The Accelerative Integrated Method in Grades 7 and 8: Teachers’ Perspectives and Experiences

By

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Abstract

Reports show that less than 30% of Canadian students graduate from high schools with the ability to hold a conversation in French. This is problematic for various reasons, including the fact that French is one of the two official languages of Canada. A relatively new second language teaching methodology called the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) has been implemented in more than 4,000 schools across Canada, but very few studies have evaluated its effectiveness, especially in Grades 7 and 8. This research study analyzes the opinions of 3 teachers about the benefits and challenges of using the AIM to teach Core French in Grades 7 and 8. A qualitative research protocol was followed, based on standardized open interviews with 3 Core French teachers of the Greater Toronto Area who use AIM to varying degrees. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using emergent themes. Results show that teachers perceive AIM as being effective in their Grade 7 and 8 classrooms. They describe student attitude as being very positive towards AIM. Academic benefits for students include better memorization of vocabulary, better understanding of grammar patterns, and greater self-efficacy beliefs about their ability to speak French. The discussion includes implementation challenges for teachers and suggestions on how to make the program a better fit for Grade 7 and 8 students.
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The Accelerative Integrated Method in the Grades 7 and 8 Grades:

Teachers’ Perspectives and Experiences

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

French as a Second Language in Ontario

There is a long history of French as a Second Language (FSL) education in Canada, characterized by both successes and challenges. Academic, political and social influences have led to the creation of many programs, including the recent Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM).

Benefits of bilingualism

Canada has recognized for a very long time that bilingualism is an asset. The four most frequently mentioned reasons for learning FSL are cognitive benefits, social psychological benefits, and Canadian heritage. Bilingualism has been shown to help cognitive functions such as conflict resolution (Costa et al., 2008) and social psychological characteristics such as social ease (Pesner & Auld, 1980). French and English bilingualism is part of the Canadian Constitution since its creation in 1867. According to the Constitution, the languages “have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, s 16). Therefore, English-speaking students should learn French in order to improve both their employability and their connection to an important part of their national culture.

Three programs

Current FSL education in Ontario includes three types of programs: Core French, Extended French, and French Immersion. Students in Core French study all subjects in English except French, which is taught for approximately 40-minute periods every day.
In addition to their daily French course, students in Extended French study a minimum of three other subjects in French, for a minimum of 25% of the instruction being in French. For students in French Immersion, this number increases to a minimum of six subjects and the minimum percentage increases to 50%.

**The National Core French Study**

In 1982, Stern suggested a multidimensional curriculum in response to growing dissatisfaction about the Core French curriculum. In his view, the then current curriculum maintained a wrong perception of the function of second language learning, leading to students’ loss of motivation due to lack of progression in their ease speaking the language. Stern proposed a multidimensional curriculum with four components including: language, culture, communicative activities, and general language education.

This suggestion prompted research that eventually led to the National Core French Study. Results from this 3-year study across Canada confirmed the view of language as a means for communication and solidified Stern’s suggestion of the multidimensional curriculum (Leblanc: 1990). The results of the NCFS led in turn to the development of many programs in the 1990s, but research has shown that they have failed to produce significant improvements in the proficiency of Canadians in their second language (Hart et al., 1996; Calman & Daniel, 1998; Lewis, 1998).

**The Action Plan for Official Languages**

Both the federal and the provincial governments agree on increasing the percentage of adolescents who are French and English bilingual (Government of Canada, 2003). In its *Action Plan for Official Languages* published in 2003, the federal government set the goal to “double the proportion of secondary school graduates with a functional knowledge of their second official language” by 2013 (p. 27). In 2001, only
AIM IN GRADES 7 AND 8

18% of Ontario citizens between the ages of 15 and 24 spoke both languages (Statistics Canada, 2003). Furthermore, between 1996 and 2011, the proportion of Canadian youth able to speak both French and English decreased steadily (Statistics Canada, 2013). It is therefore obvious that more efforts need to be made to improve the effectiveness of French programs at teaching communicative skills.

**The Accelerative Integrated Method**

In 2002, in response to the still unchanged dissatisfaction about Core French methods, Wendy Maxwell created the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM), a program whose objective is to develop fluency in the second language. The few research projects that have investigated the method generally found that it leads to increased oral fluency in a short time, although there are some conflicting results in the literature (e.g. Bourdages & Vignola, 2009; Mady, Arnott & Lapkin, 2009; Maxwell, 2001; Michels, 2008).

Keeping in mind that this method was initially designed for beginners, and that very few, if any, studies focus specifically on the application of this method to students in the Grades 7 and 8, there is a gap in the literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to help fill the gap in the literature related to the implementation of AIM in Grades 7 and 8. More specifically, it aims to investigate teachers’ perceptions about the students’ response to AIM in their classroom, as well as the benefits and challenges of the method for students and teachers.

**Research Questions**

What are the opinions of 3 Core French teachers in the Greater Toronto Area regarding the use of AIM in Grades 7 and 8?

- Is AIM age-appropriate for students in Grades 7 and 8?
• Is the delivery of AIM different enough from previous years to maintain students’ interest?

**Background of the Researcher**

My interest in this topic stems from my passion for languages and my high school experience. I have always felt passionate about languages. As most native French speakers growing up in Montreal, I was only introduced to English in Grade 5, and the technique was questionable. Nevertheless, English was an object of curiosity, and bilingualism was my obvious goal because it would allow me to access recently released books and movies much sooner than would be the case when waiting for translated versions to be available. Most of my friends shared the same thirst for English. The school culture was also such that English-speaking students were the most popular in the school. Their bilingualism was admired and respected. When I moved to Toronto, I was surprised to find that the French language did not generate the same excitement among students in elementary school. I heard on numerous occasions, from both students and teachers of other subjects, that Core French was “boring” and “useless”. Later, though, I had the opportunity to observe an AIM classroom in the first months of Grade 4, and was amazed at the fast improvement of students’ oral fluency. I became interested in knowing more about this topic in the hope of contributing to the popularity of French in Canada.

**Overview**

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in the field of Core French education in Canada, with a focus on AIM and related issues. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedures
used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 describes the results of my study, especially the main finding that teachers feel that students in Grades 7 and 8 respond well to AIM, as long as they differentiate tasks for the various mastery levels in the classroom. Other findings will be discussed as well. Chapter 5 deepens links with the literature and offers recommendations for teachers, school boards, and the AIM program developers. References and a list of appendices follow at the end of the document.

As a note, the terms motivation and engagement are used interchangeably throughout this text.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

A common goal across Canada is to improve the fluency of high school graduates in French. Researchers (Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1982) have known for decades that proficiency is linked to motivation, and that focusing on increasing the motivation of students in Grades 7 and 8 in their Core French lessons is an effective way to improve their results. Results from surveys such as the National Core French Study (Leblanc, 1990) and new frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001) have led to multiple developments in Core French programs in Canada, but none of them has had as much impact and success as AIM. The following review of literature will explain the context briefly, and present the current research on AIM, highlighting the gap in the literature with respect to older students.

The Link between Motivation and Proficiency

In 1982, Krashen proposed a new theory related to second language acquisition which was to have an important impact on the field for years to come. His theory encompassed five hypotheses on different aspects of second language learning, including the difference between learning and acquisition. Of importance to this paper is the fifth hypothesis, better known as the Affective Filter hypothesis. It suggests that negative attitudinal factors such as lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence and high anxiety act as barriers that prevent second language input from being acquired by the student. The lower this filter is, the better the student will be able to process and internalize the second language. It explains why students in the same classroom may progress at different levels although they are exposed to the same input. In light of this theoretical construct, it
makes sense to try to increase the motivation of students in the classroom, because it optimizes their use of the French input provided by the teacher, promoting proficiency and fluency.

More recent studies are tackling more specific issues, such as the benefits of vision to motivate students in the second language classroom (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

**Trends in Research on Canadian Core French Methods**

Two sources of data have been crucial to the development of CF methods in Canada from theme-based programs to programs with a different focus and/or organization. First, the 2004 report from the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation suggested that students in the CF classroom should have more opportunities to speak the target language. This prompted a variety of programs, such as drama-based methods. Another important report from the National Core French Study suggested the use of more student-centered methods. This gave rise to the multidimensional project-based method (Leblanc, 1990). The findings of these reports are supported by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001).

The CEFR has had an influence on FSL in Ontario. With the goal of unifying the language used to describe foreign language proficiency across Europe, the Council of Europe created a system of six *common attainment levels* describing someone’s general and communicative competence in a foreign language. There are two levels to describe Basic Users (A1, A2), two levels describing Independent Users (B1, B2), and two levels to describe Proficient Users (C1, C2). According to a report by the Ottawa-Carleton
District School Board, this framework has begun to shift the focus from grammatical accuracy to functional oral communication in Ontario FSL classrooms (OCDSB, 2013).

The Framework for French as a Second Language in Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) integrates this idea that proficiency should be based on the ability to communicate. It is still too soon to determine the effects that it will have on FSL in Ontario, since it was implemented in classrooms in September 2013, but it can be said that in addition to proficiency in FSL, the framework places emphasis on motivation and positive attitudes toward French. One of the goals of this study is to contribute to reaching the goals of the CEFR.

**The Accelerated Integrated Method**

AIM is used in at least 2,400 Ontario schools (Mady, Arnott, & Lapkin, 2009) and at least 4,000 schools across Canada (AIM Language Learning, 2007).

The objective of AIM is to maximize and accelerate the development of oral fluency in the target language (Maxwell, 2001). Listening and speaking skills are developed before reading and writing, to mirror the development of the first language.

AIM is based on the idea that using gestures helps internalize vocabulary and language patterns (Maxwell, 2001), which links to both the Gesture Approach and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983). It is also based on the belief that the more students produce L2 output, the more likely they are to become fluent. Finally, the language is seen as a tool to communicate rather than the end itself.

As for many other methods, AIM was primarily conceived as a set of techniques that work. It consists of four core strategies: gestures; pared-down language (PDL); songs, dance and plays; and inductive grammar. Gestures, probably the most famous
aspect of AIM, are introduced and used with every new word. They help internalize the patterns of the new language. The pared-down language is a list of high-frequency functional words including nouns, verbs, and other useful words. Contrary to traditional theme-based programs, the vocabulary is chosen for its functional, rather than thematic attributes, and contains a high proportion of verbs. This is something that the author felt was very important for the development of fluency (Maxwell, 2001). Words are taught gradually with every lesson building on the vocabulary previously learned and adding new words. Songs, dance and drama are at the centre of the program, in order to engage students emotionally and through multiple senses. In class, the focus is on plays and related activities. Each unit based on a play is designed for 50 hours of instruction. A related activity might involve students answering questions about a character. Finally, grammar is taught in an inductive rather than deductive way, shifting the focus from structure to meaning and allowing students to deeply internalize the rules. In addition to these four core characteristics, AIM is firm about the fact that all classroom interactions need to be in the target language, and a portion of each class is dedicated to authentic conversations (AIM Language Learning, 2007). AIM can be implemented from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

**AIM and Oral Proficiency**

There are only few studies verifying different aspects of AIM. For example, Tellier (2010) has demonstrated the positive effect of gestures on second language long-term vocabulary memorization for children 5 years of age. Twenty students were taught eight new words in their L2, half of the group saw and reproduced gestures as well. Results showed that the group that repeated the gestures remembered the words better
than the other 10 students. Reproducing gestures is therefore better for vocabulary acquisition. It is unclear if the same results could be replicated with a group of adolescents.

The first studies on AIM itself focused on whether it is effective at increasing the oral proficiency of Core French students. In the following years, the focus shifted to more qualitative explorations of teachers’ experience with AIM. There is still no clear consensus in the literature about the benefits of AIM for oral proficiency development in general.

Studies in the early 2000s observed positive results. For example, in a study of 18 Grade 4 students, half of whom were taught with AIM and the other without AIM, Maxwell (2001) found that AIM students were better able to understand and to create stories in French. Her data collection included a scaffolded interview and storytelling activity. Students exposed to AIM had better fluency than their non-AIM counterparts. This study has since been criticized for its small sample size.

Similar results were found by Michels (2008) in her study of boys in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario. Through a scaffolded interview of 14 students (8 AIM and 6 non-AIM), the author observed significantly higher fluency in AIM students compared with non-AIM students, despite the small sample size and the fact that only boys were studied.

In the following years, however, a shift occurred. Later studies failed to detect a significant effect on oral proficiency. For example, in their study of two Grade 3 classes, Bourdages and Vignola (2009) found that although AIM students produced more sentences in French, there was no significant difference in the number of grammatically correct sentences. In other words, AIM students were simply taking more risks.
Another study reached similar conclusions. In a mixed-method research project with 260 students from AIM and non-AIM classes, Mady, Arnott and Lapkin (2009) investigated the effects of AIM at the Grade 8 level. Using both quantitative (formal testing and questionnaire) and qualitative methods (semi-structure interviews), they examined the effects of AIM on Grade 8 students’ French proficiency and attitudes towards their instruction in the Bluewater District School Board of Ontario. In total, 260 students participated in the study. Quantitative data showed no statistical difference between the test scores of AIM and non-AIM students. Triangulation of questionnaires and interview data demonstrated variation in certain aspects of attitude such as confidence in their oral skills. Overall, this study demonstrated that AIM is not the ultimate solution to improve Core French instruction, but differences in attitudes of students suggested that some elements of AIM, such as increased use of the L2 in the classroom, should be researched in more details. This study has since been criticized for the fact that non-AIM teachers were also using some AIM techniques, which may wrongly skew the results towards higher fluency for the non-AIM groups.

Overall, these varied results suggest the lack of consensus among researchers about the effectiveness of AIM. However, most researchers agree that AIM improves oral fluency.

**AIM and Professional Agency**

Towards the end of the 2000s, the focus of AIM research shifted from student to teacher and from product to process. According to its creator, the success of AIM depends on its complete implementation in the classroom (AIM Language Learning, 2007). Teachers, however, do not seem to apply the method “purely”. A study by Arnott
(2011) showed that all teachers do not use AIM in the same ways. From interviews with eight elementary Core French teachers from Ontario, the author found that most teachers supplement AIM with other materials, especially those related to French culture. Modification of the program was also especially present in Grades 7 and 8, where teachers reduced their use of gestures and welcome raps. In order to refer to this quality of selectively implementing aspects of the program, the author used the word agency.

AIM in the Intermediate Grades

AIM was originally designed for beginner level students (Maxwell, 2004), but has since been developed for students from Kindergarten to (and including) secondary school. The plays are organized by both level of proficiency and age, which means that the plays for beginners in Grades 4 to 6 and beginners in Grades 7 and 8 are different. However, AIM documents give only scarce information on the application of the method for older students, such as increasing the proportion of individual, partner or group (IPG) work time, creative work with language, and spontaneous communication. It is also expected that students will monitor each other and correct each other’s mistakes (Maxwell, 2007).

However, this is not necessarily easy and might meet resistance from students. One of the key findings of Arnott (2011) relates to how teachers modify their delivery of AIM to match the learning style of adolescents. The author identified two challenges specific to students in Grades 7 and 8: their resistance to using gestures and speaking only French in the classroom.

Resistance to gestures
The resistance to gestures among students in Grades 7 and 8 was also found by Mady, Arnott and Lapkin (2009) in the study mentioned earlier. Some AIM students qualified gestures as childish. The authors concluded by saying that “Grade 8 may not be an optimal level at which to use AIM” (p.718). This resistance can be explained by the fact that these gestures, especially in whole-group choral speaking activities, are evidence of a rigid pedagogy, whereas studies show that adolescents prefer more student-centred and flexible learning environments. For example, a study by Barber and Olsen (2004) addressed the issue of students experiencing more problems in their lives during the transitions to middle school and high school. This concept is called “social functioning”.

The 2004 study had two aims: first, to find out if the type of teaching methods in the higher level schools were correlated with the decline in social functioning; second, the study aimed to describe these transitions in more details. By using data from surveys sent periodically to 933 families with adolescent children over the course of 4 years, they found out that in most transitions, this decrease in social functioning is correlated with a decrease in autonomy at school. It therefore suggests that autonomy (e.g. psychological) is important for adolescents’ wellbeing at school, although the degree to which they feel supported by their teachers matters even more. This study supports the idea that students in Grades 7 and 8 might resist the controlling and rigid aspects of AIM, such as the gestures or the French-only environment.

The same concept of mismatch between learning needs and school was addressed by Eccles et al. (1993). Their study highlighted the mismatch between the needs of early adolescents and the characteristics of junior high school, and how this may cause a lack of motivation at school. Through questionnaires distributed to 1,500 adolescents
transitioning from Grade 6 to 7 (elementary to junior high school) in Michigan, they found that junior high school is more teacher-centered and offers less quality teacher-student relationships than in elementary school. However, developmentally, early adolescents are in greater need of autonomy, decision-making power, and support from their teachers. There is therefore a mismatch, which they call *stage-environment fit*, which would explain students’ lack of motivation in Grades 7 and 8. Although this study dates from more than 20 years ago, it supports the idea that the lack of control experienced by students in middle school learning environments might be a source of frustration in early adolescence.

**Resistance to the French-only rule**

The second characteristic, i.e. reluctance to speak only French in the classroom, was also observed by Marshall (2011) in her study of 58 students in Grade 7 in middle school. Results showed that many students preferred being taught in English because they believed they would learn the concepts (e.g. vocabulary words or grammar rules) faster. However, after a few months being taught in the target language, their attitude towards the use of French generally improved.

Data presented later by Arnott (2012) in a study comparing the perspectives on AIM of educators in contexts that impose AIM versus contexts that do not impose a method suggests that in both cases, students resent the lack of explicit grammar teaching and other types of texts.

**Summary**

In summary, the findings of the few research studies on the influence of AIM on fluency in French are not conclusive. However, there seems to be an agreement that
generally students have a more positive attitude about learning French and increased opportunities to use French in class to develop fluency. However, none of the studies focused on the specific needs and attributes of students in Grades 7 and 8, although research suggests that their learning needs are different from those of younger learners. More specifically, several studies suggest that adolescents prefer more autonomy in the classroom than the structure of AIM can accommodate. The present study aims to bridge that gap in the literature by investigating the opinions of Grade 7 and 8 AIM teachers, specifically their beliefs about what works with students at this age, and how they use their agency to adapt the program to make it as effective as possible for this group of students.
Chapter 3: METHODS

Procedure

The exploratory qualitative research protocol used for this study comprises an in-depth review of the relevant literature and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with three teachers, in the overall goal of gaining insights on their strategies to adapt AIM for students in Grades 7 and 8.

The literature review shows that there is a gap in the literature regarding the implementation of AIM in the Grades 7 and 8. With its heavy reliance on songs, dance and drama, as well as strict French-only rule and teacher-centred activities in the first stages of learning, AIM may not match the preferred learning style of adolescents, who tend to prefer more autonomy in the classroom. The present study aims to investigate intermediate students’ reactions to the teaching materials and strategies in more details through teachers’ experiences, as well as teachers’ perspectives on the benefits and challenges associated with using AIM to teach Core French in Grades 7 and 8.

Instruments of Data Collection

The main instrument of data collection was a semi-structured face-to-face interview protocol with three Grade 7 and/or 8 Core French teachers. This type of interview protocol falls under the umbrella of open-ended interviews, frequently used in qualitative research (Turner, 2010). This type of protocol was chosen in order to capture rich data about the personal views and experiences of teachers. Questions focused on the two following themes: teachers’ experiences in the classroom, and their perspectives on the benefits and challenges of using AIM with students in Grades 7 and 8. Here is a sample of the interview questions:
• How do students respond to your use of the gestures?

• What does a typical AIM lesson for Grade 7 and 8 students look like in your classroom?

• Are the plays age-appropriate for students in Grades 7 and 8? Why?

See Appendix A for the complete list of questions.

Participants

There are three participants in this study, discussed in this paper using pseudonyms. My first participant, Amanda, is a Core French teacher who has been teaching FSL for 3 years to all Grade 3 to 8 students in her school. She started using AIM with all her students 2 years ago. She received formal training with AIM through their annual Summer Institute. This participant was suggested to me for her experience with a wide range of grades by a friend who completed a teaching practicum in her classroom.

My second participant, Barbara, has been teaching for 12 years. She started using AIM in 2004 to teach Core French in Grades 4 to 8. In 2010, she began to teach Grade 1 French Immersion, but still uses the AIM methodology. She received formal training and is now an AIM Certified Teacher. I selected her due to her deep knowledge of AIM. Finally, my third participant, Cheryl, had 10 years of experience teaching Core French to students in Grades 7 the last 4 years using AIM. She received no formal training in AIM. All her knowledge comes from watching the DVDs that come with the program, talking to other teachers using AIM, and talking to students who have used AIM in their previous Core French classrooms. I selected her for inclusion in the study due to her different experience and knowledge about AIM. I wanted to see if it would have an effect on her perspectives about the method. I refer to my third participant as one who uses AIM.
techniques, rather than as an AIM teacher which I reserve for the two participants who have received specialized training.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

All interviewees were given a hard copy of the questions at the beginning of the interview. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into a Word document. Formative analysis was performed throughout the transcription process. Two follow-up questions were sent via email 3 months later.

The following analysis protocol is derived from Falk (2005). Once interviews were finished, transcripts were read and re-read carefully, focusing on the two themes emphasized in the questions: students’ attitudes towards AIM, and the modifications made by Grade 7 and 8 teachers on the AIM directives. Transcripts were color-coded and key ideas were organized in a data analysis chart. These were a priori themes, but four other themes emerged during the analysis: academic benefits, students’ attitudes, recommendations for teachers, and challenges. Any new thoughts occurring during the analysis process were recorded in a research log for further reference.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

The ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program were followed. Participants signed the letter of consent for the interview (see Appendix B), which indicates that interviewees can withdraw from the study at any time and have the right to revisit their answers after the interview.

Interview transcripts are stored on a password protected personal computer and were only seen by the researcher, her supervisor, and her course instructor. The confidentiality of interviewees was further protected by the use of pseudonyms.


Limitations

The results of this research study are limited by the small sample size and short time to perform the study. The fact that only three teachers participated in the study makes it impossible to generalize from the findings. However, it also led to a more in-depth analysis of their experience. The time available to complete data collection and analysis limited the depth of the analysis. Finally, since two of my participants responded to an advertisement that I had posted, their answers might be biased towards a positive experience with AIM.
Chapter 4: RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the data according to the three following emergent themes: academic benefits, student response, and challenges for teachers. In summary, all three teachers agreed that AIM is effective in the Grade 7 and 8 classroom. Teachers mentioned the same academic benefits as mentioned for students in Grades 4 to 6. Motivation did not seem to be an issue either, as teachers found students to be motivated by songs and raps just like junior students. However, teachers experienced new issues, such as preparing their students for non-AIM Core French classes in grade 9.

Academic Benefits

Cognitive benefits

AIM helps students in Grades 7 and 8 make sense of French. Two of the three teachers specifically mentioned that AIM helps students develop better comprehension skills. Gestures are especially useful for the reality of the mixed classroom, where many students come to Grade 7 from traditional theme-based Core French programs and various degrees of understanding of spoken French. Cheryl explained that “for them, more than for anybody, [she] finds the gestures really helpful, because [students] can at least follow what it looks like is happening, and with the repetition, they eventually figure it out”. The gestures, according to Amanda, “paint a picture of the language” such that students are better able to grasp the meaning of the words. One reason why gestures are so effective is that they are often obviously connected to the word that they represent. For example, the word “bien” (good) is represented with an upward thumb, which is understood as good in general.
In addition to comprehension, Amanda talked about gestures helping internalize the grammar. For example, the same verb can have an ending in “-é” in the past tense and “-er” in the infinitive, and since they sound the same, they can be easily confused. Since the gesture for verbs ending in “-er” includes the “r” represented by a bent finger, it is easier for students to infer that when they feel they need to use the bent finger, it means that they need to write it with an “r”. According to Amanda, “it’s a great tool for having them self-correct their own grammar and to hear what sounds right and to use that as a tool for their learning.”

Maxwell (2001) also observed the fast internalization of grammar forms, which she linked to the gestures but also to the repetition of these words and patterns over and over again in the program.

**Self-efficacy beliefs**

For Cheryl, a significant difference between traditional theme-based Core French lessons and AIM lessons had to do with confidence. She explained that with the textbook method, students did not feel confident when speaking French, and therefore never practiced. “I did the textbook before, and they just didn’t feel confident in French anyway, so they wouldn’t try. Some of them did great, but those are the kids that would have done great no matters what”. With AIM, in contrast, “they [speak], and they can do it confidently”. It seems that activities like choral speaking are effective at making students feel successful when speaking very early in their learning. This higher self-efficacy in turn leads to greater engagement in the classroom. Another reason why students might feel more confident is that there is a lot of practice in groups before students are required to speak on their own. A lot of scaffolding is therefore occurring.
Reduction of the achievement gap

One of the challenges, as mentioned earlier, is that teachers are faced with classes of mixed abilities. For example, when going through her list at the beginning of the school year, a Grade 7 Core French teacher might very well learn that some of her students have learned French with AIM since Grade 4 while about a third of her class comes from a French Immersion program and a few others from non-AIM Core French. According to Cheryl, one of the greatest benefits of AIM is that although the learning curve for beginners is steep, most are able to catch up with the more proficient students within a month. She found that “the gestures really help level the ground for everybody, and get everybody in at the same level”. She also added that she is “able to pull those kids that don’t know hardly any French up way higher, way faster, than [she] could with (the textbook) ‘On y va!’” It therefore reduces the frustration that beginners might otherwise feel.

Michels (2008) also found a smaller variance in the results of AIM than non-AIM students, suggesting that lower achievers end up closer to the higher achievers on measures of fluency.

Student Response

Students’ positive attitudes

All three participants were generally positive about the students’ attitudes toward AIM. Students in Grades 7 and 8 seem to like the different elements of AIM, such as the plays and gestures. Barbara said that students “really enjoyed [the] play”, and Amanda explained that “Grades 7, especially this year, really enjoy the gestures. They really like
it”. Also, although some students might have done the AIM activities repeatedly since Grade 4 or earlier, repetition was not reported as being a problem. According to Cheryl, this is because there is so much oral work, which makes sense for students. She said: “I always worry that they would be bored, but they are not. Because there is so much talking”. Students in Grades 7 and 8 understand the usefulness of the AIM exercises and truly want to be able to express themselves in French.

This supports the theory of meaningful learning (Ausubel et al., 1978), according to which students learn better when they can relate new information to their previous knowledge and their everyday experiences. It therefore seems that authentic communication is a critical part of the program to engage students in Grades 7 and 8. Contextualization is what makes repetition pleasant, because the activities are meaningful and suited to the students’ needs (Maxwell, 2009).

Students’ negative attitudes

Even though, from the teachers’ perspectives, most students like AIM, it seems that some elements meet more resistance than others. For example, enforcing the French-only rule in the classroom can be difficult, especially in conversations between students. Both Barbara and Cheryl agreed on this, although they have very different types of training. Barbara is very strict about students using French when they talk to her. She says that it takes a significant amount of energy. In her words, “the French-only rule takes much time and effort and the success/failure of some teachers to enforce the rule depends on this”. In order to help, Cheryl uses the ticket system. She gives students tickets when she hears them speaking French among themselves. In her words: “They make it seem like the program could be all in French, but it isn’t. It’s way more French
than it used to be, but once I put them in groups, I can’t get them to stay in French.” This difficulty has been observed in many other studies such as the one by Arnott in 2011.

Finally, there is still some resistance to gestures in the classroom sometimes, especially when students are new to the method and need to learn the gestures to be successful. Amanda commented that when they “watch the videos in class in Grades 7-8, [she] can see that they find that a bit silly. Whereas with the Grade 4s, they love watching the videos and they find that it’s just really well-tuned to their learning style”. This probably has to do with the normal attitude change of adolescents. Students in Grades 4 to 6 are more inclined to want to please the teacher, whereas students in Grades 7 and 8 start looking for more independence. They alternate between their younger and more grown-up identities, sometimes wanting to sing and dance, and sometimes not. Linked to this are the physical changes of puberty.

**Puberty.**

Puberty is another factor affecting the motivation of students. It is widely recognized that puberty involves many chemical processes in the brain of teenagers. Barbara believes that this is one of the main reasons why students might sometimes be reticent to AIM. In her words, “in terms of motivation with the intermediate kids, there’s a lot of things they don’t like, because they are going through puberty.” The implication is that students would react the same way to any other method, no matter how inherently motivating it is. Teachers therefore need to not take this personally. It also affects students’ energy level, which means that they may come to the classroom extremely tired. Amanda tries to be mindful of that. “If your class is coming with low energy, especially in Grade 8, there’s sort of this transition where they’re tired a lot, and you’ve
got to know when to be empathetic to that”. She mentioned, though, that at other times teachers just need to be firm and ask students to give their very best attention and participation. Teachers need to find the balance between empathy and being firm.

**It depends on the teacher and the student**

There is evidence that the motivation of students to use AIM is dependent on at least two factors: the AIM teacher’s attitude and students’ individual characteristics. Cheryl believes that the teacher’s attitude has a lot to do with how students respond to the method. For example, she believes that part of the reason why students do not mind looking silly when gesturing is that she does not mind herself. She is their drama teacher as well, so she is used to being silly with them and has created a safe space for exploration in the classroom. She gestures confidently. Given their training and many years using AIM, it is likely that Amanda and Barbara demonstrated the same confidence, explaining their students’ enthusiasm. Barbara believes that the effectiveness of teachers to set up routines and stick to them is also an indicator of their success with the French-only rule.

Not all students demonstrate resistance. For example, Barbara noticed that “there are specific personalities across grades that may be more resistant/oppositional to the French-only rule”. Further research could focus on how to identify those students and make the program more motivating for them.

**Flexibility as a way to motivate**

When discussing student motivation, all three teachers talked at length about the different ways in which they differentiate the program for students. Although they hardly ever mentioned the word “flexibility”, they mentioned many examples of it. For example,
the AIM guidelines already mention that teachers can choose to talk about the topics that really interest students, in order to make the discussions more authentic and meaningful (Maxwell, 2007). They do not have to restrict themselves to a pre-determined topic, such as the themes of the play. Although flexibility in terms of topics is important at all levels, it seems that this is even more important in the Grade 7 and 8 classroom.

Teachers have different reasons for being flexible in their approach. For Amanda, it was to motivate her students. She said that she has “taken some liberties with the program, in order to build an opportunity for the students to take ownership of their learning”. For example, she took the time to explain the brain-based research underpinning AIM to her students at the beginning of the year. She is also very aware of the energy level of her students, and ready to make a change in her teaching if they come with less energy. She described this as “having a conversation with their engagement, and adjusting the way [she’s] teaching based on that”. For Cheryl, flexibility is more a question of facilitating success. She explained that although the AIM guidelines suggest that students both speak and gesture in their first lessons with AIM, at least in certain activities, she gives her students a choice of gesturing, speaking, or both. This is “because some kids, occasionally, it is difficult for them because they are worried about doing the gestures and can’t follow the French.” She modifies the expectation to make sure that all her students can succeed.

Flexibility was mostly demonstrated by three adaptations: the addition of activities, the variation of timing, and listening to students’ preferences. Most teachers differentiated their instruction by offering extra activities. For example, Amanda and Cheryl offer their most advanced students the opportunity to write their own song or their
own play. Amanda also suggested that they re-read novels in French that they have already read in English. Barbara talked more about the timing of the different AIM activities. Talking about the necessity to make lessons more student-centred, she commented: “this is why the ‘teacher-led student expression’ portion of the daily lesson plan is usually shorter with intermediate grades than it is with the younger grades”.

Teacher-led student expression is a type of activity in which the student gestures in front of the classroom without speaking, and the student have to say the words. Finally, Amanda described her view that students in Grades 7 and 8 have two types of identities: their child-like identity and their grown-up identity. They are constantly alternating between both. According to her, it is important to be “open enough that you allow space for them to try their more adult and mature selves, but also their more kid-like selves by providing opportunities for them”.

**Challenges for Teachers**

Compared to the other categories, the challenges mentioned were more heterogeneous. Only the first theme, preparation for high school, was emphasized by all three teachers. It is also the most related to Grade 7 and 8 students in particular. Lack of knowledge about AIM, cost of training, lack of materials on French culture, and lack of opportunities for authentic communication were more individual concerns.

**Preparation for High School**

All three teachers agreed that one main challenge was to prepare Grade 7 and 8 students for high school. According to Cheryl, “the problem is that they get to Grade 9, and they are expected to be used to rote memorization of verbs, doing a lot of grammar sheets they are not used to doing”. Barbara had a similar opinion. “I can’t send the kids
off to Grade 9 without them having some sort of idea of what’s going to happen in Grade 9. The teachers in Grade 9 (...) are using the old deductive method system with grammatical units”. The difference between implicit grammar (as used in AIM classrooms) and explicit grammar (in non-AIM classrooms) seems to be the biggest issue. Still, students need to pass one credit of French in high school for the completion of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The teachers interviewed did their best to make the transition as smooth as possible. For example, Amanda provided grammar notes to help her students study for the compulsory exams at the end of the year, Barbara used activities from the textbook “Tout Ados”, and Cheryl had her students do more grammar activities. This preparation is costly: it can take up to a third of the school year, according to Barbara, but they still find it important.

**Misconceptions about AIM**

The participants were critical of how other teachers understood and used AIM. These criticisms came mostly from Amanda and Barbara, the two teachers who had the most training. Their stronger opinion was probably due to their greater awareness of the importance of adhering to the AIM rules and techniques. For example, they both described a common misconception about the use of gestures in the classroom. In the words of Barbara, “the thing to remember, that a lot of teachers have a hard time with this concept, is that gestures are not a language”. Amanda had a similar opinion: “Another thing is that you don’t ever expect your kids to gesture. You gesture, and they speak with you. The gestures are a tool”. Cheryl was less clear in her explanation, but still expressed a similar thought: “I don’t force it. I don’t make them have to do the gestures”. The teachers hinted at the cost of training to explain this common misconception.
Research shows that teachers are sometimes aware that they may have misconceptions about the method, but lack the guidance of a professional to identify those misconceptions (Arnott, 2012). They would appreciate more AIM-related professional development.

**Lack of institutional support for professional development**

Barbara, who has the most training in AIM, felt that the lack of affordable professional development is an important problem for AIM teachers. She voiced her concern about the high cost of training for AIM. She pointed out that it is not uncommon for schools to spend their whole budget on kits leaving no money for training teachers with the material. She said that “teachers are not going to spend their own money, 200-400$ on a weekend to go to an in-service to learn about AIM. They would like to, they want to, but they don’t have the money.” Cheryl mentioned a similar story when explaining why she did not get trained to teach AIM: “It costs extra money, and I didn’t want to put the money out.” Barbara mentioned the online AIM teacher training program as a helpful tool developed by AIM to help make training more accessible for teachers.

It may be more accessible physically, but its affordability is questionable. The online teacher training is offered to teachers on the AIM website for a cost of 110$ for the year, or 10$ per month. It contains 11 modules on different aspects of AIM that teachers can complete independently. For teachers with at least 150 hours of teaching experience with the method, a special training process called the AIM Teacher Certification is offered. At a cost of 375$, teachers can complete the 11 modules under
the supervision and support of a mentor. This shows that there are opportunities for professional development offered to teachers, but there is a cost attached to them.

**Lack of materials on French culture**

Amanda and Cheryl agreed that there is a lack of focus on Francophone culture in the AIM program in general, as was suggested previously by Carr (as cited in Arnott, 2012). Amanda said that she “definitely [finds] that it’s not embedded in the program, and that it’s definitely something that [she has] to bring to [her] classroom”. For example, the play “Salut, Mon Ami” is used by many teachers in Grades 7 and 8, but does not address Francophone culture in details. Arnott (2011) had mentioned the same issue, showing that teachers “created activities and themes and used non-AIM materials (…) to supplement for things they felt were missing from the method and the accompanying resources” (p.171). Indeed, culture is part of the curriculum, as exemplified by the third overall expectation from the 2013 Core French curriculum for Grade 7: “Intercultural Understanding: demonstrate an understanding of information in French texts about aspects of culture in diverse French-speaking communities and other communities around the world, and of French sociolinguistic conventions used in a variety of situations and communities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 102). Since cultural knowledge needs to be assessed, Amanda added videos of current events to her program, and Cheryl added a mini-unit on winter sports.

**Lack of authenticity**

Cheryl is concerned about the lack of authenticity in the communication situations in the program. She mentioned that “the language that is used in the AIM program is easily transferable, (…) but it still has to take a leap for kids to understand that if you
need help playing baseball, or basketball, you can use those same phrases”. She is aware that AIM is developing ties with the CEFR, and she hopes that this framework will be more and more present in the AIM materials to make it more practical and usable for students.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The main purpose of the study was to investigate whether, from the point of view of teachers in the field, AIM is adapted to the needs and learning style of adolescents, and if so, how teachers can help tighten the fit. The review of the literature suggested that there could be an issue with middle school students, especially those who are starting AIM in Grades 7 and 8, due to the teacher-centered nature of AIM and the fact that adolescents prefer more independence in their studies. The three following major findings emerged from the interview data: 1) students’ attitudes towards AIM as reported by teachers were mostly positive, 2) teachers were flexible in their delivery of the method, and 3) main challenges included preparation from high school and lack of institutional support for professional development. In other words, it can be concluded that AIM is age-appropriate for students in Grades 7 and 8, and there is room within the AIM structure to vary the activities and keep students engaged.

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The findings related to the resistance to gestures and to the French-only rule in this study and in the 2011 Arnott study are similar. However, the findings of the two studies diverged in terms of teachers’ perspectives on the issue of teacher centredness. The teachers interviewed were successful at choosing activities that matched the learning style of studies because the AIM guidelines are flexible enough to allow older students more autonomy and self-determination in their studies, thus minimizing the stage-environment misfit (Eccles & al, 1993).
The prediction that students would show significant resistance to teacher-centered elements such as gesturing and choral speaking, given their teacher-centered nature and previous research (Eccles et al., 1993; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Arnott, 2011) was supported by the results. Teachers mentioned it as being a fact, that students would sometimes find gestures silly, but teachers were able to diffuse this negativity by reducing the proportion of whole-group activities in their teaching.

The prediction that students would show resistance to the French-only rule, as suggested by Arnott (2011), was also supported. Teachers agreed that enforcing this rule takes a significant amount of time and energy, especially for communication between students, and in one instance the teacher decided to modify the expectation.

In spite of these specific concerns, however, students seemed very enthusiastic about AIM. This may be due to the various opportunities for communication and the functionality of the Pared-Down Language (PDL) adding meaning to the subject matter. In other words, the PDL allowed for connections with their everyday life (i.e. previous knowledge), which triggers the learners’ emotional system and makes the learning French more efficient than rote learning. This concept is described in the literature as meaningful learning (Ausubel et al., 1978).

This study also confirms that many teachers use their agency to select what they like about the program, as shown by Arnott (2011). Teachers did not always find themselves able to implement all aspects of this highly structured program. Furthermore, they often added activities to compensate for important elements they felt were missing in the program, such as cultural literacy.
The ubiquity of the theme of flexibility in the interview responses suggests that the success of AIM with adolescents depends a lot on the attitude of the teacher. When teachers show confidence, students tend to “play the game” and stay engaged. Confidence often comes with experience. Therefore, if the proportion of Core French teachers trained in AIM grows in the future, a lack of confidence might be less and less of an issue.

**Implications**

As the findings of this study suggest that middle school teachers are able to adapt AIM to meet the needs of adolescent learners, school districts that have found success with the implementation of AIM in Grades 4 to 6, should not be fearful about expanding the AIM program into Grades 7 and 8.

**Recommendations**

From these three teachers’ opinions and experiences, many recommendations can be made, especially for other middle school AIM teachers, school district curriculum leaders, and AIM program developers.

For other teachers, it is recommended that they adopt an attitude of confidence when they gesture in front of the classroom, be flexible in their delivery of AIM (e.g. adjusting the flow to students’ energy level and adding activities if necessary), and get as much training as possible.

For the school district curriculum leaders, it is recommended that they facilitate appropriate training for AIM teachers, review Grade 9 Core French programs to ensure they mesh better with AIM to reduce the transition challenges for students, and facilitate
communication between AIM teachers in the same region so they can share ideas and strategies.

Finally, it is recommended that AIM curriculum specialists continue the efforts to make connections between AIM and the CEFR, continue promoting key materials, and continue producing materials adapted to the needs and interests of adolescents.

**Limitations**

This study was exploratory in nature. The results are limited by the small sample size and short time to perform the interviews. The sample size of three teachers limits the generalizability of the findings. It is therefore not best suited for decision-making. Also, it is important to note that attitudes of students were gauged by their teachers whose perceptions might be distorted by their own beliefs.

**Future Directions**

It would be interesting to conduct additional studies related to different aspects of AIM to gain a fuller understanding of its effectiveness as a method for middle school students of French. First, it would be interesting to interview or survey students in Grades 7 and 8 on their experiences and opinions on different aspects of AIM. The number of years during which students have been learning French with AIM could be taken into account. There might be a significant difference between the level of engagement of a student who has been learning AIM for 4 years and one who is new to this method. Classroom observation of the specific strategies recommended by AIM teachers to adapt it to the needs of Grade 7 and 8 teachers could provide additional insights on why certain strategies are more effective than others with this age group.
Conclusion

Students in grades 7 and 8 respond positively to the use of AIM, as long as teachers are willing to differentiate their program to fit their ability level and personal interests. These results, together with the rest of the literature on AIM, suggest that we may have reached a tangible solution to help increase the proportion of high school graduates fluent in both French and English.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

My research questions:

What are the opinions of 3 Core French teachers of the Greater Toronto Area regarding the use of AIM in Grades 7 and 8?

- Is AIM age-appropriate for students in Grades 7 and 8?
- Is the delivery of AIM different enough from previous years to maintain students’ interest?

Background Information

- For how long have you been teaching?
- For how long have you been teaching French as a Second Language?
- For how long have you been teaching Core French?
- Have you ever taught extended French or French Immersion? If so, when and for how long?
- When did you begin teaching with AIM? At what grade levels have you taught AIM? For how long have you been teaching AIM to students in Grades 7 and 8?
- Did you receive training to teach with AIM? If so, what did this involve?
- Do you teach other subjects now?
- Did you teach other grades / subjects before you began teaching French?
- In how many different schools have you taught French?
- In how many grade levels have you taught French and other subjects?

AIM in Your Classroom

What does a typical AIM lesson at the intermediate level in your classroom look like?
a. How does it start?
b. How does it end?
c. What happens in the middle?

Gestures
- The AIM instructions stipulate that all teacher-led communication should be combined with gestures. How do you feel about using gestures with Grades 7 and 8 students in particular? Why?
- How do students respond to your use of the gestures?
  a. Do they find them useful? Distracting? Silly?

Plays
- How many plays do you work through every year with your students at the intermediate level?
- Are the plays age-appropriate for intermediate level students?
  a. What do you think of the characters, storylines and themes of the plays?
- Do you supplement the AIM program with other activities? If so, with what and why?

French Culture
- One of the recommendations of the National Core French Study was that students should study French culture. However, there is only a minor emphasis on French culture in AIM. Do you think it is an issue? Why?

Student Response
- In which grade have your intermediate students generally started AIM?
a. By the time they are in Grade 7, are students generally familiar with AIM? Are some or all of your Grade 7 students being introduced to the method for the first time?

- At the intermediate level, do you think that your students’ motivation is affected by the AIM approach. How do you think the repetitive nature of the AIM procedures is affecting your intermediate students?
  a. For example, how do you think they feel about the vocabulary presentation and play sequence? Do you think they like its predictability? Do you think they would prefer more variety?

Professional Development

- Do you think that the AIM training you received sufficiently addressed the opportunities and challenges of using AIM at the intermediate level?
- What other professional development opportunities do you wish you would have in order to be more effective with AIM at the intermediate level?

Conclusion

- Do you have any additional questions or comments?

Follow-up Questions

- One element of AIM is that both students and teacher use only French at all times during Core French periods. Does it happen in your intermediate classroom? Why?
  a. Do you enforce the French-only rule? To what extent?
  b. How do students respond to the French-only rule?
c. If you have also used AIM with younger grades, have you noticed a difference in their response to the French-only rule?

- Do you feel the need to make AIM more student-centred when teaching intermediate students, for example by giving students extra choice or autonomy? Why?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the strategies used by Grade 9 teachers to motivate their students to study Core French for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Antoinette Gagné. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40-minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Sarah Boucher

Phone number, email: ______________________________
Instructor’s Name: ____________________________________________
Phone number: _________________ Email: _______________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: _________________________________
Phone #: ______________________ Email: _______________________  

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _________________________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________________________

Date: __________________