

A Note on the Use of French in the Classroom

Like most language instructors, I choose to start using the target language (for us, French) in the classroom right away: from the very first day of the very first semester. Don't panic! Though being immersed in a French-speaking atmosphere from the get-go may be an intimidating experience, there is a reason for it.

Your time in your French classroom is going to be different from that in many of your other classes. One of the principle goals of your French class is that you acquire a skill—that of expressing yourself in French. Take a moment to think about how you have mastered certain skills:

- How did you learn how to ride a bike? Did your parents make you read a textbook on “Cycling for First Graders” before you hopped on a bike?
- How did you learn how to use many of the computer applications you use? Did you take several hours to read a “User’s Manual to Facebook” or an “Instruction Book for Instant Messaging” before sitting down at the computer?
- How did you learn how to speak English?

Just as you wouldn't learn how to ride a bike by spending hours reading a book about riding a bike, you will not learn how to express yourself in French simply by reading English explanations about French. Like other skills, you will only improve your ability to communicate in French by practicing the skill—in our case, by **speaking and hearing French in class**.

No matter how many French textbooks you read, the first few times you try to express yourself in French it will always seem a little frightening. But know that your classmates, who are having the same misgivings, and I-- who started learning French in a college classroom just like you—can sympathize. Remember: for most of you, your time in French class is your only opportunity to speak and hear French, and we need to make as effective use of that opportunity as possible. For that reason, our best use of class time is interacting **in French** as much as possible. Keep these tips in mind as you start trying to speak French:

- **Trust me to use language appropriate for your level.** I don't speak the same French to you as I do with native French speakers. Some of the “tricks” that I and other language instructors use to get our point across to our students include the use of: vocabulary and language we know you have studied, cognates (words that sound and are spelled like their English equivalents), hand gestures, repetition, and multiple examples. Also, you should trust me that anything urgent (the day and format of a quiz, for example) I will communicate at least once to you in English.
- **Be willing to take risks.** This means being willing to speak up, give it your best shot and TRY to say what you want to say in French. Conquer your shyness. Conquer your fear of making mistakes. You *will* make mistakes as you try to communicate in class in French, just as you probably fell a few times when learning to ride a bike. That's O.K.! As you hear, read and speak French, you will begin to naturally correct these mistakes.
- **Don't be intimidated if you don't understand every single word.** If you effortlessly understand everything I say, you should be in a more advanced class. If you only get the gist or “main idea,” you're doing fine. Participating fully in a language class takes mental effort—if you are truly engaged during French class, you should leave class with your brain feeling a little tired, or even with a slight headache from concentrating. Don't worry, that's your brain getting some exercise learning a new skill that is good for it, even over time. (Learning a foreign language is one of the best ways to keep your brain young.)
- **Read here for some study tips to help you get the most out of your class experience.**

(Adapted from Kristin Routt).