pilot study? Above all I was interested in observing the power of engaging with drama in the additional/second/foreign language classroom.

In my teaching, I used a variety of basic drama strategies and games to engage the students' interest and to portray learning French as a challenging and creative activity. We then built on the drama exercises to create written texts and to practice spontaneous dialogue. The students were already familiar with drama in the classroom, as they were using drama strategies to explore Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in class. They were also working on a class production of the play (complete with sets, music and memorized lines) to be shared with their peers and their parents at the end of the school year. Overall the students were a motivated group with a positive attitude toward learning an additional

language⁸, and only one student did not complete the six-week pilot study. I will discuss the students and their feedback in more detail in later chapters.

Role of the Teacher/Researcher: “when it's fun you remember”

As a teacher, the goal of my action research study was to invite my students to get to know themselves and their new language (French) better through drama. As a researcher I was interested in observing their attitudes and reactions to using drama strategies to learn French. I observed my class in action, journaling my impressions after class. I also collected data via exit slips at the end of every class and via interviews with the students and with their regular teacher. As a teacher I used strategies such as tableaux and tap-ins to allow the students to practice their language and literacy skills such as reading, negotiating, and conversing. Building on Baldwin and Fleming's argument that “literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, but encompasses all aspects of communication and understanding” (2003, p. 18), I used a series of improvisational activities (and variations thereof) to allow for spontaneous dialogue to build confidence and to provide my students with opportunities to express themselves verbally, physically, and emotionally in the target language (French).

Review of the Literature

This section explores some of the relevant literature in the fields of drama in education and drama in the context of additional/second/foreign language learning, in particular in the core French and the FSL classroom. Although my review of the literature is not exhaustive, it touches upon the salient

⁸ This was measured by asking the students to respond in writing to questions about their previous French experience.

research in these fields. It is a review *for* research, meant to support my own study – “to create a focus, conceptual framework, design, and justification for the study” as opposed to being a review *of* research (Maxwell, 2006, p.28).

Drama in Education

Drama in education is a rapidly growing field with roots stretching back to the beginning of the 1900s (Cox qtd in Bolton, 1984, p. 17), but it was from the 1950s and 60s onward that the work of Gavin Bolton, Dorothy Heathcote, and Brian Way began to reach a larger audience. Way focused primarily on using drama to train children in life skills such as sensitivity and intuition, while Bolton argued for drama's placement at the centre of the curriculum. I will discuss Heathcote's contribution to the field in more detail below. Drama in education has a strong presence in the recent literature, as evidenced by the writings of such scholars and practitioners as Belliveau (2007), Booth (2005), Howell & Heap (2001), Fels (2008), Neelands (2009), O'Neill (1995), O'Toole (2009), Schonmann (2005), and Wagner (1998), to name just a few. Growing scholarly interest in the field can also be seen by the emergence of several new journals. Aside from some of the more established journals (Research in Drama Education; Youth Theatre Journal; Applied Theatre Researchers) new scholarly publications have emerged including *Scenario: Journal for Drama and Theatre in Foreign and Second Language Education*, a bilingual (English – German) peer-reviewed on-line journal launched in 2007; *Drama News*, an Australian publication launched in 2006; *Word Matters: the Journal of the Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama*, a British publication launched in 2008; and the *New Zealand Journal of Research in Performing Arts and Education: Nga Mahi a Rehia*, launched in August 2008 by Drama

New Zealand.

Drama in education as we know it today was greatly influenced by pioneers such as Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. Heathcote developed her own drama teaching methodology in the 1950s and 60s – *mantle of the expert* . The approach was innovative in that it focused on the acquisition (and understanding) of knowledge while working with large groups of learners. Heathcote also developed the idea of *teaching in role*, in which the teacher takes on the role of someone in the drama, in order to help the students transition into the drama. She was very involved in teacher training, and also worked with students and their teacher in their own classrooms, helping them to develop their own classroom dramas to explore topics that ranged from history to archaeology to issues of social justice. In her book describing Heathcote's teachings, Wagner (1979) notes that Heathcote empowers ordinary classroom teachers to use drama, instead of relying on trained drama specialists. “The time has come to show all teachers – ordinary day-in and day-out classroom teachers – how they can use drama at times to achieve something that cannot be attained effectively in any other way” (Wagner, 1979, p. 15). Wagner explains that Heathcote's method does not produce plays, rather it enables participants to “look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning” (1979, p. 15). My study too hopes to point the way for ordinary classroom teachers, generalists without specific drama training, to take the initiative to enrich their own and their students' second language learning experience.

Heathcote's method is a step-by-step, planned process, in which the facilitator lays down the ground rules, but steps back from the drama once the learners are sufficiently involved. The facilitator usually plays a minor character, such as a messenger, who can help lead the drama in one direction or

another as necessary, but allows the learners to direct their own learning. “The great advantage of a teacher's assuming a role is that it takes away the built-in hierarchy of the usual teacher-class relationship” (Wagner, 1979, p. 132). During my own study I did not immerse my students in the kinds of drama worlds Heathcote developed, but we followed in her footsteps – following the spirit of her teachings. I as the teacher/researcher listened to what the students hoped to gain from the experience, and drew on their input to plan in-class content and activities. Our journey focused both on enjoying the learning process and on improving the students' overall level of French.

Fels and Belliveau (2008) are strong advocates for educational drama as inquiry and an action-site of learning. They have created a series of role dramas for learning in subjects as diverse as science and history. Performative inquiry investigates the issues and insights that emerge when teachers and students co-create curriculum through improvisational play. In their book, *Exploring Curriculum. Performative Inquiry, Role Drama, and Learning*, Fels and Belliveau supply “how to” pointers, including how to design and implement role drama, a drama activity equally applicable in the foreign language classroom. They cite the example of a group of elementary school teachers working on masters’ degrees who designed role dramas in class and then tried them out with their students. “[The masters students] later expressed how surprised they had been by their students’ participation and demonstration of new learning. They also spoke of the novelty of being excited and engaged in their own learning while working with their students in role” (2008, p. 174). Furthermore, in order to allow for exploration of the self and of the topic at hand, Fels and Belliveau underline the need to create respectful and supportive learning environments where students are encouraged to take risks. This sentiment is also expressed by Dodson (2002) who draws on the work of Via (1976), Stern (1980), and

Kao and O’Neill (1998) to state that the use of drama in the foreign language classroom improves self-esteem, self-confidence and spontaneity, while reducing feelings of alienation, inhibitions, and sensitivity to rejection. Drama allows students to imagine stepping into someone else’s shoes, to catch a glimpse of being someone else. While we cannot “claim ownership” of another’s experiences, (Fels and McGivern, 2002, p. 27) drama affords us a chance to imagine being in a different time, culture or place in which we can try out a different vocabulary – including speech and gesture. “Language learning is a personal, communal and political act that involves border-crossings – strangers in a new land” (Fels and McGivern, 2002, p. 20).

While there is much literature examining the role of theatre and drama in education, there are as yet few systematic studies examining drama’s impact on learning in the additional/second/foreign language context⁹ (Bournot-Trites et al., 2007; Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009; Dodson, 2000; Kao & O’Neill, 1998). There is therefore a need for further research investigating the impact of teaching additional/second/foreign languages through drama. Notably missing from the literature are practitioner reflections examining how drama can best be integrated into the additional/second/foreign language curriculum.

Drama in Additional/Second/Foreign Language Learning

There is, however, growing interest in the field of drama in additional/second/foreign language teaching and learning. In *Understanding Drama-Based Education*, Wagner lists a number of studies

⁹ Core French is one model for teaching French as a Second Language.

done between 1974 and 1998 demonstrating “the effectiveness of drama in facilitating the learning of a foreign language” (2002, p. 4). Many of these studies focus on the role of drama in the FSL classroom: Blanch (1974) examines the use of the “drama lab” in her French language lessons in order to bring to life the cultural content of the Foreign Language (FL), Masson (1994) examines the use of role-play to improve French oral skills, and Erdman (1991) explores conflicting views and expectations of drama from the perspective of elementary FL teachers versus a drama/theatre perspective. Miller (1986) investigates three common uses of drama in the FL classroom: teacher-centred to enhance communication, creative student activities and FL theatre, while Ralph (1997) examines the use of drama to engage the interest of FSL learners.

A number of these studies also focus on the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL), an area that is actively delving into the possibilities of drama as a language teaching approach, as evidenced by a growing number of studies. Welkner (1999) explores the use of drama in the ESL classroom, Geffen (1998) explores the value of producing musicals in ESL classes. Gaudart (1990) conducted a large-scale investigation of the use of drama activities to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in Malaysia. More recent work examining the role of drama in the ESL context includes studies by Winston (2004), Stinson (2009), Culham (2002) and Dodson (2002).

Deborah Wilburn's book chapter (1992) explores drama's capacity to immerse students both in the FL and in the creative world of drama. Her eight-month study observes and documents the role of drama in several American elementary Spanish immersion classrooms, with the goal of arriving at an understanding of how the use of drama affects classroom behaviours (Wilburn, 1992). Wilburn's

findings echo Heathcote's thoughts regarding the role of drama as a comprehensive teaching approach:

Drama offers a context for actively using language as a means to an end rather than practicing language as in vocabulary and grammar drills. Drama, then, as a learning tool, draws on content from across the curriculum, instilling a deep sense of understanding by involving children emotionally with the content. (Wilburn, 1992, p. 67)

This emotional connection to their learning was evident as my students experimented with words and explored imaginary worlds during my study. French phrases were shaped and used in a meaningful context as the students practiced language in a hands-on context.

It is interesting to note that Wilburn comments on the degree of proficiency of immersion graduates, who, although often proficient in the target language, lack authenticity in their additional/second/foreign language. She suggests “the nature of traditional tasks in the classroom, be it an L1 or L2 classroom, precludes the use of extended discourse found in the outside world” (1992, p. 74). Her comment would seem to caution against considering the repetition of routine dialogue such as “instructions for handing out supplies, or moving around the class or gym” (BC Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 25) as an adequate supplement to enhance classroom French. Students need meaningful language practice; they need to be able to practice spontaneous and creative dialogue in a context they can make sense of.

Through drama, the teacher is able to create situations which require children to grow socially and emotionally as well as academically. In drama, there are actually two complementary plays going on simultaneously. The students' play has a 'what's going to happen next' orientation while the teacher's is more concerned with educational goals. (Wilburn, 1992, p. 80)

From my vantage point as teacher/researcher I was able to observe this very interplay: as the

teacher I was focused on advancing the learning; building up on previous activities and previously learned vocabulary. As the researcher I was able to step back and reflect on the students' play and how it influenced their perspective of what learning French through drama was all about.

Wilburn also reminds us that using drama in an L2 setting is not a new idea, pointing to the work of Stephen Smith (1984), in which he teaches adult L2 learners through drama activities and play productions. In fact, there is much evidence in the literature to show that the use of drama strategies, such as role-play, mime and tableaux in additional language classrooms is not new (Booth, 1998; Bournot-Trites et al., 2007; Dodson, 2000; Fels & Belliveau, 2008; Liu, 2002; Schewe, 2002; Wagner, 1998). However, there is a need for more research in the area of drama in the additional/second/foreign language classroom as evidenced by the appearance in 2007 of *Scenario*, an e-Journal dedicated specifically to exploring drama and theatre in Foreign and Second Language (L2) education contexts. The online journal is peer-reviewed and bilingual (English – German) and focuses on drama pedagogy as an approach to FL teaching. Scholarly articles in *Scenario* share the accounts of individual FL teachers using drama in their classrooms (mostly teaching German), as well as tackling big questions such as what competencies are to be expected of future language teachers if drama is taken seriously as an approach to FL teaching.

Studies show that drama as a teaching approach increases language-learning engagement (Catterall, 2002; Dodson, 2000; Wagner, 1998). Through repetition it develops language accuracy and through improvisation it helps develop fluency (Bräuer, 2002). Through the power of imagination drama allows learners to step beyond the boundaries of their classrooms and daily lives, to engage in a

new discourse community exploring language and culture through (role) play, dance, pantomime and other ways of knowing and learning: “drama can provide a social context in which to use and learn language” (Bournot-Trites et al., 2007, p. 8). Drama as a language teaching and learning approach creates space to explore (and to play in) imagined – potentially possible – cultural and social stories. The dramatic lens allows participants to experiment with the powerful discourses that construct relationships, identities, and knowledge: “it promotes individual responsibility to the group effort and a willingness to accept and respect the ideas of others” (Wilburn, 1992, p. 67). This is particularly relevant for learning French in a Canadian context.

More recent studies exploring the use of drama in FL and L2 contexts include the work of Liu (2002) and Lauer (2008) as well as the work of Bournot-Trites et al. (2007), who conducted a controlled experiment, teaching French immersion (FI) social studies to two groups of elementary school students; using drama to instruct one group and the traditional lecture style to instruct the other. Bournot-Trites et al. were interested in the use of drama for acquiring cultural sensitivity and knowledge in the French immersion classroom. For the duration of the study, two elementary school French immersion classes were taught the same content (the arrival and expulsion of the Acadians, 1604-1755) using two different approaches. The library group was taught lecture-style, while the drama group used drama strategies, which included the teacher in role as an Acadian. The researchers found that the use of drama stimulated student sensitivity as they “personalized history through their role playing, making their learning more engaging, fun and meaningful” (Bournot-Trites et. al., 2007, p. 27). The teachers involved in this study had minimal drama training, but were mentored by the research team in the use of drama strategies.

Drama as a teaching approach allows the teacher and the students to work with the imagination as well as with the kinds of hands-on skills that improve language and literacy acquisition in the target language. The use of drama in a second language context allows students to gain insight into a new culture by imagining what the experiences of another person, or another group might have been like. In the introduction to his book *Body and Language: Intercultural learning through drama*, Bräuer echoes this finding:

The reason for this great educational potential of role taking within larger social contexts lies in its complexity of representing reality. Educational theorist Jerome Bruner identifies three aspects of human cognition: enactive (the physical gesture), iconic (the image), and symbolic (the linguistic sign) representation – all three, as an interconnected entity, make up the essence of dramatic role taking as an entity of social being, which explains its unique power for gaining knowledge (Bräuer, 2002, p. xi).

Bräuer's comments also remind us that drama has the power to simulate reality, affording actors a way of gaining new insight and perspective. It gives drama participants a goal to work towards, giving their tasks within the drama meaning. My interest in this topic stems from my own experience as a foreign language learner: I was most engaged in my classes when I was living in one of my additional languages – for example through role-play or when writing in role. As a language teacher I would like to afford my students the same opportunity to live in a new language and culture from as many perspectives as possible. “Drama is able to provide contexts which both extend pupils’ use of language and, because of the fictitious situation, protect them from feelings of linguistic inadequacy. This is as much true for reading and writing as it is for speaking and listening” (Fleming, 2003, p. 40). As Fleming notes, drama-work can include exercises such as reading or writing in role – giving students a “safe” context in which to test their literacy skills in the target language. (The context is “safe” because

the students are not writing in their own voices and are thus distanced from the written or spoken work).

Lauer (2008) discusses the advantage of working with a scripted drama (something I did not experiment with in my study). Lauer and his German L2 learners (university students) put on a dramatization of the 1961 Hans Peter Richter novel *Damals war es Friedrich*. Realizing that “the repetition of complex sentence patterns and vocabulary items accompanied a teaching approach that was, all too often, centered on the instructor” (2008, p. 19) Lauer chose instead to enrich his students’ learning by mounting a production of Richter's novel. Originally intended to be a stage reading, the project quickly took on a life of its own, with students memorizing lines and working on their pronunciation. By taking part in a German language play, Lauer’s students were able to move away from an instructor-centred model, as they worked with a script that included a scene written collaboratively by the class.

Liu (2002) points out that language learning is both social and personal, and he draws on the work of Kao and O’Neill (1998) to argue for the use of process drama which “requires language to be used in meaningful, authentic situations, where the focus is on posing questions and seeking answers to those questions” (Liu, 2002, p. 54). Liu makes a clear connection between the use of drama in the foreign language classroom and the need to create meaningful learning contexts for those students. He also explicitly states the need for more studies focusing on classroom use of drama for additional/second/foreign language learners.

Other recent studies of drama in additional/second/foreign language contexts include the work of

Dicks and Le Blanc (2009) who investigated the use of process drama and global simulation to foster positive attitudes and increase motivation in grade 9 and 10 FSL classrooms, and Early and Yeung (2009) who conducted an exploratory case study in a grade 9 core French classroom. Both studies examined the potential of drama-based approaches in core French classrooms in Canadian high schools; one study was conducted in Vancouver, British Columbia and the other in New Brunswick. Within the context of using drama in the language classroom, Dicks and Le Blanc stress the importance of students having a sense of ownership of their own learning, as well as the importance of dramatic play and learning in context. “The concepts of social interaction and the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) are integral to drama for learning, an approach that promotes personal and social development” (Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009, p. 5). Relying on these concepts, the researchers worked together with teachers and students to create a (fictional) youth activity centre (Le centre des jeunes). They documented the dramatic process and followed up with teacher interviews and student surveys. The pilot study yielded positive responses from both students and teachers, who were able to meet the curriculum outcomes expected by the province. The student surveys showed an increase in positive responses in three areas: “students’ responses to the statements A1 (I really enjoy learning French.) and A2 (French is an important part of the school program.) indicated a significant positive change in attitude. Also, statement I3 (I would study French in school even if not required) also showed a significant positive change” (Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009, p. 28).

In their study, Early and Yeung documented a multistage project where core French students wrote and illustrated their own French children’s stories, dramatized some of the scripts, and finally put on a play for a local French immersion school. According to the authors, the students improved their

French vocabulary and syntax and also reported: “they were able to apply those skills specifically in the context of the narrative genre. Many students found it challenging but exciting to engage in an extended practical application of concepts they had been studying” (Early & Yeung, 2009, p. 309-310). Here, the authors touch on the subject of meaningful learning in context, showing that drama lends itself well to teaching real-life language and literacy skills in order to complete the kinds of tasks and achieve the kinds of goals they need to be able to perform in their daily lives.

Drama as “Real-world” Immersion

Engaging in drama and creative learning strategies in the additional/second/foreign language classroom opens up new possibilities for language and literacy pedagogies. There is room for learning the kinds of skills needed in the “real-world” in a make-believe context: purposes for reading and writing are now meaningful within the context of the dramatic world. Students writing in role, for example, as they did in the study conducted by Bournot-Trites et al. (2007) produce texts “that function communicatively for people beyond *learning to read and write*” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p. 140). Their texts are meaningful within the imaginary world they have created in their classroom. These skills are transferable to the real world where “participating in real-life conversations requires sophisticated skills in verbal and behavioural communication: adopting different roles, performing various tasks, using appropriate forms of language, finding suitable forms of social behaviour, and so on” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 35-36). Drama-work is practice for life.

Weaving the Threads

A combination of authentic (within the context of the creative world) language and literacy instruction and drama strategies in additional/second/foreign language classrooms allows different types of learners to explore language in new ways that are creative, physical, and practical. Schewe touches on this notion in his exploration of bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, in which he draws on Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences.

One glance at the intelligences list will suffice in order to realize that a drama-based concept of teaching and learning deserves to be called holistic. Certainly six of the intelligences are heavily drawn upon in day-to-day drama work, and even the remaining two – logical-mathematical and naturalist – could be addressed in specifically designed drama projects. (Schewe, 2002, p. 74)

And in Fleming's words "participation in drama (as creator or spectator) is to engage with the construction of meaning in a way which acknowledges context, culture and values. Drama helps us not to take meaning for granted, to look underneath surface meanings and explore differences" (Fleming, 2001, p. 134). The literature then, shows that the use of drama strategies improves teaching and learning opportunities in the additional/second/foreign language classroom.

In her exploration of the potential of drama for ESL classrooms, Dodson reflects "as language learners take on new characters and adapt to new roles, they practice vocabulary and grammar in a sustained context that mirrors what they can expect when interacting in the target culture" (2002, p. 161). Through drama, teachers and learners build up an authentic context to allow for meaningful language and literacy instruction. According to Wagner, drama is highly relevant in an educational, language arts context where it "aids thinking because it has the same goal as that of all cognition – to

understand, to gain a larger perspective on, and to engage more profoundly with the world. This is the goal of foreign-language teaching at its best, and it should be no surprise that for reaching this goal, drama is a highly effective teaching strategy” (2002, p. 15). Drama simulates an authentic context – and yet the work done within that context is meaningful and practical – it serves to communicate ideas.

The literature I have examined in this section shows that educational drama in an additional/second/foreign language context yields positive learning results and motivates students to learn. “Successful foreign- or second language learning requires an embodied understanding by the learner of the context, land, history, cultural, social and political environments experienced by first-language speakers” (Fels & McGivern, 2002, p. 20). By using drama in class, teachers can foster a desire for inquiry beyond the walls of the classroom. Hegman Shier notes the power of theatre, which has a built-in commitment to process and product, and promotes collective learning that “increases students’ confidence to reach beyond individual limitations. At the same time it promotes students’ responsibility and desire to be actively involved in their own learning process” (Hegman Shier, 2002, p. 184). It seems reasonable to believe that confident and motivated students are more likely to continue to practice the language and literacy skills they have begun to learn in their language classroom.

Still missing in the drama in education literature are first-hand teacher accounts examining possible implementations of drama in additional/second/foreign language teaching and the impact such teaching may have on student motivation and attitudes toward the target language: “conducting valid and reliable research about what is happening in drama oriented language classrooms has been neglected by language teachers and researchers” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 35). In this thesis, I

undertake an exploration of one small aspect of this field: in an action research study I examine what happens when a group of elementary school students are immersed in a combined drama and French class twice a week over a six week period. Teaching French using drama activities, I focus on keeping the language and literacy goals meaningful for the students, encouraging them to improve their French through play.

Chapter 2 – Research Design

In this chapter I discuss my research question, theoretical framework and research design. Using a hands-on action research approach, I explore core French instruction at the elementary level using a drama-based approach. As a non-expert teacher (I am not trained as a drama teacher) I observe the students and listen to their feedback about learning French through drama strategies. It is my hope that this action research study will be of interest to practitioners and researchers alike. I hope it will show that there is a need to foster creative spaces promoting arts-based learning in our curriculum, especially in the field of language and literacy teaching and learning.

Action Research: “What Happens When...?”

While studies show that drama creates positive learning environments, few systematic studies have been conducted which examine drama's impact on learning in foreign language classrooms (Bournot-Trites et. al., 2007; Dodson, 2002). During my study, I actively promote the use of drama and creative learning strategies while also putting them to the test. As the teacher/researcher I build upon a Vygotskian sociocultural framework, which posits that language is best learned in a social setting while interacting with others (Vygotsky, 1978). As drama lends itself well to exploring second language and literacy skills in a social environment, I set out to explore what happens when drama strategies are used to teach core French to a group of elementary school students. “Drama gives students the vicarious experience of a variety of situations, attitudes, roles and worlds” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 2). Asking a “what happens when” question calls for an action research design, allowing the

researcher to try out the teaching strategies she is interested in first hand.

Research Question

The main purpose of my study is to examine an alternative method of teaching core French using a variety of drama approaches as opposed to working from a textbook or worksheet. I ask *what happens when drama strategies are used to teach core French to a group of elementary school students?* My interest lies in seeing how students react to learning solely via drama strategies – does it compensate for the lack of time and intensity that often factor into the teaching of core French? I am also interested in seeing whether this teaching approach helps students better appreciate learning the French language; are they more motivated to continue with French after using a drama-based approach?

Framing the Scene

In this section I will lay out the theoretical assumptions underlying the research I conducted for this study. As suggested by O'Toole (2006), I will begin by situating myself as a researcher and language teacher: “Action research is about change and intervention. ... Firstly the problem or vision must be clearly delineated. Then the *context* – and that includes the researcher's position and role in it – needs to be described as fully as possible” (O'Toole, 2006, p. 50).

Whether I am working with an after school class of hyperactive seven year olds or teaching a morning class of sleepy first year University students, I enjoy having action in my classroom. My students are seldom left sitting in their seats for long; I prefer to have them up and *doing*, interacting

with each other and with me in either French or German (the two languages I currently teach.) My teaching philosophy is to create a fun and comfortable space in which my students of all ages can experiment safely with their language skills. I place emphasis on building trust among the students and between the students and the teacher. I also feel there has to be a balance between teaching the form of a language (grammar and syntax for example) and practicing it aurally, orally and in written formats.

After ten years of teaching second language classes in a variety of school and university settings, I have observed that students learn best when they are engaged in and challenged by the work they do in class. I have found drama to be an excellent vehicle to challenge my students and to allow them the creative freedom in which they can engage with their new language in meaningful ways.

Just as I enjoy being a part of the action while teaching, I find myself taking a similar approach to research – I feel most at home in the thick of things, participating in the action, testing out hypotheses, trying to see “what happens when...?” This type of questioning lends itself well to action research, a “qualitative inquiry through which teachers can research their own practice” (Edmiston & Wilhelm, 1996, p. 85). It is a research design that allows me, the researcher, to wear several hats at once, that of teacher, researcher, observer and facilitator. It is also a participatory type of research, which allows me to interact with my students, and gives me the opportunity to share some of the decision making with them. Their reaction to and assessment of my drama/teaching activities determines to a large extent what we do next.

Research Design

Action research requires reflection by its practitioners. “Listening carefully to determine what puzzles students enables us to shape work around *their* concerns and explore ideas *with* them” (Edmiston & Wilhelm, 1996, p. 85). It is also about “change and intervention” within the context being studied (O’Toole, 2006). Action research allows a teacher/researcher to work toward solving a real problem in the classroom in a step-by-step, trial-and-error manner. It is a four step cyclical model, which requires a) pre-planning, b) implementation, c) observation, and d) reflection. After reflecting on what was observed during the first session, the teacher/researcher re-plans, re-implements, re-observes, and re-reflects. This process can be repeated multiple times; slowly making the kinds of changes and adjustments needed to reach the goal the teacher/researcher has in mind. Sometimes no concrete goal is reached, but as O’Toole points out “action research is never wasted. At the very least, some unproductive interventions have been ruled out” (2006, p. 51). Action research reports are usually written in the first person:

To do otherwise is difficult to defend methodologically. The practitioner researcher examines his or her own role, behaviour and relationships in a particular social situation as part of the investigation. At the core of action research lies the process of reflection in which research data is used to inform an ever-deepening understanding of the complexities and richness of social interaction in groups. (Somekh, 1995, p.347)

Reflection is an integral part of action research, closely linked with decision-making by the cyclical process of the method. Each practitioner effectively makes the method her own, as her mode of viewing the world shapes her reflections and her decisions. Reflection is also an important step in which to engage the whole group. It is necessary for the whole class to reflect on what has happened in

the lesson as a way of building trust and commitment to the process (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). In order to encourage my students to reflect on the day's lesson, they were asked to complete exit slips at the end of every class. I also checked-in with them several times during class and we had the opportunity to reflect on the process as a whole during our focus group interviews.

Implementation of Research Design

Over the course of my pilot action research study I wanted to invite my students to get to know themselves and their new language (French) better through drama. As I reflected upon my first lesson in my journal I noted that it was my goal “to have the students feel more comfortable with the language [French] while using it in fun yet functional ways” (Personal journal, May 2010). I used drama strategies to allow the students to practise “real-world¹⁰” language and literacy skills, such as reading, negotiating, or conversing. The multi-modal nature of drama (Cope, Kalantzis, & Group, 2000; Siegel, 2006) allowed my students to express themselves in different ways, both verbally and physically and lent itself well as an approach for actively teaching language and literacy skills. “Drama helps students to own their learning; drama comes to personally involve them in that learning; it helps them to experience and express their learning as a story” (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 139). As an example of this, my students often got caught up in the stories they were creating in class – so caught up they forgot they were actually practicing French.

My teaching strategies were drama-based and developed from student feedback and input. Relying on improvisation and drama activities my students and I experimented with basic French

¹⁰ I refer here to practical skills students also need to perform in their everyday lives, outside of our dramatic world.

dialogue, creating and re-creating short verbal exchanges through which my students could learn from each other in a social setting. It was my goal to be able, at one point, to step back and allow my students to be the “experts.” I find it very telling that when I asked the students during our first lesson to respond to the prompts “I like French because...” and “I don't like French because...,” one student wrote: “I don't like learning French because some French teachers don't think you can count past *trois* without help.” I took this as evidence that the students wanted to be independent thinkers and learners, “experts” in their own right.

In order to test the hypothesis that students will be more motivated and successful French language learners if taught through drama, I decided to simultaneously don the hat of a teacher and a researcher: I conducted an action research study in which I taught basic French literacy skills, (reading, writing and speaking) to a group of elementary students solely via drama. The first lesson was a chance to get to know my students and to assess their current level(s) of French orally and in writing. I took Wilburn's advice that within educational drama, the teacher provides the structure, allowing the learners to “influence the outcome of the activity. Therefore, the teacher begins by clearly defining for him/herself the aims, approaches, and boundaries to be used for each session” (Wilburn, 1992, p. 70). I began with an informal chat as we sat in a circle, introducing myself and what I was doing, and asking the students to introduce themselves and to share some of their previous French experiences. I then asked the students to work in small groups to make a list of what they felt they already knew in French, as well as what they would like to work on with me. Overall, the class felt relatively confident about naming the months, using basic greetings, counting, and listing colours. They expressed interest in learning proper spelling, “how to use words in sentences” and perhaps most telling of all “sentences

and things we can use in life.” My intention as a language teacher was to introduce the students to French through the medium of drama – as a living language to which they could relate on a personal level. I wanted them to use the language in ways that were meaningful to them and at their level of language learning.

After completing these formalities, we plunged directly into the material: drama activities in French. My first priority was to establish a good rapport with the students, and to allow them to feel comfortable working with me and with each other. In order to establish my classroom (actually the school's staff room) as a “safe” space, I chose a few games that I would be able to repeat at the start of every lesson, to ground the students and to give them an activity they recognized and could excel in. My interpretation of a pedagogically “safe” space is one in which everyone can feel free to make mistakes, as I feel strongly that we learn most when taking risks and while making mistakes. A “safe” classroom is also a place of trust and mutual respect; a community in which the members support each other's ideas and learning styles and processes.

During our first lesson, we played a name game. I wrote the phrases “Je m'appelle...” and “Il/Elle s'appelle...” on the board and had everyone repeat it in chorus. We then formed a circle, and I demonstrated the game in which each participant calls out his or her name (“Je m'appelle Eva”) and accompanies it with an action. The rest of the group mimics the action, while saying “he/she is called ...” (“Il/Elle s'appelle Eva”). This first activity served the dual function of giving me practice with everyone's name, while also getting everyone used to moving around in our new classroom space (which we created by pushing tables and chairs against the walls). It was also a good opportunity to

collectively get nervous giggling and initial shyness out of everyone's system.

I observed the class during this first meeting and journaled my thoughts after the lesson. In my first journal entry I noted that the students “participated well and seemed eager to improve their French.” While journaling I reflected on what we had done in class and how the students had responded to my approach and to the various activities. I then repeated this cycle twice weekly over a six week period, often re-planning my lessons based on my in-class observations and student input. As a final check-in I interviewed the students in two smaller groups at the end of the study. During these two focus group interviews, we collectively reflected on the process of our learning journey.

My class consisted of eight grade 6 and two grade 5 students from the same 4/5/6 split class at Cedar Springs Elementary School, a Montessori school in Vancouver, British Columbia. With the exception of one student, who had recently transferred out of French immersion, and another, who had a French tutor, the students had little to no previous experience learning French. Based on the information I gathered during our initial meeting, as well as during two wrap-up focus group interviews, the other eight students had only had a minimal exposure to French, mainly in grades four and five.

The students described their previous French lessons as being focused on learning basic vocabulary such as numbers and colours, which they did not find very useful. They also expressed frustration with what they felt was a lack of continuity from one year to the next; they felt they were taught the same material from year to year. When asked about her previous French experience Katja wrote: “I started learning French in grade four, then I did basically the same French in grade 5 and I

just learned the colours, clothes, food etc. I also learned how to greet people but I don't really know how to write in French. I don't remember that much of French, because when I learned it I just memorized it for tests then forgot it.”

At the beginning of our lessons together the class had mixed feelings about learning French; responses to the prompt *I don't like learning French because* ranged from “sometimes it is a little challenging” and “it is more complicated than English but that would not make me quit” to “I don't like tests or having to repeat after the teacher” and “some of the exercises have no point at all.” Responses to the prompt *I like learning French because* included variations of “it is fun to learn another language,” “with Eva everything is more fun” and “if you can speak well you can go to Paris or Montreal!”

During our first meeting the group consisted only of grade six students. However, their regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, asked two grade five students to join us for our second lesson. Gabriella spoke Spanish at home and therefore had a certain affinity for French. She was planning to begin late French immersion the following school year (grade 6). Carly was receiving regular instruction from a private French tutor, as her parents were also planning to start her in late immersion the following year. I now had the added challenge of two students who already had a fairly good grasp of French, Carly and Ryan who had recently opted out of French immersion, while the other eight were beginners. In my journal I noted “the challenge will be to engage his [Ryan's] curiosity and intellect” (Personal journal, May 2010). I resolved to put Carly and Ryan to work as my assistants whenever possible and to make use of their French “expertise.” I am less concerned with the success of this

particular strategy than with the overall outcome of the pilot project. Did the majority of the students leave my classroom feeling positively about continuing to acquire French as an additional language? I will speak to this question only briefly at this point, as I will discuss it in more detail elsewhere. However, I will say that based on my own observations and the feedback I received from the students during their exit interview in June, as well as based on the feedback I received from a parent¹¹ and from the classroom teacher, the students generally felt positively about coming to class and about their acquisition of French. “They had positive attitudes about coming to my class and they told me they felt learning a new language would open doors for them” (Personal journal, May 2010). With the exception of the two students who already spoke a fair amount of French, the class was eager to continue the experiment and to continue to learn French via drama the following school year¹², citing enjoyment and the chance to be active while learning as reasons for wanting to continue using the approach.

Working with a mixed level group I opted to teach to the lowest common denominator while encouraging the two students with prior knowledge to be supported by my assistants. I began by building on the basic activities I used during the first class, including “je m'appelle” plus an action. My goal was to slowly build up the classes' comfort level, building trust-based relationships among the students and between the students and myself. In a slow step-by-step manner, using short trust-building activities, which allowed us to get used to our classroom, we moved around interacting with others in our new space. As we moved through a variety of activities I realized that some students needed more structure

¹¹ Maria's mother approached me about half way through the project to tell me that her daughter was thoroughly enjoying her new French classes and had been telling her mother that she felt she was really learning a lot in class.

¹² In fact, during a follow-up interview with the classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, I was told that Julie had approached her to ask if and when I was returning to teach French again. Julie said she missed learning French through drama.

than others and one of my challenges was finding a balance that worked for the class as a whole. Eventually, as Heathcote advises, I stepped back from my role as teacher/leader and the students began to take turns at being “the experts.” I was still there to help provide more structure should it be needed. Using activities with which the class was now familiar, we began to navigate our way through a variety of French texts, stories, poems and dialogues.

I added a new game featuring *le tigre volant* (the flying tiger) the basic premise of which involves tossing around a stuffed animal (in our case, a tiger). Whoever catches *tigre* completes a sentence with “J'aime ...” (I like ...) and tosses *tigre* to someone else in the circle. The recipient repeats “Il/Elle aime ...” (he/she likes) and then adds another sentence with “J'aime...”. Before beginning this exercise, I went over the meaning of “j'aime” and its conjugation and we brainstormed things we might like, such as foods, sports, and music. Once the students began to get the hang of the game, we sped it up, and ended it with a speed round. The students enjoyed the challenge and often requested one more speed round.

We repeated this game and variations of it in most of the following classes, allowing the students to familiarize themselves with certain vocabulary (of their own choosing) and to feel comfortable speaking quickly - without hesitation and without having to read off the board. Many of the students later told me that this game was one their favourite in-class activities. It didn't seem to bore them despite the repetition because we kept it challenging by adding new vocabulary and new phrases, such as “je suis” and “je ne suis pas.” One of my challenges as a teacher was being flexible enough to improvise new variations of the game that were suitable to the language learning level. The variations

included exercises such as working in a group to create new sentences: each student then chooses one sentence to recite when *tigre* is tossed to him. “Improvisational drama is effective because of the repeated pressure it puts on participants to respond. It is not enough for students to hear the target language spoken; they need to talk themselves” (Wagner, 2002, p. 4). As a teacher I had to measure the energy level and gauge when the students were having fun learning or when they were just plain having fun. (I believe in the need for unstructured play, but as it was not a component of my study I tried to avoid such moments). We therefore never played any one game for too long, moving on to new activities as soon as I felt the class was warmed up and feeling comfortable in the space. I also valued *tigre* games because they allowed everyone to be active and also kept everyone alert: one never knew where *tigre* would fly next.

In order to introduce written French to the class I had the students work with a storybook called *Sami à la mer* (2008). We worked with the text (which included illustrations and was written in relatively simple French) over several classes. I read the story aloud to the class in sections and I had them re-read it in small groups (each lead by one of my “experts”). In a June journal entry I wrote “I found it made sense to finish working through the story with pauses for explanations, guesses as to meaning and repetitions of words and sounds. The students seem to enjoy reading aloud for themselves – speaking French – and guessing at meanings.” The students then picked scenes to re-enact via tableaux. By using their bodies to tell a story, language students, especially beginners, can get around the obstacles sometimes presented by missing vocabulary or weak grammar skills.

The concrete conceptual framework provided by dramatic situations can both encourage and enable students to compose and transcribe for authentic reasons. The discussions and

reflections arising from the possibilities and explorations within imagined and felt situations can lead to a variety of written activities. We write to see what we think we have said. (Booth, 1998, p. 73)

As a final step, each group summarized their scene in writing, with astounding results¹³. While reading their written texts it is important to keep in mind that each group contained a French “expert” who already knew how to read and write and who could guide the group and provide a certain sense of confidence. The original text was also available to provide help for spelling, sentence structure and finding vocabulary. While one group relied heavily on the original text, sometimes copying complete sentences, they still had to understand and process what they read -and eventually- wrote. What emerged from this process and what interested me most both as a teacher and as a researcher was the students' increased confidence using the French language. I was amazed to note the energy one group in particular put into creating and writing their text. I was not concerned with how much they were relying on the source text, or on the group's “expert.” My focus was on the fact that they were enjoying the process of creating a text in French.

What I found fascinating was the group's genuine desire to produce a “good” written text. The students made use of the available resources, including each other, to tell their stories. One aspect of having them do challenging work, was that it gave them great personal satisfaction and a sense of independence; a moment Vygotsky (1978) would describe as the 'zone of proximal development,' the optimal learning situation in which, with guidance from a teacher or a peer, an individual can solve problems that would normally be just beyond her cognitive abilities. With the aid of scaffolding, such as drama activities guided by a teacher, and learning collectively with support from peers, the language

¹³ See appendices.

learner is able to push the boundaries of what she knows. To quote Gabriella's comment during our focus group interview: "...we learnt more words there [with *Sami à la mer*] and, like, what some signs meant, like how to pronounce them, the symbols." Maria, too, comments that she enjoyed using the storybook: "I remember a bunch of the vocabulary from there, so, also because we spent a lot of time on it, it kind of stuck in."

Building on the ideas of Kao and O'Neill (1998) I argue that drama allows us to suspend reality and to create an illusion of the real world. Activities such as writing in role or writing as an extension of a drama activity should be considered authentic literacy practices as participants in the drama perform a task that is meaningful in the context of the drama. Instead of engaging in "school-only activities" students immerse themselves in a world they help create. They take on new roles and responsibilities in the context of the drama activity and in an additional/second/foreign language. Their reading, writing and speaking moves away from learning by rote, as they improvise dialogue or write in role. "Since the dramatic situations are under the control of the entire group and not the teacher alone, students develop a kind of ownership toward the activity" (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 2). The students must therefore be involved in developing the story or the dialogue so that the drama can move forward.

Looking Through a Sociocultural Lens

Language learning, like other forms of learning, is a social process (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). In my experience, the best teachable moments in additional/second/foreign language teaching arise while students are experimenting with the language, and (as far as is possible within the constraints of a classroom) with the culture. While this does not replace the type of learning done

when immersed in the new language in the “real world,” experimenting with language allows students to interact with each other, to practice their language skills together and to learn from each other's mistakes. Drama helps students build an imaginary linguistic, cultural and social world in which they can practice their communication skills in a supportive environment (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Miccoli, 2003). I ground my thinking in the theories of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, and the social school of thought born from his ideas, when I state that language learning is done best in social settings interacting with others such as family, friends, and acquaintances. Social interactions in the classroom with peers and teachers, as well as more academic language instruction, also play an important part in language learning.

Vygotsky states that human development, including language development takes place in the social domain. Humans, as social beings, learn how to behave and how to express themselves by imitating and interacting with others. Children especially, learn by trial and error, testing out behaviours and skills in social settings. Vygotsky writes: “Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults” (1978, p. 88). Drama as a teaching approach suits such social beings – to capture our interest and to help us develop into functioning members of the society in which we live: “drama needs more than individual imagination; drama worlds are created and experienced in *interaction*” (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 5).

Drama as a teaching approach places language learning firmly in the social domain. It encourages student-centered learning in a social setting, where the teacher takes on a secondary role,

encouraging students to take on leadership roles and take ownership of their learning, supported by the teacher who helps stimulate positive encounters with a new language. The teacher is still present in this scenario, guiding the learning, nudging students in the right direction. “Teacher-student interaction is crucial in drama. Although drama work follows students' interests and suggestions, the teacher is responsible for sequencing tasks and shaping the drama” (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 5).

An example of this type of learning is Dorothy Heathcote's *mantle of the expert* approach, which involves students becoming cognizant of the fact that they are learning: “...they have to take responsibility at some stage for their own learning. A mantle of the expert approach can do all this – *and without members of the class falling into their traditional role of students/learners*” (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 16). Heathcote's approach involves the whole class in a role drama, with the teacher taking on a secondary role as she guides the learning and keeps the class on track. However, after providing the necessary tools, she allows the students to continue exploring the issues by themselves (Wagner, 1979). In the language classroom, this type of experience, of living in another language, of “gaining compassion for another's experiences” (Fels and McGivern, 2002, p. 27), guided by a knowledgeable expert, pushes the learner just slightly out of her comfort zone, nudging her toward a higher level of language use and comprehension.

I argue that by allowing the creation of imaginary worlds (Kao & O'Neill, 1998), drama effectively simulates an immersion setting in a way most traditional language teaching approaches cannot. A teacher's flexibility and inventiveness are an important part of this type of language teaching: “these qualities will, consequently, inspire confidence and linguistic skills among students.

Through drama, teacher and students together enter the world of increasingly authentic scenarios and creative dialogues” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 2). Maintaining the energy and focus required to be a flexible and inventive teacher was sometimes quite demanding both physically and emotionally. I found teaching through drama to be both highly rewarding as well as at times quite challenging in terms of the amounts of energy it requires.

As I begin to undertake the journey of a teacher/researcher, I find that moving the focus away from myself and onto the students allows them to step into a different role and to test their knowledge of their new language, much like in Heathcote's *mantle of the expert* approach. After becoming familiar with certain drama strategies, the students again push the boundaries of their knowledge as they begin to take ownership of their own explorations. They guide their own learning and begin to take risks, such as speaking more French, trying to incorporate newly taught concepts or vocabulary – and in the case of some of my students, voluntarily practicing their French at home or with friends outside of school.

Chapter 3 – Results

I also think the things we learnt were more useful than saying “hi, bye” and how to say 24. It's something you'll actually use in life. Not saying “I want pancakes”. But like, something actually useful, that's also why it stuck. (Maria, June 2010 interview)

The action research study discussed in this thesis explores the use of drama strategies to teach core French to a group of elementary school students. The findings show that drama is a powerful motivator providing opportunities for learning through play. Through interviews, narrative, and reflexive journaling, I observed and reflected on the kind of learning that happened in my classroom over the course of six weeks. My findings show that using drama as a teaching approach increases learner autonomy and allows the students to co-create the curriculum, thus investing in their own learning.

Puzzling Together the Pieces

The results of my study were overall very positive and encouraging. The students who participated expressed a great deal of interest in continuing to study French through drama and seemed genuinely excited about learning French in future years. One student, Julie, told me that she had at first reacted negatively to having to take a French class: “I would be like 'I hate French,' 'cuz it just really didn't work out that well. But when you came I was like, whenever it's after recess and then Mrs. Black always like 'all the grade sixes have to go with Eva now,' and then I would always be like 'Yes! There's French after recess!’”

Julie's comment resonated with others in the class, who had also been cautious when they were first informed about the new French class. However, the students assured me that once they knew what to expect, they began to enjoy the French lessons: “first class, I thought it would be like sitting around reading from a book. And repeating after the teacher, and then the second class and the third class I knew more what we were gonna do” (Colter, June 2010 interview). Colter's comment underscores Kao and O'Neill's message that drama is useful in the second language context because it “provides contexts for multiple language encounters and encourages authentic dialogue between teachers and students. As a result, the usual classroom interactions are profoundly and productively altered” (1998, p. 1). The French lessons were not limited to just “sitting around reading from a book” (although we did read and work with one); the lessons were animated, active and somewhat unpredictable. The students actively created their own learning, they helped chose the topics and the vocabulary we worked with, and they created their own imagined worlds – resulting in their perception that they had learned “something actually useful” (Maria, June 2010 interview). Students actively involved in meaning-making through dramatic play need not passively accept teacher-mandated activities, instead they cooperate as a group to imaginatively resolve a given task (Wilburn, 1992).

Gabriella: I learnt like more French in this class than I have like in the other classes, 'cuz they usually like, in the past, 'cuz I've done two years of French, they don't really like, teach you that much. I learnt more in this one month than I have in those two years (murmurs of agreement) 'cuz they were like ... they would like repeat the same thing for those both two years and then it would be like counting and the same thing over and over again. And everybody already knew that. So it got kind of boring. But they never like advanced from counting, and like, days of the week. So, and here we actually like read a book and did more things.

Katja: Yeah, I think I learnt more as well. From all of it, 'cuz all the other ones they just give you a piece of paper, told you to memorize it all and gave some of the words in a test.

And you had to know what they meant. And then so, I did that, but then I forgot what they meant, 'cuz I was so bored.

Using drama as a teaching approach gave these students a chance to break away from rote memorization. They were learning French for a purpose – in order to communicate with each other and with the teacher. Ralph (1997) attests to “the motivational power of using drama in teaching for arousing and maintaining interest, for stimulating learning, and for evoking feelings of worth, both for the students and for the teacher, in second-language programs” (p. 1). The students sensed they were making progress and at the same time, they were having fun in the French language classroom. As I reflected upon my first encounter with the students I wrote about my excitement about being afforded the opportunity to work with drama in the core French classroom.

As a language teacher and student I firmly believe that we need to change our approach to teaching core French in BC. Especially at the elementary level there is a need to instill a curiosity about language learning and a desire to continue working with the target language outside of school. The process should be fun, creative and inspiring. This does not imply a lack of structure – simply a change of attitude. Let's model French as being a fun, living, functional language. (Personal journal, May 2010).

Data Collection

I collected much of my data during two focus group interviews conducted with the students in June 2010, which are further discussed later in the chapter, as well as by observing the class. I recorded these observations and reflected upon them in journal entries after every lesson. I had several discussions with the students' regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, about the progress students were making in her class and how the French lessons appeared to be impacting them, as well as how the class production of *The Tempest* was progressing. (I watched the dress rehearsal of the show in June

2010). I sat in on Mrs. Black's class twice to observe how she integrated drama in the classroom. I also triangulated my findings by discussing them in a follow-up interview with Mrs. Black in December 2010.

During one of my sessions observing Mrs. Black's class, the students were rehearsing *The Tempest*. In my journal entry I noted: “rehearsal was in full swing when I arrived. Mrs. Black had promised me chaos and even though different groups of kids were engaged in different activities, they were mostly focused on their tasks – memorizing lines or doing worksheets or painting sets. As the team rehearsing the scene aboard the boat repeated their actions and lines, Mrs. Black encouraged them to *feel* the part, reminding them they were in a storm and about to capsize.” As an observer I was captivated by the teacher’s and the students' focus on and engagement in the rehearsal. During our follow-up interview, Mrs. Black told me “I guess when they were rehearsing their parts, they were working on some form of trying to get movement going [asking] 'what is going on in this scene?' Getting them to really try to think about what was happening.” From my vantage point as observer I saw the students investing in the make-believe world they were co-creating; bringing characters, places and events to life. While some students preferred to run the lights or play a musical instrument, everyone was engaged in the play and in its creation.

In addition to these methods of data collection, at the end of each of my lessons, I regularly asked the students to spend a few minutes responding to 3 short prompts, always the same ones: *I enjoyed today's class because, I didn't enjoy...*, and *next time I would like*. The prompts allowed the students to share the day's successes as well as any perceived problems or areas where the lesson could be

improved. The final prompt was meant to invite general feedback or suggestions for other activities. In general, the responses were perfunctory – only one or two word answers, often to only one or two of the prompts, with the prompt *I didn't enjoy* going mostly unanswered. I at first attributed this brevity in feedback to the rush to head out for lunch right after my class. In speaking to Mrs. Black, however, she confirmed my sense that the students were a particularly positive group, which might explain why they almost never answered the prompt *I didn't enjoy*¹⁴. “They were an incredibly positive group, I have to say. My whole class was pretty enthusiastic about, not everything, but they were a pretty positive bunch¹⁵.” The critical prompt remained an option at the end of every lesson to encourage the students to think critically about the process and to leave the door open to express any misgivings or negative experiences. In one instance Chris made use of the prompt to express his discomfort with an in-class activity: “my group forced me to be Narrator and I have one of the worst skill levels in my group, but they still force me! Also I am the starter of the scene (the first person on the scene)¹⁶.” This insight was a good reminder that practicing drama requires a “safe” environment built on trust, in which everyone is comfortable performing his or her assigned task. It also underlined the importance of reflecting on the process in a group setting afterwards. “Where drama has not been immediately successful, reflection can save a situation from degenerating still further” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 32).

The two students who came into the class with a very clear “anti-French” attitude often responded very positively in writing – a medium in which they were not performing for their peers. I found this

¹⁴ With the exception of the day I sang a song with them, which many felt was “too high.” This perception might be due to my singing the song myself... my classically trained voice can be discouraging for new singers and I have resolved to use recordings or to play an instrument in future when teaching children to sing.

¹⁵ December 2010 Interview with Mrs. Black

¹⁶ I am happy to say that only a few lessons later Chris asked me how to say “I like this class” in French.

very encouraging. Although there is not any one teaching method that works for every student, it was clear that even those who were anti-French (or perhaps anti-drama?) did enjoy some aspects of the experience, as long as they did not have to admit it to the rest of the class. Carly, who decided to opt out of the class in the last week¹⁷, often acted up in class (and also in her regular classroom) but nevertheless wrote very positive responses about the lessons: “Everything was pretty much FUN¹⁸” and another time she wrote “the Sami story was very fun.” Ryan wrote: “It was good. More fun than French in class is.”

The student's input was an important part of my reflection and planning phases. I received an overwhelmingly positive response to the work we did with the storybook *Sami à la mer*. Katja wrote: “I get to read in French and try to figure it out.” Ali wrote: “It was fun reading the book and I learned some new words.” Chris rightly pointed out that during one lesson in particular he had not enjoyed “sitting for a while and reading the whole time.” (Time ran away from me that particular lesson and we were not as active as I had planned to be). Julie wrote: “It was really fun reading the book in French and I can understand it really quickly.” Based on these and similar responses, we continued to work with *Sami à la mer*, using it as the starting point for scenes, improvisational games and writing exercises. Because the feedback and response in the classroom continued to be positive, we continued building on Sami's story. During one of the focus group interviews all three students highlighted the book as contributing to their enjoyment of learning to read in French. When I asked the same group what activities they had learnt the most from there was a general chorus of: “the reading!” and “Sami!”

¹⁷ In discussion with the classroom teacher I learnt that Carly had decided to take a break from the French lessons. This was apparently not an unusual decision for her and she did not indicate that she was opting out of the study entirely.

¹⁸ Written in rainbow colours.

Katja explained that working with the book had been helpful because: “I can see it in my head, like as visual memory. And so I can't really learn very well from when I just hear it.” Julie on the other hand enjoyed moving away from the written text, preferring to embody it instead: “I would really like to do the outdoor activities again, like when we had the book about Sami, we would do the tableaux outside. And that was lots of fun because we could kind of run around and do what's in the story.” Julie was the most outgoing student in the class and enjoyed jumping into activities headfirst. Interestingly, Katja, a more visual learner, felt the tableaux had not really worked well. She felt that doing them outside had been “too fun” and that “people weren't really paying attention, they were just playing.” Joelle, too, wanted more visual material and in one of her early written responses expressly asked for worksheets “like a booklet for example. A title page to colour and on the inside the words to do with the title like school and stuff that you do in school in French and ways you can learn about them.” These varied responses highlight the importance of using various teaching approaches, even in an experiment such as this where the focus is on the use of drama-based work. In response to these and other comments, my drama activities expanded to include written texts and called for a mix of speaking, listening and writing.

Data Analysis

My research design, action research, calls for the continual analysis of the data collected during every lesson. Reflecting upon what I had experienced and observed while teaching, I used narrative to help me interpret my findings. By journaling my process I was able to use my own narrative to critically reflect upon my teaching as well as upon what was happening in class. The students'

narratives, which were provided to me via their weekly responses, their written assignments and finally during the two focus group interviews, complemented my personal perspective. The observations and insights of the students' regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, served to ground the other narratives.

By observing the students in class and by reflecting on what we did during our lessons, it became clear to me that the majority of the students were not only improving their French, but more importantly, they were gaining confidence in their own ability to learn an additional/second/foreign language. “Research findings document the value of drama in the development of competence and confidence in using the target language. Positive attitudes to learning and an increase in social and cognitive skills among students have also been noted” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 1). While my students were positive to begin with, their attitudes towards French class improved – as did their self-confidence about speaking French.

During our last lesson we did a review of our newly acquired French skills and our drama games and strategies. I also asked the students to write what they felt they had learned that day. Katja wrote: “I learned how to use sentences in French, how to figure out what something says in French by looking at the words you know and that learning French is lots of fun!” Maria wrote: “I learned some new vocab. I enjoyed the songs/poems (Marie Madeleine) and going back to Sami [smiley face]. I also learned how to figure out what words are by looking at them and using your previous knowledge.” Gabriella's response was along similar lines: “I learnt how to read simple French words and how to say things about myself. I also learnt a lot of new words. It was a lot of fun.” Some of these final responses were less eloquent: “I learned lots of new words. Also I learned two new songs.” “I

learned how to sing some basic songs and some animals.” “I’m not sure what [we] learned today since we learned it before.” And some of the responses were the kind of encouraging feedback any teacher would enjoy: “I learned more French (of course) and I learned a new song/poem that I liked. I enjoyed everything because it was our last class and we learned everything that we learned before but more!” Joelle, one of my shyest students, indicated a clear enthusiasm for the drama work we did in class: “we did a lot of stuff like we redid Sami which was fun also we saw *tigre* again and I learned a lot of new words which makes me glad!”

Focus Group Interviews

At the end of our six weeks together, I sat down with the students, in two groups, for a focus group interview. I wanted to hear their views about our study and what they felt they had learned, as well as what had worked for them and what had not. I was able to talk with eight of the ten as Carly had opted out of the group and Ali had a dentist appointment that day. I therefore spoke first with a group of five students and then with a group of three. I made a point of putting Chris and Colter, fraternal twins, into different groups. I also separated Katja and Maria, who are very close friends, so that every child could speak freely, without feeling the need to agree with a sibling or a friend.

According to my observations and notes, the students were actively engaged in the French lessons and the drama activities. They were motivated and participated well. They were also generous about sharing their thoughts in response to my questions.

Excerpt from focus group 2:

Eva: So what are your thoughts now about French overall?

Katja: It's fun if you learn it in a fun way.

Colter: Yeah.

Gabriella: Yeah, French is fun if you learn it in, like, that way. But if you learn it in another way it's boring.

Colter: And if you learn it just by, like, repeating you'll never remember it.

Gabriella: Yeah, 'cuz you're just, like, repeating it, you're not really paying attention to any of it.

Colter: You don't...

Katja: You don't have to pay attention; you just have to say what they said.

Colter: That's what I did in grade five.

Gabriella: I know and, like, for example they would, like, repeat it but they wouldn't do anything, like, for example the game, where you have to say and not repeat, so you actually have to think and remember. Like the other times, the person would be like “repeat” and “repeat this”, and you'd like be “oh, okay” and you'd repeat it, but then like ... you never remember it. (laughs).

Eva: Okay, so this made you think a little more.

General reply: Yeah.

Katja: It's more Montessori.

Colter: Yeah, Montessori style. Not just sitting at your desk and writing stuff, or repeating after the teacher.

The game Gabriella refers to is a variation of *tigre* in which we did a speed round of sentences with *je n'aime pas / j'aime ...* without repeating a previously used sentence. Based on what the students told me in the two exit interviews, they felt that the drama activities had allowed them the freedom to

express themselves rather than just parroting back sentences fed to them by the teacher. They brainstormed the words they wanted to learn and they had the opportunity to keep practising them through games and reading and writing activities. As Julie said: “we'd do it over and over and I think it's really fun 'cuz when we use *tigre* we have new sentences in French that we would talk about.” Maria added: “we did a different thing every time and you kind of have to think fast. And then that's quite useful, 'cuz sometimes, you don't always have time to think for 5 minutes about what you're going to say before you say it.”

The students responded very candidly to my questions during the two interviews. When I asked them about their impressions of our first few lessons together, Katja told me that she didn't know what to expect the first time: “so it was just like 'oh, wow.' And then in the second one I expected it, so it wasn't as crazy.” Gabriella agreed: “yeah, like the first time I expected to do like boring French class. But it was fun. So in the second class I knew what to expect.” Colter, too, was pleasantly surprised not be sitting around reading from a book or repeating after the teacher.

Even though I highlighted the fact that we would be doing French through drama, the students focused on the fact that it was *French* class. They made sense of our process by comparing it to other French lessons they had experienced. Julie, for example, noticed that we had spent time working repeatedly with the same sets of vocabulary and basic grammar rules: “I'll remember a lot of it ... because you were teaching us really slowly so it just goes in our head, like it just stays like a magnet. It just comes and it sticks to your brain.” From my perspective as the teacher, I never felt that we were going through the material slowly – we seemed to be moving along quite quickly. However, Julie and I

would have been focusing on quite different things. I was attempting to stay one step ahead of the class, observing them and modifying my lesson plan, trying new variations of an activity. As a participant Julie would have focused on content rather than on methodology. Joelle perceived that doing French through drama “was easier because you weren't just sitting all day.” She later added, “I liked it because you took your time. You didn't rush through it all in, like, a day.”

All nine students who completed the study expressed an interest in continuing to use a drama-based approach to learn French. Chris stated, “I want to do more of this, to learn more vocabulary and different words and how to express your feelings more.” Maria added “I also like it because it's a very small group, so it's easier to learn. Like when it's a whole class it's just kind of obnoxious.” Ryan wrote: “It was enjoyable, I guess.” Gabriella felt she had learned more French in our six-week course than during two previous years of French instruction. Katja agreed, stating that her past French instruction had mainly revolved around learning for a test, after which she would forget whatever she had memorized. The students often complained about previous French classes in which they were asked to learn for a test, saying they just memorized words and immediately forgot them again. Maria felt she wasn't going to forget her new vocabulary so quickly this time: “I remember games more than textbooks, so it's a more fun way of learning and when it's fun you remember it.”

When asked what could be done to improve the experience of learning French through drama strategies, Maria requested having the lessons for a longer period of time “like for the whole year. And then we'd probably get a little farther than where we are now. It's kind of like-- it was not a very long time, so what knowledge we got here, if you multiply it by three that would be a lot.” Joelle requested

more activities with *tigre*, “because it was fun to hold and throw around and learn words.”

Limitations of Study

This study was limited to one class in one school over a six-week period. Ideally this study should be repeated in a number of classes in a variety of schools (including schools in less affluent neighborhoods, and schools without any special programming such as a Montessori program). Although this study can be replicated by other teacher/researchers it is important to note that “the use of drama approaches make unique demands on the teacher, who will be required to assume functions in these activities that go beyond the more usual ones of an instructor, model and resource” (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 1). The experiment will therefore be different for every teacher, depending on their energy, flexibility and comfort level using drama strategies in the classroom. (This is not so much a limitation as a variation in design).

As a researcher, I was an outsider who pulled the students out of their regular multi-age classroom to work with a select group of students (mainly the grade sixes). Although I am not a trained drama expert, I do feel comfortable using drama in the classroom, and I am a fluent speaker of French. It must be noted that these are factors that may well have contributed to the overall success of this study.

It is also worth noting that the outcomes of my study reflect the process of a particular group of students and a particular teacher/researcher – such is the nature of action research. The results of each study are unique to the group of participants and researchers. Every repetition of this study will yield

different results, reflecting variables such as different students, a different teacher, varying degrees of previous experience with drama, or a less supportive classroom teacher and/or school administration. The results discussed in this chapter apply to the specific group of students I had the privilege to work with, and cannot be extrapolated to every student or every class. Every class has its own dynamic. A repetition of the study will necessarily call for planning, implementation, observation and reflection that suits that particular group of students and circumstances. My study points the way for further studies engaging with questions such as: In what ways does this approach engage learners and promote the continued learning of French? How can drama be used to develop and improve French language and literacy skills?

Drama is Fun

In their 2009 study, Dicks and Le Blanc found that high school students enrolled in grade 9 and 10 core French responded positively to the use of drama education in the French language classroom. Their pilot study showed improved student attitudes and increased motivation to continue learning French. My findings are similar; the use of drama strategies engaged my students' interest and challenged them. As a language teacher and an avid language learner I firmly believe that drama can empower and inspire students. Its multi-modality makes it conducive to teaching literacy skills, and it affords students creative freedom giving them a positive entry point into language learning. As a researcher I aim to help move language teaching in a new direction by exploring the innovative and interactive teaching and learning approaches with which drama provides us. I strongly feel that drama facilitates a positive connection to language acquisition, improving attitudes towards language learning.

Chapter 4 – Analysis and Discussion

Getting Creative

EVA sits at her computer, consulting her data as she writes up a scene portraying her students in action during one of her French lessons.

(The scene: The staff room of an elementary school somewhere in Vancouver, British Columbia. A group of ten students, aged 11 and 12, and their teacher stand in a circle, tossing a stuffed tiger back and forth.)

JOELLE

(Catching the tiger) Je suis parfois maladroite. (Throws tiger)

KATJA

(Catching the tiger) Je suis hyperactif! (Throws tiger)

RYAN

(Catching the tiger) Je ne suis pas ... une mouette. (Everyone laughs) (Throws tiger)

CHRIS

(Catching the tiger) J'aime ... How do you say “this class?” ... cette classe. (Throws tiger)

EVA

(Catching the tiger) J'aime le chocolat! Okay, we'll do one last round – a speed round.

JULIE

(Bouncing up and down) Oh, me first, me first! (Catching the tiger) J'adore le sport! (Throws tiger and giggles as it bounces off MARIA's head and she jumps to catch it.)

(The round continues until EVA interrupts it.)

EVA

Merci tout le monde! Maintenant nous allons essayer le jeux du Taxi. We'll play a new version of the Taxi game now. We'll do it in two groups: let's try Katja, Colter, Joelle, Julie and Ryan in one group and Ali, Maria, Gabriella, Chris and Carly in the other. This time I'd like you to pick a character from the Sami story and an adjective to describe that character. What are a few examples we could use?

(EVA writes adjectives on the board as students suggest them.)

ALI

(Raises his hand) Where are we supposed to play? There's no room.

EVA

Hmm... Let's push back those tables and chairs. Who can help me?

(The games get underway. EVA observes both groups, and adds a few extra words to the list on the board, as needed.)

EVA

(As the games are ending) Okay, let's stay in the same groups, and have three people build a tableau, representing a scene in our story "Sami à la mer" (2009). Here is copy of the book for each group to use as a resource. I'm also here to help. Ryan, why don't you start your group off?

(EVA again observes as the two groups get to work. RYAN stands aloof, looking bored and a little lost. When EVA next looks over, he is engaged in the work, although still slightly self-conscious as he pretends to be a hot dog. EVA moves over to the other group, which is looking a little chaotic.

CARLY is reduced to a fit of giggles as MARIA and GABRIELLA mime what looks like a sand fight.

CHRIS and ALI are engaged in building a separate tableau.

After a moment, EVA moves over to help the girls refocus on the task.)

EVA

(After a few minutes.) Okay tout le monde, we're running out of time... I'm passing some paper out to each group. In the time we have left I'd like you to get a start on writing out the scene you've been working on.

COLTER

In French?

EVA

Yes, in French. You can use the book as a resource, and you can ask Carly, Ryan and me for help.

(A scramble for pencils and a scraping of chairs ensues as the students move over to the tables. Each group assigns a writer and everyone groups around him or her.)

Lights dim.

*The door bangs open and MRS. GRADGRIND¹⁹ walks in.
She glances over Eva's shoulder, skimming through her script.*

MRS. GRADGRIND

That is a rather idyllic scene you're painting Eva. Why, listening to you, you'd think teaching was all about stopping to smell the roses. An apple for the teacher and all that. And yet, I remember what it is really like when you're teaching – turmoil, prep time and marking. Constantly worried about criticism from parents and administration – you seem to have neglected to mention those aspects of teaching in your cozy little classroom portrait.

EVA

Well I am quoting from my data, I'm not making this up. There was not much in the way of conflict. Okay, I've moved a few quotes around for artistic purposes, but this fictional scene very closely mirrors what was actually happening in my classroom. Yes, it was hectic and there was a fair amount of turmoil, but isn't that where most of the learning happens?

MRS. GRADGRIND

Oh go ahead, pat yourself on the back. But now lets be serious: you had the luxury of teaching the way you did because you didn't have a full course-load or even a full class. Imagine the effort it would take to teach French through drama to 30 students, while also juggling ten other subjects, course preparation and assessment. Not to mention that your students were a motivated group attending a Montessori school.

EVA

Okay, I did have ideal circumstances, but this was a first step, an experiment to see what happens when we offer students the chance to learn language through drama, getting both their brains and their bodies in action. And based on what I observed over a six-week period, despite certain negative preconceived notions about French, these students were *learning* French and *enjoying* the process.

MRS. GRADGRIND

And? What will you do with your observations? How will they impact teachers and students?

EVA

Well, observing and documenting my findings is only the beginning: the next step is to look at ways of implementing drama work in the regular core French curriculum. That might mean pulling students out in small groups, the way I did, or training teachers to use basic drama strategies with the entire class. We need to create space for drama in the curriculum so that is accepted by teachers, administrators, parents and students alike.

¹⁹ Dickens' novel *Hard Times* begins with these words from the schoolmaster Mr. Thomas Gradgrind: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." (Dickens, 1856, p. 1)

MRS. GRADGRIND

Ha! What about assessment? How does one assign drama-work a grade? Do you really think teachers, administrators and parents will accept an approach that is so difficult to assess?

EVA

Now that is a good question, and I will counter it with this: does everything have to be assigned a grade? Are there not other ways of measuring success? Should we not try to teach our students to learn for learning's sake, as opposed to simply memorizing trivia for a test? Drama is an approach that allows students to authentically connect with what they are learning, in ways that will stick with them until long after the school bell rings.

MRS. GRADGRIND

Always so optimistic. Just like this thesis. Too much optimism. Drama isn't for everyone you know.

EVA

You're right. You can't always please everyone and not everyone has the same learning style. But you can apply the same argument to any other teaching approach: there is no "cure-all" teaching strategy. That is why it is important to expose students to many different approaches and to encourage them to be proactive about their own learning. Drama may not be for everyone, but it does encompass a spectrum of philosophies and possibilities.

A knock at the door. MRS. BLACK²⁰ enters the room.

MRS. BLACK

I hope I'm not interrupting, but I just happened to overhear you discussing drama in the classroom...

EVA

Yes, we were just looking at some of the pros and cons of my study. Perhaps you could give us your perspective, as the students' regular classroom teacher. Would you like to see the study or some similar approach continued?

MRS. BLACK

Yeah. Absolutely. It was a good experience all around: for me, for them, for you. It was fantastic. I mean, it takes a bit of co-ordinating, but once it is up and running it's a benefit for everyone. Even the kids who are not doing it benefit because the teacher has more time to work independently with them. So I think it is fantastic. I am not a big advocate of "pull-out" stuff, but for things like that, you need to have a quieter space where one thing is going on. And when you have a more intimate group, it is much nicer than doing it with the whole class. So absolutely, I would certainly say that it is something that could continue and should continue.

²⁰ Most of Mrs. Black's responses are almost verbatim transcriptions from our December 2010 interview.

MRS. GRADGRIND

But one of your students stopped coming to class during the last week of the study.

EVA

Yes, it was a good reminder for me that using drama strategies might be a fabulous way to teach French, but it is not necessarily for everyone. It will not suit every child, or every parent.

MRS. GRADGRIND

Nor every teacher.

EVA

Perhaps not, but that remains to be explored. With some basic training in the use of drama strategies, some tips for assessment and some willingness to try something new, many teachers might enjoy using drama in their language lessons.

MRS. BLACK

There is no one philosophy that works for everyone. That's why you have to try a whole bunch of different things when you have a group of kids, so that you can catch everyone's interest. We teachers cannot afford to simply stand at the front of the classroom while our students repeat the contents of their textbooks back to us.

EVA

Yes, active learning is key! And in my study I wanted to know *what* had caught *whose* interest. The students and I established a community of trust: during our last session together they told me they went from being quite suspicious about having to learn French with a stranger, to being excited about Tuesdays and Thursdays after recess because it was French class.

MRS. BLACK

And that's exactly true. They would make sure that it was on the day plan.

EVA

Really?

MRS. GRADGRIND

Really?

MRS. BLACK

Yep. They would say: "Okay, we're going to French, right?" I would reply: "Yes. Would you like to add it to the day plan?" And just last week I was in the office talking to Julie, who is now in grade 7, and she asked me when you were coming back. She said she loved learning French through drama

with you and that she wished all of her French could be taught to her that way. It made a huge impact on her. They all loved it. They did love it.

MRS. GRADGRIND

Again with the optimism. In fact, those students were generally too optimistic in their outlook. Those 11 and 12 year olds were not critical enough and displayed far too much enthusiasm in Eva's class.

MRS. BLACK

They were an incredibly positive group, I have to say. My whole class was pretty enthusiastic – not about everything, but they were a pretty positive bunch. I did not do too much teaching of French, although I did have someone come in and teach some. And it was very much “sit at your desk. And now everyone repeat 'un, deux, trois.’” Well for those students who had previous French experience “un, deux, trois” was not going to cut it. Neither was “January, February, March” in French. Maria and Gabriella, for example, were just not interested in going over the same stuff they've been over before. And that's where the difficulty sometimes comes in when you're teaching a multi-age class: I had kids who did no French in their previous class as well as kids who did a lot of French in another class. So Eva was like a breath of fresh air to them I think. All of them, even the ones who didn't really have too much French.

MRS. GRADGRIND

What about the ones who already knew quite a bit of French?

MRS. BLACK

Well, Ryan came from a French immersion school so he actually already spoke French. And yet, I'm sure somewhere deep down he found the exercise of using drama in the French classroom interesting.

MRS. GRADGRIND

That's all very well and good, so the study worked with *this* group of students. How do you know it will work as well with another group?

EVA

Well, I guess we cannot know that for sure –

MRS. GRADGRIND

Aha!

MRS. BLACK

Well, every group of kids is different. You will not know what works until you try. In my classes I do an entire Shakespeare play at the end of year. The experience is different every year, but every year I decide it was worthwhile and I do it again. Learning lines and getting into character helps them think about the connection between what they're saying and what they're doing. And it also helps them listen to what someone else is saying. They focus on that whole body language of speaking and then

listening, which is often confused.

MRS. GRADGRIND

I have had about enough of this optimistic chatter. I'm late for an appointment with someone writing a thesis down the hall. I'm off. *(She exits)*.

EVA and MRS. BLACK look at each other and shrug. Eva starts tapping away on her computer.

Mrs. Black sits down next to her and looks over her shoulder, nodding.

Lights dim.

Discussion

It's good to learn different things. All the games pretty much helped, because I've done French for a while, there was never any games. Just learning with books. (Joelle, June 2010 interview)

Looking Through a Dramatic Lens

The scripted data that begins this chapter is both an artistic representation of my perspective while teaching French through drama as well as an interpretation of my data. Leggo (2008) reminds us that the artist, as a narrator, merely attempts to “frame fragments of experience in order to remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, in the mundane” (2008, p. 5). Much of what happened in our core French classroom can be framed as mundane routine learning and yet as an artist I have the power to highlight key moments, bringing stories to life by choosing to narrate them.

The children's voices in the first section of my scripted data portray the essence of what was said during our French classes. The script as a whole narrates part of my journey as teacher/researcher. The character of Mrs. Black, although fictional, is largely inspired by my interview with the actual classroom teacher who was very supportive of my work. The character of Mrs. Gradgrind, so named for a particularly utilitarian teacher²¹ in Dickens' *Hard Times* (1856), represents that nagging little voice of the researcher, always at the back of my mind, spreading doubt and questioning the value of my work. She is the critical foil to my teacher voice. My own questions about artistic license and the ethical implications of scripting my data echo a conversation between David Beare and George Belliveau in *Dialoguing Scripted Data* (2008).

²¹ “Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations.” (Dickens, 1856, p. 2).

David: Whether our playscripts are didactic or artistic, I found that one of the biggest challenges of writing scripted data is remaining true to the essence of the original data. For instance, each of my characters represents a mixture of several sources. ... I took some artistic license to fill in the blanks. ... Should I have been totally faithful to the data?" (Beare & Belliveau, 2008, p. 144)

George responds to this question by pointing out that the artist/researcher highlights the salient - and sometimes provocative- parts of the story and leaves out "the so-called boring stuff" (Beare & Belliveau, 2008, p. 145). "The results are a participant's and/or researcher's combination of meaningful life vignettes, significant insights, and epiphanies" (Saldaña 2005, p. 16). Although my characters are not compiled from composite sources, I did weave data from various lessons together. The scripted scene, although arguably lacking in dramatic tension, is a collage highlighting key moments, the small successes of individual students as they remembered and integrated vocabulary or simply began to engage more deeply in their own learning. My scripted data tells the story of our French classroom, a story I find worth telling, ordinary as it may seem:

The mundane events of our lives *are* already stories, but they are only invested with significance in the ways they are told. Just as an artist *represents* a still image of the ocean rolling onto a beach, the writer holds a moment, or part of a moment, in order to draw attention to it. In this way the artist and the writer present to us images that are emblematic of the billions of moments that are given little attention. (Leggo, 2008, p. 4)

As the artist/teacher/researcher I chose to give these moments, these stories, these voices, my attention.

Later in their scripted conversation, David voices a concern that has also been haunting me. He reflects on the dangers of arranging data artistically, of inadvertently favouring one aspect of an issue

over others in the scripted representation of the data.

David: Even though I want to provide many perspectives, I see how the rearrangement of data shows my bias on this subject. I sense that I am trying to persuade the audience in certain directions. (Beare & Belliveau, 2008, p. 146)

George: I think it's inevitable and essential for us to manipulate the data as we shape our scripts, because in the end we are playwriting, turning the research into an art form (Saldaña, 2005). However, there is an ethical obligation to stay true to the essence of what was said or recorded during the research. For instance, if 80% of the responses were negative thoughts towards the process, then I think we're ethically obligated as researchers to represent that within our scripts. If not, we'd not only be creating a script, but fabricating data. Our goal is to represent dramatically the multiple voices of participants' experiences in an honest, truthful, and efficient manner. (Beare & Belliveau, 2008, p. 146)

Balancing the representation of critical and positive student responses to my work was more of a challenge than I expected, as my data mostly reflects positive feedback. As I worked through my script, I realized that what was missing was dramatic tension; I needed a conflict to move the dramatic action forward. Mrs. Gradgrind entered my script with ease, as she had merely been waiting in the wings to voice the questions already buzzing around in my head. I also struggled not to put a disproportionate amount of emphasis on the one student out of ten who did not join us for the last week of class. This was especially important, as the written feedback I have from Carly is positive. To help me make sense of this kind of data I needed a character with a better overview of the situation, so a fictionalized version of Mrs. Black joined in our conversation. This allowed me to use a lot of the classroom teacher's narrative to ground both the data and the artistic piece. These two characters helped me, the artist, dramatically represent “the multiple voices of [my] participants' experiences in an honest, truthful and efficient manner” (Beare & Belliveau, 2008, p. 146).

Looking Back

The greater part of my study was spent observing and listening to my students. They provided me with data collected from observations of their in-class behaviour, from written responses, and from focus group interviews. I found the interviews especially helpful because many of the students shared personal stories about their journeys as learners of French. They shared their perspectives as language learners in my classroom as well as stories about how the French lessons were affecting their everyday lives. Julie was particularly excited to share an experience she had had at home, while chatting on MSN with a friend from another school.

Julie: there was a time when I was on the computer. My friend, she was typing to me, in French. 'Cuz... I have no idea [why] actually, she was just typing in French. And then I knew what she meant. 'Cuz she was taking classes in French and she was typing "I don't like French", [in French]. And then I typed her back [in French], saying that "I sometimes like French if it's a good teacher". I said that and then she replied to me in English, "how did you know French"? And I'm like "because I take French". And then, yeah, 'cuz it just came up to me when I looked at it "oh I know that," like the sentence. Because you taught us really really well, so now I could, ... like ... even writing in French is really good because when she gave me that message I could automatically know what she's saying, so I could type back [on MSN].

Julie was clearly motivated to practice her French, and in this case she also appears quite excited about her burgeoning French language abilities. I would suggest that her excitement and sense of confidence in French likely stem from her enjoyment of and subsequent engagement in the in-class drama-based learning activities. Other students also shared their stories: Katja told me she was alarmed when her mother, upon hearing about the French lessons, immediately began speaking French! Gabriella, who had previously attended a private school told us about her experiences with French:

“we all had to sit in desks and we had this book and the teacher would read from the book and it was really boring. 'Cuz it would be like “what's that” and you had to say it.” What came across for me as I listened to Gabriella's story was her sense that French was fun when you were not stuck behind a desk repeating after the teacher. “Drama pedagogy stands out from other teaching and learning approaches in that both kinesthetic and emotional dimensions are strongly brought into play — the learners have to physically act within a given situation and empathize with others” (Even, 2008, p. 2). Students need to be engaged physically, mentally and emotionally in order to maximize their learning.

Joelle, too, shared previous French experiences in which she was not able to fully engage in the learning: “I've been doing French a while and they don't really explain it, they just go do it and they ask you if you just know it. And then most people don't and so they don't explain it, they just skip that and do something even easier.” When I asked her which activities she would like to do again, Joelle responded: “*Tigre*.” Joelle was one of the shyest students in the class, and yet she indicated that the *tigre* activities, which involved a lot of improvisation, were her favourite.

In her article “*Show, don't tell!*” *Improvisational Theater and the Beginning Foreign Language Curriculum*, Matthias advocates for the implementation of improvisational theatre as part of the foreign language curriculum. She argues that improvisational theatre encourages “a personal and creative response to whatever the linguistic input may be” (Matthias, 2007, p. 47). She adds that improvisation helps students see communication in the FL as more than just sounds. This approach empowers students to express themselves in a foreign language context, and “by keeping them focused on a limited problem, they concentrate on solving this problem and get absorbed in this collective

experience” (Matthias, 2007, p. 47). I witnessed the same kinds of behaviours and results among my students: they were so focused on our activities that they did not have time to feel self-conscious about speaking French. They had to think fast, especially during the speed rounds. They had to remember vocabulary and they had to pay attention to what had already been said. Matthias finds that “under these circumstances, students are then also more open to language acquisition as a kinaesthetic experience” (Matthias, 2007, p. 47). Rather than focus on creating a polished performance, drama in education emphasizes the immediacy and informality of improvised activities (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). While my study emphasized the importance of improvisation, not all teachers may feel comfortable with such an approach, as drama does demand the teacher take on new and challenging roles, including a certain amount of flexibility and spontaneity (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

There are many variations of drama strategies that can be used in the language classroom, so that individual teachers can adapt their use of drama to their own teaching style. However, Kao and O'Neill raise an important point in their discussion of the spectrum of drama approaches available to language teachers. They describe the spectrum as moving from “totally controlled language exercises and scripted role-plays through the semi-controlled approach of the scenario, to the kind of open communication of process drama” (1998, p. 5). They find that L2 teachers show a preference for the more controlled language exercises, which most restrict the creative freedom of language learners. They also find the use of scripted or rehearsed role-play limiting, declaring them to be problematic because although learners appear to be producing fluent and accurate language, retention and transfer of learning is unlikely as the students do generate their own thoughts and ideas but simply repeat text learned by rote (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

My own work with drama strategies in the core French classroom places me about mid-way along the spectrum. While we shied away from controlled language exercises and scripted role-plays we did not progress as far as process drama, which would, however, be the next step if the study were to be extended. As the teacher I placed a lot of emphasis on improvisation and playing with language. My goal was as much to foster an enjoyment of learning French, as it was to focus on the transfer and retention of the L2.

Even (2008) argues that drama's key to success lies in improvisation, which she says is at the core of drama pedagogy. She points out that we all improvise everyday, it is simply the shift into a foreign language context that makes us aware that improvising is a skill: "The fictional context of drama situations serves as a safety zone in which learners can enjoy the freedom of being someone else and the freedom to behave in non-routine ways" (Even, 2008, p. 3). During the exit interview, when asked how he liked French now, Colter told me: "I like drama. French drama. Yeah." He too chose the improvisational *tigre* games as his favourite drama activity. Despite my initial fears that drama would be declared as "uncool," my students enjoyed using drama to learn French. They told me so in writing, in person and during our final interviews. Maria's mom (herself a fluent French speaker) went out of her way to tell me that Maria was enjoying learning French this year – a first!

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

“Perhaps it doesn't understand English,” thought Alice; “I daresay it's a French mouse, come over with William the Conqueror.” (For, with all her knowledge of history, Alice had no very clear notion of how long ago anything had happened.) So she began again: “Où est ma chatte?” which was the first sentence in her French lesson-book. The Mouse gave a sudden leap out of the water, and seemed to quiver all over with fright. “Oh, I beg your pardon!” cried Alice hastily, afraid that she had hurt the poor animal's feelings. “I quite forgot you didn't like cats.” (Alice in Wonderland, p. 40)

The students in my study responded well to learning a language in a meaningful way – for a purpose. Using drama strategies in the core French language classroom was a success for the group of grade 5 and 6 students I worked with at Cedar Springs Elementary School. Chris said: “I like how we did lots of drama activities to learn more French.” Joelle agreed: “I think it's a really good way to teach.” The students felt they had learned (and would remember) some basic French words, phrases and language skills that would allow them to communicate effectively in French in a given context. Unlike Alice, who must resort to the first phrase in her French lesson-book, these students felt confident about having acquired useful basic vocabulary in addition to an understanding of the contexts in which the vocabulary should be used.

Drama Matters

“We used drama and I think that was a really good way to teach it [French]” (Maria, June 2010 interview). Drama provides students with alternative ways of expressing and exploring their knowledge: “Acting is a way of learning by experiencing” (Dickson, 1989, p. 300). As a class learns through the use of drama strategies “the problem is attacked using a variety of media at a rather slow

pace resulting in factual knowledge as well as a true sense of ownership for the eventual understanding reached. One of the primary purposes of drama is to promote reflection in learning” (Wilburn, 1992, p. 68). This is true not only of work done through process drama – in the case of my students, it is also true of learning done using drama strategies in the core French classroom.

“Drama is by nature social, communicative, interactive, and gestural” (Culham, 2002, p. 109). It helps students build an imaginary linguistic, cultural and social world in which learners can practice their communication skills in a supportive environment (Miccoli, 2003). It encourages student-centered learning, where students take on leadership roles and take ownership of their learning, supported by the teacher who helps stimulate positive encounters with a new language. Drama authentically engages language learners and invites them to explore themselves and the world they live in (O'Neill, 1995). Attitude toward and motivation for language learning are key factors within the context of drama education in the French language classroom (Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009).

“Like right now I like French and I don't want to go back to not wanting to learn French” (Maria, June 2010 interview). Studies show that drama is a teaching approach that increases language-learning engagement (Catterall, 2002; Dodson, 2002; Wagner, 1998). Through repetition it develops language accuracy and through improvisation it helps develop fluency (Bräuer, 2002). Through the power of imagination drama allows learners to step beyond the boundaries of their classrooms and daily lives, to engage in a new discourse community exploring language and culture through role-play, dance, pantomime and other ways of knowing and learning. Drama as a language tool creates space to analyze and experiment with the powerful discourses that construct identities, relationships and

knowledge (Menard-Warwick, 2007). Allowing students to be creative and inquisitive language learners is key; having a sense of ownership of their own learning will hopefully encourage students to continue to explore French as an additional/second/foreign language.

Looking Forward

This study lays the groundwork for further explorations of the integration of drama work in additional/second/foreign language classrooms. These humble beginnings invite further study and the implementation of other types of drama strategies, such as Heathcote's *mantle of the expert* approach and process drama work. There continues to be a need for further research in drama education specifically in the additional/second/foreign classroom (Bournot-Trites et. al., 2007; Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009; Dodson, S, 2000; Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

During my study, I felt strongly that “the experience is the destination” (O'Neill qtd in Howell & Heap, 2005, p. 63). I wanted my students not only to improve their French language skills, but through drama, to be curious and excited about a new language and to learn more about themselves in the process. In the case of my French class, the use of drama removed ‘blocks’ that were impeding learning (Hegman Shier, 2002). I was pleased to observe some of the shyest students gaining self-confidence as our lessons progressed. Chris began asking me for vocabulary and requesting favourite games. Joelle's written feedback also reflected a change from caution to enthusiasm, demonstrating an enjoyment of the French lessons.

In my French/drama classroom I watched learning emerge as I began to step back from my role as expert and to *trust the process*. I wanted my students to have a chance to direct their own learning,

to choose vocabulary, to indicate activities of interest. This is an integral part of action research, which I intended to honour as much as possible. In my study I experimented with drama as a way to imitate (and practice) real-world language and literacy skills in the classroom. We read, we wrote, we spoke. We chose topics that mattered to the students and that were appropriate to their beginner level (with the exception of Ryan, who had previously been in French immersion). Even though the process of giving the students more control was sometimes a little daunting, I was amazed at how much they enjoyed it when they were given the freedom to play with the French language. In her case study examining the value of using drama in a university-level English oral-skills class, Miccoli finds that:

...language comes alive through drama in an oral skills development class. For example, the confrontation of fears, and the taking of risks led to an improvement in [the students] oral skills, as a consequence of understanding the aspects that underlie oral communication, i.e., that speaking is not only about words and structure and pronunciation, but feelings, motivations, and meanings. (2003, p. 128)

Drama not only facilitates the various types of communication that are key in the language classroom, but it also allows individuals to take on different roles and duties, through which they can safely explore a new language (Kao and O'Neill, 1998). Chris emerged as an enthusiastic language learner over the course of the six weeks we spent together. He was sometimes so involved in a drama activity that I could see he had forgotten to feel shy. I especially noticed this during one class when we were playing the taxi game, in which each student mimics an animal passenger (of their choosing) which the other taxi riders must imitate until the next passenger joins the group. During our exit interview at the end of the study, Chris told me: "I particularly liked the taxi game, and how you're an animal with an attitude. And everybody has to mimic you, including the driver. And we add more and more people until it's done, and then we go back[wards] through the process."

Second language learners often feel put on the spot when operating in the new language, afraid of making mistakes in front of teachers and peers (Matthias, 2007). This initial feeling of awkwardness was quickly dispersed as we engaged in our dramatic play. My students were visibly less worried about making mistakes after the third lesson, by which time they had a good understanding of the overall structure and flow of our lessons.

Drama offers a “safe place” for second language learners to speak in the target language. It offers alternative ways of communicating such as using gesture or pantomime (Culham, 2002). In my experience both during this study and during my years of teaching German at the university level, to adult learners as well as to groups of elementary school students, I have observed that allowing language students to step out of their own skins and to take on the role of a different persona can ease some of the anxiety of making a mistake. In the context of my study, the shyest students began to engage with the learning when they were involved in the drama: Chris really immersed himself in the action during the taxi game, becoming an animal with an attitude and encouraging the other taxi-riders to imitate his animal. He specifically referred back to his enjoyment of this game during the focus group interview. Joelle became very proficient at playing the *tigre* games, placing an emphasis on knowing phrases well, without help from the white board. She explained that she enjoyed holding and throwing *tigre* back and forth. Ryan, too, was more engaged in the learning process when he was creating a tableau and directing the building of an alternative scene for the Sami story. When students are not speaking as themselves, but rather as someone else, they may take risks they normally would not. Further research is needed to more fully explore this finding.

In my study, the use of drama helped my students build an imaginary linguistic and social world in which they could practise their communication skills in a supportive environment. It encouraged student-centred learning: my students began to take ownership of their own learning, supported by myself and their peers. My observations during this study are in agreement with O'Neill (1995) in that drama authentically engages language learners and invites them to explore themselves and the world they live in. The students in my classroom were fully immersed in the creative worlds they co-created, creative worlds which revolved around French texts and French language activities. "Why shouldn't drama and play remain a natural way of learning, and of teaching? We have only to overcome our traditional and very tired notion of what a school is, and what should happen in a school to bring dramatic learning to life" (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 150). Moving this model of learning into a traditional classroom will be challenging, but if we provide support for those teachers willing to explore the role of drama in their classroom, we can move towards a more open and flexible model of teaching and learning.

Future Directions: Widening the Lens

In this particular study I focused on the role of drama in core French teaching. I stepped into multiple roles during my study, those of facilitator, teacher and researcher, as I attempted to observe my own practice in action with the aim of sharing work that could be of interest to both teachers and researchers alike. The natural next step would be to extend the project to cover an entire term, or perhaps a whole school year and to move into process drama work, thereby immersing the students more fully in the French language.

I would then expand the project to include a student created and student produced play, one that would reflect their collective French learning journeys. Such a play would provide an opportunity for students to showcase their French language and literacy skills, while also providing them with multiple modes of expression. Putting on such a production would require gathering more data from the students about how they viewed their language acquisition process, and what their attitudes were/are toward learning French. The students I worked with at Cedar Springs certainly have the potential to deliver such a polished and self-reflexive end product. The resulting play, in English and French, would then be rehearsed and produced (with lights, a stage crew, a set and perhaps with music) and would be work-shopped for peers in order to share the students' experiences and to encourage an open, positive approach to learning French. With this play then becoming part of the data set for my study, I would rely on research-based theatre as part of my methodology (Rossiter et al., 2008). I believe it is fitting to use an arts-based approach to examine how a drama-based curriculum can affect motivation for and attitudes toward learning French.

Completing the Circle

In my experience, teaching and learning are all about risk-taking. I believe that allowing students to be creative and inquisitive is the key to setting them up as life-long language learners: “drama seeks to build social competence and confidence amongst participants through purposeful work with others” (Wilburn, 1992, p. 67). The students in my study experimented with various modes of expression (using their bodies, their voices, getting past their shyness) and I experimented with teaching and drama strategies – all with the common goal of improving our French. As the teacher, I provided the

structure, while my students helped provide the content (Wilburn, 1992, p. 70).

The focus of our work was on finding ways to build a basic knowledge of French to facilitate spontaneous communication. We worked towards this goal by using improvisational drama strategies. In a June journal entry I reflected on our process, which often centered on the students demonstrating and expanding their learning: “As a first exercise I asked the class to review descriptions – things they could say about themselves. I then asked them to write sentences describing themselves. In small groups we then read 2 – 3 of these sentences aloud. The exercise was then turned into a pantomime guessing game to reinforce the vocabulary. I continue to be impressed with the students' enthusiasm and interest in learning and using new nouns and adjectives through drama activities.”

In my class I structured our improvisational games so that students had a crutch to lean on; the key vocabulary was often on the board, and was also supplied by me on demand. However, as the students became more comfortable with the *tigre* game and its variations, many of them no longer needed the words on the board, remembering the vocabulary from a previous lesson. Not only was *tigre* a didactic success, the game was also fun. Julie told me: “I really like *tigre*, that was my favourite part of drama games (other voices agreeing in background) 'cuz, like, about four times we'd do it over and over and I think it's really fun.” This focus on fun was an important part of a key insight, which I, as a teacher, gained from this study. I realized how important it is for the teacher to *enjoy* the learning along with the students. I was learning along with the class simply by being involved in and enjoying the drama activities. I feel that we teachers sometimes disconnect from the learning going on in our classrooms, when in fact it is the learning that gives us joy and the creative energy to further push

the boundaries of our own and our students' learning. Using drama strategies was not only empowering for my students, but also for myself as a teacher. Combining drama work with an action research approach allowed me to create and re-create activities and to refine them as we cycled through the process of planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting.

Indeed, I found the opportunities to reflect upon my own work and goals and to hear the students' reflections on the process invaluable. Wilburn notes that the enjoyment of learning through dramatic play can mask an improvement in language skill, and suggests teachers take the time to reflect on the work done in class. "Reflection is a way of making students aware of the learning that has taken place and demonstrating the significance of their achievements, both socially and linguistically" (Wilburn, 1992, p. 32). Opportunities to reflect were therefore an important part of my process as both a teacher and a researcher. The exit slips and interviews provided my students space to reflect. The interviews and my journaling provided me with the same. During the two focus group interviews I was pleased to hear to what extent the students had reflected on what we were doing in class, and to what extent they had embraced both the idea of learning French through drama and also the desire to continue learning French. If we teachers can but light a spark of interest in our students, we have achieved our goal. For this group of students, teaching French through drama gave them new possibilities for playing with learning.

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Appendices

A: Writing Samples – *Sami à la mer*

[All student writing samples are replicated using their original spelling]

Katja, Colter, Joelle, Julie and Ryan

Tout à coup, Sami voit un hot dog.

“Miam” pense-t-elle.

La muette plonge sur le hot dog.

Le crabe voulait le hotdog aussi.

Un homme arrive.

Il essaie prend le hotdog.

Ali, Maria, Gabriella, Chris and Carly

Joanne et Bob mangent des sandwiches. Les sandwiches ne sont pas pour les chiots, dit Joanne. Sami jouer est l'eau. Sami voit des crabes. Sami court vers le crabes. Elle avance le museau pour les renifler. Le gros crabe lui pince le nez. Tout va mal, se dit-elle. Je veux m'amuser. Sami voit un hot-dog. Miam! Ouaaak! crie une mouette, la mouette plonge sur le hot-dog et le prend dans son bec. Puis Sami voit quelque chose sur le sable. Elle renifle. "Parfait, pense Sami. Cette chose ne me mordre pas." "Ah! quelle bonne odeur!" pense-t-elle. Sami se roule sur le sable. - Oh, non! crie Joanne et Bob. - Arrete! Sami! qui bob. Sami n'entend pas Joanne et Bob. Elle aime l'odeur de poisson. "Maintenant, je m'amuse!" pense Sami.

B: Written Responses

These responses correspond to the following prompts:

I like French because...

I don't like French because...

My previous French experience is...

[All student writing samples are replicated using their original spelling]

Carly

mardi, le 25 mai

1. I like learning French because it's a different language and after if you can speak well you can go to Paris or Montreal!
2. I don't like learning French because some French teachers don't think you can count past trois without help.
3. My French experience is that I used to have private lessons, and also last year we had a French teacher that taught us to count to (neuf mille) and beyond!

Julie

Mardi le 25 mai

I like learning french because, with Eva everything is more fun and she teaches us slowly so we understand it more clearly and learning how to say it properly. I like doing french with Eva because she teaches us slowly step by step so we understand alot.

Ali

Mardi le 25 mai

1. I like french because it is fun to learn another language. It is also good to know for going to France.
2. I dis-like french because it is more complicated than English but that would not make me quit.
3. I learned a little bit of French this year and in grade 5 (in school).

Katja

mardi le 25 mai

I like learning French because when we do it in a group with Eva it is really fun! And I like learning different languages. It is also interesting, and a beautiful language!

I don't like learning French because I don't like the tests or having to repeat after the teacher.

I started learning french in grade four, then I did basically the same french in grade 5 and I just learned the basic colours, cloths, food etc. I also learned how to greet people but I don't really know how to write in French.

I don't remember that much of French, because when I learned it I just memorized it for tests then forgot it.

Maria

mardi le 25 mai

I like learning french because I like learning other languages so if I go to another country I can use it and have an easier time. Basically, I like the end result.

I don't like learning French because I don't like some of the exercises because they sometimes have no point at all. Also most of my teachers (2/3) I haven't learnt anything from so they've been useless.

Teachers/Times

-Beginning of Gr. 5 (useless) w/Gr 4/5

-End of Gr. 5 (usefull) w/Gr 5

-Beginning of Gr. 6 (useless) w/Gr 4/5/6

(Pardon my writing please.)

Gabriella

mardi le 25 mai

I like learning french because, it is another language that is used a lot in Canada. It is also easier to learn than other languages because I already speak Spanish and they are similar.

I started learning french when I was in Grade 2, I also learnt more french in Gr. 3, 4 and half of this year (Gr. 5).

Le Nom: Joelle

Mardi le 25 mai

I like learning french because its fun to learn a new language cause then you can speak it to other people and can travel worlds that speak a lot of french.

I don't like learning french because sometimes I forget it if I don't do it in a long time. Also cause sometimes it is a little challenging (hard).

I've learned french a little in preschool like weather, numbers, days of week. I learned some in grade 3 and only the Months. Then In grade 4 I learned emotions, how to greet people in different ways and how to ask your name and how you feel. In grade 5 I learned school supplies, haloween, Christmas, spring items, how to say seasons,how to say I like or hate. Than I took a french class after school in grade 5 and learned colors, bodyparts and something I can't remember. Than in grade 6 I learned how to count to 100 and some breakfast, lunch and dinner snacks.

C: French Skills Part 1

[All student writing samples are replicated using their original spelling]

(French the students felt they already knew)

J'mappelle ...

J'aime ...

Je n'aime pas ...

Tres bien, comme si comme ca, bien, mal,

tres mal

les nombres

les colour

comment ca va

Il s'appelle

les sport

some pronounciations (la prononciation)

les fette

articles et genders

Janvier

Fevier

mars

avril

mai

juin

juillet

août

septembre

novembre

decembre

octobre

Bleu

blanc

noir

verte

rose

Je'apelle

le petite suer

Comocaqva

Cq va bien, mal, comme ci comme cq, tres bien, tres mall

un, doux, etc. - 39

lundi, mardi, mercredi, jeudi, vendredi, samedi, demache

janveir, fevrier, mars, avril, mai, juen, julliet, août, septembre, novembre,

decembre.

Tet, epoul, genou, piet

le colores

D: French Skills Part 2

[All student writing samples are replicated using their original spelling]

(French the students wanted to learn)

spelling (in all sentences)

sentences and things we can use in life (eg. Not body parts, some foods, etc.)

accents

some pronunciations

les fette

food

numbers

how to spell things

how to use words in sentences

How to use things in a sentence.

How to spell things.

Not that sure numbers 40/50 and up.