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In this Issue:

Assessing AIM: A study of Grade 8 students in an Ontario school board

Research study by Callie Mady, Stephanie Arnott and Sharon Lapkin*

An Examination of the AIM (Accelerated Integrative Method) Approach through Research

(*) Mady, C. Arnott, S. and Lapkin, S. (2009). Assessing AIM: A study of Grade 8 students in an Ontario school board. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 65* (5), 703-729.

Reflect - What experiences do I bring to reading the research?

1. How do I make my oral French understandable to my students? How do I make French texts understandable to my students? Does my support differ for different groups of students? If so, how?

2. How do I choose the topics and materials I present to my students?

3. How do I choose the instructional approaches I use?

4. How do I judge the effectiveness of the instructional approach, topic and/or materials?

5. Are my practices grounded in my readings? My studies? My teaching and/or learning experiences? How?

What experience do the researchers bring to conducting the research?

Introducing Callie Mady, Stephanie Arnott and Sharon Lapkin

As an elementary and secondary FSL teacher for 19 years, Callie had many opportunities to use a variety of texts and instructional approaches in both core and immersion. She has a Ph.D. with a focus on second language education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. At present, Callie is an assistant professor of FSL methodology at Nipissing University. Callie is the author of numerous academic articles and classroom resources.

Stephanie Arnott taught FSL at the primary level, using the Accelerated Integrative Method (AIM) approach. Currently, she is a 4th year Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education studying instructional methods in core French. Stephanie has worked on multiple research projects studying FSL education in Ontario.

Sharon Lapkin is Professor Emerita in the Second Language Education program of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Her research projects centre on FSL education in Canada. In addition, she has been co-editor of the Canadian Modern Language Review and served as co-President of the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics. In 2006, she was awarded the Prix Robert Roy for outstanding contributions to second language teaching and learning in Canada by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, and since 2007 she has been a member of the Board of Directors of that Association.

A conversation with Callie Mady, co-author of
Assessing AIM: A study of Grade 8 students in an Ontario school board

Where did you conduct your research? With whom?

Our team of researchers was chosen to conduct research in a public school board in Ontario. Some of the FSL teachers in the board used the AIM approach where others did not. The AIM approach is primarily grounded in the use of high-frequency vocabulary with accompanying gestures, with the focus on listening and speaking before reading and writing. We worked with 12 classes within the board: 6 that used AIM for two years and 6 that did not.

What were you trying to find out?

The board wanted to gather data on FSL student achievement so as to have additional evidence in its consideration of how to best provide FSL programming for the future.

How did you gather your information?

We observed the classes, tested, surveyed, and interviewed the students: 260 students completed the listening, reading and writing parts of the French test with a quarter of them also completing the speaking portion, 439 completed an attitudinal questionnaire and 94 students were interviewed about their classroom experiences.

What did you do with the data?

We entered the test and questionnaire data into a statistical computer program called SPSS. This program allowed us to compare students' results-those who had been exposed to the AIM approach and those who had not-skill by skill: listening, speaking, reading and writing for the test and according to attitude toward French and French cultures for the questionnaire. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Once all the answers for each question were organized we read them looking for patterns, themes to emerge.

How would you summarize what you found?

The statistical comparison of the test results according to students who had been exposed to AIM to those who had not showed no significant differences—the groups had similar performance on all parts of the test. Similarly, the comparison of attitudes as revealed in the questionnaire did not show any differences between the groups.

The interviews showed both groups of students to be fairly positive about their FSL experiences. The students without AIM exposure attributed their positive experiences to their teachers and themselves. Some of the students with AIM exposure linked their success to the use of gestures while others found them to be childish. The groups also provided different answers about the French used in class. The AIM group used more French than the non-AIM group, as did their teachers. Both groups indicated that they enjoyed games the most and written work and tests the least. The AIM group felt most confident about its listening and speaking skills whereas the non-AIM group was most confident about its reading skills.

What practical messages come from this study?

1. Our students provide us with information that can guide our instruction.
   For example, as per the AIM-students, if my class expresses negativity to using the AIM gestures I would consider their age, the amount of gestures I expect the students to use and the necessity of their use. In regard to the non-AIM group, if I knew my students were most confident in their reading skills, I would provide further opportunities for authentic oral practice. We often survey our students at the beginning of the year to get to know them; this research encourages us to check in throughout the year providing our students the opportunity to tell us how they have learned best or what they would like us to start, stop and continue for example.

2. Data can inform our instruction.
   In this study, neither group performed well on the FSL test, which tells us there is room for improvement of student outcomes. Ideally such information, as with any classroom assessment data, should be considered in our planning. The study's findings also tell us that the AIM approach did not diversely impact outcomes in this context and therefore its use should be weighed according to students' needs and outcomes.

3. Our instructional approach (es)/materials should be chosen and adapted to students' needs.
   The fact that the AIM students in the study did not all appreciate the AIM approach highlights the necessity to provide variety to meet the diverse needs of our students. Variety should be considered not only in terms of materials but also in terms of teaching approach.

4. Keep asking questions and testing hypotheses. Many of the teachers in this study believed that what they were doing produced positive results. Their perceptions were, at times, different from those of their students and the test results. We must therefore continue to gauge the impact of our choices on our students and adjust accordingly.

What next?

1. What do I want to learn more about? How can I do that?

2. How can I verify if/when my approach(es) is meeting my students' needs?

3. How can I judge the effectiveness of my materials?

Additional research articles

- Bourdages, J., and Vignola, M.J. (2009). Évaluation des habiletés de communication orale des élèves de l'élémentaire en utlisant AIM. *Canadian Modern Language Review 65* (5), 731-755.
  This study compares the oral and grammatical accuracy of Grade 3 students exposed to AIM to those without such exposure. The interview data revealed no significant differences between the two groups on any measures of linguistic or grammatical accuracy. The AIM group, however, produced more words in French than the non-AIM group.

- Carr, W. (2001). *Study of York House School's core French program: Accelerative integrated method approach: September 2000 to June 2001*. Unpublished report.
  Carr interviewed Grade 1 students who had been exposed to AIM and concluded that they exceeded provincial expectations for core French in BC, but that the students had difficulty transferring their abilities to contexts outside of those provided with AIM.

- Maxwell, W. (2001). *Evaluating the effectiveness of the Accelerative Integrated Method for teaching French as a second language.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), Toronto, ON, Canada.
  Maxwell conducted interviews with 18 Grade 2 students from a private school in Ontario : 9 AIM and 9 non-AIM. Maxwell found the AIM-group to do significantly better than the non-AIM group.

- Michels, M. (2008). *Innovation in French as a second language teaching at the elementary level: an exploratory investigation.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of London Institute in Paris, France.
  Michels evaluated student's French oral skills through interviews. She interviewed 8 AIM students and 8 non-AIM students from various programs to find that the AIM students outperformed the non-AIM students who had had more exposure to French.