

Effective communication in L2: an experience at a summer camp in Switzerland

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This article aims to show how a lively, interactive teaching method can bring young learners to communicating effectively in L2 after a very short period and can, furthermore, motivate them to deepen their knowledge, gratified by their immediate success.

In the Swiss Alps, an International Summer Camp offers 3-week sessions of sports and languages to children aged 8-17. They come from all over the world, and so do counselors. English is the official language, and most of the counselors come from English-speaking countries.

Besides sports and leisure activities, there are optional language courses in French, English and German. On the first day of Camp all the children who are going to follow one or more of the language courses – except the total beginners – are required to take a test, in order to determine their level. Children at Camp are divided into three different age groups: Juniors, 8-10; Pioneers, 11-13; Seniors, 14-17 and, within these groups, into three different levels for their language lessons: beginners, intermediate, advanced. Lessons are 1 hour/day, Monday to Saturday.

The English course is by far the one most children attend, in all three age groups and at all levels (12-15 students per class). German is the least popular language (3-6 students per class). In this study, I chose to follow the French lessons for two main reasons:

1. French is the language spoken in the village where the Camp is located. The children have therefore many opportunities to verify their communication abilities and their progress, sometimes immediately after class, on their outings to the village. Thus, they are quite motivated and progress quickly. This is also true for the English language which is the one spoken at Camp. The students' communication in French was less artificial, because it was related to real-life situations. The Camp, being a small community, is an artificial microcosm where everybody makes a particular effort to ease communication.

2. The classes were not too crowded (5-8 students) and it was therefore possible to analyse each pupil's progress.

All the children came from families which, in all ways or another – bilingual background, foreign schools, stays abroad, etc. – motivated their children to learn languages. The teachers were all young qualified professionals enthusiastic about international understanding.

I followed, for six different sessions of three weeks each – during two consecutive summer periods – all the French classes at beginners' level, age group 11-13. Again, the reasons for concentrating my analysis on these specific groups are the following:

1. Language: French, for the reasons stated above.
2. Level: beginners; I have noted that progress in communication can be observed more easily at this level.

3. Age group: 11-13; this age group seemed to be highly motivated and willing to put some effort into building grammatically correct sentences. The age group 8-10, although enthusiastic, was more concerned with immediate communication, using isolated words, gestures, and body language in general, and not paying much attention to language structures – but the communication level was excellent! Finally, the age group 14-17 lacked spontaneity, and found it difficult to overcome barriers in an ‘informal’ classroom situation: this particular group achieved very good results, once it had accepted the different approach and got involved in the activities.

Each course consisted of 12 lessons. There were 38 pupils involved, with the following characteristics:

Sex: 21 girls – 17 boys.

Nationality/country of residence: Italy – 13; USA – 8; England – 5; Saudi Arabia – 4; Spain – 3; Germany – 2; Greece – 1; Israel – 1; Egypt – 1.

Linguistic and cultural background: Italian – 11; English – 15; Arab – 5; Spanish – 2; German – 1; Greek – 1; Hebrew – 1; other – 2.

Previous study of L2:

- a) formal teaching at school for one year or more: 7 (3 girls, 4 boys)
- b) formal teaching at a summer school: 4 (2 girls, 2 boys)
- c) bilingual background (because of family): 11 (6 girls, 5 boys)
- d) bilingual background (because living in a foreign country): 6 (4 girls, 2 boys)
- e) none: 10 (6 girls, 4 boys).

All the pupils were considered beginners; those with previous study or bilingual background had none or extremely limited, mostly passive, knowledge of L2. In any case, their communicative abilities at the beginning of the course were non-existent. All of them were quite motivated, with very few exceptions. Also, motivation grew steadily throughout the course. The lessons were all recorded on audiocassettes, and some of them were videotaped. The linguistic progress of each child was analysed in the following areas:

1. listening comprehension,
2. oral production,
3. reading/writing skills.

I focused on the main aspects of oral production, such as interlanguage and linguistic strategies. In judging their progress, I paid particular attention to their ability to communicate effectively at a basic level in L2, obviously without expecting them to achieve correct grammar and syntax. Everybody was able to follow the lessons without difficulty.

At the beginning of each course the pupils were given a folder containing photocopies of puzzles, drawings and different exercises, a reading book, and the book ‘Le petit français en herbe’, especially designed by the language teachers, related to camp life and therefore highly motivating

The lessons were taught with great enthusiasm and always geared towards total participa-

tion of each member of the class. Most situations dealt with the different activities of the pupils. Imagination, improvisation, games, music were a very important part of the teaching. Classrooms had usually a board, a screen, a tape recorder, a videocamera and a map. The teacher used only the target language backed up by gestures and mime. At the end of the first lesson all the children could introduce themselves, say their country of origin and their nationality, and even state some of their preferences. Every student received a piece of paper with formulas like: 'Je ne comprends pas/Qu'est-ce que c'est?/ Comment s'appelle ça en français?/Je ne sais pas/Plus doucement, s'il vous plait' ('I don't understand/What's this?/How do you say this in French?/I don't know/More slowly, please'). The paper would stay on their desks during the following lessons, until needed: it helped communication, because the only language allowed during the classes was French. There were also different cards with words and pictures that the students could use at any time if they wanted to. They were allowed to consult their books, their notes, anything that could help them communicate. The teachers were not interested in anybody showing how much they had learnt. All the students felt they were welcome to participate freely, whatever level they had attained. There was continuous interaction and cooperation between the two parts. Murphey (1992) states that 'the teacher has as much to learn from the student as the student from the teacher'! Mistakes were corrected in a positive way, by repeating the same sentence, or word, correctly, but showing approval of the effort made, e.g.:

Pupil: J'ai jaloux. (I'm jealous.)

Teacher: Oui! Je suis jaloux! (Yes! I am jealous!)

Pupil: Je suis jaloux.

At beginners' level, communication is more important than correct grammar and syntax, because the pleasure of being able to interact in L2 is an immediate spur to the learner to deepen his knowledge. Learners adopt different strategies to compensate for their lack of knowledge in L2 (Nigris, 1996). The ones I noticed appearing more often in this group were:

Redundancy reduction: some items were considered unnecessary to convey the message, e.g.

Je viens Etats-Unis. (Je viens des Etats-Unis). I come from the United States. Le T-shirt est blanc et pantalons bleus. (...et les pantalons sont bleus) The T-shirt is white and the trousers are blue.

Over-generalization and approximation: simplifying some linguistic structures and getting as close as possible to the message the learner is trying to express, e.g.

Je n'aime pas le sport c'est le pony. (Le sport que je n'aime pas c'est le pony). The sport I don't like is pony-riding. J'aime le nager. (J'aime la natation). I love swimming.

Transfer, using the linguistic knowledge of L1 to overcome difficulties in L2.

Positive interference (structure of L1 parallel to that in L2): J'ai les cheveux chatains. (chatains) (J'ai les cheveux bruns). *Italian:* Ho i capelli castani. I have brown hair. *Negative interference* (the two structures differ): Je suis 13. (J'ai 13 ans) . *English:* I'm 13.

Avoidance strategies, avoiding situations which present insuperable difficulties.

Teacher: Où vas-tu pour prendre l'avion? *Where do you go to catch a plane?*

Student: Je vais...uhm, uhm... *I go...uhm, uhm...*

Teacher: Si tu veux prendre l'avion, tu vas à l'aér... *If you want to catch a plane, you go to the air...*

Student: I don't know...airport?

Teacher: Oui, tu vas à l'aéroport. Bien! *Yes, you go to the airport. Good!*

Adjustment, trying to 'readapt' the message by changing it, and expressing it according to the linguistic resources available, e.g.

'Je vais en piscine.' (Je vais à la piscine). Italian: Vado in piscina.. I'm going to the pool.

Word coinage, that is the creation of new words, sometimes the literal translation of a word in L1, e.g.

'la pilleau' (l'oreiller), English: pillow; 'la vasque de bain' (la baignoire), Italian: la vasca da bagno, bathtub; 'le poulot' (le poulet), Italian: il pollo, chicken; 'le naze' (le nez), Italian: il naso, nose.

Language switch, using structures from L1, e.g.

'Mes sports préférés sont le sailing, swimming...' (la voile, la natation...) My favourite sports are.. Pour petit déjeuner j'ai toasts et confiture. (Au petit déjeuner je prends des toasts avec de la confiture) I have toast and marmalade for breakfast.

Of course, two or more of the above mentioned strategies can be used simultaneously; we can also have very common errors, like omissions, substitutions and wrong word-order that fit in with many of these strategies.

In the area of **pronunciation**, the most common problems were nasals which are very difficult to pronounce, regardless of the learner's L1. The French 'r', understandably, caused a lot of problems.. With much drilling, repetition and encouragement, progress in this area was satisfactory. 'Un' is often 'une', 'en' is 'ine', 'une' becomes 'ane', 'le' and 'je' are almost without exception 'lé' and 'jé'.

Grammar caused difficulty for everybody in the following areas:

Preposition plus article, e.g.:

La piscine est à gauche de le manège.(...à la gauche du manège) The pool is to the right of the riding ground.

Il est à le restaurant. (...au restaurant) He's at the restaurant.

Masculine and feminine articles, e.g.:

J'aimerais avoir un maison. (...une maison) I'd like to have a house.

Je suis une homme. (...un homme) I'm a man.

Verb accordance, e.g.:

Je va à la piscine. (Je vais...) I'm going to the pool.

Ils vient d'Australie. (Ils viennent...) They come from Australia.

C'est des biscuits. (Ce sont...) They are biscuits.

Vocabulary was very much related to the pupils' activities in general, so there were no particular difficulties, because of the opportunities to learn and practice new words in real life situations. The main topics covered were: sports – food – family – colours – shopping – hobbies. The teachers always tried to use simple language, employing verbs such as 'have, be, do, go, want, can, etc.'. Although it is a poor vocabulary, it leads to a very quick interchange with the student, gratifying him with immediate success and creating self-confidence, indispensable for further progress.

Very simple structures were used, gradually becoming more complex, and this did not seem to cause problems. The most used – and useful, in that they were the ones which proved to be effective from the very beginning – were:

'D'où viens-tu? Je viens de...Where do you come from? I come from...
Comment ça va? How are you?
Comment t'appelles-tu? Je m'appelle... What's your name? My name's...
J'habite... I live...
Quel âge as-tu? J'ai... How old are you? I'm...
Aimes-tu...? J'aime.../Je n'aime pas... Do you like...? I like.../I don't like...
J'adore.../Je déteste... I love.../I hate...
J'aimerais.../Je voudrais... I'd love.../I'd like...
Qu'est-ce que c'est? What's this?
Combien...? How much...?/How many...?
Pour qui?/ Avec qui? For whom?/With whom?
Depuis quand?/Jusqu'à quand? Since when?/ Till when?
Où vas-tu? Je vais... Where are you going? I'm going...
Pourquoi?/Parce que... Why?/Because...
A quelle heure?/Quelle heure est-il? At what time?/What time is it?
Qu'est-ce que tu fais? What are you doing?

Games and music made the lessons lively and interesting. The most popular ones were different card games, questionnaires, surveys, video interviews (each student was 'interviewed' and shown on video).

The emphasis here was on effective communication rather than mastery of the language. The absence of pressure to achieve immediate academic perfection, and freedom from the sensation of being constantly assessed liberated the children's natural desire to acquire a new skill.

In spite of the brevity of the period considered, there are lessons to be learnt, at all levels, perhaps in more formal settings, from this sensitive approach.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank R. Studer, N. Evequoz, T. Murphey and P. Koch of International Summer Camp Montana for their help and cooperation in this study.

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