

7-1-2003

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### Recommended Citation

Claes, Jan (2003) "'Kiss My Donkey!' or Raising the Level of Authentic Communication in My Core French Classroom," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1151>

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# "Kiss My Donkey!" or Raising the Level of Authentic Communication in My Core French Classroom

*Jan Claes*

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The way I see it, teacher action research found me rather than my finding it. In April of 2002, I attended the Quebec Conference on Teacher Action Research in Montreal as an observer. Having absolutely no prior experience with the concept, I was at first completely overwhelmed by the puzzling new vocabulary and by the obvious passion of the participants. Then, about halfway through the second day, I suddenly understood. It felt as if an internal dam were breaking and I began to engage in conversation after exciting conversation about the phenomenal power of this approach.

On the plane coming home from Montreal, I turned to my colleague and said: "You know, I think action research has to do with my Core French students. I know I'm not happy with how I teach Core French".

In the Halifax Regional School Board in Nova Scotia, Canada, French as a Second Language is delivered through three channels:

- early immersion, where students begin in primary to study all core subjects in French;
- late immersion, where students begin in Grade 7 to study their standard core subjects - Social Studies, Science, Math, Health, as well as French Language Arts - in French;
- Core French, where students begin to study French in Grade 4, and continue through middle school to carry it as one of their numerous core subjects.

With such a system of delivery, streaming ultimately takes place. By the middle school years, particularly where immersion and English schooling are offered side-by-side in the same building, a stereotypical perception settles in. Administrators and teachers alike tend to share the view that Core French classes are heavily weighted with students who are under-motivated, and/or challenged by processing difficulties, behavioural patterns, and - in cases of inclusion - severe physical and mental disabilities. It is not an exaggeration to say that middle school teachers routinely shudder involuntarily at the prospect of carrying Core French as part of their teaching load.

I was no different. I am a teacher with twenty-six years of experience: twelve at the high school level and the last fourteen at the middle school level. I am principally a Grade 7 late immersion

teacher, but have always had one class of Core French as part of my assignment. I have thoroughly enjoyed teaching immersion and working with my twelve-year-old immersion students. It has consistently brought me feelings of success and creativity. This I contrast to strong feelings of disappointment with the way I have handled my Core French classes.

### My Research Question Finds Me

My introduction to teacher action research last spring started the wheels turning. I slowly recognized that my dissatisfaction was rooted in an ever-widening gap between *what I believe* about second-language acquisition and *what was actually happening* in my Core French classroom. As I stepped mentally into this gap, I also began to carefully observe my own attitudes toward Core French.

Following the steps laid out in *You and Your Research Project* (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 1996), I formally began my action research by making a list of my values : what elements I strongly believed should be part of a successful approach to Core French. The next step demanded a generous helping of painful honesty; I began to analyse very carefully what was actually happening in my classroom . In essence, what I *valued* for my Core French students was a collaborative environment in which French was spoken by teacher and student alike in a truly communicative way. My *reality*, however, was a tense and chaotic environment in which I was speaking French, but my students' oral efforts ranged from sporadic to non-existent. This was decidedly not true communication! The final step was to reflect on my own attitudes as forming part and parcel of my reality . At this stage, I truly began to recognize the elements of my own "teacher-initiated crisis" .

In all honesty, I was *appalled* and very uncomfortable with what I had put on paper about the actual state of my Core French class. In my research journal I wrote: "This process certainly makes you vulnerable!" However, I recognized that something very good was already happening. From this zone of professional discomfort between values and daily reality, my research question crystallized. Pages and pages of my journal were devoted to my struggling to define exactly what it was about my practice that needed improvement: what *exactly* did I want to change? My first draft of my question was: *How can I improve my success with my Core French students?* But that was far too vague: what was my personal definition of "success"?

I wanted my students to *speak*. That was the most disappointing aspect of my practice: in my language classroom, nobody was *communicating!* I wanted my students to participate more. I eventually concluded that it was not so much the *quantity* of their participation as the *quality*. I not only wanted them to be speaking French, I wanted them to be speaking French *for a reason*; in a word, *authentic communication* was what I was really after. So, my research question finalized itself as:

*How can I improve the level of authentic communication in my Core French classroom?*

### My Initial Research Project

My initial research project took place in May and June of 2002 with twenty-four Grade 7 Core French students. The focus of change was the concept of "authentic communication", which I

defined as any communication that is initiated for a valid social reason, in a real context, and responded to in an appropriate way. The standard asking and answering of questions directly related to the current lesson and theme cannot really be considered authentic, although it serves as structured oral practice.

However, greeting each other, asking for help or clarification, complaining, volunteering, expressing a spontaneous opinion or compliment, encouraging, expressing fatigue or illness or joy or anger : these are categories of everyday classroom chatter, and hence categories of authentic communication.

So, what did I introduce into my teaching? Over and above the regular curriculum content that we continued to pursue:

- I made them aware of the concept of authentic communication;
- I identified with and for them the categories of communication that already existed in their classroom and that they could convert to French;
- I systematically provided them with a key phrase to say in each category;
- I posted these key phrases in the classroom;
- I provided regular reinforcement of those key phrases and encouragement to try them;
- I posted an on-going and student-generated list of very specific expressions that the students asked to know in French;
- I asked them to reflect in writing on their own learning style and the nature of their own participation during class time;
- I praised their efforts and strongly praised all authentic communication;
- I made it evident that their efforts were recorded as part of their participation mark. We had been using a checkmark- for -participation system for most of the term, but they seemed to take a sudden keen interest in making sure that all of their attempts to use the new phrases were carefully documented. Authentic communication became a class value and a class goal.

My research data collection included observation grids of the frequency of categories of communication, students' journal reflections on the process of language learning, observation notes regarding incidents of authentic communication, analysis of daily participation charts, and analysis of cassette recordings of the class in session.

### My Claim to Improvement

What I hoped would happen did indeed happen. I felt that there had been a dramatic increase in the overall effort to participate by students in general, an increase in the desire to participate in students whose participation to date had been considered an area of concern, and - perhaps most importantly of all - an improvement in *my* overall perception of the students' abilities.

Even more powerful were the effects that I had *not* anticipated:

- Students seemed to have an overall increased respect for their French assignments;
- Students did not deface their journals with graffiti ( as opposed to the copious amount of graffiti on their pocket folders and binders);

- Students reached for their dictionaries more often, motivated by their own curiosity about a certain word or expression;
- Students without exception began to enjoy being spoken to in French in the hallways as long as it was within the categories that we had been developing;
- Students began to initiate brief "Bonjour, comment ça va?" exchanges with me in the hallways and in the cafeteria;
- Students understood very well the concept of what was authentic communication and enjoyed being told when they were practicing it;
- My students were going out of their way to chat with me more after class and in the hallways to tell me about themselves, albeit in English;
- I perceived a definite and a positive shift in the quality of the students' efforts to use their French.

I recorded a total of sixteen critical incidents over the course of the month. I felt strongly that these critical incidents supported my perception that something new in my practice had caused an almost immediate change for the better. These four that I have chosen to illustrate are examples of "extreme" students who showed a significant change in their classroom persona.

### **"Yahoo!"**

June 4: A. P., who for most of the term had not spoken a single word, came up at the end of class and asked if she could try speaking French just to me after the class had gone. She pointed to the prompt on the board - "Quel est ton intérêt?" - and told me in simple French about her pride in her gymnastics. I praised her and said I had been worried about her because she never participated. She said yeah, she knew and her Dad was French. I said she could try speaking to me before and after class and get her practice that way. I wrote in my notes: "Yahoo!"

### **Kiss my donkey!**

June 7: I told D. and T.J. that if they were going to complain about each other it had to be in French because that was one of our categories. D. replied: "Give me a dictionary!" and looked up "Kiss my \*#!" (D. has anger management issues) as a message that he then wrote on T.J.'s paper. When T.J. complained, I went to read what D. had written and it was [the equivalent of] "Kiss my donkey!" Not a bad try, although the vocabulary was wrong! I said: "Well, D., I'm very pleased that you used your dictionary, but you might want to change that last word!" This incident gave rise to the idea of personalized vocabulary cards. D. needed an expression for T.J., but a more socially acceptable one.

### **"I don't understand this gibberish!"**

S.W. was the first of a handful of students to receive personalized vocabulary cards. For most of the term, if he spoke at all, it was to declare: "I don't understand this gibberish!" As the class learned to use their expression for "saying you don't understand", he began to occasionally mutter: "Je ne comprends pas". One day, I handed him a small card.

"What's this?"

"It's 'gibberish' in French."

From then on, I had the enormous pleasure of hearing the same student exclaim, in a perfect accent, but with his usual ennuï: "Je ne comprends pas ce charabia!"

June 10: authentic communication outside of the classroom:

I passed by C. in the hallway and said: "Bonjour, C., comment ça va?" He stopped, thought about it, and replied: "Uh, je suis fatigué" . June 12: I told the class that I had taken the story of my hallway French conversation with C. to my action research meeting. C. was extremely pleased and the class was very intrigued. Hallway conversations in French picked up a little bit more after that! (this is an unmeasured perception).

The concept of *transfer* began to haunt my observation notes. Teaching the vocabulary provided in the curriculum units does not seem to guarantee an automatic transfer to actually speaking French. Students are not automatically able to, nor do they automatically want to, transfer what they are learning inside the classroom to other situations in the classroom and/or similar situations outside the classroom.

Although the project lasted only a month and we did not advance very far down our list of communication categories, I believe that I was beginning to see the first glimmerings of transfer. Even now, whenever I run into students from that class, who are now in Grade 8, they are unfailingly polite and make a special effort to respond in French if I start a simple conversation with them. They slap their hands on their foreheads, they hold up one finger and say: "Wait, wait, I know this!" as they struggle to retrieve what we learned together. These are little miracles to me because in our middle school world:

Core French students do not use their French, except under duress or lure of candy;

Grade 8 students traditionally snub all of their Grade 7 teachers!

More importantly, my critical incidents have also been perceived as miracles by other Core French teachers who have heard about them. The story of C.'s simple "Uh Je suis fatigué" has caused ripples of surprise, even disbelief. So, evidence would indicate that although I was labouring to improve my own reality, it was nonetheless a classroom reality shared by a large number of Core French teachers.

#### [A New Action Plan](#)

I was very excited about the rapid changes that had occurred in my students. I now wondered what exactly it was that I had done right! I was keen to try to "bottle" whatever it was and try it all again with a new group of students. I decided to roll my action research into the present academic year and to run it for the entire length of an academic year. My research question evolved into:

How can I nurture - that is, observe a growth in - the level of authentic communication in my Core French class over the course of an academic year?

Now, it is true that I did improve my students' motivation to communicate in French. On the other hand, my research procedures did very little to influence the overall *behaviour* of that first group of students. It is in no way an exaggeration to say that this group was rowdy, noisy, physical, socially non-functioning, and bordering on the vulgar in their preoccupations. The day that I introduced the project, I happened to have an observer in the room: a young pre-service teacher from one of the universities. I shall simply say that her presence did nothing to polish the manners of the group. In my journal I wrote: "*They listened politely to my introduction and then went completely berserk when we got to the brainstorming part. It was deeply embarrassing to have this so noisy and horrible in front of Elise! That is depressing and humiliating. This process is depressing and humiliating.*" In retrospect, at least I have a witness who can supply base-line data as to the typical environment that reigned at the beginning of my project!

Although improving behaviour had not been an objective of the first research, I definitely wanted to tackle it as part my second action plan! Reviewing my early lists regarding "*What is actually happening in my classroom*" and "*What I have observed about my own attitude toward Core French*", I decided to address the remaining discomforts with a three-channelled approach:

1. return to my basic concept of authentic communication with my students;
2. (2) expand the authenticity of my own communication with their parents;
3. (3) put some serious thought into basic classroom management.

From September 2002 to the present, in a framework of five thirty-minute periods per six-day cycle, I have been working with my new co-researchers: my one class of Core French, Grade 7, twenty-two students.

There seems to be an assumption among teachers who have heard about what I am doing that I must have a "good class". Well, of my twenty-two students, I have a full range of abilities and attitudes ranging from one national-level kayaker and one child from a French-speaking home to one mildly autistic child. I have one child with severe anger-management issues and eight who are on the Resource case-load. I protest that I have a perfectly "normal" Grade 7 mix!

*704: they are "awesome"!*

To return to my overall action plan, my first of the three main channels was a reintroduction of the concept of authentic communication. Basic elements from the first project were: the explanation of the concept, the introduction of the categories, the systematic teaching and drilling of short expressions in each category, and the clear posting of all new expressions. New elements in this second project included:

My change in philosophy regarding the use of English: what I proposed to my students in September was that we both teacher and students - work *together* on a gradual elimination of English, with a class goal of all-French instruction in Term 2. This is the total opposite of what traditionally happens; we as teachers are advised to use no English whatsoever from the very

first class, with the result that students who walk through our door already negatively inclined toward French and/or unsure of their own abilities, have these feelings compounded from "Day One" and progress to acting out their distress;

My administration of periodic "attitude surveys" to explore how each student is feeling about French in general and how they rate their personal comfort level in the classroom;

My introduction at the beginning of Term 2 of a motivational system to help my students keep their class focus on the goal of an all-French classroom environment: "*Monsieur Tim*" is a ledger-sized clipart of a cartoon musketeer, laminated and cut into eight pieces. Every time that I am able to deliver my lesson 90% or better in French and the students have made a reasonable-to-superb effort to activate their authentic expressions, we earn a piece of the puzzle. Once all eight pieces of Monsieur Tim are back together on the wall, I arrive in class the next period with a box of Timbits. Monsieur Tim is hugely popular and the envy of all the other classes!

### *Monsieur Tim*

My categories of authentic communication have been revised somewhat, based on my observations from my first project. So far this academic year, we have explored the following categories: greeting, telling how you are feeling, asking for permission, saying you don't understand, asking for help or for clarification, volunteering, encouraging, complimenting, complaining, and saying "That's mine!" All around the classroom are bright colourful wall charts that cue the students to the one or two expressions that we have learned in each category.

Many of the expressions that we are using have come from the students' requests or from my observation of phrases or turns of speech that they tend to use frequently in English. For example, in the category of "complaining", I gave the students a mini-survey asking them to list things they routinely complained about in English in their classes. In order of popularity, it was *homework*, *Matthew (!)*, and *wanting someone to be quiet*. So, we have added to the wall: "There's too much homework!", "Madame, he's bugging me!" and "Stop talking!"

Returning again to my overall action plan, my second channel was to strengthen my communication with parents. And when I opened this door, I found that parents were eager to share important information about their child's learning style and learning history. Early in September, I sent home a welcome letter which included space on the back for parents to provide contact information. These letters, once signed and returned, then formed the base pages for my binder of observation notes on individual students. Three times so far this year, I have sent home a progress rubric to inform parents about their child's participation, classroom attitude, and comprehension of the course content. I have also made an effort to be present at any special meetings - initiated by Guidance, Resource, psychologists, administration, or parents - regarding a particular child. As a result of this communication, I feel that I know my class very well. Most importantly, I also feel that this understanding of my students has helped to head off potential behaviour problems during class time by making a fundamental change not in their attitudes, but in mine!

The third channel of my action plan has been to address the issue of classroom management. Over my years at the middle school level, I have tried to keep abreast of the literature, and to keep up with shifts in school and board philosophy. The result has been that I have tried *quite* a variety of approaches over my fourteen years with my Core French classes. However, over and over again, regardless of the approach, I have "lost them" about half-way through the year! Well, here we are in April and for the first time I have not lost my Core students. We are still a happy, functioning unit with strong and healthy relationships: teacher-student and student-student.

So, what did I do differently? Routines, routines, routines, and responsibilities:

- We never vary from a standard class opening and standard class closure;
- Students sit at tables in groups of three;
- Each group has a kit box to store dictionaries and student pocket folders
- We have five responsibilities, rotated among the students and used as part of our class structure in the same order every period. Someone is in charge of the participation chart, someone is the drill sergeant to lead the class in an oral practice of their growing list of authentic expressions, someone signals (in French) when there are five minutes left in the period, someone asks (in French) if the class has earned a piece of the Monsieur Tim puzzle that day, and someone asks (in French) if there is any homework. These responsibilities are highly valued by the students and serve to greatly multiply the possibilities for authentic involvement.

#### *One of our daily "Drill Sergeants" at work*

Throughout this year, I have been tracking my research with the following data-collection methods: attitude surveys, notes on individual students, daily observations, meta-observations on those daily field notes, daily participation charts, written comments from parents, written comments from observers, and a videotape of the class in session.

And do I think I have met my research objective? A resounding YES! My claim to improvement would be that I have been able to track an observable growth in the level of authentic communication being used by my students this year. So, what have I observed?

- Forty-five authentic expressions (and counting) on the wall;
- Four boxes of Timbits earned. That translates into thirty-two classes of all-French instruction;
- The "French enrichment gang": a small group of students from this class has developed the habit of coming to my room once a cycle during their "non-band" period - which coincides with one of my preparation periods - to play a game with me in French, sit in a round-table conversation with me in French, or help each other with French homework;
- Very positive shifts in attitudes over time, as evidenced on the students' three attitude surveys to date;  
students' perception, as recorded on their attitude surveys, that they are "learning to speak French";
- Positive written feedback from parents;
- Positive written feedback from observers.

When I return to my original *Values Statement* generated last spring, I am able to confirm that *all* of the elements are now in place. It is with a very deep sense of satisfaction that I realize that I am now working within an environment where my values and my reality mesh perfectly.

### The Impact of My Research

I am convinced that the impact of my research has been greatest on me! I have changed my attitudes about my Core French students so much that I have to struggle to remember how stunned I was when C. answered me in the hallway last June. Now my students are always talking to me: in the hallway, in the cafeteria, in the office, and of course in the classroom. Not just "Bonjour, Madame", but sustained (although short) conversations. *So* often, that I have stopped writing them down as critical incidents.

I recently observed in my journal: "I truly feel like I have shot through some 'worm-hole' in edu-space and am now floating around in some distant and foreign galaxy! I feel light years away from who I was".

My colleagues who also teach Core French in my school have shown an interest in some of the organizational ideas, specifically the standard class opening and the kit boxes. More recently, as they have begun to see and hear the results in my students, they have expressed an interest in introducing the authentic communication expressions next year. One of them confided to me a few weeks ago: "I don't know what to do with my Core kids. They're not speaking any French!" "Ah", said I, "well."

The concepts that I am experimenting with have reached a larger audience as well. Quite early in the year, news of what I was trying to do reached the ears of one of our French Second Language Facilitators and she came to my classroom to talk to me. In no time at all I was literally running around the room in my eagerness to show her the kit boxes on the counter and the expressions on the wall. She was so taken with my enthusiasm that she invited me to join a board-level leadership team of teachers with the mandate to develop ideas to improve the delivery of Core French.

I have even had the following observation from a senior board administrator, who also happens to be a member of my validating group:

"The lessons that she has learned from this project should be transferable to many Core French teachers, with a corresponding change in instructional methods and increased satisfaction for teachers and students in Core French classes in any school that chooses to implement it." - Don Buck, Senior Staff Advisor, Halifax Regional School Board.

I believe that the most powerful change to come out of my research is my own transformation into a passionate advocate for Core French students. Given the way that I felt about Core French less than a year ago, I find myself thoroughly amazed by this!!! The more that I have spoken to other Core French teachers throughout this year in my role as part of the leadership team, the more I have come to the realization that there is so much that could be done to change the

entrenched stereotype and the unfortunate entrenched prejudice against the typical Core French class. I wrote to one of my validators:

What has become suddenly clear to me is that the adaptations that could help so much to give the kids a feeling of success don't seem to be happening. I know some kids are just plain bad, but they are such a tiny percentage of the class. What about the kids who could do it if you gave them an alternate way of presenting, if you acknowledged their learning challenge and sat down with them to figure a way around it, if you started with them where they are instead of where you think they should be, if you offered extra help in some palatable form, if you built in steps for success, if you told them (and told them and told them) they could do it!

So you see, I'm a work-in-progress! I'm already off and running in the new direction that my research has unearthed for me. As I wrote in my journal that very first weekend last April: "Action research: what a liberating, empowering, energizing process!"

"Off and running" takes concrete shape

This author would like to add a very exciting update to this paper. As of August 2003, the Halifax Regional School Board (Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia, Canada) has granted approval for a two-year collaborative action research project, using my authentic communication approach as a framework. In its first year (2003-2004), this project will involve nine teachers working in three schools and at three levels of middle school. The focus will be to implement the basic elements of my approach and to track how they align to teacher concerns and student needs in widely-varying school climates. The ultimate goal is the validation of a base of best practices for the delivery of Core French with a view to enhancing student success. The collaborative sessions planned for this dynamic project team promise to be marvellously rich experiences in reflection, discussion, and shared pedagogy!

## Appendix

### *What I believe: Values Statement*

- Students should be speaking French as much as possible;
- I should be instructing in French as much as possible;
- There should be a satisfying amount of real communication going on (ie. students and teacher speaking to each other in French for a reason);
- There should be a comfortable camaraderie in the room;
- There should be fun;
- There should be routines and expectations;
- Every student should feel successful at his/her level;
- I should be familiar with each student's learning style and needs;
- I should communicate regularly with the parents of my Core French students.

### *What is actually happening in my classroom*

- Some students are speaking some French, while others have not spoken at all;

- I make an effort to instruct in French but have a tendency to revert to English for "complicated" instructions or for discipline concerns;
- There is very very *little authentic communication going on*;
- There is sometimes a comfortable level in the room, but at other times there is tension due to discipline concerns;
- Sometimes there is fun;
- There are *routines and expectations*;
- I am not at all convinced that my students feel successful. I believe that there are those who arrived discouraged about French and I have done little to encourage them;
- I am not familiar with the learning requirements of my students;
- I communicate with the parents of my Core French students only through the mid-term interims; *occasionally by phone, occasionally by [school discipline form]*.

*What I have observed about my own attitude toward Core French:*

- I leave their marking to the last;
- I am tense on days when I have them, relieved on days when I don't. I do not have this tension vis-à-vis any of my immersion classes;
- I am most tense just before they arrive. I often am hurrying to prepare the classroom as if I need to be in a state of hyper-organization to deal with them;
- I feel successful if "we" have spoken French for the whole period, or for a good part of it, but in reality that means that I have spoken French *and participation remains generally unaffected*;
- I switch to English to explain directions or to maintain (regain?) control. I assume that they will not understand;
- I have the impression that I "might as well do an action research with my Core French students because things couldn't get any worse";
- I have the impression that as soon as I start to speak French, they become almost immediately inattentive;
- I have the impression that they cannot sustain attention through a full period of instruction all in French;
- I have been known to say that I have one class of Core French "to keep me humble."