

French and English Literacy in French Immersion: Student Performance and Perceptions¹

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1. Introduction

Although many French immersion studies have focused on students' achievement, very few have reported on the voices of students themselves in the program. Our study explored French immersion students' achievement in French, English and Mathematics as well as their perceptions through questionnaires and interviews with regards to their progress in French and English language production and their attitudes towards French and English. They were also asked for their suggestions based on their experiences about the best teaching and learning strategies.

In order to find out about students' perceptions of their language learning in early French immersion, the present study relied on the students' language awareness about their school experiences. By "language awareness", we mean the ability to reflect on language use as well as learning and teaching strategies. This is based on Scott's (1994), definition which states that language awareness is "the explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use" (p. 91). Bilingualism in children has been associated with high degrees of language awareness in comparison to monolingualism (Cummins, 1978; 1993). Other researchers (Carlisle, Beeman, Hull Davis, & Spharim, 1999; Diaz & Klingler, 1991; Hakuta & Diaz, 1985; Jones & Jones, 2001; Takakuwa, 2000) have corroborated this finding. Chamot and El-Dinary's (2000) study of immersion students' learning strategies in language, involving French, Spanish, and Japanese immersion classrooms ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 6, used think-aloud procedures to identify which strategies--more-effective and less-effective--students used while on task and how these strategies changed over time and across languages. They concurred that:

The findings to date on the study of learning strategies of language immersion students provide insights into the language learning processes of elementary school students as they use a foreign language as the medium for acquiring new information and skills. The degree to which many of these young learners could describe their own thinking and learning processes seems to indicate that metacognitive awareness begins at quite an early age. (p. 19)

As was the case in Chamot and El-Dinary's study and other studies about learners' perceptions (Barkhuizen, 1998; Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1994) we expected that French immersion students in Grade 7 would be able to reflect on their language use and on the learning and teaching strategies they had experienced when writing compositions. Furthermore, the researchers cited above, who have focused on second language (L2) learners' perceptions have indicated that the experiences and perspectives of students are worthy of investigation. Nunan (1989) also encouraged researchers to seek out the learner's perspective because he argued "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into account" (p. 177).

We consequently sought to tap into students' language awareness by bringing together their reflections, following their years in primary school, on what they had learned in relation to writing, how they had learned those skills and what they thought were the most effective learning and teaching strategies. We also used questionnaires each year from grade 4 to grade 7 to give them the opportunity to assess themselves in English and in French and to express their attitudes towards both languages.

This paper presents first the longitudinal intensity study and its quantitative results in French, English and Mathematics since it constitutes the context for the analysis of the students' self-

assessment and perceptions, then it presents the students' self-assessment, then their perceptions on the importance of reading, vocabulary and grammar study for writing in French and finally recommendations they gave to their teachers for the future.

2. Context: an intensity study in French immersion

A longitudinal study was undertaken to evaluate increased intensity of French exposure which was provided "in an attempt to overcome a perceived plateau effect in second language learning in the standard model of early French immersion instruction" (Reeder, Buntain, & Takakuwa, 1999, p. 50), in accord with studies which have indicated a positive correlation between time spent learning a second language and proficiency (Carey, 1991; Gray, 1981; Lapkin, Hart, & Harley, 1998). In the mid-1990s, the administrator of an elementary French immersion school in the Vancouver school district with her staff decided to maintain primary school second language intensity throughout the intermediate school years (grades four through seven) by teaching approximately 80% of the core academic curriculum (Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, French Language Arts), i.e., all subjects but English Language Arts in French. From kindergarten through grade 3, students had received all of their instruction in French. In the revised grade 4-7 program, English was to remain the only core academic subject taught in English. By learning mathematics in French instead of English, students in the treatment group stood to gain at least 600 hours of instruction in French. Furthermore, because the administrator attempted to assign Francophone teachers to the non-core subject areas whenever possible, "the net gain could be closer to the 900- to 1000- hours range by the end of the four-year study, or an increase of 225 to 250 hours per year of French language experience for the higher-intensity French program group" (Reeder et al., 1999, p. 57).

The project school was a small (pop. \approx 300 students) all-immersion centre located in a mid-to-higher income neighborhood, with a predominantly Anglophone population. 6% of the students used a language other than English at home, compared to 23% in neighboring schools and 50% in the city's public schools as a whole. Typical of local French immersion school programs, parents elected to send their children to this centre and applied for admission.

The year of the change of policy, the school's 45 Grade 4 students followed the newly introduced 80% French, 20% English program (the treatment group), whereas the school's 36 Grade 5 students (the comparison group) continued to follow the previously-established 50% French, 50% English intermediate program.

The questions of the main study were:

1. What are the effects of increasing French language intensity to 80% in the intermediate school years on French oral and literate proficiencies?
2. What is the effect of increasing French language intensity to 80% and reducing English core academic teaching to 20% in the intermediate school years on English literate proficiency?
3. Would the 80% group be at a disadvantage academically when its mathematics was taught in French?
4. Would the 80% group perform as well as the group taught mathematics in English on a standardized mathematics test administered in English?
5. What is the quality of written French at the intermediate level in French immersion and is there a plateau effect at the intermediate level in French writing?

The results of these studies will be presented below. Further to these quantitative studies, the perceptions of the students were accessed through interviews in grade 7 and questionnaires each year from grade 4 to grade 7. The perceptions and attitudes of the students will be presented after the quantitative studies.

3. Grade 7 interviews

The purpose of these interviews was to reveal the grade 7 French immersion students' language awareness and perceptions about improvements in written proficiency between grades 5 and 7 and the learning and teaching strategies related to it. The two cohorts of grade 7 students (high and low

intensity) were interviewed about two compositions they had written in both grades 5 and 7, and asked about the differences they observed between the two compositions. Students were asked how they had learned to write better, what teaching and learning strategies they found the best in retrospect and what advice they had for their teachers. The interviews of the two cohorts were analysed separately. However, the answers of the two groups (57 students) were so similar that we collapsed them together.

4. Student questionnaires: Gr. 4-7 ²

Three student questionnaires were administered to both L2 intensity cohorts at the ends of 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades:

- Self-Assessment, English Language: *16 items*
- Self-Assessment, French Language: *20 items*
- Attitudes Toward English and French Experience: *33 items*

All 3 measures were administered to both intensity groups at the end of each school year in the study, and used 4-point Likert-type items. The purposes of these 3 measures, like the interview, were to complement the test findings on literacy and mathematics performance by providing not only different dimensions of assessment that tapped student's own perceptions (self assessments and attitudes) but also to reveal potential explanatory factors underlying the biliterate and mathematics performance findings, to the extent that self-evaluations and attitudes not only reflect, but can influence academic performance (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

5. Results: biliteracy and mathematics performance by intensity groups

5.1. Findings: biliteracy and intensity

Results from the French-English literacy phase of the main study (for details see Reeder et al., 1999) showed that better performance on overall quality of French descriptive writing as judged holistically by their teachers was associated with higher intensity of French language program delivery whereas there was no difference between the two groups in narrative writing or reading comprehension in French. On the English measures, better performance on a standardized test of English reading comprehension was associated with lower intensity of French language program delivery whereas there was no difference between the two groups on the other measures, overall quality of narrative writing and descriptive writing in English.

5.2. Findings: mathematics and intensity

At the end of grade 6, an analysis of covariance showed that there were several significant differences between the two intensity groups. The 80 % French group was superior to the 50 % French group on the total math test and on all subtests (Numbers and Numeration, Computation, Applications), although the 80% group had Mathematics taught in French whereas the test was in English. For more details about this study see Bournot-Trites & Reeder (2001). In grade 7, the teacher who was teaching mathematics to the 80% group decided to teach mathematics in English. However, at the end of grade 7, the 80% group still outperformed the 50% group significantly on the total score of the Mathematics test and on the Application subtest. The two other subtests showed no difference between the two groups in grade 7. These findings are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

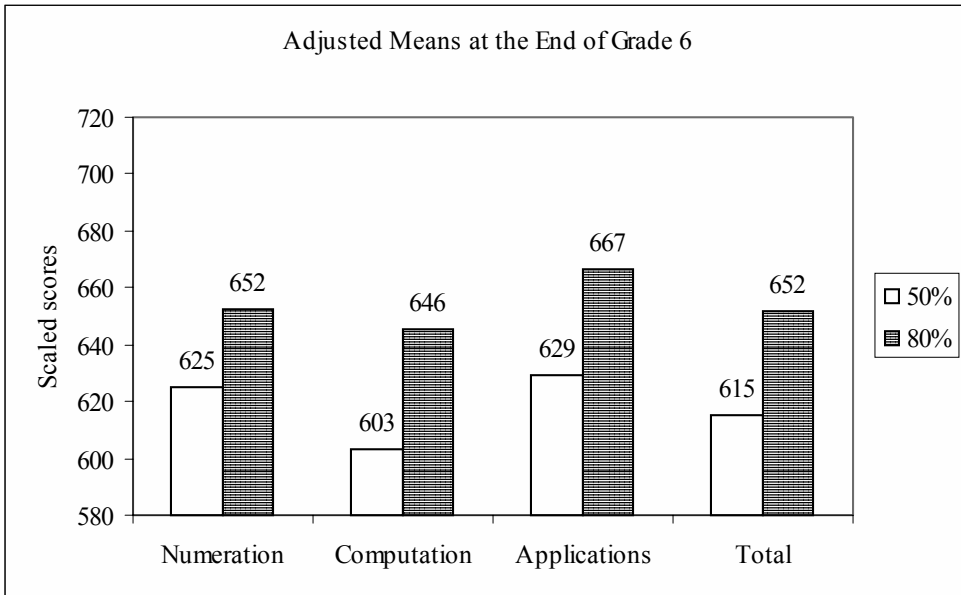


Figure 1. Adjusted mean scores on the Stanford Diagnostic Mathematics Test and sub-tests by intensity group in Grade 6

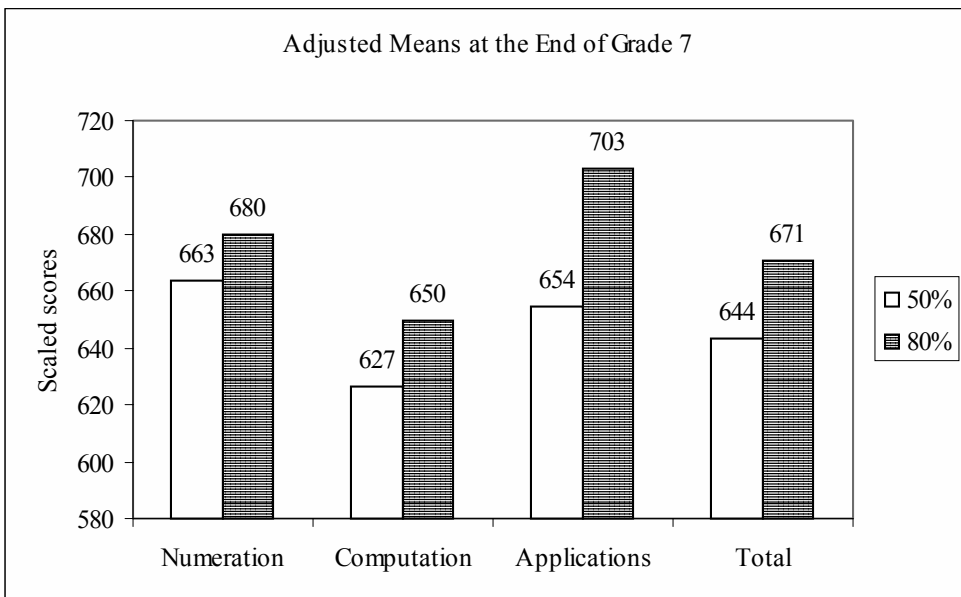


Figure 2. Adjusted mean scores on the Stanford Diagnostic Mathematics Test and sub-tests by intensity group in Grade 7

6. Questionnaires: comparing intensity groups on literacy and mathematics

We turn in this section to the relevance of our questionnaire findings to student performance in French descriptive writing, English reading comprehension, and mathematics.

6.1. Descriptive writing in French

The first biliteracy result, regarding French descriptive writing effectiveness in which the 80%

intensity group outperformed the 50% group, was not supported by the results of a key statement from the self-assessment of French:

“I express my thoughts easily when writing non-fiction pieces in French.”

Both intensity groups rated themselves high on this item at grade 7, rating themselves 3.06 and 3.23 on a four point scale. Is this performance result explained better by language of instruction? It was the case that the 80% group received a higher proportion of their instruction in French, and that mathematics instruction would have, by its curricular nature, involved academic, expository talk and text. We hope to investigate whether that additional academic language experience in French was likely to have influenced performance on our academic descriptive writing task in French in a direct manner, possibly by means of a genre analysis of the mathematics textbook material including its discussion tasks.

6.2. English reading comprehension

With regard to our English reading comprehension result, in which the 50% group outperformed the 80% in the last two years of our studies, once again the self assessment of English item “Understanding what I read in English” saw both groups rating their attainment positively by the end of grade 7, (3.81 and 3.83 / 4.) As with the writing results, a better account of this reading result is probably provided by focusing upon the language of instruction in the program overall: the 50% group received proportionately more of its instruction in English, in their case, through Mathematics. An informal content analysis of the reading test at 6th & 7th grade revealed that it stressed expository-descriptive prose passages, suggesting that for these two grade levels, the Gates McGinitie reading comprehension test assessed the very genre that we believe this particular group had learned from the English language mathematics instruction and materials. Further, an informal interview with teachers to discuss this literacy result revealed that the upper grades’ English reading instruction stressed fiction, not information literacy. One teacher of our 7th grade participants throughout the study stated: “We help them learn to read in the primary years, but we aren’t helping our kids read to learn in the later years.” Happily, our study’s literacy findings helped confirm a decision by the school’s staff to identify information literacy as a major professional development theme for the year immediately following the conclusion of our work.

6.3. Mathematics

As described in section 5.2 above, the 80% program group outperformed the 50% group in most subtests of the standardized mathematics test in 6th and 7th grades. Our questionnaire permitted us to address the question of whether translation of mathematics test items by the 80% group might have resulted in additional processing of academic content and as a consequence, higher test achievement. A translation hypothesis was clearly refuted by our attitude survey item “I do my French homework in English then translate it back into French. If so, in which subjects?” The numbers of students in the 80% group (n=45) mentioning translation in mathematics began with 4 mentions in 4th grade, 3 in 5th grade, 2 in 6th grade, and none in 7th grade. This pattern of results held also for the 50% intensity cohort, and other subjects received equally low reported mention of translation as a learning strategy for both intensity groups.

7. Written compositions: quality, improvement, and plateau effect

The purpose of this component of our larger study was to test the hypothesis of the plateau effect in written French at the intermediate level. Various authors have discussed plateau effect in French immersion. Halsall (1989, p. 3-9) indicates that the literature provides some suggestions that the second language development of French immersion students tends to reach a plateau, and their second language errors tend to fossilize, as of grade 4. Cummins (1987) corroborates this by saying that, “research does not present a totally positive picture of French immersion programs...[they] appear to reach a plateau in the development of their French skills, at least as far as grammatical competence is concerned” (p. 202). Finally Hart, Lapkin, and Swain (1991), reviewing the results of two evaluations

conducted in several secondary schools in Ontario, indicate that, “the comparison of junior and senior secondary level immersion students revealed few differences, providing evidence of a plateau in French achievement” (p. 250).

A second purpose of this component was to explore whether a higher intensity of French instruction during the intermediate years would improve the quality of narrative written French compositions in grade 7.

7.1. Method

Each student had written a composition in Grade 5 as part of a language proficiency test entitled “Où est Nicou?” (Lapkin, Argue, Levy, Scane, & Swain, 1985). The core component of this test kit was a slide/audio-tape presentation about a young boy looking for a guinea pig. The topic of the composition used for our study was given by a prompt involving Nicou saying to the students in French: "Hello, my name is Nicou. You will take me home this weekend. We will have a lot of fun. What are we going to do together? Mention at least three activities."³ There was no set time limit to write the composition. Students took less than an hour to complete their compositions. Although the topic for the composition came from a published test, neither the norms of the test nor the marking scheme were used to mark the compositions. Only the topic and the slides with the story were used.

At the end of Grade 7, students were asked to read and rewrite their Grade 5 compositions. They were told that they had to keep all the ideas included in their Grade 5 compositions, but that they could add ideas and/or change their order. As in the first composition, there was no time limit set for this task and students took between 30 and 45 minutes to complete it.

7.2. Analysis

The grade 5 and grade 7 compositions from each cohort were analysed with a structural and a discursive competence analysis. Lexical, grammatical and discourse measures were derived from these analyses.

The lexical measures included both vocabulary diversity and sophistication, and the total number of words. Vocabulary diversity was obtained by counting all verbs in the composition, excluding repetitions and dividing the result by total number of words. Vocabulary sophistication was the total number of infrequent verbs (not on the frequency list included in the “Où est Nicou” test) divided by the total number of different verbs. Finally, the total number of words was obtained by counting every word in the composition, including repetitions.

The grammatical measures included the ratio of correct prepositions, the ratio of correctly conjugated verbs, the number of subjunctive mode verbs, the number of conditional mode verbs, and the number of composed tense verbs.

The ratio of correct prepositions was calculated from the number of correct prepositions divided by the total number of prepositions. The ratio of correctly conjugated verbs was calculated from the number of correctly conjugated verbs divided by the total number of conjugated verbs.

The discourse measures included the time markers ratio (number of time markers divided by the total number of words), the number of paragraphs, the presence of an introduction, a conclusion, and a story line.

7.3. Results

7.3.1. Plateau effect

The structural analysis showed that in Grade 7 the students scored significantly higher on all measures except in vocabulary diversity and correctly conjugated verbs which were lower in Grade 7 than in Grade 5. Furthermore, there was no difference in the ration of time markers, one of the discourse measures.

7.3.2. Intensity

There was no significant difference between the two intensity levels except for ratio of correct prepositions which was better for the high intensity group.

8. Self-Assessment: a general finding

The self-assessments scores for both English and French Self-Assessment questionnaires yielded a general finding, in which the 50% intensity group rated themselves consistently higher on most items. In the English Self-Assessment for example, this group rated themselves higher on 49 of 64 items totaled across four years, yet it was the 80% group that was measurably *stronger* academically at the outset of the study in both English and French reading (vocabulary and comprehension) resulting in the need to adjust for this difference in subsequent group comparisons by means of covariate methods. We can only speculate upon whether students in an intensified bilingual setting were more inclined to assess their own performance somewhat more realistically than their less intensive counterparts, but this raises in turn the rather intractable question of what constitutes a realistic self-assessment for a group of learners. In any case our questionnaire results need always to be interpreted in the light of this response bias.

9. Interviews and self-assessment results

9.1. Writing

9.1.1. Interviews: Improvements in writing noted by students

When asked to compare their two compositions, students noticed many differences. First, they remarked on improvements in organizational skills, noting longer sentences, more paragraphs, and greater flow of their ideas. Student S, for instance, brought out the point that he had expanded his original idea of going to Whistler by creating a topic sentence followed by examples of what they were going to do. Student D similarly pointed out that, "...the vocabulary is more expanded and it is not as limited as the older one... There's like more paragraphs instead of just two lines." Quite a few students pointed out that they made greater use of sequence markers in their compositions to give them structure by presenting their ideas in chronological order. They felt that this helped avoid the needless repetition of words, as well as short "bad" sentences, and the use of English in the composition.

Students also commented on the increased complexity and sophistication of the language in the second composition. Students C and K commented on the difference by referring to the different states of mind in which they had written these compositions. They felt that their second composition reflected more elaborate thinking and fewer unrealistic ideas. Longer, clearer and more detailed explanations of their ideas made things "sound better" (Student S.) and made compositions "easier to read" (Students A., K., and J.), "less boring" (Students C and T), "less like a list" (Students L and D) and "more like a story" (Student M).

Generally, students also felt their second work contained better spelling and punctuation, more precise vocabulary, more adjectives, and better sentence structure. They also said that they had paid more attention to and understood grammar better. Students felt that they had conjugated verbs better and used them in more sophisticated ways, making greater use of tenses such as the conditional and the future instead of the *futur proche* ('going to'). For example, Student A stated, "The grammar was a lot better. The tenses, I used more and I understood more. And it made more sense".

9.1.2. Interviews: advice to teachers about writing

Fourteen students suggested doing more writing in French, especially after Grade 4, in the form of essays or reports rather than solely story writing, or daily writing exercises or weekly written assignments such as paragraphs. Students indicated that they did not write in French as much as they did in English, "We didn't do much French writing so more could've helped us a little bit" (Student L), "We have a lot of writing, like essays and stuff in English, but we haven't done anything like that in French" (Student J), "One assignment a month is not enough" (Student B), "We did not do a lot, more would be good" (Student K), and Student G added, "Even if we don't like it, it helps with our writing. We need teachers who can explain how to write". Student S suggested a need to have "lots of compositions to work on at home" while Student A asked for "more rewriting and editing". Some students said that it would help if teachers gave notes to the students and were open and available to

talk and had discussions with the students about their writing, such as setting individual writing conferences during silent reading periods. One student recommended using more writing samples, “Maybe showing more examples of writing, not just saying, blah, blah, blah, and then you do it” (Student V).

9.2. Reading

9.2.1 Interviews: role of reading in writing

When students were asked to explain how they had improved their writing, reading was one theme which emerged in the interviews. Only a few students who liked to read and read a lot in French mentioned explicitly that it helped them write. For these students reading helped for spelling and learning new words, and one of them explained that reading helped one learn language rules naturally. However, out of the 57 students interviewed, 34 mentioned reading might have helped their writing improve, *if* they had read more in French, something that they did not do as much as in English since they found it difficult. This attitude towards reading in French is well-represented by the comments of students K and A “...we only read in French if the teacher makes us do a book report or something. We don’t pick up a book in our free time” (Student K) and “More French reading might help vocabulary but French books are boring” (Student A). Interestingly, in both the 80% and 50% group a few students suggested that the actual amount of French reading had gone down since they had started getting good at reading in English, especially since Grade 4 when they began to be allowed to read English books at school.

Despite doing little reading in French, students did say interesting things about the perceived benefits of reading. Reading was perceived by some students as a way to learn the spelling of new words and their meanings, and as a good way to get information and find good models to learn how to write. Students also mentioned that being read to by their teachers was a good technique to help notice the different ways language could be used to write and to give students a chance to question teachers about material they did not understand.

9.2.2 Self-assessment: reading in English and French

These views from the interviews were also borne out by the questionnaire findings for both English and French. Not only did the 66 students we surveyed in the two intensity groups combined report choosing English books more frequently than French books by 7th grade (3.66 vs. 3.0 on our 4 point scale), but also their assessments of reading comprehension differed across languages (3.82 for English, and 3.29 for French), reminding us that these are not fully biliterate learners yet. The interviews provide a qualitative account of these self-assessment patterns.

9.2.3. Interviews: reasons for not reading in French

Two questions arose during the interviews. First, what did the students have to say about the reasons that deterred them from reading in French, despite its potential advantages for their language development? And, second, what did they have to say about the things that might have motivated them to read more in French?

Students gave three explanations for their choice of English over French for their independent readings. First, 40 students mentioned that reading in English, their first language, was a natural choice since it was easier and hence more enjoyable. Reading in French was made difficult by unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary, slang, idioms and puns, and students’ inability to pronounce all of the words in the text. A good example of this is illustrated in student C’s interview.

Student C: Okay, the vocabulary, some of the vocabulary is very hard and the way the words are used, it’s very different in French than in English, the expressions and those are things you can’t look up in a dictionary ’cause it’s just slang, and Quebecois slang or French slang is... just you can’t look it up in the dictionary. You

have to live there and know it, and mostly the way the words are used. Little word games or plays are obvious in English, but not so obvious in French.

In addition to the linguistic difficulties encountered while reading in French, students talked about the cultural challenge of reading books written by people with “different” and “unfamiliar” stories. Student T sums up this cultural challenge when talking about her experiences with French books “I’ve kind of noticed they’re kind of different from English books. People from Quebec and from France have different stories; I guess it sounds kind of weird.”

Finally, students also felt that their selection of interesting books was limited when they chose texts that were closer to their reading level. They complained that easy books tended to be about easy and simple topics. They expressed the desire to read texts closer to their interests and age levels. Student C expressed this well when she said that:

French books aren’t as available as English books and I also find that like in our library, they have to have books that are our level in French in technical French but the stories are a little too babyish, when I’m reading adult fiction books in English, I have a hard time reading Grade 3 level French books when the stories aren’t at my level.

This inability to find material suited to their expectations of what a good book should be, along with the dissonance between their French reading ability and their intellectual level, seemed to have played a large role in driving students to read more English books than French books.

The problems of “finding good French books” seemed to have been compounded by the fact that the students had only limited resources to choose from when looking for a French text to read. Whereas a great variety of English texts were available from a wide selection of sources at school, at home and in the community, students were limited to what they could find in the library when choosing a French book. Many students complained that they simply could not find French books they liked in the school library. It is also interesting to note that students questioned the fact that their school library contained a large number of French books that were translations of English texts. Students often criticized the value of translated books that would be available in English in the same library.

9.2.4 Interviews: advice to teachers about reading

Although students acknowledged that they were not doing much reading, the majority did recognize its benefits for their acquisition of French. As Student P noted it, “I read in French because they write stories and if you write stories in French you can get ideas and also they have really good grammar. So if you read a lot you can learn the different grammar stuff”, or as Student D put it “Reading more teaches about writing like paragraphs, sentences, and structure. Maybe just reading more is what could have been done to improve even more”. Consequently, students recommended more reading in French, “no quick reading tests, but more overnight reading” (Student A), and also more reading for pleasure, “When I was younger I was reading easy books or hard books. You did not have to answer hard questions. I liked it; I could easily get B’s or A’s. I learned most of my vocabulary in English, like all the punctuation, but in French I want to learn the words” (Student A). Student R advocated reading every day, “Have a thing that would make you read half an hour in French a night. They don’t even tell us to read. Maybe, they should get us to read” and Student G suggested that teachers should trick students into reading, “They have to get some way to persuade the kids to actually read, but not force them, like make them think they want to read. You kind of force them but they don’t know. That’s hard to do, kids are smart, they know.” Another student noticed her teacher’s dilemma with students who did not want to read and mentioned:

I enjoy reading and don’t mind. But for some people, reading does not interest them. If you enforce reading when they don’t want to read or when the stories are boring,

then they will start shirking away from French even more, and that is even worse.
(Student C)

Students also proposed that setting reading habits early could help. “Get them starting to read early because it’s harder to start things later. Like it would be a lot harder for me to start reading when I am 15 than when I was 7. So you have to get them with it early.” (Student G)

9.2.5 *Self-Assessment: reading*

With regard to the interview finding on a need for more reading in French, and reading more for pleasure, indirect support came from the French self assessments, in which students showed strong agreement with the proposition that “The more time I spend using French, the more my skills will improve,” but at the 4th and 7th grades, we found that it was the 50% French group in particular who rated this significantly higher as a concern, indicating that perhaps the 80% group were happier with this aspect of their program by the end.

9.3. *Grammar*

9.3.1. *Interviews: learning and advice to teachers*

Based on the comments of the students, grammar instruction was perceived at the intermediate level as being the most helpful for their writing. At the end of Grade 7, students felt more confident than in Grade 5 with verb usage, subject-verb agreement, verb endings, tenses and irregular verbs. For some students there was a strong feeling that their knowledge had recently improved in this area. Student S mentioned that she had only recently truly understood verbs and what verb tests were about. Students also talked about learning irregular plurals, as well as how to ensure grammatical agreement in sentences and how to use pronouns to avoid repetitions. Beneficial instruction also included being taught how to structure sentences using punctuation, combining sentences, and giving more detail by adding clauses at the end or at the beginning of sentences.

However, they had several suggestions for their teachers regarding grammar. For example, they wanted more meaningful application exercises, because “after the test we don’t have to do any work on it. I practically just forget” (Student D). Other suggestions were to start earlier, “maybe Grade 2” said Student B, or on a daily basis for short periods, “sentence structure, verbs, pronouns, and adjectives, I think, like fifteen minutes every day in the morning” (Student P). Another suggestion was to base grammar lessons on diagnostic tests to determine where students needed the most help, “like give kids a test and see how good their grammar skills are and what they’re doing wrong and teach them the lessons they need help on” (Student M). The general opinion was that studying and knowing verbs was very important, and that this knowledge helped them to write, and communicate effectively. Students felt that more time should be spent on pronouns and explaining differences between words such as homophones that students know, but don’t know how to use. Finally, Student A liked the workbook *Majuscule* (Goyette, Bouthillette-Sansoucy, Éthier, & Grossinger-Divay, 1992) because the teacher:

helped us with it, she corrected it with us, so it helped a lot. Nobody failed the test. And we had more things like that, and it’s good because it is not isolating. You can talk with your friends about how you get it right, how you think about it.

9.3.2. *Self-assessment: grammar*

Our interview findings around the theme “We need to work on grammar...” were supported by our self assessment questionnaire for French, in which both intensity groups reported relatively low satisfaction with “Using correct verb tenses and endings when I write in French,” still reporting ratings below 3 / 4 by 7th grade.

9.4. Vocabulary

9.4.1. Interviews

Some students felt that an increased vocabulary from Grade 4 to 7 had also helped improve their writing. In their opinion, learning more French words allowed them to add details to their sentences and paragraphs through the use of more descriptive words. Only a few students did not agree with the statement that their vocabulary had improved. One student from the 50% French cohort even felt that her vocabulary had regressed because the students were not speaking French enough, and that not being in the intensive French programme had been detrimental to her vocabulary acquisition. Some students suggested that the teachers should give more vocabulary lessons and French vocabulary tests in addition to dictations and verb tests.

9.4.2. Self-assessment: vocabulary

When we asked the students to assess their French vocabulary development, both groups seemed fairly happy with their level of development, averaging 2.93 in 4th grade, and rising to 3.12 by 7th grade. We had to ask whether this finding contradicted the findings in the rewriting task about a lack of improvement in vocabulary diversity.

One explanation is that in fact the vocabulary of the students increased in absolute value between grade 4 and grade 7. However, we have to remember that the vocabulary diversity was calculated in the quantitative analysis by counting of all verbs in the composition, excluding repetitions and dividing the result by the total number of words. The number of words in the composition increased significantly between the two grades and even if the number of different verbs increased in absolute value it did not increase in proportion of the total number of words in the composition. Therefore the students expressed in the interviews and questionnaires the feeling that their vocabulary had increased, which it had in absolute number of different verbs in the composition but not as a ratio of total number of words.

9.5. Tests

9.5.1. Interviews

Interestingly, the word “test” came back again and again from the students. They noted that they took a variety of tests between Grades 5 and 7, mostly focusing on grammar, verbs, and vocabulary. These were considered useful, and students felt that tests contributed to their success in learning verbs, especially tenses. Tests offered motivation to learn and gave at times a sense of satisfaction. Students were invited to correct their own mistakes with the teacher, and would rewrite the test until they had mastered the topic. This was also seen as an effective technique. To our surprise, students found tests useful and considered them good practice. Some of them even recommended more frequent and harder spelling tests.

9.5.2. Self assessment: spelling

Our interviewees’ call for “More and harder spelling tests!” was provided moderate support by our yearly self assessment questionnaire findings on the item rating “Progress in spelling French words correctly in daily written work.” Although earlier years’ self-ratings were more critical, by the 7th grade, the 50% group rated their progress at about 3.2 / 4 on this item, while the consistently more self-critical 80% group rated their progress at approximately 2.9 / 4.

9.6. Culture

9.6.1. Interview: advice to teachers about cultural contact

Seventeen students suggested more direct or indirect cultural contact. According to them this could be achieved through several means such as trips to Quebec or France, speaking more French in

class, doing E-mail exchange with a francophone class, or inviting French people to their class.

9.6.2. *Questionnaire: cultural contact*

Very strong support for the interview findings concerning cultural contact was offered by our attitudes survey item “I’ve found my experiences with the French language to be enjoyable” in which the 7th grade rating was 3.14 / 4 across our two intensity groups. Indirect support for cultural contact arose from our attitude survey item concerning the immersion program itself: “I’ve found my experiences in the French Immersion program to be enjoyable.” Our 7th grade students in both intensity groups combined rated this item at 3.43 out of 4, making this one of the two highest-ranked items in our attitudes survey.

Similarly, when our 7th grade interviews revealed several students calling for more opportunities to speak French, the yearly self-assessments of French also confirmed that report and lent a longitudinal perspective to the interview findings. There were fairly low ratings given to the item asking how students were doing at speaking French during French instruction, ranging from the just under 3 on the 4 point scale at 4th grade for both groups, and actually diminishing over the years to just over 2 / 4 by the 7th grade.

10. Conclusion

Perhaps more telling even than our students’ strong support for continued contact with French language and culture and their overall satisfaction with their experience of French immersion education was their response to our attitude questionnaire’s item “If I had children, I would like them to be in a French immersion program.” This item also received a 7th grade rating of 3.43 / 4 across both intensity groups, suggesting a high degree of commitment to the value of undertaking their education in a second language.

In conclusion, the results of the interviews and questionnaires suggest that much can be learned by listening to the voices of students. Their experiences and perspectives are worthy of investigation in that they can provide both researchers and teachers with valuable clues about the complex variables at work with the learners they face, providing them with greater information to make better decisions and provide better opportunities for learning. Although there was some consensus, we found it relevant that there was also a great variety among students’ perspectives, suggesting that strategies that would be useful for some may not be for others. It is therefore important for teachers to use a variety of strategies in their classrooms in order to reach all students (for details on the interviews see Bournot-Trites & Séror, 2003).

Notes

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² These three questionnaires were developed for this project by Jennifer Buntain as part of her thesis research for the M.A. degree in Language Education at the University of British Columbia.

³ In French the prompt was the following : «Bonjour! Je m’appelle Nicou. Tu vas m’emmener chez toi cette fin de semaine. On va bien s’amuser. Qu’est-ce qu’on va faire ensemble? (Mentionne au moins trois activités) »

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