Cognitive tools in the French language classroom
An inquiry into the engagement of intermediate students through IE and AIM

Kathryn Guenter
Abstract

As one of the official languages of our country, French is an integral part of the curriculum in Canada. While many students enter the classroom eager to learn, enthusiasm often fizzles and most young Canadian students never attain a meaningful proficiency in the language. The AIM methodology infuses the language learning process with song, story, drama and gesture, which effectively captivates young learners and rapidly brings them to a basic level of proficiency in French. The Imaginative Education theory calls these four driving components of AIM, “cognitive tools” (i.e. features of the mind that shape the way we make sense of the world). These are tools that engage oral language learners. Kieran Egan offers a more extensive toolkit that reaches a broader range of learners as they understand and perceive the world around them through different lenses. I am curious to know if this expanded toolkit – specifically the tools Egan claims engage literate students (e.g. the extremes of reality, heroic qualities, humanizing of knowledge) could supplement the learning fostered through AIM and bolster students’ competency and appreciation for the French language.
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Ça débute
My first day

Tuesday, February 26th, 2019: My first day at a brand new school in a brand new position. I had imagined every possible scenario for this day. I had inklings of what it might look like to teach French to Grades 2-5 students, and how the classes may respond to the different introductory lessons I had prepared. I was not expecting, however, to have some of the theories that had been brewing in my mind for several months to be affirmed within the first few hours of my day.

In the morning, I taught my first few Grade 2 and 3 classes and within the 20-minute period I had with them, the kids laughed, danced, sang and gestured along to a French song about a little fish who gets eaten by progressively bigger oceanic creatures. As I wrapped up one lesson, the Grade 2 teacher said, “Great first class – they were so into it!” A student in a Grade 3 class actually called out, “You’re an awesome teacher!” as I left the room. I was soaring and feeling pretty confident that I was born to be a primary French teacher. Fast-forward to my Grade 4 and 5 classes that afternoon. I tried out one of the same gesturing games I had used earlier with the younger grades, having the kids call out, “Cours! Marche! Cours! Saute!” (Run! Walk! Run! Jump!) or “Bien! Mal! Bien! Mal!” (Good! Bad! Good! Bad!) as I gestured different actions as quickly as possible. The grade 2 and 3s had roared with laughter, trying to keep up with me. The Grade 4 and 5s on the other hand, begrudgingly participated while rolling their eyes. The message they were communicating with all but words was coming across so loudly I’d swear it was audible: “This is old news. What else you got, Lady?” To be clear, I had planned different lessons to cater to each age group, but given the success I had had earlier with this game, I thought I would at least get a laugh or two. The contrast between the primary and intermediate students was stark.

And if I wasn’t already convinced that the older students are drawn in through different means than the littles, my next class reaffirmed that notion. Shortly after entering a Grade 4 classroom, my opening activity was usurped by a conversation about extremely large families. In my brief introduction to the students, I told them that I have 2 kids. This prompted an immediate discussion, each student trying to top the next. “My family has 4 kids.” “My grandma had 10 kids.” “My friend’s grandpa had 13 kids.” “My great-grandma had 20 kids!” Finally one girl chimed in, “I know someone who has more than 1000 kids.” To which I replied,
“Not true!” “Yes”, she says with a smug grin, “it’s God.” It would seem, as suspected, that early-intermediate students have moved past silly songs, dancing and identifying opposites in a speedy gesturing game and are looking for something a bit more in touch with their present interests and own (at times bizarre) reality.

Qui suis-je?
Who am I?

I was raised in St. Albert, Alberta, where I completed my elementary and high school education in the French Immersion program. Inspired by an excellent, passionate and engaging teacher, I decided in Grade One that I wanted to become a French Teacher myself. 25 years later, here I am, having taught French now for 8 years. After graduating with my Bachelor of Education from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, I moved to Montréal, Québec and taught there for 6 years, which allowed me to refine my French language skills. My passion and appreciation for the language only deepened during that time. My story, however, is anomalous. The majority of French Immersion and Core French students in Canada do not pursue further French studies or opportunities beyond what is required of them by the curriculum.

La Grande Évasion
Why students are dropping out of French

I’ve always been curious about French speakers who acquired the language through second language and immersion programs. It seems there is a disconnect between students’ competency and success in these programs and their actual ability to express themselves in a meaningful way in the “real world”. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that young Canadian students are choosing to forgo French classes once they are no longer required. Despite the Canadian government’s investment in French education, “few young Anglophones are continuing their studies of French beyond grade 9” (Carroll, 2011, 21).

“Parlez français s’il-vous-plait” (Speak French, please)

Wendy Maxwell, a Canadian educator, theorist and author believes that one key failure of the Core French program in Canada is that many French language teachers rely heavily on English to instruct, using it during up to 63% of class time, which hinders students’ receptive knowledge of the French language (Maxwell, 2001). Whether these teachers are lacking true
proficiency themselves, or it is simply easier to communicate in English with Anglophone students, it is a common phenomenon that threatens to stunt student’s receptive and expressive language skills.

Students are also often presented vocabulary that is grouped thematically, through lists of nouns. The common result is that students can identify terms based on a theme, such as autumn or clothing items, but are not able to produce simple sentences about their lives. When they are not given the necessary tools to understand and communicate effectively even at a basic level, students soon lose the motivation to learn French.

_Du simple au complexe (From simple to complex)_

Maxwell also denounces the fact that the curriculum recommends “simple” reading materials and “simple” writing assignments for students, even after their fifth year in language classes. “Nowhere is it mentioned that students should be exposed to reading material that is linguistically rich, motivating or that stimulates the imagination” (Maxwell, 2001, 6). Another example is the late introduction of certain verbs. _Faire_ (to do) and _aller_ (to go), two of the most commonly used verbs in French conversation, are only introduced to students by the end of their third year in the program, due to the complexity of their conjugations. The idea of simplifying content until students are “ready” was originally made popular by Herbert Spencer, then later by Jean Piaget and John Dewey. “This principle is potentially and has been in practice, a recipe for making the early years of schooling intellectually barren” (Egan, 2002, 123).

Given the lack of modelled language, stimulating material, relevant vocabulary and useful grammatical structures, it is not surprising that many Canadian students are developing neither competency in, nor an affinity for the French language and are losing interest altogether.

_Et alors? Why does this matter?_

Canada is a bilingual nation. The heritage and history of the country are rooted in the existence of the French and English languages and the complex relationship between them. Fractures between provinces, leaders, political parties, enterprises and families have formed over French and English territorial lines. Cultures have been created and strengthened over opposition to the “other” language and at one time, the country was split - nearly literally – with
a close vote deciding whether Québec and Canada would become two separate nations. And yet, there are some who have fought for bilingualism, those who have embraced both languages and trumpeted the advantages of using the two in our country. Students who call Canada “home” should have a sense of the historical complexities and present importance of both English and French in our country.

As with any second language learning, students pursuing French studies will find doors opening to them for travel, work and relationships. Though elementary school students may have difficulty grasping the significance of becoming fluent in a second language, the benefits that await them as they gain proficiency in French are undeniable. My hope is that with maturity, my own students’ appreciation for the value of multilingualism will deepen. As a French language teacher, I feel I play a role in demonstrating and helping students to become aware of these benefits.

IE et moi
Where Imaginative Education and my story intersect

Shortly after returning to Vancouver from Montreal, I began my graduate studies in Imaginative Education at Simon Fraser University. My curiosity in French language learning was piqued by Kieran Egan’s theory of education, which seemed to align with everything I had experienced within the educational realm. Egan’s theory claims that students are drawn in by and through certain cultural cognitive tools as they gain linguistic skills and engage emotionally with the knowledge they acquire.

As a younger student, I remember learning French grammar and vocabulary through stories and songs (e.g. the fish song mentioned previously, “Petit Poisson”). I vividly remember that as a Grade 6 student, I gave a presentation to my class in French about my favourite pop star. In university, one of my favourite classes was French Linguistics, learning about the
etymology and morphology of certain French words and where English and French roots intersect. This was when I realized for the first time that having a second language allowed me a scheme through which I could gain comprehension of new words I stumbled upon in both languages. I was also intrigued by the phonetic alphabet, which offered me processes through which I could learn about French pronunciation and different dialects within the French language. These examples each contain one or several of the cognitive tools that Kieran Egan unpacks in his Imaginative Education theory. I cannot help but wonder if these moments in my schooling stand out to me because they transformed the way I understood and felt about the French language. I also cannot help but wonder if, as a French teacher, I could take tools such as these and use them to deepen my own students’ interest and capacity in the language.

**IE**

*Imaginative Education*

Imaginative Education is a theory of education developed by Dr. Kieran Egan, which situates imagination (the capacity to conceive of the possible) at the core of student learning. Through his Imaginative Education (IE) theory, Egan promotes the use of cognitive tools, which he explains as being “features of our minds that shape the ways we make sense of the world around us” (Egan, 2006, vi). Egan’s IE theory introduces five kinds of understanding (Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic) that accumulate and coalesce as students gain fluency in oral language and literacy. There are sets of cognitive tools within each of these kinds of understandings that Egan believes can engage students and bring meaning to their knowledge when employed in the classroom.

Through regular use of cognitive tools, French language teachers can help make the language acquisition process more meaningful and effective. For example, Mythic learners, who are developing their oral language skills, often respond well to the use of binary opposites (e.g. “bon/mauvais”, “chaud/froid”, “long/court”) to gain an initial grasp on the language. Other tools of this kind of understanding include story, rhyme, metaphor, forming vivid mental images and humour. As they engage with the French language through these and other cognitive tools, students refine their comprehension and fluency in French at a basic level.

Students who are gaining and refining literacy skills are engaging with the world through the lens of Romantic Understanding. They are fascinated by the extremes and limits of reality,
heroic qualities, revolt and idealism and that which instills in them a sense of wonder. These cognitive tools appear, but are less common, in the FSL classroom. They can be powerful tools in intermediate and high school French classrooms, but I would venture to say that most teachers don’t employ them regularly and have not thought consciously about why or how they are effective.

The toolkits of Philosophic and Ironic understanding are comprised of tools such as: drive for generality, processes, lure of certainty, general schemes & anomalies, reflexivity & identity and radical epistemic doubt. Should a student gain a high proficiency in the French language and be supported by the academic community around them, they would be able to engage with and understand the world through a more philosophic and/or ironic lens. For French language learners, and especially grade-school students, this higher level and complexity of thought in an additional language are possible but require an adequate development of the previous kinds of understanding (Egan, 1997).

Egan also emphasizes the importance, for both the educator and the students, of finding a sense of wonder in everyday language instruction (Egan & Judson, 2013) and the necessity of emotional engagement for students to acquire active and meaningful knowledge. In order to motivate FSL students, it is imperative that the teacher feel invested in French education and be convinced of the value of learning the language. To spark enthusiasm in their students, the teacher must find within themselves an emotional connection to their topic (Egan, 2006).

In order to continue to pique students’ interest and have them pursue French studies at a higher level, or be motivated to continue an exploration of the French language, teachers must help students to build upon, evolve and expand their set of cognitive tools. Teaching language and literacy skills, therefore, is not so much about reaching a destination, as it is about an ever-expanding exploration: “…we can reconceive of education as an enterprise aimed at ensuring for each of our students as full as possible an acquisition of each of these toolkits” (Egan & Judson, 2013, 353).

The Accelerative Integrated Methodology
What is AIM?

The Accelerative Integrated Methodology (AIM) is a model for second language learning, designed to accelerate the process of language acquisition. Created by Canadian
educator and author, Wendy Maxwell, AIM introduces students to French with a focus on the experiential aspect of language acquisition (message and meaning), rather than analytical study of the target language. Looking through the lens of Imaginative Education, one could consider that AIM is effective in that it infuses the second language learning process with the cognitive tools of song, story and drama. AIM teachers also use repetition, accompanying gestures, and whole-class oral production to bring kinetic energy to the classroom.

Part of what prompted the creation of AIM was Maxwell’s dissatisfaction with current FSL language programs in Canada. Maxwell found that students were being presented French vocabulary in a way that was detached and disconnected to their daily lives. If students feel that communication serves no relevant purpose, they may quickly lose motivation and the desire to learn. In response, Maxwell devised a base of high-frequency verbs and phrases for students termed, “Pared Down Language” (PDL). AIM presents students with the most useful and common words and phrases and slowly builds upon these, which maximizes the opportunity for effective communication through minimal vocabulary. Through various mediums (songs, stories, plays etc.), students are given multiple exposures to the PDL, increasing the likelihood that these essential words and phrases will be incorporated into their long-term memory and daily speech.

Ça marche!
Why AIM works

Story

The AIM model highly emphasizes the use of narrative to evoke personal interest in students:

When we base second language (L2) acquisition in story, we are contextualizing it emotionally and experientially. When I see my students acting out plays or telling stories, I can see how sometimes they are completely wrapped up in the unfolding adventure playing out in their imaginations. In drama, they are externalising hopes and fears from their lives, and in the safety of fantasy, manifesting them in a non-threatening way (Maxwell, 2001, 58-59).

Many educators celebrate the tool of story, for the way it awards memorable and meaningful language acquisition for the learner. David Booth and Bob Barton recognize narrative as a powerful tool that allows us to imagine life through the eyes of another: “Story can cause us to
tap into the universal situations of life, to stand in the shoes of others in all the world’s past, present and future, taking risks, suffering, sorrowing, laughing, wondering, challenging, feeling satisfied…” (Booth & Barton, 2000, 11). Many stories also include rhyme and repeated phrases, giving students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the structure of the language and with high-frequency vocabulary (Claudio, 2016; Maxwell, 2001).

Song
New vocabulary presented through music is more easily retained: “[U]se of songs, chants and rhymes helps draw out patterns and aid in memorization” (Judson, 2008, 4). The combination of song and gesture, often used in classrooms with young children, is extremely effective: “…children remember the lines long after the initial singing…gesture seems to help to trigger the student’s memory” (Maxwell, 2001, 43). Many traditional stories and songs are also full of repeated phrases (e.g. Who’s been sleeping in MY bed?). “For elementary and intermediate students, [these] can be used as an almost subliminal grammar input” (Morgan & Rinvolucri, 1996, 2).

Drama
The use of drama in the classroom allows students to engage with the target language in an imaginative setting. While embodying a character, students are able to be playful and communicate in the L2 using their bodies and voices in a way they normally wouldn’t: “…such kinesthetic engagement can enhance students’ interest and work to extend the range of their personal utterances” (Stinson & Winston, 2011, 484). Drama is particularly beneficial in the language classroom being that the study of language, according to Dr. Stephen Krashen, necessarily involves public practice (Stinson & Winston, 2011). Where students may normally feel pressure to produce a certain quality of oral output, a role-play activity shifts students’ attention away from their insecurities and others’ judgement to the story being told.

Gesture
Gesture is a communicative tool that is used instinctively by many second language teachers. It is powerful in its ability to add dynamic or emphasis to the speaker’s message as well as to convey meaning in a fairly universal way. Inspired in part by James Asher’s Total
Physical Response, Wendy Maxwell uses repetition as well as accompanying gestures for each new word and phrase that is introduced, to engage students’ minds and bodies in the learning. The use of signing or gesturing “helps children to develop verbal communication at a much faster rate because they are employing all of the paths in their brain required for abstract thinking” (Forsyth, n.d., 8). The visual and kinesthetic components of gesture allow the brain to process language through multiple inputs, making it extremely effective for language acquisition.

Routine and patterns

One of the foundations of the AIM model is its use of routines and patterns. Educational theorist and linguist, Stephen Krashen states that the second language learner has an increased need for routines and patterns. These are often thought of as “props which temporarily give support until a firmer foundation is built” (Krashen 1981, 92). AIM provides the rapid acquisition of a specific repertoire of vocabulary and phrases that are used repeatedly by students through stories, songs and written activities. Students quickly learn to use these words and phrases, more or less appropriately, in their everyday dialogue within the classroom.

With their ability to emotionally engage the learner, stimulate the imagination, convey information effectively, aid in memorability of key vocabulary and bring kinetic energy to the classroom, the above-mentioned cognitive tools are highly effective in the language acquisition process. One could argue then, that the success of AIM is largely due to its level of integration of these tools.

Affective Filter

Ultimately even the most thoughtful and well-designed lessons may be ineffective without the investment of the educator and the emotional engagement of the student. Given the vulnerable nature of communication in a new language, students’ emotions can accelerate or hinder the acquisition process (Stinson & Winston, 2011). Especially in the context of an L2 classroom, where motivation and risk-taking are paramount, it is important that teachers create an encouraging, supportive and non-threatening learning environment (Forsyth, n.d., Maxwell, 2014). Though often overlooked in the development of FSL programs, students’ emotions are inextricably linked to cognitive function and must be taken into consideration, “or else
curriculum becomes useless” (Forsyth, n.d., 16). “Once we lose any connection between the tool kit of literacy and the students feelings, we reduce literacy learning to a crude acquisition of skills removed from what can give them life and meaning” (Egan, 2006, 58). Inspired by Stephen Krashen’s “Affective Filter hypothesis”, which states that language acquisition is impeded by anxiety and insecurity, Maxwell advocates an environment that is as stress-free as possible. One of the ways in which she does this is by prompting students to produce oral output chorally. In Maxwell’s framework, no one student is ever “put on the spot” or asked to respond to a question without being guided by gesture and full-class repetition.

**Jusqu’à un certain point…**

*Limitations of AIM*

While the AIM methodology offers students an excellent foundation in French, it may not be enough to propel them into a meaningful and continuous journey of learning the language. Students who learn for utilitarian reasons are likely to discontinue their studies once they have reached a certain level of proficiency.

“With instrumental motivation, language acquisition may cease as soon as enough is acquired to get the job done. Also, instrumentally motivated performers may acquire just those aspects of the target language that are necessary; at an elementary level, this may be simple routines and patterns, and at a more advanced level this predicts the non-acquisition of elements that are communicatively less important but that are socially important, such as aspects of morphology and accent” (Krashen 1981, 22-23).

Maxwell uses the term “critical fluency” to describe the linguistic outcome of AIM and admits that this is a starting point for students, a “springboard to a higher level of proficiency” (Carroll, 2011, 22). In this sense, Maxwell is very aware of how teachers using AIM in the classroom can equip students. What remains to be seen is how students will continue to pursue studies in French beyond the AIM classroom.
Je me demande…

Inquiry Topic

In my years of teaching French at the primary level, I have seen many young students with a passion and enthusiasm for the French language. This exuberance is especially typical of Grade 1 and 2 students. They are obedient, honest and excited to be in the classroom each day. They are committed to speaking French and don’t mind making mistakes, even in front of their peers. They enjoy songs, stories and plays, making it easy for teachers to incorporate language into the classroom through these mediums. As of Grade 3, students’ motivation and enthusiasm for French begins to waver. By Grades 4 and 5, in my experience, students’ interest has dwindled and it becomes near to impossible to motivate them to speak French in the classroom. I am curious as to what changes in these short years. Why do students who were once passionate and excited about the French language lose interest? Is there a way to maintain this fervour for second language learning?

When I first learned about AIM, I was interested in its claim to heighten student engagement and increase spontaneous oral production in the French language classroom. I eventually saw it at work and was further convinced of its effectiveness to provide students a base of proficiency in French. Once I began my Masters Degree in Imaginative Education, I realized that given certain principles of Egan’s theory, we could consider that Maxwell’s model is effective because it engages students on an emotional level and employs cognitive tools. I am intrigued and excited to see how teaching using AIM can be complimented by Egan's Imaginative Education theory, which is why I directed my fieldwork research towards this particular inquiry.

Selon moi…

My theory

The base that Wendy Maxwell provides through AIM taps into and equips students with the cognitive tools of Somatic and Mythic Understanding. As they engage with the French language through song, story, gesture, drama and pattern, they refine their oral comprehension and production at a basic level. Based on my understanding of Imaginative Education, I am tempted to offer that the employment of additional cognitive tools could supplement Maxwell’s method and further engage intermediate students in the FSL classroom.
Primary students have enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards the French language because many FSL language teachers are instinctively employing strategies that cater to the way they are perceiving and engaging with the world around them. When students reach the early intermediate grades, though tools such as story and games are still useful, they may be looking for more. For students to continue along the trajectory of meaningful learning in their second language, they need the basic tools that Maxwell provides through AIM, but also to develop and become fluent in the toolkits of each of Egan’s kinds of understanding. Students who have already been drawn into the excitement of learning French could be compelled to further their knowledge and proficiency in the language should they be equipped with a more extensive toolkit within the target language. My hope would be that as they engage imaginatively in the language and uncover emotional connections to it, students would develop not only proficiency, but a lifelong interest and desire to live in, love in and express themselves in French.

**Inquiry Questions:**

Why do intermediate students tend to lose interest in learning French?

How can a deeper appreciation and sense of the value of learning French be fostered in students?

How largely can the success of AIM be attributed to its use of the cognitive tools of story, song, gesture and drama?

How can the use of additional cognitive tools lead to increased engagement in intermediate students?

**AR methodology**

*Why Action Research?*

The long-accepted notion that educational research is conducted by the academic elite is shifting. “Educators, groups of educators and educational systems are recognizing the power of conducting their own research – focusing with intentionality on specific questions and issues they face, and determining links between effective practice and student learning” (Parsons et al., 2013, 2). Inquiry projects are now more common among educators as they seek to find answers
to problems they experience in their own classrooms and to share knowledge and experience with peers in their field. “We do research to learn about something that is important or of interest to us” (Parsons et al., 2013, 7). Over the years, I have grown a deep appreciation for the Québécois people and culture. I had a love affair with the city of Montréal and a piece of my heart will forever be there. Put simply, I actually care about the English-French tension in our country. I hope to use my career to equip students with French skills by helping them engage emotionally in and through the language.

**Method**

*Mixed methods approach*

As is common in research today, I took a mixed methods approach to this inquiry, employing both quantitative and qualitative strategies where I thought each would be most fitting. For example, in conducting surveys, I gathered information from students about their experience in French class and then analyzed the data by counting students’ responses and representing those numbers using graphs and charts (quantitative strategy). While conducting my focus group and surveys with teachers, I collected data that was based on student and teacher feedback. They were able to share personal thoughts and experiences with me, which in turn informed my research (qualitative strategy). Within the qualitative aspect of my study, I was focusing on the correlation between certain grade levels and their engagement in the French classroom.

*Action & reflection spiral*

Though I had limited time with students, I found that what I experienced in the classroom one day would in turn influence my thoughts, responses and planning for the upcoming lesson. I went into this position with a certain notion of how students at different grade levels would respond to various activities, and of course, my notions were not always correct. “Action research can be viewed as a cyclical or spiral process that moves from reflection to action and back to reflection again” (Parsons et al., 2013, 24). When classes surprised me by how they responded to certain activities, I would consider their reaction and head “back to the drawing board” to plan for the next lesson. I also realize that I am still becoming acquainted with the school and the students, so though my report is complete for now, there is no doubt this inquiry
will be ongoing for me. “Action research is often viewed not as an isolated project, but as an ongoing philosophy of thinking, learning and problem solving” (Parsons et al., 2013, 24).

**Data collection methods**

**Focus groups**

Partly due to the limited amount of class time I had with the students, I wanted to form a focus group to be able to hear more intentionally from students about their experiences in the French classroom. The dynamic created in a focus group “…produces data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Parsons et al., 2013, 56). The AIM methodology relies on the teacher using French exclusively in the classroom, which is another reason the classroom setting was not appropriate for this kind of data gathering. In our focus group, I used English to facilitate and moderate the group, which allowed students to share more openly and authentically because they could express themselves easily in their mother tongue.

**Surveys**

I chose to survey one class of each grade group to give me a broad-brush feel of how the students were reacting to French class. I was primarily interested in the contrast between Grades 2 and 5, but gathered data from the Grade 3 and 4 students as well. I benefited from consultations with my critical friend group as I drafted up surveys. “One major problem with [surveys] is interviewer bias which includes not just active bias but also passive bias, such as an inability to consider all of the possible questions that could be asked. This is why critical friends are helpful when constructing an interview agenda” (Parsons et al., 2013, 57). One of the most helpful tips I received from a classmate of mine (another French teacher), was to give the survey in English. She felt that this would give students the opportunity to be more vulnerable and would remove the “barrier” of reading and responding to questions in French. With the teacher surveys, my critical friends reminded me to zone in on what I was actually looking for: “The process is simple, actually: figure out what you want to know and whom you want to ask, then write a series of questions that would elicit the information you need” (Parsons et al., 2013, 57).
**Observation**

As most teachers do, I was consistently observing students as I delivered lessons. I was noting (mentally and afterwards in writing) anything from body language to general classroom “vibe”; which students were keen on which activities, whether the class was restless or antsy, whether students were laughing, eye-rolling, chatting amongst themselves or locked in, engaged and taking part in lessons and activities. Of course, one must acknowledge the temptation to see what you assume you will see: “…observations are always shaped to some degree by your own biases. Simple awareness of this fact will help you to represent what you see and hear more fairly” (Parsons et al., 2013, 58).

**Ethics**

In order to ensure that projects were ethically sound, our instructor held an ethics workshop at SFU. The presenter informed our cohort about appropriate procedures when interviewing, running focus groups and collecting data in other forms. Before beginning my inquiry project, I sought permission from administration, parents and students by drafting up a research proposal and consent forms. The forms were sent to parents of the classes I surveyed and from which I drew students to create my focus group. I anonymized the names of all students and staff mentioned in this report and asked permission of those whose names I did mention. There are no photos included that would reveal student or staff identities. Every person surveyed was notified of my intent for the survey data and offered access to the completed report.

**Où se passe l’histoire?**

*Vancouver Christian School*

Vancouver Christian School is an independent school that was established in 1949 by Dutch settlers. It has maintained its Dutch Christian Reformed roots in many ways but has grown from 8 students in a living room, to a Kindergarten to Grade 6 school and finally in September 2018, opened the doors of its brand-new building, welcoming in 700 students from Kindergarten to Grade 12.
In 2004, after observing first-hand the effectiveness of AIM in a Grade 1 classroom at another independent school in Vancouver, the principal at VCS decided to bring the program into her own school. Since then, VCS has been implementing the AIM methodology in all French classes from Grades 2-7.

The first teacher to have used AIM at VCS found it to be extremely effective and engaging for students. This teacher took many initiatives to develop and expand the program within the school in order to further foster excitement and motivation in students. That teacher has since moved on to another school, where he is still implementing AIM and seeing his students thrive. Following his departure, a young teacher with great energy and organizational skills took over the program. She was also committed to implementing AIM in its purest form and saw students quickly gaining proficiency. This teacher eventually went on maternity leave and did not return to the school following her leave. In her place was a teacher with a slightly more traditional approach who was unable to commit to the position due to an extensive commute time. Within the last few years, while the school was undergoing a major rebuild, VCS was operating out of three different campuses in East Vancouver. Needless to say, students and staff had gone through much change in the weeks and months leading up to my arrival.
Data

Initial surveys

During my second week in the school, having established an initial connection with students, I distributed surveys to one class of each grade group. I had attempted to select classes that showed a wide array of personalities, behaviours and abilities in order to collect a range of data from the greatest variety of students.

1) The first question on the survey asked students to draw how it feels to learn French.

Grade 2

![Draw a picture of how it feels to learn French.](image1)

![Draw a picture of how it feels to learn French.](image2)

![Draw a picture of how it feels to learn French.](image3)

![Draw a picture of how it feels to learn French.](image4)
Grade 3

I fed okay

Sometimes it is confusing to learn French.

Grade 4

Huh uh huh huh

In bulk? Today is the test!
After analyzing each photo, I categorized them based on what I felt the drawing communicated in terms of the student’s feelings towards French. I separated them into images I felt demonstrated sentiments that were: positive, negative, neutral or unknown. Based on this I was able to observe that, in general, the Grade 2 students were most enthusiastic towards French, the Grade 3 and 4 students were quite balanced in their outlook and the Grade 5 class had a significantly higher number of students that communicated a negative experience of French class. Most often communicated by those students were feelings of anxiety, confusion or boredom.
Once I had separated the images for each grade, I counted each response and used a chart to demonstrate overall difference in students’ sentiment towards French class, comparing specifically the Grade 2 and Grade 5 classes.
I immediately noticed the heightened difference between students who felt positively about French class (represented by the turquoise section), versus the students who demonstrated negative sentiments (represented by the blue section).

2) General abilities and interest in French

The graph below represents students’ responses to the second question of the survey. Students were asked to respond with “No”, “Kind of” or “Yes” by coloring in faces. The Grade 2s generally had more affirmative responses to most of the questions as is evident below. In all but one question, the Grade 5s demonstrated a less optimistic opinion. The Grade 3 and 4 classes that were surveyed revealed such a similar result that I chose to represent the Grade 3s only in the figure below, in order to simplify the reader’s view of the data collected. The most stark contrast was the difference between the Grade 2s and 5s in their response to the statement, “I like French and want to learn more”.

Students’ self-assessment of abilities and interest in French
The above graph represents the students whose response was the affirmative (i.e. the happy smiley face). The below chart represents in more detail the students’ responses, comparing specifically the Grade 2 and 5 classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Kind of</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I know a lot of French words.</strong></td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
<td>![Neutral]</td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 :</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5 :</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When the teacher speaks in French, I understand her.</strong></td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
<td>![Neutral]</td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 :</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5 :</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I can speak French.</strong></td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
<td>![Neutral]</td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 :</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5 :</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I like French class and want to learn more.</strong></td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
<td>![Neutral]</td>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 :</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5 :</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) Activities I enjoy in French class (from 1-7)

Grade 2
#1 - singing funny French songs
#2 - games in French
#3 - the entry rap
#4 - practicing the play
#5 - talking about ‘real life’ in French
#6 - worksheets
__ other: _______________

Grade 5

#1 - games in French
#2 - singing funny French songs
#3 - practicing the play
#4 - the entry rap
#5 - talking about ‘real life’ in French
#6 - worksheets
Other: Lotto, French auction (#1 or #2 for four students), Tests (#7 for six students)

There were not many differences in the results between the two grades for this question. The Grade 5s mentioned games, lotto and the French auction to be among their favourite activities and a few mentioned tests as their least favourite. I was a bit surprised by the overall similarity, but I had also not spent much time with the students, had not yet introduced any new
activities to them and had based my list upon only the activities I knew that they had done with their previous teacher.

4) What would you like to see happen in French class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Nothing. It’s good.’</td>
<td>‘Sing more songs.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I want to play more French games.’</td>
<td>‘Practicing the play.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I want to speak French.’</td>
<td>‘More games.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I would like to have a French party!’</td>
<td>‘More worksheets.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘If we do good in class we get a prize:)’</td>
<td>‘Make slime.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Free time.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grade 4**

Affective

‘My French teacher encouraging me to listen in a nice way and being nice to me.’
‘I would like you to never leave this school!’
‘I would like to have fun and enjoy French class.’
‘Euros and French auction ‘because it was so fun.’

Practical

‘I would like to see practicing ‘every day life’ in French so we understand what happens in the real world.’
‘I would like everyone to have fun and know lots of French later on.’

Other:

‘More funny French songs because I enjoy them a lot...and more time to practice the play because it will help me to memorize it easier.’
‘More practicing the play.’
‘I would like to see more games!’

**Grade 5**

Affective

‘More fun (from a children’s perspective) education.’
‘Play games more with friends that you are comfortable with, that is what sometimes feels good.’
‘I want to see when people make a mistake or mess up they will encourage each other.’

Practical

‘Lots of games and practicing the play lots. I like to practice the play and I find that playing games to learn is a very good way to learn.’
‘I want to see us learning more practical words.’
‘I would like to see myself learning French.’
‘I would like to see us practice stuff more.’
‘Activities that help you learn French.’
The Grades 2 students seem generally happy with the way things are in class; they would like to see more songs, games, parties and prizes. The Grade 3s had similar responses to the Grade 2s, but two responses that I wasn’t expecting were “make slime” and “free time”. Initially I was going to ignore these and not include them in my research but then I realized that sometimes one finds ingenuity in the least likely places. Maybe through use of metaphor, I could take an interesting spin on the French language as it relates to slime, or as a class we could write a story with Mr. Slime as our main character, or a step-by-step process in French for how to make slime. I could also potentially implement “free time” but in French (e.g. playing French board games or iPad games) - trick them into thinking they are just playing games, when they are actually gaining syntax skills and vocabulary.

What was very interesting to me is that the Grade 2 and 3 students’ ideas and suggestions were based on activities in the classroom. The Grade 4 and 5 students made several comments about the social-emotional component of the class, writing comments such as “I’m not the biggest fan of when I get called on and I don’t know the answer, it feels weird”, and “I want to see when people make a mistake or mess up, they will encourage each other”. The other big theme that arose out of their comments was that they were looking to be able to use the language in a relevant and practical way. This was evident through comments such as: “I would like to see practicing ‘everyday life’ in French so we understand what happens in the real world”, and “I want to see us learning more practical words”. I eventually started classifying students’ responses in those grades using the words “practical”, “affective” and “other”.

4) What do you NOT want to see happen in French class?

**Grade 3**
*I do not want to do a lot of worksheets.*
*I would not like to see so much French tests.*
The Grade 2s did not have suggestions or ideas about what they didn’t want to see in class. The Grade 3, 4 and 5 students communicated a distinct distaste for worksheets, tests and quizzes. A total of twelve Grade 3 students, seven Grade 5 students and two Grade 4 students commented that they did not want as many tests and worksheets or none at all. This was not surprising to me, as I’d been told in different ways by VCS parents, administrators and teachers that there had been a bit of anxiety on the part of the students in regards to assessment as it was happening before I arrived. As was noted earlier (emphasized by Krashen, Forsyth and Maxwell), anxiety in students can significantly hinder their language acquisition. Quizzes and tests are not typically a major element of the AIM methodology. This is where it becomes more evident that teaching style ultimately influences student engagement (but that is a whole other action research project).

One major benefit of being new to the school while conducting this research was that students seemed to feel more open to share; they knew they weren’t going to offend me by talking about activities I had done with them or my teaching style. It was a bit like being a detective - an outsider coming in and getting the “inside scoop”. This was particularly true of my focus group.

---

**Grade 4**
'I do not like seeing French worksheet during French time.'

**Grade 5**
'Keep it up!'

**Affective:**
'I’m not the biggest fan when I get called on and I don’t know the answer, it feels weird.’
'I don’t want you to call on someone who doesn’t have their hand up. If I don’t put my hand up, it usually means I don’t know the answer.’

**Other:**
'I don’t want to write alot in French class.’
'I don’t want to see us have soooo many test.’
'Lots of tests and not understanding French.’

The Grade 2s did not have suggestions or ideas about what they didn’t want to see in class. The Grade 3, 4 and 5 students communicated a distinct distaste for worksheets, tests and quizzes. A total of twelve Grade 3 students, seven Grade 5 students and two Grade 4 students commented that they did not want as many tests and worksheets or none at all. This was not surprising to me, as I’d been told in different ways by VCS parents, administrators and teachers that there had been a bit of anxiety on the part of the students in regards to assessment as it was happening before I arrived. As was noted earlier (emphasized by Krashen, Forsyth and Maxwell), anxiety in students can significantly hinder their language acquisition. Quizzes and tests are not typically a major element of the AIM methodology. This is where it becomes more evident that teaching style ultimately influences student engagement (but that is a whole other action research project).

One major benefit of being new to the school while conducting this research was that students seemed to feel more open to share; they knew they weren’t going to offend me by talking about activities I had done with them or my teaching style. It was a bit like being a detective - an outsider coming in and getting the “inside scoop”. This was particularly true of my focus group.
I attempted to pull a variety of Grade 4 and 5 students together for this focus group. I explained my project to students – that I was attempting to improve French class and find ways to increase the appeal for students. I told them that I would like to know about the activities they do and do not enjoy so that we could all benefit from our time together moving forward. Many students were interested and in order to maintain a rather small group size, I had to turn away some, telling them that we would repeat the process after Spring Break. I would like to believe that students came out in support of creating a better experience for everyone in the French classroom, but I also offered homemade baking, so that may have contributed to the appeal of Café Chez Kathryn.
I specifically asked two students, we will call them Henry and Trey, to participate in the focus group (okay, fine, I coaxed them in with fresh banana bread). These are students who seemed mostly disengaged in French class and when they do participate, it is often in a way that steers others’ attention away from the activity at hand. One female student who joined, Alice, had a “P” designation (gifted) and was very vocal in our first class together; I was curious to know her thoughts. Another female student, Grace, who is the daughter of a teacher, was eager to participate. The three other students, Billy, Rex and Kendall seemed to have a positive attitude in the French classroom and many ideas to share about how to improve it further.

One of the central, (if not the central) ideas of AIM is that everything in the classroom happens exclusively in French. The language is pared down so much that anything can and should be expressed using the vocabulary and gestures that students already know. According to Wendy Maxwell, students should almost question whether I speak English (some have!). In this sense I play a role, or take on a persona, of monolingual French speaker. I was able to “break character” for this focus group. I found it reduced the tension and allowed students to express themselves openly and with clarity.

We met in a small room off of one of the Grade 4 classrooms for three lunch hours over two weeks. I had set up a device to record the conversation and put out a large sheet of paper and pastels for the kids to doodle and write on. Below are the results of these three sessions.

**Session #1:**

| Learning French is like... | Billy: Opening your brain. Expanding your vocabulary.  
|                          | Me: You could use a metaphor too.  
|                          | Billy: Lighting up a lightbulb.  
|                          | Rex: Learning another language.  
|                          | Henry: Learning French for me is really hard.  
|                          | Me: Thanks for sharing that. |
Grace: Complicated sometimes.
Trey: Complicated sometimes and stupid.
*many giggle*
Rex: Awkward for me too.
Henry: Like when there’s a word and then there’s an accent, and I don’t know why there’s an accent.
Trey: Songs seem too happy and it seems pointless.
Grace: I feel like the stories always keep repeating themselves over and over and over.
*many agree*
Trey: In our stories, reading the same thing over and over.
Henry: It’s kind of like hard, if you keep talking in French and we don’t understand.
Alice: At my old school, the French teacher used to explain in English and talk to us in English a bit.
Me: And you found that helpful?
*everyone agrees*
Rex: Like if you don’t understand something, like, once you say a sentence, like if you hand out a worksheet, then you can ask if everyone understands it.

| What are some of your favourite activities you’ve done in French class? | Rex: Um, I like the rap  
Trey: I don’t like anything.  
Kendall: I like the auction.  
*many agree*  
Kendall: I like learning list A, B, C (vocabulary lists).  
Henry: In Grade 3, I thought of French as nothing, I just sat there listening.  
Trey: Listening, fall asleep, I just get bored, unless there is something I have to do.  
Henry: I thought French was gibberish. I thought of French as pointless.  
Trey: I see it as pointless, It’s stupid.  
Henry: I don’t see how songs are helpful. |
|---|---|
| So let’s talk about that idea that French is pointless. What do you guys think? | Alice: Not really, it’s like, if you go to France, you can’t really communicate to everyone else if you don’t know French  
Grace: And if you go to Québec.  
Henry: Why would I go to France?  
Kendall: It’s useful.  
Trey: It doesn’t seem useful.  
Kendall: And you can get like government jobs if you speak both languages. |
| What would you change about | Kendall: Maybe not that you have to talk French the |
French class if you could and why?

whole thing because sometimes you don’t know how to say a word in French, and so you have to use English. Alice: And we used to have cards that if you don’t talk in English in French class then you get it. Billy: I think like, you can talk in English to like, explain what you want to say, but not just talking with your friends. Me: So what about saying what you want to say in English and then having help to say it in French, does that sound fair? Kendall: Yeah. That way we could ask “Est-ce que je peux parler en anglais?” (Can I speak in English?) Me: The problem is, if everyone says that, the whole class becomes English class. Alice: We only used it when we needed it. Kendall: So like, the teacher would say it and we copy it. Me: Okay, that sounds fair. Those are really helpful ideas.

What would you like to see more of/less of in French class and why?

Rex: Activities. Grace: Because before, we never really did activities, but now we get to choose what games we actually want to play which is nice. Rex: Not that many worksheets, like every single French class. Alice: More slides. Like presentations so we can actually visually see it. Henry: I like the Gravity game and the hitting (the board) game. Kendall: I want to do more vocabulary like List A and B.

Reflections

I was very grateful that students were open and vulnerable. I think that Henry’s initial comment about French being “hard for him” prompted others to share more honestly as well. Though I feel strongly that we should have a “French only” policy in class, I think that our conversation led us to a mutual agreement (one that I had always had in mind, but this way made it seem like it was “their idea”). I could tell as well that students appreciated the effort I was taking to listen to their ideas. It seemed they finally had a “voice” in terms of what goes on in French class.
Session #2:

| In French class, what activities most help you learn the language? | Alice: Plays or videos.  
Kendall: The vocabulary lists.  
Henry: Quizlet.  
Rex: Gravity.  
Kendall: Songs and learning words that we know that we can just play over and over and review them.  
Me: Like the number songs?  
Kendall: Ya, they get stuck in your head and then you learn them.  
Alice: Kahoot. |
|---|---|
| What have you enjoyed that I have done in class? | Rex: Quizlet.  
Billy: We like the auction.  
Me: What if we did a bake sale instead of the auction? And used our “Euros” to buy whatever baking we wanted?  
*enthusiastic response from the group*  
Trey: Or have like, a full lunch.  
*a discussion ensues regarding baking and cooking* |

**Reflections**

I was surprised that these students were as enthusiastic about the use of songs as they were. They had a sense of how songs are effective for acquiring and retaining vocabulary in a second-language, which was also a pleasant surprise. I am very excited about the possibility of a bake sale in class. I think this would be a great (and delicious) real-life scenario in which to employ students’ language skills.

Session #3:

| Has your attitude toward French class changed since Grade 2? Why or why not? | Billy: Oui (yes), definitely.  
Kendall: Yes because I like French and it’s one of my favourite subjects and I want to learn more.  
Alice: Because in Grade 2 I didn’t even know any French.  
Kendall: I understand it a little bit more so I like it.  
Trey: I never liked it.  
Henry: French words were easier in Grade 2, I was younger and when I was younger I liked learning the language, and now when I’m older I don’t understand it. |
|---|---|
Now I don’t like singing French songs. In Grade 2, I thought it was like a break and it was pretty fun, but now it’s like, I have tests every week for French and my mom’s seeing them. I didn’t even pay attention in Grade 2, I was more focused on the fun stuff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you look for now in a class versus when you were in Grades 2 and 3?</th>
<th>Rex: Uhhhh, fun games? Kendall: More vocabulary...the lists is the best.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the advantages to learning French?</td>
<td>Kendall: You can get more jobs because you know more language. Alice: You can go to France.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think you will use the language later?</td>
<td>Many: YES. Trey: Definitely not. Rex: Maybe if I travel some place else. Like if your job is in Vancouver but you have to go to France. Me: Or Montréal. Rex: Yeah. Me: Someone said no, why? Henry: Because I don’t like going to places, I’m scared the airplane will blow up. Kendall: Because I have a horrible memory and I don’t think I’ll remember any of it, and my mom won’t take me to Paris. Me: Raise your hand if you think you will use French later? <em>3 hands up, 2 maybe gestures and 1 no</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is learning French like gaining a superpower? Or is it?</td>
<td>Henry: I don’t feel like it is. Trey: If you don’t go to France, what’s the point of it? Or if you don’t use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you ran a school, would you implement French classes? Why or why not?</td>
<td>Rex: I think the government forces your school to. Billy: But not all schools, ‘cuz there are some separate French Immersion schools that you can go to. Trey: I don’t want the kids to be stressed. Grace: French is really awkward. Trey: I would give them the choice. Rex: I think I would implement French but not so many hard tests, more games as in a fun thing to do, like the kids are looking forward to learning. Kendall: And then you can get the teacher of the year award. Henry: I would force them to get French in their heads...because French is another language and they need to know another language. Me: Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Henry: I don’t want them to be like me.

**Terminology:**

**Quizlet**: a website with interactive flashcards that allow the students to see an image and call out the French word for it. In class, I project these flashcards on the board. We often go over vocabulary together as a class before playing Gravity.

**Gravity**: a communal game where students yell out words as asteroids with images of each word fall towards the earth. As a class, they ‘save the world’ by knowing French vocabulary.

**Kahoot**: a race against the clock and your classmates to respond to comprehension questions for points. Students work in teams using iPads to answer the multiple-choice questions projected on the board. The questions are mainly based in their specific AIM play or on themes learned in class (e.g. body parts in French).

**Euros**: little cards students collect by speaking in French during the entire period. Additional euros are handed out to those who make an extra effort to communicate in French.

**French auctions**: at the end of each term, the students pool their euros together to bid on prizes.

**Reflections**

The kids were clearly wanting to steer away from the worksheets and quizzes that classes had mainly been comprised of previous to my arrival. They were enjoying some of the interactive online quizzes we had been doing as a class and in teams to review vocabulary and basic comprehension and were hoping for more incentives in the classroom such as Euros, the monthly draw for prizes and the per-term auction.

During our discussion about the differences between Grade 2 French and Grade 5 French, it seemed the students were expressing that the class used to be “fun” and now is more serious. It made me wonder how I could bring back the “fun” part of learning for them. And whether the employment of more of the tools of Romantic Understanding would actually help towards this end.

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I found it so interesting when Henry said that if he ran a school, he would not want other kids to be like him (monolingual). Most of the students seem to know it is important and/or helpful to acquire French language skills, but can only speculate as to why.

With the superpower question, I was really wondering if the kids would pick up on the fact that knowing a second language opens up another realm to them. When one understands a second language or multiple languages, it allows them to see the world through a different cultural lens. It opens a door that leads to multiple perspectives. A bilingual person gains the ability to be a “fly on the wall” when they hear others speaking their second language in public. They also have a leg up in their own mother tongue because when they stumble upon new words, they have a whole other set of roots to grasp at to uncover their meaning.

Following our last discussion, I asked students to rate proposed activities. I had compiled a list of activities based on the cognitive tools of Mythic and Romantic Understanding. My hope was to be able to compare these activities to assess whether the Grade 4 and 5 students naturally veered towards those based in the toolkit of Romantic Understanding. In order to obtain these results, I asked students to number from 0-10 the activities they thought they would most enjoy doing in our French class (0 = no desire and 10 = totally game). I then tallied up the total points for each activity and ordered them from the highest total number to the lowest.

Which of these activities most appeal to you?

<p>| #1 - Skyping with a French class in Quebec | Humanizing of meaning |
| #2 - collecting “euros” in class to win prizes | Collections &amp; hobbies |
| #3 - going to a French cafe to order and have a meal in French | Change of context |
| #4 - coming up with French jokes | Humour |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#5 - making up your own French rap</th>
<th>Rhyme, meter &amp; pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#6 - talking about the most bizarre French words in the language</td>
<td>Extremes of reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tied with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 - learning French words through songs</td>
<td>Rhythm &amp; musicality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 - telling the class about your favourite song or artist</td>
<td>Association with heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 - doing a roleplay of a day in French (e.g. getting on the bus, buying groceries, going to a restaurant etc.)</td>
<td>Sense of reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 - Learning French phrases by tapping out a rhythm as a class</td>
<td>Rhyme, meter &amp; pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 - acting in our French play</td>
<td>Games, drama &amp; play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11 - coming in character as your favourite pop star or athlete</td>
<td>Association with heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12 - writing your own French story</td>
<td>Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13 - rearranging words that are out of order to make complete French sentences</td>
<td>Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14 - learning about some of the leaders who fought to have French as one of Canada’s official languages</td>
<td>Humanizing of meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#15 - finding opposites (e.g. good/bad, fair/unfair, rich/poor) in a French story</td>
<td>Binary opposites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be completely honest, I was a bit discouraged by my results. I was, of course, hoping that the activities based on the toolkit of Romantic Understanding would top the others by a long shot. As it was, the results between the Mythic and Romantic-based activities were fairly similar. Students actually did enjoy the use of French songs more than I anticipated at this level. I was happy that some of the Romantic-based activities were appealing to them and look forward to trying some of these out soon.
Dialogic vignettes

As I was unable to turn off the “researcher” in me during this inquiry process, I found myself having conversations with any and every teacher I knew who had taught French, as well as colleagues and classmates who had studied French in grade school. I even spoke to a stranger at a park once she told me she was a teacher and found out that her school used AIM in their French classes. According to her, students were thriving in French, versus in their Mandarin classes where the teacher was using more “traditional” methods.

I attended an AIM workshop in January in order to gain the proper AIM certification before beginning my position. There, I met Wendy Maxwell, the creator of AIM. Over the course of the next few weeks, we were in touch by e-mail and phone and I explained to her my inquiry. She was very gracious and offered advice to help me get my feet on the ground in my new position. She mentioned using French only in the classroom as one of the most vital aspects of the AIM methodology and one that many teachers neglect. She also talked about how AIM falls in line with Stephen Krashen’s “Natural Approach”, which emphasizes communication over explicit instruction of grammar rules in the second language classroom. She agrees with Krashen’s theories and stated the AIM is “all about” comprehensible input; ensuring that students are hearing vocabulary and phrases that they understand before they begin to produce language themselves. She also mentioned the notion of the “affective filter” in the classroom and how the teacher is encouraged to offer much support and praise to students.

I explained to her my reasoning for comparing AIM to Imaginative Education and she was able to see the connections right away. She immediately recognized the link between the cognitive tools of Mythic and Somatic Understanding and AIM, and identified some of the cognitive tools of Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic in her AIM kits for older grades. It was
exciting for me to be able to converse with someone who had been so instrumental in second-language learning within Canada and abroad and whose work I had researched and appreciated previous to our meeting.

I also found myself mentally gathering passing comments from teachers who had experience using the AIM methodology in their classroom and eventually decided to create a survey in order to gather more formal responses. These results are found below.

**Teacher survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry questions for teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Tell me about your experience using AIM in the classroom (please include grade level(s)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 1:</strong> has taught AIM at both the primary and intermediate levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 2:</strong> has taught grades 5, 6 and 7 using the AIM program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 3:</strong> has 14 years of experience using AIM; five years of Grade 5-8 and nine years of Grades 1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 4:</strong> taught Grade 6 Late French Immersion (students had no previous experience with French) for three years; would use AIM for the first 4 months of the school year only, to help students quickly acquire a foundation in French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) What about the AIM program have you found to be most engaging for students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 1:</strong> The speed of language acquisition, particularly in the primary grades. Students - especially in the younger grades - are also very engaged by the play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 2:</strong> AIM Plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 3:</strong> Parents are impressed with level of oral ability at such a young age. Songs are catchy for younger students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher 4:</strong> Students start to feel success in speaking and understanding French quickly. This encourages and motivates them to continue in French despite the challenges of being fully immersed in it. Students are speaking chorally with teacher, instead of individually.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) What, if any, are the limitations to using AIM in the classroom? If this varies by grade group, please explain.

**Teacher 1:**
- students in the older grades become bored by the repeated format of AIM; the plays, the gestures, the worksheets always follow the same pattern
- the older students were less engaged in the plays
- limits of teaching grammar following the AIM format (e.g. raps); older grades appreciated more “formal” grammar teaching

**Teacher 2:**
- students show a clear disinterest in the gestures at the grade 7 level
- they no longer want to repeat the RAPs
- overall they seem to thrive through a more “academic” approach to learning

**Teacher 3:**
- older students may find actions (gestures) childish
- all depends on the attitude, engagement and classroom management of the teacher
- use of French in class is vital

**Teacher 4:**
- some students are not as engaged as others when using AIM and tend to make less progress than others; they experience gaps in their learning in other subjects within the French Immersion program later on

4) What activities, strategies and/or content (within AIM or otherwise) have you found most engage your primary students? Respond if applicable.

**Teacher 1:**
- songs, dances, games, acting out the play
- sense of humour (e.g. ‘des phrases bizarres’)

**Teacher 2:** N/A

**Teacher 3:**
- songs, raps and dances (e.g. YouTube French songs - alphabet, numbers, seasons, colours)
- memorizing the play as a class
- answering questions both as a group and individual

**Teacher 4:** N/A
Reflections

1) Of the four teachers surveyed, three have been teaching using AIM closely in line with its intended structure and purpose. Two had experience teaching AIM with primary and intermediate students and the other had only used it within the intermediate grades (grades 5-7). A final teacher surveyed had had success using AIM in the beginning stages of her students’ introduction to French in a Grade 6 Late Immersion class, but did not use the methodology throughout the entire school year due to the nature of her program. She states that she used AIM “to help (students) acquire a foundation in French quickly”.

2) When asked what about the AIM model they found to be most engaging for students, three out of four teachers commented on the rapid acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension skills in French. The two teachers who had taught both primary and intermediate grades noted that it was
the primary students particularly, who benefited from the songs, plays and overall format of AIM.

3) In considering the limitations of AIM, it was interesting to note that three teachers mentioned the intermediate students or “older grades” seem disenchanted by the AIM raps, songs and gestures. The experienced AIM teacher claimed that “older students may find actions childish”. One teacher noted that students “become bored by the repeated format of AIM; the plays, gestures and worksheets all follow the same pattern”. Another teacher stated that, “students show a clear disinterest in the gestures at the grade 7 level”. Two teachers explained that they began teaching French grammar structures using more traditional methods when students were no longer inspired to learn verb conjugations through the AIM raps.

4) Both teachers who had taught using AIM at the primary level stated that songs, dances, games, raps and acting out the play were the primary way of engaging these students. One of these teachers also mentioned humour. These are all examples of the cognitive tools of Somatic and Mythic Understanding.

5) All four teachers mentioned that the intermediate students were motivated and drawn in by competitive games (e.g. running to the board, yelling answers out quickly and loudly, bidding in the French auction). One teacher noted that they also enjoyed coming up with their own bizarre sentences. This teacher also referenced the content of the AIM plays at that level. She explained that students were drawn in by content that reflects their own reality (e.g. dating) and certain themes or qualities (e.g. selfishness, forgiveness and redemption). Another teacher had had similar experiences: “I found the lessons that I was able to tailor to their interests and realities the most engaging early on…lessons that I could make relatable and humorous”. These statements seem to affirm that intermediate students enjoy activities infused with the cognitive tools of “sense of reality” and “association with heroes” (heroic qualities), which are found within the toolkit of Romantic Understanding.
Pas facile ça…

Limitations of study

Timeline

Though I had a general idea of inquiry questions and a hope for what my focus group and data collection process might look like, there were many factors that I could not account for without being in the physical space, getting a better sense of the new position and building an initial connection with students, parents and colleagues.

Given the timeline of the Action Research term and the fact that my position began in late-February, I had only 8 teaching days to distribute and collect surveys from four classes, form a focus group, make general observations as I was teaching and survey teachers who had previously used or are currently using AIM in their classrooms. In order to inform my research, I also wanted to assess the students’ linguistic competency, level of engagement and enthusiasm towards the French language, and attempt to build connections with students.

Newness

Having most recently worked for the Vancouver School Board, I was new to the independent school system in Vancouver, had never taught in a Christian school, and though I had researched and written about it, I had yet to implement the AIM methodology with my own students. This is also my first time teaching in a Core French classroom versus in the French Immersion program. Being in a new school meant that I had to become acquainted with its values, routines, class schedules, environment and building. I was establishing my research plan and beginning to collect data while building new relationships with the administration, my teaching colleagues, the parent body and of course, my students.

A note about anxiety

I was told by some parents and the administration before I began teaching at VCS, that students were feeling unease and pressure due to French class. This may have been born out of the lack of consistency, having been displaced as a school community, or for some, the multiple teacher handovers. For others, the tension may have been due to the fact that some traditional assessment methods had been used in the classroom, or simply to the general nature of learning a second language. The existing level of unease and anxiety may very well have skewed some of
the data I collected; a lot of students responded negatively about their feelings towards French, which of course, was based mainly on what they had been experiencing in the classroom. As a newcomer to the school, I was unable to state with any certainty the reasons behind their negative sentiments as I had not witnessed what went on in the classroom previous to my arrival.

Researcher bias and assumptions

Of course, as a teacher-researcher, I brought some of my own presuppositions to the table. I was seeing through the lens of Imaginative Education, as one who had learned French as a second language growing up in Canada and had also lived in Québec. I had also had more experience teaching in primary French classrooms than in the early intermediate grades. Considering and explaining these possible biases is a key aspect of any research project (Maxwell, 2013, 281). Based on my experience, I assume that most students’ motivation and interest towards French language learning (and perhaps school in general) starts to fizzle around grade 4 or 5. Perhaps this is different depending on the school, teacher and/or students. Perhaps I am wrong altogether. Of course, over the data collection process, elements that confirmed this notion would stand out to me. As I gathered information and observed the students, I realized that I was reading everything through the lens of my own bias, zoning in on examples that confirmed my hunches and quickly glancing over data that nullified my ideas. I had to be aware not to skew my own data towards a definite affirmation of my theory.

Striving for validity

Based on J.A. Maxwell’s strategies for testing validity (Maxwell, 2013, 283), I was not set up to have a very valid result in my action research project. There had clearly been no long-term involvement in my school setting, which negated the possibility of having rich data. In an attempt to yield the most valid conclusions possible within 8 teaching days, I used triangulation, gathering data from multiple sources. I collected surveys from students and teachers, conducted informal and formal interviews, held a focus group and had general observations of happenings in the classroom. Maxwell mentions a case similar to mine, in which a researcher came into a new setting and interviewed students, comparing teachers they felt were most effective to those whose teaching styles they had not found as helpful. This researcher was able to use her own background and knowledge to identify what it was that the more effective teachers did. (Maxwell, 2013, 286). This example gave me hope for my own inquiry.
Conclusions

There were several moments with students and interactions with teachers that I felt confirmed my initial theory, there were also surprises along the way. As suspected, the Grade 2 and 3 students generally lapped up songs and dances like cats at a milk dish. They laughed easily at silly games and gesturing activities and participated, for the most part, readily. This enthusiasm seemed to dwindle in the older grades (even students’ body language and expression demonstrated this).

There were, however, activities the intermediate grades enjoyed that I hadn’t anticipated them being enthusiastic about. I was initially surprised at the Grade 5 students’ willingness to continue to start each class with the AIM-inspired French rap. The surveys and focus group data revealed that they actually enjoy the rap even more than the play. I also hadn’t considered the appeal of games. Students in grades 4 and 5 mentioned most often the interactive games that involved a race against other teams and/or the clock. Perhaps this is the association with heroic qualities coming through, or the Mythic tool of drama, games and play.

Another challenge I hadn’t been able to properly anticipate was the level of French of these students. As mentioned, I had previously taught in French Immersion and comparatively, these students’ proficiency and comprehension levels were quite low. The sheer fact that students struggled to understand basic instructions (and that I was attempting to limit myself to using only those words that they had learned through AIM) made my desire to implement cognitive tool-infused activities more difficult.

I am also forced to wonder how much of the shift in students’ attitude is in relation to French and how much is related to age and students’ general disposition towards school once they have been attending for several years. Perhaps there is a mystery that is lost or a need to feel “cool” around their peers that emerges at this age. Perhaps there is a cynicism in some Grades 4 and 5 students that can’t be shaken; they are clearly never going to rush up to me saying, “Everything you do is awesome all the time – I love French now!”

One obvious truth that was affirmed in this study is that no matter what I do, I will never cater to every student at all times. This was made clear through the survey and focus group. Some students asked for more vocabulary lists and worksheets while other begged for no more. Even classes within the same grade group responded differently to various activities. This element proved to be a challenge for someone teaching three classes of each grade group. I
would have one class laughing and cheering in one room and walk across the hall only to find that the next class of the same level, was not interested at all in what I had planned. Alas, it would appear that teaching, classroom management and lesson planning are not so straightforward after all, regardless of how many cognitive tool-infused activities one has prepared.

**Implications**

**What does this mean for me moving forward?**

Evidently, I was not able to wrap this inquiry project up with a nice bow, stand back and say, “Now I am positive that if I use these strategies in the classroom, the Grade 4 and 5 students will love French” (I wish). But my inquiry project allowed me to try out some new ideas, hear students’ voices and collaborate with other teachers in an attempt to better understand students’ experience of the French classroom.

Based on the information I gathered through literature and conversations, as well as results I collected from surveys, observations and the focus group, I will attempt to try out more activities that are rooted in the cognitive tools of Romantic Understanding with the early intermediate students. I will do this in and through the AIM curriculum. At the end of this document is an appendix of activities I have conceived of in order to incorporate more tools of Romantic Understanding into the AIM program with Grade 4 and 5s moving forward.

**Further Inquiry**

As if I hadn’t asked enough questions, I was left with nearly as many, if not more, than I came in with. Whether I pursue further research officially or not, I know that I will continue to consider how Egan’s Imaginative Education scheme ties into second language learning. Are students more aptly using different kinds of understanding in their second language than in their first? Egan states that students need the bases of Mythic and Romantic Understanding before they can “move on” to Philosophic Understanding, regardless of their age (Egan, 1997, 118). Before employing the cognitive tools of Romantic Understanding, I have to wonder if my intermediate students have adequately acquired Mythic understanding in their second language? I wonder if students have a harder time accessing and employing the cognitive tools of Romantic Understanding in their second language even though in their first language they are readily
employing them. Many of my ideas for incorporating the tools of Romantic Understanding into the French language classroom also assume that students have adequate comprehension skills to understand the activities. If my students are lacking comprehension in the target language, will I be able to present and access slightly more complex ideas with them? In other words, are the cognitive tools of Romantic Understanding blocked in some ways for our intermediate FSL students due to lack of language skills?

**The Sky is Raining Cakes**

In my last class of the day on the last day before Spring Break, I was in a Grade 5 class (one of my more difficult classes) and out of nowhere, I suddenly saw what may be over the rainbow. While greeting the class, on a whim, I decided to steal an idea from the younger grades in which students create bizarre sentences to discuss their plays (e.g. The big bad wolf sings and dances with the little pig). I took “Les phrases bizarres” and applied it to our discussion about the weather. So instead of students telling me the typical responses they had learned with their former teacher “Il fait beau” (It’s nice out), “Il y a des nuages dans le ciel” (There are clouds in the sky), I asked them to tell me something that would be crazy if it were true about the weather. Here are some of their responses:

“The clouds are raining suns.”
“The sky is raining cakes.”
“The sun is black.”
“The sky is green.”
“The sun is jumping into the clouds.”

I love that students incorporated vivid imagery and extremes into their responses. They seemed to really have fun with it, which was a pleasant surprise on my part (perhaps on theirs too). Then, with a couple of moments left to spare, I decided to show the Grade 5 class a funny video of an AIM-inspired “Les Trois Petits Cochons” (The Three Little Pigs) song remixed to Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face”. Just when I thought they would roll their eyes and start dry heaving, to my surprise, they were laughing, their eyes glued to the screen. I started thinking perhaps I could further pique students’ interest by allowing them to bring in songs written by some of their
favourite pop stars or bands. When the video was done, I asked them to think of a song over
Spring Break that they might want to write new lyrics to, using vocabulary from their play
“L’Arbre Ungali (Ungali Tree)”. One of the more boisterous students popped his hand up.
“Maybe Havana?”, he asked. “Pourquoi pas (why not?)”, I answered. The students left the room
singing “Ar-bre Un-gali” to the tune of Gaga. I see the light.
References


Appendix 1

Romantic tools in Grade 4 and 5 classrooms
Practical ways to implement my thoughts

Association with heroes (bands/pop stars)
I will also try to include more songs they know and like. Students might enjoy writing their own lyrics to the Entry Rap, or writing French lyrics to one of their favourite songs to make it about a theme or topic we have talked about in class (e.g. their play, emotions, weather etc.).

Extremes of reality
I will continue to use AIM activities but attempt to weave in the strange and unexpected (e.g. for “L’Arbre Ungali – talk about the country in Africa that has gone the longest without rain).

Collections and hobbies
I have begun and will continue to implement the process of handing out Euros for speaking French in class. The students are extremely motivated by them and I get to see what they are actually capable of. It changes the whole dynamic of the class.

Next year, I hope to use an AIM play based on the story of Noah’s Ark (“Noé et le grand déluge”) and put an emphasis on the following:

Extremes of reality
Look at the measurements of the ark as found in the Bible; find comparisons for size with students that are relatable to their lives (e.g. football fields). Have students speculate on what it would be like to have so many animals on one giant boat for that amount of time. There are many other extreme ideas to be found in the text (the earth flooding etc.)

Association with heroes
Looking through a Christian lens, there are many heroic qualities attributed to Noah (e.g righteous, blameless, faithful, obedient). As a class, we could talk about these qualities, try to identify others and see how these heroic qualities play out in students’ lives.

Sense of wonder
If students believe the Bible to be true, hearing the story of Noah’s ark would create a great sense of wonder. If students truly believe that God exists, created the world and wants a relationship with them, it is awe-inspiring. And for a student to have faith to believe something they can’t “know” to be true evokes wonder.

Change of context
As a class we could do even as simple an activity such as going out to the field to measure how big the ark would have been in order to have a change of context. Going to the zoo, the aquarium or on a boat as a class would be ideal as well.
Regardless of which play we are working through, I would like to offer students an option for an end-of-year or end-of-term assessment piece. Instead of simply performing the play (4-5 groups performing the same play), I would like to give students the options of:

A) performing the play with a group
B) writing lyrics about the play to a song of their choice or
C) writing the opposite of what happens in the play (e.g. 3 Little Pigs, write about how the pigs terrorize the wolf) or a prequel to the play (e.g. Arbre Ungali – the flood before the drought).

Other future activities to do with students:

*Heroes*: come in character as their hero or give a presentation on them

*Songs*: lip-sync battle with a French song and/or use DITTY (app): students create French lyrics to a short music clip of their choice (e.g. putting our own raps to Kid Cudi songs) or a music video using AIM plays

*Sense of reality*: debate whether VCS should have French classes (2 sides)

*Humanizing of meaning*: send video messages back and forth with a Québec cohort

*Collections*: collect the most hilarious and fun to say French words and present them with drawings and a story (e.g. pamplemousse)

*Story*: co-creating sketches, creating stories for younger grades
Appendix 2

French class for me...

Draw a picture of how it feels to learn French

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I know a lot of French words.</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Kind of</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When the teacher speaks in French, I understand her.</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can speak French.</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like French class and want to learn more.</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
<td>😞</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activities I enjoy in French class (from 1-7) :
__ singing funny French songs
__ the entry rap
__ practicing the play
__ talking about ‘real life’ in French
__ worksheets
__ games in French
__ other: ______________

What would you like to see happen in French class?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What do you NOT want to see happen in French class?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 3

Student engagement in the French classroom
Inquiry questions for teachers

Tell me about your experience using AIM in the classroom (please include grade level(s)).

______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________

What about the AIM program have you found to be most engaging for students?

______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________

What, if any, are the limitations to using AIM in the classroom? If this varies by grade group, please explain.

______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________

What activities, strategies and/or content (within AIM or otherwise) have you found draw in your primary students? Respond if applicable.

______________________________________________________________________________________
What activities, strategies and/or content have you found most draw in your intermediate students into the learning?

Please return by March 15th
Appendix 4

February 2019

Dear Parents and/or Caregivers,

I am currently working on my Master of Education in Curriculum & Instruction through Simon Fraser University. This program enables me as an educator to reflect upon my teaching, as well as on my students’ learning, with the intention of developing my own best practices. As part of my studies, I have developed an inquiry project to examine how to further engage students in the French language acquisition process. I anticipate that my inquiry will provide me with insights that will help me develop a meaningful way to foster in students a love for the language and a desire to pursue further studies and opportunities in French. It will also help me to reflect on my practice as a professional and improve my teaching.

My inquiry will be primarily informed based on observations and reflections on my own teaching. Over the course of the next two months I will also collect student work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to inform my understanding of my practice. All elements of my inquiry will take place within the context of my normal instruction and practice.

This letter of informed consent is part of my ethical responsibilities as a teacher-inquirer. I am asking your permission to use your child’s work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to present to members of my graduate cohort and my instructors to demonstrate my own learning. As part of my responsibility as an educator, professionalism around issues of confidentiality will be ensured. Consistent with the ethical protocols of teacher inquiry, if your child is mentioned in the presentation of my work, an alias ( pseudonym) will be used at all times to respect and protect his/her privacy and any photos will be anonymized.

This inquiry process is not intended to assess, place, or evaluate your child in any way, but will serve to strengthen my teaching practice. Regardless of your decision, the integrity of the relationship I have with your child will not be affected, and you can withdraw your consent at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns please don’t hesitate to contact me at (604) 219-5380. If you agree to give permission, please sign below. Return one signed copy and keep the other for your own records.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
KATHRYN GUENTER
VANCOUVER CHRISTIAN SCHOOL
FRENCH TEACHER
Child's full name: __________________________________________

I, __________________ give permission for my child to be included in Mrs. Guenter’s inquiry and for the collection of work samples, surveys, reflections, audio recordings, and photographs as described above.

Parent/guardian Signature: __________________________

Printed Name: ________________________________

Date: _________________________________________