Reducing Second Language Anxiety in Core French Classrooms in Ontario

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract
This research explored the experience of second language anxiety in the Core French classroom. I focused primarily on the educator perspective of how to recognize and respond to this anxiety in an effort to reduce students’ experiences of second language anxiety in the classroom. To collect data for this research, I began by conducting a review of the available literature on the topic of second language anxiety, both in FSL classes in Ontario as well as in a wider global context. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with three experienced Core French teachers in order to gather first-hand information. The analysis of this data led to several key findings, including participants’ observed indicators of second language anxiety in their students, strategies and resources used by participants in an effort to reduce student experiences of second language anxiety, observed outcomes of participants’ strategies as well as the barriers that are hindering participants’ abilities to effectively respond to and prevent second language anxiety in the Core French classroom.

*Keywords:* French, language anxiety, language learning
Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to acknowledge the many people who have supported me throughout the process of writing this paper. First and foremost, thank you to my parents who have always encouraged me to chase my dreams. Without your unwavering love and support, I would not be where I am today. Thank you for everything you have done for me throughout the years. To all my friends with whom I have spoken about my research and the writing process, thank you for listening. I was lucky enough to be placed into a wonderful cohort with some incredible people and I am grateful to have been able to share this process with you all. Thank you, JI 252, for always being there and for creating lots of laughter and memories along the way. Finally, thank you to my professors, particularly to Angela and Eloise, who have guided me through the process of conducting my first research study. I learned so much from you and I appreciate all the feedback and encouragement that brought my paper to this level. From the bottom of my heart, to everyone that helped me along the way, thank you.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research Context

Canada is a multicultural country with two official languages, namely English and French. Since 1970, the Official Languages in Education Program has provided financial and institutional support for second-language education programs (Canadian Heritage, 2003 as cited in Roy, 2008). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education (2014) mandates that all students in publicly funded English language schools must study French as a Second Language (FSL) at the elementary level from grades four to eight, and they must complete at least one FSL credit at the secondary level. In 2013, the revised edition of the elementary FSL curriculum was released, and the updated secondary curriculum followed in 2014. These revised curriculum documents share the vision that “students will communicate and interact with growing confidence in French, one of Canada’s official languages, while developing the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they need to participate fully as citizens in Canada and in the world” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b, p. 6).

Students have the option to follow either the Core French, Extended French, or French Immersion stream. In Core French programs, the language is taught as a subject and students must receive a minimum of 600 hours of French instruction by the end of elementary school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Core French instruction typically begins in grade four, although some schools and boards choose to offer it earlier. In the Extended French program, elementary students learn French as a subject as well as receiving instruction in French for at least one other subject so that a minimum of 25% of the students’ days are made up of French language instruction (ibid). At the secondary level of Extended French, students must complete four French language courses as well as three courses that use French as the language of
Last, students can follow the French Immersion stream where they receive instruction in French for at least two subjects as well as studying French as a subject on its own so that at least 50% of the total instruction at the elementary level is provided in French (ibid). At the secondary level, students are required to obtain four credits for French language courses as well as six credits for courses in other subjects where French is the language of instruction (ibid).

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

It is expected and understandable that certain aspects of education may be anxiety-inducing for some students, particularly when it comes to assessments and evaluations in the form of tests or presentations (Cassady, 2010; Cizek & Burg, 2006; Huberty, 2009). Students’ experiences of anxiety in school have also been linked to specific subjects like math and science (Finlayson, 2014; Chiarelott & Czerniak, 1987; Math Anxiety, 2007). Language anxiety is a further example of this, and is a relatively common experience for students in second language classrooms (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 2001). This form of anxiety can affect students in FSL programs as well as students who are English Language Learners (ELLs). In the case of the latter, anxiety can be heightened given that ELLs are expected to understand the curriculum while still learning the language of instruction. Although some teachers are able to detect such anxiety among their students (Gregerson, 2007), more work is needed to allow educators to better help language learners overcome this anxiety so that they are able to perform to their fullest potential.

This anxiety in second language classrooms affects many students, particularly those who are given fewer opportunities to learn the language and practice communicating with it, and as a result, students’ achievement in language courses often suffers (Huang, 2014). High levels of language anxiety can inhibit students and impede communication, particularly unscripted oral
communication, which is not only strongly emphasized in the revised FSL curriculum but is also vital to succeeding in learning a new language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz, 2001; Toth, 2012). For these reasons, second language anxiety can be detrimental to the success of FSL students.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In considering this problem, the purpose of my research is to learn how a sample of Core French teachers in Ontario recognizes and responds to their students’ experiences of second language anxiety with the goal of improving performance and attitudes towards French language instruction in the classroom. This topic is important to the education community as a whole as every student in a publicly funded English language school board in Ontario is required to study French throughout their years in elementary and secondary school. I believe that many classroom environments could be improved if teachers were better able to detect, respond to and ease second language anxiety, and this could lead to improvements in students’ language acquisition and attitudes towards FSL. Second language anxiety is an issue that affects many language learners and I believe developing a deeper understanding of this form of anxiety could not only benefit FSL students and teachers, but also ELL students and language teachers more broadly.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary question guiding my research is:

- How is a sample of Core French teachers in Ontario recognizing and responding to their students’ experience of second language anxiety, and what outcomes do they observe in terms of students’ academic performance and attitudes toward French Language Instruction?
Some subsidiary questions include:

- What indicators of language anxiety do these teachers observe from their students?

- What instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches do these teachers use to respond to their students’ experiences of language anxiety?

- What factors and resources support and hinder these teachers’ pedagogical responses to students’ experiences of second language anxiety?

- What range of outcomes do these teachers observe from students?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As someone who was a student of the Core French program from grades four through twelve and who continued on to pursue a major in French as a Second Language at a bilingual university, I have had a variety of both positive and negative FSL classroom experiences. From a young age, I was privileged to be an eager student with a genuine passion for languages which helped me to develop a positive attitude towards learning in my Core French classes regardless of the instructional methods used, the often intimidating classroom environment or my peers’ overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards FSL. Despite this relative ease with which I approached my language classes, I still experienced varying levels of language anxiety that have at times influenced my ability and my desire to communicate in my second language, both within and outside of the classroom.

I believe my language anxiety stems largely from having a lack of opportunities to engage in authentic conversations in French as a young learner. At both the elementary and
secondary levels, my French language education consisted primarily of written exercises and grammar lessons so there was less of an emphasis on oral communication and comprehension skills. Furthermore, when I was using my oral communication skills in the classroom, it was often in anxiety-inducing situations like presentations or assessments. I believe this has contributed to my own experiences of language anxiety as I continue to feel more comfortable expressing myself in my second language in writing as opposed to orally. Moreover, as a part of my teacher education program, I have had the opportunity to go into four different classrooms as a student-teacher, three of which were FSL classrooms. In these experiences, I have been able to work with Core French and French Immersion students in grades four through twelve and I have observed what I perceive to be indicators of language anxiety in these students firsthand.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should also mention that I have experienced anxiety outside of the language classroom as well and this is something that I continue to deal with in a variety of daily situations. In this way, I am aware that my experience is not representative of that of every language student and I acknowledge that I may be more prone than others to experiencing some level of anxiety in a variety of contexts, including that of a second language classroom. With that said, it is my belief that language anxiety does not discriminate and it can affect anyone, regardless of their level of ability, confidence or mental health.

Because of my own personal experience with this issue, I hope to learn how to overcome or alleviate this anxiety in my own practice as a lifelong language learner. Moreover, I would like to learn how to better support students who are struggling with anxiety in the context of second language learning to create a more positive classroom environment for Core French students. As someone who hopes to teach French at the elementary and/or secondary level in
Ontario, the findings of this research are especially pertinent to my future career and I look forward to incorporating some of the findings of my research into my own practice as a teacher.

1.5 Overview

To respond to these research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study consisting of three informal interviews with exemplary French language teachers regarding their observations of and instructional strategies for managing second language anxiety in the FSL classroom. This first chapter serves as an introduction to the topic that will be researched and provides background information about myself and my motives for studying this issue. Chapter two contains a review of the literature in the areas of second language anxiety and second language learning. In chapter three, I provide further detail on the methodology used for my qualitative study. Chapter four centers around the research findings and answers to the research questions as previously stated and finally, chapter five focuses on the significance of the findings and their implications in relation to the field of education as a whole and my own practice as a beginning teacher.
Chapter 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will consist of a review of the available literature in the areas of second language anxiety and its effects on students’ proficiency in the target language. More specifically, these themes are reviewed as they relate to the context of French as a Second Language (FSL) classrooms in Ontario. I start by examining the literature in regards to the development of a common definition of second language anxiety and I consider its causes as well as how this form of anxiety differs from a more generalized trait anxiety. Next, I review the existing research on the effects of second language anxiety in regards to confidence, performance and participation in the second language. From there, I review the available literature on how to recognize and reduce second language anxiety in the classroom. Finally, I examine the literature that is specific to the Ontario FSL context.

2.1 Understanding Second Language Anxiety

In order to best understand the concept of second language anxiety, it is important to first be familiar with the more general forms of anxiety. In this section, I introduce the topic of anxiety and how it relates to learning, and more specifically how it influences second language learning. I start by examining the definitions of this particular form of anxiety that have been commonly used by other researchers and authors and reviewing some potential causes of second language anxiety. I then move on to differentiating second language anxiety from other forms of anxiety, including other subject specific forms of anxiety like math anxiety as well as the more generalized types. For the purposes of this chapter, the terms *language anxiety*, *second language anxiety* and *foreign language anxiety* will be used interchangeably to describe and refer to this issue.
2.1.1 Defining Second Language Anxiety

There are two definitions of second language anxiety that are most commonly used in the literature surrounding this topic. The first was proposed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and states that “language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284). Similarly, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). As these two definitions illustrate, the concept of second language anxiety is a complex issue that commonly presents itself among second language learners and is associated with a variety of negative thoughts and feelings. Horwitz et al. (1986) elaborated on their definition by proposing the idea that there are in fact three distinct components of second language anxiety, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation. These three aspects all contribute to the anxious feelings that second language learners experience. These two definitions are still used by researchers today and their early work and continued research on the topic have established these authors as authorities on the subject.

Though scales exist for measuring general anxiety, it has been suggested that “scales directly concerned with foreign-language anxiety are more appropriate for studying language anxiety than are general anxiety scales” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, p. 254). In order to reliably test for and measure second language anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which consists of 33 statements related to the three aforementioned components of second language anxiety (p. 127) and it remains one of the most widely used scales for reliably measuring students’ levels of language anxiety today.
2.1.2 Causes of Second Language Anxiety

As the language learning process is unique for every student, second language anxiety may develop differently among learners, but there are a variety of factors that have been suggested as causes of second language anxiety. It has been proposed that these “feelings of anxiety may be caused by students not having developed proficiency in the language” (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2004, p. 24). Likewise, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that this form of anxiety might occur because second language learners may not feel as confident or competent communicating in their second language and as such, “second language communication entails risk-taking and is necessarily problematic” (p. 128). Since written and oral communication are integral parts of language programs, it is understandable that many students may experience some form of second language anxiety throughout their studies.

Similarly, some researchers have suggested that the student’s sense of self may also be a contributing factor to the development of second language anxiety (Huang, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986). This is explained by the idea that second language learners may feel limited by the increased difficulty they experience when communicating in their second language due to a lack of vocabulary or proficiency which may contribute to the development of a second language identity with which lower levels of self-confidence are associated (Huang, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986). This idea is supported by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope’s (1986) definition of language anxiety as being related to one’s self perceptions. Although there are not yet any concrete explanations for what specifically causes this anxiety in second language students, this research illustrates that there appear to be a variety of factors that may contribute to its development, including lower levels of proficiency, lack of self-confidence and the concept of a second language identity.
2.1.3 Differentiating Second Language Anxiety from Other Types of Anxiety

In understanding second language anxiety, it is important to be aware of how it differs from other forms of anxiety. The most important distinction to be made is between trait anxiety and state anxiety. Trait anxiety, which is “conceptualized as a relatively stable personality characteristic,” (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113) can be considered to be a more generalized form of anxiety, whereas state anxiety is “a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus” (ibid). In this case, the second language classroom as a whole or specific activities or aspects within the language program act as the trigger; therefore, second language anxiety is considered to be a form of state anxiety, or “situation-specific anxiety”, similar to that of test anxiety or public speaking anxiety (ibid).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) examined the idea that anxiety affects all learning, with the idea that “anxious persons tend to engage in self-directed, derogatory cognition rather than focusing on the task itself” (p. 255). They examined the theory that anxiety can interfere with learning at the three levels of input, processing and output and found that anxiety did have a negative influence on both the learning and the production of vocabulary in the second language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Their findings support the idea that anxiety can not only hinder learning and performance in educational settings, but also indicate that “a clear relationship exists between foreign-language anxiety and foreign-language proficiency” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, p. 272). Furthermore, their study measured anxiety levels for French, English, and Mathematics classes, and the average French class anxiety level was significantly higher than that of the other two classes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). This is not to say that anxiety does not play a role in other curriculum areas, but it does help illustrate the concept that second
language anxiety is indeed a specific form of the more general concept of anxiety and it should be treated as a separate issue.

2.2 Effects of Second Language Anxiety

As the definitions and causes of second language anxiety have been discussed, I now turn my focus to the existing research surrounding the effects of second language anxiety. I will concentrate primarily on the effects of anxiety in terms of confidence, performance and proficiency in the target language.

2.2.1 Effects on Confidence

It has been shown that students with anxiety more commonly experience negative thoughts and feelings towards themselves, through “excessive self-evaluation, worry over potential failure, and concern over the opinions of others,” when they are faced with a language task (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 285). These thoughts and feelings are related to the idea of the second language identity in that language learners often feel as if they have a separate, more limited self when they are attempting to communicate in their second language (Huang, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986). This identity is unique from the sense of self associated with the first language, and second language learners might have lower levels of self-confidence associated with this particular identity which could contribute to second language anxiety. In this way, there are connections between confidence levels and second language anxiety since low self-confidence associated with the second language identity might lead to the development of second language anxiety and similarly, the anxiety itself might cause negative self-cognition which may also contribute to lower levels of self-confidence in relation to the second language.
Furthermore, in the study conducted by Horwitz et al. (1986), university students in foreign language classes shared some of their struggles with anxiety in relation to their language course and some “spoke of ‘freezing’ in class, standing outside the door trying to summon up enough courage to enter, and going blank prior to tests” (p. 128). These experiences are indicative of a lack of confidence concerning the target language. Some of the surveyed students also mentioned experiencing some “psychophysiological symptoms commonly associated with anxiety (tension, trembling, perspiring, palpitations, and sleep disturbances)” (p. 128) which clearly indicates that second language anxiety is an issue that affects students both in- and outside of the language classroom.

2.2.2 Effects on Performance

Many studies have shown that second language anxiety has a negative impact on performance in the target language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) showed that “it is French-related anxiety that causes poor performance on the test of French vocabulary learning” (p. 270). Furthermore, not only did participants with lower levels of anxiety perform better on production and retrieval tasks, they also appeared to learn content more rapidly (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The results of this study point toward the idea that higher levels of second language anxiety may cause “deficits in learning and performance” (p. 271). In Toth’s study (2012) of Hungarian university students studying English as a Foreign Language, it was discovered that language learners with higher anxiety levels tended to score less well on all performance measures (effectiveness of communication, fluency, grammatical and lexical resource, pronunciation and intonation) than their peers with lower levels of anxiety. The results of this study suggest that high levels of second language anxiety might contribute not only to lower grades on oral tests, but also to less effective communication and portrayal as a less competent
speaker of the target language (Toth, 2012). Several other studies have been conducted using similar methods and have drawn similar conclusions, illustrating the idea that anxiety and performance in the second language are inextricably linked (Salehi & Marefat, 2014; Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Such research confirms that second language anxiety contributes to decreased performance in the second language.

Horwitz (2001) draws attention to another issue regarding anxiety’s effects on performance in that language students with higher levels of anxiety not only received lower grades, but actually expected to receive lower grades than their peers with lower anxiety levels. This may be reflective of the lower levels of self-confidence that commonly accompany second language anxiety. In another study that compared language anxiety and test anxiety (Salehi & Marefat, 2014), it was found that many students who had high levels of second language anxiety also had high levels of test anxiety which may contribute to poor performance in the target language because both types of anxiety play a “debilitative role in language learning” (p. 937). Overall, second language anxiety has been shown to have a negative effect on performance and can be detrimental to success in the second language.

2.2.3 Effects on Participation

Since second language anxiety has been shown to contribute to lower levels of confidence and performance in the target language, it is understandable that participation in second language classes might also be affected. It has been suggested that, even for second language learners with high levels of proficiency, oral communication is the skill that creates the most anxiety for students (Toth, 2012). Results from Toth’s study (2012) also indicated that students with higher levels of anxiety provided less depth in their answers when communicating with a native speaker and gave the impression of being quite shy or nervous in conversations.
These findings point to the idea that students with high levels of second language anxiety might not be eager to participate in class discussions or activities which would require them to use their oral communication skills. For some students, this might lead them to the avoidance of anxiety-inducing classes or activities, procrastination or avoidance of homework or a lack of participation in class (Horwitz et al., 1986). As shown in these works, second language anxiety can have detrimental effects on student participation in language classrooms.

2.3 The Educator’s Role in Reducing Second Language Anxiety

Though it is necessary to understand what second language anxiety is and how it can affect students, it is also crucial that educators be able to recognize the signs of second language anxiety when it presents itself in the classroom. Furthermore, language teachers should be aware of some methods of lessening the levels of anxiety in their classrooms. In this section, I review the literature in these two important areas.

2.3.1 Recognizing Second Language Anxiety

Although students might experience second language anxiety in differing ways, there are some common signs and symptoms that teachers should be aware of so that they can better recognize this anxiety in their classrooms. As Gregerson (2007) points out, nonverbal communication might be used more often than verbal communication in second language classrooms when conveying emotions. This could be due to a lack of proficiency in the second language, a lack of confidence in oral communication skills, or perhaps the potential discomfort with disclosing certain emotions to peers and teachers. As such, it is important that educators be able to decode some of these nonverbal cues. Gregerson’s study (2007) sought to determine how well language teachers were able to recognize second language anxiety among their students.
The results showed that teachers were better able to recognize the extreme levels of anxiety, that is, they were “much more accurate in their assessment of individuals on the high and low ends of the anxiety scale than they were with the students who fell in the middle” (p. 216). On average, their accuracy also improved when they were provided with specific criteria upon which they could base their judgments (Gregerson, 2007). These results support the idea that teachers need to be informed on the signs of second language anxiety so that they could more accurately recognize it in their students and provide the necessary support.

In terms of common signs that educators should be aware of, there are some nonverbal behaviours that differ between anxious and non-anxious learners. For example, Gregerson (2007) mentions that “anxious learners manifested limited facial activity including brow behaviour and smiling” and that they were less likely to hold eye contact when communicating in the target language (p. 210). Furthermore, highly anxious students tended to have more rigid, closed postures and used fewer gestures when speaking, although they were more likely to be manipulating objects or fidgeting than their peers who had lower levels of language anxiety (Gregerson, 2007). Although these behaviours may not apply to all students with second language anxiety, they help provide a generalized idea of the type of nonverbal cues that might be indicative of anxiety.

2.3.2 Alleviating Second Language Anxiety

Although recognizing second language anxiety is an important first step for educators, it is not enough to simply identify it as an issue among affected students. Rather, second language teachers should also be informed of methods and strategies that they can use to minimize anxiety levels in their classrooms. Unfortunately, due to differences in cultures and learning styles, it is not always possible to minimize anxiety for all students in a class as what is comfortable for one
learner may be considered stressful or anxiety-inducing for others (Horwitz, 2001). However, there are many ways in which teachers can lessen stress and anxiety levels in the language learning environment. For instance, the majority of students would prefer to participate in small group discussions or activities rather than performing or presenting orally in front of the entire class (ibid). It is suggested that teachers should start small by having students work in pairs, “giving the students enough practice and training and then gradually change to a more challenging pattern such as group work and class work” (Salehi & Marefat, 2014, p. 938). This strategy may be useful in minimizing anxiety in regards to oral interaction while also encouraging participation in less threatening activities.

As mentioned by Huang (2014), self-confidence is imperative to being successful in the process of language learning (p. 67). Teachers, therefore, should strive to build their students’ self-confidence in the language classroom. One way to accomplish this is by “encouraging students’ involvement in classroom activities and creating a comfortable atmosphere” (Salehi & Marefat, 2014, p. 938). Overall, it is suggested throughout the existing research that fostering a supportive, positive and welcoming environment in the second language classroom is one of the keys to minimizing anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Curriculum Services Canada, Module 1, 2014; Curriculum Services Canada, Module 2, 2014; Salehi & Marefat, 2014). This positive atmosphere might be established through the use of non-competitive activities, clear task guidelines and the avoidance of singling out students in class (Horwitz, 2001). More specifically, it has been shown that “the level of perceived teacher support had the strongest relationship with students’ feelings of anxiety” (Horwitz, 2001, p. 119). In this way, teachers may be able to lessen the anxiety experienced by their students simply by showing genuine support and interest (ibid). Similarly, correcting student errors in a supportive manner is vital to creating a positive.
environment and minimizing the anxiety associated with communicating in the target language (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012; Curriculum Services Canada, Module 1, 2014).

Although assessment and evaluation are necessary components of all second language programs, there are several ways in which educators can lessen the anxiety associated with them. For example, providing students with ample opportunity to practice and prepare before evaluating them can help build confidence and reduce anxiety when it comes time for evaluations (Salehi & Marefat, 2014, p. 938). Moreover, familiarity contributes to lessening anxiety so having more frequent evaluations might help students become more accustomed to the process and minimize their anxiety levels when faced with tests or assessments (Salehi & Marefat, 2014; Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012). Atasheneh and Izadi (2012) add that simply “arranging test items from easy to difficult can be an anxiety-reducing factor” and making test questions or classroom activities as unambiguous as possible may also lessen the anxiety associated with evaluations (p. 183). Through a combination of these methods, educators have the opportunity to play an important role in alleviating second language anxiety.

2.4 Second Language Anxiety in an Ontario FSL Context

Although minimal research has been done on second language anxiety in the Canadian context of French as a Second Language (FSL) courses, it is clear that this form of anxiety affects language learners around the world, so it is likely that many FSL students in Ontario are also struggling with this issue. Therefore, it is important that Ontario FSL teachers be able to understand, recognize and minimize second language anxiety in their classrooms. In February, 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a document entitled *A Framework for French as a Second Language Teachers in Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12* which states that
one of the current provincial goals is to “increase student confidence, proficiency, and achievement in FSL” (p. 9). This is significant as it has been illustrated that second language anxiety can hinder confidence and performance in the target language so if Ontario FSL programs are able to increase students’ levels of confidence in relation to their French abilities, it could lead not only to increased proficiency and achievement, but also to decreased levels of language anxiety.

In a study by Rehner (2014) on Ontario FSL students at the grade 12 level, it was found that students were more confident in their reading abilities and performed best in written comprehension tasks while they were least confident in their oral communication skills and performed least well in oral comprehension activities. This supports the idea that confidence and proficiency levels are linked, and suggests that FSL teachers should consider spending more time focusing on these areas of weakness.

Over time, the Ontario FSL curriculum has been adapted based on a variety of different theoretical models and most recently, the focus was shifted first to a communicative approach, and currently to what is known as the action-oriented approach. These pedagogical models seek to foster a meaningful and supportive classroom environment with the goal of lessening anxiety and encouraging participation and communication. As Piccardo (2014) states, “if the goal of language teaching is to ensure that the learner is able to communicate in this language…the usage of language in the classroom must serve this purpose (p. 12). One of the strengths of the action-oriented approach is that “the teacher is a blend of coach, resource person, advisor, organizer, and facilitator” and “the task becomes the federative moment of both the learner’s work and the teacher’s work” (Piccardo, 2014, p. 29). This is significant in that it moves away from the more traditional pedagogical approaches of teaching languages and encourages the
teacher to become more of a supportive presence in the classroom which has been shown to contribute to lessened anxiety. Moreover, this approach allows teachers to assess knowledge in formats other than through anxiety-provoking tests or presentations. The type of assessment that is encouraged in this model focuses on what the student “is able to do in the language, rather than what he or she knows of the language” (Piccardo, 2014, p. 43). In relation to second language anxiety, this pedagogical shift is important as it provides the opportunity for students to learn how to communicate in the target language in ways that are authentic and pertinent to their own lives, while aiming to increase confidence and minimize the anxiety associated with second language learning.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the existing research on second language anxiety, its causes and its effects on students’ confidence, performance and participation in language classrooms. I also looked at ways in which second language teachers can accommodate for their students’ anxiety and how this issue relates and applies to the Ontario FSL context. This review illuminates the fact that although there have been studies on second language anxiety in general, there is still a need for further research on language anxiety as it relates to the second language learning environment in Canada. It also raises questions about how teachers can effectively identify second language anxiety in students and what can be done to minimize the levels of anxiety that are necessarily associated with second language learning. The research conducted in this paper will contribute to this area of research by focusing specifically on the issue as it is observed in Ontario FSL programs.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the methodology used throughout this research paper. I begin by describing the general approach and provide details on the instruments of data collection used. I then discuss the sampling criteria and procedures used to select the participants and give a description of each participant including pertinent details about their experiences as educators. I then move on to describe the methods used for data analysis and discuss the ethical review procedures which this paper followed. Finally, I discuss both the limitations and the strengths of this methodological style and conclude by elaborating on the rationale behind this methodology given the purpose and questions guiding this research.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research paper consists of a qualitative study including a literature review and semi-structured interviews with three different teachers of French as a Second Language in Ontario. Conducting a literature review allows one to be immersed in the existing research on this topic while the interview process invites new voices in an attempt to answer the questions guiding this research study.

Qualitative research has been defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and which allows the researcher to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 3). Similarly, Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as a methodology that “begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe
to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Based on the issue being examined and the questions guiding my research, the use of a qualitative approach will be valuable to my research as this method of inquiry is appropriate when “a problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). In this way, this approach will allow me to further my understanding of the issue through discussions with qualified educators specializing in the field of second language education.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The data collected throughout this research study comes from semi-structured interviews conducted with certified teachers from varying backgrounds, experiences, and teaching environments. Rowley (2012) suggests that interviews are often used by researchers interested in “gaining insights or understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, or predictions” (p. 261). This method of data collection is valuable to my research because it will provide me with the opportunity to have a small sample of educators share their lived experiences as they relate to the issue of second language anxiety.

Each interview will follow the same protocol consisting of four sections of questions (Appendix B). The first section focuses on background information of the participants including their past and present experiences in teaching French as a Second Language. The second section contains questions relating to their current practices including their observations of and responses to second language anxiety in the classroom and the third focuses on their beliefs and values in relation to second language teaching. The final section pertains to the challenges they experience in connection with second language anxiety and the steps they are taking to overcome that anxiety among their students.
3.3 Participants

In this section, I describe the criteria I developed to help find appropriate participants and discuss the methods I used to find the educators that would be interviewed. I then provide a brief description of each participant, including their years of experience, relevant qualifications, and information about their current classes and schools.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- a minimum of 5 years of FSL teaching experience;
- experience working with students with second language anxiety;
- use of an action-oriented pedagogical approach;
- currently teaching in the Core French stream;
- leadership or expertise in the area of French language instruction.

I elected to choose teachers who have at least five years of experience teaching in an FSL environment to allow for interviews in which participants could draw on several years’ worth of experience and strategies in order to provide a more comprehensive discussion about the topic of second language anxiety. Moreover, participants all have experience working specifically with students presenting signs of second language anxiety which allows their interviews to provide meaningful data on the topic of this study. I selected participants who are comfortable with the use of an action-oriented pedagogy as this is the current approach supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education and it has been suggested to be beneficial in the reduction of second language anxiety (Piccardo, 2014). I chose to interview teachers who are currently working in
the Core French stream in order to facilitate comparisons in regards to teaching strategies, students’ abilities and curriculum goals. Finally, participants have demonstrated leadership or expertise in the area of French language instruction by means of presenting at professional conferences, completing additional qualification courses or professional development in the field, and/or mentoring new teachers. These criteria ensured that the interviews will provide valuable data on the topic of second language anxiety in Core French classrooms in Ontario.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

As a member of several online professional development groups and as a graduate student in the field of education, I am surrounded by knowledgeable peers, colleagues and mentors which has allowed me to recruit participants through non-random, or purposeful, sampling. As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) mention, “if the goal is not to generalize a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events, as will typically be the case in qualitative research, then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 111). To recruit participants, I contacted the administrators of relevant organizations and groups, including the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers and an online professional development group entitled Ontario Core French Teachers, via email and social media to provide them with an overview of my research and request their support in locating potential participants. The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers included an announcement in their weekly electronic newsletter containing the topic of my research study and the selection criteria for participants as well as my contact information. Similarly, the Ontario Core French Teachers group allowed me to post an overview of my research topic and selection criteria. This provided
interested teachers with the opportunity to contact me directly without feeling pressure or obligation to participate.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

The first participant in my research will be referred to throughout this paper as Pamela. Pamela is a Core French teacher for students in grades 4 - 8. She has 13 years of teaching experience, has completed her French Specialist qualifications and also has a strong interest in special education. Pamela is an AIM (Accelerative Integrated Method) certified teacher and mentor and she uses this methodology in her classroom. She is also involved in mentoring French teachers within her board and frequently facilitates workshops across Canada pertaining to classroom and behaviour management in FSL settings.

For my second participant, I will use the pseudonym Samantha. Samantha has 7 years of teaching experience and is currently working at the school board level as a Core French Instructional Coach for grades 4 - 9. She has an Honour Specialist qualification in French as a Second Language and is involved in several CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) related initiatives within her board.

Lastly, my third participant will be referred to as Kelly. Kelly is a Core French and French Immersion teacher at the secondary level who has 10 years of teaching experience. She has an Honour Specialist in French as well as the Specialist qualifications for special education. Kelly uses the action-oriented approach within her classroom and is actively involved within her school board in the creation of CEFR-inspired strategies as well as in the modelling of these strategies for her colleagues.
3.4 Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis procedure is the transcription of the interviews. Upon completion of this process, each transcript is coded individually to allow for the identification of categories of data and the interpretation of themes. I will read the data to find commonalities and divergences amongst themes. In this context, themes can be considered to be “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). After analyzing each transcript individually, I compare the themes present in each and synthesize where possible to allow for comparisons among participants. Creswell (2013) notes that these steps of coding, categorizing and comparing make up the “core elements of qualitative data analysis” (p. 180). I also consider that which the participants did not speak to and how this null data might be significant to the findings of this paper.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

There are several ethical considerations associated with the data collection, analysis and discussion found in this paper including confidentiality, consent, the right to withdraw, risks of participation, member checks and data storage. Confidentiality is ensured by using pseudonyms for all participants and avoiding the use of any identifying information. Participants all read and signed a consent letter (Appendix A) which provided an overview of the study as well as the expectations associated with their participation, including their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalties. There are no known risks associated with participating in this research study. Upon completion of the interview transcriptions and before data analysis, participants were provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Finally, all data, including the audio recordings, are stored on a password-protected laptop and
will be destroyed after a maximum of five years. By following these procedures, I can ensure that all steps of this research will be conducted in an ethical manner.

### 3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Due to the ethical limitations that are guiding this study, I am only able to interview a small sample of educators and cannot conduct any further research in the form of surveys, student interviews, or classroom observations. This small sample size could be seen as a limitation as it eliminates the ability to generalize on teacher and student experiences of second language anxiety. However, as Crouch and McKenzie (2006) mention, one of the goals of qualitative research is a “depth of meaning” and in order “for this depth to be achieved, it is much more important for the research to be intensive, and thus persuasive at the conceptual level, rather than aim to be extensive” (p. 494). For the purposes of this research study, in-depth interviews with a small sample of teachers will provide more valuable insight than could a closed survey of a larger population. Furthermore, interviews allow the participants to reflect on and make meaning from their own experiences in relation to the topic of language anxiety rather than “merely reporting” their experiences and the process may help “generate new knowledge, or at least understanding, for the respondents” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 487). In this way, I acknowledge that there are some limitations given the methodology used for this research study, however there are also many strengths associated with the process.

### 3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided details in regards to the methodology used in this research study as well as the reasoning behind these methodological decisions. This research constitutes a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews with a small sample of educators
chosen based on a series of selection criteria. Participants were recruited through the use of purposeful sampling and ethical issues were considered at all stages of data collection and analysis. In the next chapter, I report the research findings from these interviews.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings that emerged through the transcription and coding of the interviews with my three participants by comparing the outcomes across participants, relating the themes to the relevant existing research, and finally by describing the significance of these results. The three participants are all experienced FSL teachers with a passion for second language teaching and learning. The first participant, referred to as Pamela, is an elementary Core French teacher who specializes in using the AIM (Accelerative Integrated Method) program of second language teaching. Kelly, the second participant, is a Core French and French Immersion teacher at the secondary level. Finally, Samantha is a Core French Instructional Coach within her board and provides support to Core French teachers at both the elementary and secondary level.

The primary focus of my research is how a sample of Core French teachers recognizes and responds to their students’ experiences of second language anxiety and what outcomes they observe in relation to their students’ academic achievements and attitudes towards French language instruction. There are four main themes that resulted from the data analysis process, each of which connects directly to at least one of the research questions guiding this paper. The first theme consists of indicators of second language anxiety that participants reported observing in their students, including emotional signs of anxiety as well as manifestations of anxiety that impact students academically. Secondly, there is a theme related to strategies and resources that participants use in an effort to minimize student experiences of second language anxiety, including methodological and pedagogical strategies, assessment and evaluation techniques, and resources available to teachers. The third theme focuses on the observed outcomes of these
strategies in regards to student achievement, participation and attitudes in the Core French classroom. Finally, the fourth theme examines the challenges and barriers that are hindering these participants’ abilities to effectively prevent and respond to their students’ second language anxiety.

All three of my participants are experienced teachers with a passion for second language teaching and they each have strong views about the reasons why students in the Ontario school system should be learning French. Two of the participants spoke to the fact that Canada is a bilingual country and our students should therefore be learning both official languages. Furthermore, it was mentioned that learning a second language also provides students the opportunity to be more successful in a global context. Finally, each of the participants also discussed the many benefits of second language learning, including the ability to better communicate with others, gaining knowledge of and respect for other cultures, as well as developing the resilience and perseverance that will help them succeed in the future.

4.1 Observed Indicators of Second Language Anxiety

During their interviews, all participants shared the signs and symptoms that they perceived as being indicative of second language anxiety in their students. Within this broad theme, participant responses have been separated into two distinct sub-themes. The first sub-theme focuses on the emotional manifestations of second language anxiety, such as fear and lack of confidence in the Core French classroom. The second sub-theme concentrates on the indicators of anxiety that have a direct impact on academic success in the second language classroom, including avoidance, misbehaviour and negative attitudes towards French. It is also important to note that all three participants admitted to experiencing some degree of second language anxiety themselves, both personally as second language learners and professionally as
second language teachers, and therefore some of the indicators of anxiety that were mentioned in the interviews were ones that participants had experienced themselves as well as having observed them in their students.

### 4.1.1 Emotional Indicators of Second Language Anxiety

One of the main emotional indicators of second language anxiety that participants reported observing is fear. All three participants spoke about their students’ fear of making mistakes in the Core French classroom and this overarching fear may present itself as a fear of speaking, writing, participating or presenting in their French classes. Kelly, a Core French and French Immersion teacher at the secondary level, explained that she frequently has Core French students approach her to seek exemptions from class presentations due to their fear of presenting in front of their peers. This emotional response to learning a second language is quite common and it has been suggested that this fear and anxiety may be connected to “students not having developed proficiency in the language” (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2004, p. 24). One participant, Pamela, hypothesized that this fear is rooted in the older methodologies of teaching French as a second language which focused primarily on analyzing the language rather than speaking it and resulted in a learning environment where students did not feel safe. Similarly, both Samantha and Kelly mentioned their students being afraid to take risks despite the fact they had tried to make the Core French classroom a safe learning environment.

Another emotional indicator of anxiety that each participant reported observing in their students is a lack of confidence in the Core French classroom. Pamela, a Core French teacher at the elementary level, remarked that when she tried to encourage her students to speak in French, “they would look at you, you would see the fear on their face and they would say ‘Oh, I don’t do French.’” This type of statement is indicative of a lack of confidence as it suggests that even after
several years of Core French education, students still do not feel that they are capable of communicating in the language. Similarly, Kelly revealed that working in a dual track school with students in both the English and French immersion streams has proven to be a challenge. Thinking that it would benefit all of the students, Kelly and her colleagues arranged for Core French students to practice communicating with those in the French immersion program who have had more exposure to the language. While planned with the best of intentions, this resulted in some students in the Core French program feeling defeated in their abilities and thinking that “if they’re not in French immersion, they’re just not good enough.” As suggested in the research by Huang (2014) and Horwitz et al. (1986), this low level of confidence in regards to learning French as a second language may be linked with the existence of a second language identity which might be triggered by low levels of proficiency.

The fact that all three participants spoke so clearly about the presence of both fear and low levels of confidence in the Core French classroom suggests that these two symptoms of second language anxiety may be quite prevalent among FSL students. This data might also indicate that educators need more support in order to further prevent and alleviate the anxiety associated with students’ experiences in the Core French program. These three participants, however, were selected because of their expertise in the field and their experience in working with students to minimize second language anxiety. Therefore, the continued presence of these symptoms of second language anxiety might also suggest that there is necessarily some anxiety associated with the process of learning a second language and teachers may only be able to minimize this anxiety to a certain extent.
4.1.2 Academic Indicators of Second Language Anxiety

Along with the effects of second language anxiety that present themselves emotionally, participants also reported observations of manifestations of anxiety that hindered students’ academic success in the Core French classroom. The most commonly reported of these perceived symptoms of second language anxiety was avoidance. One participant, Kelly, who teaches at the secondary level, noted that very few students at her school continue with Core French beyond the mandatory grade nine level, even despite previous success with the language. As she stated, “if the students think this uncomfortable place is escapable, they will escape.” This avoidance of higher level FSL courses may also be indicative of an emotional response to second language anxiety as it could suggest low levels of confidence in French or a fear of not being successful if they were to continue with the subject. Although it is possible that all of the effects of second language anxiety might hinder performance in the Core French classroom, this manifestation of anxiety has a direct impact on academic success in the subject as it prevents students from pursuing further FSL education. Even for those who are unable to or choose not to avoid the FSL program entirely, participants mentioned that their students often still try to avoid some aspects of the class that they find particularly anxiety inducing. Kelly reported having some students try to find an alternative to oral presentations, whereas others frequently misbehave in class which she perceived to be their own method of avoidance as it prevents them from working on assigned tasks and in some cases, might result in their removal from the classroom for a period of time. Pamela also spoke of students acting out in the Core French classroom which she perceived to be a sign that they were uncomfortable with either the teaching strategies or the subject material itself.
Another potential manifestation of second language anxiety that participants reported observing was negative student attitudes towards learning French. Pamela made several mentions to the fact that before she adopted the AIM (Accelerative Integrated Method) methodology, many of her students had little desire to continue learning French. She attributed this negative attitude to the fact that these students were struggling to learn the language and to be successful in the Core French classroom. Pamela also suggested that due to students’ past experiences of being unsuccessful in their Core French classes, without a change in instructional strategy, students might have suffered from the unfortunate effects of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which they assume they will not be successful which may result in a lack of effort and a negative attitude towards the subject.

As suggested by these participant experiences and observations, avoidance, misbehaviour and negative student attitudes can all hinder academic success in the Core French classroom. Although there may be other contributing factors, second language anxiety appears to play a role in the development of these negative attitudes and avoidance tactics. The prevalence of these observations among the participants might suggest that educators need to strive to create a positive learning environment in order to change or improve student experiences of and attitudes towards Core French classes.

4.2 Strategies and Resources for Minimizing Second Language Anxiety

Each participant spoke of a variety of strategies and resources that they used in an effort to minimize or alleviate student experiences of second language anxiety in the Core French classroom. This section has been divided into three sub-themes in order to best reflect the range of strategies and resources that the participants have used in the past or are currently using. The first sub-theme discusses the methodological and pedagogical strategies used by participants that
align with the revised FSL curriculum and contrasts them with strategies that participants had formerly used or observed. Secondly, the focus turns to evaluation and assessment strategies that participants have found to be successful in their Core French classrooms. The final sub-theme examines the resources available to teachers to reduce second language anxiety as reported by the three participants.

4.2.1 Methodological and Pedagogical Strategies

Before the FSL curriculum revision, participants reported teaching primarily through a deductive approach where students learned the French language through studying its grammar. Pamela suggested that this analytical way of teaching the language did not create a safe learning environment and resulted in students not speaking very often or very well. Similarly, she explained that the old methodology focused on teaching all of the aspects of language individually and then expecting students to be able to put them all together to produce language on their own. In Pamela’s opinion, this is an unsuccessful way of teaching French. Likewise, Samantha suggested that the oral communication aspect of Core French is often the most anxiety inducing for students if their teachers are still using this old methodology.

Much of the existing research on the topic of second language anxiety proposes that a supportive and positive classroom environment is integral to the reduction of second language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Curriculum Services Canada, Module 1, 2014; Curriculum Services Canada, Module 2, 2014; Salehi & Marefat, 2014). Similarly, the recently revised edition of the elementary FSL curriculum document (2013) notes that “in a supportive learning environment, most students will develop oral language proficiency quite quickly” (p. 39). All three participants spoke about the importance of developing a safe learning environment for students in the Core French classroom in order to minimize anxiety and support student success. Both Pamela and
Kelly spoke about making time at the beginning of the year to introduce the classroom routines and expectations and to begin to develop a supportive environment in which students can feel safe enough to take risks with the language. Pamela elaborated on this strategy by sharing that her use of the AIM program ensures that each of her lessons follows the same format so her students always know what to expect from their French period which she believes reduces some of the anxiety associated with the subject. Likewise, Kelly spoke of using her background in special education to minimize anxiety by ensuring predictability in how the French classes would be taught.

On creating a safe and supportive learning environment, all participants spoke of using praise and encouragement in the classroom. As part of the AIM program, Pamela reported frequently using both individualized praise for students who are actively participating in the class as well as praise for the class as a whole so that all students are receiving positive feedback throughout the entire Core French period. Similarly, Samantha spoke of the fact that her classes are always celebrating their successes because “doing something and making a mistake is better than saying nothing and staying in our shell of nervousness.” This type of encouragement is important because, as Horwitz (2001) suggested, students who feel supported by their teachers are less likely to experience anxiety in the second language classroom. As well as fostering a safe and supportive learning environment, Samantha explained that she works to minimize second language anxiety by explicitly teaching and practicing language learning strategies like circumlocution so that students gain strategies that they can turn to when they are struggling.

All participants also reported encouraging and facilitating pair and group work in the Core French classroom as well as focusing on oral expression before progressing to written tasks. Kelly mentioned that this year, after the introduction of the new secondary FSL
curriculum, she and her colleagues spent much of the first two weeks of classes focusing only on oral comprehension and expression in order to build student confidence and comfort before introducing reading and writing. Similarly, Pamela explained that her students do not use vocabulary sheets or glossaries when they are writing because she works to ensure that they have learned all of the necessary vocabulary already through their oral practice so that all of their resources are in their head by the time they need to start writing in French. These three participants all shared a variety of strategies that they use in their Core French classrooms in an effort to minimize and alleviate student experiences of second language anxiety. The range of strategies used by this small sample of participants suggests that there are numerous strategies that could be beneficial in a Core French classroom. As the participants are all experienced FSL teachers, this may also suggest that newly qualified teachers should be receiving training or support in order to ensure that they are aware of such strategies and are using them effectively to minimize anxiety in the Core French classroom.

### 4.2.2 Evaluation and Assessment Strategies

When asked about the strategies they use in the Core French classroom to attempt to minimize second language anxiety, all participants also mentioned strategies used to alleviate anxiety in regards to the evaluation and assessment of students. This aligns with the suggestion by the CEFR to focus on proficiency rather than deficiency (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2013) as these strategies facilitate student success and achievement in Core French. Pamela explained that she has eliminated homework from her classroom as she found it to be a cause of anxiety for her students. By not assigning homework, her students are able to work with the help of the teacher and their peers in the classroom which contributes to decreased anxiety as well as increased success in the program. Pamela also implements a reward program where
students receive small prizes for having accomplished a certain number of tasks which she has found to be a successful strategy for motivating students in Core French.

In regards to the assessment of students’ oral communication abilities, each participant spoke clearly about strategies that they use to minimize the anxiety associated with the evaluation process. Understanding the need for differentiated assessment, Pamela explained that she worked with a student who was struggling with the idea of presenting in front of the entire class and allowed them to record their presentation on a tablet and share it with her privately. This use of technology minimized the anxiety associated with presenting for the student while still allowing the teacher to appropriately evaluate their skills. Similarly, Kelly reported collaborating with students who are experiencing anxiety to determine an appropriate path for the student to follow in order to meet the expectations. She elaborated on this strategy by saying that she believes it helps to minimize anxiety because it allows for students to follow individualized steps or timing so that they can be as comfortable as possible in the class, however it also reminds students that she is confident that they will be able to meet the existing expectations with the support of the teacher where needed. All three participants spoke of ensuring that all students had sufficient time to practice in class so that they could be as prepared as possible at the time of evaluation. Pamela explained that she frequently conducts formative assessments by simply sitting with a small group of students and listening to their discussion. This allows her to gain valuable information about her students’ progress without requiring intimidating oral assessments. Similarly, Samantha spoke of conducting oral assessments using what she referred to as a carousel method where students have the opportunity to practice presenting to several small groups before being evaluated by the teacher. This allows students to
receive feedback from their peers and improve their presentation before being graded which she feels contributes to improved success and minimized anxiety.

The fact that all participants mentioned similar evaluation and assessment strategies suggests that these may be effective ways to minimize and alleviate anxiety in the Core French classroom. This may also indicate that it might be beneficial for less experienced teachers to receive training in such strategies so that Core French teachers across the province can improve their abilities to evaluate and assess student achievement without causing further anxiety for students.

4.2.3 Resources

Although participants all spoke of a variety of strategies used in their classrooms to help minimize student experiences of second language anxiety, the resources that are available to them also play a role in their ability to effectively alleviate this anxiety. When asked about the resources that support teachers in reducing second language anxiety, all participants acknowledged that there are minimal resources available. However, each participant mentioned a few specific resources that have proven to be beneficial. Pamela explained that the AIM program involves a variety of resources that are specifically designed to align with the methodology of the AIM program itself as well as with the Ontario FSL curriculum and her school board provided training for its FSL teachers to effectively use these resources and materials. Kelly shared that she completed a Tribes certification which provided her with the knowledge on how to create a safe learning environment in the Core French classroom so that her students can be successful. Samantha also mentioned that the DELF (diplôme d’études en langue française) and the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) have provided some support as the revised Ontario FSL curriculum aligns with the methodologies put forth by these resources.
Finally, all participants spoke of attending conferences and workshops hosted by a variety of organizations including the OMLTA (Ontario Modern Language Teachers’ Association), CASLT (Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers) and individual school boards which provided some resources and training for FSL teachers. Moreover, Samantha mentioned that some boards have instructional coaches who can be valuable resources to teachers by providing support and guidance in how to create the best Core French classroom possible. Finally, both Samantha and Kelly suggested that the support of their colleagues is invaluable to their success as it allows them to share ideas and improve their Core French programming.

The data from these participant interviews may indicate that there are several resources available to FSL teachers in Ontario that may assist with the minimization of student experiences of second language anxiety. The fact that these participants still feel as though there are not enough resources, however, may suggest that there is a need for more easily accessible resources and more consistent training on how to use these resources across the province.

4.3 Observed Outcomes of Participants’ Strategies for Minimizing Anxiety

All of the participants shared that they had observed what they perceived to be signs of minimized anxiety in their students which they attribute in part to the aforementioned strategies and resources that they have incorporated into their Core French classrooms. Each participant mentioned that their students appeared to have gained confidence in their abilities in French. Furthermore, Pamela spoke of the fact that her students experience a sense of empowerment which may be accredited to the methodology and strategies she uses as part of the AIM program. In her opinion, this is because “students don’t care that they can conjugate a verb, they want to know that if a person speaks to them in French, they can understand and they can speak back.” Pamela’s emphasis on oral expression and communication skills before focusing on grammar
and writing ensures that her students feel empowered because they are learning how to use the language authentically. Similarly, both Samantha and Kelly noted that her students’ confidence levels increased as they gained the ability to speak in full sentences in French. Samantha attributed this to the interactive strategies that she uses in the classroom to promote the practice of communication skills. Likewise, Kelly found her students showed increased confidence after being given more opportunities to interact with their peers in the safe learning environment she had created in her classroom.

Another significant outcome that was observed by all participants is the fact that students were speaking in French and participating in class more often. Pamela noted that her students develop such an interest in French that they are using the language outside of the classroom as well. Some of her students initiate conversations in French with Pamela or other teachers in the hallway or the school yard, and some parents have reported that their children are speaking French with siblings or parents at home as well. Furthermore, Pamela mentioned that not only are her students speaking in French, they are developing positive attitudes towards the language and are achieving success in the Core French classroom. Similarly, Samantha shared that she encourages her students to be risk takers in the classroom and this has been effective because even though her students may still be nervous, they are taking risks by communicating in the language which suggests that their anxiety has been at least somewhat minimized. Kelly has also observed her students achieve great success in regards to oral communication which she views as a superficial indicator of minimized anxiety. Unfortunately, despite the fact that she incorporates a variety of strategies to “try to help them lessen that anxiety and to have that confidence and they succeed, that overriding feeling of inadequacy does not go away” which she believes is one
of the reasons why students do not continue with Core French beyond grade nine even if they have been successful in the past.

These outcomes observed by participants suggest that students’ experiences of anxiety can be minimized by using a variety of strategies in the Core French classroom. The fact that all participants observed an increase in student confidence and participation in the language may indicate that the strategies used by these educators were effective in alleviating student anxiety. However, as Kelly observed, this second language anxiety may not disappear completely. This could suggest that this form of anxiety cannot be fully eliminated from the language learning process despite teachers’ best efforts. It could also indicate that FSL educators need further support in learning effective strategies to reduce this anxiety at all levels of the Core French program.

4.4 Challenges in Minimizing Second Language Anxiety

While participants shared some strategies they had found effective in minimizing student experiences of second language anxiety, they each also mentioned some of the challenges and barriers that they encounter in their careers as Core French teachers that prevent them from achieving further success with their students. One of the primary challenges that was mentioned by each of the participants is the lack of consistency in FSL programs across the province. Although the Core French curriculum begins in grade four, some school boards choose to offer Core French programming earlier, allowing students in the primary grades to learn the language as well. Furthermore, the allocation of class time dedicated to French language learning is left to the discretion of the schools and school boards which leads to inconsistencies in the structure of the Core French program across the province. Additionally, Pamela suggested that there is a difference in the focus of Core French programs at the elementary and secondary levels as there
may be more emphasis given to tests and exams in secondary schools which may result in different methodological and pedagogical styles. As both Pamela and Kelly mentioned, there is also a challenge that is specific to the secondary level which is that of scheduling conflicts. In the creation of timetables, schools are often left with single sections of elective credits that may be scheduled during the same period. As Core French is not mandatory past grade nine, this often results in students having to choose between continuing to take French as an elective credit or selecting another option offered at the same time, which, according to Pamela and Kelly, is often physical education.

Another challenge that was mentioned by all three participants is negative attitudes towards French from school and community members. All participants stated that they have observed negative attitudes from their students, however it was suggested that these students may be influenced by the negative attitudes presented by their parents and the school administration. Kelly shared that she has heard from parents who have negative attitudes towards French and she believes this stems from their negative experiences in learning French as taught through the previous methodology when they were in elementary and secondary school themselves. Similarly, Pamela revealed that she has had experiences with parents who believe their children should be exempt from Core French which she attributes to their experience with the former methodology of language teaching where these students may not have been successful. Pamela advocates for keeping all students in Core French because, especially with the new curriculum and methodology, she believes that they can find success in the French classroom and may be able to use the strategies they learn in French to improve their achievement in other subjects as well. All three participants also spoke of the negative attitudes towards French that they have often observed from the school administration. As they shared, this may result in a lack of
support given to FSL teachers in the school and may foster negative attitudes towards the subject amongst other community members.

Finally, all participants mentioned that, in their experience, the lack of training and resources that are provided to Core French teachers hinders their ability to successfully minimize second language anxiety for their students. It was mentioned that if the school administration does not have a positive attitude towards French or does not see the value in learning the language, there may be fewer resources and training opportunities provided to teachers within that school. Moreover, it was said that many resources that are designed for Core French teachers are inaccessible to educators due to their cost or availability. Another issue that was mentioned by all three participants as detrimental to the success of the Core French program is the frequent absence of a designated Core French classroom. Pamela shared that she does not have her own classroom and instead must travel to each class using only a cart to store her materials. Samantha mentioned that she has heard from teachers in similar positions feeling like “second-class citizens” in the school because their subject is not deemed valuable enough to deserve its own classroom. Each participant spoke to the challenge of teaching French without having the space to display resources like anchor charts and word walls which would contribute to the success of the students. Finally, it was suggested that some Core French teachers may experience a sense of isolation as they are often the only teacher in their subject area within the school which may limit their ability to collaborate with other educators and develop new ways to engage students through the French language.

These challenges mentioned by participants represent a few of the barriers preventing FSL teachers from successfully minimizing second language anxiety in the Core French classroom. This data may suggest that change is needed at an institutional level in order to
improve the working conditions of Core French teachers by providing further support, resources and consistency within the FSL programs in Ontario and improving the perceptions of French within both the school and the community.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the main themes that arose during the interviews with my three participants. Firstly, I discussed the indicators of second language anxiety that participants reported observing in their students, beginning with emotional indicators of anxiety like fear and lack of confidence before moving on to the manifestations of anxiety that hinder academic achievement like avoidance, misbehaviour and negative student attitudes towards French. I then focused on the strategies and resources that participants have used in their Core French classrooms, concentrating first on methodological and pedagogical strategies, followed by evaluation and assessment strategies and finally focusing on available resources. This led to a discussion on the observed outcomes from the implementation of these strategies and resources as reported by the participants. Finally, I focused on the challenges that participants reported facing as a Core French teacher that may prevent them from effectively minimizing and alleviating the second language anxiety of their students. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this research study, suggest recommendations based on these discoveries and identify potential areas for further research.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Overview

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the methodological aspects of this research paper and review the key findings that were presented in the previous chapter. I then focus on the implications of these findings, both in a broad sense for the educational community as a whole and in a more narrow view for my own practice as a teacher and researcher, before making recommendations for those involved with second language education. Finally, I provide suggestions on areas that might benefit from further research given what has been found in this study.

This research study was guided primarily by the question of how a sample of Core French teachers in Ontario recognize and respond to their students’ experiences of second language anxiety and what outcomes they observe in terms of students’ academic performance and attitudes towards French language instruction. Subsidiary questions also sought to determine what indicators of second language anxiety a sample of teachers observe from their students, what instructional strategies and approaches these teachers use to respond to their students’ experiences of second language anxiety, what factors and resources support or hinder these teachers’ pedagogical responses to students’ experiences of second language anxiety, and what range of outcomes these teachers have observed from their students. I began my research process by conducting a thorough review of available literature on the topic of second language anxiety. Then, after careful selection of three experienced Core French teachers, I began the process of attempting to answer my research questions through semi-structured interviews with each participant which were then transcribed and coded for data analysis.
5.1 Key Findings

One of the most significant findings of this study was the prevalence of second language anxiety among Core French students as observed and reported by the three participants. According to participants’ observations, this anxiety manifested itself in a variety of ways, including emotionally and academically. The most common presentations of second language anxiety reported by participants were fear, lack of confidence and negative attitudes in the Core French classroom, as well as avoidance of anxiety-inducing activities or French courses as a whole. Participants also shared a variety of strategies that they use in order to minimize student experiences of second language anxiety. As mentioned by all participants, creating a safe and supportive learning environment is perhaps one of the most important strategies for alleviating anxiety in the second language classroom. In regards to evaluation and assessment, each participant spoke of providing sufficient amounts of class time for students to practice material before being evaluated and differentiating assessments based on students’ abilities and needs. In regards to external support, all participants agreed that there are not enough resources available to Core French teachers in order to succeed in completely minimizing anxiety in the classroom, however each mentioned resources that they have found beneficial, including the AIM program, Tribes training and the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) as well as a variety of conferences and workshops.

Another significant finding that was reported is that all participants have observed student behaviours that they perceive to be indicators of reduced second language anxiety. These signs of minimized anxiety include higher levels of self-confidence and increased oral communication and participation in the Core French classroom. Although some of the participants’ strategies in minimizing second language anxiety appear to have been successful, each participant also shared
some of the barriers they face in fully eliminating this anxiety. The most commonly reported challenges included a lack of consistency with Core French programming across the province, negative attitudes towards French language instruction from school and community members, and a lack of training and resources available to Core French teachers. These findings responded to the research questions guiding this study and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Core French teachers and their efforts to alleviate students’ experiences of second language anxiety.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I discuss the implications of the findings of this research study. I start with a broad perspective by examining the implications as they affect the larger educational community. I present implications for elementary and secondary schools and their students, Core French teachers, administrators and school boards as well as for teacher education programs across Ontario and the Ministry of Education. I then narrow my focus by considering the implications of these findings for myself in regards to my own practice as a teacher and researcher.

5.2.1 Broad Implications

From a broad perspective, the findings of my research suggest that many groups may be affected, either directly or indirectly, by the experience of second language anxiety in Core French classrooms. Firstly, students who are experiencing this form of anxiety themselves are directly affected by this issue. The findings in this paper suggest that if teachers are able to alleviate some of the anxiety associated with the Core French program, students may experience increased success and confidence with the language and may be more inclined to continue their
FSL studies beyond the mandatory grade nine level. Similarly, the implications of these findings for Core French teachers include the idea that teachers should seek greater awareness of strategies to reduce their students’ anxiety in the second language classroom and promote more positive student attitudes towards French language learning. However, the fact that all three participants, who were selected for their expertise as FSL teachers, still reported observing anxiety in their students despite implementing a variety of strategies to minimize this anxiety might imply that some degree of anxiety may be necessarily associated with the language learning process and teachers may unfortunately only be able to alleviate this anxiety to a certain extent.

In regards to implications for those at the administrative or school board level, the findings from this research suggest that a lack of support for FSL from the administration can be detrimental to teachers’ abilities to reduce student experiences of second language anxiety. This research also implies that Core French teachers are not being provided with enough training or resources in order to effectively support their students in alleviating their second language anxiety. This might suggest that school boards, teacher education programs and the Ministry of Education should provide more opportunities for professional development specifically for FSL teachers in an effort to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to face the challenges associated with the Core French program.

5.2.2 Narrow Implications

Building upon the broad implications of my findings, I now turn my focus to the implications as they affect my own practice. The strategies that were mentioned by my participants reaffirmed my belief that teachers have the ability to minimize the anxiety associated with language learning, at least to a certain extent. Through this research, I was also able to
deepen my understanding of the importance of creating a safe classroom environment in order to help improve student learning and success. As I move forward in my career as a teacher, I hope to incorporate many of the strategies that these participants shared so that I can help my future students develop a sense of confidence in their abilities and the motivation to continue their French language education. As a lack of support in the form of training and resources was mentioned by all participants, I intend to seek out my own opportunities for professional development as much as possible so that I can continue my own education in a continuous effort to become a better teacher. Despite the challenges that were mentioned by my participants, I look forward to having the opportunity to incorporate these learnings and develop my own strategies for minimizing student experiences of second language anxiety in the Core French classroom.

As a researcher, the findings of my research illustrate that much can be learned from interviews with a small selection of qualified participants. Conducting this research also allowed me to see the benefit in immersing oneself in the research on areas of interest as it can be a very valuable experience that contributes to the development of professional knowledge. As such, I will continue reading new research on this topic as it emerges so that I can stay informed on new developments and adapt my teaching practice as necessary.

5.3 Recommendations

The prevalence of second language anxiety among Core French students as observed and reported by the participants in this study suggests that this is an issue which deserves to be addressed within Ontario’s school systems. As suggested by the challenges preventing teachers from eliminating second language anxiety mentioned by all three participants, there may be a need for some changes to FSL programming at an institutional level. For example, implementing Core French programming that is consistent across the province in regards to the grade levels in
which it is provided and minutes of French language instruction per week could help ensure that all students are receiving equivalent exposure and opportunities to learn the language. Due to the lack of resources and support mentioned by the participants, I would recommend that the Ministry of Education, teacher education programs and school boards try to offer more resources, training and support for both new and experienced teachers in order to better serve their students in FSL programs across the province.

In regards to support within the school, all participants shared that the school administration played a key role in terms of professional support and community attitudes towards French language instruction. Administrators might be able to support teachers in fostering positive attitudes and towards French by giving it the same level of priority as other subjects. One way to provide this support would be ensuring that all Core French teachers have their own classrooms so that relevant material could be displayed around the room in order to better support student learning. This may also encourage students to respect and appreciate the subject more if they observe other adults in the school community recognizing its value. As mentioned by participants, it is also important that guidance counselors and administration at the secondary level be supportive of the school’s FSL programs so that students are not only given the opportunity, but are encouraged to pursue their French language education. This support could be demonstrated by ensuring that Core French courses are not scheduled so that they conflict with other elective courses, such as health and physical education, as participants suggested that this may be a contributing factor in the decline of students enrolled in Core French beyond the mandatory grade nine credit.

Finally, based on the findings of my research, I recommend that Core French teachers take the initiative to better educate themselves about how to minimize and prevent student
experiences of second language anxiety in their classrooms. The participants’ observations suggest that second language anxiety can be minimized if teachers are willing and able to use appropriate strategies in the Core French classroom. Furthermore, these findings indicate that, if teachers are provided with further support, training and resources, students may experience lower levels of second language anxiety in their Core French education. This would benefit teachers and students by providing a better learning environment for all and may lead to increased interest and enrolment in higher level FSL studies. Overall, there are many areas mentioned in this research study that would benefit from change or improvements and these adjustments could help improve the Core French experience for both students and teachers.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The research conducted for this study was limited in scope and focused on a small sample of Ontario teachers and their efforts to minimize their students’ experiences of second language anxiety. I therefore think that it would be beneficial for further research to be done on a larger scale. In Kelly’s interview, she spoke of the challenge of teaching Core French in a dual track school where students are also exposed to or aware of the French immersion program and I think it could be interesting to delve further into a comparison of students’ experiences of language anxiety based on their status as Core French or French immersion students and the language environment within their school. With the introduction of the updated curriculum document, I think it would also be valuable for further research to be conducted on how teachers are implementing the new curriculum and how these changing practices are affecting students’ levels of language anxiety. Given that there are several different versions of the Core French program offered throughout the province, further research could also be conducted on whether there is a difference in students’ experiences of language anxiety or confidence levels between these
programs. For instance, one could question whether students whose Core French programs begin in the first grade experience less second language anxiety or higher proficiency levels than those who begin at the mandated grade four level. Similarly, it could be valuable to know whether there is a difference in anxiety levels or attitudes towards French language instruction between students who learn the language in a designated Core French classroom and those whose teachers do not have a classroom and instead are required to bring their supplies with them from class to class throughout the day.

5.5 Conclusion

In this study, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with experienced FSL teachers in an attempt to address the question of how teachers can recognize and reduce second language anxiety in the Core French classroom. After the data analysis process of transcribing and coding these interviews, several themes emerged. Firstly, all participants reported observing indicators of second language anxiety in their students, including manifestations of anxiety that impact students emotionally and academically. Secondly, participants shared the resources and strategies used in an effort to reduce their students’ experiences of second language anxiety. Thirdly, the focus turned to the observed outcomes of these teachers’ efforts in reducing second language anxiety, including student achievement, participation and attitudes in regards to the Core French program. Finally, the last theme focused on the challenges and barriers that participants reported as hindrances to their abilities to effectively respond to their students’ experiences of second language anxiety.

Overall, this research has suggested that language anxiety is something that an overwhelming majority of language learners experience to some degree at some point in their language learning journey. Despite its incessant presence in second language classrooms,
however, the findings of this research study have shown that there are ways for teachers to be successful in preventing second language anxiety and alleviating it when it inevitably does occur. This is significant because it gives hope to second language students and teachers that they can work towards overcoming this anxiety and find success in achieving proficiency and gaining confidence in the language.
References


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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying how a sample of FSL teachers in Ontario recognizes and responds to their students’ experiences of foreign language anxiety with the goal of improving performance and attitudes towards French language instruction in the classroom 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 is Dr. Eloise Tan. 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 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-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.

Sincerely,

Kristin Andrus

Email: kristin.andrus@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor: Dr. Eloise Tan

Email: eloise.tan@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 Kristin Andrus and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ______________________________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. This research aims to provide information on how a sample of FSL teachers are recognizing and responding to their students’ experiences of foreign language anxiety with the goal of improving performance and attitudes towards French language instruction in the classroom. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. I want to remind you that you may choose not to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. I will ask questions about your background information as a second language learner and teacher as well as your experiences and practices relating to second language anxiety. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1. What grade(s) are you teaching this year?

   What stream (core, extended, immersion) are you teaching this year?

2. What grades and streams have you previously taught?

3. How long have you been teaching?

4. Can you tell me a bit about your current school? (e.g., size, demographics, programming)
5. How did you learn to speak French? What experiences and resources have contributed to your own French proficiency?

6. Do you speak, read or write any other languages (aside from English and French)?

7. Prior to beginning your teaching career, did you develop an interest in teaching French? Did you study French as a teachable subject?

Section 2: Teacher Experience and Practices

8. Have you ever experienced feelings of second language anxiety when learning a foreign language?

   If yes, what was this experience like?

   What do you feel triggered these feelings?

   How did your anxiety manifest? (e.g., physically, emotionally, academically)

9. Are these symptoms that you see from students in the Core French classroom? What indicators of second language anxiety do you recognize in students?

10. In your experience, how common is second language anxiety in the Core French classroom?

11. In what ways do you try to prevent and/or minimize second language anxiety for your Core French students?

   What range of instructional strategies and/or approaches do you use?

   Where did you learn these strategies and approaches?

   What kinds of resources support you in this endeavour?
12. Can you give me a specific example of a student that you have had who experienced second language anxiety, and how you responded instructionally?

How did this student respond to your approach?

13. What are your learning goals when it comes to students’ attitudes towards French language learning in the Core French classroom?

How do you create opportunities for learning to realize these goals?

Generally, how do students respond to these opportunities for learning?

14. What indicators do you observe to suggest that students’ second language anxiety is minimized or alleviated?

15. Which areas of your French program do your students tend to perform best in and/or enjoy the most? Why do you think that is?

16. Which areas of your French program or which types of activities appear to be the most anxiety inducing for your students? Why do you think that is?

Section 3: Beliefs and Values

17. Why do you believe it is important for students to learn French in the Canadian education system?

18. What are your views in regards to the time allocated to French language learning in the Ontario education system?

Section 4: Supports, Challenges and Next Steps
17. What range of factors and resources support you in minimizing or alleviating second language anxiety in the Core French classroom? What further support would be beneficial to you and your students?

18. What challenges do you encounter as a Core French teacher, and what would help you to confront these challenges?

19. What factors, if any, do you feel hinder your ability to respond to your students’ second language anxiety?

20. What advice do you have for a beginning Core French teacher about how best to minimize or alleviate students’ experiences of second language anxiety?