

An American Francophile Learning French in France

A critique and exploration of personal beliefs on effective teaching, and effective language learning and how they manifested for me in a range of language input settings

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Introduction:

Throughout my education in the Second Language Studies (SLS) program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, I have learned about different important factors that are generally accepted as useful for learning a second or foreign language, and what is involved in the process of second language acquisition. According to many studies and theories in second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism, such as the communicative approach, one of the best ways to learn a language is to fully immerse yourself in the language, and to find as many opportunities as possible to speak your second language in as native a setting as possible. The communicative language approach which was first developed in the 80s and 90s, states that second language acquisition is best facilitated through conversation. Lightbown and Spada wrote in their 1999 article, “When learners are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities they are compelled to ‘negotiate for meaning,’ that is, to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions, etc., in a way which permits them to arrive at a mutual understanding. This is especially true when the learners are working together to accomplish a particular goal . . .” (p. 122) in reference to the necessity for meaningful interactions through communication. Stephen Krashen in his 1994 article mentions the necessity of language acquisition by meaningful input; that is having interactions and language input that is wholly advancing your language acquisition skills. This is interpreted through his other works and beliefs as following the necessity for communication, that consists of meaningful input, often through conversation and exposure, as necessary for language acquisition.

While it is understood that this communication in the form of an immersive, authentic, and meaningful interaction, can be ideal, for example in a study abroad setting, the opportunity to study abroad and learn a second language in a natural setting, can seem impossible, expensive, and difficult to do. As such, I feel that there may be many second language learners who do not receive the opportunity to study abroad ,or to study a language in an immersive setting. However, I was fortunate enough to

have the opportunity to study French language in Annecy, France, a cute little medieval town in the south-east region of France, nestled between snow-capped mountains and the cleanest lake in Europe, for a five-week program at the Institut Française des Alpes, the French Institute of the Alps (IFALPES). Having studied French for about seven years prior in the USA, I felt that it was about time that I learned French in France. I was able to go not only as a French major, but also as an SLS major, with my eyes open to the methods and situations that were helping or hurting me on my quest to learn French, which supplemented my desires and drive to learn French in a francophone, or French-speaking, setting.

For the purpose of this paper, I will begin by discussing my experiences in a French as a second language classroom and, according to what I have learned through my SLS studies and coursework, coupled with my personal interpretations, how these experiences were effective or ineffective in furthering my own French language skills. I will first describe my two French language teachers, then compare and discuss how their styles were similar or different, and what I found to be effective and ineffective for me as a second language learner. Then I will discuss the advantages and the effects of living with a host family with whom I could freely converse and practice my French outside of the classroom. And finally, I will discuss how this experience has affected my language learning skills now that I am back in the USA studying French in a foreign language classroom, as opposed to the second language classroom that I was exposed to in France.

The start of My Journey:

Upon arriving in Paris, France with my mother and father, I immediately dove into an environment where I had to speak French with native speakers. I can admit that I was a little rusty at first due to the fact that I hadn't studied French the semester before this summer session, and so I was a little out of practice; but I was more or less able to communicate with French speaking citizens, airport workers, and anyone else my family and I needed to communicate with. At first it was a bit of a culture shock to be surrounded by French signs, French people, French language, even the French monuments like the Eiffel Tower and the Arc du Triomphe which zipped by my window as we drove to our hotel; monuments that I have seen and read about in textbooks for seven years but never got to visit in person. Once that initial sense of awe settled, I realized what I had to do, and what I was there for, and I

allowed myself to become more comfortable speaking and practicing French. This week-long transition into speaking French again helped to lower my affective filter during the week prior to my language program. According to Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model, an affective filter is defined as a process where "certain emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt, and mere boredom [can] interfere with the process of acquiring a second language. They function as a filter between the speaker and the listener that reduces the amount of language input the listener is able to understand. These negative emotions prevent efficient processing of the language input" (Krashen, 2003). Looking back on this experience, I realize that this initial week was very important for my transition into the program at IFALPES because by the time I was sitting in the brightly lit testing room to take my placement exam, and on my first day of class where I had to hit the ground running with French communication, my affective filter was already significantly lowered. So by exposing myself to French language and culture prior to my French language program, I put myself at an advantage because I was more comfortable speaking, and I had less anxiety and self-doubt, which lowered my affective filter towards language reception. As a result I feel that I was better able to perform on my written and oral placement tests than I would have if I hadn't had that exposure.

After I was placed into group 12, a group of students whose French was considered to be at a high intermediate level, my classmates and I had our first day of class with Francine*, who was to be our primary teacher, and we were introduced to Flora* (*names have been changed), who was to be our secondary teacher. Knowing that I was going to be writing a report about this experience, I immediately began noting the similarities and differences that I saw in teaching methodology between the two teachers. One teacher seemed to have more experience with teaching styles that I was accustomed to, she would teach us new material, then build on that knowledge and ultimately test us on it. Whereas the other teacher taught us in a way in which she would assess what we did not know and then teach from our mistakes. While both of these methods have their advantages and disadvantages, I found that for my learning style, I learned better through the first teaching method, where the teacher presented material and built off of the knowledge it provided.

Comparing and Contrasting Flora and Francine:

The first day of classes started the day after our placement test and group tour of Annecy. Since it was the beginning of summer, and the air was still cool, I was welcomed by a sunlit room, and a cool

breeze coming through the open windows from the pollen filled outdoors. Francine was our first teacher, and she chose to leave the bright ceiling lights off, and to rely on the light provided by outside, which was more than sufficient. This was welcome because it created a more comfortable environment, again providing a situation in which the students' affective filters could be lowered.

I was able to immediately note what was effective or ineffective for me, and how the teachers conducted their classes. Since IFALPES offers courses year round, and students can stay for however many weeks they choose, sessions are a constant continuation of information, and continual overlap of students. For example, our first course began with introductions of all the students around the tables, at which point we learned that some students who were in the class had already been there for anywhere from one week to a few months.

At the beginning of Francine's first class, she asked the class about what our goals were, what we wanted to learn, and why we were there. This process is called needs analysis. According to J. D. Brown, needs analysis is "the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum processes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation" (Brown, 1995). In other words, it is figuring out all information necessary to create the best possible language curriculum, while taking into account learners', educators', and administrators' needs. She made a point from the beginning of the lesson, to ask each of us what we hoped to gain from our time there, and what we felt was important to focus on.

This information is valuable in any student-teacher relationship, because it lets the teacher know what the student expects, gives an opportunity for the student to know what to expect from the teacher, and also lets the students know that the teacher is interested in addressing their needs, and lets them know they have a voice. I noted in my journal after a few classes with Francine that she wrote the program for the class on the board every day, and went through and checked off each step as we completed it. This allowed the students to be aware of what we were doing for the day, and what she expected of us. I also noticed that Francine would ask students questions, and correct and explain any errors in students' speech, but the best part was that she was patient throughout the whole process, and would calmly explain things in a way that the students could understand. Throughout the program, I found these characteristics to be consistent. Any time that a new word, or phrase, or anything really,

was provided, she would make a point to write it on the board and explain it thoroughly. By the time a week had passed, I had already noted in my observations of her classroom that I found her styles to be very effective, and I liked her way better.

As time went by, I did notice a few aspects of her teaching style that I found to be less effective for my personal language acquisition. One aspect that I noted was that, while it was important that she was giving us a variety of new vocabulary, and synonyms, and definitions, there often wasn't enough opportunity for us to practice and use that new vocabulary, as we would often quickly move on to the next topic. This is very ineffective because according to accepted second language education literature, with any input of information, students need to have the opportunity to reproduce and practice the information, or it isn't going to be as effective. After all, how can students learn and practice something like speaking and producing language if they never have opportunities to do so?

When Francine gave us new information, but no opportunity to practice it, she was reducing our ability to reach our full potential and to grasp the information she was presenting, and she was denying us the chance to practice our productive language skills rather than only focusing on our receptive language skills. Receptive language skills are reading and listening to a language; productive language skills are writing and speaking a language. Another aspect of Francine's teaching that I found to be problematic or ineffective for me was when she would present new material and spend an unnecessarily long amount of time talking about it. This is called teacher talk time, and as a result she would not be giving students much time to talk or discuss. Teacher talk time (TTT) is defined as "the time that teachers spend talking in class, rather than learners.", where student talk time (STT) is defined as "the amount of time in a lesson that a student talks, rather than teachers" (British Council: Teaching English). Second language acquisition literature has been firm in its belief that for students of second or foreign languages to be effective language learners, they need to have opportunities to use the language. A conversation-based approach to language acquisition is one of the more accepted approaches to second language acquisition, and promotes the belief that students need to have opportunities to speak and converse, and need to be able to practice new material as it is introduced; while teachers need to be available for a resource, they still also need to allow the students plenty of time to practice speaking. Teacher talk time and student talk time need to be constantly evaluated and monitored to make sure that the students are given enough time to talk and to practice their language. When Francine would present

new material and deny the students more opportunities to practice, she was providing an ineffective method of teaching us, because after receiving the new language and the new material, we were denied the opportunity to practice it, and occasionally she would go on with the lesson and increase the teacher talk time in the class.

While Francine's methods had their benefits and faults, though she was generally more effective for me as a language learner, it is also important that I discuss my secondary teacher, Flora, and what methods she subscribed to and practiced. In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned how one of my teachers presented the material, then expanded, practiced, and tested us on what she had presented, while the other teacher presented and tested us on new material, then went off of our mistakes to further the lesson; this was Flora.

During our first lessons, Flora did something similar to what Francine did in terms of needs analysis. She asked us what we were there for, what we wanted to learn, and went through the standard icebreaker activities. This was good because it set us up to know that both teachers had a vested interest in our progress and our intentions for the class and what we expected. Flora seemed genuinely interested in what the class needed to cover. In addition to Flora asking us what we needed and what we expected, she attempted to show us what she expected and what she was going to give us. While Francine would write the daily schedule on the board, Flora had a typed and printed schedule on a bulletin board in the classroom that was a general idea of what we would do that week e.g. "comprehension orale", where we would listen to an audio track and answer questions about it, or "dicté", where we would listen to her read something and write it down. The problem with this was that she never specifically went into what exactly the subject or topic was that we were going to talk about, whereas Francine would have the specific topics or homework assignments written at the beginning of each class, and she would have the homework for next class written down from the beginning of class. I found this to be important because it made the students aware of what they could expect to be doing, rather than coming in to class each day blind.

One aspect of Flora's classroom that I felt hindered my French acquisition was that she was very inconsistent. As I mentioned before, Francine's classroom setting and teaching style set the classroom up so that the students could have a lowered affective filter, Flora's classroom was often the opposite. Sometimes she would turn on the harsh luminescent lights which made the classroom feel

much more sterile and proctored rather than a comfortable learning environment, and sometimes she would leave the lights off, making the classroom a little more comfortable but still difficult and confusing because of the activities and lessons she would give us.

In second language acquisition studies in the 70s and 80s, Stephen Krashen, developed the definitions of theories and hypotheses that were included in his monitor model, one of which is the input hypothesis. In his 2003 article the input hypothesis, or $i + 1$, states that “If i represents previously acquired linguistic competence and extra-linguistic knowledge, the hypothesis claims that we move from i to $i+1$ by understanding input that contains $i+1$. Extra-linguistic knowledge includes our knowledge of the world and of the situation, that is, the context. The $+1$ represents new knowledge or language structures that we should be ready to acquire” (Krashen, 2003). This concept of $i + 1$ is still widely accepted in the SLA world. So keeping this hypothesis in mind, I was constantly assessing my teachers’ abilities to present to us new knowledge or language structures that was at the $+1$ level, or the next step up. Often when Flora would teach, I would find her to be teaching at what I, and many of my peers, considered to be more similar to $i + 2$ or $i + 3$ which ultimately put us at a disadvantage because, again according to Krashen’s theories, this can raise our affective filter because it will increase our anxiety or self-doubt about a topic. Ideally she should be introducing material that we are prepared for, when in actuality it would often go over our heads.

One example of this situation was a French crossword puzzle that we had to do about sports. Mind you, I don’t know much about sports in English as it is, so even if we could have used a dictionary, I would not have had the slightest idea where to start. Flora handed out the crossword puzzle, split us into groups, and instructed us to find the words for each prompt given without using a dictionary. I understand that she had intended this to be an assessment of our knowledge but the way she went about it is what concerned me the most. She chose to split us into groups with members from different countries, I was paired with a Russian student and a Chinese student. While each group was similarly arranged, a Russian, a Chinese, an American (or two), some group members were clearly more advanced than others; in this case some had been at IFALPES longer and thus had been exposed to more French culture and more lessons from Flora. The two other members of my group and I had all arrived at IFALPES at the same time and we were all in the same boat. So as we went about this crossword puzzle, which she had given us 20 minutes to do, we quickly realized that we didn’t even

know the terms we were looking for in our native language, things like “left guard” in soccer (football) or similar. After about 5 minutes we had exhausted all of our resources and were attempting to discuss with other groups. Flora would come to us periodically and make comments similar to “these other groups are X percent done with their crosswords how do you only have Y amount of answers?” At this point I think I gave up. That she had the audacity to compare us to the other groups on an assignment that we were not allowed to use outside resources for was a situation where I sent my affective filter straight up and said “I’m done”. This process and her teaching methods affected not only my affective filter but also my motivation and willingness to do the work. Motivation is a big factor in second language acquisition, and if my teacher, who is supposed to be supporting me and helping me to learn, is criticizing me in a way that is derisive, that puts me in a situation where I am no longer motivated to do the work, and it can significantly affect my learning.

Flora justified this very narrow activity by indicating that it was used to assess our knowledge of French content and French words, which is understandable, except for the fact that we were not allowed to look anything up, and that we hadn't discussed anything pertaining to sports prior to this activity. This is an example of, as I called it, *i + a million*, a situation in which the professor presents something to the class that is beyond their level and beyond their capabilities, but expects them to understand.

The input hypothesis is also present not only in the teaching methods, but in the group rankings of the school. As I mentioned above, there were 13 groups, where group 13 was designated as C2 (high-advanced/fluent), and group 1 was A1 (low-beginner). Group 12, my group, was considered B2 (high-intermediate). Often in class Flora would pull material from books that had a large, bold, C1, or C2 on the cover, and would teach us from that. While I understand that Flora may have seen that as C1 or C2 is *i + 1 or 2* from B2, that actually was not the case because the material she exposed us to was often material that was far beyond our comprehension level. Even within those C1 and C2 books there was a range of difficulty, the first chapter and activities in C1 were going to be easier than the last chapter in C1, similar with the C2 book. So by pulling material from the C2 books to teach our B2 class, she was actually teaching us at a level that was far beyond what we were ready to comprehend.

In addition to these activities, she did have a variety of activities that worked, and some that did not work. In one case she gave us an oral comprehension activity where we had to listen to a poor

quality audio track with a man speaking in Quebecois French (imagine having to understand a thick southern drawl mixed with jargon and slang words from all over the United States), and we then had to answer questions on the audio. This was another example of an activity that was beyond our level, because even as high intermediate French speakers, we didn't necessarily have a lot of exposure to this French dialect, and hadn't learned or listened to it before the assessment, so we weren't being assessed on something that highlighted our capabilities, rather it again assessed our mistakes and what we didn't know. On the other hand, Flora did also occasionally have activities where she was very capable of providing us with effective sample sentences, and she gave us opportunities to practice our productive skills fairly often. She also had many discussions, often on topics that may be considered a little more taboo, which was good because it allowed us to break out of our comfort zones and discuss things we may not have otherwise had opportunities to discuss in French. In the end I felt that both Francine and Flora had their strengths and weaknesses in their classroom settings, but personally, I found Francine's teaching style to be more effective for me as a language learner.

An Authentic Experience in a French Homestay:

In addition to my in-school language learning, I was exposed to various other activities and encounters which helped improve my French speaking skills, these included interactions with shopkeepers, French youths, and my homestay family. The most important of all of these, I think, was the exposure to French language and culture that I received through my host family. Through the SLS major, we learn about factors that could influence second language acquisition. One that I have always considered to be very important, as I mentioned earlier, is the idea of the affective filter. Affective filter plays a key role in language acquisition, and its effects are often seen in language-learning classrooms. When the lights are bright, the chairs are hard, and the teacher is speaking too fast for you to ask her to slow down, your affective filter may be up, and as a result it may be inhibiting your opportunities for language acquisition. That is why it is so fundamental, in a second language acquisition immersion setting, to have a situation where you can lower your affective filter, be comfortable with your language use, and be comfortable asking for help.

I was placed into a homestay situation with a host mom and a host sister. I was lucky enough to be in a situation where both the mother and the daughter knew enough English so that if I was really

stuck then they could help me out a little bit. They were both incredibly sweet, and helpful throughout the whole home stay process. Throughout my stay with this family, I was exposed to situations where I had to speak about topics that I had never spoken of before in French, such as laundry terms, the word for ceiling, throw pillow, and on the other side of the spectrum talking about politics and how to apply for a scholarship at an American school. Because I had this opportunity to speak in a comfortable setting, and lower my affective filter, I was able to learn and practice talking about topics that I may not have otherwise had the opportunity to talk about. I feel that my motivation to be included, and to have this relationship with the people I was living with for five weeks was a strong factor that encouraged me to practice my French more, which helped me to develop my language skills. One example I remember is of a particular night around the dinner table, we almost always ate dinner outside in a calm and peaceful setting, and the daughter, the mom, and I spoke about everything from French politics versus American politics, to the American school system and how to apply for scholarships and grants, to fondue and fruits, to their plans for their vacation this year, to New York City (which the daughter was absolutely enamored by and always spoke about).

To be honest, I feel that if I were presented with these topics now, and had to discuss them in a classroom setting, with the depth and time constraint we had (about an hour), I don't think I could do it again. Because I was in that comfortable setting, with people I knew were there only to help, and not to judge, I was able to tap into my French knowledge in a way that was immensely beneficial. Though I feel I may be a little less capable of speaking at that level, the experience of knowing that I do have that ability was immensely worth it and helpful, because in a classroom setting, if I know I am not being judged, I can slowly get back to the level I was in that wonderful garden on the patio of an apartment in Annecy, France.

Thinking Back on My Experience:

Having all of these experiences wrapped into one program, and one adventure, helped me to progress in my language skills, and my understanding of myself as a language learner. By taking advantage of the opportunity to learn relatively the same material, in the same setting, from two different teachers, and being able to see what was and wasn't effective, I was able to learn more about how I learn languages. I found that in a setting like Francine's classroom, where the room was comfortable,

consistent, we were prepared and aware of what we were doing, we knew we could ask for help and use whatever resources available, and practice when necessary, I was most confident, motivated, and able to learn. I found that Flora's teaching method was ineffective for me as a language learner because I never knew what to expect and I was constantly faced with material that was beyond my level which made me hesitant to participate. Because of this and more I was unmotivated to want to learn in her classroom.

In addition to learning about how I best learn a language in the classroom I also learned what processes help me outside of the classroom setting. By having the constant interactions with my host family, and the people in the real world, I find myself much more comfortable engaging with French speakers in and out of school. For example, a French-speaking customer came into the store I work in the other day, and where normally I would pretend like I don't understand her, I approached her and began speaking to her in French to help her find something. Because I am more confident in my French abilities, as a result of my program in France, I am more comfortable and less hesitant to practice whenever I can. My increased confidence and comfort with speaking French is noticeable in my conversations with my professors on campus. While I am not required to speak French with my teachers outside of the classroom, I am more comfortable trying to communicate my thoughts and questions to them in French in their office hours because I know that it is an environment in which I am not being judged as harshly, so I can practice more with a lowered affective filter.

While most of my language learning took place in the classroom, some of it also took place in the real world, in the environments outside of my classrooms. Though my teachers at IFALPES sometimes seemed to lack the understanding that they needed to give us students opportunities to practice our productive skills, I feel that I was able to make up for that with my host family, people I met, other students, shopkeepers, neighbors, and family friends of my host family that I met and talked to throughout my stay. Overall, though I had different experiences in-class and out-of-class, the combination of all of my encounters with French language turned into a very effective method for me to ameliorate my French language skills, and to better understand what I need as a language learner to constantly improve. Being back in an American classroom learning French as a second language, I have been able to take the experiences and lessons that I learned in France, and use them to my advantage, to get the most out of my French education at the University of Hawaii.

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