

The Lessons

by Valerie Nicholls

In part 1, Valerie Nicholls looked at four sensorial materials: the pink tower, the sound boxes, feeling materials and smelling boxes. In this article she examines the structure of the lessons and techniques for helping children to learn.

Teaching French as a planned lesson can utilise the same techniques as any lesson in the Montessori class.

Maria Montessori's way of presenting lessons influenced my method. Indeed, I found the simplicity and the straightforward nature of her lessons inspiring. Montessori's unique approach provides a balance between strict rules and freedom, since the lessons must fit into a pattern with material that has one purpose only, but at the same time, the mind of the child is allowed to develop and flourish. In the same way, my lessons follow a routine which the children become used to and start anticipating very quickly. My three- to four-year-olds often say "is it time for the Magic Bag, yet?". They know that the Magic Bag will lead to the feeling and the naming of the object inside and as they are keen to be the first to feel it, they are preparing for this moment from the start of the lesson.

Here are some ideas on what to include in your lessons and how to present them while remaining in tune with the Montessori way.

Choose the vocabulary

When selecting the contents of a syllabus, include easy words for three to four year olds. I find that, unlike five-year-olds, they cope very well with words of one or two syllables, but find it difficult to deal with longer words. Introduce no more than one or two words at a time with the three to four year olds. Teach no more than two grammatical structures with the older ones and avoid words that sound the same in the same lesson or consecutive lessons. When introducing the words, pronounce them very clearly, so that they can see your lips move. This is what they will imitate. Only give them what they are ready for.



Rosie, 3½ years old, associating words (sounds) with pictures.

Silence is important. Silence has always been a positive element of Maria Montessori's classes and it should be used strategically in the language class. Without silence, the children will not hear the sounds properly, and they will not be able to imitate them exactly. In order to train the children to hear perfectly without making a noise, I play whispering games.

They enjoy whispering and being whispered to. They quickly realise that they cannot hear properly if they are noisy. I whisper a short familiar word, and they whisper it back to me. Choose words with only one pronounced syllable for very young children: *chat*, *chien*, *nez*, *piéd*. Older children can whisper to each other because their whispering technique is more developed giving even longer words a better chance of coming back intact! I also insist that when a child sings to the class, the other children should listen quietly.

Unfortunately, not all the nurseries I visit every week understand this need for quiet. It is difficult to imagine having to teach a child still settling into the nursery and crying for his mother, but I have been expected to do this on a few occasions!

Communicate enthusiasm

Learning French can be a lot of fun and the children will respond much better if lessons are conducted in a peaceful, relaxed manner with humour, enthusiasm, mystery and anticipation. Young children in particular enjoy mysterious bags or boxes. With my classes of three to four year olds, the Magic Bag that concludes the lessons offers many opportunities for mystery. We could of course call it the Magic Bag, open it and leave it at that but it is so much more stimulating for the children to hear a roar coming out of the bag, or see the bag 'walk' or 'hop!' The children really do think the bag comes alive and it is fascinating to see and hear their reaction! A little girl in a nursery who had seen me for the first time one week could not remember my name when I came back the following week but she remembered the Magic Bag, so she called me the "Magic Lady!"

Isolate concepts

Whatever the object of the lesson, it is essential to go straight to the point, so that the attention of the children is not lost in meaningless talk or diverted because of other material placed in front of them. So when you show the picture of a horse, say *un cheval* and nothing else. Flash cards should be of the same size, too.

When introducing grammar to older children it is important to isolate the grammatical structure within your sentence so that they focus precisely on what is new to their ears. If you say: *qu'est-ce-qu'il y a dans le sac?*, you are