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Written Feedback in the Classroom and Beyond

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WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an in-depth look at the experimentation with and use of written feedback with middle school foreign language students and their parents. It includes my own learning about giving written feedback, the process by which I have trained my students to give written feedback, and finally the extension of written feedback beyond the classroom, to the parents. Examples of written feedback forms and formats are included, as well as completed examples.

ERIC Descriptors:

Classroom Community
Experimental Teaching
Home and School
Parent Support
Second Language Learning
Student Teacher Relationship
Written Student Feedback

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INTRODUCTION

After teaching French for 19 years in public school, I finally decided to seek a Masters degree at the School for International Training. During the two summers of classes there, I was introduced to the practice of giving meaningful, written feedback to my teachers. I felt quite uncomfortable and unsure about the whole process at first. I had never before, as a student or a teacher, been asked to tell a teacher what I thought he or she could do to help me learn better. It took some personal retraining and lots of practice for me to learn to be honest and give valuable feedback, rather than just being nice and giving compliments.

What I realized along the way was that I, too, wanted my students to be able to give me meaningful feedback. I believed, and still do believe, that if my students are more aware of their own learning, they can then voice their thoughts and feelings about it. I also believed that this process would help me to know my learners better, help them to know me better, and help all of us to improve our learning - my awareness of my learners and their learning of French and of themselves as learners.

With all that in the forefront, I set out on my IYTP year with one of my goals being to try using written feedback in my classes. I formulated a plan, carried out that plan and adjusted some aspects of the plan as the year progressed. On a whim, I thought about trying feedback with the parents of my students. The more I reflected on that idea and thought about it, the more I liked it and went ahead and took the risk, not knowing what would come of it.

What I found from my experiment in written feedback was that it helped the process of building community in my classroom. The students knew that I cared about them and their learning, they learned to express their feelings about their

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learning, and the student-teacher relationship seemed better than any other year that I had taught before this one. There was truly a sense of community with teacher and learners working together to learn.

In The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer states that "The model of community we seek is one that can embrace, guide, and refine the core mission of education - the mission of knowing, teaching, and learning." [1] I have experienced, and continue to experience, that refinement of the core mission of education. My research and experimentation with written feedback has served to help me refine my own core mission of knowing, teaching, and learning. I know my students better, I know myself better (as a learner and as a teacher), I am more aware of my teaching, I am more informed about my teaching, and my students are more aware of their own learning.

In this paper, I will explain in great detail about parent feedback, which is the main focus of this research project. Although initially formulated as a passing thought, this aspect of my written feedback experiment has turned out to be the heart and soul of this project. In soliciting written feedback from parents and their children, a powerful sense of community emerged which served to influence my teaching, my students' learning, and the parents' informed support of what was happening in the French classroom.

For the reader of this paper to be better informed and to understand my project, I feel that it is important to explain my teaching context. I teach in a public school in Portland, Maine. I teach sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students, ranging from age 11 to age 14. All are beginning level French students who have French for one quarter of the sixth grade year, two days per week for 45 minutes each time. In the seventh grade, students have French class four days per week for 45 minutes each class. In the eighth grade, classes meet daily (five times per week) for 45 minutes each day. Portland is a city with a population of

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[1] Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 94.

approximately 60,000 people of various and diverse backgrounds. Most are middle/lower-class working families, with more immigrants moving to the city each year. Many of the immigrants are from Somalia, Togo, and other African nations. These immigrant students are all in the sixth grade French program, but only enter the seventh and eighth grade French classes if their English language skills are adequate for studying a foreign language. This is determined primarily by the school's ESL teacher, who works with these students on a regular, daily basis. This decision is not based on a test, but rather on the ESL teacher's "subjective" decision.

It is my intention that this research project will be of interest and will be useful to teachers in general and, in particular, to foreign language teachers. I have documented the process of using written feedback with middle school French students, then the practice of extending that process beyond the classroom to the parents. I hope that other teachers, in reading this paper, will see value in not only using written feedback in the classroom, but also in the extension to incorporate parents in the process.

CHAPTER I

FIRST EXPOSURE

My first experiment with using written feedback in my classroom began at the start of the school year during my IYTP year. I entered the classroom in September knowing that I had decided to work on this goal. I had spent time researching written feedback forms and formats that I thought would work with younger students and I had formulated a plan for the beginning of the process. I started requesting feedback from my students at the end of the second week of school. I realized that I needed to present this process to my students in a way that would encourage them to take it seriously, that would let them know that I was taking it seriously, and that would inform them that this process would be helpful to me. For their first exposure to this process, I decided to ask them to answer three simple questions:

1. What is working well for you in French class?
2. What is not working well for you in French class?
3. What suggestions do you have or what could I do to help you in this class?

At first students seemed a little tentative about answering these questions. It seemed when I read their comments the first time that they were unsure of what to write and mostly complimented me, saying that I was nice, that I didn't give too much homework but certainly gave enough, and that they liked French class and thought it was fun. They tried, but some wrote such things as: "I like when we don't have homework." or "I like playing games." I did not want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I felt that something was lacking. I thought that this was probably a natural part of learning how to give meaningful feedback. So, when I

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returned their feedback papers to them, we spent some time in each class discussing what honest feedback means. As a class, each group came up with samples and suggestions of examples that did not specifically relate to French class. Then, once we all agreed that they had a concrete understanding of what types of things they might discuss, I asked for feedback from them every two weeks. Over the next few weeks, I asked the students not only to answer those three questions, but also to tell me why those things were working or not working for them. Ah-hah! Now I was getting somewhere. Their answers became more purposeful and they started saying "why" with more thought to their feedback responses. They said things like: "I like when we get to move around because I have a hard time paying attention when I have to sit a long time." and "I really liked working in a group because people helped me do the work." These types of responses were more valuable to me as a teacher in planning future classes and activities. They were also more valuable to the students because they were learning to give feedback while becoming more aware of themselves as learners. They had been provided with a great self-awareness learning experience. To be able to articulate their needs in writing to the teacher on a regular basis was a skill that they would hopefully always value.

ALTERED FORMAT

At this point in the year I decided that I would slightly alter the format. I knew that if I asked the same three questions every other Friday the students would soon get bored and not want to bother doing it. So, I thought that if I could vary the format each time they would gain several things from it. First, they would see that I had carefully thought out and planned ahead of time what it was that I wanted feedback on. Secondly, they would not be able to predict the feedback format and would, therefore, be more interested in it. Finally, varying the format would allow me to elicit different kinds of feedback, while expanding students'

awareness of themselves and their learning. So, in mid-October I asked my students to complete the following statements:

1. Something I learned in French class in the last two weeks was...

2. Something I need to practice more in French is...

3. Something I enjoyed in French class in the last two weeks was...

The students seemed to appreciate a change in the questions and to think about their responses before writing them and giving them to me. In answering the second question, students were being asked to take responsibility for their own learning. They had to think about themselves as learners and what they might be able to practice on their own or with help to improve their learning. It seemed like a logical next step in the process and I found in their responses a great deal of honesty. They were making progress in knowing themselves as learners and knowing what worked well to help them in learning a second language.

"SYLVIE"

One student, "Sylvie", wrote on her feedback that what she needed to practice more was "being organized." She said that she was having a lot of trouble being organized and saving all her French papers. I responded to her on her feedback paper that we could set up a folder for her in my classroom where she could leave all her French papers and not lose them or shove them in the bottom of her backpack or locker. She spoke to me after class and we set up a folder for her. I remember reflecting afterward about her feedback and thinking that all she needed was help with organization, that she wasn't neglecting her work, and that I may never have known that if I hadn't asked her for feedback.

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MID-YEAR SELF-ASSESSMENT

As the year progressed, I experimented with different forms and formats and found it quite useful to vary these. In February, I asked students to complete a mid-year self-assessment of their learning and study habits in French class. They had, by this time, become familiar with thinking about their learning and about themselves as good learners. They completed the self-assessment with great care, much thought, and knowing that it would be very helpful to me and also to them. The results included many students saying things like: "I never thought about doing some of these things to help myself." or "Wow! That's a great idea. I'm going to try it.", referring to some of the items on the self-assessment form[2].

STUDENT GOALS

As I listened to them in class that day, I thought that this seemed like a good springboard to discussing goal-setting with them. We entered into a class discussion on that topic and ended by having each student choose two items on the self-assessment form[3] that s/he would like to make a commitment to work on for the rest of the school year in French class. They wrote their goals, they each kept a written copy of their own goals, and they each submitted a written copy of those goals to me. This gave us a new focus for future feedback sessions: they could reflect on and assess their own progress on the goals that they had set for themselves. Later in the year, in late May or early June, they did just that and they were very honest about their progress. I asked them to write whether or not they achieved each goal, what they had done to achieve each of the goals (specifically), and what they could do to achieve the goals that had not already

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[2] Helena Curtain, <u>Increasing the Success of Your Foreign Language Students</u> (Bellevue, WA: Bureau of Education & Research, 1998-99), 210.
[3] See Appendix, Figure #9

been achieved. In their responses, students showed responsibility for their learning. Some had actually done the things that they had agreed to work on, such as color-coding words in their notes, using one color for masculine words and a second color for feminine words. Others were very honest in saying that they had tried to work on their goals but had not really progressed much. Still others admitted that they had not worked on their goals at all. A discussion was held in each class during which students talked about possible goals for next year or the commitment to continue working on the same goal/s they had set for themselves this year. For me, the main point was that they were all aware of what they had or had not done, that they were all able to assess their own progress on their goals, and that they all took ownership for their level of success on the goals they had set for

themselves.

VALUE

The value of written feedback in my classroom is difficult to explain. I now find it impossible to think back on all the years that I taught without eliciting feedback from my students. I feel as though I've been given a gift. I am able to communicate better with my students and they are able to help me better inform my teaching, thereby improving their learning. They have continued to surprise me with their honesty, their willingness to take written feedback seriously, and their appreciation for the fact that I do actually read what they write and respond personally in writing to each of them.

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CHAPTER II

TAKING A RISK

Having experienced the power of feedback first-hand as a learner and as a teacher, I decided to experiment with incorporating the parents of my students into the feedback process. I feel that readers of this paper need to know that this decision was quite a risk for me to take. I have always been told that lawyers live by a rule which states that you should never ask a question if you're unsure of the answer you might get. Well, I was very unsure of the answers I would get, but I knew that this was something I wanted to try. It fit my written feedback goal, pushed me to the edge of my learning about feedback, and supported the work I was doing at my school around the learning results and the National Standards, which support parental involvement in their children's learning.

ORAL FEEDBACK AT CONFERENCES

At parent/teacher conferences that were held in late November at my school I received oral feedback from many parents. Several mentioned that their son/daughter was not being challenged in most of his/her classes, but that they were being challenged in French class. Parents stated that they were very pleased with what their child was doing and learning in French, that their child enjoyed the class, and that they wished to thank me for all my hard work. In reflecting on those conferences, I think that that was the inspiration for my decision to seek written feedback from parents. So, I created a feedback form[4], which I decided to send home with each student along with his/her mid-quarter

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[4] See Appendix, Figure #1

progress report for the second quarter. On that form, I asked each parent to sit with their child and discuss the items on the form, then to complete the form together. The form consisted of three items: what was working well in class for them and/or their child, what was not working well for them and/or their child, and any suggestions or information for me that might assist me in working with their child in French class.

FIRST RESULTS

The results of that first parental feedback experiment were enlightening for me. I learned a lot about my students, their parents, and myself. It surprised me to read how much the parents knew about what was going on in my class. It was very obvious that the parents had indeed sat down with their children to discuss this form and had filled it out together, but what surprised me the most was that it was obvious to me that the parents and students had talked about French class together before this feedback request had gone home. There was already a core knowledge and a good understanding of how French class was conducted, the activities that were planned and presented, and many more details than I believed might have been discussed at home!

Another surprising revelation for me was that it seemed like mostly mothers of students who completed the forms. There were some forms signed by fathers, but I would estimate that 90-95% of the forms were completed by mothers. This was something that continued to be consistent throughout my research project. I'm really not sure what it means, as the contact that I have with parents in person at Open House and Parent/Teacher conferences seems to be fairly equal numbers of mothers and fathers. I can only guess that perhaps mothers tend to get home from work earlier in the evening or that perhaps more fathers were involved in the discussions with the students, but then the mothers

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signed the forms, for whatever reason.

My summary of the responses on the parental written feedback form are as follows. For the most part, parents and students said that they liked the variety of activities that we were doing in class. They said it helped the students to stay interested. Overwhelmingly, parents and students said that I give clear explanations which are easy to understand because I simplify them. They also said that my expectations are reasonable and clear. Many parents commented that the classes are well-structured, well-planned, and well-controlled. Most students and their parents liked receiving mid-quarter progress reports (weekly ones for those who requested them) and weekly "missing work" slips, so students can complete work that needs to be made up. Several parents and students said that they like the seating arrangement (horseshoe shape) because everybody can see and hear everyone else.

One thing that appeared on the feedback that did not seem to be working for some students was the seating arrangement. Several different parents said that their child would like his/her seat changed, one because she could not see the board well from her seat, others gave no reason. I decided to talk to those students individually and work out the seating if there was a legitimate reason for the request for a change. I also decided to revise the feedback form for next time, including the question "Why?" after each of the three questions.

Several parents said that drawing does not work well for their child and that students should be able to use computer graphics and/or magazine pictures for the pictures on their projects. For the remainder of the school year, I allowed students to use computer graphics and/or magazine pictures on any out-of-class projects or homework assignments. It was a simple enough request to honor and might not have come to my attention without this written feedback process.

Finally, on the last part of the form, where I asked for suggestions, there seemed to be two common threads in the responses. First, it was clear to me that

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parents and students wanted more conversational French in class. One parent even suggested some oral practice be required to be done at home (such as asking for bread at the dinner table). Keeping with this item, they suggested more cassette recordings of the students' own voices, singing French songs in class, and conducting some classes completely in French. I had incorporated some of those things into the classes already and worked on doing more conversation in all my classes throughout the remainder of the school year.

The second common thread was that students and parents would like the students to have French pen pals or to take a trip to France or Quebec. I have since attended a workshop on computer key pals and plan to try that with my four eighth grade classes this year. Pen pals seem to present a wonderful opportunity to open up many new learning experiences for students and add to their second language proficiency. Another great suggestion that came from the parents was for me to send home a monthly newsletter informing parents of what their children were doing in French class. I spoke with a colleague about it and I developed a form[5] to use whereby different students would actually complete it each month and it would go home to parents. I thought this was a wonderful idea because not only would parents be informed about their child's French class, but the students would take ownership of completing the monthly newsletter, signing their names to it, and taking pride in their work being published. So, beginning this school year, my students are publishing a monthly newsletter to go home to their parents - thanks to the parental written feedback! An additional benefit of the newsletter is that I feel it may be an aid for parents and students to discuss the class before completing the feedback forms that will be sent home this year.

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[5] See Appendix, Figure #2

WHAT I LEARNED

What I learned from this first experiment with student and parent feedback was that it was important to have a plan, not just to elicit feedback when I felt something was wrong or for my own reassurance. I found that asking for feedback on a regular basis allowed students to improve their skills at it and to be more honest in giving feedback.

I also learned that extending the feedback beyond the classroom to the parents was a powerful way to gain allies and to involve parents in their children's French class. The comments from the parents allowed me to gain insights about my students that they may not have given to me themselves, for example, that a particular student might benefit from using computer graphics instead of drawings.

One comment from my advisor during my IYTP made me think about a possible negative aspect of feedback. I realized that I needed to make sure not to present feedback to the students or the parents as a message that states that "if you don't like something, or something is too hard, or there is a problem, let us know and we will change it." I do not want the fact that I ask for feedback to ever be interpreted that I am "at the disposal" of my students or their parents. I am there to help them and to best serve my students and their needs, but I am not there to find out what is easiest for them and to comply to that. In the end, I decided that there has to be a fine balance in this whole process and that, as a professional, it is my job to present the written feedback to students and parents in a manner that will promote it as a process by which the teacher, the students, and the parents become more informed and help each other to provide what works best for all concerned.

I would like to end this chapter with a quote from a set of parents that I

received on their written feedback form: "We think what you are doing is fine. "Xavier" has more interest in French than any other language due to your teaching style! You bring excitement and enthusiasm to it! Overall, we feel "Xavier" is learning quite a bit and has more interest in foreign language than previous years."

CHAPTER III

RETURNING TO MY CLASSROOM

In returning to my classroom after my second summer at the School for
International Training, I formulated an organized written feedback plan. I decided
to again elicit written feedback from my students every two weeks, on Friday,
using various feedback forms and formats, much like the previous year with some
minor changes and adjustments. The piece that would be very different this time
was the parent involvement. I decided to elicit regular written feedback from
parents. I knew that I could not request feedback too often or parents wouldn't
value it and might just toss it aside and never complete it. So, my organized plan
was to send home an initial form[6] in the first week of school which would explain
the feedback process briefly, tell my beliefs about written feedback, and ask
parents and students to complete this first form together. On this form, I
requested that students and parents discuss the questions first, then write a
response that they both/all felt would be helpful for me to know. I decided on the
following questions for this first written feedback form of the school year:

1. Why did you decide to take French this year?

2. What would you like to learn in this class?

3. When school ends in June, what would you like to be able to do in
   French?

4. Of the four language skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking), which
   one are you best at?

5. Of those same four skills, which one is your favorite? Why?

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[6] See Appendix, Figure #3

INITIAL RESULTS

Out of the seventy-five students in my eighth grade classes, seventy-two feedback forms were returned completed. Parents and students had taken the time to discuss the form and fill it out. In general, students wanted to learn to speak French more fluently and to be able to carry on a conversation with a native speaker. Most said they took French this year because they had taken it last year and either they had enjoyed it or they had been successful at it (or both). In answering the questions about the four skills, students and parents responded overwhelmingly that the students are best at speaking and listening and by far their favorite skill is speaking. Following is the breakdown of the responses to those two questions.

Question #3: Of the four language skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking), which one are you best at?

Writing: 11

Reading: 14

Listening: 24

Speaking: 23

Question #4: Of those same four skills, which one is your favorite?

Writing: 12

Reading: 11

Listening: 15

Speaking: 34

MY CONCLUSION

I concluded from this feedback that students feel more comfortable hearing and speaking the language and that the skills they feel they are best at are also their favorite ones. Obviously, we like the things in life that we are best at, so that makes sense. As my reader, Susan, pointed out to me: "if second language learning follows the pattern of learning our first language, then students need to hear the sounds before being able to produce them. Infants and children spend many months "playing" with the sounds and creating patterns before beginning letter recognition. So, ... it shouldn't surprise us that our second language students crave speaking and enjoy listening ... it's a natural process!" What helped me most in the responses to this feedback were the reasons why students preferred speaking and listening. They gave reasons such as:

"Writing because I can express my feelings & thoughts in many ways"

"Speaking because you get to express yourself out loud"

"Reading because it allows me to interpret the words into my own mental pictures and it's relaxing"

"Speaking because you usually get to work in a group and discuss French words with your partners"

"Reading because I read a lot and I am always able to reread sentences instead of making someone repeat a sentence"

"Speaking because I realize how much I know then"

"Speaking, it's awesome just knowing that you're speaking another language"[7]

I realized from these comments that, first of all, the parents had spent time

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[7] See Appendix, Figure #4

with their children to discuss these questions and had helped the students formulate their thoughts and express them to me, but, secondly, and more importantly, the parents had, in the process, assisted their children in understanding the four skills more clearly and in discovering and articulating their own learning styles and preferences.

A GIFT

This seems to me like a great gift for parents, students, and teacher. How wonderful to have students discussing these things at home with their parents and to have parents supporting the French program by having these kinds of conversations at home with their children. An added benefit for parents and students is that they are given a focused purpose for discussing French class, rather than asking: "How is French class going?" and receiving the answer: "Fine.", end of conversation. I believe that giving parents and students a common topic and focus for discussing French class opens doors for all of us and gives parents the chance to talk with their child about school and to learn more about what is happening in their child's daily school life. I have come to believe that feedback is truly a gift to parents as it is a tool to open discussion at home about school. There is often a barrier between parents and students when it comes to discussing school at home. In our American culture, it is not "cool" for students to talk about school or their classes with their parents. This format gives parents and students that opportunity by giving them something to talk about, a conversation opener. I think it would be interesting to form a question around that for parents to respond to as a final, culminating feedback at the end of the year.

This type of written feedback is also a gift to teachers. What I have learned is that I receive feedback from parents with information that I might not have

otherwise known, that the student probably would not have written. Parents have informed me about such things as their child's learning styles, specific strategies that work best for their child in class, ways to best handle behavior issues with their child, and information about their child's work ethics. Most likely, that information would not have come from the student and it would have taken me weeks, perhaps months, to learn about some of those specific things. Via written feedback from parents, I knew up front within the first week of school how to best deal with those things. I was given the gift of knowing my students and their learning habits better, thereby allowing me to help them be successful in French class right from the very beginning, rather than having to problem-solve or call home for information after several weeks or months of poor performance by the student. What a truly helpful, valuable, and essential gift for the teacher!

CONTINUATION

In my feedback project, I decided that I will continue to elicit this type of information in an attempt to help parents and students become more familiar with such aspects of second language learning as the four skills, the writing process, thematic units, the feedback process itself, monthly newsletters, technology in the classroom, the learning results and content standards, portfolios, projects, homework, and any other concepts or aspects of learning French that I would like to involve them in.

OPEN HOUSE

At our school's yearly fall Open House in late September, parents followed their child's Wednesday schedule and attended 10-minute "classes" to meet teachers and get an overview of the class. I decided during this time to briefly

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introduce myself and the content of the course, then to spend some time talking about the new textbook and other materials students will be using in class. After that, I spent a couple minutes explaining my Classroom Research Project to them. I clearly defined the purposes of it: to complete my degree requirements for my Masters Degree at S.I.T., but also, and more importantly, to further my experimentation with written feedback. I told the parents how valuable it had been to me and to my students last year to engage in regular written feedback. I explained how students had improved their feedback skills and the quality of their feedback as the school year progressed. I gave several concrete examples of how the written student feedback had informed and directed my teaching (for example, students voiced their opinions that moving around and doing more "hands-on" activities had helped them to retain the knowledge better, so I've incorporated more of those types of activities regularly into my lesson plans). I ended each session that evening by giving the parents a two-page hand-out. The first page was a copy of the first student monthly newsletter[8] and the second page was a feedback form[9] asking how the Open House French "class" worked for them, how it might be improved for next year, and any other comments they had for me at that time. I explained to the parents before they left that I would not overburden them with feedback this year, but rather ask for some short written feedback at the middle of each quarter. I asked them to please sit down with their son/daughter at those times, discuss the feedback, then complete it together and have their child return it to me. Parents seemed receptive to the idea and some even stayed right there "after class" to complete it and return it to me right away. I think that my acknowledgement of the value of their thoughts, while being conscience of their busy schedules, was absolutely on target. If I had just given the form to them as they left the room, they probably would not have seen it as the worthwhile exercise that it was.

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[8] See Appendix, Figure #5
[9] See Appendix, Figure #6

The responses that I received from parents on the Open House written feedback forms overwhelmingly stated that my explanations were clear, useful, and well-organized. They acknowledged that I had informed them of the information they were seeking, while they understood that I had to do it in a limited amount of time (10 minutes). One parent said that my overview of the curriculum and materials was "succinct." He said that this worked for him because he has a short attention span as "Dominique" is his fourth child to attend our school.[10] In reflecting on Open House afterwards, I was pleased that I had organized my presentation ahead of time and had given thought to what parents would most likely be seeking for information. I had prepared a written agenda, which I posted on chart paper in front of the room. It read as follows:

- Bienvenue!

- Introduction

-Curriculum / Topics

-Text / Materials

-Feedback / Classroom Research Project

- Monthly Student Newsletter

- Questions?

- Merci!

I realized in my reflections that this visual agenda helped parents to see that I had thought about it earlier, that I had a definite purpose, and that I had organized a 10-minute "class" for them that would briefly give them the best possible overview of French class that I could in a limited amount of time. The posted agenda also helped me to be sure to include everything I had planned and to cover the same topics with all parents. Overall, it worked well and made for a successful, informative evening.

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STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION

Another area of this project that I instituted this year involves student self-evaluation. I decided to have students complete a weekly self-evaluation form[11], in which they rate their performance in French class each week. On the form, I asked them to assess their participation in class, their attitude in French class, whether or not they had all their supplies and their completed homework each day, how often they spoke French in class, their behavior in French class, and what they did this week to challenge themselves to learn more French. On the last section relating to challenging themselves, we discussed in class some things they might be able to do to earn those points, such as reading an article about something French (a French Olympic athlete, Pierre Trudeau's death, etc.), speaking French to a relative or tourist, looking up extra French words to use in class or on an assignment, or doing extra practice outside of class. After completing each section, students totaled their points (out of 24 possible points) and submitted the form to me. I discussed the process with all students, so they were aware that each week I would look at their self-evaluation and sign it if I agreed with it. If I disagreed with any section, I would revise it and write a comment explaining why I disagreed. I would then adjust their total points (higher or lower accordingly). The point values were broken down by section and the number of points in each section depended on how much or how often the student participated in that aspect of their learning. For example, in the area of class participation, a student could earn four points for volunteering in class often, three points for volunteering occasionally, two points for volunteering only when called on, and one point for volunteering almost never[12] . The final number

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[11] See Appendix, Figure #7
[12] See Appendix, Figure#7

of points they received was entered each week as a class performance grade. I found that students are amazingly honest and that they are tough on themselves in their evaluations of themselves. I have altered many of their evaluations to adjust the points and have had to increase many of them. The wonderful part of this aspect of my project is that students are now aware of things they can do to improve their self-assessments each week. I hear students talking about French commercials they've seen on television and trying to understand what the announcer is saying. (There have been several commercials that aired this fall on the major stations that are completely in French, including a car commercial, a shoe commercial, and a Wimbledon tennis commercial). Students are speaking French to their grandparents and other relatives in order to "get more points". They have found movies with French in them and English subtitles ("Passport to Paris" with Kate and Ashley Olsen). Students are making a conscious effort to ask in French during class to sharpen their pencil, get a drink of water, go to the bathroom, etc. It has proven to be a great motivation for the students and has raised their awareness of the language and culture and how it exists all around them.

The next step for me, then, was to ask the students and their parents to complete the self-evaluation together. I feel that raising the parents' awareness of these same areas of learning a language will only serve to benefit the students in their learning. Hopefully, parents will point out commercials, articles, etc. to the students and also become excited about it. My goal is that this will increase parental support and awareness of their child's French class and, therefore, increase the motivation and excitement surrounding the child's second language study in class as well as at home.

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A GLITCH

The down side of this part of my project was that parents were very vocal on their feedback forms about the self-evaluations. They felt that behavior should not be a part of their child's French grade and some were quite adamant that those grades be removed, as they had no part in reflecting their child's "knowledge" of French. I sat down and reflected on this feedback. I decided to remove the grades for the self-evaluations from my grade book. The reasoning behind that decision was two-fold. First, in my school system, all teachers give each student 3 different grades on each quarterly report card: an overall grade for the class, an effort grade (1=excellent, 2=satisfactory, 3=unsatisfactory), and a conduct grade (same scale as effort grade). Therefore, each student is already graded separately on their behavior in French class. It seemed unfair and possibly "double jeopardy" for some students for it to be included in their self-evaluation grades. Secondly, this was not a battle that I wanted to choose to "fight" with parents and administration. It seemed like a small problem that would be easy enough to fix at my level, without allowing it to snowball to administration and possibly beyond that. In my reflections about this issue, I decided on a plan to alleviate the problem. I eliminated the self-evaluation grades, I revised the self-evaluation form[13] to not include behavior or attitude but to still include the other items, I continued asking all students to complete the self-evaluations weekly, and I used the self-evaluations as a tool to discuss students' performance in French class with them and to determine their class participation grade for each quarter. The whole self-evaluation process was a learning experience for me as well as for my students and their parents. I will still ask the students and their parents to complete the self-evaluations together at the middle

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[13] See Appendix, Figure #8

of each quarter, giving parents the opportunity to discuss their child's participation, preparation, motivation, and self-direction in learning French. I learned a lot from the process and still value it as an important tool in assessing each child's performance, as well as an important tool in opening up conversations between parents and their children and between each student and me, their teacher. I decided to continue the process, without grading it, because it had proven to be such a great motivation for students in their overall awareness of the French language and culture. That seemed to be the best remedy for everyone involved. I had achieved my goal, which was to learn more about my students and had provided a tool for them to become more aware of and more responsible for their own learning. Since grading could possibly interfere with that process, I decided to eliminate that risk.

ADDED BONUS

During my reflections on the self-evaluation situation and in thinking about how best to handle it, I wondered what I should say to my students. I questioned whether or not to tell them that I was eliminating the self-evaluation grades, at the risk of having a couple students and parents feel that they had "won" or that they had me "at their disposal." In the end, after much reflection and much debate with myself, I decided to discuss the situation with each class. I began by reviewing with each group, asking them the reasons why we were doing regular written feedback. In every class, students gave responses such as:

"We do feedback so you can know what works well for us."
"Feedback helps you plan lessons for us."

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"You ask us for feedback because you want to know what works better for
us and what doesn't work so well."

"Feedback gives us a chance to tell you how we learn better."

It was obvious to me at this point that they understood the purpose of
feedback and that they were serious about doing it, realizing that it was important
to me, but also that it was an opportunity for them to help me, thereby helping
themselves. I wanted to be clear with them at this point that I was not just there to
fix things they felt were wrong. So, from this point, I then told them that I had
received many good comments on their feedback that they had completed with
their parents. I explained to them that there seemed to be some common threads
in the responses surrounding the self-evaluations and so I was going to look at
revising the process and the form to address those concerns. What ensued was
a wonderful oral feedback session in which students were honest about the
specific areas of the self-evaluation that were difficult for them and about the
areas that they thought were helpful. They said things like:

"I like the part that tells me what I can do to challenge myself outside of
class."

"The behavior part brings my grade down every time and that doesn't
really show my performance in French."

"I like having time to think about my own performance in French and
assessing myself, instead of just being graded by the teacher."

I realized from these discussions that students were not as concerned as
several parents were about the whole process. It appeared that by not including
the self-evaluations as a grade and revising some areas of the form, that the
problem would be solved without much ado. The students valued the process

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and felt that it was an important part of their learning and gave them an opportunity to reflect on their own learning. Obviously, this is an essential tool for them as they prepare for high school, college, and life in general!

OTHER COMMENTS

In addition to the self-evaluation comments, parents responded to the mid-quarter feedback form with various comments. On this particular form, I asked the following questions, listed below with sample responses.

1. What is working well for your child so far this year in French class?
   Please explain WHY.

"Having an organized learning environment. It keeps her on task."

"Reviewing the format before a quiz because he knows what and how to
   study."

"The extra help. Thank you!"

"Pace of class is good. He's able to keep up."

"The speaking French in class seems to be really helping his
   understanding."

2. What is not working well for your child this year in French class? WHY?

"The self-evaluations, but I'm not sure why."

"Not getting homework in on time."

"Warm-ups. They take up too much time."

"Not studying. Would rather go outside and play."

3. Something that my child has learned in French this year is...

"Family members"

"Making sentences negative"

"Telling time - she finally understands it!"

"Writing her autobiography"

4. Something that my child and I agree that s/he needs to practice more is:

"Irregular verbs"

"Her notes"

"Speaking French at home"

The last question on this form asked parents and their son/daughter to look at a list of suggested strategies for French class and to choose two of them that the student was willing to work on for the remainder of the school year. Some that were chosen are:

- Talk in French with a friend or relative who knows French
- Study/review what we did in French class every evening
- Try to use the new vocabulary we are studying in nightly assignments
- Keep a list of new vocabulary in the back of my notebook
- Read out loud from the text to practice on my own
- Study/review my French with a friend or relative who knows French
- Review corrections/comments made by my teacher on my work
- Make and use flash cards for studying/practicing
- Use pictures to help me remember words/concepts
- Use color coding to help me remember gender, major ideas
- Write myself notes in French
- Read French children's books regularly

Students and parents would be asked later in the year on subsequent feedback forms to assess where the child was at in working toward the goals that they had chosen on this form. This process gave the students a choice, allowing them some freedom in their goals and also allowed them to discuss these goals with their parents, changing their goals or adjusting them if desired. Hopefully,

this would give them an opportunity for reflection on these goals later and allow
for good conversation around those goals between parents and students.

CHAPTER IV

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

I plan to continue using written feedback in my classes as part of the regular program for students, parents and teacher. It has proven to be indispensable to my teaching, my students' learning, and in better informing parents about French class and their child's learning.

I'm not sure that I will ever find the perfect form or format for eliciting written feedback from students and parents, or that there even is such a form, but there remain for me some questions that I would like to explore further.

PLANNING WELL

First, I think that the form I use each time I elicit feedback, whether from students or parents, needs to be well thought out and planned for that particular time. It needs to be written with that audience in mind and must ask specifically what it is that I wish to know at that time. I would like to do further research in this area and continue working with different forms that may better reflect the type of feedback and information I need in order to better inform my teaching.

HOW OFTEN?

Secondly, I still wonder about the amount of times to elicit feedback from parents. As it is a "gift" to them, I would not want it to become a burden or to overuse it so that it loses its meaningfulness or freshness. How do I know how many times is enough but not too much? For now, I am comfortable with asking

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parents to complete written feedback at the beginning of the year, in the middle of each of the first three quarters, and a final year-end summative feedback. I currently feel that that gives parents ample opportunity to respond and to discuss French class with their children, without getting bored with it or thinking "oh, no, not again". Something to consider would be to include in the year-end written feedback a chance to give feedback on the feedback process itself. This could include, but not be limited to, how often it was elicited, the types of questions asked, the process of discussing the questions with the student, and the amount of time involved. That would give parents and students an open window for letting me know how the written feedback process worked for them this year. In that manner, I could then adjust and revise the process for the following year. Eventually, I might be able to establish a routine that works for everyone involved.

PARENTAL SUPPORT

Finally, I have learned that written feedback increases the support that parents have for the French program, for their child's French class, and for me, their teacher. I wonder if I could capitalize on this in engaging qualified parents as guest speakers in my classroom, as helpers in class on project days, and in being advocates for the program in years that the budget requires cuts in Foreign Language programs. I have seen how powerful it is to have informed parents supporting what I do in my classroom and I think that there are endless ways for us, as educators, to take full advantage of this asset. I hope to delve deeper into this part of the educational process in the future, keeping in mind that it stemmed from my written feedback classroom research project!

CONCLUSION

My work on this classroom research project has proven to me that written feedback is a valuable tool for teachers, students, and parents. When I began this project, I had done some experimentation with written feedback with my students, but I had only touched briefly on the aspect of eliciting written feedback from parents. What I learned from this project is that written feedback from students and parents can be a gift to all the parties involved (teacher, students, and parents) if it is done well. By that I mean several things.

First, the written feedback must be done with a purpose. It is essential for the teacher to decide in advance what it is that s/he is looking for from the feedback and to be aware of the audience it is intended for. "What information am I seeking?" Then, the feedback form and/or questions must be written to try to attain that goal. Each time feedback is requested this process must be followed to ensure that the feedback is meaningful. Students and parents will not value feedback that they feel is useless or just "busy work."

Second, the timing must be considered. Written feedback should not be overused. If it is done too often, it loses its meaning and value. For me, four or five times during a school year was often enough to be consistent and meaningful, but not so often as to be a burden to parents who already have very busy schedules.

Third, it is essential for the teacher to read and respond to the feedback. With students, it is easy to respond verbally or to write comments on their written feedback and return them to each of them. With parents, a note on the next form that goes home or on a progress report may be best. In some cases, where there is a problem or an issue that deserves immediate attention, a phone call to the parent may be in order. It was my experience that most parent comments were just informational and did not require a response. It needs to be considered on

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an individual basis by the teacher, using his/her professional judgment to decide the best course of action, if any.

Finally, I believe that written feedback needs to be accepted as a tool to open conversations between teachers and students, between parents and students, and between teachers and parents. If done in the manner it is intended, written feedback is truly an asset to teachers, students, and parents. It opens doors to communication, allows opportunities for open communication at home and at school, and involves students and their parents, as well as their teachers, in the teaching/learning process.

It is my belief and my hope that other teachers will benefit from this classroom research project on written feedback, not only in their classrooms, but beyond those classrooms to include the parents. This project has heightened my awareness of the power of using written feedback with students and parents. I plan to continue my experimentation in this field. I hope that other teachers will benefit from my explanation of how written feedback can be used effectively with students and parents and will learn from my experience in this area.

APPENDIX

Student/ Parent Feedback

Dear Parent(s) / Guardian(s),

      Please take a few minutes to sit down together with your child and discuss his/her French class. After your discussion, please answer the following questions together regarding the class. This process will help me to understand your child's accomplishments and his/her future needs more easily. Thank you for taking the time to share in this valuable feedback process.

1. What is working well for your child in French class? Why?

2. What is not working well for your child in French class? Why?

3. What suggestions and/or information would you like to share with me that might assist me in working with your son/daughter?

FIGURE #1

Le Journal des Classes de Français

PENOBSCOT

LINCOLN

WALDO

YORK

FIGURE #2

To: French Students, Parent(s) / Guardian(s)
From: Madame Peltola
Date: September 5, 2000

Bonjour et Bienvenue! Hello and welcome! I would like to start the year off by asking you, my students, and you, their parent(s)/guardian(s) to work together with me to help this year be as successful as possible for you. I believe that knowing you, my students, can help me to move you along more easily in your learning. In order to do that, I'm asking for help from all of you. I will be asking you, at different points throughout the year, to give me feedback on how French class is working for you. I will vary the formats for feedback (individual, in writing, student and parent working together on it, etc.). I ask that you take this process as seriously as I do and realize the value of it.

On that note, for this first feedback, I would like to know the following information. Please work together (student and parent(s)/guardian(s)) to complete this form, then return it to me. I suggest that you discuss the question first, then write a response that you both/all feel would be helpful for me to know.

1. Why did you decide to take French this year?

2. What would you like to learn in this class?

3. When school ends in June, what would you like to be able to do in French?

4. Of the four language skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking), which one are you best at?

5. Of those same four skills, which one is your favorite? Why?

FIGURE #3

To: French Students, Parent(s) / Guardian(s)
From: Madame Peltola
Date: September 5, 2000

      Bonjour et Bienvenue! Hello and welcome! I would like to start the year off by asking you, my students, and you, their parent(s)/guardian(s) to work together with me to help this year be as successful as possible for you. I believe that knowing you, my students, can help me to move you along more easily in your learning. In order to do that, I'm asking for help from all of you. I will be asking you, at different points throughout the year, to give me feedback on how French class is working for you. I will vary the formats for feedback (individual, in writing, student and parent working together on it, etc.). I ask that you take this process as seriously as I do and realize the value of it.

      On that note, for this first feedback, I would like to know the following information. Please work together (student and parent(s)/guardian(s)) to complete this form, then return it to me. I suggest that you discuss the question first, then write a response that you both/all feel would be helpful for me to know.

1. Why did you decide to take French this year?

Because I took it last year and I'd like to study it or take a semester in collage.

2. What would you like to learn in this class?

I would like to relate to remember a lot of words and phrases etc because I have a bad memory.

3. When school ends in June, what would you like to be able to do in French?

Be able to remember all the stuff we went over this year.

4. Of the four language skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking), which one are you best at?

Reading, because it gives me more ... or as much time as I need to process words.

5. Of those same four skills, which one is your favorite? Why?

Speaking, it's awesome just knowing that your speaking another language.

FIGURE #4

PENOBSCOT—The past few weeks in French class we have been doing many review activities from last year. These activities include writing autobiographies—Juliette Biermar drawing and describing people—Dominique (Hannah) Smith, et we used cuisinaire rods to r... the day ... ...

WALDO

Dear parents,

In French class this month, we have reviewed many things including:

- School subjects
- days of the week
- negative sentences

all is going well

and we also did autobiographies—
FiFi Lemly / Dominique Gauger

LINCOLN This month we did our first section of our French biography. The biography is written in complete French, no english. The biography will help show us how well we have progressed throughout the ... —Genevieve Millington
We also reviewed the days of the week with cuisinaire rods each one representing ... (lundi, mardi, mercredi, jeu vendredi, samedi, and dimanche). — David Kindler

YORK

In French we:

We wrote our autobiographies in french —Igor Hartwell

We practiced the days of the week with cuisinaire rods —Julianne Clark

We learned how to make a positive sentence negative —Bruno Korthy

Merci!
Madame Peltola

FIGURE #5

OPEN HOUSE FEEDBACK - FRENCH - MRS. PELTOLA

Name of Student: _____

Name of Parent(s)/Guardian(s): _____

Please take a few minutes to complete this feedback form and return it to me as soon as possible. It is important to me and will help me in planning next year's Open House format.

1. What worked well for you in the Open House format in "French class"? Why?

2. What suggestions do you have for improvements on this format in the future?

3. Was there any information about French class that you wanted or needed, but did not receive at Open House?

4. Other Comments, if any:

FIGURE #6

Name _____   **Évaluation de Soi**

I participated in French class this week:
4 = by volunteering often
3 = by volunteering occasioally
2 = only when I was called on
1 = almost never

In class, I spoke French...
4 = most of the time
3 = some of the time (asked to get a drink in French, etc.)
2 = only when I had to answer a question
1 = never

My attitude in French class this week has been ...
4 = very positive
3 = good, most of the time
2 = okay, I guess
1 = pretty negative

My behavior in French class this week has been...
4 = excellent. I've been quiet and cooperative
3 = good. Rarely talked or didn't pay attention
2 = not so good. I talked, goofed around or daydreamed a lot
1 = poor. I disrupted the class so that activities had to be stopped

I had my supplies and completed homework...
4 = every day
3 = most days
2 = sometimes
1 = never

This week I challenged* myself to learn more...
4 = a lot, by _____
3 = some, by _____
2 = once, by _____
1 = not at all. I didn't do more than was required, if that.

(*A challenge can be something ilke: looking up extra words, making conversation w/French-speaking tourists, reading a French-related article in newspaper, reviewing notes or textbook, etc.)

COMMENTS: _____

_____ TOTAL POINTS EARNED OUT OF 24 POINTS POSSIBLE

I AGREE WITH THIS SELF-ASSESSMENT: _____ (TEACHER INITIALS)

FIGURE #7

Evaluation de Soi

Nom _____   Date _____

I participated in French class this week:
 4 = by volunteering often
 3 = by volunteering occasionally
 2 = only when I was called on
 1 = almost never

My pronunciation in French class this week was...
 4 = Excellent (I spoke exactly the way the teacher does)
 3 = Very good (I tried to mimic the teacher, but still need to practice
 2 = Good (I was understood, although I made errors in
                                         pronunciation)
 1 = Fair (I made many errors and others could not understand my
                                         French)

In class, I spoke French...
 4 = Most of the time (asked to get a drink in French, etc.)
 3 = Some of the time (greeted teacher in French, etc.)
 2= Only when I had to answer a question
 1= Never

****

In addition to the above items, I challenged myself to learn more French this week by:

___ Writing extra in French (note to self, friend, etc.)   ___ Listening to a French song/tape

___ Reading an article about something/someone French   ___ Reviewing my notes from class

___ Doing extra practice in the blue activity book   ___ Watching a French movie/cartoon

___ Having a French conversation with a friend or relative   ___ Looking up extra words

___ Other: _____

FIGURE #8

Self-Assessment
Strategies for Studying French

1. I study/review what we did in French class every evening.

2. I keep up with my homework for French class.

3. I ask for help from the teacher or a classmate when I'm lost.

4. I try to use the new vocabulary we are studying in my assignments.

5. I keep a list of new vocabulary in the back of my notebook.

6. I read out loud from the text.

7. I volunteer in class.

8. I study/review my French with a friend who knows French.

9. I review corrections/comments made by my teacher on my work.

10. I make and use flashcards.

11. I use rhymes, rhythms to help me remember words, concepts.

12. I use pictures to help me remember words, concepts.

13. I use charts to help me remember word, concepts.

14. I use color coding to help me remember gender, major ideas.

15. I attend class every day with a positive attitude.

16. I keep trying: I don't give up and/or switch to English.

17. I check my work by proofreading and using a dictionary.

18. I listen to others for right answers and so that I don't give the same wrong answer.

19. I ask questions, seek new information, look for challenges.

20. I take charge of my learning; I keep track of my progress.

Source: Donna Clementi, Appleton West High School (Appleton, Wisconsin)