

## **Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) and the Core French Teachers Who Use It: Why Agency and Experience Matter**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last decade, almost 4,000 Canadian schools have moved to using the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) for core French (CF) instruction. Following researchers' recommendations (Brumfit, 1984; Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 1996, 2000; Prahbu, 1990), I am shifting the focus in this case study from product to process. In other words, investigating how AIM teachers use and shape the method during implementation instead of comparing AIM and non-AIM student outcomes (Bourdages & Vignola, 2009; Carr, 2001; Mady, Arnott, & Lapkin, 2009; Maxwell, 2001; Michels, 2008;). Four interviews and observation sessions were conducted with eight elementary-level CF teachers. Findings showed that while some AIM routines and strategies were used by all, teachers exercised their agency in supplementing recommended AIM activities and materials, especially those with more AIM and CF teaching experience. Establishing that using AIM engaged teachers' *senses of plausibility* (Prahbu, 1990) also exposed important implications for future AIM research and board-level policy.

### **Résumé**

Depuis les années 2000, plus de 4000 écoles canadiennes ont décidé d'utiliser une forme d'enseignement qui s'appelle *AIM (Accelerative Integrated Method)* pour leurs programmes de français de base (*Core French*). Selon les recommandations des chercheurs suivants (Brumfit, 1984; Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 1996, 2000; Prahbu, 1990), au lieu d'étudier les résultats, l'objectif de cette étude de cas était d'examiner la mise en œuvre de *AIM*. Huit enseignants de français de base ont passé quatre entrevues individuelles. Ils ont eu quatre sessions d'observation de pratique de *AIM*. Selon les résultats, quoiqu'ils aient employé des stratégies et routines de *AIM* de la même façon, tous les enseignants ont aussi décidé d'ajouter leurs propres activités et ressources à *AIM*, surtout ceux experts dans l'enseignement du français de base et de *AIM*. En démontrant que cette méthode les incite à user de leur sens de plausibilité (Prahbu, 1990), ces résultats impliquent d'autres conséquences importantes pour une recherche ultérieure et la politique des conseils scolaires en ce qui concerne l'utilisation de *AIM*.

## **Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) and the Core French Teachers Who Use It: Why Agency and Experience Matter**

### **Introduction**

Over the last fifteen years, trends and innovations have continued to emerge and generate conversation about improving core French (CF) as a second language programming in Canada (see Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009 for summary). This study investigated the implementation of one such innovation - an instructional method being used for CF instruction called the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM).

Generally speaking, AIM is a language-teaching methodology that combines target language use with emblematic gestures, (Breckinridge-Church, Ayman-Nolley, & Mahootian, 2004), choral activity (McCauley & McCauley, 2002) and drama (Dodson, 2000), among others (Arnott, 2005). According to resources designed to support the implementation of AIM (Maxwell, 2006, 2008), AIM teachers should be able to boost students' oral fluency to previously unattainable levels from the onset of second language (L2) instruction. Thus far, however, research into the validity of these predictions has been inconclusive. Some AIM students out-performed provincial curriculum expectations (Carr, 2001), or their non-AIM counterparts (Maxwell, 2001; Michels, 2008), on oral interview protocols, while larger-scale quantitative and mixed method research suggested that merely using AIM does not make students significantly more proficient in French (Bourdages & Vignola, 2009; Mady, Arnott, & Lapkin, 2009).

Some researchers have voiced opposition to what the majority of existing AIM research has tried to do (i.e., measure the effectiveness of methods by comparing student outcomes). Both Brumfit (1984) and Prahbu (1990) cautioned that attempts to objectively evaluate methods in relation to learning outcomes are futile, highlighting concerns with these types of studies related to theoretical assumptions (e.g., questioning the objectivity of attributing learning directly to teaching) and methodology (e.g., controlling contextual features, only assessing quantifiable language attributes). In most cases, performing these kinds of evaluations tends to yield more complications than answers:

Such an objective evaluation is so difficult to implement that all attempts at it in the past have resulted in a wider agreement on the difficulties of doing an evaluation than on the resulting judgments on methods. (Prahbu, 1990, p. 168).

In the face of inconsistent findings garnered from these inquiries, teachers and decision makers across Canada have continued to support the use of AIM for CF instruction. In fact, AIM is presently being used for L2 instruction in 4,000 schools across Canada, 600 schools in Australia, and in other international contexts such as the Netherlands and Japan (AIM Language Learning, 2011). In an attempt to go beyond comparing AIM and non-AIM student outcomes and expand the literature documenting how AIM is being used in CF classrooms, this case study explored AIM implementation across multiple teachers. This article reports on findings that addressed two specific questions: (a) How are eight different elementary-level core French teachers implementing AIM?; and (b) How do participating teachers feel about the way they are using AIM?

## Brief Description of AIM<sup>1</sup>

The basic premise of AIM rests on the belief that the more students produce the language from the very beginning of L2 learning, either chorally with gestures or spontaneously with teacher support, the more likely they are to become fluent and accurate in their overall production of the target language. Some salient techniques and philosophies inherent to the method are similar to methods past (e.g., choral repetition of the Audiolingual Method, the idea that L2 learning should be considered to be similar to L1 learning in the Natural Approach, the value of kinaesthetic movement for language learning in the Total Physical Response method); however, one of its more distinctive characteristics is the gestures representative of each unit of vocabulary presented in AIM text resources as well as grammatical markers (e.g., masculine, feminine, past-tense, etc.).<sup>2</sup> The method was originally designed based on the belief that L2 learners need to experience language aurally, visually, and kinaesthetically in order for internalization to take place.

The AIM syllabus is divided into units of “years” that do not correspond directly to specific grade levels, but rather to the progressive acquisition of high frequency vocabulary and structures (based on Clarke, 1985; O’Connor DiVito, 1991) that are embedded in plays and stories. Teachers who use AIM are expected to implement scaffolded language manipulation activities where vocabulary is studied primarily in the context of the play, and sometimes out of context, but always completely in the L2. By using this vocabulary to complete these activities and communicate about the stories they are learning, it is assumed that students will become linguistically prepared to engage in more spontaneous, open-ended communicative situations. While students in the beginning years of AIM go through a similar activity sequence as students in later years, the expectation is that older students will accelerate faster because of their developmental readiness to complete more complex activities (e.g., written story retelling versus oral story retelling activities).

## Teachers Using AIM

Instead of looking at how methods influence student outcomes, Larsen-Freeman (2000) proposed that researchers should focus on how methods are being used by teachers. To date, three studies have observed the use of AIM in action, either as their primary source of descriptive case study data (Arnott, 2005; Carr, 2001) or to select and distinguish between samples of AIM and non-AIM students for subsequent comparison (Mady et al., 2009). In other studies comparing AIM and non-AIM student outcomes (Bourdages & Vignola, 2009; Maxwell, 2001; Michels, 2008), researchers did not observe what was happening in the AIM or non-AIM contexts that might have been influencing student test scores. Instead, they assumed that teachers were implementing AIM as it was described in the instructional materials, a “pure” version of method implementation that some have

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of AIM, see Arnott (2005) and Maxwell (2006, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The gestures themselves are most times fairly straightforward. For example, the verb *manger* (to eat) is the motion of bringing food to one's mouth; opening and closing your hand beside your mouth quickly means *dire* (to say); and putting your index finger above your lip simulating a moustache is the gesture to indicate masculine articles and adjectives.

contested is impossible in reality, given the complexities of classroom-based L2 instruction (Danesi, 2003; Stern, 1983).

Findings from existing AIM studies that did include observations established that some central elements of the method (e.g., target language use, individual/partner/group work, etc.) are, in principle, common to any L2 classroom (Mady et al., 2009), and emphasized the significant responsibilities placed on teachers during the realization of AIM (Arnott, 2005; Carr, 2001). Findings also challenged the notion that CF teaching – either AIM or non-AIM – is uniform across all teachers, a suggestion that is consistent with observations of other CF approaches in action (e.g., multidimensional project-based teaching) across multiple contexts (Turnbull, 1998, 1999). With this in mind, it seems unwise to portray AIM teaching as being static, done the same way by each teacher, with each class, over the course of each school year. Rather, as Sierra (1995) insists, L2 teaching should be viewed as always changing to accommodate the needs and demands of a volatile classroom context.

### **Dynamic Relationship between ‘Teacher’ and ‘Method’**

Prahu (1990) argued that “the enemy of good teaching was not a bad method, but over-routinization” (p. 174). In his view, regimented methods in language instruction reduce teaching to a pedagogic ritual and characterize teachers as mechanical beings with no agency. He maintained that the choice between which methods to use was not as important as a teacher’s subjective understanding of the teaching they do while using or not using a particular method, what he called their “sense of plausibility”. For teaching to be productive, Prahu insisted that a teacher’s sense of plausibility must be engaged:

Teachers need to operate with some personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning – with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility for them. (1990, p. 172).

In the twenty one years since Prahu’s declarations, the field of second language education has gradually shifted towards a re-valuing of teachers’ pedagogical intuitions. With the widespread adoption of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, helping teachers to become self-directed, autonomous individuals is now seen as more conducive to effective L2 instruction (see Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Similar to Prahu, Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003, 2006) insisted that teachers be characterized not as passive technicians, but as individuals who need to avoid designing their classroom and teaching according to one specific method. Instead of an alternative method, he advocated an alternative to the notion of method itself, claiming that all teachers construct personalized theories of practice and “know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula and textbooks” (2003, p. 33).

Others have claimed that implementing a method affects both the teacher and the method being employed. Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993) maintained that the act of using mediational tools like methods for teaching (i.e., exerting one’s “mediated agency”) unavoidably changes the method and the act of teaching resulting from its use. This contention is supported by Larsen-Freeman (1986, 2000) and Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) who insisted that instructional methods are no longer static once they have been implemented by a teacher because any method put into practice “will be shaped at least by the teacher, the students, the conditions of instruction, and the broader

sociocultural context” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 182). According to the accompanying instructional materials (Maxwell, 2006, 2008), AIM does not necessarily change with usage; rather, teachers are expected to follow the directives closely in order to ensure correct implementation. Richards and Rodgers (1986) warned against characterizing language teaching in this way as it runs the risk of “teacher proofing the instructional system by limiting teacher initiative” (p. 28). In this article, data is presented that contradicts the static characterization of AIM, and emphasizes consistencies and discrepancies between teachers’ uses of it.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted in the Ontario elementary school context, as AIM is often used at this level and because Ontario accounts for a large proportion of the AIM use across Canada.<sup>3</sup> Instead of focusing on one case where AIM was being used for CF instruction, a multi-case study framework (Stake, 2006) was used, anticipating that more could be learned about AIM implementation (i.e., the “beach”) by investigating its use in multiple contexts (i.e., examining unique “grains of sand”) (Larsen-Freeman, 1996, p. 165). Despite the challenges associated with classroom-based research (see Schachter & Gass, 1996), this study embraced the “messiness” of the classroom (Freeman, 1996) and adopted a more emic research perspective to ascertain how each AIM teacher perceived their context and their place within it.

### **Teachers**

Eight elementary-level AIM teachers participated in this study (see Table 1). Of the eight AIM teachers, seven were female and one was male; however all were given a female pseudonym to protect their identities. There was a wide range of general CF teaching experience represented in the sample, ranging from 5 months to 20 years. Experience using AIM for CF instruction was equally variable, ranging from 5 months to 7 years. Two participating teachers also had experience teaching French Immersion. All of the teachers had received AIM training offered by their board, while three additional teachers had also attended workshops offered by the creators of the method (AIM Language Learning, 2011). Four AIM teachers were from a board with a policy in place stating that AIM was the only method being used for Kindergarten to Grade 6 (Mandated), while the remaining four AIM teachers had chosen to use AIM for elementary CF instruction (Optional). The starting grade for CF programming in the Mandated board was Junior Kindergarten, while the Optional board began CF instruction in Grade 4.<sup>4</sup> This resulted in observations of AIM implementation across a range of elementary grades (Kindergarten to Grade 8), with some commonalities across teachers and board contexts. Each teacher was visited four times during the latter half of the school year (December to May). The objective of each visit was two-fold: (a) to observe teachers’ use of AIM in as many of their CF classes as possible; and (b) to conduct one semi-structured interview.

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<sup>3</sup> This is based on sales of AIM instructional materials as reported in email correspondence with Wendy Maxwell in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Ontario Ministry of Education & Training (1998, 1999), CF programming normally begins in Grade 4 and continues until Grade 9; however, school boards can offer CF earlier than Grade 4 if they so desire.

Table 1

*Characteristics of case study teacher participants*

	CF experience	AIM experience	CF grades taught	AIM training	Board policy on AIM
Veronica	5 years	5 years	4 – 8	Board	Mandated
Stacey	4 years	3 years	SK – 4	Board	Mandated
Gabby	5 months	5 months	SK – 5	Board	Mandated
Barb	12 years	6 years	2, 4, 8	Board	Mandated
Kim	17 years	2 years	4 – 6	Board	Optional
Sara	7 years	7 years	3 – 6, 8	Board, AIM	Optional
Brittany	1 year	1 year	4, 5, 8	Board, AIM	Optional
Trina	20 years	4 years	4 – 6, 8	Board, AIM	Optional

**Observations.**

Like other AIM studies (Arnott, 2005; Mady et al., 2009), detailed field notes and a modified version of the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) observation scheme (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995) were used to document each teacher's implementation of the method. Over the years, this instrument has been adapted and validated in many CF classroom-based studies (e.g., Allen & Carroll, 1987, 1988; Arnott, 2005; Harley, Allen, Cummins, & Swain, 1990; Turnbull, 1998, 1999; Vandergrift, 1992). In this study, the first part of the COLT scheme was used in order to capture AIM teaching practice in terms of organization of students and activities, content, student modality, and materials used. Links were easily made between these categories and how AIM teaching was described in the instructional materials.<sup>5</sup> However, since the COLT was not originally developed to examine AIM implementation exclusively, some additional categories were added to document how activities and strategies specific to AIM were being implemented<sup>6</sup> (see Table 2). During each observation, the beginning time of every activity was noted and the applicable categories were checked off. Percentages of their occurrence during the study period were calculated in relation to the total time observed. In addition to overall averages across the entire study period, percentages were also calculated for each grade level observed to look for trends and patterns in participating teachers' use of AIM across grades.

**Interviews.**

In total, each teacher was interviewed four times. Interviews focused on different themes, like teaching context and local needs (Interview #1), instructional materials and transition to becoming an AIM teacher (Interview #2), professional development and local

<sup>5</sup> For instance, it was expected that AIM teachers prioritize whole class activities during the initial years, and then revert to more partner/group work as students advance (Maxwell, 2006, 2008). Tracking how AIM teachers organized their students in each of their classes was possible using the category "Participant Organization".

<sup>6</sup> The "Target Language Use" category was actually taken from Part B of the COLT. It typically refers to target language use during teacher-student interactions, and is coded using audio recordings. However, for this study, this category was coded in real time, and refers generally to teacher and student target language use during each activity/episode.

support (Interview #3), and assessment and practicality (Interview #4). As well, the same three questions were asked at each interview to gauge how the implementation of AIM progressed over the course of the study period: (a) how teachers perceived their role in the implementation of AIM, (b) whether teachers were experiencing any challenges, and (c) how teachers perceived their students were reacting to their use of AIM. After transcribing the interview data verbatim, transcripts were analyzed for emerging themes related to the topics of that particular interview, and for links to categories from the observation scheme or specific activities that were observed.

Table 2

*Description of AIM-Related Observation Categories (adapted from Spada and Fröhlich, 1995)*

Category	Description
Teacher Support	This category referred to support corresponding to the general progression of scaffolding provided by the teacher (i.e., modeled, shared, guided, and independent). The categories “Gesture (All)” and “Gesture (specific)” were added because gesture is considered as a support system for learners, as they provide “extensive guided/modeled practice of the language” (Maxwell, 2006, p.30). Using gestures as support is also said to vary across levels - in the beginning teachers are expected to gesture throughout all teacher-led activities; however as students progress, teachers are expected to gesture less (e.g., when practicing new vocabulary or to correct grammatical mistakes).
Target Language Use	This category referred to teacher and student language use during each activity/episode, whether it be target language (L2), L1, or a mix thereof. Exclusive use of French by both teachers and students is identified as a key strategy for successful implementation of AIM. While the degree of “Mix” was not identified, if either group spoke English and French during a particular activity or episode, it was coded as “Mix”, and then the degree to which this kind of L1 use occurred throughout the particular activity or episode was detailed in the field notes.
Context	This category distinguished how teachers contextualized language practice during activities/episodes by using: (a) the context of a text (e.g., AIM plays, a different text that the teacher was using, etc.), (b) integrating students’ lives or other topics that interest them (e.g., during teacher-led self-expression activities), or (c) language practice in isolation from either (a) or (b), which I labeled “other”. An example of ‘other’ would be if the teacher was doing a gesture review activity using a list of vocabulary that was not overtly connected to the context of the play or text under study or the students’ lives.

### **Limitations.**

As in most case study research involving observations of teacher practices, limitations are present that must be acknowledged. In terms of this study, certainly the mere presence of an outsider in the classroom had a potential impact on how the participating

teachers conducted their classes and responded to interview questions, despite efforts to minimize this effect (e.g., repeatedly communicating that the objective was to hear teachers' individual stories and observe how they chose to use AIM, not so much in comparison to any norms or standards per se, but more in relation to other AIM teachers).

As well, although efforts were made to maximize the number of observations, this data cannot be considered entirely representative of each teacher's habitual classroom organizations. Generalizing the findings from this study to other AIM classrooms is also limited given the complex nature of each context. However, as Larsen-Freeman (1996) argues, capturing this very complexity is as much at the heart of classroom-based research as it was this study. The objective of this study was to make connections across equally complex contexts by intentionally examining how each individual AIM classroom operated in terms of its inner logic and rules, and how each participant perceived their unique context and their place within it.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the observation data revealed that several AIM routines and activities were used consistently across all participating teachers. At the same time, teachers were observed using other "non-AIM" materials and activities, and offered different reasons for doing so during their interviews. While teachers were often confident in their motives, they remained at odds about the implications of their use of AIM on the reputation of the method itself, and whether their use of AIM was "correct".

#### **Commonalities in AIM Implementation**

Observation data showed that the majority of AIM classes across all grades were teacher-centred; 53% to 87% of the observed time was spent with the teacher directing the class by speaking alone or by prompting students to simultaneously repeat what they were saying chorally. Three of the AIM teachers were observed contextualizing the majority of their activities in the AIM play under study, while others spent more time presenting activities connected to a context that was different from the play or the students' lives (Other Context), mostly when studying and practising vocabulary in isolation during games or gesture reviews.

All of the participating teachers were observed using the AIM instructional materials (Maxwell, 2006, 2008) to support their use of the method. They also implemented several AIM routines and activities that coincided with practices recommended in those materials. For example, they all facilitated some form of small talk during their CF classes, asking students about how they were doing that day, what the weather was like, and to recite the date. Beginner-level CF classes (primary or junior level) commonly began with choral repetition of songs and raps from AIM (AIM Language Learning, 2011; Maxwell, 2006, 2008;), which were used in these contexts to facilitate everyday activities (e.g., handing out folders, getting pencils, etc.) and to remind students that French was the language of the classroom. Many teachers also rewarded student production of French and discouraged the use of English by using the paper ticket reinforcement system outlined in the AIM materials (Maxwell, 2006, 2008), or substituting alternative tokens that they found to be more practical (e.g., clothespins, poker chips, bingo dabbers, etc.). Questions related to the play under study were integrated into each teacher's implementation of AIM. Some chose to have students answer the questions orally during whole-class activities, while others used the questions to facilitate guided writing activities, initiate competitive games,

or when assigning independent seat work.

Some patterns in the observation data also corresponded closely to central tenets of the method. For instance, an ideal portrayal of AIM execution involves maximized use of the target language, in this case French. As Table 3 demonstrates, participating AIM teachers did use French during the majority of their AIM classes, either exclusively or “predominantly” (i.e., instances of “Mix” were all noted as dominant use of French with brief use of English), and never used English exclusively. When English was used, it was often brief and restricted to: (a) translating instructions given in French, (b) translating single words in French, or (c) disciplining students.

As Table 3 suggests, some teachers used French more exclusively than others across the CF grades they were teaching. Closer examination of the data revealed that some French-only averages were brought down significantly by teachers’ increased use of English with their older students, particularly in the case of Gabby and Barb whose oldest students were in Grades 4/5 and 8 respectively. During their interviews, those who taught intermediate grades in particular also talked about the challenge of enforcing and modeling the French-only rule so students could maximize their use of the target language in the CF classroom.

Table 3

*Target language use – Teacher (Percentage of total time observed)*

	<b>French-only</b>	<b>French-dominant</b>	<b>English-only</b>
Veronica	75	25	0
Stacey	78	22	0
Gabby	55	45	0
Barb	56	43	0
Kim	98	2	0
Sara	100	0	0
Brittany	100	0	0
Trina	99	1	0

Gabby spoke about how she noticed that her older students in particular did not like to speak French, and cited maintaining French as the language of the CF classroom as being a challenge for her as an AIM teacher, especially given her belief that using students’ L1 (often English) was a useful strategy for her:

Speaking French all of the time, I think this is something I have to really work on...but sometimes, I find that if you explain it in English and say “in English we have the article ‘the’ and in French, it’s ‘le’ or ‘la’ ”. I explain how it is in English and that this is why we do it in French. They need to know why.

Another prominent tenet that participating AIM teachers seemed to follow was the principle that teachers should need to provide less gestural support as students progress through the units and become more fluent, at which point gesturing is only required during specific times (e.g., when introducing new vocabulary or correcting grammatical mistakes). Table 4 shows data representing the percentage of time that teachers were observed gesturing every word they spoke ( All) or when they only gestured certain phrases or words of what they were saying ( Specific). As this table shows, most of the participating AIM

teachers gestured to a lesser degree with their oldest CF students, gesturing more specific words as they moved up the grades as opposed to gesturing everything they were saying. Further examination of the data related to Kim and Brittany – who were observed using AIM at the junior level only – also revealed that they gestured less with their Grade 5s than they did with their Grade 4s. The only teacher who used AIM at each grade level (Barb) was observed gesturing more with her primary and junior students (All & Specific combined), and only gesturing specific words when using AIM with her intermediate students.

Table 4

*Gesture use across all grade levels (Percentage of total time observed)*

	Veronica	Stacey	Gabby	Barb	Kim	Sara	Brittany	Trina
Primary								
All	-	20	15	22	-	-	-	-
Specific	-	72	50	63	-	-	-	-
Junior								
All	26	20	-	25	28	36	22	17
Specific	62	45	5	74	48	54	28	44
Intermediate								
All	0	-	-	-	-	20	-	13
Specific	57	-	-	100	-	77	-	35

This pattern of gesturing less with older students coincides with another trend in the observation data showing that AIM teachers initiated more choral language work with their beginner-level students, which in some cases was Kindergartners and in others was Grade 4 students. During such activities, AIM teachers are strongly encouraged to gesture and speak at the same time to encourage student repetition of what they are saying (Maxwell, 2006, 2008). In her interview, Barb explained how she used fewer gestures and implemented AIM differently with her intermediate students in this respect, saying:

The Grade 8s don't do AIM in the same respect and I'm sure you've noticed that I don't use the gestures as much and just use them to kind of prompt students through because there's no way the Grade 8s are going to speak chorally or gesture.

Interestingly, those teachers who were observed initiating choral language work or "Gesture All" with their intermediate students reiterated the same point as Barb about the fact that gesture support offered by the teacher in particular is met with resistance from adolescent AIM learners, leading teachers to have to implement the method differently or simply persist to get these students speaking:

I'm still using AIM with the Grade 8s, but we've kind of dropped the actions. They aren't cool anymore. They don't really need to see the actions anymore, but I don't mind doing them and looking silly when I do need to use them. (*Trina*)

I've found we're still plugging along in the Grade 7-8 class with the play. I can't teach it using gestures though. I've tried. I've gone back and tried it a couple of times and they just tune out. But it's interesting because I think it's also part of the problem whether they're understanding the story really well, because they won't watch me gesture. They won't speak with me. They just think it's stupid. I understand why they think that, because it is an unnatural way to speak with your teacher. If I have something on the chalkboard, they'll read it with me. But they won't speak with me when I'm gesturing. (*Veronica*)

As they do go up higher, I do gesture less and less, and it is expected that students will gesture less and less. But I do know that the less I gesture, then the less the students speak. And they're not getting that oral practice then....They don't need the gestures to understand. I could give an entire lesson and the Grade 8s would understand 100%, but they're not speaking...and if they're not getting the oral practice then it's going to suffer in their writing as well. (*Sara*)

### Supplementing AIM

While teachers are encouraged in the AIM materials to “take the activities as a template, and try to be as creative as [they] can” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 67), participating teachers in this study often went beyond the template to create their own materials and activities. During their interviews, teachers explained how the tendency to supplement emerged most often (a) when establishing a balance between AIM and their existing CF teaching practice, (b) when dealing with the repetitiveness of using AIM for many years, and (c) after noticing things that were missing from the AIM instructional materials.

#### Integrating AIM and existing practice.

Some teachers did not feel it was necessary to completely abandon previous teaching practices that had worked for them. During her interview, one teacher complained that she missed creating units for her CF students as she had done before, saying that she sometimes found it difficult to “use somebody else's stuff and read instructions on how it should be done” (*Stacey*). So, instead of spending time getting her students to memorize every word of the AIM play, Stacey was observed playing games she had created and integrating thematic units to practice the vocabulary in different contexts. One of the former French Immersion teachers (*Gabby*) also described how she would frequently “dip into” her old resources to supplement AIM, like during one of her Grade 3 CF classes when she was observed implementing a phonics activity that she had created. For this activity, she designated some of the AIM gestures to simultaneously represent vocabulary and phonetic sounds to help the students as they learned to read in French. For instance, the nasal vowel < *ã* > (e.g., *quand*, *temps*, *gens*, etc.) was paired with the AIM gesture for *dans* [in], and when students were shown words with letter combinations representing this sound, she would use that gesture to help them to pronounce and read the word correctly. Interestingly, *Gabby* acknowledged that most of her AIM teaching was done like this, with her “immersion hat” on:

I find I do monthly themes, so whatever is relevant, like the authentic part. I also tend to go to what they're expected to do in immersion and I find I will look at that as well just for certain vocabulary, like numbers and colors, that sort of thing. I find that works with my core French students here. (*Gabby*)

### **Dealing with repetition.**

Although the vocabulary and content of each AIM play changes, and students progress through the AIM units at different rates depending on their age and skill level, teachers are often expected to follow a similar sequence of tasks and activities with each play. This is ideally meant to familiarize students and teachers with the routines and expectations related to each AIM unit. However, this regularity has its risks and benefits, as one teacher who was new to AIM and CF teaching highlighted during her interview when talking about how long she could foresee using the method:

I feel totally fine now doing the plays over and over. There's a certain amount of familiarity that I'm hoping to get because it's too overwhelming right now, but I imagine at a certain point I'll be like 'Oh, geez, I have to go through this again?'  
(*Brittany*)

Those participating teachers with more AIM experience reported having such feelings, and spoke about how they supplemented the method with thematic units and other non-AIM activities and materials in order to keep their students engaged in the CF classroom and motivated to continue studying the AIM play:

It helps keep their interest level up if you can incorporate something else that's going on because play, day after day after day, gets monotonous. (*Barb*)

I've put more cultural components in this year because I find that missing in AIM....The students like that, so those things keep them motivated for the other work with the plays and stuff. (*Veronica*)

They also highlighted how being able to supplement and having access to extra materials are what keeps them interested and motivated to use AIM for the foreseeable future:

I think the hardest challenge is actually to keep me interested, I mean am I going to be singing the same song for the next ten years? So it's not entirely a criticism of AIM, but it might breed boredom because if you take other textbook series, you can pick different kits from one year to the next and take a break . . . I would like to continue using AIM, but. . . it's going to get boring as teachers, teaching the same play for years and years. (*Veronica*)

I want to use AIM forever. It may evolve. I even find this year I'm maybe not using it as much as I was initially. At first I was focused on AIM all the way and everything had to be a gesture. And then it just depends on the situation now, I don't feel obligated always to do a gesture for everything I'm doing because their comprehension is so good that I don't need to. They know what I'm saying without it and I'm sure that will change over time too. Every class is different. (*Trina*)

### **Missing elements in AIM materials.**

Although they were all using the AIM instructional materials during the majority of time observed, each of the participating teachers also used other resources they had created or adapted. Some did this more than others, with teachers from the Mandated board using their own materials between 8% and 36% of the observed time, and those from the Optional board doing so more often, between 17% and 47% of the time. Some examples of non-AIM materials that were observed included pictures from French magazines, French comic books, other FSL textbooks, websites from France, and French story books used to

facilitate the creation of a class book. Interestingly, teachers were often observed introducing these types of non-AIM materials in tandem with AIM gestures and French-only instruction, which would suggest that they were trying to stay within the aforementioned “template”, and that implementing the method using “non-AIM materials” was not only feasible but acceptable practice, as one teacher clarified during her final interview:

- Sara: As long as you’re still using the AIM materials in an AIM way, or even other stuff but bringing it in an AIM way - run with it.
- Researcher: And in an AIM way, you mean...
- Sara: Like using gestures, getting the students to talk, making sure that they’re doing the production, that they’re doing the doing, and not you.

Of all of the participating AIM teachers, the two teachers who used the most teacher-made materials (Kim & Trina) also had the most CF teaching experience, with 17 and 20 years respectively. When using the AIM materials, they described how they found that certain aspects were missing for them, and compensated by creating activities and resources that had worked for them in the past. For instance, Kim felt that additional texts were needed to help students “get past the play” and have other opportunities to read and write the vocabulary they were learning in a context other than the play itself. While she appreciated the supplementary readers provided in her AIM resources, she described other materials that she had used to fill the void:

I add more of the colloquial stuff, like more activities with *la famille* [the family], more activities with *les parties du corps* [parts of the body], or do a little bit more culture of where the Francophone countries are. (Kim)

Kim was also observed implementing a routine activity where students were expected to independently read and write answers to what she called the *Questions de Salut* [Welcome Questions]. Questions increased in complexity with each grade and were either about the play or were general in nature (e.g., solving math equations in full sentences, personal yes/no questions, creating bizarre phrases independently, etc.). To start each class, Kim had students write answers to the questions independently, show her their work, and then help take the questions up as a class. Her rationale for doing this activity with all of her AIM classes was to “get them to be able to read more” because “the words are written down, so they will see it contextually in a different context than the play”.

While Trina acknowledged that she “would be supplementing with any program [she] used”, she also felt that there were not enough reading and writing activities in the AIM materials. For the reading in particular, she wanted her students to practice reading with non-AIM materials, especially seeing as the vocabulary they were learning was not exclusive to the AIM materials:

That’s one great thing about AIM it’s all encompassing vocabulary. It can be applied in many other situations, which is great. The books I have, the things I have, they are really old, but I don’t care. They work and the kids understand it so I supplement with that for the reading. (Trina)

Like Kim, Trina also supplemented because she felt that the AIM materials were too centred on the play, resulting in a lack of opportunity to assess how students could actually

use their French outside of this context. In response, she was observed implementing an activity routinely with all of her CF classes called the *Chaise Chaude* ["Hot Seat"]. During this activity, a student would volunteer to sit at the front of the room on the hot seat, and the rest of the class was required to ask them general questions about themselves and their lives. Students were expected to ask and answer questions in full sentences, reading from a sheet of "question starters" that they had collaboratively created at the beginning of the year. Trina sat at the back of the class assessing individual students' abilities to use their French independently, as she reported feeling that this activity and using other non-AIM materials helped her to assess students' true fluency as opposed to their ability to recite what they had memorized:

So I want to know if they can, in another situation, take what they know and create sentences and communicate, and I don't find that AIM offers that opportunity, even with rewriting the story or retelling the story. It's still a lot of the same structures and so that's why I do a lot of other things like the *Chaise Chaude* [Hot Seat], or I have a picture on the board and they have to tell me or write what they see. (*Trina*)

### **Proper use of AIM**

One noteworthy difference between Kim and Trina was their perception of whether their supplementing of AIM and the materials represented an appropriate use of AIM. Kim felt that her supplementing was "still the same methodology" as long as her practices fell in line with her interpretation of the underlying philosophy of AIM (i.e., that second language acquisition should mimic first language acquisition, where learners hear French first, then speak French, and only after that do they see French in writing). In contrast, Trina was confident that she was doing what was right for her, but was not as certain that she could be characterized as a typical AIM teacher:

I may not be using AIM just like in the video, but I do believe that the kids are learning and AIM is helping me, so I don't think it's a bad thing for me to use it the way it works for me . . . Even when I offered my classroom to you for this study, I thought, 'Am I an AIM teacher?', because how much of it do I follow to the letter? Do I stray too much to be an AIM teacher? I don't know. (*Trina*)

Although all of the participating teachers believed that using AIM helped students to learn French, and were confident in their motives for using AIM the way they did, many echoed Trina's doubt as to whether their own use of AIM was "acceptable" or "correct". Many reported feeling guilty that they were not getting through enough plays in one year, or ashamed that they were not using AIM exactly like it was described in the manual. Some admitted that they did not use certain materials (e.g., DVDs, songs, dances, posters) because of logistical constraints (i.e., no DVD player, not enough room in the class, lack of time, etc.). Three teachers also claimed that not having their own classroom impacted their ability to implement AIM according to how it was described in the materials, with some noting that students were not used to speaking French in their homeroom class, and others describing how they were at the mercy of how the classroom was organized (e.g., no carpet space to conduct whole class activities). Another teacher felt that she did not have the right personality to get students excited about AIM, saying:

I sometimes think I don't have that personality, so sometimes it's a bit of a struggle. I guess I'm not like that. I just can't be up like that all the time. I don't know how

other AIM teachers do that. I would like to be that way, but I just don't have the determination, I guess. (*Stacey*)

Although they expressed doubt as to whether their own implementation of AIM was "proper", some teachers went on to declare that the integrity of AIM would suffer if teachers were not invested in AIM or if it was used "improperly"<sup>7</sup>:

If you're not sold on [AIM], you're going to butcher it.  
It [AIM] can do a lot of damage if not delivered properly.  
If you're not going to do it the way it's meant to be done then don't do it at all.

### Discussion

Teachers were observed implementing many of the same AIM routines, techniques, and activities, including extended use of French and decreased gestural support with older AIM learners. In terms of target language use, other studies that included observations of AIM in action also found that AIM teachers were able to maximize their use of French in the CF context (Arnott, 2005), sometimes to a greater extent than teachers who were not using the method for CF instruction (Mady et al., 2009). While maximized target language use has generally been identified as a desirable CF teaching strategy, particularly in Canada where learners' exposure to French is frequently limited outside of the classroom context (Lapkin, Harley, & Taylor, 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002), previous studies have shown that CF teachers and students tend to use a great deal of English for classroom communication (Calman & Daniel, 1998), and that teachers find it difficult to maintain French as the language of instruction in the CF context (Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006; Salvatori, 2007). Findings from this study suggest that using AIM might enable teachers to sustain French as the primary language of communication in the CF classroom; however it is not certain whether this works to the same degree for all teachers at all grade levels. Some found the French-only rule challenging to enforce with their older students, particularly those at the intermediate level, which could be explained by other research showing that adolescent CF learners do not always consider maximized target language use as being helpful to their learning of French (Marshall, 2011). Other studies have also highlighted the negative impact that teacher-centred classroom environments like those observed in this study can have on adolescent student motivation and engagement in the learning process (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; O'Connell Schmakel, 2008), which might explain the resistance that teachers reported experiencing when using AIM gestures during teacher-led activities with their intermediate students. The fact that teachers reported supplementing and changing the way they used AIM in response to this resistance, instead of abandoning their use of it altogether, speaks to their belief in its utility at the intermediate level which addresses previous findings questioning whether Grade 8 is an optimal level at which to use AIM (Mady et al., 2009).

Although the eight participating teachers implemented many of the same AIM routines, techniques, and activities, they also chose to leave out certain AIM strategies and materials, and introduced supplementary non-AIM activities and resources. Not only do these findings confirm that CF teachers were exercising their agency while using AIM, they also suggest that AIM teachers are not mere executors of the method, but professionals who

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms for these quotes removed to preserve confidentiality

are “users and creators of legitimate forms of knowledge who make decisions about how best to teach their second language students within complex socially, culturally and historically situated contexts” (Johnson, 2006, p. 239). Participating teachers’ sense of plausibility (Prahbu, 1990) also seemed to be highly engaged, particularly in the case of those with more AIM and CF teaching experience. While experienced teachers commonly have a more diverse repertoire of practices to draw from (Arends, 2004), observations showed that AIM teaching across all participants was more “real” than “mechanical” as teachers extracted aspects of the method that worked or did not work for them:

When the sense of plausibility is engaged, the activity of teaching is productive. There is then a basis for the teacher to be satisfied or dissatisfied about the activity, and each instance of such satisfaction or dissatisfaction is itself a further influence on the sense of plausibility, confirming or disconfirming or revising it in some small measure, and generally contributing to its growth or change. (Prahbu, 1990, p. 172)

Like other second language teachers (Bell, 2007), the CF teachers in this study seemed to consider AIM to be a pragmatic resource for their pedagogy, picking and choosing whatever procedures or techniques that worked for them and helped to realize learning objectives or solve problems in their classroom. While post-method enthusiasts may argue that AIM teachers in this study were exhibiting the autonomy that is typical of post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), these findings showed that teachers often delivered their non-AIM activities and used their teacher-made resources in an AIM-like manner (e.g., using AIM gestures, connecting to the play, etc.) and believed that they were optimizing their students’ learning of French by using AIM in the way that they were. For them, the concept of method was not dead (see Bell, 2003; Brown, 2002); rather, they engaged in a dialectical relationship with AIM, welcoming some practices imposed by the method and constructing others based on their own sense of plausibility. Bell (2003) would consider this to represent the “liberating of teaching practices” in that two necessary forces were being mediated, “the one imposing methodological coherence [and] the other deconstructing the totalizing tendency of method from the perspective of local exigencies” (p. 334). By doing this, teachers were not only moulding their own AIM teaching practice, but reinventing AIM to represent more than its idealized characterization in the instructional materials.

Findings showed that participating teachers were also actively engaged in the “doubting and believing game” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), contemplating what aspects of AIM they agreed or disagreed with, and acknowledging those that challenged their notions about effective CF teaching. During their interviews, teachers justified their supplementing of AIM, explaining that they created activities and themes and used non-AIM materials (a) to balance their own teaching practice and the expectations of AIM, (b) to supplement for things they felt were missing from the method and the accompanying resources, or (c) to thwart the probability of boredom from having to teach CF using one method and one set of plays for many years. At the same time, some teachers also felt a sense of uncertainty about how their AIM teaching measured up to the pure characterization of the method described in the materials, and condemned those who used AIM improperly or who were not 100% invested in its use for doing damage to the method itself. According to Prahbu (1990), this type of insecurity is indicative of a more “frozen” sense of plausibility, where teachers strongly believe in the method they are following, but also feel threatened by questions about how they are using it instead of confident in the

changes they bring to its realization. These findings also indicate that participating teachers believed in both the existence, viability, and integrity of the static version of AIM described in the materials and the dynamic version of AIM they were employing, despite observations showing that their implementation of AIM was often more dynamic in nature. On the whole, these findings suggest that perhaps instead of feeding AIM to FSL teachers as an “unvarying diet” (Nunan, 1991, p. 243), AIM implementation should be characterized more in relation to its adaptability (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), whereby the degree to which teachers exercise their agency and adapt AIM to satisfy different conditions, while maintaining certain central routines and tenets, could be used to represent “successful” implementation. Doing this may lessen the degree to which teachers feel guilty for breaking from the AIM regimen, and provide a more realistic picture of classroom-based language learning as being one with micro- and macro-level influences that inevitably make the passage of prescriptive methods from theoretical principle to pedagogical reality context dependent.

### Conclusion

Findings from this study show that AIM teaching does not look the same in different CF classrooms, or across different grade levels. While some AIM routines, activities, and strategies were implemented by all, the participating teachers also exercised their agency while using AIM, especially those with more CF teaching experience in general, and those with more AIM experience in particular. They all supplemented and adapted AIM for different reasons, some having to do with the understandable conflict of integrating a new method into one’s existing teaching practice, and others related to expected challenges and perceived limitations of the method and its resources.

Generally speaking, these findings confirm what Stern (1983) and others (Danesi, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 1996, 2000; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Sierra, 1995; Tudor, 2001) have been emphasizing for years, that “much more is included under the name ‘method’ than the feature that has given it its name” (Stern, 1983, p. 451). Findings also confirm a long-standing understanding in the field of second language acquisition, that teachers’ beliefs about methods have a strong influence on how they plan their lessons (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Woods, 2003). Considering this, AIM teaching needs to be understood as representing more than the descriptions put forth in the accompanying resources, especially when the complexities of classroom-based teaching and teacher agency are taken into account. Assuming that mandating AIM for CF teaching will lead to some form of standardized use would also be a risky hypothesis given these findings. Certainly, if researchers continue trying to isolate AIM as one of the main independent variables affecting second language acquisition, these findings would call into question the usefulness of such studies that did not include observations of how AIM is being implemented. Research investigating AIM teachers’ belief-practice congruency in more detail would also yield interesting insights into the role they think AIM should or should not play in CF teaching. In this way, innovations like AIM and the teachers who implement them, could receive equal credit for attempting to develop the CF program in Canada.

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