Factors Putting Late French Immersion Students “At Risk” and What We Can Do As Teachers

By

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Abstract

In Canada, French immersion programs continue to be very popular. Enrollment rates are rising nation-wide and society is becoming more aware of the richness of culture and the opportunities that these programs provide for children. For example, French immersion enrolment in York Region north of Toronto has more than doubled over the last decade (Friesen, 2013). Contrary to the enrollment rates, attrition rates have not changed, especially in late French immersion programs (Gunn, 2011). The purpose of my study is to explore how two teachers identify “at-risk” students and implement effective teaching practices to engage these students in the hope of reducing attrition rates. Using qualitative research methods, I conducted semi-structured interviews to learn about the experiences of two teachers who have successfully motivated “at-risk” French immersion students to remain in the program and succeed.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

As we progress into a new decade, French immersion programs are developing and expanding. With this there are new challenges for French immersion teachers. Students with multiple intelligences and different learning abilities are entering these French immersion programs and it is up to teachers to help motivate these students to do well and be successful. Even though studies have shown that there are high success rates in French immersion programs (Turnbull, Lapkin & Hart, 2001), there are many factors that lead to attrition. Harding states that students “tend to drop French as soon as possible because of the difficulty they experience with the reading- and writing-based curriculum” (Harding, 2012, p. 9). This is an issue that has been ongoing, and the attrition rates haven’t changed over the last decade (Gunn, 2011). There are many factors that can cause students to drop out of a French immersion program and I believe teachers can modify their teaching methods to minimize attrition.

Strategies such as the jigsaw technique, gallery walks, conceptual maps, analyzing case studies, holding classroom debates, group work activities allow teachers to move away from the textbook. Using such strategies allow teachers to get to know their students and be more creative in meeting the needs of their students while setting them up for success. Abbasi believes getting to know your students and making material meaningful is one of the most effective ways of teaching.

In addition to exploring how teachers recognize when students become at-risk of leaving the late French immersion program, I want to find out about the strategies they
use to motivate students and prevent them from dropping out. The focus will also be to find out how to create a beneficial learning environment for all students and minimize attrition in the program. Once a teacher is able to recognize when a student is at risk for academic achievement, it is important to communicate to the family that removing their child from the program may not be the best solution. Genesee says that, “There is no evidence to support the belief that students who are at risk for poor academic performance are at greater risk in immersion than in English-only programs” (Genesee, 2012, p. 6). Misinformed parents is another prime reason for high attrition rates in the late French immersion program and this can be mediated through proper communication (Harding, 2012).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore ways of recognizing “at-risk” students in the late French immersion program and investigate effective teaching strategies that help motivate these students to stay in the program and succeed. With this research French immersion teachers will have a better idea of how to assist at-risk French immersion students in order to minimize attrition.

When students are withdrawn from a specific school program they go through many changes. They may have different groups of friends, different attitudes towards school and their peers, a possible school transfer, and lifelong insecurities. If teachers are able to recognize “at-risk” attributes before students become too lost to want to continue in the program, they can set up their students for success with the right teaching strategies. The ultimate result will be students who feel more culturally connected with their country and have more opportunities in their society as bilingual citizens.
Research Topic/Questions

The main research question that guides this paper is:

What are the views of French immersion teachers on the most effective strategies to support the success of “at risk” students in late French immersion programs?

The sub-questions that will be considered are as follows:

- How do teachers recognize students at risk in late French immersion programs?
- What teaching strategies do French immersion teachers report as being the most effective for engaging their at-risk students?
- What are the preferred strategies of immersion teachers as they relate to promoting the use of French in the classroom?

Background of the Researcher

As a junior intermediate student in the Master of Teaching program at OISE/UT, I am very passionate about French being my teachable. Going through an early French immersion program all of my life, I feel I have developed a greater sense of culture as a Canadian citizen. Not only has the program given me opportunity to discover the true roots of my family, but it has also given me more opportunities for school, work, and travel. I feel grateful for being enrolled in such a rich program and have experienced the benefits of a French immersion program first hand.

The friends that I had made in primary class were the friends whom I graduated with in Grade 12. We were about sixty students in the program, and during the 13 years of the program, only three students dropped out and did not receive a French immersion
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certificate at the Grade 12 graduation ceremony. Two of those three dropout cases occurred because these students wanted to take specific courses in high school and didn’t have enough space in their timetable to obtain all the required French course credits. They did not dropout because they were at-risk or discouraged within the French immersion program. If I compare this personal experience with my observations of the late French immersion programs in the city where I grew up, the attrition rate from late French immersion is much higher. I have a great concern of how many students leave late French immersion before entering high school and I’m interested in exploring ways to lower these numbers.

I remember that when one student was removed from my French immersion class, we were simply told she couldn’t handle the second language expectations along with the usual curriculum expectations. Students made fun of her, which no doubt led to feelings of isolation. Eventually, my FI peers and I, the so called “Frenchies”, lost all contact with her and she moved on to a new school. This unfortunate situation has motivated me to conduct this study and to explore inclusive teaching strategies in French immersion.

Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure that was used in this study including information about the participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 presents findings from interviews conducted with two French immersion teachers and are organized into five themes. Chapter 5 discusses the
findings of my research and how this affects me as a teacher and as a researcher.

References and a list of appendices follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Affecting Attrition in French Immersion Programs

Students who drop out of late French immersion programs the most are those deemed “at-risk students”. For the purpose of my research I will define the term “at-risk”. In the textbook Educational Psychology Developing Learners, Ormrod defines an at-risk student as a student “with special educational needs” (Ormrod, 2008). For example, a student may have learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral problems that interfere with their learning and achievement. Ormrod says, “other at-risk students may have cultural backgrounds that don’t mesh easily with the dominant culture at school. Still others may be students from home environments in which academic success is neither supported nor encouraged” (Ormrod, 2008, p. 1). In any of these cases, teachers must be aware of the students’ needs and ensure that they have opportunities to be successful. Teachers need to ensure that they foster equity in their classrooms, and not just equality. At-risk students may need more assistance or resources. As not only the presence at-risk students can explain the high attrition rates in late French immersion programs, I will consider the literature on attrition.

A primary reason why attrition rates in French immersion programs are so high is due to misinformed parents being told that their child will become illiterate in both French and in their first language if they are struggling academically (Harding, 2012). Harding says, “Parents are often left to find remediation and support on their own. They feel guilty and may question their decision to keep their child in French programs. It’s often easier to leave than it is to challenge the system” (Harding, 2012, p. 10). This tells us that communication with the families of our students in French immersion programs is
extremely important. As much as we need to support students, we also need to support their parents by giving clear expectations of what students usually experience when entering the program, frequent progress reports, and reassurance if ever there is a concern for the student’s success. It needs to be stated that for French immersion students to have success in developing English language development, English has to be introduced at some point in the curriculum, which is the case in most if not all immersion programs. Genesee says, “There is no evidence to support the belief that students who are at risk for poor academic performance are at greater risk in immersion than in English-only programs” (Genesee, 2012, p. 6). This provides insight that switching a student from a French program to an English program may not be “the easy way out” and that they may experience the same learning challenges in both programs. Bourgoin says, “Second-language learning does not negatively affect the first language, that students rapidly catch up once English is introduced and, that many students surpass their peers by Grades 5 or 6, and that skills in French can and do transfer to English” (Bourgoin, 2012, p. 7). If parents aren’t patient enough to see their children’s English language skills developing before Grade 6 or sooner, then they may withdraw their children from the program.

If a student is identified as at-risk, this may discourage the parents or guardians from keeping their child in the program. Once we are able to identify these characteristics in an immersion student, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the particular student is a candidate for transferring out of the immersion program. Genesee says, “At-risk students can become bilingual and attain levels of first-language and academic ability commensurate with their learning challenges. The challenge is not usually for the children, but rather is for the adults around them” (Genesee, 2012, p. 6). Therefore it is important not to remove at-risk students from an early immersion program because it
may be their only opportunity for bilingualism. As teachers we need to work on creating a healthy learning environment that best works for them.

A concern identified by parents and guardians who are contemplating putting their children in French immersion is the issue of academic achievement (Mady, 2012). Students themselves also have concerns about their own academic achievement in the years that they would attend the late French immersion program (Ellsworth, 1997). Ellsworth says, “For secondary students, grades are particularly important because students are planning for post-secondary studies” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 15). Mady explains that the concerns of parents regarding the progress of their children in French immersion are sometimes connected to documents distributed by boards of education listing the specific characteristics of successful French immersion students (Mady, 2012). Some of these characteristics listed include:

- Strong skills in his or her first language, is verbal and likes to talk
- Enjoys books, imitates easily, and has a good memory
- Is confident, is a risk taker, and enjoys new challenges
- Demonstrates a successful transition from home to school. (Mady, 2012, p. 11)

If parents understand these characteristics as expectations, they may hesitate to register their children into the French immersion program. Mady also adds, “these characteristics are five times more likely to describe females than males” (Mady, 2012, p. 11). This might create an imbalance of boy to girl ratio in the French immersion programs.

Finally, parents' dissatisfaction with the teacher has also been a prime factor why attrition rates are high (Boudreaux, 2011). Boudreaux says, “The issue of parent aspirations, including what some practitioners refer to as hidden agenda, should not be
taken lightly. The deep reasons for parents to enroll their child in a specific program should be investigated from a societal point of view as much as from an educational point of view” (Boudreaux, 2011). This implies that understanding the goals of families and why they enroll their children in French immersion can help us better support those students. For example, if a family is looking to preserve their heritage language the teacher should seek material that relates to that student’s cultural background. The inability of the teacher to address the needs of the child has been cited as a reason for dropout from the French immersion program (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 19). Mady believes that poor quality French immersion teachers may be due to the lack of resources available (Mady, 2012). She says, “Many teachers do not get the supports they need to help academically-challenged students succeed, which allows them to maintain their negative beliefs” (Mady, 2012, p. 12). As teachers we need to keep a positive attitude and perform the best we can in meeting every student’s learning needs in the immersion and non-immersion programs.

The Roles of Attitudes and Motivation

What are the attitudes of students entering a French immersion program for the first time? How can teachers encourage a positive attitude to help motivate the students to learn? In a document from the Government of Alberta Education, we see that not all students are going to be entering the program with a positive attitude and it is the teacher’s responsibility to foster appropriate learning attitudes at the beginning of the program (Alberta Education, 2010). The document says that, “Teachers have to emphasize the teaching of French and the students’ oral production. They must be confident that the students are able to learn at a good pace” (Alberta Education, 2010, p.
27). These teaching practices will enhance the confidence of students and help create an overall positive attitude in the classroom.

In the immersion classroom, some learners are fearful while others are confident in learning the language. In order for students to stay positive, teachers’ attitudes should correspond to their learners’ aptitude and motivation (Ali, Mukundan, Baki, & Ayub, 2012). This suggests that high attrition rates could be due to unmotivated teachers with negative attitudes, demonstrating that we need higher quality late French immersion teachers to help motivate students.

Shoebottom suggests that students’ confidence can be boosted if they possess a larger vocabulary in their additional language. He states, “The more words students know, the more they are able to understand what they hear and read, hence the better they are able to say what they want when speaking or writing” (Shoebottom, 2007, p. 1).

Let us imagine the students who begin the school year with a negative attitude. What are the main characteristics of these students and can we notice any trends? Kissau says that students who demonstrate negative attitudes and a lack of motivation to learn French is particularly evident with respect to male students studying FSL (Kissau, 2006). The state of FSL education in Canada has raised concern about male involvement and achievement in French programs and Kissau indicates that boys are less likely to study French in senior high school (Kissau, 2006). A survey conducted in 2004/2005 by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario revealed that 89.5% of the elementary FSL teachers in the province were female and 10.5% were male (Kissau, 2006). Along with this fact, Kissau explains that it has been a few decades there has been a great decrease in male French teachers and that male students would be more encouraged to study the language if there were more male role models (Kissau, 2006).
Something to motivate our students might be to educate them on of the long-term benefits of the French immersion program. In general, enrolment rates for all French immersion programs across Canada are rising little by little each year (Canadian Parents for French, 2011). Will French immersion students graduate with more, less, or equal benefits compared to their non-immersion peers? An online pamphlet by the Canadian Parents for French explains that French immersion graduates will be much more likely to be successful in finding work in Canada. The pamphlet states:

Thousands of businesses in Canada operate in more than one language and the numbers are growing. In today’s global economy, those who are bilingual can choose from a wider range of national and international jobs that require employees with second language skills. The Government of Canada alone has about 67,000 bilingual jobs. (Canadian Parents for French, 2013)

From a personal point of view I know this is very important information to educate your students on. Many of my colleagues from high school tell me they have missed out on job opportunities due to the fact that they did not exercise their French and lack the require French language skills to be eligible candidates for these positions.

In order to motivate a class as a whole in a French immersion classroom, there needs to be a good sense of community and team dynamic (Brims, 2012). The Calgary Board of Education has a program called The French Immersion Learning & Literacy Program. Brims explains that the success of the students in this program is based on a classroom understanding that everyone is different and learns differently (Brims, 2012). This shared understanding helps develop relationships in the classroom where students can use their individual strengths to work together and accomplish more than if they were to be working alone. Brims states that the goal of this program is “to support students
with learning disabilities within the French immersion setting and to help each child gain
skills, knowledge, and competencies to reach their academic, social, and emotional
potential” (Brims, 2012, p. 13). This type of inclusive environment where students feel
like they belong sets them up for success.

**Teacher Practices**

What are the teaching practices that work well in a French immersion classroom? Which teaching techniques should be removed and what changes should be made? Ali, Mukundan, Baki, & Ayub reviewed a study conducted by Mei (2005) that revealed on average, 69 primary school students in her study preferred the use of picture clues and phonics, instead of guessing meaning from context, to learn vocabulary (Ali, Mukundan, Baki, & Ayub, 2012). Picture clues might sound elementary to some teachers, but these strategies work very well, even in the intermediate and senior level classrooms. Ali, Mukundan, Baki, & Ayub also reviewed Kuen's (2000) study showing that a majority of the subjects in her study found that using computers was more interesting than just working with paper (Ali, Mukundan, Baki, & Ayub, 2012). In fact, they claimed that the use of computers created enjoyment and fun in the quest to acquire a newly learnt vocabulary. Therefore, as immersion teachers we should be trying to incorporate more technology into our classrooms.

A very effective way of teaching in any classroom setting is getting to know your students and by making the material meaningful to your students; they will want to learn and the material will be much better absorbed (Abbasi, 2011). In order to know what is meaningful to our students, we should be having critical conversations to know what relates to them. When I was grade school, I learned the most from my teachers who had
got to know me the most by setting up oral communication skills activities on a daily basis. Ur elaborates on this, stating that some characteristics of good speaking skills classrooms are ones where learners talk a lot, participation is even, motivation is high and the language is at an acceptable level (Ur, 2012). This enforces that communication is key and can help develop healthy relationships with our students.

As a teacher, can we motivate the attitudes of all students in our classroom? Can any student benefit from French immersion programs? Are there any reasons why we should refrain from enrolling our children? Canadian Parents for French explains that French immersion programs are suitable for all students, even those who struggle academically (Canadian Parents for French, 2012). It is more of a challenge for educators who generally aren’t provided training about academically challenged students in their teacher education programs (Canadian Parents for French, 2012). Mady and Harding both agree that there are strategies for FI teachers without training about academically challenged students. These strategies include demonstrating techniques, using manipulatives, supporting oral language with writing, pre-teaching vocabulary, rephrasing and restating, using simpler language, teaching explicit strategies, and pacing lessons (Mady 2012; Harding 2012). In this sense it is the teacher’s responsibility to overcome this challenge and meet the needs of all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this professional literature outlines some of the characteristics of immersion as well as effective strategies for teaching an additional language. This work has brought light to some of the challenges a French immersion teacher may encounter; properly identifying at risk students and understanding the attitudes of the students,
parents, guardians, and community. As French immersion can be a highly effective way to learn French, exploring how to motivate students to remain in the program is important.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The findings of this research paper are based on an analysis of the literature on the topic of French immersion programs and the strategies that teachers use in these programs, as well as structured interviews.

i) Literature Review

The literature review presents a collection of articles, government reports, and professional peer-reviewed material that was analyzed prior to the interview data collection. The purpose of this review was to have a strong background in the domain of French immersion programs. This helped me form relevant and appropriate questions for my interview participants. This literature review allowed me to compare opinions and data in the articles.

ii) Interviews

I conducted qualitative research by interviewing teachers who have taught French immersion in order to have some first hand data on how they identify at-risk students, strategies they use in their classrooms, and how they motivate students to be successful. These semi-structured face-to-face interviews were recorded and approximately 30 minutes in length.

Instruments of Data Collection

My overarching question led me to develop an interview protocol focused on 1) recognizing the attributes of students at risk for discontinuing the French immersion program, 2) effective and engaging strategies for teaching French in immersion
programs, and 3) the preferred strategies of immersion teaching as they relate to promoting the use of French in the classroom.

In the document *Making Sense of Your Learnings* we learn about reflective analysis and its importance (Falk & Bluemenreich, 2005, p. 23). Through reflective analysis it is important to continuously write down new thoughts and questions you have based on your data. Each time we analyze further, we arrive at a deeper stage of understanding. I made sure to analyze each strategy to promote the use of French that my participants explained to me so that I could ask sub-questions on the spot before moving on to the next question.

In my interviews I asked questions involving past experiences with at-risk students and asked the teachers to discuss what they did in those situations. Turner speaks of constructing effective research questions and how it is one of the most crucial components to interview design (Turner, 2010, p. 757). Encouraging my interviewees to reflect on their past allowed the opportunity for a deeper and more thorough explanation of their experiences and/or knowledge. This enabled me to gain maximum data since I only had two interviews to pull information from. See appendix A for entire list of interview questions.

**Participants**

As criteria for participants in my study I searched for French immersion teachers with at least five years of experience. I chose two teachers who work in the public school system because all of my own experiences are in the public school system and I was able to relate to their data on a personal level. I had initially hoped to interview three teachers; one who had only taught early immersion students, a second who had only taught late
immersion students, and a third that had taught both. Unfortunately I was only able to interview teachers from two of these categories; that is one teacher who had taught late French immersion students and one who had taught French to beginners in the French language school system as well as late French immersion. Since one of my participants had only worked in the late French immersion program, the data from her interview excludes any biases based on her having a preference, for a particular French program. I was able to interview the associate teacher of a colleague so I was assured of her effectiveness as a French immersion teacher. I have both a male and a female participant to try to account for the perspectives of both genders.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

To critically analyze my data, I read and reread the transcribed interview data, with a focus on identifying the factors leading to at-risk students. I examined the actions each teacher took in specific situations to minimize attrition rates in the French immersion programs. Both of my participants believe that it is up to the teacher to identify at-risk students and help motivate them to continue in the French immersion program if it seems like the right fit. This shared idea helped guide my paper. I used different coloured highlighter markers to highlight the important quotes and insights in the interview data. Afterwards I made a chart with five overarching themes. Within each of these themes I established codes that appeared in both interviews. During the interview process I took brief moments to reflect and ask sub-questions on the spot that were relevant to the interviewees responses. Once having my five themes and codes, I compared my data collection from the interviews with the background information I
obtained from my literature review; this helped me form opinions and draw conclusions for my findings.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

I asked my participants informally if they would like to participate in my research, and made it clear that taking part would be completely on a voluntary basis. After my participants agreed to participate, I sent a letter of consent that they read and signed, indicating their willingness to participate (see APPENDIX B). The letter states that participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and remain anonymous through pseudonyms. Throughout the interview process I reiterated to my participants that they are not obligated to answer every question, and at any point are able to withdraw from the study. At the end of the interview I asked if there was any information my participant shared that they would like to be removed from the data. The raw data was saved as a confidential file on my password protected computer. After extracting the data from my recorded interviews I destroyed the voice recordings.

**Limitations**

Due to my small sample size, the opinions and beliefs of my two participants may not accurately represent those of the entire community, province, and country. Although my participants have similar ways of identifying at-risk students of leaving the late French immersion program, their strategies of handling these situations are different. With only two perspectives it is difficult to assume which of these action-taking strategies is most effective.
From looking at data, attrition rates fluctuate across the board for each grade level. For example, in Grade 10 (typically the third year into the late French immersion program), some attrition rates are double those at the Grade 8,9,11, and 12 levels (Gunn, 2011). Neither of my participants has taught French immersion in Grades 9 to 12 and this could be why they haven’t experienced a variety of instances of at-risk student asking to leave the program. It is possible that other issues occur in the later stages of the late French immersion program that my participants aren’t aware of.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from interviews conducted with two French immersion teachers working in public schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). My participants will remain anonymous under the pseudonyms Eugenia and Étienne. After analyzing the data from both interviews, five main themes emerged: skills/lack of skills in school, motivation, resources, teacher strategies, and making decisions. I focus on each of these themes individually and discuss what my participants agreed on or not.

Participants

My first interviewee, Eugenia, has been teaching in the public school system for 10 years. She currently teaches Grades 6 and 7. The subjects she is teaching are physical education, health, art, French for late French immersion students, core French, history, geography, drama, and dance. She did a double major in history and French before completing her bachelor of Education. Eugenia is a Caucasian Anglo-Canadian.

My second interviewee, Étienne, is currently an academic advisor but taught for 4 years in the French Catholic School Board and 1 year in another school board in the GTA. He has mainly taught actualisation linguistique en français (ALF) to Grades 3 to 6. ALF is a program that supports French language learners while they acquire French language skills required to pursue their education in a French school. In his third year of teaching he taught French Immersion at the Grade 7 level. Étienne did his undergraduate degree in sports psychology with a minor in French. He completed teachers college with physical education and French as his teachables. After completing an AQ in special
education, Étienne is now certified to teach primary, junior, intermediate, and senior levels. Étienne is a Caucasian French-Canadian.

Themes

Skills/Lack of skills in school. Both participants believe that a certain skill level should be required in language before students are permitted to enter a late French immersion program. However Étienne viewed this as a minor problem since he mostly had small class sizes and could give one-on-one attention to any student in need. When a student has literacy difficulties in their first language, they are most likely to have worse problems trying to learn a second language and this will serve as a barrier to success in all subjects taught through the medium in French. In Eugenia’s school, the late French immersion program asks to see the student’s Grade 5 report card to review their grades for core French, English, and Math before entering the program. Eugenia explains that this is done because if students are not already proficient in the core areas, learning subjects such as Math or Social Studies through the medium of French will likely be too challenging. In order to further understand this concept, Eugenia compares the French immersion program and lack of literacy skills to a hypothetical Math program:

A part of the problem is you're putting kids in a program where they have a massive new expectation, and you're also putting everything in a new language, and it's just too much. For me it surprises me. We don't have people putting kids into specialist math programs if they're not proficient at math. But they don't seem to apply the same rules to language programs, and it doesn't make sense to me because I think it is the wrong thing for certain kids.
This statement coincides with Wiss’ French immersion study that suggests that French immersion might not be appropriate for students who are cognitively and linguistically immature (Wiss, 1989). Étienne argued the extreme of this matter; that the late French immersion program might not be suitable if a student already has extensive language skills. Étienne raised the issue that it is also possible to have students who are too advanced in terms of their French proficiency to be challenged enough in the French immersion program:

[He was] a very strong kid, and he spoke a little bit more French at home than the other kids. So aside from differentiating and really pushing that kid in classroom individually, he still had a hard time relating to the other students, and he was really speaking at another level compared to everyone else. So it’s really hard when you don’t have anybody else other than the teacher that you can actually work at your full potential. So every time we are doing group work and stuff like that, that child had to be with the teacher or doing individual work to push himself, otherwise he would just have to be the team leader.

This comment suggests that even in a small classroom setting, it might be difficult to maximize the success of a student working at a higher level than all of his or her classmates.

It is important for French immersion teachers to be aware of the fact that low proficiency skills including literacy skills in French are often connected to weak literacy skills in English and not necessarily caused by a lack of hard work or motivation on the part of the students. At Eugenia’s school, there was one case where a family wanted to
remove their son from the late French immersion program but Eugenia gave them a fair warning that his marks wouldn’t improve drastically in an English program. She said to the family,

Well I don’t know. I think you’re sending the wrong message to move him because the same problem is going to happen in English. He may get better marks because it’s English but he’s not going to get A’s because he doesn’t do his work. In these cases I believe it is up to the teacher to find strategies to help motivate these types of students who are not “giving it their all”.

Now I will be discussing what exactly seems to motivate students in late French immersion programs.

**Motivation.** According to my two participants, French immersion students are highly motivated by reward and penalty systems. Eugenia says that her most effective strategy to motivate her students involves a stuffed animal that is the core element in her reward and penalty system. She explains, “If someone is speaking in English, [the stuffed animal] sits on your desk. If he hears anybody else, he moves. And the last person has to write ten lines that say, "I will speak in French...". If the students speak in French they receive a ticket to put in a box and Eugenia will draw for prizes. Eugenia is unsure if this makes student want to speak in French, or if it just makes them speak French because they feel they have to. Eugenia also speaks about the advantages of having group reward systems:

I know one teacher who works with groups, so the groups earn points as a group, and then they get benefits. They might get some free time, or they
might get some choice in some matter. And [the students] also self monitor because you get one kid saying to another kid to stop fooling around.

For Étienne, the motivation of the students determines the success rate for the entire class. He recalls one group of students who were very motivated by community and working together:

Motivation was a key issue. I really had to focus with that class, the focus had to be very little on French and a lot on motivation and group dynamics… yes of course grammar and the acquisition of the language was the main focus throughout the day, however my main planning went really towards how can I create rich tasks for these students to really feel included in our community, that’s how we ended up getting success, but without that team dynamic approach, I see very little success for late immersion.

Étienne believes that in a classroom with a strong sense of community the students will feed off of each other’s positive attitudes and motivation. He continues on to say:

A lot of kids kept going just because their friends were still there and everyone was still there, and I find especially with a group of teenagers and late French immersion students, team dynamics and the friendship piece is really important. So if you’re able to create as a classroom, or even better as a school, a climate of perseverance, then that is key for that cohort to be successful.
Contrary to Eugenia, Étienne believes that penalty systems intended, motivate students are problematic in many ways. In fact, the school district policy also discourages the use of penalties such as those describer by Eugenia. The prevailing philosophy is that once you give a student something as a reward for good behaviour, you shouldn’t take it away as a penalty for bad behaviour. Basically, what is given is given and should remain.

In regards to reward systems, Étienne believes it is important to reward a student when there are really significant goals achieved by students particularly if the students have set these goals themselves. In Étienne’s case, the reward system will be slightly different for each student because each will have set his or her own individual goals. Another strategy Étienne has found effective to motivate students involves, allowing them to wear a fun object or article of clothing during the class period during which any subject is taught in French. For example, students can wear hats, scarves, and gloves during French class so long as they communicate in French.

Étienne is concerned that students who are not at all motivated in French immersion programs may not develop very strong literacy skills in either French or English, leaving them at risk of failure as they progress through the grades. Étienne explains:

When you’re not so great in French and become unmotivated with French, you decide to go back to an English program but you’re so behind in English because you’ve been focusing on French for so many years. Those poor kids who had tons of academic potential are now in a situation where they are really unmotivated. They are not only behind on a second language, but they are now behind on their first as well. I think parents can potentially put their kids in a really higher risk program and schools that
accept anybody in those programs put these kids at higher risks as well for what is, to me, almost a fashion statement.

**Human and Material Resources.** In Eugenia’s experience, there is a lack of French immersion teachers in the Greater Toronto Area. In Eugenia’s school board, her school is the only one that offers late French immersion. She also teaches ten different subjects to numerous grade levels over the course of one year. This is overwhelming for Eugenia as this puts a lot of stress on her as a teacher. She also believes that there is too much of a focus on the Extended French program. In her school, the Extended French students are only taught 50% of the time in French and Eugenia doesn’t think that is sufficient to support the development of strong language skills. The students are not immersed in the language, and there is not enough time spent in French for them to become proficient. She believes this program should be dropped so that more of a focus can be put on late French immersion. This would channel limited resources to the late French Immersion program where there is more time allotted to French in the curriculum.

Étienne also saw a lack of resources and classroom space as a problem. Étienne worked in a spacious school with enough classrooms and spaces to allow his students to have a separate classroom for all subjects taught in English as well as a “French” classroom. He found this helpful for learning French because it “really dissociated the languages by physical space”. Étienne reported that having clearly designated spaces for learning through the medium of French and English motivates students to show a greater respect for each language.

Resources that can actually be used by teachers for their students can make a big difference on the attitudes of the students. Étienne argues that early French immersion
also works a lot better compared to late French immersion because of how many more resources there are with role models. What might interest a teenager is very different to what might interest a 7-year-old student. Étienne says:

I think in pop culture there aren’t many famous francophone pop icons or role models that are there for older students but in terms of the little guys, if you look at things like TFO and you look at all these cute role models that they have and fun TV shows that really capture young kids, there is a lot more for them than there are for teens.

Both participants agree that a lack of human and material resources in French immersion programs continue to be an issue. The lack of qualified teachers, the lack of physical space and curriculum resources help to understand why some students may not be as motivated as necessary to be successful in French immersion.

**Teacher strategies.** The strategies that were used by the respective schools of my participants were very different in general. In Eugenia’s school, other than the English class, every subject was to be taught in French. Late French immersion requires the complete immersion of students in French in order for them to be successful. However, in Étienne’s experience, certain subjects such as physical education and music were taught in English. Something Étienne viewed as a good strategy was completing his additional qualification in special education. He found this was very helpful in order to relate to all of the students in his class and be more aware of their learning needs for acquiring a second language. Taking this course allowed him to learn additional instructional
strategies that are not only helpful to students with special needs but also to the other students in the class.

Both of my participants strongly agreed on the effectiveness of consistency, focus and relationship building in teaching late French immersion. Being consistent and focused as a teacher is a key factor. Eugenia said that it is hard to always “be on the ball” because if you try to multitask while students are doing work, they will realize that you are not listening to their conversations and they may switch to speaking in English. Making sure to keep the focus on your students and enforcing the classroom rules is important.

The second strategy my participants agree on is getting to know your students the best you can. This coincides with Abbasi’s study on strategies for ESL students. He says that,

The teachers need to be aware that motivation is a consideration in determining whether or not learners are willing to communicate. Clearly, the more meaningful the materials and the tasks are for the learners involved the better the outcome will be" (Abbasi, 2011).

Eugenia explains that it is a lot easier to do this when you have smaller class sizes but you do the best that you can do. She says,

You get to know the kids a lot faster when you have fewer kids. I think you're able to do a lot more different kinds of things. You can definitely give them more support, you get to know them faster, and you get to know what they need faster.

Eugenia also believes that knowing your students well is important when having family interactions. For example, in the case where a student or the family of the student
approaches you to request to leave the program, you need all the background information on the student in order to properly speak on the matter. Eugenia explains this view:

I think sometimes, especially for young teachers, and it doesn't matter if it's French or anything, you're faced with parents who are older, sometimes assertive, but you have to believe in yourself and your understanding of the kids. I do think, especially at this age level, that these kids don't want to work; they want to go socialize and play. This might set up students to leave for the wrong reasons. I have 5 kids in the school now that I have to tell, "Check your agendas." I mean they are Grade 7 students for heaven's sakes. But when you get to know your students, you realize you need to tell some of them, "Check in your agenda or you're going to stay after school, I'm going to force you to do this!" But it's tough, and I would say definitely try and figure out what the real problem is if the program is not working out for them because they may just have specific needs in order to be successful.

Eugenia and Étienne differed in how they viewed the importance of developing a sense of classroom community. Eugenia didn’t speak about the need or importance of creating community. However, for Étienne, a strong classroom community is key. He says:

It goes back to that team dynamic and that team cohesion, and I think if you’re able to create a school or class culture, that is very tightly knit, the kids really feed off of each other and of each others’ successes, so I find that’s the main key. I find marks are somewhat indicative of kids
continuing in the program but I think that that team dynamic piece is the biggest one.

**Making decisions.** The fifth theme that came up in my interviews is based on how to take action if a student is considering leaving the program. Eugenia prioritizes talking with the student whereas Étienne is more likely to talk with the parents about the situation. Eugenia says:

> Usually I will go to [the students] because I will recognize something is not going right. So I usually like to speak to them first. I then go to the parent and ask to talk to them about what was happening. I have suggested that kids leave the program. But you also get the kids who are not doing well because they are not doing their work. In that case same thing I would talk to the kid, and then talk to the parents. I have a student for example, [the parents] want him out, and I have convinced them to keep their child in the program until February.

Eugenia mentions February because that is the end of the first term and she believes it is important to give every the student enough time and a chance to get used to the late French immersion program. Eugenia recognizes the steep learning curve for student in the late French immersion program and feels that some students just need longer to become accustomed to learning most of their school subjects through the medium of French. She also believes this has to do with developing a student-teacher bond and finding the right strategies that work with each student.

In Étienne’s experiences it is best to speak to the parents first because he believes they quickly become very concerned if they do not see their child achieving success in
the first few months of the late French immersion program. It is not uncommon that
parents will make the decision to remove their child from the program before giving it a
decent chance. Étienne says, “Parent attitude is one obvious reason that ends up making
that final decision for a student to stay in the program so I think parents satisfaction of the
teachers, homework, and work load need to be met.” It is therefore important to re-
enforce that the child has the tools to be successful in late French immersion. This
statement also confirms some of the findings of Ellsworth’s study on rising attrition rates
in late French immersion programs. She says that the inability of the teacher to address
the needs of the child and provide sufficient information to parents are two of the many
reasons that explain why some students drop out from the French immersion program
(Ellsworth, 1997).

Both participants worry that the high dropout rates as well as community
perceptions that late French immersion is an elitist program may put the entire program at
risk. Eugenia explains that some parents see faults in the program. She says:

The parents will do whatever they want to do. They are trying to stop the
late French immersion program because it doesn't fit into the idea of
complete integration for all. The fact that we look at [the students’] report
cards bothers a lot of people. We are still allowed to do that, and that is
how we accept kids, but once they are in the program, you can suggest that
it is not for the child. In the end, whatever the parent decides is usually
what happens.

Étatienne believes that what he considers as the “bad choices” of some parents to withdraw
their child from late French immersion before giving them a chance to adjust creates a
domino effect. If one student leaves the program it can have a ripple effect on the entire
class. He says, “It comes down to that class culture really falling apart, that team dynamic. If it one person goes up, there’s that snowball effect of, if he or she is able to go back to regular English school, then so can I, and that’s kind of the easy way out.”

Both Eugenia and Étienne believe that it is important for parents and students not to rush their decision to leave or remain in the late French immersion program. They tell parents and students that it is important to do what feels right. However, they have seen quite a number of students who have chosen to leave the program for what they consider to be the wrong reasons. They have seen how many of these students have regretted their decision to leave the late French immersion later on. Étienne says,

When you’re in Grade 6, 7, and 8 French doesn’t seem like a big deal but when you’re in Teachers College and there are no jobs available and you wish you kept on with your French and all you had to do was work a little harder to have opportunities, then that is something to really reflect upon.

Eugenia and Étienne’s views are aligned with the contents of the article entitled To Practice: Is Immersion Education Appropriate for All Students?. In this article, Gaffney explains that even if a student is considered “at-risk”, it is likely that they will achieve about the same standard in either the French immersion program or in the regular English stream. Therefore, it would seem that enrolling in late French immersion might be a good option as it presents an opportunity to become bilingual (Gaffney, 1999).

Overview

Overall the findings from my two participants matched up really well with the literature I researched. It is no surprise that to ensure the success of French immersion students, a teacher must get to know their students as best they can. This is true across all
grades and programs where it is important to find out the specific needs of students in order to be able to accommodate for these and create a truly inclusive classroom environment where all students can be successful. Having good communication with the families of students is particularly important for making the right choices when a student is struggling. Teachers should inform families that a learning curve is normal and to be patient for results as sometimes it takes time. Unfortunately the late French immersion program is lacking funds to supply high-quality resources, but teachers can be creative in discovering other ways to connect and relate to their students, for example a classroom mascot that helps in motivating students to speak French. There are many opportunities for graduates of French immersion. As a result, it is important for teachers to engage students in learning through the medium of French and help them be successful in the French immersion program.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I discuss the findings of my research. First I examine the implications both as a research and as a teacher. I review the limitations of my study and make recommendations for further research on the topic of late French immersion attrition rates.

Implications as a Researcher

What I have learned as a researcher is that asking the right questions makes all of the difference. Eugenia, my participant who has been teaching for 10 years did not elaborate and express deep thoughts when answering the first set of interview questions. With some scaffolding and questions that related to her experiences, I was able to elicit some robust answers that provide critical data for my study. After teaching for so long, sometimes our classroom strategies become intuitive and Eugenia was happy to reflect on these methods and analyze them. Explaining her views, sharing her experiences and describing her preferred strategies was a good refresher of what is really working in her classroom.

For better results I would have benefited from having more research participants to interview. However, it was a lot more difficult to find participants than I had previously assumed. In addition, as there hasn’t been a lot of research done on late French immersion programs, there was not much literature specifically related to this type of immersion program. Interviewing practicing teachers working in the community was very helpful as there were few answers to my research questions to be found in the literature.
By searching for interview participants, I discovered the lack of late French immersion programs in the Greater Toronto Area where I hope to teach. There was little literature to review that was specific to the this program or this region. As a result of my inquiry, I now believe that attrition rates in late French immersion programs are even more problematic than I had initially thought. The high dropout rates have led to there being fewer late French immersion programs in Toronto. The lack of programs is compounded because most students interested in late French immersion are not willing to travel a great distance to attend while leaving their friendship group behind.

Conducting the interviews and interacting with the participants were the most enjoyable part of the research process for me. Discovering the codes and themes for my research was also very interesting in spite of being time consuming detail oriented work. The themes that arose from my interviews mostly connected with and extended the literature, which is interesting because my participants had never read up on the literature, but there were also themes and concepts that popped up outside of the literature. This implies that there is much room for continuing the research on the topic of late French immersion programs.

Implications as a Teacher

This research has been very useful in helping me to form my pedagogy as a teacher, especially since I want to be teaching in a French immersion program. In my own experiences this far, I have not yet come across a student who has asked to leave the program, and I know I will be faced with this issue. As a result of having conducted this small study, I feel more confident in knowing how to proceed if a student in late French immersion approaches me about wanting to drop out. On another note, I always liked the
idea of using a reward system, but now I realize it will be much more effective if it is used on an individual basis where students are setting their own goals and working hard because they really want to achieve their goals and not just to win a prize.

Going into the teaching profession as a late French immersion teacher, I would have assumed that it is important to convince and motivate all students to enter the program and strive for success. However, through this research I have learned that there is a group of students that we might want to discourage from entering the program; that is, students who already have language proficiency issues in their first language. Now I see the importance of reviewing a past report card to see if a school should accept a student into the late French immersion program or not. We don’t want to set up any student for failure.

As a new teacher I wasn’t one hundred percent certain what I would set as my number one priority in a French immersion setting before this research. After conducting my interviews, I am now aware that community plays one of the most important roles in the success of the classroom environment. When students are able to relate to each other they develop a dynamic that allows them to build on success as a team. I plan to incorporate as many collaborative learning experiences for my students as possible. Having a strong class culture will help my students feed off each other’s achievements.

Lastly I will discuss the necessary communication skills a French immersion teacher should possess. I always knew that keeping the families of students well informed is important, but now I realize the type of support they may need when their child is struggling in a late French immersion program. Families need to understand that a learning curve is very common in the early months of this program and that their child may not succeed to their expectations right away. Giving a second language a chance to
develop and evolve in a teenager may take some time, but with the collaboration of teacher and student motivation, there will surely be results.

**Limitations**

Due to a lack of late French immersion programs in the Greater Toronto Area, it was very difficult to find participants to interview. Consequently, my small sample size of only two participants generated opinions and beliefs that may not accurately represent those of the entire community, province, and country. Only one of my participants had taught both early (ALF) and late French immersion; one opinion makes it difficult to accurately compare the strategies in early and late French immersion programs.

**Recommendations**

The literature in my research suggests that parents and guardians are often dissatisfied with their child’s grades in late French immersion and, as a result, remove their child from the program. This coincides with the data from my interviews, however my interview participants described strategies for dealing with these kinds of situations. I strongly recommend that teachers provide more information to families as many may not be aware of what to expect over the course of a full year in late French immersion. Eugenia attempts to keep all of her students until at least the end of the first semester, if not the second, which this helps create a bond with her students in order to meet all their needs.

In Étienne’s experience, he has struggles to find current francophone role models for his teenager students to relate to and learn from. He believes that integrating famous French-speaking athletes, stars, and musicians would be an excellent motivation for late
French immersion students. I agree with Étienne and would recommend that teachers find out the interests and needs of their students as soon as possible at the beginning of the year. With this information teachers could strive to find French rap artists, French chefs, French fashionistas, or whatever it may be to really motivate and engage their students to speak French.

**Further study**

This research has uncovered many strategies to identify at-risk students and provides an explanation for high attrition rates in the late French immersion program, but I still believe there is a lot of room for more research. I have learned throughout this process that there are many different perspectives on the same topic. While Eugenia and Étienne have shared their experiences working with parents and students openly, it would be interesting to interview the families of the students, and even the students themselves to get their first hand account on the same situations. In addition, exploring with families what they believe would be most motivating for their teenaged children enrolled in late French immersion could be very useful.

Once late French immersion students complete Grade 9, they are integrated with the early French immersion students for all of high school. Upon their graduating year, I think it would be really interesting to interview the students and ask them what specifically motivated them to continue in the program until graduation. It would also be useful to interview the Grade 9 to 12 teachers who teach these students. Finally, I think my research could be expanded to include other types of French programs.
Conclusion

Working towards diminishing late French immersion attrition rates is beneficial. Late French immersion programs provide middle year students with the opportunity to become bilingual. This is important as many students may have missed out on other opportunities such as early French immersion or Extended French. In today’s society, bilingualism is in very high demand by the majority of employers. Students who graduate from French immersion programs will be able to ensure the success of our society as an entirety.

In the stages of early adolescents there are a lot of changes going on with these students, but as teachers we need to do our best to recognize when they are at risk of leaving the program and motivate them to want success and be successful. I think a strong class community, with healthy student-teacher relationships, and good communication with parents can prevent students from becoming at-risk in late French immersion and this has the potential to make a significant difference in their future.
REFERENCES


Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the practices of teachers for motivating students to be successful in late French immersion programs for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40-minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Curtis Dillon
416-XXX-XXXX,
curtis.dillon@mail.utoronto.ca
Instructor’s Name: Dr. Arlo Kempf
Email: arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Curtis Dillon and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: __________________________________________

Name (printed): ______________________________________

Date: __________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

OVERARCHING QUESTION:

What are late French immersion teachers' beliefs and practices as they relate to the motivation of students to learn French and continue in French Immersion in high school?

Background

• What grades and subjects do you teach?
• Do you teach early or late French immersion?
• How long have you been teaching?
• What were your majors/minors/specialties for your degrees?

Characteristics of late FI students

• Should late immersion students possess certain qualities before beginning the late immersion program in order to be successful?
• In your experience, what are some of the common characteristics of a student who is at-risk of leaving the French Immersion program?
• In your experience, what are some of the factors that contribute to a student being at-risk of leaving the French immersion program?

Strategies

• What do you think might motivate late French immersion students to stick with the program until graduation?
• What do you do to encourage the use of French by students in the late FI program? Do you have a reward or penalty system? Can you give some specific examples?
• Are you aware of other strategies that some of your colleagues have put in place to encourage the use of French?

Challenges

• Are there differences in the attitudes of early and late FI students towards learning a second language?
• Can you explain how you deal with students who are thinking about exiting the FI program? Can you give some specific examples?

Professional Development

• What advice do you have for new French immersion teachers when it comes to working with students who are considering leaving the program? In particular, how would you suggest dealing with a student who doesn’t feel « good enough » to continue on in the French immersion program?
• Do you have any additional comments or questions for me?