

RETHINKING TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR INTENSIVE FRENCH

JACQUIE COLLINS, WILLIAM MERCER ACADEMY (LEWISPORTE/GANDER SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEWFOUNDLAND-LABRADOR)

SHELLEY STEAD, VILLANOVA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL (AVALON EAST SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEWFOUNDLAND-LABRADOR)

SID WOOLFREY, NEWVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (LEWISPORTE/GANDER SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEWFOUNDLAND-LABRADOR)

ABSTRACT

This article gives the perspective of three teachers of Intensive French (IF) as they adjusted their thinking to teaching in an FSL classroom that was very different from the core French classroom and developed teaching strategies to facilitate effective learning of communication skills by the students. Four major differences with regular core French are presented: the increase in time and intensity; the enriched curriculum; the atmosphere in the classroom; and the role of the teacher. Following this, eight teaching strategies for the IF classroom are described: always communicating in French; creating interaction in the classroom; integrating language and the experiences of the students; developing literacy skills; balancing accuracy and fluency; teaching grammar implicitly; sequencing tasks; and the need for variety and flexibility in the teaching strategies used. The article concludes with a summary for the beginning IF teacher of the most important teaching strategies.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article présente les conceptions de trois enseignants de français intensif qui ont dû modifier leur façon de voir l'enseignement du français langue seconde en salle de classe, qui est très différente de ce qui se passe en français de base, et développer des démarches d'enseignement visant à faciliter chez l'élève l'apprentissage d'habiletés de communication. Il y a quatre différences importantes, comparativement au français de base : une augmentation du nombre d'heures et l'intensité, un programme d'études enrichi, l'atmosphère dans la salle de classe, et le rôle de l'enseignant. Puis, les auteurs décrivent huit démarches d'enseignement qu'ils utilisent en enseignement du français intensif : toujours communiquer en français, recourir à des interactions, intégrer la langue et l'expérience des élèves, développer des habiletés en littératie, conserver un équilibre entre le précision et l'aisance, faire apprendre la grammaire de manière implicite, ordonner les tâches d'apprentissage, et conserver un équilibre entre la variété et la flexibilité dans leurs démarches d'enseignement. L'article se termine par un résumé, s'adressant à l'enseignant débutant en français intensif, des démarches d'enseignement les plus importantes.

Teaching Intensive French (IF) has been an interesting and rewarding activity for us, and also one that has changed our teaching styles. As experienced core French teachers at the elementary school level we had developed a number of successful strategies to use in the French-second-language (FL2) classroom and a number of assumptions about our students. However, once we began teaching IF, we found ourselves questioning both our practices and our assumptions. All of a sudden, teaching FSL was a different type of activity altogether, and a much more enjoyable one. The change, however, required a good deal of effort in developing new strategies and in adjusting our assumptions about learning a second language.

Intensity as catalyst

The first change was created by the increase in time and the intensity of the program. In the core French classroom, one is always conscious of time. There is never enough time to do all that one wants to do, and it seems that one has only just begun an activity when the French class is over. French is such a small portion of the student's day that it becomes lost in the overall English atmosphere of the classroom and the many other academic demands on the student's time. Core French is actually disappointing for the students; there is so little time to learn. If one is teaching about a season, for example, autumn, the season is over before the topic is done. Motivation is a constant challenge and promoting authentic communication is almost impossible because of the limited amount of time available and the restricted language skills of the students. Linguistically, one tends to think of teaching French as teaching students the appropriate vocabulary and structures to express a particular message, and the focus of lessons inevitably is on how to communicate a particular thought correctly.

In the IF classroom all this changes. One has a concentrated period of time in which to develop activities in French, and this sustained activity in French enables students to become implicated in their learning. At the end of the day they *know* what we want to teach them; they can talk, read and write, simply but with ease, about the topic they have been discussing. It is not that they have been exposed to more structures and a larger vocabulary than would be the case in the core French classroom, but they have learned and internalized the vocabulary and structures to which they have been exposed; they do not come back the next day having forgotten what they did the day before. Thus, the effect of the increase in time is twofold: students are motivated and interested in their learning and they have time to absorb the language. They experience French as a means of communication, and the language becomes real, a part of their lives, not just a subject they study in school.

Enrichment of the curriculum

Part of the reason for increased motivation is the fact that students are exposed to a richer curriculum. All four skills are used and developed every day. Oral language is developed first, as is done in the primary classroom. This means that often one starts a lesson with a brain-storming activity, working from the interests of the students to develop a small repertoire of vocabulary and structures that can be used and reused in different activities in the course of the day. One uses word webs, story charts and many other strategies that are a regular part of developing literacy skills in the primary grades. Oral introduction and use of the vocabulary and structures necessary to explore a topic is complemented by reading. Each day there is a time for shared reading related to the topic being explored; as well as other reading activities done individually, in pairs or in small groups. Writing about the topic is also introduced, generally flowing from the reading activities, progressing from modelling to free composition. In essence, reading and writing skills are re-taught in the

second language in the manner that they have been taught in the first language. This language arts approach to teaching FSL enhances language growth, both in English and in French; FSL becomes a major contributor to the development of literacy skills.

Adopting this change to our way of teaching French was not an easy adjustment. We tended to think that reading and writing in French was too difficult for elementary pupils in their first year or so of FSL instruction. However, we soon discovered that our expectations were much too low. Students can transfer from their first language many aspects of discourse competence, and are ready and willing to read and write in French, with some guidance, from day one. The reinforcement (or reuse) of oral language through reading and writing enables students to integrate new vocabulary and structures into their language repertoire, and remember them, more effectively than is the case when language is used only orally. This process also contributes to the development of accuracy as well as fluency in the language of the students.

Another reason for the richer curriculum is the type of task that can be undertaken in the classroom. Since students are using all four skills in an integrated and authentic fashion, the tasks given to the students can be much more cognitively demanding than is the case in the core classroom. In essence, the curriculum is developed around a project approach to learning. Each unit of work culminates in a final task, and each topic within the unit contains a mini-project which helps to build up to the final task. The intensity contributes to the success of this approach, since students have time to work on their projects in the classroom, and are thus able to complete them in French. Furthermore, because they are using all four skills simultaneously, and integrating their literacy skills already developed in the first language, they are able to engage in tasks that are intellectually challenging for them. It is this aspect of the program that enables them to develop cognitive abilities, such as generalizing, problem solving, and so forth, that are applicable to other subject

areas (social studies, science) as they are learning French. There is also a sort of symbiotic relationship between the cognitive tasks and second language development. Using the language for cognitively interesting activities appears to increase the rate of development of second language competence. Very quickly students are able to use relatively complex sentences, and express relationships, causes, reasons, and so forth.

This ability, and desire, of the students to engage in cognitively demanding tasks also required considerable adjustment of our approach to teaching in the IF classroom. Our preconceptions suggested that students would be interested in playing games, singing songs, and engaging in other 'fun' type activities. Certainly, students do like to spend some time in doing these things, but they also want to read, to write, to do research projects, and to discuss questions of substance. Planning challenging and interesting tasks becomes an important part of lesson planning. This is also what makes the learning of French a more enriching educational experience than is normally the case for the learning of core French. Time is not spent on analysing and dissecting linguistic aspects of the language, which is only of interest to a very limited number of students, but is used to discuss matters of interest which contribute to increasing the general knowledge of the students and broadening their horizons.

Learning about life, not language

A third major change is the atmosphere in the IF classroom. The classroom is an interactive one, and the focus is on the sharing of knowledge about the world, not on acquiring a language. Students participate in discussing themes or topics that are related to their experiences and their interests. While we start with information that is close to home, as one says, we then expand beyond the students' experiences, following their interests. There is always room for some student choice in the topics explored, or the way in which they are explored, which maintains student interest and

implication in their learning. The emphasis of the program is not on learning set vocabulary or structure; the object is to talk, read and write about something interesting, exactly what it is, to a certain extent, is not important. Students must talk in order to learn to talk, and because they are talking about matters that are of interest to them, learning French is no longer a subject to them. It becomes their life.

This aspect of the program entailed another major adjustment for us. In the core French classroom, the presentation of material tends to revolve around the presentation of linguistic structures. In the IF classroom, there is no particular language sequence that is followed, or that is better than another. Students use present, past and future as is necessary, right from the very beginning. It is real language that they are using, not controlled or contrived sequences and structures. Related to the spontaneous nature of communication in the classroom, there is another aspect of sharing knowledge that we, as teachers of core French, found rather difficult to adjust to. We are no longer the expert in the class; the students teach each other, and also teach us. This applies not only to the topic which is being discussed, but to the language as well. If students have researched a particular topic, they will often know specific vocabulary items that we do not know. And sometimes, students will remember language forms that we have forgotten for a moment. This aspect changes dramatically our role in the classroom, and it is a change that is not easy to get used to at first. It tends to be a somewhat humbling experience to realize how much the students can do and say in the second language, without the direct intervention of us as teachers.

Adjustment to a new role

The fourth important change relates to this question of the role of the teacher in the classroom. We do not impart knowledge, but act as facilitators. We design activities that enable the students to use French in tasks that are appropriately prepared linguistically for their level of language competence.

Tasks increase gradually in difficulty in the course of a unit of instruction. In effect, tasks are prepared in such a manner as to enable students to learn to use the second language without realizing that this is what they are doing

This change in our role is also not an easy adjustment to make. We have a tendency to think that we, as teachers, teach the students how to speak, read and write in French. It is not easy for us to realize that, in fact, we cannot impart this knowledge to the students. It is the students themselves who, through using the language in authentic situations in these different modes, learn the language. Without the active participation of the students in speaking, reading and writing French, they cannot learn the language. We only create the conditions for this process to take place.

Given these changes in our assumptions and our understanding of how students learn to communicate in a second language, what are some of the strategies that we use in the classroom to encourage this learning to take place?

Always communicating in French

First of all, French is the language of communication in the classroom at all times. In order for the program to work, it is essential that the atmosphere in the classroom be totally French, given that the atmosphere in the school, in general, and in the daily lives of the students is English. For us, this means that everything is in French from day one. If we use English, even for certain well-defined purposes, such as the times for lunch or bus schedules, the impression is created that French is just an extra, and that matters of importance are discussed in English. Essentials are written on the board or chart paper so that students can consult the information at their leisure. If students are permitted to talk to each other in English, again a wrong impression is created that French is a language that is

related to us, and that any other communications that are not directed to us can be in English. The use of French at all times by all the students is a habit that we attempt to develop as quickly as possible in the classroom. If we do not use French immediately, a month will be lost, and a totally French atmosphere may never be achieved in the classroom. Once the atmosphere in the classroom is predominantly French, then communicating in French becomes an accepted, and natural, activity. The intensity aspect of the program contributes to the use of French as the language of communication, as students are using French for 50% to 80 % of the day, and not just for brief interludes of 30 or 40 minutes.

Developing French as the language of communication requires much effort, particularly at the beginning of the program. During the first few weeks, we use gestures, visuals, drawings and comprehension checks constantly. Students do not mind if the drawings are not professional, and we can make fun of our artistic abilities, or lack thereof, with the students. Comprehension is extremely important, and much attention is given in the first few weeks of the program to ensuring that students understand. The students also need to feel that they do understand what is being said, and we encourage their attempts to comprehend. As their language skills increase, synonyms, antonyms, circumlocutions and various other linguistic aids to comprehension are used. Often some children in the class understand, and they can help explain to those who do not. Comprehension skills actually develop quite quickly.

The more difficult aspect is to encourage the students to use French as much as possible from the very beginning. In the first few days, we teach the students the sentences, questions, explanations, and so forth that are needed to operate in the classroom (*les phrases de survie*) on an 'as needed' basis. When a student says something in English, the appropriate French expression is given, and the student is encouraged to use it immediately. When students speak in English, they are

reminded gently to use French. In the beginning weeks there is still much English in the classroom, but gradually the amount of English used by the students decreases if the use of French is constantly encouraged. Sometimes, reward systems are used for a period of time. We prefer systems where students are rewarded for the use of French rather than those which take away something because English has been used. The class is a common experience for developing the ability to communicate, and, if a positive atmosphere is maintained, in a few weeks most students are trying to speak French as much as possible. Gradually, a certain amount of peer pressure to use French develops, and the students help each other to do so. The classroom is a language-rich environment for the students, where books, pictures, dictionaries, posters, word walls, and the students' compositions on display reinforce the use of French. We have found that the teacher's voice is also important, as it gives a model for the students to follow. Modelling plays a very important role in giving the students the structures and vocabulary they need to interact in French. We ensure that we always speak French.

Bringing about interaction

Oral language development does receive more emphasis in the first week or two. It provides the basis on which one builds the other skills. We begin with routines, keeping in mind that our goal is to encourage communication. For example, we may start with a routine that includes the date, weather, season, and other day-to-day matters. We model the questions and answers at first, but gradually one of the students takes the lead role. The student asks the questions and interacts with the other students in the class. This activity gives the students a language repertoire which they are soon able to use automatically, thus developing in the student a sense that he/she can carry on a conversation in French. This ability to speak in French develops confidence in the students, and encourages them to pursue their attempts to speak French. Gradually, the student is able to use the

learned expressions spontaneously. In this beginning phase, we also use songs, games, poems, proverbs and role- plays.

We also begin with an easy theme which is closely related to the lives of the students, their home and family. The students learn to talk spontaneously about these topics. At first, we model the communication, and the children follow. Then we ask questions about the topic, as well as giving the answers. Gradually, we ask the questions to the students, who give their personalized answer, and then the students ask, and answer, the questions with each other, first in a whole class situation, then in small groups or in pairs. In this way, students use and reuse a small amount of material in different situations, until they are comfortable with the structures and use them with a considerable degree of spontaneity. As already mentioned, and as will be described below in more detail, we then read a passage that contains structures and vocabulary similar to those that have been developed orally, and then the students do some reading of related material. We talk about what we have read. Last of all, we write material related to the vocabulary and structures used, and the students also do some writing. We may also talk about what they have written. Gradually, the topics become more complicated, but the pattern for presentation is retained. Throughout, facilitating communication remains the priority in the classroom.

Integrating language and experiences

Presentation of a theme begins with brainstorming. This activity integrates the experiences of the children with the development of vocabulary and structures needed in French to discuss the topic. We think beforehand of a small number of basic vocabulary items and structures that are needed to develop the topic, and ensure that all of these items are mentioned; students add others which reflect their own interests and particular experiences. The vocabulary and structures are written on the board or chart paper, and left in front of the children for the ensuing activities. Then the vocabulary

and structures are used in a variety of relatively simple tasks, so that, at the end of the day, the students know how to say, read and write the essential items. All these tasks are done in small groups or pairs, giving students the opportunity to interact in French, using the new vocabulary and structures. The next day the complexity of the tasks is increased, but the same basic vocabulary and structures are used. Students modify to some extent the vocabulary according to their own interests, introducing words that reflect what it is they want to talk about that is still related to the main theme, but not the structures. The structures reflect the way in which the French language works. Thus, gradually students learn implicitly how to express certain messages in appropriate and correct French, at the same time modifying the vocabulary to reflect their own interests. The students develop a feeling for the form of the French language; that is, the way in which they put words together conforms to French usage. However, the vocabulary which each student knows may vary somewhat, depending on the interests of the student. Each student is encouraged to keep their own list of vocabulary words which they want to use. Structures used, however, do not vary substantially; all students are using the same basic sentence forms to talk about the particular topic.

The development of the oral language first is of prime importance, as it is the oral use of the structures that enables students to learn implicitly how the French language works. Emphasis at the beginning is put on the features of the language that are important to oral communication, pronunciation, intonation, language forms that are heard, language structure. It is only with the introduction of writing activities that attention is paid to those features of the language that are important for writing, such as verb forms, plurals (*elles chantent*), and so forth. However, one of the major differences from core French is that in IF the four skills are not separated at all, except perhaps in the first week; students talk about what they have read, read about what they have discussed, and write about what they have discussed and read. The integration of the four skills

comes from using language authentically. In this way language and experiences are more closely combined.

Developing literacy skills

Interspersed throughout the day are reading activities enabling students to recognize and understand similar vocabulary and structures in print form. After discussing a topic, we develop a chart story with the students; students are encouraged to notice word families, and learn to sound out words (sound-symbol relationships). Students also learn to recognize key words, and for learners who have greater difficulty, some activities which enable them to fill in key words are developed to reinforce these words. Reading awareness is also encouraged, and students are asked to notice French around them; even the cereal boxes at home are used as examples of material to be read! Other reading activities include shared reading of a new book; reading, in small groups or pairs, of books already read in class, or at a level of difficulty that enables them to be readily accessible to the students so that the students can interpret the meaning accurately, as well as making sound symbol relationships correctly; and buddy reading in the school. Students also read a variety of materials that contain structures and vocabulary that are similar to what they have been using orally in the games, songs and poems that they engage in throughout the day, as well as other material which they create during their activities of the day.

We develop shared reading activities, as well as other types of reading, following the general practices used in the primary classroom. Books are explored with the students by asking questions about the illustrations, and having students interpret and predict what they see and understand. Later, their predictions are reviewed, and corrected if necessary, with reasons given as to why. We also have students create new endings to stories, imagine other changes in the story according to

their experiences and do various other activities that are generally undertaken when teaching reading in the first language.

We also study in detail two or three novels that are of interest to the students. Students learn about plot, climax, dénouement, and other aspects of building a novel, information which can be transferred and used in English language arts classes. Some forms of poetry are also explored, and students write their own poems afterwards.

Extensive reading of material of interest to the student at his/her level of reading ability, which is often continued at home, is encouraged. There is a classroom library of books in French at varying levels of difficulty. Generally, we use some sort of 'book bag' system, where students take out books regularly, and later report on their reading. Books are generally colour coded in some manner, and, if students select their books, they do so from the appropriate colour group, which assists them to find books at their level of ability. The students also complete book reports; the first ones are quite simple, perhaps just a checklist. Gradually they become more complicated, where the title of the book is recorded, as well as the main idea of the story, and the student's reaction to the book. As time progresses, the reports become much more detailed, and students are asked to describe the plot, characters, and to evaluate the book. A record is kept of the number of books each student has read. Oral reports on the books are also given from time to time so that students have the opportunity to share their reactions to a story or to information from a non-fiction source.

The reading materials students are exposed to are also used as sources of inspiration and models for their writing activities. We have students engage in writing in a variety of forms everyday. In the early stages of the program, the writing activities are controlled and are directly related to what the students have learned orally. We develop a short paragraph, on our likes and

dislikes, for example, with the students. The paragraph is then read and discussed with the students. Possibilities for personal adaptations are explored; then the students are encouraged to write their own paragraph. In this beginning stage the students generally illustrate what they have written. This guided stage lasts different lengths of time for different students. Gradually, however, the paragraphs developed with the children become longer and more complicated. As the writing activities become more advanced, the writing process is introduced; the use of this process is very important. We develop an introduction and conclusion with the students, and make suggestions for the body of the paragraph. Also, attention is given to writing conventions, such as capitalization, punctuation, and so forth. The students work in pairs, or small groups to edit and revise their work. By the end of the program, students are able to find information in a variety of sources, take jot notes, and write a research report on a particular topic. Writing activities are not always informative or descriptive. Students are also encouraged to write different types of poems, limericks, compose their own songs, and generally create as much as possible with the language. Writing activities are, however, always related to the theme.

Various ways of sharing their writing with others, and publishing it, are used. Correction of writing is individual, but is generally more rigorous when the writing is for publication. An activity that we find helps to give a purpose to writing in a simple form is preparing materials for buddy reading with younger children in the school. Students really enjoy being authors. Books prepared for buddy reading begin with either simple vocabulary, perhaps an ABC type of book, or numbers from one to 10, or vocabulary related to a particular topic, such as animals. Over time, the books become more complicated, growing from one or two words, to whole sentences, to two or three sentences on each page, and eventually students create an entire story. Often the story may be a retelling in the students own language of a story that is well-known to the younger children.

As well as writing books for buddy reading, students also compile their own books. Sometimes these may be fiction, but often the class will work on a co-operative book related to the topic they are studying. We have created books on famous people, on the class members themselves and their hobbies, on animals that are facing extinction, and so on. The topics depend on the general theme being studied and the particular interests of the class. We have also produced a class newspaper which is distributed in the school.

In addition to the writing associated with the development of a theme, students also write daily in their journals. This type of writing activity is much more personal, is generally used to encourage students to write, and is not usually corrected. However, we do make comments on what the students say, to show our interest, and sometimes to encourage them to write more. In the beginning stages, journal entries are, to a certain extent, modelled. We write our own journal entry and then read it with the students. Then students are asked to write a similar entry, making small changes to personalize what has been said. Gradually, students become more and more independent, until they are writing quite freely in their journals. Of course, some students require supports for a longer time than others. We use different means of helping students find a topic on which to write when they are short on inspiration. One of us keeps a series of pictures, from which students can choose an item and write a description; another keeps a file of cards, each of which has suggestions for a topic that could be explored. Journals are kept in a dedicated notebook, and it is interesting to notice how often students go back to consult what they have written on a previous occasion to remind themselves of a particular word or structure when they are composing a new entry.

Once a week we have students reflect on their learning. At the beginning of the program we did this everyday, but we found that the students tended to become very repetitive. Now we only engage in this activity on a weekly or biweekly basis. As with other writing activities, students are prepared first before being asked to write. We have a class discussion on what we have learned, and relevant vocabulary and structures are written on the board, or chart paper, so that students are able to write coherent and correct sentences in their reflections.

Balancing accuracy with fluency

We never ask students to engage in writing activities without appropriate preparation. Preparation is of two, or possibly three, types. The topic has to be discussed with the students so that they are aware of what can be said, that is the content. The appropriate vocabulary and structures to express the content need to be learned or reviewed; usually students in IF are familiar with most of the language necessary to begin a writing activity already because they have been using it orally beforehand. However, when preparing the students for writing is the time when one brings to their attention the points that have to do with correct spelling, sound symbol relationships, and to a certain extent, grammar rules. When the students are speaking, it is not necessary that they be aware of how words, verb forms for example, are spelled, as long as they are pronouncing them correctly. However, they do need to know that the form of a verb that has an infinitive in *er* requires an *s* with the *tu* form when they are writing. On the other hand, they do not need to be taught how to conjugate the whole verb, as this gives them an overload of information all at once. Only what is needed to write the particular paragraph that is under discussion is taught. In addition some attention must also be paid to paragraph construction and mechanics. Students need to be reminded of the need for opening and closing sentences, and of the correct use of apostrophes and contractions,

particularly those forms that are specific to French. In this way we place considerable emphasis on accuracy right from the beginning of the program.

Another useful strategy in encouraging accuracy is the compilation of a chart for relationships between sounds and the way in which they are written. This helps the students to think about how they write what they say. We make lists of words that contain an 'e' sound, showing the different ways in which this sound may be written, such as *é* in *écoute*, *er* in *regarder*, and *ez* in *vous venez*. As soon as possible, students become responsible for adding new ways of writing the sounds to the lists so that the lists of sound-symbol relationships are generated from the language used by the students.

Correction of language errors is always a delicate issue. We do not want to over-correct the students, as this interferes with developing communicative confidence and risk-taking. However, students do need to be aware that it is important to use correct forms of the language. We find that if the language is introduced in small amounts, and used and reused frequently that students tend to learn the correct form of a structure from the very beginning. This is helpful, as it is much easier to learn the form correctly first than to have to correct it afterwards. However, there is always some correction that is necessary. Some students do not hear the form correctly, or make an incorrect application of a form in another situation, and there is always a certain amount of interference from the first language. Generally, we have found that a small amount of correction can be done orally, and this correction should always pertain to the features of the language that can be detected in speech. When we correct orally, the correction is usually very short and specific in nature; sometimes we ask for reasons why a particular change is made, for example, why it is important to say *elle* in some circumstances and *il* in another. Reasons are always given in simple language, and are not related to complicated rules or explanations. When possible, the correct form is sought from

another member of the class. More correction is done when students are writing. In this situation, students have more time to reflect on the language and the reasons for using particular forms. Also, correction can be geared to the level of the student. There are generally very wide variations in the classroom as to the type of error that students are making. If corrections are made regularly, eventually students become aware of the need to check their work for accuracy.

Sometimes there are certain common errors, particularly as new vocabulary or structures are being learned. In this circumstance, often we point out to the class as a whole the error that is being made and may even give some brief practice in repeating the form correctly. With an error that seems to persist among a number of students, the correct form is placed on a chart on the wall, and we focus particularly on saying that form correctly for a period of time. Students are also sometimes given a reward when they use the form appropriately. This is a strategy used normally with a student who has had particular difficulty in using a correct form.

What we try to encourage above all is a concern with accuracy, not to the extent that it interferes with the desire to speak, but to the extent that students realize the importance of using correct language forms. We try to make a link between the use of the correct form and the meaning of the message, helping students to realize that the use of incorrect forms interferes with understanding the message correctly. And everyone becomes conscious of the need for correct language. We try to develop in the classroom an understanding and acceptance of error as a necessary part of learning, but also of the importance of finding and using the correct form. In this way, students learn to correct each other constructively, and to use the dictionary to assist them in finding correct forms.

Using the dictionary well is a skill that we tend to spend some time developing; otherwise, the dictionary is not always a help to the students. Students need to be encouraged to consult the dictionary as much as possible for information to assist them in speaking and writing accurately. However, we have to enable them to understand the symbols in the dictionary, such as *m* or *f* in conjunction with a noun, the forms that are given for verbs, and the variety of meanings that a word may have so that they do not fall into the assumption that there is always a one for one correspondence between a French word and the meaning which they wish to express.

Learning grammar implicitly

Teaching grammar is an area that is treated quite differently in the IF classroom than is usually the case in core French. In fact, we do not teach very much grammar. The reason for this is that we do not need to do so; students learn to use the forms correctly through the way in which the topics and activities are presented. If the students can use the forms correctly, there is no need to explain grammatical rules. In fact, explaining rules tends to lead to confusion and more errors. It is more effective to have the children use the language in situations which are as authentic as possible. For example, the students use the expression *avoir mal*, and do a number of role plays, indicating where they are sick, or in pain. After a day spent doing all sorts of activities with these forms, they can use the expression correctly in a variety of situations. In this way they learn the language through use. They do not realize it, but they have also learned the grammar. It is important that students use and re-use certain vocabulary and structures throughout a theme. In this way they have practice and reinforcement of the grammatical forms, but this practice is not in the form of exercises or drills; the practice arises from use in real communication in the classroom.

Learning verb forms is more difficult; there needs to be a lot of repetition. Verb forms are learned through playing games with the forms until students become familiar with the correct way to say, and write, the form. In core French, it is practically impossible for students to learn the verb forms; they do not use them enough and the forms are not stored in their long-term memory. In IF, the increase in time helps considerably. It takes at least a day for students to become familiar with new forms of a verb. However, in IF, after two days of practice with the form, students are able to use it in context correctly.

Sometimes, short mini-lessons on a particular grammar point are used. The mini-lesson is only to make students aware of forms they should use, or to consolidate for them information which they already know so that they can make correct generalizations, such as, for example, the use of *de* after negative forms, or the use of *des* for plural forms of *du* and *de la*. After the mini-lesson there is much use of the form in context so that students internalize it and are able to use it accurately in context. Use of the form in authentic language situations is important; drills are not used.

Sometimes, an exercise on a particular form is given to an individual or small group who are having difficulty with the form in order to help them internalize the form. Individual differences in the ability to use forms correctly are the rule rather than the exception; consequently, there is often an individual focus to the practice of a specific form. In general, learning grammar is always treated with the students as a means to an end: expressing their ideas so that they can be understood.

Sequencing tasks

Sequencing tasks in the IF classroom is very important. There is constant use and reuse of the pertinent vocabulary and structures through out the theme. In other words, a small amount of

linguistic material is used in a variety of situations. The sequencing, however, is not based on linguistic difficulty, as the language must always be authentic. Rather the sequencing is based on the cognitive difficulty of the tasks. Furthermore, we suggest that the sequencing is not a continued hierarchy, as this makes the learning too difficult, particularly for more challenged students. Tasks do begin with the easy, and continue towards the more difficult, but after a difficult task there is often an easier one, or a song or game. This variation gives students an opportunity to succeed at a task and helps to build their confidence.

The final task in a unit helps the students to see what they have done. It is a means of bringing everything together for them; they see a product. It is interesting to note that the project replaces the unit test, and helps to move students away from the test syndrome. It also develops confidence in using the language. The series of mini-tasks that build up to the final project keep the interest and enthusiasm of the students. Tasks are also adjusted to the child, which enables the student to experience success and contribute to the attainment of the goals of the group, or class. While the tasks must be suited to the child, it is important that the teacher not have low expectations for what the student can do.

The use of project activities, and the preparation of a final task, are important to the interaction and social development of the students. The tasks are completed in a variety of ways, individually, pairs, small groups, larger groups and the whole class. All work on the projects is conducted in French. This is possible because the vocabulary and structures have been used many times since the beginning of the unit, and the structures necessary for working together cooperatively are also taught before engaging in group work. Occasionally, there may be a slip into English, but usually this can be treated with humour, and the class will return to the use of French.

Students keep a portfolio on each unit they have done. This also helps to give them a sense of accomplishment, and an indication of the progress they have made. It also acts as a resource for the next theme, as students will often consult their previous work to find vocabulary or structures that they need, and remember using before.

Variety and flexibility

Teaching in IF does not require following a rigid program of activities. There is no routine, and no book to follow. Instead there is a great deal of flexibility in what can be done in a classroom. The way in which outcomes are reached can change from unit to unit, as well as from year to year for the same unit or theme. Lesson preparation is much more complex than in core French, as lessons are no longer confined to one or two activities in which a limited number of structure and vocabulary items are used and practised. Instead, we always develop a variety of activities, based on a limited number of structures and vocabulary items that will interest the student for the greater part of the school day: songs, games, poems or stories to listen to or read, issues to discuss, pieces to write, manipulative activities. Art, drama, music and all sorts of creative activities are included. Also, we always ensure that the activities are cognitively demanding, suitable for the age of the students, and that they follow a sequence in level of difficulty so that gradually the student is able to integrate and use the new linguistic features in a variety of communicative situations with relative accuracy and ease. And, in between, there are moments of relaxation, easy tasks to enjoy, but all in French.

This means that lessons, indeed days, take a long time to prepare, particularly at the beginning. It is not always easy to find the right things for the students to do, the things that they will enjoy and that are related to the topics under discussion. We want to develop in them a passion for learning, and, to do so, we need to keep their interest. To create the constant variety in the

classroom is a challenge for us, but it is also a benefit. We do not become bored or stale; we grow with the students. And also, we can relax in the classroom. We are not driven by the need to reach chapter 10 by Christmas, and we do not need to know all the answers. It is possible to say, *I don't know. You tell me.*

Teaching the program, also, is exceptionally rewarding. First of all, we see incredible growth in all of the students, both personally and linguistically. In no other subject do we see this much change take place in one year. We are amazed at what the students can do in French, and at the increase in their self-confidence. Everyone learns, and is able to speak and use French. There is no longer any negativity from the students (*Oh, no! Not French again!*). Instead there is optimism about French and learning French. The change in the students with special needs is most notable. They are no longer isolated, no longer seen and treated as different. Working in groups enables them to receive support, and all students learn to encourage each other.

To those of you who may be teaching IF for the first time, we would like to share some of the points which we feel are the most important ones to remember.

- IF is not core French. A different pedagogy is required. The program is primarily a literacy experience, and there is much emphasis on language arts and on cognitive development.
- A warm and supportive classroom atmosphere is essential. Students are learning a new language and are taking risks with that language. They need encouragement and praise to build their self-confidence. Every student needs to feel that he/she is accepted and has accomplished something.
- Interaction is also essential. Students need to be taught how to communicate.
- We have learned not to panic over the use of English. It takes five to seven weeks for most students to communicate in French. It is helpful to reward the spontaneous use of French, and not

to punish the use of English. Generally, we try to persist in giving the French equivalent for any English used, and to do so patiently and courteously. And we always communicate in French.

The essence of an IF program is to create a learning situation that is not artificial, unlike the typical core French situation. We say that teaching French is *déscolarisé*. Teaching strategies are the means by which the use of the language is linked to the life of the child, and the language becomes a real means of communication. When this happens, students do learn to communicate in French with considerable accuracy and fluency in a very short space of time.