



I CAN SPEAK FRENCH!

Increasing the Oral Proficiency of
French Second Language Learners

Students' Online Conversations



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Introduction

I Can Speak French! is a multi-component resource designed to support FSL teachers in building oral proficiency (listening and speaking) in French second language learners. “Students’ Online Conversations” connects to the “Research Compendium” component and extends the support offered in the “Strategies and Instructional Practices” component.

Social communication is a prime reason for learning to speak a language – for exchanging information and gaining understanding. French second language learners build their oral communication skills as they interact in conversations in French. Technology provides a conduit for engaging students in face-to-face online conversations with other French-language learners and Francophones. During these purposeful oral exchanges, students have opportunities to hear a variety of French dialects and pronunciations, and to respond using their French-language skills. As well, these authentic online conversations involve learners’ active spontaneous participation in sharing, exchanging, and debating information relevant to life experiences.

As the teacher is pivotal to the success students have in participating in this type of active learning experience, these guidelines outline considerations for organizing students’ online conversations under the following headings:

- Planning
- Knowing Your IT Environment
- Making Connections
- Reflecting

Planning for Effective Student Online Conversations

Organizing an online synchronous (real-time) conversational exchange opportunity for FSL learners requires careful planning and consideration by the teacher.

Pedagogical Considerations

It is important to determine the purpose for the online exchange – communication (e.g., peer-to-peer conversation for practising French), collaboration (e.g., partnering with other students for task-based interaction). The purpose of a conversational exchange should reflect the FSL program and its related curriculum.

Choose an engaging focus with students that makes cross-curricular connections or highlights a current social or cultural issue and, together prepare questions to guide their conversation. Select a springboard as a starting point for a conversational exchange. This could include the use of a video, a news clip, an expert, or a related story that highlights the selected focus.

Identify learning goals and success criteria with students so they have a clearly stated purpose for learning as well as some indication of ways to demonstrate their learning.

Provide students with ample opportunities to practise speaking using the identified questions, vocabulary, and language elements to talk about the topic in order to build student confidence and to support spontaneous conversational exchanges. As students begin their conversations, they might need some support with the language, however, as they engage in the conversation, their exchanges should become more spontaneous.

Refer to the “Strategies and Instructional Practices” component for effective oral communication strategies, language learning strategies, and instructional practices to select and incorporate when designing a learning task.

Logistical Considerations

Prepare a letter to parents and consent forms for students to be involved in an online conversation and get feedback and approvals. Provide parents with a brief overview of the project and make links to the FSL program and curriculum.

Discuss online etiquette with students. There are rules for digital citizenship when communicating in online conversations. Some common social conventions to discuss with students include:

- using a respectful tone
- asking for clarification when unsure or lack understanding
- staying relevant to the chosen focus for conversation
- supporting stated opinions with facts
- agreeing to disagree respectfully to the opinions of others
- respecting the privacy of others

Remind students about school and board/district policies and codes of behaviour.

Knowing Your IT Environment

Online conversations provide an alternative instructional model that assists students in building their oral communication skills. For these conversations to be successful, FSL teachers should be aware of the technologies and technical support available to them as well as the protocols and policies that must be followed.

Determine:

- school and board/district policies regarding online learning (i.e., consult with school administrator and board-level IT staff about protocols, permissions, restrictions, safety and privacy concerns);

- school board/district available technological infrastructure and capabilities (i.e., Internet connectivity, bandwidth, hardware);
- availability of technical support (i.e., IT staff and technicians at school as well as board/district level);
- availability of additional technologies and hardware such as microphones, headsets, smart phones, web cams, computers (stand-alone, laptop, tablet), interactive whiteboards;
- an appropriate time to try out the technology before students engage in the online conversation.

Consult with school administration and IT staff to:

- identify the online platform that students can use for their conversation and any training support available, (e.g., video, slide presentations, or tutorials to get familiar with the platform) and access to Help features so students can work more independently;
- select software applications that would be useful to facilitate the conversation, considering: availability, cost (free, subscription, license fee), security/safety features, ease of use, technical requirements, permissions required;
- access support resources (e.g., software for converting audio recordings to MP3 files, procedures, and software for archiving conversations);
- determine a location for conducting the online conversation (e.g., classroom, school computer lab).

Making Connections for Interactive Communication

Key to providing a positive experience for the students is to establish a well-coordinated partnership with another class for the online oral conversation.

Determine potential or possible partners for interaction – within a school board/district, within a province or territory, or other regions within Canada.

Seek out partnerships based on shared interests, availability, and student ages. If possible, a partnership could include conversations with French first language students.

Find an appropriate partner by:

- connecting with other colleagues (e.g., network established participation in professional development, school or board liaison for student exchanges);
- contacting provincial/territorial professional organizations (e.g., Modern Language organizations, francophone networks);
- Internet searches.

Engage in joint planning with a partner teacher to:

- decide on the purpose for students interacting online (e.g., a specific focus for the conversation such as a topic being studied, talking about a social issue or cultural event);
- discuss expectations for the students' conversation and follow-up after the online exchange;
- establish timelines for the duration, (e.g., 30 minutes with each student having 15 minutes) and the frequency of communication, (e.g., one conversation, multiple conversations at scheduled times);
- determine the number of students participating in online communication at one time;

- identify a possible process for extending the interaction (e.g., a staged process that involves initial conversation for getting to know one another; deciding what to talk about; making a plan for action; discussing results).

Reflecting on the Experience

Following the conversation, it is important to provide opportunities for reflecting on the online conversation to make connections with what students experienced. These conversations also are focussed on language learning, interaction, and information gained. To gather this feedback, use students' journal entries, small group sharing, and teacher-student conferences.

Students individually reflect on their online experience by:

- analyzing its impact on their language learning and oral communication skills;
- assessing its impact on their social interaction (e.g., engagement, willingness to communicate, motivation, confidence, use of feedback);
- discussing a goal for further online conversations as a way to identify their progress in speaking French.

Teachers reflect on the process and experience to make adjustments or improvements by:

- examining the impact of the online exchange on the development of students' oral communication skills;
- reviewing the availability/reliability of the platform used, school and board/district infrastructure, IT support, and additional support resources;
- considering the interaction with the partner teacher and class (e.g., benefits, strengths, and areas for improvement).