


Integrating Character Education in Grammar-Based FSL Programs

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Introduction:

The main question driving my inquiry is, "**Can character education be successfully and meaningfully integrated into the Core French classroom setting?**" Sub-questions derived from the prime question are as follows:

- **What strategies will assist the successful integration of character education into the second language learning classroom?**
- **Will communication activities support this process?**
- **What kinds of modification in program are necessary?**
- **What are the pitfalls and the benefits for stakeholders?**
- **Do benefits expand beyond the walls of the FSL class?**
- **How do I evaluate the feasibility of integrating character education into the second language class?**

This inquiry evolved naturally from my participation in the Character Education Committee at Markham District High School. I have taken part in the creation of a school mission statement/vision for character education; as well, I have facilitated informal discussions in French with students (particularly OAC students) about the effectiveness of character education in our school. I am actively involved in character education work in the Moderns Department, and I support character education photography projects.

The inquiry is also based on my experience and my values. I believe that character education must be an integral part of the culture in the FSL Classroom. Children live what they learn. We as educators have the responsibility to live, with integrity, the values that we proclaim. When our daily actions illustrate positive character traits in action, when we are authentic, credible, consistent, living role models of positive character traits, then we significantly increase the likelihood of having a positive impact upon the learner. The teacher, as program deliverer interacting with youth, has the power to stifle or nurture positive character development. Consequently, over the course of the year, I looked for ways to integrate a character education component naturally into the Core FSL curriculum.

Data Gathering Process:

Implementation of this research project began with an "informed letter of consent" being sent home to the parents of my students. Participating classes were Core FSL students in three grade nine applied classes, two grade nine academic classes and one split FSF/FSG OAC class. Data collection began in September, 2001. Data collection in French was simpler at the grade nine level as vocabulary was more restricted, although with the OAC students it was easier to have discussions and debate.

Activities that promoted character education and allowed collection of data are as follows:

- a creative collage activity during the first week of school to promote character education in FSL while enhancing student self-esteem, promoting recognition of positive character traits in one another and providing a pleasurable purpose for oral communication.
- informal surveys on multiple intelligences and positive character traits
- "Qui suis-je?" collages to decorate portfolios for a visual oral presentation
- discussions focused on character education: thought for the day; featured characteristic for the month; initiatives and issues at the school; observation of student interactions with one another; participant observation within the context of the working classroom; written work such as essays on "*Comment j'envisagerais un monde meilleur*"; short stories terminating with a moral or lesson; and samples of audiotaped and videotaped student oral production of dialogues, short public speaking presentations and ISU presentations on famous people who are examples of positive character traits in action

I obtained a wealth of qualitative data, both verbal and written. I also developed an extensive English bibliography of Character Education literature to which I referred.

There was no disruption of program or of regular classroom activity. In fact, character education was woven into classroom work at levels students' linguistic skills would allow. For instance, when we studied regular and irregular adjectives in the grade nine program in September, we brainstormed lists of positive character attributes of self, friends and family members. During many of the *French Speechcraft* speaking sessions, students were provided with ample opportunity to develop their leadership skills and positive body language. I consciously provided opportunities for students to communicate and collaborate as frequently as possible in the target language. I also shifted from extrinsic to more permanent intrinsic motivation techniques.

Analysis of the Data:

- When compared to previous years, student behaviour and on-task commitment was higher. This was particularly noticeable in the applied classes.
- The number of students going to summer school for reinforcement courses dropped significantly.
- Students expressed satisfaction with increased opportunity to voice their opinions as well as with their higher comfort level communicating verbally about issues in French. It appears to be extremely important to students to feel that their voices are heard and that it is safe to agree to disagree.
- Student perceptions of character education successes in the school tended to vary, coloured by their individual, personal experiences.
- Further study would be required to determine whether there is any significant correlation between student performance and reinforcement of positive character traits. The Character Education literature proclaims this is true.

Implications for My Practice:

- This research project has led to conscious adaptation of program and delivery to meet student needs and interests beyond mere cognitive levels. Students need to be involved in activities that engage their hearts as well as their heads and hands. What was initially a school focus, at what I considered to be a more superficial level, became more meaningful as I became more actively engaged with the students. Input = Output.

How do my findings relate to future practice? BE! DO! HAVE!

Personal Implications for the Teacher:

As Ghandi said: "Be the changes that you want to see in the world."

1. Listen attentively with eyes, ears and heart to what students have to say.
2. Be yourself - an authentic role model of positive character traits, supporting the school and board vision and mission statements.
3. Be a balanced role model; use healthy wit and humour.
4. Monitor student progress with respect; guide them with understanding and compassion.
5. Sincerely praise students for random acts of kindness and surprise them occasionally with certificates to acknowledge some good act.
6. Provide safe venues for clearing up miscommunication right away.
7. Practice positive immediate feedback to individuals, to small groups, to the class.
8. Co-create win-win situations where stakeholders feel validated.
9. Engage students fully in their own learning, while guiding them to respect each other's learning styles, gifts, challenges and opinions.
10. Be a reflective practitioner, asking yourself questions along the way, recognizing that we are

all on a life-long journey evolving towards better character.

11. Forgive yourself and others for shortcomings, remembering that tomorrow is a new day. As First Nations people say: "*There are no mistakes, only lessons.*" Model this.

Curricular Implications for the Teacher:

12. Create a safe French cultural learning environment for communication wherein students will increase risk-taking.

13. Think of small activities that support the content and themes of your Core French program and can be easily integrated; e.g. an activity based on a grammatical feature or cultural aspect that can be connected to character education.

14. Consciously provide students with many concrete examples of fine character models; make connections between larger-than-life heroes and the heroes in their own homes.

15. Reinforce positive character traits through storytelling.

16. Support the monthly character education theme of your school by integrating short character-developing activities into your lesson, that raises the theme beyond lip-service or platitudes plastered on a hall wall to a "lived reality". For example, there are ten character traits and ten school months. Make a connection!

17. Make the character education focus highly visible in your classroom, not just through posters, but also through student work proudly posted on the walls (with FOI-POP release, of course).

18. Make character connections with culture whenever possible through elements such as poetry, music and drama to help bridge cognitive and affective domains.

19. Provide students with learning tools that facilitate more confident, independent self-expression, more independence in written expression and homework completion.

20. Incorporate meaningful metacognitive tasks involving student self-evaluation for debriefing. The reflective process on personal growth and development is a very useful tool that helps students chart the course for their own character development.

21. Take notes on what worked and on what didn't work. Seek student feedback as well. Your opinions may differ. Written response to questions such as, "Comment te sens-tu à la fin de cette activité?" are very important. Responses can be anonymous.

A language-learning environment provides ample opportunity for building character if we work consciously to cultivate it.

Remember!

Our perceptions are our realities. Conscious character education can lead to important paradigm shifts in how we perceive ourselves interacting with the world and in how we perceive others interacting with us. Helping our students to understand and see their gift, and the benefits to themselves of embracing their responsibilities as well as their rights, helps them to be open to learning and ultimately, more productive, happier members of society. .

Know that when we teach character in a way that touches hearts, we touch the future. If we haven't touched the heart, we have missed the mark. Our students learn much more from who we are than what we profess. "Some people come into our lives and quickly go. Some stay for

awhile and leave footprints on our hearts and we are never, ever the same" (Flavia). As teachers, we strive to leave footprints.

Currently, grade nine students represent the bulk of the L2 clientele in Ontario secondary schools with only about 20% continuing on to grade ten. If more students graduate from grade nine feeling more positive about their personal identity and more positive about others, I wonder if the numbers continuing on to language study in grade ten will increase. Could meaningful character education keep an increased number of students in our language classrooms on the road to bilingualism and satisfying communication with more people on this planet?

Reflections on My Action Research Experience:

One of the most enjoyed activities in which OAC students engaged this year for Character Education was an hour spent on our second-last day together in June, reading stories and discussing positive character traits with primary students at Franklin Street Public School. The OACs expressed delight over how much vocabulary the younger students had and how confidently they spoke. In the same breath, they exclaimed how good it felt to be respected by their partners and looked up to as adults. For some of my OAC students, the most enjoyable time of the day has become French class. Why? They feel that they matter. Their voices are heard. Perhaps with Character Education that is the bottom line. **We all matter.**

My FSL Character Education Project didn't turn out the way that I had expected it to, but it has certainly shown me that there is more work to be done in this area and provided me with more food for thought as I continue my own journey of growth. Action research in the area of Core French and Character Education helped me become a more reflective practitioner, examining motivation, attitude and the psychological and social aspects of language learning. I believe I have also become more insightful into my own strengths and weaknesses and more determined to address them. Now, especially through my OACs involved in major character education projects this year, I realize that people like to be asked questions. Questioning lets students know we are interested and students need to know we care. So do adults. I will continue to work at becoming a better listener and at asking more questions, not just of my students but also of my colleagues. **I care.**

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