Transcripts of Expert Voices-Instructional Coach Secondary FSL

(Denis Cousineau, Instructional Coach)

For many years now, teachers have been hearing about the communicative approach. While many kinds of approaches to grammar have been used in the past, what we are now trying to do is help the student see himself or herself as a social player, a person taking real actions in real life. When students see that the language is useful to them, they will use it, and talking in the language becomes a necessity. Consequently, we try to create situations during development that reflect real life so that the student will acquire the language because he or she will know that it can be used in real-life situations.

We know that boys need to see a practical use to their education. In many cases, when they took a second language, they felt they were participating in very repetitive exercises and being made to learn lots of grammar and content rather than the real or useful aspects of the language. Students were asked to write texts or do oral presentations. While these may have an application in real life, it remains a rare occurrence. It is much more important for young boys or girls to be able to speak directly and fluently, with spontaneity, without having to worry about preparing a presentation that has little relationship to real life. The action approach has been discussed earlier. This is a true action approach, enabling students to talk about what happens in daily life. That is why it is important to develop maximum interaction; talking in groups, talking one on one, talking about very familiar topics.

When students are exposed to audio material in the second language, they are often at a loss because the flow is too fast and they are unable to follow. They don’t have the reference point. Consequently, it is very important that students be exposed to radio and television programs and music videos so that they will hear French spoken in many ways and at different speeds. Ideally, the speed should be that of real-life speech. At the starter level, we would normally turn down the speed somewhat, but the aim is to have students gradually develop an ear for the language so that they may hear, for instance, a radio weather report and understand it. And the more students develop an ear for the language, the more their fluency will improve.

Instead of looking at what is lacking in the student’s progress, we want to introduce a positive approach. Therefore, the descriptors are always “the student can...”. This kind of “can do” statement is a very positive approach because as the student progresses in the language, instead of being faced with all that is left to master, he or she is made aware of what has been acquired and will feel that “I can do things in the language.” We all know that learning a second language is a lifetime endeavour and that linguistic perfection will never be attained. However, the student knows that he or she can make progress in the language and is aware of what the next step will be and of what is needed to get there.
I have often heard, while travelling, people say “can’t do French” and I have wondered how one can come to feel, after eight or nine years of schooling, that nothing of the language has been acquired. The reason is that students saw French as difficult to master, and would often quit without having any feeling of achievement. What we are aiming at is to enable students to see where they are in relation to the language. They should see themselves as progressing along a scale, knowing that they don’t have be become linguistic experts to be able to get along in the language. This means they can do a much better self-evaluation because they can see where they stand in their command of the language. This demonstrates the usefulness of a tool such as the European framework. Each student will develop at a different pace and if some need more help, that’s okay. I think we have the perfect model because we can enable students to progress at different rates.

Every good system should have scale by which progress can be measured. When we talk about using a tool called the European framework, people are somewhat worried and will say: “that may be fine for Europe but in Canada we have different ideas.” The basic principle is to borrow a fundamental value that Europeans have used for at least a hundred years. People in Europe recognize that fluency in another language is an essential element of social mobility. This means that language skills are valued and that students are aware of the usefulness of acquiring a second language. With globalization fast increasing, second language teaching is absolutely essential to the 21st century education system.

Learning a second language should be approached in the same way as learning to skate. What we need to do is develop greater tolerance and have a greater number of learners at various levels of fluency, but who are convinced they are able to succeed. In the same way as skaters venture on the ice, we need people that are able to use the language and are confident in their abilities, whatever their level of proficiency. We know that if you want to help people learn to skate, you must get them on the ice. They need to learn how to fall and how to get back on their feet. When somebody has trouble learning to skate, you don’t tell them “you’d better give up skating because you’ll never be able to learn.” I believe we have used this approach in language teaching. Often, we say this student is not able to learn the subject; we should exempt him, we should ask him to get out of the program because he is not strong enough. What we should be doing is to create support and anticipate that they will sometimes fall down and help them get back on their feet.

Students who do drills and assignments often have trouble seeing the relationship between what they learn and real life. Extensive research has demonstrated that giving students assignments or textbooks that reinforce the learning of linguistic formulas without context will impair language development. Some students will not be affected by this and will learn the language anyway, but a greater number will fail or drop out. When students see a relationship between what they learn and their own life, they see that learning a second language is useful and has a practical use. Therefore, we need to create such a context to help students acquire language structures.
Telling students that today’s lesson is about present perfect verbs will not be very motivating for them, whereas asking them, from a personal point of view, to talk about what has happened yesterday, over the weekend, may interest them because they may have had an interesting activities. As a teacher, what I will do afterwards is help students with language structures, but my first objective is to get them to talk about what happened yesterday. The action approach as well as research tell us that students need to know that in a real-life context, they will have to talk about what will happen in the future and they will have to put forward arguments. Therefore, we must emphasize the importance of action verbs and real-life situations. As research demonstrates, these two elements are fundamental.

When we look at a document such as Growing Success, we know that feedback is needed. The idea of giving feedback is absolutely essential to know what the next steps are. Students need to know when they are making progress. The objective is to get them to speak fluently and with confidence, to know what they need and know how to get it.

First of all, we must support French as a second language. The form that such support takes does not matter as long as there is a will to support it. We must impress on students that learning a second language is something that will help them in life.

I also think that in learning French, the idea of risk and acceptance of mistakes is very important. When students think that teachers strive for perfection, it’s extremely stressful for them. When a child says “Ma père est très malade, elle a la cancer”, if we focus on the mistakes, he or she will not communicate the message and will learn that the way to avoid mistakes is to say nothing. So what we need to do is to allow students to make mistakes, but also to help them correct those mistakes. When my student says the sentence I just quoted, I will start a conversation with him or her and reply “Oh! Ton père est malade. Ça c’est vraiment triste.” I will enter into a discussion with the student so that gradually he or she will acquire the idea that the word “père” is masculine but will continue to express what goes on in his or her life. That’s what I mean by allowing students to take risks. And also that mistakes are an essential part of learning.