

Proposal: Great Ideas for Teaching

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Proposed activity: Expressive reading

Primary intended audience: Undergraduate French Students (First-third year)

I first created this very simple but highly effective activity for students enrolled in a second-year university French course (2905A/2906B). I had noticed that my students struggled with intonation and with identifying intonational cues. This meant that they were unable to communicate emotional nuances effectively and had great difficulty in identifying humour, sarcasm, irony and/or emphasis put on ideas and positions taken by speakers which is often communicated exclusively through intonation. We vary our intonation naturally in our mother tongue, and recognize the variations in the intonation of other speakers without difficulty. However, this is done mostly unconsciously, and the process does not always carry to language learnt in a classroom.

While some French courses include laboratory components that allow practice for pronunciation of individual French words, overall intonation and its importance are sadly overlooked. As a result, many students remain unaware of the key role intonation plays in oral communication. This negatively affects both oral comprehension and oral production in French students. Nor is this issue exclusive to French courses. I have personally taken courses in four languages at university and I have noticed similar trends in the structure of the courses. In creating this exercise, I had three learning outcomes in mind:

- 1-Increase students' awareness of the importance of intonation and how it can influence their oral comprehension as well as the efficacy of their own speech**
- 2-Provide student with the opportunity to identify varied emotions and nuances communicated through intonation**
- 3-Allow students to practice varying their own intonation to make them more effective at communicating orally**

The first part of the exercise was an in-class activity (20 minutes in groups followed by 10 minutes of discussion) during which I provided students with extracts of highly emotional text such as slam poetry, monologues from plays, and journalistic exposé documents to name a few. Prior to starting the activity, I put a simple sentence on the board, and read it myself out loud multiple times, each

time expressing a different emotion and asking students to identify that emotion. This was a magical moment! They could really see how the same sentence can change meaning dramatically depending on the intonation. I then had them work in groups on the texts provided to practice best intonation that communicated a position/emotion which I had indicated on the text in advance. Once students in each group had agreed on the best intonation for the sentences in their extracts, I had one person from each group read the text and had other groups identify the intended emotion. We then discussed the results and what may have been done differently in the case where the emotion intended could not be identified. This activity created the ground work for the second part of the exercise, an assignment completed in groups during which students took on the role of enthusiastic commentators and presented a sport/cultural event to the class (10 minutes/group).

While the exercise focused on situations where intonation was exaggerated, the ideas discussed apply to everyday communication. I noticed a significant improvement in students' use of intonation and their ability to identify intonational cues during oral comprehension exercises following this activity. I have since adapted the exercise and used it to profound effect in first and third-year classes. It is an exercise that focuses not just on language components but on how to communicate effectively. As such, it can easily be adapted for use in communication courses, specially in speech classes and any course that requires presentation skills. As effective communication skills are highly in demand in all disciplines, I think it is very important to draw students' attention to simple strategies they can use to become better communicators in general, as well as across languages.

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