

Speaking French with their bare hands

Award-winning teacher Wendy Maxwell has found that simple gestures help students learn.

**Susanne Hiller
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Wendy Maxwell gestures to her students. The kids giggle as they mime and say the words, but Maxwell says her technique has them speaking at French immersion levels.

A group of elementary school boys sit cross-legged on the floor at Crescent School in Toronto and answer questions in French with what appears to be a bizarre form of sign language. They gesture energetically with their hands as they say each word aloud -- physically acting out their sentences.

It's part of a workshop to demonstrate a new method of teaching core French being piloted at schools across the country. Teachers who have already implemented the Accelerated Integrated Method (AIM) have had such success they say it will revolutionize the way core French is taught in the classroom. Next month, in fact, Alberta will be adopting the program province-wide in its schools.

Wendy Maxwell, who currently teaches at York House in Vancouver and formerly taught at Bishop Strachan in Toronto for 10 years, developed the program after becoming frustrated with the current core French programs. She found students rarely achieved fluency even after years of instruction.

"The other teachers I spoke with were struggling with their students," she said. "There was a lack of motivation, minimal fluency and increasing frustration on the part of their students. As well, the parents of the children I taught during the 1990s in Toronto were not happy with their children's progress."

So Maxwell set about creating a more effective curriculum. After much research on language acquisition techniques, she determined that children remember words more easily through hand gestures and can better contextualize new words by acting them out in plays, songs and dances. Maxwell has had remarkable success with her own core French students in the last few years, claiming they achieve fluency on par with French immersion students.

During the workshop, Maxwell demonstrates for about 60 Toronto teachers how hand gestures can help comprehension of a second language. She calls this the gesture approach, and the rest of her AIM program is built around it.

Basically, Maxwell has created a defined set of gestures for a comprehensive list of words that kids use the most to interact. Maxwell makes various signs as she talks in French to the students, who are in Grades 4, 5 and 6 at Crescent School. Their teacher, Sylvia Duckworth, implemented the program last September. They have no problem understanding Maxwell, and immediately follow along happily with the hand signs.

The gestures themselves are pretty simple. The verb manger (to eat), for example, is the motion of bringing food to one's mouth; opening and closing your hand quickly means dire (to say). The kids giggle as they mime and say the words.

Maxwell, who won the 1999 Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, calls the introductory vocabulary Pared Down Language, and emphasizes verbs. In core French programs, the verb *vouloir*, which means "to want," is not usually introduced until the third year.

"The word 'want' is the first word a baby says," says Maxwell, who developed her word list after carefully listening to children chatter. "We are simulating how a baby learns. We are all programmed to learn a language -- even those who are weak academically learn a language. This program is not about being the brightest in the class."

After students have learned the Pared Down Language, they can start adding more complicated words and expressions. The idea is to learn to communicate at a basic level. Their grammar skills (such as learning the past tense) will be refined as they get more proficient. Kids are not allowed to resort to English during French class.

"In this program, they start by learning the words they need to know to communicate and that have relevance," says Duckworth, who says she hears the boys talking in French in the halls after just one year. "In some regular programs, they start by learning the names of different insects. I don't even know those words."

Studies have proven that the use of gesture helps students remember the subject matter. It also makes the teacher appear more approachable, interested, caring and warm. Maxwell says there is a sense of ease associated with gesturing. She points out that children of deaf parents sign words before children of hearing parents begin to talk.

"Everyone uses gestures to help them get a point across, but by using a defined set of gestures, the use of gesture is taken to a whole new level," says Maxwell. "For me, this opened up doors to communication with my students that I would not have thought possible."

Unlike most contemporary programs, AIM is based on familiar stories and fairy tales rather than themes (like food, sports, hobbies etc). The extensive use of drama and acting is not only fun for the kids but allows for lots of "pleasant repetition" of the same words.

At each grade level, kids work with a fairy tale or play over an extended period of time. After they memorize it, they do various activities associated with the play to reinforce the words they have learned. They might, for example, be asked to paraphrase the story, tell the story from the point of view of a different character or write a journal about it. In this way, the words are reviewed constantly and eventually added to. Many of the plays written for the program are based on songs from CDs recorded by Maxwell's husband, Matt Maxwell, a musician who specializes in French recordings and performances for children.

"All the class activities are based on the play and because they know it so well, they are confident about the activities," says Maxwell. "They learn because they are enjoying themselves."

Edite Sammons, a French teacher at Havergal College in Toronto, says she was on her way to "teacher burn-out" before she observed one of Maxwell's Grade 2 classes four years ago. She describes the experience as a "renaissance."

"The kids were speaking in full sentences, not only with Wendy but with each other. I had never seen or heard such well developed oral fluency in a core French classroom," she says. "I could not believe it."

She spent a summer practising the gestures in front of a small mirror, and piloted the technique with her Grade 1 class in 1999. She said these kids are now more advanced in French than their older siblings in senior levels, and they are able to read and write stories independently, as well as communicate spontaneously.

"My pilot classes are now in Grade 3 and converse with me and each other exclusively in French during French class," she says. "I do not need to gesture nearly as often to ensure comprehension. It is undoubtedly the most innovative, exciting and successful method of teaching core French that I have encountered in 21 years as an elementary school teacher. I would say every child in the class is successful,

every child understands what I'm saying. Even my weakest student who would have been lost in a traditional program is speaking and is able to communicate ideas to me."

Likewise, Duckworth says she was "blown away" when she sat in on one of Maxwell's classes. She admits, however, she was a little hesitant at first to try the program herself.

"Her program seemed so radical that I was afraid I was not going to pull it off," she says. "And I was not sure the boys could handle it. It is a very loud, dynamic way to teach French. I had reservations about whether I could keep them focused and under control."

Instead, Duckworth says she has found her students to be more focused, and their French skills have improved dramatically. She says, after 16 years of teaching core French, she feels revitalized. "As a teacher, nothing could be more exciting. There were almost immediate results with the gestures. It is very heartening."