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# French is Fun: Teaching French to Elementary School Students

*by Jeanne Mae Kernan Tonkovich*

## *Introduction*

**F**RENCH IS FUN! What will we do at our next class? "French is my favorite thing in school!" All French teachers yearn to hear comments such as these, and elementary students learning French will definitely provide them, as well as enthusiasm and excitement, if learning activities provide action, meaningful conversation, and situations similar to those described here.

Following is an explanation of methods used by the author for teaching French as a second language to students in grades one through six, in ten consecutive half-hour weekly classes after school. The classes, tBaken for a monetary fee, were offered as a voluntary enrichment program sponsored by the American Association of University Women. French was taught through personally-relevant conversational situations and exercises which the teacher initiated, yet performed with the students as a learner. Enthusiasm and interest levels were high for all involved; the students eagerly anticipated the classes and were reluctant to see them end.

## *Background Support*

The benefits involved in teaching elementary school students a foreign/second language are many: a better understanding of the native language; a broadening of the students' view of the world, its cultures, and situations; a heightened awareness of communication; and an excitement, which often carries over into other academic and social areas, at learning something completely new. Individual and group interactions which stress creativity, responsibility, and the dynamic process of relating can be implemented in teaching a second language. Humanistic education, an outgrowth of Abraham H. Maslow's humanistic psychology, treats the cognitive (knowledge and information), behavioral (skill), and affective (feelings, attitudes, and relationships) domains as equally important integral parts of education.

Related to Maslow's theories of personality are Gordon W. Allport's descriptions of vital portions or "propriate functions" of personality: bodily sense, self-identity, self-esteem, self-extension, sense of selfhood, rational thinking, self-image, propriate striving, cognitive style, and the functions of knowing (Hall and Lindzey 448). Allport's concept of "functional autonomy," a belief that an activity or behavior may become an end or goal in itself, in spite of the fact that it was originally engaged in for some other reason (Hall and Lindzey 449)

is of special interest to teachers of foreign languages, with this application: students may initially take a foreign language course because of parental, school, or peer pressure; however, to continue study in the language or to progress satisfactorily in learning the material presented, the students must enjoy the learning process and want to learn the language because they like what they are doing.

In humanistic education communicators participate jointly in creating new meaning, adjusting in dynamic interaction to resultant circumstances (Yoshikawa 1982). Stephen Krashen's belief (Krashen 1981, cit. in Young 1983) is that meaningful interaction between speakers, in which the main concern is the message conveyed, rather than the form of what is said, is the primary condition needed to acquire a language. Joseph Huang and Evelyn Hatch's study (1978, cit. in Young 1983) supports the belief that communicative interaction in which participants experienced a wide range of negotiations of meaning and cooperative behavior have an important role in the way children acquire a second language.

Richard Young (1983) found that three techniques are necessary for optimum second language acquisition in the primary classroom: meaningful language practice, communication games, and children's games involving music or drama. The rhythm of music and the movement of dance synchronize with the verbal message of language to accentuate expression and facilitate reading or speaking activities. Through the use of drama and role play children are less self-conscious and inhibited in their attempts to participate in language exercises and can focus on the message being conveyed. Christie and Johnsen's survey of the results of studies on the role of play in social-intellectual development (1983) supports the findings that play enhances I.Q., creativity, and language development in children.

Leo van Lier's findings (1984) in a study of analyzing interaction in second language classrooms cite the importance of random turn-taking in assuring that students listen carefully to the language and derive maximum benefit from the lesson. Many circle games in the French classes employ this principle.

In the classes described no syllabus or textbook is in view; the text (lesson sheets) is used as a basis for each lesson but is supplemented by other materials and activities and is used mainly to show parents what was covered in class. French is used as much as possible in greetings, directions, instructions, and class conversations. Warriner's study (1980) on methodology in foreign language teaching in the schools notes that these two procedures were cited by the Virginia Foreign Language Supervisors' Association as being effective instruction methods. To further clarify, the teacher gives an instruction in French, e.g., "Venez avec moi," and motions for the class to follow her to an area for an activity. The students learn by observing, understanding and repeating, and participating in the conversation and activities. If the students begin to speak in English the teacher can say "En français, s'il vous plaît." The teacher uses English occasionally in explaining grammatical constructions, words, or situations, but keeps this at a bare minimum.

Prabhu and Carrol (1980, in Young 1983) support a syllabus in which pupils learn a language through the performance of certain tasks and activities, rather than by focusing on the language itself. Richard Young concludes that a multi-dimensional syllabus in which linguistic and communicative elements revolve around a classroom or out-of-classroom activity is the best system for teaching young children a second language; older children and adults can benefit by practicing linguistic forms and communicative functions used in activities.

### *Descriptions of Activities*

**CIRCLE/BALL GAME FOR INTRODUCTIONS:** In this game for teaching introductions the students and teacher form a circle, and the teacher begins the game by saying, "Je m'appelle \_\_\_\_\_. Comment vous appelez-vous?" The teacher then throws the soft sponge ball to a student in the circle; the student catches the ball and answers, "Je m'appelle \_\_\_\_\_. Comment vous appelez-vous?" The ball is thrown until all persons have had a chance to introduce themselves. This game uses the humanistic education principle of allowing students freedom of choice since they can choose the receiver of the ball. The game activity keeps the interest level high because there is personal relevance and the focus is on the meaning and interaction of the communicators, rather than on the specific language being used.

**CIRCLE/BALL GAME FOR LEARNING NUMBERS:** The students and teacher form a circle. The teacher begins the game by bouncing a large rubber ball once and saying, "Un." The students repeat the word or say it simultaneously with the teacher. The ball is bounced to another person in the circle, who catches it and says, "Deux." Those in the circle respond also with the word, and all count aloud, "Un, deux," as the person bounces the ball two times. The action continues, counting to ten or higher numbers.

**CIRCLE/BALL GAME FOR COLORS:** The students and teacher put on signs made from colored construction paper on which that particular color word is printed. The students and teacher form a circle; the teacher begins the game by saying, "J'ai (e.g., bleu)." (The color named is the word on the speaker's sign.) The teacher throws the soft sponge ball to a student in the circle and says while throwing it, "Quelle couleur avez-vous?" The student who catches the ball answers, "J'ai \_\_\_\_\_ (the color of his sign)." The student then throws the ball to another child in the circle and asks, "Quelle couleur as-tu?" The game proceeds until all children have had a turn to tell their colors one or several times.

**CIRCLE/BALL GAME FOR WEATHER:** The students and teacher put on signs with pictures depicting various kinds of weather, with a sentence caption underneath; for example, "Il neige." The teacher and students form a circle and the teacher begins the game by saying what kind of weather she represents by reading the sentence on the sign around her neck. She throws the soft sponge ball to a student in the circle while saying, "Quel temps fait-il?" The student catches the ball and responds with the sentence on his sign, for example, "Il

pleut." The ball is thrown until all persons in the circle have had a turn to tell the weather. The teacher adds some comments about the present weather, e.g., "Il fait beau aujourd'hui, n'est-ce pas?" The class replies, (e.g.), "Oui, Il fait beau aujourd'hui." The teacher can ask individual students the same question, for more practice in conversation.

**WORDS FOR PIERRE:** Students take turns choosing a word card from a can labeled, "Les Mots pour Pierre." (Pierre is an affable monster made from imitation fur and felt pieces who eats nothing but French words). Students "feed" Pierre the word, saying it as they put the word card into his mouth. On each card is the French word, phonetic pronunciation, and a picture illustrating the word. The fun involved in the game lessens inhibitions in students' attempts at pronunciation, and words are learned easily in this manner.

**FLANNEL BOARD AND FELT CHILDREN FOR NAMING PARTS OF THE BODY AND CLOTHING:** On a table is a large flannel board with a boy and girl made from felt pieces, and labels for body parts or items of clothing. Students remove the labels and pieces of each figure and place them on the flannel board, saying the French word for each item as they do this.

**CARDBOARD APPLE FOR NUMBERS:** A can with a cardboard apple taped to the front of it is filled with numbered paper worms and is put on a table. Students pick a worm from the apple and say the number on it. On each worm is the numeral, corresponding number word, and phonetic pronunciation of the word.

**CHANTONS:** "Venez avec moi." The students follow the teacher to a rug by a piano. The children sit down on the rug and the teacher leads them in singing "La Chanson de l'Alphabet," accompanied by the piano or guitar. Singing "The Alphabet Song" helps students to hear the pronunciation of the single letters and to compare them with the English pronunciations. It also introduces students to rhyming phrases, the use of music and rhythm to facilitate learning language, and the possibility of discussing with the students literal interpretation of words vs. meaning. "Frère Jacques" is another favorite song for elementary school children. "Il était une bergère" is effectively sung using a guitar for accompaniment to focus on the meaning of the words of the song. The students take turns placing on a flannel board replicas of the characters in the song as the story unfolds. "Meunier, tu dors" and "Savez-vous plantez les choux?" are excellent dramatization songs.

**CHANTONS ET DANSONS:** Students and teacher form a circle to sing and dance "Alouette" and "Sur le Pont d'Avignon." The names of parts of the body as well as expressions and actions are taught and well-remembered through use of music because it reinforces the language-learning experience.

**QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST?:** The teacher and students sit in a circle and the teacher goes to each student, in random order, and asks, "(Name of student), qu'est-ce que c'est?" The student picks an object out of the paper bag containing approximately twenty-five items and says, "C'est \_\_\_\_\_," and places the item on the floor beside him. When all students have chosen items from the bag (without looking into it), the teacher says to each student, "(Name of child), donnez-moi

le \_\_\_\_\_, s'il vous plaît." The student puts the item into the sack. The teacher says, "Merci." The student replies, "Il n'y a pas de quoi," or "De rien." The students never seem to tire of this game. Items in the sack include things such as fruit, vegetables, stuffed animals, dolls, milk or egg cartons, butter containers, school supplies, books, clothing, toothpaste boxes, combs, or soap.

**TELEPHONE GAME:** Two toy telephones are used by students in the circle to role play a situation of planning to come to a friend's house. One student dials a phone number and asks, "Allô?" "Allô! Bonjour, \_\_\_\_\_. Comment vas-tu?" "Je vais bien, merci, et toi?" "Ça va, merci." "À bientôt." "À bientôt." "Au revoir, \_\_\_\_\_. " "Au revoir, \_\_\_\_\_. Additional expressions may be substituted, e.g., "Bonjour, \_\_\_\_\_, ça va?" "Bonjour, \_\_\_\_\_. Oui, ça va." "Comment ça va?" "Ça va bien, merci, et toi?"

**ADDITIONAL EXERCISE FOR THE TELEPHONE GAME:** The teacher dials and says to each student, "Allô?" "Allô!" "Bonjour, \_\_\_\_\_. Comment allez-vous?" "Très bien, merci, \_\_\_\_\_. " "À bientôt." "À bientôt." "Au revoir, \_\_\_\_\_. " "Au revoir, \_\_\_\_\_."

**PUPPETRY:** Using sack puppets the students dramatize situations in which people or animals go to a park or other place, meet others who greet the travellers, ask where they are going, and decide to come with them. (All dialogue is in French). *Un jour à la foire* by Jane Harmon Hein (The Viking Press: New York, 1963) has situations and examples for dramatic adaptation.

**WRITTEN ACTIVITIES:** Making cards for holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or other occasions provides an opportunity to learn the culture and customs of French-speaking countries as well as an exciting art lesson to take home. Greetings such as "Joyeux Noël," "Bonne Année," or "Joyeuses Pâques" are written on the cards. Decorations for the Christmas tree can be cut from paper and embellished with French greetings, crayon drawings, glitter, or paint. Booklets about the student, which include pages for writing a sentence telling one's favorite color, food, likes, or dislikes are nice mementos from the French classes because they contain the students' drawings and writings. Another writing activity is a letter to Père Noël (Cooper and McIntosh 63) expressing what presents the child would like for Christmas.

**SIMON SAYS:** The students stand in front of the teacher, who gives them simple commands in French, such as, "Levez-vous!"; "Simon dit, asseyez-vous!" The children demonstrate the commands only if the teacher prefaces the words of the command with the words, "Simon dit." If a child follows a command that is not prefaced by, "Simon dit," he must sit down. The last child standing is the winner.

**DICE GAME FOR NUMBERS:** Children and teacher have one number card with a number word and corresponding picture illustration for a number from one to twelve. All players sit in a circle on the floor or rug and take turns throwing dice, to see what number will be shown when the dice stop rolling. The author uses large foam rubber dice, for ease in seeing the dots. The person who threw the dice says the number the two dice represent, e.g., "Huit." The person who has the "three card" in front of him says, e.g., "Trois." This dialogue

can be extended to include naming as many addition or subtraction facts as the students can remember for each number represented by the dice.

**BUTTON, BUTTON, WHO HAS THE BUTTON?** The students and teacher form a circle and the teacher begins the game by standing in the middle of the circle of students who keep their hands behind their backs and pass a button around the circle, while attempting to not reveal who has the button. The teacher asks, e.g., "Bouton, Bouton, qui a le bouton? Jean, avez-vous le bouton?" "Non. Je n'ai pas le bouton." "Louis, avez-vous le bouton?" "Non. Je n'ai pas le bouton." "Marie, avez-vous le bouton?" "Oui! J'ai le bouton!" (The person who was caught holding the button is now "it" and stands in the middle of the circle, while the teacher stands in the empty place in the circle, formerly occupied by the student who is now "it.") The questions proceed from Marie, e.g., "Jennifer, as-tu le bouton?" "Non. Je n'ai pas le bouton." "Andrew, as-tu le bouton?" "Non. Je n'ai pas le bouton." "Paul, as-tu le bouton?" "Oui! J'ai le bouton!" If desired, the first time this or other games are played, the teacher can briefly explain the difference between the formal and more familiar use of verbs or other vocabulary. The students remember the concepts and words easily because the conversational activities are highly enjoyable and concentrate on the meaning of communication in conjunction with a play activity, rather than focusing directly upon the language used.

**BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS:** Students and teacher sing "Bonne Fête" (Cooper and McIntosh 86) to all students having a birthday in a particular month. Students draw or paint pictures of a cake, ice cream, candy, party decorations or favors and say the French words or write the French words for each illustration. This activity reinforces learning the names of the months and helps children to say their birthdate in French.

**TREATS:** The teacher says, "La classe est finie, et j'ai des bonbons pour vous." "(Name of student), voici un bonbon. Quelle couleur voulez-vous?" The child answers, (e.g.), "Je voudrais rouge, s'il vous plaît." The teacher replies, "Bien!" and gives the piece of candy to the student who answers, "Merci;" the teacher replies, "Il n'y a pas de quoi," or "De rien." Using the child's name and direct eye contact while speaking facilitates keen attention in the student and makes the communication more effective. Words being taught are remembered easily because a tangible item is used in a relevant situation. Another variation of this uses animal crackers for the treats. Students name the animal they pick out of the box, e.g., "C'est le lion." The teacher says, "Bien!" or some other word of praise if the student says the correct word. If he does not know the word, the teacher says it, the student repeats it, followed by words of praise from the teacher.

If activities such as these are used in teaching French to elementary school students, each class is eagerly anticipated, and much is learned in a short time in an atmosphere of excitement and enthusiasm. Teacher and students most certainly find that French is fun!

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