

# Movement, Rhythms, and Music

Active Curriculums for

Teaching Foreign Languages to Beginning Learners



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## **Abstract:**

Our task as educators is to fit our teaching methods to our learners. Middle school students have specific characteristics that can seem to interfere with learning. Among these characteristics are a bounty of energy and restlessness. The key for the teacher is to channel this energy into learning activities.

To understand a class and develop a teaching strategy for that class, the teacher should analyze the learning styles of the students. From the results of this analysis, the teacher can build effective lesson plans which match the trends that appear in the class.

With this data in hand, the teacher can also experiment and record which activities work best with his or her student population.

This classroom-based research project will describe a variety of activities used in the learning of foreign languages.

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## Introduction

I remember Jack Millet's message on the last day of his course: "Focus on the learner, put the responsibility of learning in his hand". The more I think about this sentence, the more I realize that I have to shift my focus from "What I am to teach?" to "How I am going to teach?" And, from "What are my students going to learn?" to "How are they going to learn?" The observations of John Goodlad come to mind. "Regardless of subject, students reported that they liked to do activities that involved them actively, or in which they worked with others. This included going on field trips, making films, building or drawing things, interviewing people, acting things out, and carrying out projects. These are the things which students reported doing least and which we observed infrequently" ( A Place Called School p. 114). One may argue that Goodlad's observation was made after investigating hundred of schools in 1984, and that things have changed since then. Yes, the students in our school go on field trips; they do a lot of projects. But have teaching methods changed enough?

The mission of the school as an institution is a global one. The first goal of the school system is to teach millions of children basic skills and fundamental processes. It is also to give them some tools to be productive members of a society and to function as decent citizens. Those principles are based on uniformity, not individuality.

Jack Millet's statement implies that I should focus on the individual and in some ways share the process of education with the learner. "This may be raising the spectre problem of totally individualized instruction. But learning is individual no matter how many pupils there are per teacher", wrote Bruner (The Relevance of Education p. 116).

Who are the learners I am dealing with? In the first part of this paper, I will draw a general profile of my students. I will also describe our school model and the classroom's make up. In order to understand my students' learning processes, I had to reflect on my own. How did I learn a second and third language? After several years of teaching various age groups, assisting in seminars, reading, and studying for a certification, I started to associate teaching with learning styles.

In the second part, I will describe my experience as a learner of foreign languages and my evolution as a teacher. When I started to teach in a public middle school, I was confronted with a new situation. All types of students were included in the classes. I started to wonder how to reach each one. The special education teachers had some advice. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences gave me guidelines to chart the dominant learning trends in four classes.

The factors that affect a second language acquisition and the analysis of my students' learning styles will constitute the third part of this study. I am now experimenting with those learning styles in the classroom. I will share what, from

my observations, works with the middle school population in a fourth part. At the end of the first trimester, I asked my students for some feedback. The students' voices will constitute a fifth section.

## **General profile of a middle school and the students**

I teach in a middle school located in a wealthy community north of Boston. The majority of the students are Caucasian. The biggest minority is from the Far East: Japan, China, and India, while the smallest minorities are Hispanic and African American. Most of the parents pay attention to their children's education and expect them to be successful. They expect success in the academic world as well as in sports and a variety of other activities like music, dance, and drama. The parents drive their children to the extra curricular activities even though our school offers an impressive after school program including intramural sports and no less than 24 clubs. The children do not have good reasons to be hanging out on the streets.

Our middle school is built on the team model. Each grade has two to three teams of math, English, science, and social studies teachers. Teachers meet once a day to deal with team business. Teachers of music, physical education, art, health, drama, and foreign languages are called "specialists". This team setting as it is currently structured has an adverse affect on both students' and parents' perception of foreign language. Because foreign language is grouped with specialists rather than with core subjects, parents, students, and even other

teachers do not consider that a foreign language is an academic subject. What is more academic and more complex than learning a second language? "Total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response are necessary to successfully send and receive message in a second language," said Brown. ( Principles of Language Learning and Teaching p.1).

The honor role list is published quarterly in the local newspaper. I estimate that 70% of our students are on that list. I often hear from the parents when their child got a grade lower than a B in foreign language. Again, because foreign language is not perceived as an academic subject, parents wonder how French or Spanish can keep their child from being on the honor role.

There are no major crimes in our town. The children who attend our school seemed to be well fed; they wear fashionably labeled clothing. But they are going through the turmoil of these "wonder years." In three years they grow a foot or two. Going through those growth spurts seems to require so much physical energy that I wonder if it does not impair their intellectual growth. They are also very physical. Pushing and shoving is a common practice and needs to be monitored in the halls, playground, and cafeteria. Their language needs to be decoded. "Can I see?" means "Can I touch?" "Can I go to the bathroom?" means "I need to move!"

The physical growth is associated with emotional stirrings and sexual awakening. The little 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl looks like a young woman as she enters 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The



boys' voices crack. One can sense the excitement in the air on the day of a school dance. Who likes who, who is popular or is not. A ring of notes is passed. a circle of boys read it while a circle of girls ten feet away giggle. There is a lot of business outside of the middle school classrooms. How this excitement is channeled into learning energy is the key for the teacher. I have very little control over their emotional stirrings when they arrive in my class. What happened on the bus that morning, on the playground at recess, or at home last night? The students also have different learning histories that affect the way they handle the workload in school.

There is no grouping in our middle school foreign language classes. All the students, including the special needs learners attend our classes in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It is a F.L.E.X. curriculum that the students follow for one trimester per language. In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade a small group, around 15 students per grade, has reading and assisted study instead of foreign language. The special needs teachers pass us the students' profiles where they describe the appropriate teaching strategies and accommodations to fit each learner. So students arrive in my classroom with their history, at various emotional and physical stages, their special needs, and their learning styles.

## The teacher

### *My experience as a student of foreign languages.*

It is actually from my meetings with special needs teachers, that I began to reflect on my own learning experience.

My mother is American and I should have learned how to speak English as a child but it did not happen. I started sixth grade knowing some Christmas carols that I learned from listening to a record. In the French educational system all sixth graders start a first modern language, often in addition to Latin. Even though I was a secondary school student in the 60's, the teaching approach of modern languages was still the one known as "The Grammar-Translation Method," a transposition of dead languages teaching method. Our learning was based on rote memory, memorization of vocabulary lists, application of grammar rules through paper and pencil exercises, and translations of foreign texts into French, and vice versa. The emphasis was on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. It was grueling and deadly.

The only vivid memories I have from six years of English instruction are from a British nun. She started the class everyday by making us sing "God save the Queen." She also taught us a variety of songs like "hicoridicoridock the mouse run up the clock," and we had to show with our hands the mouse movements. My first memories of second language learning are connected to music.

I then, entered an intensive Spanish course in tenth grade. Our teacher was a short Castilian lady, full of energy. She drilled us to pronounce correctly the famous Castellan “s” and would pretend to dance the flamenco, stamping her foot on the ground to model the stresses in the sentences. With her, I had to physically practice the rhythm of a language.

The best thing my parents ever did was to send me to England for two summers in a row and to Spain for one month. I obviously had to communicate in order to survive. In England the family’s daughter took me to museums in London. In a small notebook, I transcribed all the unknown words describing the artifacts, paintings, and artists. I did not know it at that time, but I am a visual learner and being able to see and sometimes touch helped to anchor a huge amount of new language in my memory.

The Beatles were becoming popular. My roommate played “Abbey Road,” and we danced to the tunes. At first, this music was disconcerting. Over time, the lyrics and the melodies seemed to become a part of me. I learned from total immersion, visual clues, music and intrinsic motivation. How can I put my students in the same context, where the language is alive, full of rhythm, music, and sights and one needs to act upon it?

The first summer at SIT I was introduced to Hebrew. I was overwhelmed by the fact that I had no previous knowledge to refer to. My fellow teachers helped me

when we performed skits but the real comfort zone was the songs. Singing with a group lowered my feeling of inadequacy and revived this inner joy I had when I was part of the high school chorus.

**My experience as a teacher** *(How I first discovered that movement works)*

I had been tutoring adolescents and adults, and had created French play groups for children age four to eight for several years. I was then hired by a company called I.E.S. where I coordinated, implemented, and taught their after school program for two years. The program in itself was not very appealing. It was taught through a story with a cheap booklet and a tape. The “television, computer game generation” was not too impressed by those materials. Nevertheless, the regional representatives of I.E.S. gave several training sessions and guidelines to implement their program. The approach suggested visuals, songs, and games, and it taught me a method. I realized that this method supported what I had done in an instinctive way in the French playgroups.

To keep elementary school children engaged in the I.E.S. program at the end of a long day was challenging. But the students were excited. They were learning and kept coming back. The key element was movement and rotation of activity every ten minutes. Even when the pupils were sitting on a carpet in a circle their hands were busy with simple games. I recycled games from my childhood, like goose, goose with a French song.

*Could this method be useful and be implemented in middle school?*

During those years teaching at I.E.S., I completed my teaching certification.

When I was then hired to teach in a public middle school, I did not consider that this approach was suitable for older children. I did not discard everything. I kept some of the I.E.S. strategies for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes: using visuals, tossing a ball, and teaching some songs.

Why 6<sup>th</sup> grade? Because we teach a “F.L.E.X.” program where the only guidelines are the themes. The teaching method is left to each individual teacher. I tried to implement those techniques in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade several times. But after a disastrous experience with a ball game in a volatile 8<sup>th</sup> grade class, I stayed with “traditional methods:” grammar drills, and pen paper exercises. My reservations on using kinesthetic activities, rhythm, and music were based roughly on these limitations:

- The number of students per class
- The program to be covered in only four periods per week
- The risk of losing control of the group
- The noise level
- The childishness of the activities
- The impression I had to make on the school administration
- The fact that I was traveling from room to room and had to carry all sorts of materials.

For some strange reason, I was unaware that I was going against what had been successful for me as a learner and as an elementary school age teacher.

It is not just the first summer at S.I.T. but also the Interim year practicum that forced me to take a second look at my teaching techniques. Weekly journaling and answering the questions brought up by my adviser made me think about helping middle school students learn better. I also took chances and experimented with ideas from the teaching approaches explored during the summer. I realized that some of my techniques came from the Audio lingual method while Suggestopedia fitted better my personality.

## **Foreign language learners: stepping into a new world.**

### *Factors which affect the learning of a second language.*

“Every body can learn a language,” said Gattegno. Yes, unless a child is born with brain damage she will learn how to speak her mother’s tongue. But to learn a second language is affected by a series of factors. The affect plays a main role. How motivated is the student, what are his needs, what previous experiences has he had with learning his own language and encountering another language?

At this age of uncertainty, family support plays a big role. A parent’s attitude towards a second language acquisition and its culture makes a difference. If a parent has learned or shows interest in a second language, or if family members such as grandparents speak another tongue, the child enters the class with a

positive attitude. He can see a purpose, and he is usually the one who asks for additional vocabulary. His learning is both acknowledged by his family and his teacher. As stated before, our community is filled with people from different countries, so the parents are open to foreign language instruction.

But the student's motivation can be affected by how he learned his own language. Inherent difficulties in spelling and in reading will interfere with a second language acquisition.

The middle school child is run by his emotions. Learning takes place when he is engaged, excited, and when he feels emotionally safe. The teacher's responsibility is to make him feel welcome and respected.

This age group has a lot of energy. The trick for the teacher is to channel this energy flow into a learning experience. When I consider my student's physical and mental well being I keep thinking of Ted Sizer's description of a school day. "One has to shadow kids for a day or two to be forcibly reminded of what it is like to change subjects abruptly every hour, to be talked at incessantly, to be asked to sit still for long periods, to be endlessly tested and measured against others, to be moved around in cohorts by people who really do not know who you are, to be denied any civility like a coffee break and asked to eat lunch in twenty three minutes" (Horace's Compromise p. xi).

When I realize that those children spend almost seven hours of their day sitting in a chair (except during physical education and maybe drama), it amazes me. I wonder how many adults would accept to be in this situation for half of their waking hours.

Beside the affect, a child's cognitive ability must also be considered when learning a language. According to Jean Piaget, the ability to deal with abstract concepts (called the formal operational stage) starts around the age of 11. It seems to me that a good number of middle school age students have not reached this stage. Therefore, they have difficulties dealing with grammar presented in a formal way. These students would benefit from concrete experiences. Vocabulary could be presented through direct experiences, manipulation of real objects, and pictures, all set in a meaningful context. ("Middle School an Foreign Languages: A view for the Future," M. Met, 1996)

A student's cognitive ability also develops according to his learning style or multiple intelligences, according to Howard Gardner. "Now that we know about the enormous differences in how people acquire and represent knowledge, can we make those differences central to teaching and learning? If we ignore these differences, we are destined to perpetuate a system that caters to an elite, typically those who learn best in a certain, usually linguistic or logical mathematical manner. On the other hand, if we take these differences seriously,



each person may be able to develop his or her intellectual and social potential more fully.” (Intelligence Reframed p.92 ).

### *Analysis of middle school learning styles.*

This is the second week of September with a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class. I have several students from last year in this class, among them Joshua, who participates with enthusiasm. Because he already knows me, he sometimes lingers at the end of class to talk. Curious, I ask him; “how is it that you remember so much from last year?” He replies, “ because last year we played all kind of games; this is how I learn best.” Josh was not an “A” student last year, and from what I recall he was somewhat jumpy but he retained orally most of the materials taught.

“Most children assume that knowledge just happens to them, that it is handed to them by some parent like seer as if it were a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Rarely are they asked how they learned something and how their way may be special.”Ted Sizer ( Horace Compromise p. 3 ).

I did ask my students how they learn. While reading material on Multiple Intelligence theory, I found a checklist adapted by R. Mook from Armstrong (1992) with an additional section on the Naturalist Intelligence adapted from Fogarty (1997). I consulted with our school system psychologist on the validity of this checklist. She estimated that the language of this evaluation form was understandable by middle school students. Nevertheless, she considered that the section on intrapersonal intelligence was far ahead of these students’ age

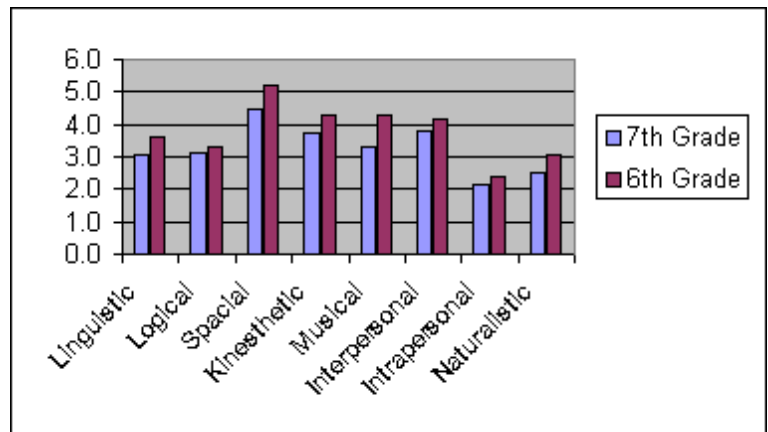
group, because it is a metacognitive ability that develops with experience and maturity. I asked four classes, two sections of 6<sup>th</sup> grade and two of 7<sup>th</sup> grade to fill out this form. I told them that it was not a test, and that there were no right or wrong answers. They also had the option to stay anonymous. The results are presented in the following charts.

**Multiple intelligence checklist scoring for the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Doherty**

**Middle School: October 2000.** *Each category is scored 0-7 (7 = high) by individual students answering the survey*

Total raw scores:		
# Students	7th Grade	6th Grade
Linguistic	94	141
Logical	97	128
Spatial	138	203
Kinesthetic	116	167
Musical	103	166
Interpersonal	117	163
Intrapersonal	67	92
Naturalistic	77	120

Average scores for each student		
	7th Grade	6th Grade
Linguistic	3.0	3.6
Logical	3.1	3.3
Spatial	4.5	5.2
Kinesthetic	3.7	4.3
Musical	3.3	4.3
Interpersonal	3.8	4.2
Intrapersonal	2.2	2.4
Naturalistic	2.5	3.1



The most prevalent intelligence shared by the four groups is the visual/spatial intelligence. “It features the potential to recognize and manipulate the patterns of wide space (those used for instance by navigators and pilots) as well as the pattern of more confined areas (such as those of importance to sculptors,

surgeons, chess players, graphic artists, or architects.” (Gardner: Intelligence Reframed 1999 p. 42).

The second most prevalent intelligence shared by these middle school students is the kinesthetic one that Gardner describes as “the potential of using one’s whole body or parts of the body (like the hand or the mouth) to solve problems or fashion products. Obviously, dancers, actors, and athletes foreground bodily kinesthetic intelligence.” p.42

The third place is shared by both musical and interpersonal intelligences. The musical intelligence is the capacity to perceive, express, and transform musical forms, and to recognize and use rhythmic patterns. The interpersonal Intelligence involves the ability to work cooperatively with others in a group, as well as the ability to communicate well with others.

The Intrapersonal Intelligence, which is the capacity to understand oneself, may be weakest in this age group because young teenagers have not yet acquired the maturity and the experience to analyze philosophical questions such as “Who am I?”, “What is my destiny?”, “What is larger than me?”.

Interestingly the linguistic and logical mathematical intelligences, which are the most valued by the school system, are not the strongest learning styles among

the seventy students evaluated. In only one 7<sup>th</sup> grade class did this intelligence place in the top three among the students tested.

## **What are the implications of this finding on a teaching approach?**

The results of this evaluation confirmed some of my intuitions and practices. Furthermore, the awareness of multiple intelligences in my classrooms gave me a pattern to build my lessons plans. Today I label in the margin of my lesson plan each section or activity. I make a point to have at least one visual spatial, rhythmical, or musical activity per class and I try to associate each one with movement.

### *Kinesthetic and visuals: "Can I see?" means "Can I touch?"*

I present new vocabulary with either pictures on transparencies, posters, or real objects. When the students have in their text the pictures represented on the transparencies, I ask them to touch them while I say the word. I distribute posters and real objects. After I show and say the new words, students hold up the poster or the object. They especially like to hold and touch objects like plastic fruit and clothes. In fact, to pull out a collection of baby clothes from a bag really



maintains their attention. They have a multitude of questions: "Who was wearing those clothes, how

old is she now, do they come from France? “

Last week a student brought the clothing he was wearing when he came back from the hospital: a collection of cabbage patch doll clothes. He was one pound eight ounces. The students were moved and fascinated at the same time. I find that awakening their curiosity, giving them real objects to hold or touch, or moving just their arms and hands helps them to retain new materials. After several classes of practice we can play games or do an activity that looks like a game.

I use, of course, a variety of ball games. A new one is with a multicolor ball. When the student catches the ball, he has to name the color underneath his thumb in the target language.

I have, through the years, built collections of cards which allow us to play Memory, or “Go fish” games, preferably sitting on carpeted floors for a change of position. These group activities also develop people skills, the interpersonal intelligence. This year, when we learned the alphabet, instead of using pre-made visuals, I asked students to make a contribution. Each student drew a letter on a piece of construction paper. I did not give specific instructions, and was surprised by the result. Each letter is an original colorful creation. The letters pinned around the room allowed us to play several, now very popular, games. The basic one consists of recognizing a letter and touching it on the walls. The class is divided

in several teams where each player has a number. The teams stand in a row. I call a student number and a letter. The player who finds and touches this letter first, wins a point for his team. On our first try, I called the students' numbers in order. They asked me to do random calls. For a variation of this game, I call a word already known, either a person name or a previously learned vocabulary. The student has to locate the first letter of that word. The students themselves have suggested a more difficult version of this activity. I pick a word and each player has to physically spell it by touching each letter around the room.

The teacher next door has been wondering what this taping on our common wall is about. I have apologized with a false look of contrition, because this activity involves the student at 99%. It requires listening recognition, visual attention, athletic abilities, and teamwork. It works with both boys and girls, with any symbols or pictures. The self-made materials give the students a sense of



ownership. It is not just an “L”. It is my pretty “L” with purple dots and “Nobody better tear it apart.”

Furthermore, to see on Leon’s face the inner joy for winning a point for his team makes my entire day (Leon is a special needs student

whose extreme difficulty with short term memory effects his comprehension skills, auditory learning, and ability to follow directions.)

Another popular activity is based on the idea of “Etcher Sketcher.” Each pair of students has an erasable board, an erasable marker, and rag. The board is the support for a variety of activities: a hangman game for spelling and later vocabulary review, a picctionary for practice, an answer to a charade. The students write, draw, hold up their boards, erase, get points.....instant feed back, instant reward. Those fast challenging activities require cooperation, focus, and taking turns. The skills involved are auditory, spatial, kinesthetic, and interpersonal.

### *Kinesthetic and rhythm.*

A language without its mountains and valleys, its stresses and pauses is hardly recognizable. It does not matter if one knows how to spell the word, without the stress on the correct syllable, the interlocutor has a hard time being understood. (How many times have American people asked me to repeat a word because of a wrong stress!) Students need to hear and practice the beat of a second language.

According to my survey, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class seems to be very musical. We are reviewing the days of the week and I ask if someone remembers a song learned last year. John volunteers with a voice that could crack a whole tray of crystal glasses. The students refrain from laughing. I thank John, remodel the song, and

ask the class to practice with me. They comply shyly. But when we begin to clap, this group suddenly becomes very enthusiastic. Several volunteers have created a rap and a clap for the vowels.

One student taught us a clapping activity called Concentration .The game is played standing up in a circle. Each student chooses a number in the target language. The whole group claps their hands and taps on their legs while saying “concentration, concentration estan listos, concentration, concentration vamos.” The “it person” in the group says her number and someone else’s number. This new person must continue the chant in rhythm, saying her number and a third number. It is very difficult to keep up with the rhythm, the clap and to remember someone else’s number at the same time. It deserves its name, concentration. But the rhythm carries the group and helps them practice the correct pronunciation.

Last year, one colleague gave me last year the idea to patty cake verbs. While the girls do not have any problems with this activity, some boys feel silly. A possible trick is to tell the boys to use boxing movements. How many times do the students mispronounce the “ent “ endings of the “ils” form of the verbs? Conjugating verbs while clapping and saying the endings corrects the mispronunciation. With the movement, the chant is ingrained into the learner’s brain.



## *Kinesthetic and music*

Besides rhythm, each language has its own musicality. The music of the words creates poems. Some people have a good ear. Others do not, but we all remember learning our alphabet in the form of a song.

It seems that previous generations of French students have learned traditional songs like “Alouette.” Most of the time I do not teach traditional staples. Instead, I adapt the tune of well-known melodies to a theme. The tune of “Frere Jacques” works well with the days of the week both in French and Spanish. This year I first presented to the French class the days of the week with the rods used in the Silent Way: one colored rod to represent the first and second syllable of the day, a smaller one of a different color to represent “di.” The student can hear and see the similarity of endings in each day of the week except for Sunday, where “di “ becomes a prefix. They can also start to sense a form of rhythm that will be stressed by the song.

A journal entry I wrote in October 2000 illustrates this activity.

“In this 6<sup>th</sup> grade class I had introduced the days of the week in that manner. The class divided in three had sung in rounds to the tune of “Frere Jacques. “ On a Monday morning I did a quick survey and asked how many students could play a musical instrument. Several raised their hands and I suggested that they bring their instruments on the following Friday. It just happens that on Fridays they

have band practice. So last Friday, last period, one student entered the door with his instrument case. Two students rushed to me and asked to go and get their instruments. They were very apologetic: "Mrs. Gregory we forgot." The truth is that I did, too. Now several students were in class putting together their instruments; others were pulling out their music. Some started rehearsing. I stopped the hustle bustle and explained my lesson plan for the day. The music would come in the last twenty minutes of the period. I watched the clock and gave the signal: time to play. The musicians put their clarinets together as if they were mounting a gun before they left the trenches. They were as serious as if their lives depended on it. They started rehearsing with fellows holding the music sheets in front of them. The teacher next door entered the class and asked us if we could play quietly because she was giving a test. I offered an alternative. We could watch the video *Tele Français* now and play another day. The proposal was put to a vote. They really wanted to play now; the question became where. One suggested the cafeteria, so off we went. I am amazed that by now, they were not discouraged. The class played and sang in rounds three times in front of the astonished janitors who were sweeping the crumbs from the last lunch. "

Playing music and singing can really lift up the spirit of a group and give it a sense of community. In the example above, the group traveled to another location. Instead of breaking the momentum, this change of décor gave the students a sense of freedom and novelty. Music can cement a group, it can also help a single individual to flourish.

Here is a story of a student who was in my French class last year.

At the beginning of the school year, I consulted with a Russian colleague who teaches French to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We reviewed the lists together and she gave me an evaluation of each student. She saw fit to use adjectives considered to be politically incorrect by American teachers. There are of course “excellent” students but unfortunately there are also those who are “disorganized” and even worse... “lazy.” Dale arrived in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class with the following recommendation: disorganized, often absent, seldom does his homework. He is a big boy with a round childish face. He often exhibits original hairdos, and wears outfits almost as noticeable as his hair. So during the first months of school only his external appearance caught my attention. I complimented him one day on his black and white 50s shoes. He received the compliment with an amused smile.

During the first week of school, I gave an evaluation exam on last year’s program. Dale received 53/100. In September and October his homework assignments were either skimped or forgotten. He came once or twice after school to complete some work. In November he received a 73/100 at his review exam. Often sitting in the back of the room, he listened but did not make himself noticeable. Then we attacked the new part of the program. I noticed that Dale was less often absent. Even though he did not do all the required work, he started to get some “B”s. In order to introduce the stressed pronouns, for two to three classes in a row, I chose to play the song “Qui a vole les biscuits de la boite a

biscuits, qui toi, pas moi.” I first played this song as background music while the students entered the class. Then I presented the new vocabulary. One day Dale passed the door whistling the tune and when we did an application exercise he was the first one to hum and say “qui toi, pas moi, alors lui.”

We were approaching the holidays. I was teaching weather expressions and decided to teach to the class the song; “Vive le vent.” I did a series of oral drills, among them a cloze dictation. I noticed that not only did Dale recognize and understand the vocabulary, but also that he was able to reproduce the musical phrases with an excellent French accent. I congratulated him without exaggeration. I also complimented the rest of the class. So began a tacit understanding. Every time we sang Dale directed the chorus. One day I ran into his mother in a parking lot. She said, “I do not know what you are doing with this child but he finally has decided to work.”

What has my teaching method triggered in this student? Last summer at SIT I discovered several approaches. Among them Suggestopedia and C.L.L have retained my attention. Those two approaches share a common denominator: the importance of music in language instruction. I also discovered in the Hebrew classes that singing with a group was creating a sense of community and was bringing me a form of inner joy. I also felt that through singing, my accent was better. In light of these discoveries I decided this year to introduce songs in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, an activity saved in the past for the 6<sup>th</sup> graders. To my surprise,

the students have insisted on singing a song to illustrate the “ir” verbs several times. I am also working on the oral side of the language by doing pronunciation drills and by insisting on the accent. Most of the students are finally pronouncing correctly the “ent” endings of the first conjugation. Obviously, these activities help the students who are oral learners. For a student like Dale, this is the area where he shines, while he has to make a tremendous effort in writing.

A while ago Dale was collecting his belongings at the end of class and was the last one in the room. I took this opportunity to ask him about his “new” motivation. He said, “Mrs. Gregory, the day you told me that I have a very good French accent and that I could easily learn a foreign language, that gave me the desire to work.” Then he added, “Before I was not doing my homework. Now that I am doing it, I find that everything is easier and fun”. In the past months, Dale’s self confidence is striking. He volunteers to read, and to play roles.

Today even though Dale does not get an “A” on all his written work, his effort, participation, and class attention place him at a good B level. Most importantly I realize how much he has progressed.

I was hesitating to integrate songs in the “oldest” children’s curriculum, but now I am glad I did. Even though some students do not feel comfortable singing, the majority enjoy this activity and it enhances their ability to learn the language.

I use music in many different ways. I often play soft classical music or a tape of relaxing sounds like ocean waves when the students are taking a test. Research on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders shows that students' reading comprehension increases with music in the background (Giles 1991). Another technique is to use a melody as the carrier of the targeted language in a lesson, as illustrated in the Dale's story.

A third way to incorporate music is to associate it with movement. I think that dancing would be a powerful learning experience. Only a few students at the middle school age will dare to dance in a classroom. Most of them are too self-conscious to do so. To break this shyness barrier and incorporate movement, I use a method presented at SIT that consists of cutting the lyrics of a song in strips. Each student receives one strip. When the song is played she has to glue her line to a poster board. This activity requires each one to listen and focus. The students have to move quickly and cooperate. When I did this activity I observed that the pupils were helping each other, calling to the one who was missing his line, going to the board, and reorganizing the lyrics. This activity may look very hectic but it is not. The whole class gets a sense of satisfaction when the song is completely rebuilt.

### **The student's voices.**

Before the 6<sup>th</sup> graders rotated to Spanish, I asked for some feedback. I wrote these three questions on a transparency:

1. What did you like best about this class?
2. What was your favorite activity?
3. What improvements do you recommend for this class?

On that day, 38 students were present. To question number one, 27 students answered that games or activities that involved movement were the best feature of the class.

To question two, 14 said the letters, numbers kinesthetic games were their favorite activity; 13 liked the projects which consisted of making a calendar poster for the month of their birth, drawing monsters on large sheet of paper and labeling their body parts, creating fashion models with catalog cut outs. Also 11 students liked to watch the videos in French: “tele Francais” and Muzzy,

For question three, their list of suggestions included the following: “Less dumb songs like ‘head, shoulders, knees and toes’”, “More coloring”, “More quiz and more French words to learn”, “More hand outs”, “More outdoors activities”, “More games”, “No projects”, “Sitting where we want”. One said “I dun’ no “ and five wrote “I would not change anything.”

What I found the most fascinating in this feedback was the huge range of language. Some students used sophisticated words and analyzed the situation “ I liked the “hands on” activities instead of workbook pages “ or, “I liked the fun and

friendly atmosphere.” Others just wrote down one-word answers. Some were stuck on the same idea: “Muzzy, more movies, watching Muzzy “.

Overall, this feed back tends to prove my point: Middle school age students need movement. They thrive on activities that not only get them out of their chairs but also give them the opportunity to use their talents and work with others. They, sometimes, also need to rest and just watch “Muzzy”.

## **Expanding the activities to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.**

Before last year, I had reservations about using kinesthetic activities in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades based on a series of reasons:

- The number of students per class: In a room packed with 29 or 30 students, the available free space is limited if they sit in rows. My first action this year was to pair the pupils. This arrangement provided more “moving space” and avoided the negotiations about “ who works with who”. By grouping two pairs I have quads, which is a good number for a team.
- The program to be covered in only four periods per week: The integration of kinesthetic activities seems to slow down the amount of curriculum covered. The question is, what is my goal? Coverage or mastery?. I have decided to go with the second option. This year the results are obvious. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade there are no grades below C as opposed to several D’ s, and one or two F’ s last year.
- The risk of loosing control of the group: I actually find that after a “ fun” activity the students are more able to focus. The class atmosphere is lighter.



- The noise level: The classroom walls are well insulated. I have not heard many complaints from the administration or my colleagues. I personally think that laughter and excitement are a part of a good class atmosphere.
- The childishness of the activities: Actually even adults like to play games, clap to an uplifting beat, or hum a melody while doing chores.
- The impression I had to make on the school administration: Happy children make my school principal happy.
- The fact that I was traveling from room to room and had to carry all sort of materials: I am no longer running into this problem because for the first time this year I am teaching all my classes in the same room.

Nevertheless, there is a downside to this approach. This kind of approach requires a tremendous amount of energy from the teacher. The students are like children who discover the joy of being pushed on a swing by someone else. They ask for more: more jumping jacks, more games, or pseudo games. After teaching five classes in a day, how much energy is left to coach an interactive eighth period?

This approach also requires a lot of thinking, not only about the materials to be created but also about the conception and the orchestration of the activity. One might include in a lesson plan, for example, an activity demonstrating the negative forms of the verbs. The questions are: how am I going to do this? What materials am I going to use: the board, cards, stickers? What setting: the whole

class: pairs, teams? If I decide on teams, how many per team? I also need to have clear directions in mind. To do so, I personally have to play the scenario in my head ahead of time. I need to define the desired output, and some form of a reward system.

The time of the day is also crucial. I found that kinesthetic activities which involved moving around the classroom are better in the morning, while hands-on activities are more suitable in the afternoon when the students are more restless. The first type perks the students up. The second one calms them down, and helps them to stay focused.

Finally some activities have to be crafted according to the personality of a class. Some groups need a lot of structure while others function well and become very creative when just given some guidelines. In other words, I need to hold some classes very tightly while with others I can let ride the waves.

## **Conclusion**

As a student of foreign languages, I was taught with the paper and pencil translation method. But my memories are from teachers who used songs and some form of kinesthetic activity. Furthermore the languages were fixed in my brain when they became alive through my trips abroad. When I started to teach my tendency was to duplicate the method I had been taught in high school. Through seminars, workshops, and courses I discovered other approaches. While developing a curriculum for French play groups I started to use visuals, hands on activities, and songs. My instinctive approach was confirmed by the

I.E.S. guidelines given to teach elementary after school programs. I was reluctant at first to import this interactive pedagogy in the middle school classes. It seemed too childish. However, when I took the time to reflect, research, and got support from teaching colleagues, I was able to implement these approaches effectively. Studying how students learn helped me to focus on this age group's characteristics. Acquiring a language thru movement, rhythms, and music is well adapted to middle school students with their bountiful energy and restlessness. I have found that the students themselves are resourceful and that it is essential to include them actively in the design of the activities.

I now believe that sensitivity to different intelligences and learning styles can help reach more students, increasing both teaching efficacy and efficiency. Active and creative approaches in the classroom seem to produce happier students who enjoy foreign language and who retain the material better from year to year.



