

Rising to the Challenge

A Research Perspective on How to Double the Proportion of Secondary School Graduates with a Functional Knowledge of their Second Official Language¹, Sharon Lapkin
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Context

This paper addresses the need to double the number of French-speaking Canadian young people² by the year 2013. From a research perspective, what can we do within our school systems to reach this goal within a decade? The approaches I propose grow out of a solid research base on FSL programs and pedagogy in Canada during the last 40 years, with particular attention to the past decade.

It is important to note that one can no longer speak of “English” Canadians as the learners who should become more proficient in French; in Canada’s urban centres, up to 50 percent of students speak a language other than English or French at home. This represents a vibrant resource and promises to make the goal of increasing proficiency in French in our “English” schools easier to reach.

Why a research perspective?

One of the main features of the immersion ‘experiment’ in Canada was the fact that research accompanied its implementation. Immersion came to be largely as a result of parental pressure (Lambert & Tucker, 1972); extensive research on the first programs established their validity and viability, and convinced later generations of parents to buy into what initially appeared to be a radical approach to achieving functional bilingualism in schooling. Research on core French, once scant (Lapkin, Harley, & Taylor, 1993), is burgeoning. As the FSL program that serves most students across Canada, the attention that core French and its variants (e.g. intensive French) are receiving is overdue. What are the implications of all this research for increasing French proficiency among our secondary school graduates?

What we can learn from immersion graduates

On the plus side, the small number of studies of immersion graduates have suggested that they valued their immersion experience; many (at least half) reported that French helped them to secure employment. Graduates generally have positive attitudes towards French and francophones, and strikingly, most plan to send their own children to an immersion program in the future. The only study related to the workplace setting (Hart, Lapkin, & Swain, 1998) concluded that many immersion students could fill bilingual positions, especially those not requiring writing in French.

Areas where improvements could have been made include the following:

- increased availability of courses in French at the university level in parts of Canada (e.g. Saskatchewan; see Husum & Bryce, 1991)
- increased opportunities for contact and interaction with francophones in most parts of Canada (e.g. Wesche, 1992)
- increased exposure to different varieties of French in classrooms, especially oriented to the ability of immersion students to understand speakers of Canadian French (e.g. Tarone & Swain, 1995)

In summarizing her study of Ottawa-area French immersion graduates at four universities (three in eastern Ontario and one in Montreal), Wesche (1992, p.232) states:

It seems quite unrealistic to expect graduates to seek personal and cultural contact with the L2 group on the basis of an essentially school bound program. This... suggest[s] that there may be things which we cannot achieve in school, or at least, will not be learned 'incidentally'.

The issue of making French real outside the walls of classrooms is a recurring theme across studies of immersion, core French and other FSL programs. I will come back to it below.

Focus on core French

With over 90 percent of non-French speaking students enrolled in core French programs across the nation, core French and its variants have gradually become a focus of research. To summarize key findings of the last dozen years or so, we must first review relevant studies that have been conducted. These have been largely predicated on the fact that many students over the last decade and even before that have dropped French at the first opportunity (often at the end of grade 9, where in most provinces/territories, it is no longer obligatory; see MacFarlane, 2003a)³. Others have reported being discouraged by the perceived lack of progress after many years of short daily periods of French instruction, often referred to as the 'drip-feed' approach. Teachers too sometimes feel discouraged by the same two phenomena, and by the tendency to marginalize them and their teaching subject (e.g., Richards, 2002).

To uncover insights from research on core French, the following topics must first be reviewed briefly:⁴

1. community and school attitudes/motivation
2. the changing demographic and the rural/urban contrast
3. new program formats for core French
4. expectations for core French

Community and school attitudes/motivation

It has long been acknowledged that home and community attitudes play a large role in school-aged learners' attitudes towards learning French (e.g. Gardner & Lambert, 1972); in fact they can be directly linked to achievement. Recently Dornyei (2001) has pointed out that second language (L2) motivation is a process that can change over time, in contrast with variables such as intelligence or aptitude (Gardner & Smythe, 1975). Enhancing motivation is a key to promoting improved L2 outcomes; this is also a theme we return to below.

A recent case study explores the relationship between community attitudes in a rural, North-Central Ontario community toward L2 learning, FSL learning and francophones. (A small percentage of community members identified themselves as French Canadians or had a French Canadian heritage; the rest were English Canadians.) Marshall (2002) interviewed 36 students from grades 5 to 8, five of their classroom teachers, two core French teachers in the school, and the principal and vice-principal of Northwood school (a K-8 school). She also distributed 141 community questionnaires (the return rate was 48%). Comments from two grade 7 students seem to capture negative attitudes reported in this study and more generally:

"Like, I'm not very good at French, like talking and stuff, and I don't really like the teachers."
"French...I don't think when I grow up I'll need it, what I'll be doing. Cause you only need it for grade 9 in high school." (Marshall, 2002, 18-19).

On a positive note, most of the students (and parents) did think the learning of an L2 was important, though that language did not necessarily have to be French.

Opportunities to use French out of school were rare; and many parents reported strong negative attitudes towards official bilingualism in Canada. Teacher interviews suggested that they were out of touch with community attitudes. Marshall concludes (p. 52) with constructive suggestions that might result in changed attitudes:

- teachers need to promote the benefits of L2 learning and should “locate and ...build awareness of the resources and the possibilities that exist within the community to increase language output”;
- core French teachers must “develop partnerships among the other teachers and subjects in the school” to avoid isolating French within the classroom walls. If French is better integrated with other subjects, then it will be accorded the same importance as other subjects;
- students need to understand that learning a language is time-consuming and difficult, and should set realistic goals along the way. “Teachers should provide students with a ‘survival pack’ of learning and communication strategies to assist with the challenges inherent in learning a L2” (p. 53).⁵

Finally, to combat the negative attitudes to the French-English debate (which may have changed somewhat with the change of government in Quebec), Marshall suggests:

Rather than focusing solely on the French Canadian culture in communities far from McCallum township, perhaps we need to consider the role of French in Canada and its relevance to the community, and develop a curriculum that addresses French in the community of the school” (p. 54).

The changing demographic and the rural/urban contrast

We move now from rural (homogeneous) Ontario to a large urban centre. Mady (2003) researched the motivation to study core French in a secondary school. She compared the attitudes of Canadian-born students in two grade 9 classes (core French for ‘applied’ students and core French for ‘academic’ students) to those of immigrants who speak a language other than English or French at home. The latter were in a special beginner core French class for ESL students. Three classes from a single school were involved; class sizes were 38 applied, 33 academic and 30 ESL, all of whom completed questionnaires. Two representative students from each class were interviewed in depth.

Mady found that the ESL students were more motivated to study French than both groups, though the difference was smaller vis-à-vis the academic group. Mady offers several interpretations of her findings, among them: “The ESL students may have responded more positively than the other two groups because of their past experience learning languages which may lend them a level of comfort and confidence” (p. 101; see also Vandergrift, submitted).

In the past, educators have expressed concern about ESL students coping in core French (e.g., Calman & Daniel, 1998). Mady’s study indicated that “the ESL students are, at minimum, motivated to study core French.” Canadian-born students, on the other hand do not feel invested in learning French:

Already reaping the rewards of their Canadian citizenship, access to education and jobs for example, the Canadian students claim ignorance as to what being Canadian means and they reject the possibility that French is part of being Canadian (p. 107).

Finally, all groups reported feeling uneasy and uncomfortable in using French outside the classroom. As MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2003) suggest, enhancing students’ willingness to communicate “is a valid goal of language education... .” (p. 604).

New program formats for core French

MacIntyre et al (2003) found advantages for students who had had a more intensive exposure to French during their schooling (in this case, immersion graduates): “the connection between communication and motivation for learning [was]...much more firmly established” than for non-immersion students (p. 601). This highlights the importance of providing opportunities for intensity within core French. Two experimental programs, conceived to allow for some form of intensity and shown to be effective, are relevant here.

1. Compact core French

The *Action Plan for Official Languages* includes a mention of compact core French that has been the object of only one case study (Lapkin, Hart, & Harley, 1998). Compact formats, also referred to as block scheduling, involve redistributing the available time for core French, so that instructional periods are longer, but extend over less than a full academic year. Three classes (one, a comparison group) of grade 7 students from a single school were tested. Benefits from the two compact formats (80 minutes daily for half the school year; 150 minutes daily for a quarter of the school year) included higher test scores in reading and writing, and enhanced student self-assessments of speaking and writing. Replication of this study is essential and another case study is in the planning stages (Marshall, in preparation).⁶

2. Intensive core French

In contrast, intensive core French actually increases the instructional time in the L2. For the period of one academic year, students study thematic content via French for up to one-half the time. Most of the evaluations to date involve Ottawa’s *bain linguistique* and Newfoundland and Labrador’s intensive French model (which has expanded to three other provinces in the last year or two; see Netten & Germain, in press). While the *bain linguistique* involves fully 450 instructional hours in French (about half time throughout the year), intensive French programs elsewhere vary between 260 and 420 instructional hours, concentrated largely within five months of the school year (Germain, Lightbown, Netten, & Spada, in press).⁷

Intensive programs can be viewed as a “kick-start” to learning French. Netten and Germain have studied L2 outcomes, with particular attention to speaking and writing, and results are impressive to date. After their intensive experience at grade 5 or 6, core French students approach the performance of younger francophone peers. In terms of the speaking scale used in Newfoundland and Labrador, they almost reach level 4, defined as “able to show considerable spontaneity in language production and to initiate and sustain general conversation” (Germain, Netten, & Movassat, in press). A major question is whether these students can maintain these impressive gains once they re-enter a “traditional” core French program for the rest of their formal schooling.⁸

Expectations for core French

A decade ago, Lapkin, Harley and Taylor (1993) reviewed the available research literature on all aspects of core French, with a view to identifying directions for future research. Among the questions they asked was this one: “Are available descriptions of language objectives (by Ministries, etc.) accurate reflections of what can be achieved in a core French program?” (p. 489)

Provincial departments of education publish their expectations for core French language outcomes at regular intervals. A recent curriculum document from Atlantic Canada (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 1999) includes the following examples of outcome statements for grade 12 core French students who should be able to:

- Participate spontaneously in a conversation
- Express and justify opinions and points of view
- Interpret and respond to texts critically and creatively
- Demonstrate a knowledge of certain linguistic and sociolinguistic variations in French
- Demonstrate their knowledge of the similarities and differences between French and English
- Recognize cultural expression in authentic documents

Ten years ago Lapkin et al. (1993) summarized what was known about the extent to which such expectations were being met. In fact, little was known then, and no research yet addresses the more demanding expectations exemplified above. Current expectations have generally not been tested, and we do not know whether the expectations listed in policy documents are realistic. Test development is a labour-intensive and time-consuming process, and for this reason, no national test development for core French had been contemplated until recently. Currently the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) has commissioned two position papers concerning developing such a test. In an initial paper commissioned by CASLT MacFarlane (2003a) concludes that at this time, a core French certificate could usefully indicate completion of a secondary school exit level course, but not that students have reached a specific proficiency level. In a second paper (2003b) she outlines what (daunting) steps would be necessary to make the development of a proficiency test possible.

Ultimately one would aim to create a standard to recognize achievement in the L2, and to establish a qualification recognized by post-secondary institutions and potential employers. This may help to retain students in FSL programs, as the long defunct university language requirement used to do.⁹

Making French real

It seems clear that intensive forms of core French contribute to making French real for students: students use French for real communication, and begin to glimpse its potential usefulness outside the classroom (Collins, Stead, & Woolfrey, in press).¹⁰ Therein, in my opinion, lies the road forward.

As we have seen, Marshall (2002) suggests taking French out of the classroom by accessing community resources and integrating small parts of the curriculum of other subject areas in regular core French. This is a considerable challenge, given the time constraints usually imposed by the daily schedule.¹¹ Minimally it entails the active collaboration of other teachers in the school and a supportive administration.

The best way of making French real is through face-to-face contact with the target-language group. MacFarlane (2001) studied a brief contact experience of only five days between a group of grade 6 immersion students in Mississauga and Québécois peers in Ste Foy. She discusses in some detail “the complementarity of classroom study and contact experiences” (p. 78) and summarizes her findings as follows:

Once students experience a wider interaction network, they may eventually select their own L2 contact opportunities during and following classroom language learning. Introducing learners to contact with native speakers at an early age and in the sheltered context provided by an exchange may decrease the operation of psychological factors when interaction is attempted later in life. The school year exchange thus provides a transitional context between the content-based classroom environment and ‘natural’ contexts. (p. 80)

MacFarlane’s findings are convincing with respect to immersion students. Lapkin, Hart, & Swain (1995; see also Warden, Lapkin, Swain, & Hart, 1995) studied both core French and immersion

secondary school students on a much longer exchange. Standardized test results and diary entries of some of the participating students told a compelling tale. For both immersion and core French students, the lower their proficiency level initially, the greater were the linguistic gains made. Both groups perceived that they had improved relative to francophone peers in reading, writing, speaking and listening in French. Both groups also reported feeling better able to function in a variety of registers.

Students made rapid progress in comprehension in the first month; improvement in speaking came in the second half of their visit. Initially, there was considerable culture shock and fatigue from functioning in the L2 so much of the time. Not surprisingly, they experienced highs and lows, with emotions ranging from fear and frustration through to elation. At the end of the exchange, students reported having grown personally and socially, and were happy and proud to have participated in the exchange.

Students participating in this type of exchange are highly selected because they have to be able to 'catch up' academically with work they have missed at their home schools, and their families have to be prepared to host Quebecois 'twins' for three months. When the OISE Modern Language Centre bid on the evaluation of this program in the early 90s, we outlined alternative projects. One alternative would have made it possible to assess the impact of an exchange on a non-elite clientele: we proposed taking an intact grade 9 class from a lower- to middle-class school in Midnorthern Ontario and funding an exchange for all students in that class. We would have predicted that a greater percentage of students in that class would continue in French beyond the obligatory grade 9 year than of other similar grade 9 classes in the school board.

How could we achieve similar attitude change and enhance proficiency for all FSL students, including the vast majority who have no out-of-classroom contact with French? Computer technology provides access to authentic experiences where classrooms and schools can be equipped with enough computers and Internet connections for all. Ideas for the use of e-mail and the Internet with respect to elementary and secondary FSL abound in Lawrence (2002; see also Turnbull, Bell, & Lapkin, 2002 and MacDonald, 2003). These teacher-researchers present evidence for growth in reading, writing and computer skills, as well as positive attitudes for e-mail exchanges and Internet-based activities. Motivation is enhanced because such activities are authentic, student-centred and fun. Learning is ensured if the activities are purposeful and well integrated into the curriculum. In asynchronous e-mail exchanges, for example, students have time to plan their contributions and teachers have time to provide linguistic tools that facilitate communication with francophone peers anywhere in Canada and internationally. As di Prisco (2002) points out, using technology for L2 teaching and learning implies a commitment to appropriate professional development for teachers.

Finally, on the topic of qualified teachers, this is a major stumbling block to implementing the ideas presented in this section of the paper. Halsall (personal communication, October 2003) has pointed out that core French teachers with advanced proficiency often "step up" to immersion classrooms, and that even in French-language schools in bilingual parts of Canada, there is a shortage of French-speaking teachers. She suggests that the federal government could encourage provinces and universities to establish intensive summer teacher education programs for candidates highly proficient in French, and allow these teachers to complete their training 'on the job,' on weekends or the following summer. MacFarlane (2003b) outlines in considerable detail the collaboration required on the part of federal and provincial governments to develop and implement a core French secondary school exit test. Increasing the supply of teachers who can accomplish the goals laid out here would require the same effort, along with cooperation from faculties of education.

Concluding comment

Just as the attitude of the Head of a school sets the tone for the achievement of students and the accomplishments of the teaching staff, so do the attitudes and policies of provincial departments of education and the federal government encourage or discourage innovation in schools. Of course funding is necessary; but making L2 learning a key part of the curriculum is of overriding importance. Canada's leading-edge research on FSL equips us to meet the challenge of increasing French proficiency among young "English" Canadians, given the political will to do so.

Notes

1. This paper has benefited from feedback from the following colleagues: Claude Germain, Nancy Halsall, Kim MacDonald, Aline MacFarlane, Callie Mady, Pam Marshall, Joan Netten, Merrill Swain, Miles Turnbull, and Larry Vandergrift. I am grateful to all of them for their timely and insightful comments on an earlier version of the paper.
2. The focus is on so-called "English" Canadians, those who do not speak French at home and cannot be characterized as French Canadians.
3. A recent report by the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (2002) surveyed close to 3000 grade 11 students no longer taking French at secondary school. One of six main conclusions (p. 18) states: "After several years of studying French...survey respondents were disillusioned with their lack of progress and their inability to express themselves in French. This coupled with finding the work difficult, and low marks resulting in a lower overall grade point average, convinced students to drop French." This report includes an excellent set of recommendations on pages 19-20.
4. Space does not permit a full treatment of all the issues raised in this paper.
5. In this they could be assisted by organizations such as Canadian Parents for French.
6. MacFarlane (personal communication, October 2003) suggested that block scheduling could solve a problem related to the deployment of itinerant core French teachers: "...many FSL teachers don't want to work .2 or .4 of a full-time schedule, but that is all that is available in some schools... . With intensive or block scheduling, teachers could be full-time at one school for several months and then move on to be full-time to another school."
7. Netten and Germain (2003) report preliminary findings to the effect that students who have had intensive French score higher than their peers in speaking, reading and writing, up to the end of grade 9.
8. Only in British Columbia do universities retain a language requirement for entry (MacFarlane, 2003a). In general across Canada, it is not clear that university French departments value the wide range of expectations that provincial departments of education specify. The mismatch between what core French students who meet those expectations hope to find at a postsecondary institution, and the 'standards' of university French departments is a serious matter worthy of study (Turnbull, personal communication, October 2003).
9. In this respect, intensive French programs resemble immersion.
10. In some provinces, the core French period serves to release regular classroom teachers from their duties, and serves as "prep time" for other teachers in the school. Some school board administrators seem unable to see beyond this fact to contemplate alternative formats for core French, such as compact or intensive programs.
11. The shortage of qualified teachers for FSL programs across Canada is a topic treated in depth by Canadian Parents for French (2002).

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The views expressed in this document are those of the author.