

Assisting Grade Nine Basic French Students
on the Road to Communicative Competence
A Teacher's Journey

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A Comprehensive Review/Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF EDUCATION

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Winnipeg, Manitoba

September, 1999

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

REPORT ON MASTER'S COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

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For a failed result, please indicate:

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Date: Sept. 13/99

ABSTRACT

Teachers are not always successful in their efforts. They try things that don't work, then adapt or abandon them. Through a process that involves reflection and change, teachers find what works for them in their teaching environments. However, teachers also get locked into ways of teaching that are ineffective, either from not knowing what to do or from having aligned themselves too firmly with methods not suited to their situations. If they are fortunate, they may chance upon some relevant wisdom that allows them to escape their predicament.

This paper follows the experiences of a teacher during the course of a single semester as he attempts to move his grade nine basic French students along the communicative competence continuum. He employs two approaches to L2 instruction: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and, subsequently, Comprehension-Based Learning (CBL). Through reflection, his practical and affective responses to the problem of facilitating communicative competence and to the specific problems that arose during the semester are re-examined and redefined. We enter the story through his practical responses to problems associated with the implementation of both CLT and CBL. His affective responses are interwoven with those of a practical nature throughout the paper and are related to his relative success or failure in creating the kind of learning environment he envisioned and in fostering the kind of learning he thought possible. As failure and success are contemplated, revision and reinvention continue as the author attempts to bring closure to a rather tumultuous chapter in his professional life.

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INTRODUCTION

As teachers we often fail before we succeed. We try things that don't work; we change them or abandon them, try other things, amend, reflect, and through this process find what works for us in the situations in which we find ourselves. However, we may sometimes get locked into ways of teaching which are not effective, a result of not knowing what else to do or of having too firmly aligned ourselves with methods not suited to our situations. As a consequence, students may learn less than they should and become more demotivated, complaining, and uncooperative than teachers generally desire. As student morale suffers, so does that of the teachers. This rather unattractive, accelerating downward spiral can lead to a very unpleasant and unproductive learning environment. However, the real problems may run deeper than a choice of method. We may lack insight into how our own attitudes, behaviours, and responses have contributed to the problems we are having, or we may be unaware of the differing personal, affective, and instructional needs of individual students. If we are very fortunate, we may chance upon a kernel of knowledge or wisdom that allows us to reverse the spiral and regain a classroom fit for learning and living.

Although we have colleagues who have survived the many travails of the classroom, we do not always have the benefit of their experience or wisdom, either because they find themselves as isolated behind a closed door as I have often been or because there is neither a tradition of sharing nor a forum for doing so. This paper has provided me with a forum to share and reflect upon teaching experiences that took place over the course of a

single semester and that have dramatically altered my approach to language teaching. Its reflective nature has allowed me to explore my practical, affective, and reflective responses both to the general problem of teaching grade nine core French and to the specific problems which arose during the course of the semester. Through the articulation and examination of my salient responses to the challenges that presented themselves, I am endeavouring to gain a better understanding of the teaching process and of my role as a teacher within it. I also hope to provide other L2 teachers with insight into a few of the myriad and, often, elusive problems we must all face in the course of teaching. While not necessarily offering complete answers, these insights may give them a direction in which to start looking.

In examining my responses to the problems I faced while teaching core French during a semester, I have followed a chronology that begins with my preparation prior to teaching my grade nine French class and ends with the writing of this paper. This story will be told, primarily, through my practical responses, specifically those related to my efforts to employ both Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as I understood it at the time and Comprehension-Based Learning (CBL) as I became aware of it during the course of the semester. The affective responses are interwoven with those of a practical nature throughout the paper. They are related to my relative success or failure in creating the kind of learning environment I envisioned and in fostering the kind of learning I thought possible. My reflective responses were few, unfortunately, as the school year progressed. It was not until I had some distance from the actual teaching situation that I was able to look back more objectively and reflect meaningfully upon what had transpired. As I began to

redefine the problems, it was not in practical terms, but in terms of what I had failed to consider. The redefining continues even as I write this paper and attempt to bring closure to a rather tumultuous, yet extremely rewarding, chapter in my professional life.

EPISODE ONE:

The Communicative Language Teaching Fiasco

Introduction

Episode one begins with the recounting of my absolute conversion to CLT and of my understanding of CLT at the time. It includes a description of my preparation prior to the start of school, of the needs assessment undertaken during the first week of classes, and of my efforts to introduce activities that I considered to be reflective of CLT and the existing level of the students. This period is characterised by frustration and despair as I tried and failed to employ CLT, eventually abandoning my dream of a classroom full of enthusiastic babblers of French in favour of an approach to language teaching which held little interest for me. Like all good and bad things, this episode had its end. The beginning of this end occurred when an alternative approach to teaching L2 beginners, in the form of Comprehension-Based Learning (CBL), presented itself.

Becoming a CLT Advocate

My second language (L2) teaching experiences had led me to believe I provided interesting (sometimes exciting) and motivating lessons that facilitated language learning through communication. This bubble was summarily burst when I was confronted with a group of grade nine core French students who, I surmised, were conspiring to drive me

mad by their collective adherence to a vow of silence. Their silence was all the more disturbing in view of the proclivity of the high school student to speak unabashedly and without solicitation. I should add that their silence was confined to French. They were quite happy to chatter away in English. I wondered if my chosen approach to L2 instruction, Communicative Language Teaching, was failing me. Or was I, perhaps, failing it?

Long before I began failing as a French teacher, I failed for a considerable time as a French student. I studied French from grades seven through nine, learning precious little. I was uninspired by non-French-speaking teachers who taught courses on French grammar with English as the language of instruction. When I began study as an adult, despite being motivated, I continued to fail. In university, I was dismayed that we did nothing but study grammar and repeat phrases in the language lab. I lost interest and began to think of myself as a very poor language learner. I was quite ready to abandon my studies when a friend suggested I try one of the local language schools.

I didn't hold out much hope for courses at any so-called language school, assuming (and, oh, so wrongly) that a university provided the best teaching available. However, from the first day, I knew I was going to be learning French. Speaking only French and using constant repetition, plenty of hand signals, a truckload of pictures, and a textbook that looked more like a grade one reader, our teacher enthralled us with the French language. I was completely amazed that I could understand nearly everything she said and even more shocked to find myself speaking French in response to her queries, albeit, only a few words at a time. To my delight, the simplified nature of the language of instruction precluded

complex, grammar-centred explanations. After my previous non-learning experiences, it was such a surprise and a relief to be in a situation where the learning of French actually seemed easy. While I was not aware of it at the time, that was my introduction to CLT.

Over the next eight months, my fellow students and I met twice a week, engaging regularly in casual conversation, performing in various role-playing situations, and discussing articles from our texts as well as the salient issues of the day. Occasionally we had guest speakers to whom we would pose questions following their talks. These activities greatly increased my aural comprehension, but it was their impact on my spoken French that most impressed me. Though I marvelled at my ability to comprehend spoken French, I judged my progress by my ability to speak. Comprehension was merely the vehicle that brought me the words I would need for future conversations. As far as I was concerned, knowing French meant having little gap between the receptive and expressive abilities. Our classes, focusing on communicative activities, gave me the opportunities to speak that I desired, moving me toward my goal of becoming a fluent speaker.

At that point in my life, CLT and I were a very good fit, which probably accounts for my becoming so enamoured with the approach. Given my failure to learn French while being taught in grammar-based, non-communicative classes, I could not help but attribute my relative success to the CLT approach. I became convinced that CLT was the way in which foreign languages should be taught - to everyone. It never occurred to me that it might not be appropriate for the high school students to whom I would later find myself teaching French.

However, when my unreserved faith in CLT as the model for second language

instruction intersected with a group of beginning, grade nine French students, it marked the commencement of a journey that began down what seemed a very familiar road. It was paved with good intentions, but that wasn't enough to keep me from losing my way as I ventured into unfamiliar territory. I drew on past experiences to survive until chance led me to a new road that glittered with promise. Although I am still out on that road, this paper is an attempt to chronicle the journey as it draws to a close.

Communicative Language Teaching

It was my intention to teach as I had been successfully taught, using CLT to provide my students with an opportunity to share in the kind of learning experiences I had enjoyed while progressing towards fluency in French. Using a thematic approach, I would introduce the language needed by students to communicate competently with native speakers in the types of situations they might encounter in a French-speaking environment. I planned to speak only French in my classroom while offering an activity-based program that would enable students to explore French in meaningful contexts. In order to facilitate the learning of French while providing for the practice of it, I was determined to have my students speaking the language from the first day. Rather than relying on the textbook, I would use materials in the form of pictures, objects, articles, and exercises that more reflected the lives they were leading than those of prepared characters. My experience had taught me that, having reached a degree of fluency, students are keen to use the target language (TL), engaging in almost any kind of activity that has personal appeal to them,

from discussions and debates to co-operative tasks and competitive games. Learning progresses rapidly as students struggle to express themselves as individuals in activities that are meaningful to them. The more fluent learners become, the less interested they are in language textbooks and exercises and anything else that appears contrived for the sole purpose of creating learning experiences.

Although I had no formal instruction in the theory and practice of CLT, my understanding of CLT was wholly consistent with general CLT principles. I adhered to the idea that language learning is best promoted when learners must communicate to complete purposeful tasks which invoke language that is meaningful to them (Johnson, 1982). Like Terrell (1982), my goal was to move my students along the continuum of communicative competence through exposure to comprehensible instances of the French language. By exposing the students to language they would commonly encounter in French-speaking contexts, I hoped to facilitate their comprehension of native speakers while giving them the means to express themselves both appropriately and effectively. In concert with Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986), I expected students to interact with each other, assuming they would acquire the language through their struggles to communicate within the context of theme-related activities which were of interest to them and, consequently, intrinsically motivating. Not surprisingly, the many problems I had employing CLT with my grade nine class were not related to what I knew, but rather, to what I didn't know about CLT. My subsequent university studies taught me that CLT is not limited to the methods that I came to appreciate during my period as a successful language student and which had proved equally successful when I later

employed them as an ESL teacher in Quebec. Since there is no single text or model of CLT considered to be authoritative, CLT has been interpreted in many ways and practised differently in a variety of situations (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 66). For instance, Piepho (1983) indicates that, before students begin communicating in the TL, an emphasis should be placed on activities that provide them with the tools for communication while developing in them an understanding of how communication occurs in the TL. Other proponents of CLT have suggested providing students with spoken translations and allowing them to use their native language (NL) in class (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Terrell (1982) emphasises aural comprehension for beginning students, delaying their use of the TL until a certain listening fluency has been reached. Since CLT seems capable of manifesting itself in very different forms, teachers, given their respective situations, must decide which goals are reasonably attainable and by which means they can be effectively achieved. Had I been aware of the scope of CLT before I began to teach my grade nine beginners, I may have been a little less dogmatic about my own version of CLT. In any event, I would have had some options when my approach proved to be less than a reasonable and effective means of teaching French to them.

The Grade Nine Curriculum

Since I was already working at the school where I would be teaching in the fall, I had the opportunity to familiarise myself with the most recent grade nine curriculum guide

for Core French titled, "*Français de base: Programme de six ans (7e, 8e, et 9e années)*."

The guide indicated that the course was to be presented thematically. The selected structures, verbs, expressions, and related vocabulary were to be integrated into several themes, including food, clothing, health, and travel. The goal was for students to be able to recognise given structures within a specific context and to use them for speaking and writing in communicative situations (Manitoba Curriculum Branch, 1988). This form of CLT was structurally oriented and suggested a greater emphasis on written production than the form which my teachers at the private language school had employed, but the primary goal of oral production in communicative situations was the same.

The structures, verbs, vocabulary, and expressions that were to be taught in grade nine included the following:

Structures:

- 1) The inverted form of the interrogative: verb (present tense) + *t* + pronoun.

Ex. *Va-t-il souvent à Paris?*

- 2) Placing of indirect object pronouns: subject + indirect object pronoun + verb.

Ex. *Je lui montre le livre.*

- 3) Necessary inclusion of *en*: subject + *en* + verb + expression of quantity.

Ex. *J'en ai deux* (Manitoba Curriculum Branch, 1988, pp. 267-268).

Verbs:

- 1) Irregular verbs in the present, near future and compound past: *pouvoir, savoir,*

vouloir, apprendre, et venir.

2) Verbs forming the compound past with the verb to be (*être*): *aller, venir, sortir, arriver, et monter* (Manitoba Curriculum Branch, 1988, pp. 271-272).

Theme-related vocabulary and idiomatic expressions:

1) Health: vocabulary - *l'accident, la maladie, l'hôpital, et le docteur*;

expressions - *avoir mal à la gorge (à la tête, au dos).*

2) Travel: vocabulary - *l'agent de voyage, la réservation, la salle d'attente*;

expressions - *combien coûte + quelque chose* (Manitoba Curriculum Branch, pp. 274, 278).

The curriculum guide also outlined the primary and supplementary texts that had been approved for use. I had at my disposal *Vive le français 3* (McConnell & Collins, 1978), which was an older version of the recommended primary text, *Vive le français: Horizons 3* (McConnell & Collins, 1985). I also had sufficient copies of most of the recommended supplementary reading texts. As it was my intention to structure the course around theme-related, communicative activities rather than relying on the textbook, I was concerned only that the primary textbook be adaptable to the program I envisioned, which, upon perusal, seemed to be the case. In addition, I felt the supplementary reading texts would provide an excellent starting point for classroom discussions. Not surprisingly, the grade nine textbooks reflected the assumption that students had already acquired a goodly amount of the French language, having been exposed to from 200 to 250 hours of French

instruction in the previous two years. By way of comparison, with 200 hours of instruction at the private, non-academic school I attended, students would have finished the four beginner levels and would be ready to undertake Intermediate One. In my experience, students at that level, having progressed beyond survival French, are capable of participating in conversations on topical issues, albeit with rudimentary vocabulary.

Keeping in mind the supposed abilities of my students, I began considering the types of activities that would be appropriate for them. For management reasons, I sought those activities that could be accomplished in groups of two or four. Discussions, debates, role-playing, and task-based activities were to figure prominently. Discussions and debates would allow students to explore theme-related topics and issues of interest to them. The role-playing and the task-based activities would allow them to practice the theme-related vocabulary within a meaningful context. I could foresee a discussion on the merits of not being fashionable (clothing) or a debate on the issue of sex education in schools (health). I could imagine students both role-playing going through customs (travel), and deciding on a weekend menu for a camping trip (food). However, I was fully prepared to eliminate or modify activities that didn't seem to work or weren't well received by the students.

The Needs Assessment

The needs assessment consisted of two components, one for assessing interests and the other, language skills. Primarily, the interest component, in the form of a questionnaire, was for establishing which themes most appealed to the students, as I wanted to proceed

with those in which students had some intrinsic interest. I also wanted to know which of the skills (reading, writing, speaking, or listening) they were most inclined to develop. This would allow me to ensure that students whose interests were in practising skills other than speaking would not be entirely neglected. As well, I wanted to find out why students were taking the course, what they expected to get out of it, and what their future plans were in regard to French studies. The answers to these questions would give me some understanding of student motivation. I hoped that the responses to the interest component would enable me to offer appealing and motivating lessons. It did not occur to me to do a more detailed assessment of language needs for the purpose of deciding course content, although proponents of CLT recommend it (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In the first place, the curriculum guide had assumed the language needs of the students, by setting out the structures, vocabulary, and expressions to be mastered and by providing the thematic contexts in which language learning was to take place. And secondly, in my experience as both a teacher and a student in CLT classrooms, I had neither administered nor been given such an assessment.

The language skills assessment resembled those to which I had become accustomed as a student of French, measuring ability for the purpose of placement in an appropriate group. Of course, the students would remain in my class regardless of their scores. My interest was in finding out what the students remembered from their two previous years of study, as this would allow me to determine to what extent review was necessary before tackling new vocabulary and structures. As I did not intend to speak English, I needed to get an idea of the level of spoken French I could use in the classroom and still be

understood. Conversely, I needed to set appropriate expectations for the level of spoken French that I could expect from the students. However, aural comprehension was the greater concern because, regardless of speaking ability, if students couldn't understand what was being said, there would be little reason to expect appropriate spoken responses. As I had no way of knowing how much speaking practice they had been given in their two previous years of study, I planned a short interview with each of the students. I was expecting to find what Newmark (1981) had found: that while most students in a given class share a similar level of aural comprehension, the range of speaking abilities may exceed several levels. An assessment of reading comprehension was included to determine the level of reading materials the students could handle and whether they could follow written instructions on assignments and tests. I did not assess written production at the time as I had not intended to spend a lot of time on writing activities. When the time came to do some writing, I would have ample opportunity to assess their abilities. What follows is intended to provide a general understanding of the types of questions comprising the skills assessment.

Aural comprehension (translating to English - 10 minutes)

- 1) *Quand est-ce que tu manges les matins?*
- 2) *J'aime le poulet mais, je déteste le porc.*
- 3) *Son nom est Philippe. Il va à l'école secondaire.*
- 4) *Elle a deux frères et deux sœurs.*
- 5) *Ouvre ton livre à la page vingt-cinq.*

Oral production (1 to 2 minutes)

- 1) *Comment ça va?*
- 2) *Quel es ton non?*
- 3) *Quel âge as-tu?*
- 4) *Où est-ce que tu habites?*
- 5) *Qu'est-ce que tu aimes manger?*

Reading comprehension (translating to English - 15 minutes)

- 1) *Ouvre ton livre à la page trente-deux et fais l'exercice quatre.*
- 2) *Écris ton nom sur chaque page.*
- 3) *Souligne la bonne réponse.*
- 4) *Réponds à toutes les questions?*
- 5) *Je suis Marc. J'ai quinze ans. J'habite au coin de la rue. Je n'aime pas l'école.*

On the first day of classes my babbling gaggle of grade nine students entered the classroom. Once they had seated themselves, I greeted them with a friendly, "*Bonjour, tout le monde.*" One student quickly responded, "We don't speak French." In the context of the greeting I took that to mean that he and his classmates neither understood nor spoke French. Although I was a little startled by the response, I didn't assume that he was actually speaking for the entire class. However, it wasn't the omen I was looking for. I then chose a student and asked, "Comment ça va?" No response. I queried more students. Finally

someone replied, "*Bon.*" I was becoming a little concerned but since it was the first day of school and they didn't know me, I thought the lack of responsiveness might be due to the students feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Time would tell.

Using English, I cited the classroom rules and protocol and then gave some details concerning my teaching approach and expectations, the course content, and the manner of testing and grading. This was followed by a distribution of the texts. There was just time enough to administer the interests component of the needs assessment and to talk a little about their previous French studies. After the interest assessment was complete, I began to ask students what they had done in grades seven and eight. The first student responded that they had spent most of the time colouring, and others concurred. Another mentioned (with a wrinkled face) that they had done verb conjugating. When asked how much time they had spent speaking French, the class was pretty much in agreement that they had not done any speaking. Someone suggested that since their teacher didn't speak French very well, he wasn't inclined to use it in the classroom. The bell rang to save me from hearing more.

The responses to the interest assessment were both encouraging and disheartening. For the most part, the students preferred the idea of developing their spoken skill over those of listening, reading, and writing. I was pleased to find that some students were interested in learning to speak French in the event that they needed it in their travels or in their chosen profession. Sadly, only one student thought that she would take French in the following school year. That same student was the only one expressing an interest to study French in university. Many students were uncertain about taking French in grade ten while others had no intention of continuing. Most of the students were only taking French

because it was compulsory and, based on their past experience, easy. In retrospect, had I used this assessment for more than getting to know the students and determining their interests, I would have realised that their motivational levels were in no way equal to the tasks I would present to them.

I had set aside the second class for the skills component of the needs assessment. I hoped dearly that my suspicions, based on the previous day's comments, would not be confirmed. Following the assessment of aural comprehension, I gave the students their short reading/translation assignment and began the oral interviews. At least five of the twenty-five the students did not understand a single question that was asked. There were perhaps another five students who answered but one question, while the remaining fifteen students responded satisfactorily to two or three questions. When asked, a full 80% indicated that they really had not understood more than two or three of the questions. When students did answer, their responses were short and laboured. Since utterances were only of one or two words, it was difficult to assess the extent to which students grasped the suprasegmental elements of French. I had to conclude that as far as listening comprehension and speaking were concerned, my students were all beginners.

I was already in a dismal state when I found the time to look at the rest of the assessment. The aural comprehension section provided no better results than the oral production section had led me to expect. Since most students had not understood the questions posed during the oral testing, I knew they would have at least as much difficulty with the more complex questions in the aural comprehension segment. Reading comprehension proved to be somewhat better. Students recognised cognates and words

they had probably seen many times, just seldom or never heard. Considering the levels of aural comprehension and oral production, several of the students did extremely well, with one student exhibiting a preparedness to tackle the reading requirements of the grade nine curriculum. Had I been a couple of months wiser at this point, I would have capitalised on the students' written comprehension skills, but I was too fixated on developing spoken ability to realise that my students' knowledge of French was not as meagre as it seemed. I immediately began to panic, wondering how I was going to teach twenty-five beginners to speak French.

Defining the Task Ahead

The problem I was confronted with was not so much that I had to teach a class of twenty-five students, but that they were beginning speakers of French and I had chosen, as the primary goal, to teach them to speak. Since their aural comprehension skills were also at the beginning level, I would be forced to begin at square one. I would be without the aid of a textbook, the assessment of language skills having rendered that useless, along with most of what I had collected to that point. As a result, I would be forced to greatly modify the curriculum and then scurry about trying to find appropriate materials. Unfortunately, I had neither taught French or English to beginners nor had I taught a second language to such a large group. I had taught intermediate English to a group of fifteen, but their language skills had made it easy to organise activities that could be done in groups. My experiences as a student were no more helpful, since my exposure to CLT as a beginner

took place in a class of six students. The teacher directed everything: she organised activities, explained words, asked questions, sought and gave clarification, and requested repetitions when we, as students, were unintelligible. Being only six sitting around a small table, we felt involved at all times, or very nearly. Trying to accomplish the same level of involvement and interaction with a group of twenty-five would be exceedingly more difficult, especially if the goal was to have everyone speaking.

What would become equally problematic was that, based on my experiences with CLT as both a student and a teacher, I had accepted what has been referred to as the strong version of Communicative Language Learning. The strong version suggests that the interactive process of communication is a sufficient route to language acquisition as it actually stimulates the development of the language system. The weak version, on the other hand, sees communication as important because it provides learners with valuable opportunities to practice language they have already acquired (Howatt, 1984, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 66). Intuitively, I knew it would be difficult to provide my grade nine class of twenty-five students with the speaking opportunities I felt were necessary to learn the language, opportunities I had been well provided with in a class of only six students. Had I listened to my intuitive voice, something I am still training myself to do, I would have realised that my goal was not achievable in the context I found myself. At that point, I could have modified my goal and found an approach that would have facilitated its attainment. I, however, ignored my intuition and ploughed ahead, unable to let go of the idea that my limited conception of CLT was the only way to achieve success.

Implementing CLT

When students possess the ability to use the meta-language of the classroom to meet their own needs, they transform the interactions using that language into authentic communication, providing themselves with another avenue for language learning (Piepho, 1983). I have always felt that when teachers use the native language (NL) of the students in the classroom, either to instruct or to talk about the language, they miss an opportunity to further the students' understanding of the TL. In that same vein, if students are permitted to speak their NL, as opposed to the TL, they are deprived of a learning opportunity. Since I was going to speak only French, I had to provide students with an understanding of the language I would be using, specifically the instructions I would be issuing during the course of a lesson. As well, students required the language necessary to communicate their own needs in the classroom, such as asking questions or offering opinions. The students would need to acquire basic classroom expressions using verbs such as *écouter*, *suivre*, *lire*, *écrire*, *prendre*, *ouvrir*, *faire*, and *poser*. For example:

- 1) *Écoutez ce dialogue.* (Listen to this dialogue.)
- 2) *Suivez ces instructions.* (Follow these instructions.)
- 3) *Ouvrez vos livres.* (Open your books.)
- 4) *Prenez ces notes.* (Take these notes.)
- 5) *Posez une question.* (Ask a question.)

By simple demonstration, involving a lot of gesticulation, exaggeration and repetition, it took very little time before the students could understand simple directions. Initially, the only expression I provided them with for their use was "*répétez, s'il vous plaît.*" It would be a long while before my students availed themselves of the opportunity to use it. Instead, when they failed to understand me, they would stare blankly at me or inform me noisily in English that they didn't understand. Those became my cues for repetition or clarification. At that point, I decided to teach other classroom language as the need arose.

As the first theme, I chose *Les voyages* because of student interest and my own. I would have to greatly modify the content as prescribed in the syllabus, but I felt I could use situations such as meeting new people to introduce language appropriate to the level of the students. In preparation, I tacked up large sheets with oft-used and theme-related verbs, including *être, avoir, aller, acheter, vouloir, aimer, détester, manger, prendre, visiter, and voyager*, along with their conjugations in the present tense. In addition, I put up as many travel-related posters as would fit on the walls. Without the aid of English, I would not be using regular classroom techniques such as brainstorming to introduce material. Everything would have to be acted out and repeated. I would find myself constantly demanding, "*comprenez-vous?*," to ensure that I was being understood.

The first day's vocabulary and English translation were on the blackboard when the students arrived. They copied it into notebooks for reference and study purposes. By way of bad acting and a lot of pointing at selected words on the blackboard, I made the students understand that our class was visiting Montreal. I introduced a prepared dialogue between

one of the students in my class and a student that she had met there. The dialogue was simple and involved a standard greeting and a few questions concerning name, age, and place of origin. Before distributing copies of the dialogue, I acted out both parts for the students. I then read the dialogue and the students followed along. When I asked for volunteers to read the dialogue aloud, there were none. I made the mistake of choosing two students to read. It was a difficult task for them and clearly painful. A few students laughed at their efforts and the damage was done. I couldn't convince anyone else to read. Students were now wondering why they had to speak. I finished the class by having them prepare a dialogue in groups of two rather than having them try to role-play the conversation as I had planned. The students conversed merrily in English as they prepared their dialogues.

Inauspicious beginnings!

The following day I began by asking questions related to the previous day's dialogue. Many of the students looked at me as if I were from another planet when I asked, "*Comment, ça va?*". As I continued the questioning, students were taking so much time in responding that I was losing the rest of the class. To avoid losing them altogether, I asked them to get out the prepared dialogues from the previous day and was met with protests like, "Why do we have to do that again?". Since I was speaking only French, I didn't respond to the protests but, instead, forged ahead. We reread the dialogue, but the students were clearly bored, indicating that they already knew the stuff. And, in point of fact, they did understand the dialogue as I read it to them. However, I wanted them to demonstrate their learning by speaking, not simply by understanding. In order to hear them speaking at least a little French, I had students read the prepared dialogues in pairs. I tried to listen as

they did this, but it was too difficult to monitor very much in the short time it took for the students to finish the reading. Because of this, I had no way of determining what the students were saying or how well it was being said. When I asked selected groups to read the dialogues again so that I could offer feedback, I could hear other groups chatting in English. I quickly realised that this method was neither efficient nor effective. The primary plan of getting students to speak French in the classroom was on the verge of derailment.

The first two days had demonstrated that if I was to get the students speaking French, I could not do it by standing in front of the class and firing off questions to individual students. It took too much time, hardly accomplishing the task of involving everyone, and did not allow each student much opportunity to speak. In addition, I could not accomplish much in groups as the students would resort to English as soon as any reading aloud was finished. Since they could hardly be expected to speak to each other in French, this was no surprise. In any event, I could not have them reading prepared dialogues to each other for an entire class as that did not constitute using language for real communication.

Although I did not blame my students for their shortcomings, I did make the mistake of comparing them unfavourably to their French-speaking counterparts in Quebec to whom I had taught English. That was before I realised that my Quebec high school students had been exposed to countless hours of English music, television, and film. Even those who students who protested vociferously at having to study English had, quite unintentionally, acquired a reasonable vocabulary and an ear that was at least partially attuned to the English language. Some of my students who were able to sing complete

songs in English without the slightest idea of their meaning. Conversely, the meaningful exposure to French enjoyed by my rural Manitoba students outside of the classroom was virtually non-existent. Although there were a number of small communities in the area where French was spoken, the students were never compelled to use French as everyone also spoken English. When they did hear French, it was simply incomprehensible noise that was easily ignored. Ignoring French was a skill quickly and adeptly learned, seemingly, by all of the English-track students in our dual-track school.

In the days that followed, although I failed to comprehend the importance of it, I was still speaking only French in the classroom and the students seemed to understand me. I was able to introduce new language using pictures and actions, and students followed along without apparent difficulty. When I read the dialogues aloud containing new vocabulary, students seemed able to follow. At least no one was shouting that they didn't understand. Unfortunately, students were having fewer opportunities to practice speaking and almost no opportunities to engage in real spoken communication. They would speak when I had them read dialogues together or when I asked them questions, which I did less of because it appeared relatively unsuccessful. Occasionally, I would have students ask one or two questions of a partner, but most did not want to undertake this without following a script. When I suggested role-playing activities, they wanted to create a script and read from it. I allowed this, but it meant that most of the activity, the creation of the script, would be undertaken in English. At the end of the first week it was very apparent that if I wasn't speaking French to introduce new language, the students were speaking English to accomplish the tasks I gave them. In sum, the students spent almost no time speaking

French.

Unhappily, I resigned myself to a situation in which I would use French to introduce new material, and the students would use English to complete the assigned tasks and to ask clarifying questions concerning the tasks themselves. Eventually, I began to use English to answer questions on French grammar and syntax because I could not explain many things simply enough in French. Moreover, the activities and assignments required the students to write in French, a task demanding considerable instruction, even for native speakers. In the next two weeks or so, while moving further away from what I considered to be a communicative program, I introduced vocabulary related to itineraries and time, to clothing and accessories, and to holiday activities. Students wrote dialogues and letters, constructed lists, and made posters. I spoke as much French as possible; the students spoke almost none. They did not complain, but I was extremely frustrated. In only a short period of time much of what was being done in the classroom was being done in English. I did have a student-centred, activity-based program, but French communication consisted of the students listening to me while I introduced new material, recited their work aloud or read prepared pieces.

I taught in pretty much the same fashion for the next month or so, with only minor changes. To ease the burden of creating new materials for every lesson, I borrowed a class set of an older edition of recommended texts for grade seven, titled *Passeport français 1: En route*, which provided me with dialogues, activities, and exercises that I could incorporate into a given theme. I introduced some direct teaching of grammar, but only those elements related to the assignments. I thought that if the students were going to be

writing, they might as well be writing correctly. Since the written production was not spontaneous, that is, not resulting from thought processes that were occurring in French, I did not think that a conscious awareness of grammatical rules would be inhibiting. Role-playing was no longer a viable option as students had little or no speaking practice, especially with the newer, more difficult vocabulary being introduced.

I tried to evaluate the students' work on a daily basis. Since written comprehension exercises and written production were a part of nearly every class, it was easy to follow their progress in those areas. I took in most of the written work, giving a sort of global mark reflecting the overall quality of the work. I noted the most common mistakes and areas of difficulty, broaching these in class. Generally, the written comprehension exercises were corrected in class, but I did collect them to see how students were doing. I did far less evaluating of aural comprehension, probably because I was speaking less French and because I considered aural comprehension important only as it related to speaking. As well, students' written skills far exceeded their listening skills, making it necessary to use much more basic structures and vocabulary in evaluating aural comprehension than I was actually teaching. I did not test oral production as the students were not learning to speak. I thought it hardly fair to test them on something that wasn't being taught. In general, the students were progressing reasonably well along the three dimensions that were being tested: aural comprehension, reading comprehension, and written production. I was satisfied with their progress, but extremely dissatisfied with the direction the course had taken.

As much as I enjoyed my students, I was not interested in teaching a French course

in which students spent most of their time thinking and speaking in English, being convinced that if my students weren't speaking French, they weren't really learning it. Although my students weren't despairing, I was. It bothered me greatly to walk around the classroom and hear English spoken everywhere. I thought I had failed as a language teacher. With the amount of English being spoken, I would have been embarrassed had another French teacher ventured into the classroom. I had resigned myself to doing what I considered to be a poor job of teaching French, mainly because I didn't know how to do what I considered to be a good job. Although I was convinced that a change in approach was needed, no attractive options immediately presented themselves. Besides, I was not prepared to move away from student-centred learning, preferring to think of myself as a facilitator in the language learning process rather than a disseminator of knowledge. I was not comfortable with the idea that I might have to do most of the talking. My experience had taught me that talkative language teachers talked about grammar and then handed out worksheets. I considered that route a definite step backward. I needed to find an alternative that would allow me to continue teaching according to my principles, implying a continued focus on meaning over form in an interactive, activity-based classroom, and a French-only format that provided authentic instances of French language appropriate to the level of the students. But how would my non-French-speaking students interact and engage in activities without the benefit of speech? While I was busy tilting at windmills, fortune guided me to Comprehension-Based Learning (CBL).

Reflections

As I looked back upon this period that was marked by frustration, failure and resignation, I began to reformulate my conception of the problems that had plagued me. It became clear that the problems, given the students I had and the context in which I was teaching, did not stem exclusively from teaching methods which were inappropriate. As hard as it was for me to admit, most of the problems had to do with me - with my attitudes and my inability to distance myself effectively from what was transpiring in the classroom. My rigidity, stubbornness, and preoccupation with my own emotional state had blinded me to other teaching possibilities, the decaying learning environment and to the emotional and instructional needs of individual students. Having revised the nature of the problems, I was able to reconsider my responses to them.

The first problem of a practical nature presented itself in the form of twenty-five grade nine students who were not the low-intermediate learners of French I had anticipated, but who were, instead, virtual beginners. My response to this disquieting revelation was to change nothing but the complexity of the content. I employed CLT as I knew it, or moreover, as I remembered it having been used successfully to teach me as a beginner in a private language school. In doing so, I failed to appreciate the differences that existed between my situation as a learner and that of my students. I had been very motivated to learn French, for personal and professional reasons. Other than doing some substitute teaching, I was concentrating entirely on learning French. I read books on grammar at home and listened to as much French television as my head would allow. At the private

school I was attending, I was given the opportunity to audit as many other classes as I could manage, regardless of the level. None of the classes had more than eight students, all of whom were motivated to learn French, providing numerous opportunities for speaking and easy interaction. And, equally important, as novice French students, we were taught by a very caring and experienced teacher. My students, on the hand, were not as fortunate. They did not have an experienced teacher nor they did not have the motivation of their adult counterparts who had made a conscious decision to learn French. For my students, French was but one of many classes they were obliged to take. They were willing to fit it in with the rest of their studies and their busy lives as teenagers, but they did not see any particular need to devote themselves so entirely to the French language at that point in their lives. Since they comprised a class of twenty-five, relatively unmotivated students, the problem of facilitating speaking and interaction was compounded.

I now realise that it had not been my students' fault that I was unable to extricate myself from my understanding of CLT. Neither was it their fault that they could not accomplish the tasks I had set for them. They were the same students at the beginning of the semester as they were at the end. They were willing to do what I asked and were quite prepared to enjoy it, as I long I didn't make it too uncomfortable or difficult. But I did make it uncomfortable and difficult, resulting in some stubbornness and defiance on their part, but who could blame them? Conversely, they were quite happy when I eased off and started speaking English and allowed them to use it as they worked in groups. They weren't learning as much French as they could have been, but that was much more my concern than theirs.

I don't know whether it was optimism, arrogance, or sheer stupidity which had led me to extrapolate so completely from my own learning experiences, but it was, as my computer is always telling me, a fatal error. Dörnyei (1994) and Oxford (1992) have discussed the importance of student interest in L2 learning and the relevance of a given L2 to the students' personal goals. Since I did not consider my students' interest in French or the importance of French in their lives, I did nothing to compensate for any lack of interest or perceived irrelevance in learning it. Consequently, my expectations exceeded what the motivational level of my students would reasonably enable them to meet, leaving them feeling unsuccessful, and me, frustrated. Rather than simply despairing over what I perceived to be the combined failure of the students, teacher, and method, there were many changes I could have and should have made.

Foremost, I should have insured that all my students were successful in the learning tasks I gave them. This would have engendered self-confidence, eliminating much of the anxiety associated with failure (Dörnyei, 1994; Piepho, 1983). To accomplish this would have required a shift from activities requiring spoken French to those merely encouraging it. Dörnyei (1994) also indicates that teachers should help students set realistic goals for themselves while providing learning activities that facilitate their attainment. This allows the pace of learning to evolve as students become more motivated. He suggests placing an emphasis on cross-cultural awareness in order to foster a greater appreciation of the L2 within a world-wide context and to enhance motivation for studying the language. Because of my lack of experience using CLT to teach beginners, I should have prepared myself more thoroughly, anticipating problems and devising ways of dealing with them before

they occurred. In sum, I should have taken greater responsibility for what was happening in the classroom. As I move into another teaching assignment, I hope that what I have learned from my struggles to implement CLT will be carried forward.

EPISODE TWO:

The Triumph of Comprehension-Based Learning

Introduction

This episode begins as my desperation coincides, fortuitously, with my study of Comprehension-Based Learning (CBL). It follows my introduction to CBL theory and practice through the work of Asher (1981a) and Winitz (1981a), and examines the model of listening fluency from which my teaching of aural comprehension emanated (Nord, 1981). I have outlined the various methods and techniques associated with CBL that I was able to employ successfully in my teaching, including TPR (Asher, 1977); a multiple choice, frame format (Nord, 1981); and a story frame format (Winitz, 1981b). Along with these techniques, I have added a method for the reading of novels that I extrapolated from Nord's (1981) description of the steps toward listening fluency, as well as mentioning several other techniques which I have not yet tried, but which may be of interest to the reader.

Comprehension-Based Learning

I had lost hope of finding a way to foster real learning of French when I began reading about CBL while doing a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Education program. At first glance, CBL seemed strikingly different from the form of CLT that I had attempted to

employ in my teaching. CBL theory contended that comprehension, not production, is the vehicle through which language is acquired (Winitz, 1981a), contradicting my own understanding of language learning because half of the equation was missing. After all, it didn't make sense to me that one could acquire a language in a complete way without speaking it. In practice, CBL is concerned with providing listening opportunities in order to produce capable listeners of French. My concern had been with providing speaking opportunities in order, ultimately, to produce capable speakers of French. CBL manifests a focussed, pragmatic approach to language teaching, aiming to achieve what is considered reasonable and feasible in the myriad language learning contexts where classes are large and there is a dearth of opportunities to speak with native target language (TL) speakers (Gary & Gary, 1981; Winitz, 1981a). I, on the other hand, had been struggling to recreate an ideal language program constructed from personal learning experiences in a context very dissimilar to the one in which I found myself teaching. In retrospect, my ideal had not been realised due a failure to consider what was possible given class size, student motivation, and real opportunities for students to speak French with native speakers.

Regardless of the apparent differences between what I had wanted to be doing and what CBL was suggesting, CBL was appealing because it promoted exclusive use of the TL. Although I had maintained a student-centred, activity-based program, all of the group tasks were accomplished in English, hardly reflective of a program designed to provide meaningful use of the TL. Since I was no longer using an approach consistent with CLT, I would be depriving my students of nothing by focusing on listening comprehension. Besides, I much preferred a scenario in which my students came to understand native

speakers of French to one in which they learned neither to understand native speakers nor to speak the TL. In any event, the exciting prospect of returning to a French-only classroom invited further investigation.

The claims of researchers like Asher (1977, 1981a) and Winitz (1981a, 1982) serve as the foundation for CBL pedagogy. They believe that older children, teens, and adults can acquire a second language in essentially the same manner as young children acquire their first, by comprehending it. The argument for the primacy of comprehension over production is based on what is known of first language (L1) learners, who are able to understand complete sentences long before they can speak a single word, having learned about the structure of language through the process of comprehending. Only when children are cognitively and physiologically able to speak is the linguistic knowledge acquired by comprehending language transferred and applied to producing it. The emergence of speech in a child is an indicator that much language has already been acquired and not merely an indication that the child is, at that point, ready to begin language learning (Asher, 1981a; Wadsworth, 1989).

The acquisition of an L2 is seen as part of the same implicit process whereby language acquisition is accomplished through comprehension of the TL. If students are provided with adequate and meaningful exposure to the linguistic forms of the TL, the rules of the TL will be easily and accurately acquired by inference. It is assumed that the acquisition of relatively simple rules is dependent upon the exposure to more complex structures, suggesting a sort of spiral curriculum where the teacher not only returns to more basic linguistic elements that have been already introduced but includes more complex

items which may or may not be addressed later (Winitz, 1981a). Finally, speaking in the TL follows a pre-production phase or "silent period" in which linguistic knowledge is amassed until the point at which the learner is ready to speak (Asher, 77, 1981a; Newmark, 1981; Postovsky, 1981).

In the L2 classroom, an instructional format is required that reproduces, as much as possible, the listening experiences of children. To this end, listening comprehension is stressed and the TL is spoken by native speakers. The meaning of L2 sentences is clearly indicated through actions and pictures and all lexical items and grammatical units are carefully programmed, respecting the implications of a non-linear (spiral-type) model of instruction (Winitz 1981a). Explicit teaching of surface rules is deemed unnecessary and even detrimental to the learning process. Allowance is made for the occasional use of production exercises, grammatical drills, and practice in translation but only to test comprehension (Winitz, 1981b). There is no production training, as it is assumed that speaking will appear naturally given proper comprehension training and sufficient exposure to the TL. Students are encouraged to speak, not pressured, reducing the various stresses associated with prematurely inducing spoken production, including memory overload and self-consciousness (Gary & Gary, 1981; Postovsky 1981; Asher, 1981a). While reducing stress and facilitating comprehension, teachers have successfully employed CBL techniques in a variety of L2 learning contexts where the aim is to understand native speakers in natural settings (Asher, 1981a; Belasco, 1981; Krakowian, 1981; Nord, 1981; Paribakht & Wesche, 1993).

I began to wonder if CBL wasn't tailor-made for learning an L2 in a typical high

school classroom. The teacher controls what is heard and spoken in the L2, and all students are involved while listening without having to worry about making fools of themselves speaking. Unlike my classroom, there would be no need or opportunity for students to waste time conversing in their NL, leaving a good deal more time for listening and learning in the TL. My students would certainly benefit from greater exposure to instances of the French language they could comprehend, as an end in itself, and not merely as a prelude to instances of interactive speech. Reflecting on my efforts to promote speech, it seemed ironic that I had probably fostered more learning of French when my methods had been consistent with CBL, that is, during those times when I was focusing on aural comprehension to introduce new language and direct class activities. It was when I forced oral production that I ran into problems.

Toward Listening and Reading Fluency

In order to implement a program based on aural comprehension and, to a lesser extent, on written comprehension, I needed to understand the process that would lead my students to listening and reading fluency. Nord (1981) provided a model for listening fluency, which encompassed three stages: semantic and syntactic decoding phase, anticipatory feed forward phase, and the discrepancy feedback phase. Nord called it a model for listening fluency, not because he hadn't considered reading fluency, but because it was through listening fluency that reading would be introduced and through which reading comprehension was to be achieved. I did not integrate elements of the third stage

as the suggested activities are beyond the capabilities of beginners, being more appropriate for students who have already achieved a fairly high degree of listening and reading fluency.

In the first phase, the idea is to present lexical items in order that sound becomes associated with meaning, ensuring that meaning will be triggered when that same sound is heard again (Nord, 1981). To this end, teachers are to introduce new vocabulary along with any distinguishing syntactical changes that occur. For example, French nouns could be presented in singular and plural form, the salient syntactic changes occurring in the articles in the spoken form, and in both the articles and the nouns in the written form. Once individual words are understood in isolation, they can be combined in short sentences. For example, one could use the association of actions and pictures to introduce words, followed by the implementation of Asher's (1977) Total Physical Response (TPR) to combine them. In my efforts to implement CLT, I had engaged students in semantic and syntactic decoding, but had failed to progress beyond a rudimentary combination of the lexical items introduced. Not surprisingly, I wasn't able to move my students into the anticipatory feed forward phase of listening fluency.

In the second phase students use context, accumulated linguistic knowledge, and discourse cues to help them anticipate what they will be hearing or reading. If a given text is to be comprehended aurally, it is up to the teacher to provide a context that will be reinforced by the reading of the text. The students must bring to the text their understanding of the context and their acquired linguistic knowledge. They use these, along with the discourse cues, to comprehend what is being read and to anticipate what

will follow. Achieving a global understanding, not full comprehension, is the aim. A variety of techniques can be used to achieve anticipation and comprehension in this phase, including a multiple choice, picture frame format (Nord, 1981), a story frame format (Winitz, 1981b), TPR (Asher, 1977), and an episodic approach to teaching novels (Oller, 1983). I used each of these techniques and found them all very effective in my teaching situation.

TPR: Theory, Practice, and Implementation

The first CBL technique I became familiar with was TPR, developed by James Asher (1977). He started from the belief that an understanding of the processes involved in L1 acquisition would lead to the best method of facilitating L2 acquisition. He focused on the preverbal period of child development since it is during this period that infants first manifest the ability to differentiate human speech sounds from other noises, to decode those sounds into relevant linguistic units, and to comprehend speech (Eimas, Siqueland, Jusczyk & Vigorito, 1971). Asher (1981a) and Wadsworth (1989) contend that during Piaget's sensorimotor stage of development, the actions of the infant and the processes directly linked to those actions play a central role in language acquisition. Infants create meaning when the language they are exposed to is synchronised with their body movements. The people, places, and things experienced directly become associated with those movements, enabling the leap from zero NL knowledge to phoneme recognition, word comprehension, grammar construction, and ultimately, to sentence deciphering.

This process of "decoding" through action is engaged during the intimate interactions infants have with their caregivers, interactions in which language causes motion. According to Asher (1981a), in the majority of these interactions, the parents, as primary caregivers, verbally direct their infant children during activities which might include looking, eating, drinking, touching, handling, pointing, and playing. Through this non-verbal motor movement infants begin decoding the sights and sounds of their world, tracing a map of how language works in the non-verbal right hemisphere of the brain (Asher 1981a, p. 63). Asher (1981a) considers this mapping necessary for the more advanced construction of concepts in the left hemisphere that results in talking and thinking in logical, linear patterns and problem-solving through symbols, numbers, and internalised concepts.

Asher's TPR (1977, 1981a) methodology stems from his theory of L1 acquisition. As is the case with infants, L2 students are without the ability to speak or comprehend in the TL. The teacher, like the primary caregiver, synchronises the sounds of the TL with movement, thus facilitating associations between sound and object and between sound and action. Using a variety of commands, the teacher directs the student in the classroom, initiating both action and object manipulation. The eliciting of non-verbal motor responses in the L2 learner through the use of commands facilitates the same necessary decoding and mapping of language in the right hemisphere that occurs when infants are acquiring their NL. Asher (1981b) proposed that "infantile regression" was an essential component of L2 acquisition, whether it was a return to behaviours associated with infant development as TPR engendered or a return to an infant-like affective state as in Curran's Community

Language (Blair, 1982).

TPR, as a method, which reflects the tenets of CBL, manifests itself much differently in the classroom than do methods associated with CLT. As opposed to focusing on the creation of meaningful situations rich with meaningful language, TPR takes a more pragmatic approach. It follows an essentially sentence-based syllabus, with the lexicon and the grammar being the prime focus in selecting teaching items. Neither frequency of appearance nor natural target language use are criteria for choosing items. Rather, what can be done and used in the classroom impact most heavily on the choice of items (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In respecting a pre-speech period, TPR endeavours to remove the stress associated with forced oral production, using success to create a positive environment that facilitates learning (Piepho, 1983). In retrospect, I can see that my own efforts to force production had created a good deal of stress, doing much more harm than good.

The TPR instructor can be seen as a director who controls the movement of his student actors on the classroom stage. He commands one or more of them at a time using the imperative. The student actors respond to the commands, then wait and listen in the event that they are given further instructions (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In the short term, those who are simply observing and listening acquire as much language as those who are acting and listening, but for long-term retention acting and listening are essential (Asher, 1969). When looked at in this way, TPR is magically simple and effective. All students must keep sharp in the event that they are called upon to do something, especially if the name of the designated actor follows the issuing of a command. Everyone is kept involved and the instructor knows immediately whether the command has been

understood, enabling students to receive immediate feedback in the event of errors. When spontaneous speech emerges after 10 to 20 hours of instruction, some students express the desire to take on the role of directing their classmates (Asher, 1977; 1981b).

Although it may sound limiting to focus on commands as a way to learn an L2, Asher, Kusodo, and de la Torre (1974), in constructing a one year program, found that most verbs could be nested in the imperative. Asher sees no reason why TPR might not be expanded to include more complex structures at advanced levels (Asher, 1981b). However, it may become increasingly difficult for teachers to generate actions in which complex structures are embedded. Aside from the introduction of verbs, many inventive ways have been created to introduce context-related vocabulary. Richard-Amato (1988) identified a variety of TPR activities, including constructing a paper doll, baking a cake, pointing to items of clothing, and drawing a map. Without much difficulty, one can also imagine students searching frantically for hidden treasures or tripping eagerly over their feet as they learn to dance the polka. Personally, I had enormous success teaching aerobics to my grade nine French class and they enjoyed the game of *Simon Dit* (Simon says) to such an extent that we played it almost daily.

I began to implement TPR within the theme, *Les partis du corps* (Parts of the body). In the semantic decoding phase, TPR followed the introduction of the theme-related vocabulary which was comprehended initially by being associated with actions. Generally, I would stand at the front of the class demonstrating the actions of the relevant verbs which included *toucher*, *marcher*, *tourner*, *prendre*, *placer*, *mettre*, *lever*, and *baisser*. To introduce most of the vocabulary, which consisted primarily of nouns referring to the

individual body parts, I touched or pointed to the body part in question. Since I always wrote the vocabulary of the day on the blackboard, there was also the association of the spoken word with its written equivalent. TPR was introduced into the lessons in the form of two or three word sentences as I endeavoured to combine lexical items. I would issue directives such as *touchez la tête, levez les bras, or marchez au mur*. If the commands weren't easily understood, I would perform the action and have the student(s) mimic me.

In the anticipatory feed forward phase I introduced *Simon dit* (Simon says). The context of the game provided students with an awareness of the verbs and nouns they could expect to hear. The conjunctions *et* (and) and *mais* (but) and the adverbial phrase *en suite* (next) were used to signal that additional elements would follow. The negatives *non pas* and *ne...pas* were also included, signalling that something was to be done.

A typical phrase of the more complex variety would be "*Baissez les bras, mais ne levez pas la jambe droite.*" As the teacher, I would be both raising my arms and my right leg. The students could follow my actions, but they would have to be very attentive to the verbal cues or they would be tricked. I enjoyed playing the game as much as the students. As the semester wore on the game became increasingly more complex, but never beyond the reach of most students.

The majority of time given over to *Les partis du corps* was spent doing aerobics. Each class, we would move all desks and chairs to the sides of the classroom, piling them up rather unceremoniously. The "dance" moves I would be teaching all came from a low impact aerobics instructional video. The language of the video was simple and didn't vary much from the language of *Simon dit* so there was little new vocabulary. I taught all of the

moves individually, without music. When I deemed the students were ready, we began to do aerobics to the video. Many of the students enjoyed learning the aerobic dance moves, and all of them enjoyed the diversion. It was the most enjoyable teaching experience I've ever had. More importantly, the students were learning and having fun doing it and even getting a little exercise in the bargain.

Multiple Choice, Frame Formats

Nord (1981) devised a variation on standard multiple choice questions, which can be used to facilitate an anticipatory response in students, enabling aural comprehension. It involves nothing more than a sheet of paper divided into a dozen or so separate, numbered frames. In each of the frames there is a picture. Students are instructed to look at a specific picture, and then hearing four possible descriptions of the contents of that frame, they decide which of the four descriptions best fits the picture. According to Nord (1981) looking at the pictures provides the context for an anticipatory response. For example, if the students are looking at a specific article of clothing, they anticipate hearing words associated with that theme. Employing this technique for a unit on the telling of time, I introduced all unit-related vocabulary with my customary hand waving and finger pointing. Next, I distributed a sheet consisting of twelve frames, each frame containing the picture of a clock displaying a different time. I read four possibilities aloud, one of which corresponded to the clock in question. The students selected what they considered to be the correct response. After only a few efforts and some re-teaching, most students were scoring

100%. I was extremely pleased with the results and used the same type of activity to teach articles of clothing and simple actions.

Story Frame Formats

Winitz (1981b) conceived of a technique using stories told in pictures and words to elicit anticipatory responses in students. The stories are told in a series of frames with descriptive captions, much in the same way a story is told in a comic book. The students begin by looking at the first picture to determine what is happening. They hear the contents of the caption as they read along. In this way the words are associated with both sound and script. The entire story is told in this same manner. As aural comprehension increases, the stories can be told without their captions or they can be told out of sequence, requiring the students to determine which picture fits with what they are hearing.

I employed this technique with comic book stories, erasing the original captions and rewriting the stories using vocabulary reflective of the student's level of comprehension. Initially, the students looked at the pictures and then followed the text as I read it. After one or two readings, I handed out copies of the stories without the captions. Students followed as I read aloud, but without the aid of a written text. I tested them by rereading the story out of sequence and having them decide which frame corresponded to the caption I was reading. Many students scored 100% on the tests and almost all students recorded very high marks. The entire process could be accomplished in two or three sessions, including the time taken to introduce vocabulary and provide students with a full

understanding of the context in which the story was taking place. I found this to be a very valuable technique but time consuming due to the rewriting involved.

A "Novel" Approach

Towards the end of the semester, I decided to introduce a novel by having the students listen to me as I read it aloud, following a suggestion by Nord (1981) to introduce reading through listening and closely related to Oller's Episode Hypothesis, (1983). I chose the short novel, *Intrigue à Québec*, which was part of the grade nine curriculum. To create a context that would enable students to anticipate what they would hear and to comprehend it, I basically acted out each chapter before reading it. Consequently, students knew who was involved in the chapter, what they were doing and what was going to happen. This did not seem to take any of the enjoyment out of their listening and reading as they followed along. Several beaming students mentioned with surprise that they had no difficulty following along. After the read-along sessions, students answered the comprehension questions at the end of each chapter with little difficulty. Given that the same students would have understood almost nothing of the novel had I asked them to read it at the beginning of the semester, I could not but smile in wonderment.

Reflections

According to no grand design the semester ended much better than it had begun.

Fortunately, CBL had returned me to a French-only classroom and to a relaxed group of students who were willing to learn. Success beget success as well as happier students and an even happier teacher. My earlier attempts to implement CLT had demonstrated that no matter how successful an approach might be in one teaching situation, it might not prove successful in another. Consequently, I have been careful not to make the same assumptions about CBL as I had made concerning CLT. I have come to realise that I don't need to find the perfect approach in every situation, although that would help, but that I do have to listen to my students. After all, they are the clients of our educational system. Having the perfect method or not, I must be concerned with how they feel about what is taking place in the classroom. Had I continued pushing my form of CLT, I would have discouraged my students from learning French. Had I continued with my non-CLT method of instruction, which had employed during the period of transition to CBL, the worst that could have happened is that the students wouldn't have learned a great deal of French, but they wouldn't have developed any negative feelings about it. Although I did need a change of approach, I also needed a dramatic change of attitude. Hopefully, if CBL happens to fail me in a given situation, I won't be found running around shouting, "the sky is falling, the sky is falling!"

The discovery of CBL and my growing awareness of the scope of CLT made me realise that there was a great deal about teaching second languages that I did not know. As I delved deeper into CBL and other L2 teaching approaches during the course of my studies and teaching, I have begun to look at approaches and methods as more fluid than fixed, as starting points for teaching rather than as complete systems in which we are

locked. In reading Krashen (1982) and Terrell (1982), I saw the line between CBL and CLT become severely muddled. While the Natural Approach of Krashen and Terrell (1983), like other forms of CLT, is concerned with facilitating communicative competence, emphasising the role of spoken interaction in learning, it also contends that comprehension is the vehicle through which language is acquired, the guiding principle of CBL. Krashen and Terrell (1983), following the proponents of CBL, advocate a silent period and assume that spoken language will emerge when students are ready. Like Asher (1981a), Krashen (1982) addresses the stress factor in language learning, especially that associated with speaking. According to Krashen (1982), high stress is associated with a high affective filter. He contends that language acquisition will only take place when students are provided with language that is one level above their existing level ($i + 1$) in situations where their affective filters are low enough to allow learning to take place. I found it quite ironic, after my struggles with CLT and my conversion to CBL, that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, that they can be viewed as complementary, coming together to form a more complete system than they would if regarded separately.

This continual process of revising the role and significance of approach in language teaching drew me quite naturally to Blair's (1982) Principled Eclecticism. In recognising the complexities that teachers are faced with in making decisions about what and how to teach, he suggests that teachers employ various approaches, methods, and techniques in novel combinations in order to provide a program that best meets the needs of their students. To this end, I am constantly seeking new techniques to add to my repertoire. I recently found an article by Kidd (1992) which describes some very interesting and unique

ways to use dictation to improve L2 listening comprehension and to promote the implicit acquisition of L2 grammar. Bragger (1992) introduces a variation on TPR which has students responding verbally in the negative in order to stimulate clarifying questions and responses. More recently, I was informed by a colleague of a technique incorporating TPR into storytelling, although I have yet to inform myself more fully on the procedure. While my evolution as a teacher has caused the lines between L2 approaches to blur, I feel more confident that I can now meet the needs of my students, not being so firmly attached to any single and limited approach to L2 instruction.

CONCLUSION

As this paper brings a temporary end to the seemingly endless process of revising through reflection, I am struck by the human ability to learn and evolve and the role that serendipity seems destined to play. During the first part of the semester myopia had precipitated my temporary downfall, but when chance intervened and led me to a better way, my willingness to change and openness to new ideas made it possible for me to learn. However, had fate not been cruel to me in the first place, I would not have realised my potential for over-zealousness, stubbornness, and complete disregard for the obvious. As difficult as it has been to address my own frailties and professional shortcomings, not addressing them would only have led to problems in another teaching situation with other students. Therefore, I am thankful to the teaching gods for having afforded me the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally.

As I look forward to my next teaching assignment, I feel better equipped to make appropriate practical responses and to refrain from making inappropriate affective responses as I focus on the needs of students and not on my own. I know that I can't afford to become complacent about what I am teaching or the way I'm teaching it. I must continue to read in order to find new and interesting activities, alternative ways of presenting materials, and new approaches because I will surely encounter more teaching problems to face and solve. I will continue to reflect upon my teaching and I can only hope the reflecting process bears as much fruit as it did when I was given the opportunity to teach basic French for one semester to a group of enthusiastic adolescents.

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