Teacher Inquiry Project - STEP 2014/2015

Does AIM have a place in my classroom?

Despite only first learning of AIM this September, I have always been passionate about learning languages in new and alternative ways. As a future French teacher I have one major goal: to create authentic and enjoyable opportunities for my students to engage with the French language and culture. While this may seem like a rather basic and obvious goal, I fear that these elements are missing from our Core French classrooms. Too often do I overhear students and even colleagues refer to French as a meaningless, boring, or hard class. I want to be part of an educational movement that makes learning French desirable and valuable in the eyes of young people.

I chose AIM for my inquiry project because, although I am highly intrigued by what I’ve heard about it so far, I realistically don’t know anything about the logistics of the method or if it would compliment my teaching style and the learning style of my future students.

Nevertheless, I believe that AIM, or at least an adaptation of Wendy Maxwell’s research on the use of gestures in language learning, has great potential to address some of the weakness in BC’s Core French program. (see box, pg. 2)

Questions About AIM:

- Is it effective at any age/introduction point?
- Would this method be effective if only used 50% of the time? 25%?
- Are older students often shy/embarrassed to try the gestures?
- Is training for educators accessible/costly?
- Assessment?

What is AIM?

- AIM stands for “Accelerative Integrated Method”. It was developed in the 1990’s by a Core French teacher, Wendy Maxwell, as part of her M.A. at the University of Toronto.
- AIM is a “communicative process that is intended to accelerate the learning of the target language through the use of gestures (The Gesture Approach) allowing students to understand and to speak in the second language (SL) as early as possible” (Aim Language Learning, 2010)
Room for growth in FSL Education: Is AIM the answer?

1. More frequent use of French.
   In order to learn a language students must use it as much as possible! Students should be encouraged to feel comfortable enough to take risks with their language learning.

2. Reduce memorization exercises.
   Repetitive vocabulary worksheets and drills are tedious and boring. Why not encourage learning vocabulary through authentic interactions in French?

3. Differentiating the French classroom.
   Just because French is a language doesn’t mean we are restricted to using written texts and our voices.

4. Spontaneous and authentic language use.
   Students grow and learn the most when they take risks and make mistakes!

5. Timely and practical grammar lessons.
   Communication is #1. Give them the grammar tools to communicate what they need to.

Potential Resources

With respect to the popularity that AIM has gained in BC and Canadian FSL education, I have still been somewhat hard pressed in my preliminary research to find many scholarly articles on the topic. It appears that any inquiry into AIM would require a much broader and arguably more authentic research approach.

In addition to scholarly articles, I would turn to online resources such as the “AIM Language Learning” website, professional teacher blogs, and potentially the BCTF and Canadian Parents for French websites. Professional development seminars may also be a good source of information and AIM training.

Another approach to my research would be to identify particular schools and/or school districts where AIM is commonly used and then to consider their mission statements, values, and long-term educational goals. This may provide insight into what type of pedagogical philosophy and school/professional community supports the use of AIM.

The only way to answer many of my questions about AIM would be integrate it into my own teaching. I would likely begin by observing other teachers who already use AIM in their classroom, taking the opportunity to discuss with them why they began using AIM, what works, what does not, how they introduced it to the students, etc. I anticipate that teachers and students who use AIM on a regular basis would serve as the most valuable resources of all.

Anticipated Research Findings

Due to the fact that much of the information available about AIM is promotional, I expect that the majority of my findings will highlight the positive aspects of the method. This would not be surprising as it is our natural instinct as human beings to use gestures as a form of expression when we do not have the words to do so.

I expect to find that AIM has proven so successful because it engages multiple intelligences and learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.) into the language learning process through the use of gestures and elements of drama. In addition, given that the word “accelerative” is included in the name, it would only make sense that students learning through AIM are capable of expressing themselves in French sooner and more comprehensibly than their peers who did not learn French using AIM. (Continued on pg. 3)
Having heard mixed reviews about AIM from teachers in SD23, I do not know what to expect of my observations. I do not want to over-generalize but I can see how schools and teachers who are more progressive and risk-taking would be more inclined to adopt AIM into their classrooms.

In addition, teachers who have classes with multiple students with behavioural issues may be hesitant to attempt using AIM because it requires a high degree of willful and positive student participation. That being said, some teachers may find that AIM is a great technique for keeping more off-task students engaged.

I also expect to find that AIM is much more prominent in elementary school classrooms than high school classrooms. Whether that be because this method is best adopted at a young age, because older students are less willing to participate, or because teachers at the higher levels prefer to keep their tried and tested teaching techniques, I am not sure.

Lastly, any educational inquiry in 2014 would not be complete without at least a brief nod towards the term “21st century learner”. I anticipate to find that AIM provides students the opportunity to engage with the French language in a more authentic, spontaneous, student-centered, and inquiry-based way. Instead of introducing grammar concepts and vocabulary in the traditional, thematic order as seen in most textbooks, students using AIM are given the language tools that they need to communicate here and now, before they understand the technicalities of what they are saying. This method much more closely resembles how we learn our mother language as children.

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**Anticipated Research Findings Continued**

**Resources**

- AIM website: www.aimlanguagelearning.com
- “Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Accelerative Integrated Method”, by Wendy Maxwell
- “Teaching FSL with AIM”, by Brandon Carroll
- “AIM in High School French Classrooms”, by Audrey Rousse-Malpat, Marjolijn Verspoor and Saskia Visser
- “The Accelerative Integrated Method: A Descriptive Case Study”, by Stephanie Arnot
- “Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) and the Core French Teachers Who Use It: Why Agency and Experience Matter”, by Stephanie Arnot
- BCTF website: https://www.bctf.ca/ProfessionalDevelopment.aspx
- Canadian Parents for French website: www.cpf.ca