

**THE RESULTS OF FOCUSED ORAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION ON THE
EXPRESSIVE SKILLS OF GRADE FOUR AND FIVE FRENCH IMMERSION
STUDENTS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The Language Arts curriculum for British Columbia, which was introduced in 2006, contains a significant focus on oral language. In fact, there are more prescribed learning outcomes for oral language than for the reading and writing components. While developing oral language skills has always been very important in the French immersion classroom, many researchers who study the French immersion program in British Columbia have noticed that a gap exists between the expressive and receptive skills of immersion students, noting that the expressive skills of immersion students are considerably weaker in comparison. It has been suggested that explanation-based instruction could help to improve immersion students' expressive skills; in other words, teachers cannot simply expect a transfer of vocabulary when instruction is not focused on that particular aspect of language. Students need to be provided with the opportunity to understand how a language works. A teacher can provide this explanation to students, gauging the depth of these discussions vis-à-vis the students' age and ability. While a teacher remains in control of much of what students receive as input, research suggests that students require regular opportunities for output or to practise speaking French in order to improve. In addition to providing students with the tools they require to fully express themselves, students also need exposure to a different register of French besides the classroom register. In this way, they may be able to better communicate with their peers at a more natural level. This paper will examine the results of different oral language interventions that have been suggested by a variety of researchers. Throughout the study, I saw continued improvement in my students' oral language skills as well as a transfer of these skills to other subjects.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began this project, I was in my fourth year as a teacher. All my life, I have enjoyed working with and speaking to children. When I was sixteen, I was able to turn this passion into a job as a swimming instructor, and it was there where I got my first taste of working with children formally. While working at the pool I realized that, as an adult, I wanted to work with children. I began university in September of 2000 and graduated in May of 2004 with my teachable subjects and my focus on the next steps towards becoming a teacher.

Before beginning an education program, I decided to travel and discovered a program in France where Anglophones could work as language assistants in French schools. As French teachers work for two months and then have two weeks off, I realized that, not only would the opportunity to work and travel be amazing, I would be able to practise my oral French which had been an ongoing challenge for me growing up. It was while I was in France that I decided to become a French teacher. I loved the culture, the traditions, the food and the architecture. While in France, my challenge with the French language had become painfully obvious. Unfortunately, I was still feeling shy and embarrassed each time I had to communicate in French with strangers. Regardless of these feelings, I knew that I needed to communicate in order to improve my spoken French and to become more at ease with the oral aspect of the language. I had to force myself to take risks.

During this time in France, I never really addressed my issue; however, when I returned to Vancouver to begin the Professional Development Program (PDP) in French at Simon Fraser University, I discovered that my challenge had followed me home: I had to speak French each day in class with people that I was getting to know. A large part of the PDP program is reflection and I have only lately realized just how important this aspect of PDP is for teachers. Along with

daily reflection we also had to decide on our philosophies as teachers. As I reflected daily and modified my philosophy, I began to internally examine my spoken French challenge. I started to ask why I had this communication challenge and where it had all begun.

When I was at elementary school, two French immersion programs existed: early immersion and late immersion. I am a result of the late immersion program, which means that I began to learn the French language at eleven years old in Grade 6. Recently, I read my report cards from elementary school and my teachers had written that I communicated well in French. I came to realize that my challenge began after elementary school. It was when I entered high school that my oral communication on French became an issue.

As I continued in the French immersion program in high school, I found myself in classes with students from the early immersion program who possessed both a better accent and a higher level of vocabulary. I recall that I was very intimidated by this fact and, gradually, I started to refrain from speaking in French classes. As a result of this silence, my oral language skills did not develop as they should have and each time I had to do any type of oral presentation, I became sick with anxiety.

When I discovered my problem and started to identify the reasons for it, I began to formulate my own educational philosophy, keeping in mind my issues with the language. I wanted to create a safe and secure classroom environment where students would feel comfortable expressing themselves. I understood that, in order to build this type of classroom, my students would need to feel comfortable taking risks. I also understood that it would be my responsibility as a teacher to create this environment. Up to this point in my career, with three years teaching completed, I have tried to follow this philosophy by modelling inclusive behaviour, positive comments and remarks, and finally creating opportunities for informal

discussion during weekly class meetings. Having created the positive and secure environment that I want my classroom to be, the next step is to provide my students with the tools they require so that they can communicate and express themselves. To do this, I must give students the opportunity to speak and provide them with the vocabulary they need to express themselves. I look forward to examining the effectiveness of a variety of methods of oral language instruction; in addition, it is my belief, as well as my hope, that the acquired oral language skills of the students transfer of to other subjects.

Context

The study was conducted in a Grade 4/5 class in an elementary school in Burnaby, British Columbia, in a relatively high-income neighbourhood where I have taught for two of my three years of teaching. My class is composed of eighteen Grade 4 and seven Grade 5 students. There are two students who receive pull-out learning support, one student who has a health-related Individual Education Plan (IEP) and two gifted students.

Unfortunately, my classroom is beside the gym and across from the library. This is a high traffic and continually noisy location. This noise has an impact of the environment of the classroom, as it seems that each time that I begin a discussion or whenever my students present orally, the students and I have to strain to hear anything. In other words, students have to learn to speak loudly in my classroom. It has been my experience that speaking aloud in general, much less than speaking louder than usual, can be challenging for students. In spite of this classroom location, it is my hope that they will develop enough confidence in themselves to be able to manage this issue.

Problem

As mentioned, I believe that self-confidence is very important to the learning process. A certain level of confidence is required to be a successful second language learner, and a lack of self confidence is one of the reasons that I believe I had such a challenge with my spoken French. As a result of my experiences and my beliefs, I work very hard to create a classroom environment that fosters the development of my students. It was not until my third year of teaching that I began to feel that I could focus beyond the curriculum. When I did, I noticed that, while most of the students in my class participated in class discussions and asked questions for clarification, they did not use French when speaking with peers in class but, rather, only in a formal academic setting. Further, their conversations were either a mixture of French and English or completely in English. I also noticed that about one third of my students appeared to become uncomfortable speaking in front of the class, whether the situation was formal or informal.

In October of each year, I explain the intermediate report card to the students; I have found this to be an effective strategy since Grade four is the first year that students receive letter grades. I have found that it is very important to prepare them (and their parents) well in advance for the differences between the primary and intermediate report cards. I speak to the students about each subject and explain that I develop their letter grades based on an ongoing evaluation or their development / learning? When we arrive at the oral language section of the report card, I stress its importance in the immersion program, as well as the fact that strong communication skills are a great asset in life. After this discussion, I can see that some students try to contribute more often or make more of an effort to speak in French in the classroom. I also organize meetings with students who are struggling in this area, offering them the opportunity to come

early on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays so that they can ask questions and be sure that they understood the work for the week.

With these interventions, I have seen some progress in my students' confidence in their oral language abilities as well as their willingness to use French to communicate with their peers; however, this progress has been slow. I have continued to try other methods with the goal of improving the expressive skills of all students. These methods have not necessarily been systematic but have included the following: debates (both formal and informal), speeches, group presentations, drama, games and theatre. I discovered that drama proved to be the most effective method for students to improve their comfort level in speaking in front of others, and I witnessed some transfer of vocabulary in the plays to their own vocabulary banks.

Recently, I began to reflect on the steps I had taken and realized that I had never really explored the question of why certain students were more comfortable expressing themselves orally. I also became aware of the fact that I had been content with the fact that my students were communicating with me and in formal settings in French even if they were still using English or mixing French and English when speaking amongst themselves. Based on these realizations, I decided to create a project based on helping my students improve their oral language skills. The idea of helping students to become more aware of their learning while developing their speaking abilities also intrigued me, especially since I had taken so long to address my own issues with spoken French and wanted to spare my students from a similar experience. In addition, I incorporated some self-assessment in my project so that students would not only see improvement in their expressive skills but also reflect on the amount of French versus English that they are using with their peers.

As I began this project, I had been observing my students and their use of French in

discussions amongst themselves. I had seen similar trends as in previous classes; some students participating more than others and some students appearing frustrated at a lack of vocabulary to express their thoughts to their peers. Due to my own difficulties and frustrations, I felt that I could be empathetic to their challenges and, at the same time, a model of someone who has overcome these challenges and now uses French on a daily basis. My hope was that, if they are provided this an explicit focus on oral language, their skills will develop so that they are at ease with their spoken French and as such, that these skills will continue to develop.

Objective

My research questions are as follows:

In what ways will my interventions improve the oral language skills of my students when they are interacting with each other?

Will there be a transfer of these oral language competences to other subjects taught in French?

Given these questions, my goal for this research project was to work with my students so that they might be able to better communicate in French when speaking with one another (amongst themselves). In order to support students who experience difficulty with this aspect of the French language, I need to be sure that the classroom environment is safe and secure, where students will feel comfortable taking risks. I introduced different strategies to help students to improve their level of spoken French while working towards creating a classroom environment that encourages this growth. I also implemented self-assessment before, during, and after oral language activities so that students were able to reflect on their use of French in the classroom while at the same time tracking the improvements in their expressive capabilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I will discuss research focused on improving oral language instruction and students' oral language skills. The topics covered include learning strategies, group work and self-assessment. These separate topics are all connected in that they are the methods that I used in the implementation of my action research. These interventions were chosen as a result of a variety of research that supports their respective effectiveness. It was also my hope that these approaches would guide me in improving my oral language instruction so that students showed growth in their French expressive capabilities.

Researchers have noted that a gap exists between the receptive and expressive skill level of French immersion students. Cummins (1998) notes that, by the end of Grade 6, students' receptive skills are close to that of native speakers while their expressive skills lag behind. Swain (1996) and Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) also suggest that the speaking skills of immersion students are relatively weak compared to their reading and listening comprehension and writing skills. Harley, Cummins, Swain, and Allen (1990) state that this gap exists despite a considerable amount of input from teachers and specific instruction in sociolinguistic awareness in immersion programs (cited in Lyster, 1994). In other words, although students are provided instruction around the importance of the social and cultural aspect of language, they do not seem to process this input as effectively as native speakers and as such, this lower level of sociolinguistic awareness contributes to the gap between their receptive and expressive skills. This view is also supported by Genesee (1987) who believes that immersion students are lacking this sociolinguistic awareness due to the fact that the language required to do well at school does not necessarily help them to communicate in natural situations with their peers.

In order to address this gap, French immersion teachers must maximize opportunities for

students to develop receptive and expressive language skills. This could be a challenge, as the expressive aspect of language requires active participation from the students. In other words, while teachers remain largely in control of the language input their students receive (at least in the early stages), there has to be some transfer of control to the students for expression since it is the students who must produce output (Tarone & Swain, 1995). To maximize these output opportunities for students, it is important that they speak French not only with their teacher but also consistently with their peers. This is even more important in Western Canada where most immersion students live their lives either in English or in another language that is not French. Their only exposure to French is often exclusively in the context of their classroom. This can pose an impediment when it comes to the development of expressive skills. Swain and Carrol (1987), Harley, Cummins, Swain and Allen (1990), and Swain and Lapkin (1990) explain that immersion students are often only exposed to one register of French, the classroom register, and therefore experience some difficulty in expressing themselves in contexts outside of this particular register (cited in Lyster, 1994).

The lack of exposure to French outside of the classroom environment makes it essential to maximize the amount of French that is both heard and spoken within the classroom. Swain (1985) found that, as students continue the immersion program, less French is spoken between them during their informal classroom interactions. It seems that as students leave the primary program, which consists of an all-French environment, and move into their intermediate years, interactions in English slowly become more prevalent. Because I teach Grade 4/5, I meet students as they come to this crossroads in their French education. I have also noticed that, once English enters the classroom (in the format of a formal English Language Arts program), students begin to use English as a means of communicating with their peers, even during French

instructional time. Students realize the ease of being able to fully express their thoughts and feelings more easily in their first language. I have observed that, once the students have experienced this type of freedom, they are reluctant to go back to the challenges that accompany an all-French environment.

My primary goal throughout this project is that my students will continually use French as a means of communicating amongst themselves during all classroom activities (English Language Arts is the exception). Along with this goal is the hope the students will express themselves more often in class by asking questions and/or participating in classroom discussion. Swain (1996) notes that most students' contributions in class are less than one sentence in length; so developing proficiency requires frequent opportunities to maximize output. Swain (1996) explains the importance of having the students focus on output stating,

[t]he importance to learning of output could be that output pushes learners to process language more deeply (with more mental effort) than does input. With output, the learner is in control. By focusing on output we may be focusing on ways in which learners can play more active, responsible roles in their learning. (p. 99)

This focus on the output from students is supported by Cummins (1996), who has observed that there is a tendency for a non-proportionately high amount of input from French immersion teachers; in other words the instruction is "transmission oriented" (p. 36). For this reason, my overall goal is having my students speak more French in the classroom. They will also need many opportunities to contribute their opinions and thoughts to classroom discussions. Through a series of activities and strategies, I hope to provide my students with the communication tools they need to improve their oral language skills.

Group Work

Before students can communicate in an effective manner that will enhance their learning, they will need guidance. One study completed by Messier and Roussel (2008) examined a teacher who provided her students with essential tools for effective communication. Using the explicit teaching techniques that Genesee (2004) suggests, the teacher explained what communication was to her students by first giving them the opportunity to create their own definitions of communication and then modeling these for the students. The modeling of effective communication skills, both speaking and listening, is also suggested by Murao and Chabot (2008), who recommend demonstrating both effective and ineffective means of communicating so that students are able to understand what to do as well as what not to do. In the aforementioned study, the final step was having students work together to test the effectiveness of their communication skills, using their definitions and what they had seen in the classroom. By observing the students as they worked, the teacher was able to identify the areas requiring intervention that arose between students and she continued her instruction by focusing on these issues. At the end of the intervention, the teacher noticed improvement of communication skills in other subjects. This outcome, the transfer of skills, is one of the goals of my research project.

Both Cummins (1998) and Swain (1996) suggest group work as a means of giving students the opportunity to collaborate and to work at a higher level in their second language. Vygotsky (1978) discusses that “the learner’s language performance with others exceeds what the learner is able to do alone” (cited in Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 24). Many researchers have found that when students are taught how to work

cooperatively, their language skills tend to improve (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980; Jacob & Mattson, 1987; Sharan et al., 1985, cited in Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2001). Johnson and Johnson (1987) suggest that “cooperative learning... often produces higher achievement, increases retention, and develops interpersonal skills” (cited in Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 267). As students work together to accomplish a task, each member often contributes a different strength or understanding, and the group is able to work at a higher level. Storch (2005) supports this idea when he discusses the result of students’ writing in pairs, stating that “pairs tend to produce texts with greater grammatical accuracy and complexity than individual writers” (cited in Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 332). By focusing on allowing students to work together in a collaborative fashion, I hope to balance the tendency of high levels of teacher input.

Before students work in groups, it is essential to teach them explicitly how to effectively work together and to cooperate. In a 1994 study, Szotek found that students resorted to English when working in a group because they were not instructed “how to manage group dynamics” (cited in Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 264). Swain (1996) suggests that the teacher be responsible for the creation of the students groups. Although Shrum and Glisan (2010) explain that intermediate students at the Grade 4 and 5 levels can work well in groups, my experience has been that the students do require instruction and guidance before, during and after the group work commences.

Giving students different roles for group work (for example, secretary), an explanation of the responsibility of each role, and some key questions and prompts that guide students in their respective roles help the students to focus and create a more structured environment during group work. Shrum and Glisan (2010) posit that giving

each student responsibility allows them depend on each other as they work to complete their task.

Teaching Strategies for Oral Language

Murao and Chabot (2008) suggest creating a *Good Listener/ Good Speaker* chart in order to model and scaffold oral language development. As a class, students discuss the ideal behaviour of a listener and a speaker and these ideas become a chart that is posted in the classroom. Students can evaluate their listening and speaking behaviour during and after an activity and, because they are involved in the creation of the chart, they feel some ownership in the development of its guidelines. It is also possible to take the *Good Speaker/Good Listener* chart one-step farther and break each category into three in which students discuss what it feels like, looks like, and sounds like to be a good listener, and then do the same for a good speaker. In order to scaffold students to be able to describe each one of these aspects, the authors suggest that the teacher either model effective skills with other colleagues, a strategy that they identify as *Fishbowl*.

After effective communication has been modeled, practised and scaffolded, it is important to focus on improving the linguistic performance of the students through the use of analytical teaching strategies (Allen, Swain, Harley, & Cummins, 1990, cited in Lyster, 1994). Lyster explains that it is through an analytical teaching approach that language receives explicit attention. Though this approach exists in the French immersion classroom, it is the grammatical aspect of language that tends to receive the explicit attention; however, explicit attention is also required to improve students' sociolinguistic competence. Harley and Swain (1987, cited in Lyster, 1994) suggest that French immersion students benefit from

the provision of more focused L2 input which provides learners with ample opportunity to

observe formal and semantic contrasts involved in the relevant target subsystem... and the increased opportunity for students to be involved in activities requiring the productive use of such forms in meaningful situations. (p. 265)

Cummins (1998) calls this type of explicit instruction, “focus on language” and supports the idea that students should be taught how to communicate in different contexts.

Lyster’s (1994) study examines the explicit or analytical focus on students’ sociolinguistic competence of the French *vous* and *tu* versus a non-analytical approach to the use of the conditional tense. The results of the study suggest that analytical instruction of these forms improved students’ correct usage. Another finding was that the students were able to change their incorrect usage of these forms, suggesting that students may be able to unlearn their socio-stylistic mistakes through analytical instruction. Explicit instruction of the French language is, therefore, one strategy that can be used to help students to improve their oral language skills. It is important to note that, although Lyster’s study examined explicit instruction, it was not prescriptive (rule-based) but, rather, descriptive (explanation-based), and provided the students with the “ability to make informed choices with respect to sociolinguistic variation” (p. 280).

Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) encourage this descriptive approach as well, stating that “[l]’enseignement de la variation sociostylistique n’exige pas la transmission d’un ensemble de règles normatives mais nécessite plutôt une présentation variée de ses diverses caractéristiques” (¶ 44). As such, the goal for teachers is to provide students with a sense of the French language so that they are able to make informed choices about their use of the language.

To improve and enlarge French immersion student’s vocabulary base, Swain (1996) posits that explaining the form and meaning of the words that make up the familiar language might correct students’ expressive lag compared to that of native speakers. Cummins (1998)

states that language instruction of form and use provides students with the necessary time to study its nuances. In other words, students are not necessarily going to understand certain aspects of spoken language simply by hearing it. Genesee (2004) also supports the importance of explicitly teaching students the form of language, explaining that

[m]ore systematic language instruction that is linked to students' communicative needs in the classroom along with more explicit focus on the linguistic forms required by classroom communication than has been the case in many bilingual programs to date would advance students' linguistic competence. (p. 8)

An additional strategy to lessen students' anxiety concerning oral language so that they communicate in French in the classroom is the use of games. Messier and Roussel (2008) suggest using games, such as charades and skits as a means of teaching effective communication. Students can work on improving their communication skills and, at the same time, feel more at ease with their classmates. If students feel more at ease, they will take more risks, which is important in language learning (Ely, 1986).

Self-Assessment

Student self-assessment involves students assessing their performance after group activities, that is, evaluating their use of French and their participation. In so doing, this can provide a motivating element to their learning of French. The significance of motivation is evident in the French Immersion classroom because students are continually being asked to stretch their capabilities. As a result, students must be motivated to acquire a certain level of success in French. Ortega (2009) and Finnegan (2008) identify motivation as one of the key concepts in the domain of second language acquisition. Ortega suggests that it is an essential factor in explaining individual differences in language acquisition. She defines motivation as

being “the desire to initiate L2 learning and the effort employed to sustain it” (p. 168). It is this sustained effort that is so important in the classroom and, while it is clear that motivation plays a very important role in learning, the question remains: How does one motivate a diverse group of learners with different strengths, challenges and personalities?

One of the solutions to this constant challenge may be the implementation of self-assessment techniques. Bingham, Holbrook, and Meyers (2010) suggest that teaching students the metacognitive skills required to become self-regulated learners can have a positive effect on their motivation levels. Teaching students how to effectively self-assess is an essential part of helping them develop into self-regulated learners (de Saint Léger, 2009). Significant time must be invested by both the student and by the teacher (Murao & Chabot, 2008; Bingham et al., 2010) and will produce a high return if indeed self-assessment influences student motivation.

Self-assessment provides the teacher with an idea of how the students view their own language abilities and progress. Saito (2003) suggests two types of self-assessment: performance-oriented self-assessment that focuses on the placement or level of a student, and development-oriented self-assessment that measures the capabilities and the level of knowledge that a student possesses. It is the latter that is more likely to be used consistently in the classroom because it is ongoing and linked to the development of the student. Development-oriented self-assessment lends itself to classroom activities because it does not simply sample students’ abilities; rather, it provides a continual measure of their performance and development.

Self-assessment is a type of formative assessment, defined by Sadler (1998) as “assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning” (cited in Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200). This type of assessment focuses on the learner and on the ways that they can improve; it approaches learning as a

continual process and not simply as the acquisition of knowledge (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). When students take more responsibility for their own assessment, they are more actively involved in their learning (de Saint Léger, 2009). Ridley (2003) suggests that “[t]he more learners are able to exercise agency, the more they become self-regulated learners” (cited in de Saint-Léger, 2009, p. 160). This agency refers to the students taking an active role in their assessment from start to finish. According to Bingham et al. (2010), the use of self-assessment can “play a powerful role in the relationship between a child’s motivation and academic achievement” (p. 160). They explain that self-assessment, “[w]hen modeled by the teacher in thoughtful ways, ... returns voice and ownership to students” (p. 59).

Murao and Chabot (2008) also support the idea of modeling techniques to students. They explain that the teacher must first model the type of self-assessment. After this, students should be provided with time to practice that assessment technique. Finally, students should have the opportunity to discuss the self-assessment either as a class or one-on-one with the teacher. This type of scaffolding is often recommended when teaching students a new concept and, therefore, this model should be familiar to most teachers and students. Brown (2005) suggests using a written rating scale that can be given to students in order to make their assessment more clear. He notes the importance of being sure that this rating scale is in written form with wording and terms that students will understand and which ensures that all students understand their important role in the assessment. He also suggests having a teacher or a student score the same piece of work to make the assessment more reliable.

There have been some concerns raised over the reliability and validity of self-assessment. De Saint Léger (2009) explains that the reliability of self-assessments is found through correlating students’ scores with those of the teacher or those of another means of assessment.

She explains that the results of the correlations vary greatly and suggests that self-assessment may be “too subjective to be used for summative assessment purposes, particularly when stakes are high” (p. 159). Where validity is concerned, de Saint Léger (2009) states that there are many variables affecting the accuracy of self-assessment and an educator must be aware of and keep in mind the many variables that could influence the assessment and its results. It is important, therefore, for an educator to keep in mind the particular goals of self-assessment and the reasons for its implementation.

Appropriate goal setting is also important to assessment and motivation. The process of goal setting, which can take place as part of pre-assessment, can also help students sustain their motivation. Students set goals, for example, on how often they use French in the classroom, reflect on those goals, and make their self assessments, thus creating “an ongoing, dynamic tool for reflecting concurrently on past and possible future performance and learning behavior” (de Saint-Léger, 2009, p. 160). It is essential to instruct and model to students how to set realistic goals because “individuals with specific goals persist longer at a task than individuals with easy and vague goals” (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995, cited in de Saint-Léger, 2009, p. 160). Self-assessment can help students become more aware of their learning and the thinking processes involved and as a result, help them to develop and sustain their intrinsic motivation when it comes to improving their oral language skills.

Summary

For students to be active learners, they must be provided with explanations and tools to make the right decision about their language use. Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) explain that analytical teaching using explanation “peut contribuer à ... équiper [les élèves avec] d’outils indispensables pour devenir des locuteurs de français langue seconde plus autonomes” (§ 45).

This explanation-based focus should allow students to deepen their comprehension of the nuances, both linguistic and sociolinguistic, of a second language. Therefore, this type of instruction could help in narrowing the large gap between French immersion students' expressive and receptive skills. I hope to facilitate improvement in the expressive skills of my students by allowing them to put into practice the oral language skills they have learned by providing them ongoing formal and informal opportunities for output in the classroom.

CONNECTIONS TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Preparation

I began the 2009-2010 school year with some trepidation about completing a research project while teaching. As I observed the interactions between students in September, I felt a sense of relief to see that my focus on French oral language had been a good choice. I noticed the same trend that I had in previous years: the Grade 4 students began to experience the sense of freedom that came with the ease of expressing themselves during English Language Arts and slowly, English began to permeate into the students' classroom conversations.

My project officially began on October 1, 2009. I explained to the students that we would be focusing on oral language for the entire first term, with the goal of improving their skills so that they would be speaking French in all conversations in the classroom, whether it be with their teacher or with their peers. In this context, I explained the expressive component of oral language and presented the students with an oral language journal. For their first entry, students needed to respond to three statements:

- Lorsque je parle avec mes camarades pendant les activités en classe, je m'exprime en français (toujours, souvent, parfois, jamais). [*When I speak with my friends during classroom activities, I speak in French (always, often, sometimes, never).*]
- Pourquoi penses-tu que tu t'exprimes en anglais en classe? [*Why do you think that you use English in the classroom?*]
- Quel est ton but lorsque tu parles en classe avec tes camarades? De t'exprimer en français (toujours, souvent, parfois)? [*What is your goal for yourself when it comes to speaking French with your classmates? To use French (always, often, or sometimes)?*]

Following Murao and Chabot's (2008) suggestions, I modeled this self-assessment strategy for

the students before asking them to complete their first journal entry. After all the students had written their responses, I collected the journals and, over the course of the next few days, met with each student to discuss his or her answers and oral language goal.

While expressive skills are a large part of my project, oral language also includes listening skills. In my next lesson with the students, we began to talk about effective communication. Murao and Chabot (2008) suggest inviting a colleague into the classroom in order to model effective communication skills to students. I asked one of my colleagues to come in and we modeled a discussion that included proper body language, turn taking and questioning. After the students had seen this demonstration, we discussed those aspects that had worked well and created a *Good Speaker/Good Listener* chart as mentioned by Murao and Chabot. The class seemed to enjoy this activity and, in so doing, they were creating the criteria for their oral language interactions.

The final part of the set up for this project was preparing students to work in groups. As the results of Messier and Roussel's (2008) study suggest, it was essential before beginning any group work that I teach the students how to be effective group members, that is, to teach them explicitly how to effectively work together and to cooperate. In order to divide my students into groups that would be successful and balanced, I needed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of my students. Although Shrum and Glisan (2010) explain that intermediate students at the Grade 4 and 5 level "work well in groups" (p. 113), it has been my experience that the students require instruction and guidance before, during, and after the group work commences.

One strategy to develop effective group work is to use a set of manila cards in which each card explains a different role for students in a group. The cards contain the name of the role (*le*

secrétaire, l'observateur, le modérateur, le surveillant), the responsibility of each role, and some key questions and prompts that guide students in their respective roles. I used these cards to introduce the idea of taking a specific role in a group. In addition, students were given these cards so that they could look at the responsibilities during the activity to be sure that they were meeting all the requirements of their particular task. I believe these roles help the students to focus and create a more structured environment during periods of group work. This follows Shrum and Glisan's (2010) discussion of the importance of each student having a responsibility when working in groups. I decided to rotate students through each of the roles so that they have the opportunity to develop a variety of skills and become comfortable with each role.

As a final strategy, I decided to implement a system that I had used during the previous year called *les batons*. At the beginning of each week, students are given ten popsicle sticks. They are able to take other students' sticks if they catch that student speaking English. At the end of the week, we count the sticks and the student who has the most receives a certificate and applause from the class. This strategy requires a lot of set up because the goal is that the students take responsibility for encouraging French in the classroom. It is important for them to realize that the goal is to get them in the habit of speaking French in the classroom. In the early stages, there was the occasional time where I had to step in to resolve a small conflict, but this was rare. I have found that most students enjoy this system and by the end of the first month, many students are able to keep their ten original sticks for the entire week.

Oral Language as a Focus

I have always incorporated oral language into other subject areas through debates and group discussions. In my research on the oral language skills of French immersion students, I read a number of studies that stated that oral language should be a focus in the classroom and, as

such, be taught explicitly. Because of this, when I created my day plan for the year, I included an oral language block of 30 to 45 minutes on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings. It was during these specific times that students understood that the activities would be entirely oral-language-based.

Reflecting on treating oral language as its own subject, I now know that I will always keep specific blocks that are focused around improving expressive skills. Through observation, as well as reading students' self-assessments, it seemed that they enjoyed the activities and work in groups. We were also able to include other subjects into these oral language blocks as group activities were sometimes focused around math problems. I had always worked the other way around, letting oral language play a supporting role to Science, Social Studies or Language Arts. Since oral language is such a large part of the Language Arts curriculum, I believe that I am now better able to address the many prescribed learning outcomes, and as such, this project has helped to strengthen my practice.

“La discussion”

I began every Monday morning oral language block with a discussion. This was very informal, but I did track student participation in these morning sharing sessions. Discussions were focused around what the students had done the weekend before. Each week, more and more students participated in these discussions and, by end of my ten-week project, more than three quarters of the students in my class were participating. These discussion blocks have continued throughout the year as I found them to be a good way to start the week and to connect with students. Because of increased student participation, I had to extend my oral language blocks on Mondays to accommodate these lengthy discussions as well as the introductions to the weekly group activity.

Group activities

Group work during oral language periods was focused around creative problem solving. I decided to use creative thinking challenges because I wanted to give students different types of activities and it was my hope that, because the activity changed each week, students would enjoy at least one of these creative challenges. I translated activities from *Springboards to Creative Thinking* (Muncy, 1985) and used math activities from *Festivale de casse-tête et d'énigmes* (Page & Gervy, 2001), two resources that I found in our school library. Activities included thematic tasks linked to Thanksgiving and Halloween as well as creative problem solving. Students also focused on idiomatic expressions for one project where they had to explain and act out both the literal and figurative meaning of an expression. For this project, I used *Leon et les expressions* (Groovie, 2004). After these presentations, there was a large amount of transfer and I heard a lot of expressions such as, “*tu as la tête dans les nuages*” in the classroom. Though I tried to do one oral language activity each week—introducing it on Monday, allowing students time to work on Tuesday and completing presentations on Thursday—I found that some activities required two weeks before class presentations were ready.

Word wall, charades and drama

To teach vocabulary, I created a word wall in my class that contained thematic words based on what we were learning in Science and Social Studies as well as French idiomatic expressions, common mistakes in French and their correct forms, and some expressions that the students felt would be useful in their interactions. A few times each week, usually just before lunch or recess, we would play charades based on these expressions. I would say a word or expression and the students would act them out. It seemed that students thoroughly enjoyed this game and as time went on, I had many student volunteers to lead this activity.

I decided to teach drama during the third term and did so in collaboration with a colleague, having our two classes meet once a week. We began with drama games in order to create a secure classroom environment and explained to the students that an important part of drama is risk taking. My students were able to connect the importance of risk taking in drama with the importance of risk taking in developing expressive skills as this had been such a focus in the classroom.

After we saw that the students felt comfortable with each other, we divided the students into small groups, mixing the classes. We explained to the students that they would now need to work together in their groups to present a play. There were six plays in total and while they were based on familiar stories, they contained a certain unique element that seemed to engage the students' interest (for example, Hansel and Gretel being interviewed about their experiences in the forest and who was really the villain). The students worked in these groups for a total of 6 weeks. During these meetings, I was able to observe my students interacting with students from a different class. I noticed that they seemed to take on the leadership roles in the groups and that they were able to effectively stay on task as well as to navigate the challenge of who would play what role. I had expected more conflict and that the students would require some teacher intervention during these rehearsals; however, I was very pleasantly surprised to be able to observe the students and to compliment them on their excellent organization and communication skills. The students took ownership of the plays by practicing during recess and lunch and bringing costumes and props from home.

On the last Friday in June, we saw the results of the students' preparations. Once again, I saw that my timid students, who had already improved so much during the year, seemed to become much more confident and expressive when playing their roles. It was a wonderful ending

to a year and, as I watched the plays and saw my students' increased confidence and improved abilities, I was able to reflect on just how far they had come.

Self-Assessment

Students worked together to create criteria for oral language activities by creating a *Good Listener/ Good Speaker* chart. They also assessed their spoken French in their journal as a type of pre-assessment. In order to model the activity or strategy to students before asking them to do it themselves, I demonstrated a self-assessment while sharing my thoughts aloud concerning my performance on a task. Students asked questions and we practised one assessment together before I felt confident that they were ready to reflect on their performances accurately on their own. After each group activity, I asked the students to complete a self-assessment that was made up of two statements:

- Lorsque j'ai travaillé avec mon groupe, j'ai bien participé et je me suis exprimé en français (toujours, souvent, parfois, jamais). [*When I worked with my group, I participated well and I spoke in French (always, often, sometimes, never).*]

- J'ai bien écouté et respecté les autres membres de mon groupe (toujours, souvent, parfois, jamais). [*I listened well and respected the other members of my group (always, often, sometimes or never).*]

As I circulated during these activities and kept observation notes, I was able to compare my results with the students' self-assessments. I found that most were quite accurate in their interpretations of their interactions. When I did find one discrepancy with one student, I discussed his view and shared with him what I had seen. He showed some improvement in assessing himself more accurately, although I am not entirely convinced that he actually understood the task.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

Through these activities, I saw an improvement in all students' oral language skills. Because oral language was my focus, it became their focus. Making them aware that the class would be concentrating on improving oral language skills seemed to truly help them to concentrate on speaking French amongst themselves. The journals and weekly self-assessments allowed me to understand the individual motivations of each student when it came to improving their communication skills. Through this project, I have learned the importance of teaching oral language skills, and more importantly, explaining language to students. I discovered that many students were very interested in improving their language by learning certain nuances and expressions. I witnessed students taking responsibility for their learning by reflecting and setting goals, skills that transferred to other subjects and that will hopefully stay with them throughout their educational journeys.

CONCLUSION

I have found this year to be so valuable in that I have seen a transformation in my students' expressive skills while, at the same time, learning so much myself. I believe that after much reflection on my own struggles and seeing the students' progress throughout the year that I finally understand the importance of oral language and why it now plays such a large role in the Language Arts curriculum.

Looking back on my research questions, I can see that this focus on oral language has not only improved the students' oral language skills but also that these skills have transferred to other subjects. Group work in Science and Social Studies ran smoothly after such a large part of this project was devoted to instructing students as to how to work together and how to be an effective group member. Finally, I saw students who became more comfortable communicating in French both formally and informally and took more risks in volunteering to speak in class. These findings have been so encouraging and I feel that my oral language program continues to develop well and that it will foster my future students' progress.

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