

# Comme Il Faut

*French immersion students need grammar instruction, especially in the verbs.*

By Ghi Dean

When I was a student, we learned French via a grammatical approach. Each lesson consisted of a story, some grammar points, an irregular verb or two, exercises to practise the grammar points and verbs taught in the lesson, and regular review exercises.

Because there were some weaknesses in this method, most notably the emphasis on written language, French instruction subsequently began a painful process of constantly reinventing itself.

First, teachers tried the structural or audiolingual method, which involved lots of memorized dialogues and oral drills. Then came a period of 'fun' grammar-less French during the Hall Dennis time. For most students, unfortunately, neither approach resulted in the ability to speak French accurately and fluently.

Enter French immersion. In keeping with the whole language approach, French immersion dealt with grammar on an incidental, 'as-needed' basis. This is like teaching kids to swim by throwing them into the deep end of the pool.

To add to the students' difficulties, most English-language teachers embraced the veto on grammar even more enthusiastically than the French teachers. Some aspects of a foreign language, however, simply cannot be taught without grammar instruction.

The good news is that the new Ontario curriculum is bringing back grammar. This will help to dissipate the unnecessary mystery of second language learning — and help students express themselves accurately in English as well.

The bad news is that this new thrust comes at a time when a new generation of teachers has come through a system that did not teach grammar thoroughly, if at all. The older teachers, unfortunately, are leaving the profession in droves as a result of five years of relentless teacher bashing by the provincial government, the public, and the media.

Core French, by definition, progresses more slowly and is more structure-focused than immersion. A good grammatical approach can take advantage of the fact that the current ninth-grader actually knows a lot but cannot access it when he needs it. With organization and a lot of practice, he can make significant progress.

The current ninth-grade immersion student has more French vocabulary in his head and an eagerness to speak. But the philosophy of not over-correcting means that these students have serious 'fossilized' errors in their language.

<u>English</u>	<u>What They Say</u>	<u>French</u>
To look like	Regarder comme	Avoir l'air de
To look for	Regarder pour	Chercher
Be 13 years old	Etre 13 ans	Avoir 13 ans
To be afraid	Etre peur	Avoir peur
He sees me.	Il voit moi.	Il me voit.
This one	Cet un	Celui-ci
Which one?	Quel un?	Lequel?

- They tend to place French words in English word order.
- They apply French pronunciation to English words, hoping the result will be a real French word.
- They use English constructions.

When I started to teach immersion at the secondary level, I actually could not understand what my students were saying to me in French. Consequently, I decided not to follow the course outline, which stipulated that their grammar instruction begin with the subjunctive mood. Instead, using verb charts, I started drilling the regular verbs.

The verbs are 75% of the French language and they, along with their subject, start any regular sentence. Their correct use also involves teaching word order, since French replaces a direct or indirect object by placing the pronoun **in front of** the verb, whereas English places the pronoun where the object was. This and the position of the negative are two major fossilized errors that need to be corrected.

Every day for two months, I drill the meanings and the uses of the tenses. Then I put all the tenses and forms together on one verb chart, continuing to drill the rules, forms and meanings of only regular verbs (including *être* verbs and reflexive verbs). The students put the verb forms on the board, and we orally drill the meanings, drill the rules, and eventually drill the negatives and pronoun objects for word order.

When we finally start irregular verbs, the students are delighted. They quickly see that if they memorize the present tense, they can pretty well figure out all the other tenses. They may or may not have to memorize the past participle, the future root, and the imperative.

During the three weeks left in the semester after finishing the irregular verbs, I do a daily short sentence translation drill based on the 'verb of the day' in any tense combined with any grammatical structure and vocabulary we may have studied during the semester. We correct their translations right away. On Fridays, I pick four of the sentences and use them as the weekly verb test.

One semester does it for many, but it is better to repeat it with different verbs during the second semester. The students' confidence then soars. They understand better, and they respond better. All this on a 10-20 minute drill session a day!

Grammar needs to be taught starting in grade 3 or 4, and to be carried all the way through. English teachers, too, will find that their students will be able to express themselves much more accurately — and ultimately more creatively.

*(Ms. Dean is a French immersion teacher with the Hamilton-Wentworth DSB. Her verb charts and other teaching materials are available at [www.sympatico.ca/ghi.dean](http://www.sympatico.ca/ghi.dean).)*