

The French Connection

Constance Dziombak explains how to use French to develop English Language skills and cross the curricular divide

The No Child Left Behind Act has been driving U.S.

public school curricula and drowning our students in standardized testing. In fact, it often seems that the ultimate goal of instruction is to improve standardized test scores. This is especially true in inner-city school districts like mine, where many students are considered “at-risk.” Here and elsewhere, classroom teachers must devote a major part of the school day to prepping students for the endless round of assessments - English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, Math. Hence, a period or two of foreign language lessons per week is a hard sell to most elementary classroom teachers, unless you can connect the language lessons directly to the rest of the curriculum. Last year, being aware of the pressures classroom teachers face, I designed a series of cross-curricular French lessons which not only developed my third, fourth, and fifth grade students’ French language skills, but also reinforced their English Language Arts (ELA) skills.

The first series of lessons was based on the traditional story, *The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* (*La Vieille Dame Qui Avala Une Mouche*), and the second on *The Giving Tree* (*L’Arbre au Grand Coeur*) by Shel Silverstein. Designing the lessons was not too difficult, since I have taught ESL for many years and am familiar with the four New York State ELA standards, which are almost identical to the ESL stan-

dards. New York’s ELA standards require reading, writing, listening, and speaking for 1) information and understanding, 2) literary response and expression, 3) critical analysis and evaluation, and 4) social interaction. New York’s ESL standards, however, include a fifth standard, “listening, speaking, reading, and writing for cross-cultural communication and understanding.”

The effectiveness of content-based second/foreign language instruction has been recognized for quite some time, and the success of my lessons on *La Vieille Dame Qui Avala Une Mouche* and *L’Arbre au Grand Coeur* can be linked to some basic tenets of language learning theory. Steven Krashen’s (1986) input hypothesis states that language is acquired when learners receive “input” from messages which contain language somewhat above their level of understanding. According to Krashen, “we are able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, our knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence...The beginning-language teacher provides context via visual aids (pictures and objects) and discussion of familiar topics.” (p.2) With a limited knowledge of basic French vocabulary (e.g. numbers, colors, etc.) and expressions (How are you?, etc.), my elementary school students were able to comprehend simplified



French translations of two stories they were already familiar with in English. In essence, they were operating within Vygostky's "Zone of Proximal Development," which he describes as a place where students can learn new material above their current level of understanding with the guidance of their teacher (Vygotsky 2005). Even though they had no formal knowledge of French grammar or syntactical structure, my students were able to understand more complex sentences, which were presented to them and practiced in "chunks." Their ability to understand and use the French seems to support the underlying theory of the "lexical approach" to second language teaching which is based on the idea that a fundamental part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or "chunks." These chunks then serve as the raw data by which learners perceive patterns of language which are traditionally referred to as grammar. According to the lexical approach, language production is the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation (Moudraia June 2001).

Content-based instruction enables the language teacher to focus on the student's academic needs and critical thinking skills while at the same time focusing on their second language needs (Snow 2001). Throughout the lessons, my students practiced higher-order thinking

skills in both French and English by sequencing events, identifying story elements, as well as cause and effect, and comparing and contrasting the French and English versions of each story.

La Vieille Dame Qui Avala Une Mouche series of collaborative lessons (involving one of my third grade French classes and a kindergarten class, which did not receive French lessons) included a preview and practice of French vocabulary with bilingual picture cards, handouts, and games, an alternating bilingual reading of the story, and discussion and comparison of the two versions in English, and the sequencing of story events with French picture cards. The older students charted the story elements and completed graphic organizers in French. In separate lessons, they performed a modified "Readers Theater" version of the story in French. As a follow-up, the third graders made picture book summaries of the story by copying a set of sentences in French and drawing an illustration for each sentence. Like the original English version, *The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, *La Vieille Dame Qui Avala Une Mouche* contains a lot of repetitive language, which made it easier for the students to understand and retain what they were reading and/or saying. Throughout the lessons, both the kindergarten and third-grade students were engaged in activities which involved speaking, listening, reading, and writing in both French