

Learning French as a foreign language: Implications for my own English teaching practice

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1. Introduction

As a Peruvian teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher with 15 years' experience, I decided to become proficient in French to pursue Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The first objective to accomplish was to apply what I learned from this endeavour to my teaching practice, while the second goal was to get experiential knowledge about certain Second Language Acquisition (SLA) hypotheses.

The first part of this project took place at *l'Alliance Française* in Lima, Peru, from 2009 until 2012. This language centre offers French classes to the public, including children, young adults, and adults, while promoting French culture. The outcome of this initial experience was earning the B2 International Certificate in French (*Diplôme d'études en langue française B2-DELF B2*) and being able to conduct workshops entirely in French for EFL teachers, whereby my colleagues could experience the language learning process from the point of view of students facing English for the first time.

The second stage of this CPD experience started in January 2020, when I resumed studying French at the same institution, being placed in a face-to-face B2 French class. Nevertheless, due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Peru in March 2020, *l'Alliance Française* went completely online, and only distance lessons have been offered since then. Finally, I was able to attain the C1 International Certificate in French (*Diplôme approfondi de langue française C1-DALF C1*) in September this year.

The purpose of this paper is to share the implications of this self-study research on my teaching practice and certain experiential insights into some SLA hypotheses.

2. Experience outcomes and implications on English teaching practice

2.1. The first French class (The affective filter hypothesis)

Krashen advanced the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 2009), whereby he stated the importance of reducing students' anxiety levels to increase the possibilities of acquiring language. My first lesson in French took place in October 2009. Even though almost 12 years have elapsed since then, I can still see the teacher stepping into the room while saying *Bonjour, comment ça va?* (*Hello! How are you doing?*), a statement he had the whole group repeat in unison while kindly and empathetically addressing some pronunciation difficulties.

Besides that greeting in French, what vividly remains in my mind is the feeling of reassurance present in the room and how the teacher made everybody relax and enjoy the class. Once, he brought a guitar and had everybody sing part of a Adamo's hit *C'est ma vie (It's my life)*, a song which I now know by heart (https://youtu.be/Lm9_zC5nRgE). That experience later on encouraged me to have my own students sing out loud *I still haven't found what I am looking for*, by the Irish band, U2 (https://youtu.be/e3-5YC_oHjE), to guide them through the use of present perfect with still. Besides that, when it comes to helping my own students learn the possessive pronouns and possessive adjectives, everybody puts aside nervousness by singing (and even dancing) the *Whose puppy is it?* song (https://youtu.be/CWxrJI_Tna8), with great results. Perhaps great emotions ensure great learning.

2.2. Noticing French (The noticing hypothesis)

The first guided visit to the French language lab became an unforgettable event when my attention was captured by the teacher announcing *On va au laboratoire. On y va (We're going to the lab. Let's go). On y va* intuitively meant *let's go (there)* since everybody stood up and followed the teacher who kindly called us with her hands. As a result, and after constant exposure to **On y va**, I began using it when telling my peers to go to

the canteen or to have a walk during the breaks. Nevertheless, **On y va** remained as a chunk until in a B1 class a teacher's explanation helped me notice the individual elements separately.

Word in French	Meaning in English
<i>On</i>	We
<i>Y</i>	There
<i>Va</i>	Go

Table 1. Noticing *On y va* (*Let's go there*).

Schmidt proposed the **noticing hypothesis** by stating that even though exposure to comprehensible language facilitates its acquisition, there are some language features that remain unnoticed since they do not hinder comprehension. Therefore, some explicit focus is needed to ensure their correct use (Ellis, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The encounter with the **On y va** chunk was the springboard from which it was much easier to use each of its elements separately for other different purposes. Indeed, should the reader be interested in learning French, the particle **y** has many different uses which help the speaker sound more natural. Taking that into account, it was possible to realize the importance of focusing explicitly on the pronunciation of the different plural endings in English, namely /s/, /iz/, and /z/ in my classes. Actually, some learners believe that it is enough to use the /s/ sound to signal the plural form, which, indeed, may not greatly affect understanding. Nevertheless, one technique used in my lessons to make those different plural endings noticeable is utilizing Kahoot to present different words in plural while asking students to choose the correct ending sound from the alternatives. Engagement and learning work together while helping students notice this important English pronunciation feature.

2.3. French language exposure (The comprehensible input hypothesis or i+1)

Krashen (2009) advanced the **comprehensible input hypothesis** by affirming that sufficient exposure to language slightly above learners' level (i+1, where i=input) favours its acquisition while furnishing grammar.

Reading for pleasure has been a powerful source of exposure to authentic French, which has enormously helped me increase my proficiency in that language. In this respect, one of the French-speaking authors who has mesmerized me since last year is Belgian writer Georges Simenon, whose stories offer a plethora of opportunities to learn new lexis, expressions, and, most importantly, the authentic use of French while almost making the reader hear rainfall in Paris. This month, for instance, while reading an unputdownable story entitled *Maigret au Picratt's* (*Maigret at Picratt's*), the expression **faire les cent pas** (*walk back and forth while waiting for somebody or something*) captured my attention (see underlined expression in Image 1).

*Il n'y avait pas d'attroupement sur le trottoir, personne non plus sous la voûte ni dans la cour, et l'agent que le commissariat de police avait envoyé par routine pour maintenir l'ordre se contentait de **faire les cent pas à distance*** (Simenon, 2002, p. 239).

Image 1. Extract from Simenon, 2002, p. 239.

The translation of the text reads: *There were not many people on the street, nobody under the arch, nor in the open, and the police agent sent to keep order walked back and forth while waiting at a distance*. After learning a new expression or word, it is put immediately into practice while talking to myself in French or, whenever possible, during my classroom interventions. Indeed, this has helped me increase my own lexis, thereby allowing me to articulate my own ideas in French and elaborate upon them more confidently. In this sense, reading for pleasure is consistently encouraged in my classes, particularly those made up of students who have attained an A2 level. In practical terms, my students are usually invited to choose any piece of text in English and try to read it while using all the reading strategies learned in class. Once the text has been understood, a suggestion is to use *Podcastle* (<https://podcastle.ai/>) to listen to the text. Then, the following day students work in pairs inside breakout rooms on Zoom to build their confidence while I monitor. After that, some students share their ideas voluntarily or are called on. In a nutshell, massive exposure to language contributes to generating communication.

2.4 Creative use of French (The comprehensible output hypothesis)

Swain (Ellis, 2015) advanced the comprehensible output hypothesis, explaining that comprehensible input may not suffice '[...] to achieve high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence (cited in Ellis, 2015, p. 158). It is therefore also necessary to produce the language, either in oral or written form. She even went further by saying that comprehensible output '[...] provides a basis for metalinguistic reflection when learners consciously think about what they have said or written' (ibid.).

Writing in French has helped me exercise my creativity and deep thinking in that language. In fact, one of the most enriching experiences as a student of French has been writing and publishing for an online journal in that language an article entitled *Un candidat bicentenaire* (*A bicentennial candidate*), in which Peru, a country celebrating its 200 years of independence, takes over the role of a candidate applying for a job being interviewed by his own future. An excerpt of this article is shown below (see image 2).

Un candidat bicentenaire

Si mon pays était un candidat, le recruteur lui demanderait où se verrait-il dans cinq ans. Question piège compte tenu qu'il fêtera ses 200 ans prochainement, pas précisément gardant toutes ses dents et portant sur ses épaules de nombreuses opportunités ratées. Pourtant, ce candidat est décidé à se remettre sur la bonne voie et s'est soigneusement préparé pour réussir cet entretien. En effet, faisant preuve d'une fierté qu'il a failli mettre en évidence, il assène qu'avant que ce quinquennat finisse, il aura établi les bases sur lesquelles l'éducation et la santé seront à la portée de tous les Péruviens (Quintana, 2021).

Image 2. Excerpt from *A bicentennial candidate*. (Quintana, 2021)

In translation, the text reads: *If my country were a candidate for a job, the interviewer would ask him where he would be in five years. A difficult question since this candidate will turn 200 soon, not having all his teeth and carrying many missed opportunities upon his shoulders. Nevertheless, this candidate has decided to follow the right path and has prepared himself to succeed in this job interview. Barely concealing his sense of pride, he affirms that before this five-year term finishes, health and education will be available for all Peruvian people*

Writing is one of the communication skills which needs to be worked on from very early levels, gradually encouraging learners to express themselves so that they get used to conveying written messages of different types. One of the tools which has been really helpful, even in A1 classes, is the forums which can be set up on Canvas, our learning management system, whereby students start jotting down their first sentences in English to introduce themselves, exchange ideas about different topics, and even hold a debate at higher levels. Perhaps, one day some students may start writing in English for worldwide audiences.

3. Conclusions

Learning French as a foreign language has been a tremendously enriching experience since it has helped me understand not only my students' difficulties, but also their possibilities while learning English in a Spanish-speaking context like the Peruvian one. Indeed, most learners face the fact that English language use remains mostly limited to face-to-face or, nowadays, online classroom settings, and possibilities for language immersion in a foreign language context are out of reach.

All the insights gained have also allowed me to constantly ponder students' learning and acquisition outcomes within the perspective gained being a student of French who juggles many roles in life besides learning a foreign language. Besides that, this CPD endeavour has allowed me to gain experiential acquaintance with some SLA hypotheses, which in turn puts me in a privileged position to continue sharing with and learning from fellow EFL colleagues.

Finally, I would like to devote some thoughts to all my teachers of French, all of whom guide many Peruvian students willing to learn that language. Had I not had their empathy, professionalism, patience, and support, I would not have been able to explore the richness of French culture. Perhaps the most important lesson of this CPD endeavour is that as EFL teachers we need to remember that everything we do in class may be part of students' dreams.

References

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Biodata



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