

You Mean They're TALKING in French?

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Jonathan, grade 9, approaches me and asks, “Est-ce que je peux aller aux toilettes...et chercher mon stylo dans mon casier?” I respond in French, telling him he may go. Then he grins, and asks, “Est-ce que je peux avoir un point?” He’s hoping I will give his group a point because he constructed a good French sentence.

The 7 & 8 class is asked to take out their puppets and practice the play. I explain (in French) that each person will have at least two parts because the play has more characters than there are people in each group. Heads nod, and soon the room is very noisy, but it’s all French. A student asks, “Est-ce que je peux...” and can’t finish the sentence. I gesture “aller”, and the student continues, “...aller aux toilettes?” I don’t say anything; I just gesture, and the *student* makes the correction.

In the high school class, two girls sit in the corner, having finished their work. They are talking about what they are going to do after school...in French!

For the first time, my students and I are able to consistently speak only French in the classroom. What has created this miracle? It’s the AIM language program. Created mainly for elementary grades and junior high, it can be used in high school, too. It is a method of teaching French through drama and gestures.

The teacher’s manual is so well laid out that I was able to introduce the program in September, even though I had only attended the AIM seminar a few weeks earlier. The first day, I explained the program to the students. Since then, all communication has been in French.

Wendy Maxwell, creator of the program, listed the most frequently used French words and gave each word a gesture. Gestures are practiced with a CD. If you don’t know much French, the program will teach you. Each lesson you present to the students adds only a few more words, and you use ONLY the words provided. For those of you who speak French well, your vocabulary is automatically limited (avoiding student confusion) because you can’t use words that you cannot gesture!

Students do most of the talking. You gesture; they speak. When you ask a question, the whole class asks it. When a student responds, the whole class says the answer. Students no longer speak only once or twice in class. They learn as they learned English—they talk, talk, and talk!

Students also write, learn regular and irregular verb tenses (the présent, the passé composé, the futur proche, and a bit of the imparfait), and use possessive and reflexive pronouns. The concept of masculine, feminine, singular, and plural is strongly emphasized.

There are no textbooks, and very little homework to do (or to correct). It is recommended that the student purchase the CD to practice the gestures at home, and I see on the website that student “cahiers” have now been added. The program provides all other equipment needed. Level one will provide approximately two years of work at the elementary level. The third play in the level

is for reinforcement and could be used for a third year. The upper grades can move faster. There is now a play booklet available specifically for high school.

Students memorize all parts in each play. They present the play and a song to their parents at home (using puppets they have made), explain how the gestures work, and show their workbook pages. Most parents express amazement at what their child is able to do. Each group also presents the play to the rest of the class, each student playing a particular role.

Students do occasionally get bored, usually the older students. They like games where groups get points for correct answers, so I use games whenever boredom sets in. Imagine everyone asking, “Pourquoi est-ce que le loup veut entrer dans la maison de briques?” and seeing hands waving wildly. Then one student, all alone, smoothly responds with, “Le loup veut entrer dans la maison de briques parce qu’il veut manger les trois petits cochons.” Wow!

I am planning to write some Bible stories in play form, using the same vocabulary. I will add a few words here and there, but the general program will be the same. David and Goliath would be a good beginning!

You owe it to yourself to try this program¹. It takes less work, but gets better results. The students are actually talking in French!

¹ Go to: <http://www.aimlanguagelearning.com> for more information and July and August seminar dates.