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Playing with Possibilities: Drama and Core French in the Montessori Elementary Classroom in British Columbia, Canada [1]

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Abstract

French as a Second Language (FSL) is not often a popular subject among Canadian elementary and high school students. Negative attitudes and low motivation for learning French contribute to attrition at the high school level. In this article, an alternative teaching approach is applied to the Canadian FSL context at the elementary school level in the province of British Columbia. This action research study conducted in 2010 investigated the outcomes of using a drama-based approach to instruct Core French to 12 year-old students at a Montessori elementary (public) school in British Columbia, Canada. Ten students worked with a teacher/researcher twice a week over a six-week period, using drama strategies and improvisational activities to practice and improve their French language and literacy skills. The use of drama strategies proved motivational for the students who participated with enthusiasm and expressed a desire to continue learning French through drama. The action research approach allowed the students a greater degree of autonomy as their feedback was used to develop lesson content. Engagement in their own learning contributed to improved student attitudes towards attending French class. Ways of further implementing this teaching approach in elementary classrooms needs to be the subject of future research.

1 Setting the Stage: Core French in British Columbia

"I remember games more than textbooks, so it's a more fun way of learning and when it's fun you remember." (Maria, grade six student, Cedar Springs Elementary, interview June 2010)[2]

[2] All names and places have been anonymized.

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Fearless.
Free-flying.
A toy tiger sails through the air
from child to child,
racing to remembered vocabulary,
strange new sounds, strange new language, strange new game
– hold on tight!
It's a roller-coaster ride.
Fearlessly Français.

Figure 1: *Taking the Plunge* (Eva Göksel)

Learning French is often unpopular among non-Francophone Canadian elementary and high school students enrolled in French as a Second Language (FSL) programs (Lapkin et al. 2009). In fact, from grades 5 through 8, the majority of Canadian elementary and high school students are enrolled in the Core French programme, sometimes known as Basic French, which is one of three FSL programmes on offer in Canadian public schools. The other two FSL options available are Intensive French (in Ontario it is Extended French[3]) and French Immersion[4] (early immersion begins in Kindergarten or grade 1, and late immersion begins in grade 6). In British Columbia, students enrolled in the former study French more intensively in grades six and seven[5] than they would in the Core French programme, while in the French Immersion programme every subject is taught exclusively in French until Grade 3 for early French immersion, and Grade 7 for late French immersion.

According to the province of British Columbia's website, Core French is "designed to enable students to begin to understand and communicate in French, as well as to experience francophone cultures" (BC government website 2018). In addition, in a Canadian Parents for French flyer, Turnbull reminds us that while Core French focuses on basic literacy skills, these are conveyed "through themes designed to spark student interest" (Turnbull 2000: 2). Unfortunately, Core French at the elementary school level is not always taught with enough regularity to develop a good grounding in the language: often it is taught only once a week, or during only one semester, and it is often the first subject dropped when something considered to be more important comes up (Carr 2006; Lapkin et al. 2009).

In the province of British Columbia, Core French has not been returning the desired results and some studies suggest the programme requires reorganizing and more effective instruction (Lapkin et al. 2009; Carr 2007, Carr 2018). In fact, Carr (2018) reports that things have changed very little since her 2007 survey of Core French teachers and BC language coordinators. In British Columbia, Core French is the default FSL programme in public schools, and it

[3] French Language Arts, and one or two other subjects, often Social Studies or Art, are taught in French.

[4] A Canadian bilingual programme which educates non-native French speakers in French.

[5] According to the Canadian Parents for French British Columbia and Yukon website (2019), Intensive French is a "relatively new approach to teaching basic French".

is a part of the regular elementary and high school curriculum as of grade 5. Mandatory instruction of Core French ends after grade 8. Elementary school spans from kindergarten to grade 7 in British Columbia, and high school is from grades 8-12. Not all teachers feel comfortable teaching Core French – in fact, many are non–native-speakers, for whom "authenticity in L2 teaching is typically understood with reference to a native-speaker" (Wernicke 2017: 209). Some teachers arrange for others to teach French for them and choose instead to teach an additional component on Francophone culture or music (BC Ministry of Education 2001), while others schedule French so that it never actually gets taught (Carr 2007).

Studies show that despite years of Core French instruction, the majority of students leave high school without being able to speak French fluently or even functionally (MacFarlane 2001, 2003). In their review of the research literature on Core French, Lapkin et al. (2009) consider various contextual factors, which heavily influence the impact and effectiveness of Core French programmes across Canada. They state that community attitudes towards French as a Second Language are often negative and frequently manifest themselves in school, where Core French programmes are often marginalized. Another contributing factor is the disillusionment of Core French teachers who find themselves dissatisfied with their teaching assignments and who contemplate leaving Core French teaching (Lapkin et al. 2009).

A third consideration raised by Lapkin et al. is the general dissatisfaction with the results of Core French programmes, which have been experiencing attrition across the country. According to a 2008 Ontario Canadian Parents for French survey, only three percent of Grade 9 Core French students stay in the programme through to the end of Grade 12 (quoted in Lapkin et al. 2009). This is not an isolated phenomenon: Core French classes in British Columbian high schools also experience student attrition after mandatory instruction ends in grade 8 (Lapkin 2008; n.d.). According to Early and Yeung (2009), the results of a 2005 report by the Canadian Parents for French of Newfoundland and Labrador show that "nearly 90% of all students studying Core French in Grade 4 in 1996-1997 were not enrolled in the programme when they reached Grade 12 in 2004-2005" (quoted in Early & Yeung 2009: 319). The biggest obstacle to effective learning appears to be a lack of engagement with the French language, due to lack of time (as there are other subjects to be taught) and lack of intensity of classroom instruction – usually less than 2 hours per week (Carr 2007; Netten et al. 2008). It should also be mentioned that in British Columbia, although there are proficiency standards for hiring in French immersion, Core French can be taught without any specialized training and there is "usually no screening for Core French teachers" (Carr 2007: 5).

In response to the need for a richer Core French language learning experience as described above, my study examines possible ways to (re)motivate elementary school students to learn French as a Second Language by working with drama-based pedagogies in the Core French classroom. In a six-week action research study (Ziltener 2011), I took on the role of teacher/researcher, working with a

group of ten FSL students (aged 11 and 12) at a Montessori elementary school in British Columbia. The aim was to explore the potential of (re)motivating the group to learn French by integrating drama-based pedagogies in Core French instruction, based primarily on the pioneering work of Heathcote & Bolton (1995) and Wagner (1998). The novelty of this study lies in its application of drama to language and literacy teaching – primarily with a focus on oral production – in order to examine student motivation. This is of particular interest as the current methodologies generally used for teaching FSL in Canada are the communicative and the action-oriented approaches (Piccardo 2014). In the following sections I will describe my theoretical framework, my research design, and the results of the action research study.

2 The Power of Drama in Education

Drama is a powerful and versatile tool for teaching across the curriculum, as has been shown by a long line of scholars including UK pioneer Dorothy Heathcote. Heathcote and fellow pioneers Gavin Bolton, Peter Slade, and Brian Way, at different points in the twentieth century laid the foundation for working with drama in educational contexts. Their work began to reach a larger audience in the 1950s. Slade began championing educational drama as early as the 1930s and Way began exploring drama as a means to train children in life skills such as sensitivity and intuition, a decade later. In the 1950s, Bolton, a teacher and later a Deputy Principal of Secondary School, argued for drama's placement at the centre of the curriculum, while Heathcote developed her own drama teaching methodology, later known as *Mantle of the Expert*. This approach was innovative because it focused on the acquisition and exploration of knowledge purely through drama work. In keeping with the premise of Drama in Education, drama strategies are used in an educational setting not to produce an aesthetic product ("a play"), but instead to dive into fictional contexts to acquire knowledge and skills. This approach made sense for Heathcote, who was closely involved in teacher training, working with teachers and students alike to develop classroom dramas exploring a wide range of topics. Her work was also pioneering in that it highlights the cross-curricular power of drama, for her approach is applicable to any subject and can be used by all manner of teachers and learners, with the explicit understanding that all knowledge is interconnected (Heathcote & Bolton 1995).

Heathcote also developed the idea of teaching in role: This technique, now well-established in the Drama in Education (DiE) repertoire, allows a teacher to become an actor in the drama alongside the students, in order to draw the group into a story and to guide them through it. Wagner (1979) notes that Heathcote thus empowered ordinary classroom teachers to use drama as a teaching tool, instead of relying on trained drama specialists to do it for them: "The time has come to show all teachers – ordinary day-in and day-out classroom teachers – how they can use drama at times to achieve something that cannot be attained effectively in any other way" (Wagner

1979: 15). Drama thus encourages student-centred learning, with the teacher often taking on a secondary role, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. However, as Wilhelm and Edmiston note, the importance of teacher guidance should not be underestimated: "Although drama work follows students' interests and suggestions, the teacher is responsible for sequencing tasks and shaping the drama" (Wilhelm & Edmiston 1998: 5). Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach exemplifies this type of learning: "...they have to take responsibility at some stage for their own learning. A mantle of the expert approach can do all this – and without members of the class falling into their traditional role of students/learners" (Heathcote & Bolton 1995: 16). Heathcote's approach involves the whole class in a role drama, with the teacher taking on a secondary role as she guides the learning and keeps the class on track, stepping back to allow the students to continue exploring the issues by themselves (Wagner 1979). In the language classroom, this type of experience, of living in another language, of "gaining compassion for another's experiences" (Fels & McGivern 2002: 27), guided by a knowledgeable expert, pushes the learner just slightly out of her comfort zone, nudging her toward a higher level of language use and comprehension. My study too, hopes to point the way for generalist classroom teachers who lack specific drama training, to take the initiative to enrich their own and their students' second language learning experience through drama.

The Drama in Education repertoire is wide and it encompasses numerous drama strategies, also called conventions: for a full list please see Neelands and Goode's *Structuring Drama Work* (2015). A selection of the drama strategies used in this study includes visualization (using words and sounds to paint a mental picture), improvisation (spontaneous dialogue and play centred around a theme), hot-seating (Neelands & Goode 43) where a character is interviewed by the group, still-image work (ibid. 28) in which students create a "photo" of an event or a moment using their bodies, and thought-tracking (ibid. 138), where students "tap-in" to the thoughts of characters in a still-image. The drama conventions most used in this study are listed and briefly described in the table below, with references to the pages on which they can be found in "Structuring Drama Work".

The idea of using drama-based pedagogies as a teaching approach in various subjects (such as language, history, and science) is not new, and additionally there already is evidence in the literature of its use specifically in the language classroom (for example: Bournot-Trites et al. 2007; Even 2008, 2011; Schewe 2002; Schewe & Woodhouse 2018; Tschurtschenthaler 2013). In fact, studies show that drama as a teaching approach increases language-learning engagement (Catterall 2002; Dodson 2000; Wagner 1998). Through repetition, drama-based strategies develop language accuracy, while improvisation helps to develop fluency (Bräuer 2002). By harnessing the power of the imagination, drama invites learners to step beyond the boundaries of their classrooms and daily lives, to engage in a new discourse exploring language and culture through (role) play, dance, pantomime, and other ways of knowing and learning.

Table 1: Drama strategies applied in this study

Drama Strategy	Explanation	Reference
Hot-Seating	"A group, working as themselves or in role, have the opportunity to question or interview role-player(s) who remain 'in character'."	Neelands & Goode 2015: 43
Still-Image	"Groups devise an image using their own bodies to crystallise a moment, idea or theme; or an individual acts as sculptor to a group."	Neelands & Goode 2015: 28
Thought-Tracking	A character's private thoughts are revealed publicly by 'tapping-in' to their thoughts.	Neelands & Goode 2015: 138
Teacher-in-Role	The teacher or facilitator: "manages the theatrical possibilities and learning opportunities provided by the dramatic context from within the context by adopting a suitable role in order to excite interest, control the action, invite involvement, provoke tension, challenge superficial thinking, create choices and ambiguity, develop the narrative, create possibilities for the group to interact in role."	Neelands & Goode 2015: 54

According to Bournot-Trites et al., "drama can provide a social context in which to use and learn language" (2007: 8). Thus, drama as a teaching approach places language acquisition firmly in the social domain.

3 Looking Through a Sociocultural Lens

Language learning, like other forms of learning, is a social process (Lantolf 2000; Vygotsky 1978). In my experience, the best teachable moments in language teaching arise while students are experimenting with the target language and culture (as far as is possible within the constraints of a classroom). While this does not replace the type of learning done when immersed in a new language in the real world, experimenting with language through drama allows students to interact with each other, to practice their language skills and to learn from each other's mistakes. Drama helps students build an imaginary linguistic, cultural, and social world in which they can practice their communication skills in a supportive environment (Kao & O'Neill 1998; Miccoli 2003). I ground my thinking in the theories of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky and the social school of thought born from his ideas, when I state that language learning is best done in social settings in interaction with others such as family, friends, peers, and teachers. Vygotsky states that human development, including language development, takes place in the social domain. Humans, as social beings, learn how to behave and how to express themselves by imitating and interacting with others. Children especially, learn by trial and error, testing out behaviours and skills in social settings. Vygotsky writes: "Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults" (1978: 88). I therefore argue that drama as a teaching approach suits such social beings – to capture our interest and to help us develop into functioning members of the society in which we live, for as Wilhelm et

al. state, "drama needs more than individual imagination; drama worlds are created and experienced in interaction" (1998: 5). It seems fitting, therefore, that Piccardo, in her 2014 guide for Canadian language teaching professionals, describes the action-oriented approach – currently one of the top methodologies used in Canadian language classrooms – as an approach that "... views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents,' i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (2014: 14). It was with this view of *language learners as social agents*, that I conducted my action research study with a group of grade 5 and 6 students at a Montessori school in British Columbia.

4 Particpating in the Process: Action Research

Action research calls for the continual analysis of the data collected during every lesson. Reflecting upon what I had experienced and observed while teaching, I used narrative to help me interpret my findings. By journaling my process I was able to use my own narrative to critically reflect upon my teaching as well as upon what was happening in class. The students' narratives, which were provided to me via their weekly exit slips, their written assignments, and during the two focus group interviews, complemented my personal perspective. The observations and insights of the students' regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, served to ground the other narratives.

According to Reason and Bradbury, "action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (2008: 4). This type of research, in which students' input – such as contributions of topics of interest and vocabulary they would like to learn – informed the lesson was, therefore, well suited for this study. In addition, action research was well suited as reflection is an integral part of both drama work and of action research, where it is closely linked with decision-making in a cyclical process. As part of the drama work, it is necessary for the group to reflect on what has happened in the lesson as a way of building trust and commitment to the process (Kao & O'Neill 1998). In order to encourage my students to reflect on the day's lesson, they were asked to complete exit slips at the end of class stating what they had or had not enjoyed that lesson.

By observing the students in class and by reflecting on what we did during each lesson, it became clear to me that the majority of the students were not only improving their French, but more importantly, they were gaining confidence in their own ability to learn an additional language. This is in line with Kao & O'Neill's findings that "research findings document the value of drama in the development of competence and confidence in using the target

language. Positive attitudes to learning and an increase in social and cognitive skills among students have also been noted" (1998: 1). While my students were positive to begin with, their attitudes towards French class improved – as did their self-confidence about speaking French.

5 A First Step: Still a Long Way to Go

This study was limited to one class, in one school, over a six-week period. Ideally it should be repeated in a number of classes in a variety of schools (including schools in less affluent neighbourhoods and schools without any special programming such as Montessori). It is, however, important to note that, as Kao & O'Neill remind us, "the use of drama approaches makes unique demands on the teacher", who will be stretched both physically and intellectually (1998: 1). The experiment will also be different for every teacher, depending on their energy, flexibility, and comfort level using drama strategies in the classroom. Although I was not a trained drama expert, I did feel comfortable using drama in the classroom, and I am a fluent speaker of French. It must be noted that these are factors that may well have contributed to the overall success of this study.

6 Teaching at a Montessori School

I began my study by asking "what happens when drama strategies are used to teach Core French to a group of elementary school students?" To explore this question, I taught Core French to eight grade 6 and two grade 5 students at a Montessori public elementary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. With the exception of one student, who had recently transferred out of French immersion, and another, who had a French tutor, the students had limited experience learning French.

Montessori differs from other programmes offered in Vancouver public schools in that its philosophy embraces multi-grade classes in order to encourage cooperative learning among older and younger students. Assessment does not include grades, although the programme at Cedar Springs Elementary follows the British Columbia Ministry of Education's curriculum and regular reports are sent home. Learning is rarely teacher-centred and students are encouraged to be self-motivated, and respectful of others and of their environment: an ideal setting for exploring the possibilities of drama strategies as a teaching approach.

The regular classroom teacher, Mrs. Black, was very happy to have me teach French, as she felt uncomfortable teaching a language she did not speak well. I elected to work with the grade 6 students as they had more previous Core French experience. Mrs. Black asked me to include two grade 5 students who were transferring to late French immersion programmes the following year. We set up a temporary French classroom in the staff room down the hall from the

students' classroom. We met regularly, 2-3 times a week for an hour and a quarter between recess and lunch, over a period of six weeks.

7 Jumping in Headfirst: Teaching French with Drama

I thus began my study with a series of introductory drama activities such as name games, trust building games, pantomime, charades and improvisational games. Once the class was familiar with these activities we added still-images to our repertoire, including variations such as thought-tracking and collectively writing in role. This was done as a group exercise in which we collectively created variations of a story we had read in class, fleshing out characters and further developing the story. We did not progress as far as role drama or process drama, which would be the next step if the scope of this study were to be extended. Woven in with the drama work were basic French language and literacy lessons focusing on expressing one's thoughts and feelings in every day contexts. The goal was to encourage the students to engage in small talk about topics such as food, sports, and hobbies. We worked with vocabulary lists of their choosing (this was one way they could influence lesson content) and with a few basic verbs: *avoir*, *être*, *aimer*: to have, to be, to (dis)like. We also worked extensively with the graded reader *Sami à la mer* (Labatt 2008) – reading it aloud and using drama strategies to explore both the story as well as the language used in the book. The graded reader became a starting point for storytelling and writing exercises.

The primary aim of this study was to observe whether and in what ways student attitudes toward learning French would change if exposed to the creative environment that drama offers. Does engaging in dramatic play in the Core French classroom foster student interest in continuing to learn French as a second language? I was also interested in observing the kinds of learning that would emerge: what kinds of hands-on language and literacy skills would the students take away from this pilot study? I began as Wilburn advises, by clearly defining my "aims, approaches, and boundaries to be used for each session" (Wilburn 1992: 70), which gave each lesson structure, while also leaving the learners room to influence the outcome of various activities (ibid.). The first lesson provided a chance to get to know my students and to assess their current level(s) of French orally and in writing. I began with an informal chat in English as we sat in a circle, introducing myself, and asking the students to introduce themselves and to share some of their previous French experiences. I then asked the students to work in small groups to make a list of what they felt they already knew in French, as well as what they would like to work on with me. Overall, the class felt relatively confident about naming the months, using basic greetings, counting, and listing colours. They expressed interest in learning proper spelling, "how to use words in sentences" and they wanted "sentences and things we can use in life." The students expressed frustration with what they felt was a lack of continuity from one year to the next; they felt they were taught the same material from year to year. When asked about her previous

French experience Katja wrote: "I started learning French in grade four, then I did basically the same French in grade 5 and I just learned the colours, clothes, food etc. I also learned how to greet people but I don't really know how to write in French. I don't remember that much of French, because when I learned it I just memorized it for tests then forgot it."

After completing these formalities, we plunged directly into the material: drama activities in French. My first priority was to establish a good rapport with the students, and to allow them to feel comfortable working with me and with each other. In order to establish my classroom as a "safe" space, I chose a few games that I would be able to repeat at the start of every lesson, to ground the students and to give them an activity they recognized and could excel in. My interpretation of a pedagogically "safe" space is one in which everyone can feel free to make mistakes, as I feel strongly that we learn most when taking risks and while making so called mistakes. I define a "safe" classroom as a place of trust and mutual respect, a community in which the members support each other's ideas, learning styles, and learning processes.

I observed the class during this first meeting and journaled my thoughts after the lesson. In my first journal entry I noted that the students "participated well and seemed eager to improve their French." While journaling I reflected on what we had done in class and how the students had responded to my approach and to the various activities. I then repeated this cycle twice weekly over a six-week period, often re-planning my lessons based on my in-class observations and student input. As a final check-in I interviewed the students in two smaller groups at the end of the study. During these two focus group interviews, we collectively reflected on the process of our learning journey with drama-based strategies.

Table 2: Student participants

Name	Grade	French experience
Maria	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6, her mother spoke French
Katja	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Joelle	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Ali	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Colin	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Coulter	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Julie	Grade 6	None, other than Core French in grades 5 and 6
Ryan	Grade 6	Left French immersion after grade 5
Carly	Grade 5	Private lessons with French tutor, moving to late immersion in grade 6
Gabriella	Grade 5	Spanish at home, moving to late immersion in grade 6

8 Finding the Fun in French

Maintaining the energy and focus required to be a flexible and inventive teacher was sometimes quite demanding both physically and emotionally. However, moving the focus away from myself and onto the students allowed them to take ownership of their learning, much like in Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach. After becoming familiar with some drama strategies the students began to take risks such as trying out new vocabulary and even voluntarily practicing their French at home or with friends outside of school.

Working with a mixed level group I opted to teach to the lowest common denominator while encouraging the two students with prior knowledge to by my assistants. I began by building on the basic activities I used during the first class, including "je m'appelle" plus an action. My goal was to slowly build up the classes' comfort level, building trust-based relationships among the students and between the students and myself. In a slow step-by-step manner, using short trust-building activities, which allowed us to get used to our classroom, we moved around interacting with each other in our new space. As we moved through a variety of activities I realized that some students needed more structure than others and one of my challenges was finding a balance that worked for the class as a whole. Eventually, as Heathcote advises, I stepped back from my role as teacher/leader and the students began to take turns at being "the experts." I was, however, still there to provide more structure should it be needed. Using activities with which the class was now familiar, we began to navigate our way through a variety of French texts, stories, poems and dialogues.

I added a new game featuring *le tigre volant* (the flying tiger) the basic premise of which involves tossing around a stuffed animal (in our case, a tiger). Whoever catches *tigre* completes a sentence with "J'aime..." (I like . . .) and tosses *tigre* to someone else in the circle. The recipient repeats "il/elle aime..." (he/she likes) and then adds another sentence with "J'aime...". Before beginning this exercise, I went over the meaning of "j'aime" and its conjugation and we brainstormed things we might like, such as foods, sports, and music. Once the students began to get the hang of the game, we sped it up, and ended it with a speed round. The students enjoyed the challenge and often requested one more speed round. We repeated this game and variations of it in most of the following classes, allowing the students to familiarize themselves with certain vocabulary (of their own choosing) and to feel comfortable speaking quickly – without hesitation and without having to read off the board. Many of the students later told me that this game was one their favourite in-class activities. It didn't seem to bore them despite the repetition because we kept it challenging by adding new vocabulary and new phrases, such as "je suis" and "je ne suis pas." One of my challenges as a teacher was being flexible enough to improvise new variations of the game that were suitable to the language level. The variations included creating new sentences as a group: the students had to think on their feet when *tigre* was tossed to them. As Wagner points out,

this need to be present in the moment and ready to respond is what makes improvisational drama so effective. "It is not enough for students to hear the target language spoken; they need to talk themselves" (Wagner 2002: 4). I valued the *tigre* games because they allowed everyone to be active and allowed for the repetition of vocabulary while keeping everyone alert: one never knew where *tigre* would fly next.

In order to work with written French, I had the students work with a graded reader called *Sami à la mer* (Labatt 2008). We worked with the text (which included illustrations and was written in relatively simple French) over several classes. I read the story aloud to the class in sections and I had them re-read it in small groups (each lead by one of my "experts"). In a June journal entry I wrote: "I found it made sense to finish working through the story with pauses for explanations, guesses as to meaning and repetitions of words and sounds. The students seem to enjoy reading aloud for themselves – speaking French – and guessing at meanings." The students then picked scenes to re-enact via still-images. By using their bodies to tell a story, the students were able to get around the obstacles sometimes presented by missing vocabulary or weak grammar skills. As Booth reminds us: "The concrete conceptual framework provided by dramatic situations can both encourage and enable students to compose and transcribe for authentic reasons. The discussions and reflections arising from the possibilities and explorations within imagined and felt situations can lead to a variety of written activities. We write to see what we think we have said" (Booth 1998: 73). As a final step, each group summarized their scene in writing, with astounding results. It is important to keep in mind that each group contained a French "expert" who already had experience reading and writing in French and who could guide the group and provide a certain sense of confidence. The original text was also available to provide help for spelling, sentence structure, and finding vocabulary. While one group relied heavily on the original text, sometimes copying complete sentences, they still had to understand what they read – and eventually – wrote. What emerged from this process and what interested me most both as a teacher and as a researcher was the students' increased confidence in using the French language. I was amazed to note the energy one group in particular put into creating and writing their text. I was not concerned with how much they were relying on the source text, or on the group's "expert." My focus was on the fact that they were enjoying the process of creating a text in French.

What I found fascinating was each group's genuine desire to produce a "good" written text. The students made use of the available resources, including each other, to tell their stories. One aspect of having them do challenging work, was that it gave them great personal satisfaction and a sense of independence; a moment Vygotsky (1978) would describe as the 'zone of proximal development,' the optimal learning situation in which, with guidance from a teacher or a peer, an individual can solve problems that would normally be just beyond her cognitive abilities. With the aid of scaffolding, such as drama activities guided by a teacher, and learning collectively with support from peers, the language

learner is able to push the boundaries of what she knows. To quote Gabriella's comment during our focus group interview: "...we learnt more words there [with *Sami à la mer*] and, like, what some signs meant, like how to pronounce them, the symbols." Maria, too, comments that she enjoyed working with the reader: "I remember a bunch of the vocabulary from there, so, also because we spent a lot of time on it, it kind of stuck in."

Building on the ideas of Kao and O'Neill (1998) I argue that drama allows us to suspend reality and to create an illusion of the real world. Activities such as writing in role or writing as an extension of a drama activity should be considered authentic literacy practices as participants in the drama perform a task that is meaningful in the context of the drama. Instead of engaging in "school-only activities" students immerse themselves in a world they help create. They take on new roles and responsibilities in the context of the drama activity and in a new language. Their reading, writing and speaking moves away from learning by rote, as they improvise dialogue or write in role. "Since the dramatic situations are under the control of the entire group and not the teacher alone, students develop a kind of ownership toward the activity" (ibid. 2). The students must therefore be involved in developing the story or the dialogue so that the drama can move forward.

9 Listening to Student Voices

> I also think the things we learnt were more useful than saying "hi, bye" and how to say 24. It's something you'll actually use in life. Not saying: "I want pancakes". But like, something actually useful, that's also why it stuck. (Maria, June 2010 interview)

At the end of our six weeks together, I sat down with the students, in two groups, for a focus group interview. I wanted to hear their views about our study and what they felt they had learned, as well as what had worked for them and what had not. I was able to talk with eight of the ten as Carly had opted out of the last week of lessons and Ali had a dentist appointment that day. I therefore spoke first with a group of five students and then with a group of three. I made a point of putting Chris and Colter, fraternal twins, into different groups. I also separated Katja and Maria, who are very close friends, so that every child could speak freely, without feeling the need to agree with a sibling or a friend.

Even though I highlighted the fact that we would be doing French through drama, the students focused on the fact that it was French class. They made sense of our process by comparing it to other French lessons they had experienced. Julie, for example, noticed that we had spent time working repeatedly with the same sets of vocabulary and basic grammar rules: "I'll remember a lot of it ... because you were teaching us really slowly so it just goes in our head, like it just stays like a magnet. It just comes and it sticks to your brain." From my perspective as the teacher, I never felt that we were going through the material slowly – we seemed to be moving along quite quickly.

However, Julie and I would have been focusing on quite different things. I was attempting to stay one step ahead of the class, observing them and modifying my lesson plan, trying new variations of an activity. As a participant Julie would have focused on content rather than on methodology. Joelle perceived that doing French through drama "was easier because you weren't just sitting all day." She later added, "I liked it because you took your time. You didn't rush through it all in, like, a day."

All nine students who completed the study expressed an interest in continuing to use a drama- based approach to learn French. Chris stated, "I want to do more of this, to learn more vocabulary and different words and how to express your feelings more." Maria added "I also like it because it's a very small group, so it's easier to learn." Ryan wrote: "It was enjoyable, I guess." Gabriella felt she had learned more French in our six-week course than during two previous years of French instruction. Katja agreed, stating that her past French instruction had mainly revolved around learning for a test, after which she would forget whatever she had memorized. Maria felt she wasn't going to forget her new vocabulary so quickly this time: "I remember games more than textbooks, so it's a more fun way of learning and when it's fun you remember it."

10 Puzzling Together the Pieces

The results of my study were overall very positive and encouraging. With the exception of the two students who already spoke a fair amount of French, the class was eager to continue the experiment and to continue to learn French via drama the following school year, citing enjoyment, and the chance to be active while learning, as reasons for wanting to continue using the approach. In fact, during a follow-up interview with the classroom teacher, I was told that Julie had asked if and when I was returning to teach French again. Julie said she missed learning French through drama. Maria's mother approached me about half way through the project to tell me that her daughter was thoroughly enjoying her new French classes and felt she was learning a lot in class. In my personal journal, I noted: "The students had positive attitudes about coming to my class and they told me they felt learning a new language would open doors for them" (May 2010).

Julie's first reaction to having to take a French class was: "I would be like 'I hate French,' 'cuz it just really didn't work out that well. But when you came I was like, whenever it's after recess and then Mrs. Black said 'all the grade sixes have to go with Eva now,' and then I would always be like 'Yes! There's French after recess!'" Julie's comment resonated with others in the class, who had also been cautious when they were first informed about the new French class. However, the students assured me that once they knew what to expect, they began to enjoy the French lessons: "first class, I thought it would be like sitting around reading from a book. And repeating after the teacher, and then the second class and the third class I knew more what we were gonna do" (Colter, June 2010 interview). Colter's comment underscores

Kao and O'Neill's message that drama is useful in the second language context because it "provides contexts for multiple language encounters and encourages authentic dialogue between teachers and students. As a result, the usual classroom interactions are profoundly and productively altered" (1998: 1). The French lessons were not limited to just "sitting around reading from a book" (although we did read and work with one); the lessons were animated, active and somewhat unpredictable. The students actively created their own learning, they helped chose the topics and the vocabulary we worked with, and they created their own imagined worlds – resulting in their perception that they had learned "something actually useful" (Maria, June 2010 interview). As Wilburn reminds us, students actively involved in meaning-making through dramatic play need not passively accept teacher-mandated activities, instead they cooperate as a group to imaginatively resolve a given task (1992). During a focus group interview at the end of the study, two students felt strongly that they had learned French because they were actively involved in meaning making:

> Gabriella: I learnt like more French in this class than I have like in the other classes, 'cuz they usually like, in the past, 'cuz I've done two years of French, they don't really like, teach you that much. I learnt more in this one month than I have in those two years [murmurs of agreement] 'cuz they were like ... they would like repeat the same thing for those both two years and then it would be like counting and the same thing over and over again. And everybody already knew that. So it got kind of boring. But they never, like, advanced from counting, and like, days of the week. So, and here we actually like read a book and did more things.
>
> Katja: Yeah, I think I learnt more as well. From all of it, 'cuz all the other ones they just give you a piece of paper, told you to memorize it all and gave some of the words in a test. And you had to know what they meant. And then so, I did that, but then I forgot what they meant, 'cuz I was so bored.

The two students with a stronger French language acquisition background, Ryan, who had just left French immersion and Carly, who had a French tutor, came into the class with a very clear "anti-French" attitude. However, their written feedback about our French class was usually positive – perhaps because it was a medium in which they were not performing for their peers. Although there is not any one teaching method that works for every student, it was clear that even those who were anti-French (or perhaps anti-drama?) did enjoy some aspects of the experience, as long as they did not have to admit it to the rest of the class. Carly often acted up in class (and also in her regular classroom) but nevertheless wrote very positive responses about the lessons in her exit slips: "Everything was pretty much FUN" (written in rainbow colours) and another time she wrote "the Sami story was very fun." Ryan wrote: "It was good. More fun than French in class is."

Using drama as a teaching approach gave these students a chance to break away from rote memorization. They were learning French for a purpose – in

order to communicate with each other and with the teacher. Ralph attests to "the motivational power of using drama in teaching for arousing and maintaining interest, for stimulating learning, and for evoking feelings of worth, both for the students and for the teacher, in second-language programs" (Ralph 1997: 1). The students sensed they were making progress and at the same time, they were having fun in the French language classroom. As I reflected upon my encounter with the students I wrote about my excitement about being afforded the opportunity to work with drama in the Core French classroom: "As a language teacher and student I firmly believe that we need to change our approach to teaching Core French in BC. Especially at the elementary level there is a need to instil a curiosity about language learning and a desire to continue working with the target language outside of school. The process should be fun, creative, and inspiring. This does not imply a lack of structure – simply a change of attitude. Let's model French as being a fun, living, functional language" (Personal Journal, May 2010).

This action research study explored the use of drama-based strategies to teach Core French to a group of elementary school students. The findings show that drama is a powerful motivator providing opportunities for learning through play. Through interviews, narrative, and reflexive journaling, I observed and reflected on the kinds of learning that happened in my classroom over the course of six weeks. My findings show that using drama as a teaching approach increases learner autonomy and allows the students to co-create the curriculum, thus allowing them to take ownership of their learning.

11 Conclusion: Drama as "Real-world" Immersion

I maintain that by allowing the creation of imaginary worlds (Kao & O'Neill 1998), drama effectively simulates an immersion setting in a way most traditional language teaching approaches cannot. An integral part of the drama approach to teaching are a teacher's flexibility and inventiveness: "these qualities will, consequently, inspire confidence and linguistic skills among students. Through drama, teacher and students together enter the world of increasingly authentic scenarios and creative dialogues" (ibid. 2). Engaging in drama and creative learning strategies in the language classroom opens up new possibilities for language and literacy pedagogies. It creates room for learning the kinds of skills needed in the "real-world" in a make-believe context: students writing in role, for example, as they did in the study conducted by Bournot-Trites et al. (2007) produce texts "that function communicatively for people beyond learning to read and write" (Purcell-Gates et al. 2004: 140). These texts are meaningful within the imaginary world created in the classroom, and they are transferable to the real world where "participating in real-life conversations requires sophisticated skills in verbal and behavioural communication: adopting different roles, performing various tasks, using appropriate forms of language, finding suitable forms of social behaviour, and so on" (Kao & O'Neill 1998: 35-36). Engaging in drama-work, therefore, is not

just play, it is preparing for life.

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