

Teaching French with Montessori, Part 1:

THE INFLUENTIAL MATERIAL

The contents of Valerie Nicholls' French lessons, their presentation and most of her games are largely influenced by the Montessori philosophy. Her company, Am Stram Gram, is based in Romford, Essex and was mentioned in an article about pre-schools in France in the Autumn issue of *Montessori International*.

"The development of the senses precedes that of the higher intellectual faculties and in a child between the ages of 3 and 6 it constitutes his formative period".

Maria Montessori,
The Discovery of the Child

Back in the early '90s, when I was studying for my Montessori Diploma, I realised that I could take the Montessori principles one step further and apply the idea behind the sensorial material to the teaching of modern languages and in my case, the teaching of French to young children.

The method I have developed is simple and is based on the development of the senses of touch, hearing, sight and smell. I purposely leave out activities involving tasting food because of possible allergic reactions.

Let's consider the following four sensorial materials and see how their principles can be adapted to the language class:

- The pink tower
- The sound boxes
- The object sorting boxes or the fabric squares.
- The smelling bottles

The Pink Tower

I could have chosen any material designed to encourage visual discrimination generally. The pink tower remains however a symbol of the Montessori education system and its use in the stimulation of sight can be adapted to the language class. The pink



Katie (aged 6) enjoying smelling a jar of spices, used to teach likes and dislikes.

tower is attractive and it has a clear purpose. It also has a striking simplicity and it provides a visual stimulus to children who at a young age, find abstracting impossible to do. Offering visual stimulus to abstract a notion such as that of dimension is crucial.

French words are just as difficult to abstract. If you tell a three year old that *une maison* is a house by showing him a toy house or a picture of a house, you will have made a meaningful association but if a few days later, even after much repetition, you ask without stimulus: "what's a house in French?", you will achieve very little response. If however you reintroduce the picture of the house and say "what is this?" the child will respond, which is why it is recommended to associate sounds (words) with objects or pictures. By doing this each time, the child will train his eyes and ears to work simultaneously for a perfect understanding.

When dealing with young children,

visual stimuli need not be accompanied by sound in order to be effective. Used alone, it can help you draw the attention of the children to the object of the lesson. Make a row with colourful boxes in front of the children or place a puppet in the centre of a mat. You can also display a bag in front of you and observe the children's reaction. They may become quiet or excited as they start to wonder what is inside. Whichever way they deal with the mystery, you will have achieved your aim: that of capturing their attention and their curiosity. This will lead to better attention and concentration on their part.

I consider colours to be an important part of my teaching. The material that I design must be brightly coloured, but, in keeping with the Montessori way, colours must be plain. Bright colours attract the attention and help the children focus. Children have their favourite colours which seem to be yellow, orange and red.