

# **Students' and Teachers' Perceptions about Strategies which Promote Proficiency in Second Language Writing**

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We examined the perceptions and suggestions of French immersion students regarding their progress in written production in French. Fifty-seven French immersion students were interviewed about two comparable compositions they had written in Grades 5 and 7 and asked about the differences they observed between the two. Students talked about what they had learned and which teaching and learning strategies they had found most effective. The students' teachers from Grades 5 through 7 were also interviewed about the progress they had noticed in the two compositions. Findings suggest that French immersion students have a high degree of language awareness, understanding what contributes to their writing abilities. These include the benefits of grammar work, reading and vocabulary, and the transfer of first-language writing skills.

Nous avons examiné les perceptions et conseils donnés par cinquante-sept élèves d'immersion française sur une analyse de leur progrès en écriture française. Deux compositions comparables, l'une écrite en cinquième année et l'autre en septième année, ont été présentées aux élèves. Lors d'entrevues, les élèves ont été ensuite interrogés sur les différences perçues entre les deux compositions, et les facteurs ayant contribué à leur progrès. Les élèves notèrent ce qu'ils avaient appris et les stratégies d'apprentissage et d'enseignement qu'ils trouvaient efficaces. Les enseignants des élèves de cinquième, sixième et septième année ont aussi été interrogés sur le progrès noté entre les deux compositions. Les résultats suggèrent un niveau élevé de conscience métalinguistique chez les élèves d'immersion par rapport aux facteurs contribuant à leurs habiletés d'écriture. Ils parlent du rôle de la grammaire, de la lecture, du vocabulaire, et du transfert d'habiletés d'écriture de leur première à leur deuxième langue.

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## Introduction

Although many French immersion studies have focused on students' achievement, very few have reported on the voice of students themselves in the program. Our study explored the perceptions of Grade 7 French immersion students (26 boys and 31 girls) with regard to their progress in French written production and their suggestions, based on their personal 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 and Spharim, 1999; Diaz and Klingler, 1991; Hakuta and Diaz, 1985; Jones and Jones, 2001) have corroborated this finding. Chamot and El-Dinary's (2000) study of immersion students' learning strategies, involving French, Spanish and Japanese language 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 and Lewis, 2002; Jones and Jones, 2001; Leki and 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, several 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) for example 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 the most effective learning and teaching strategies were.

This article first describes the background and the literature related to the study and then presents the method. This is followed by the students' responses to a questionnaire, after which the teachers' responses to a questionnaire are presented and compared to the students' responses. Finally, we discuss the findings on language awareness, the role of reading in writing and the role of writing practice versus grammar teaching.

## **Context and Theoretical Background**

### ***Context and purpose of the present study***

The present study stems from a longitudinal research project comparing low- and high-intensity French immersion which was recently conducted in a Vancouver single-track early French immersion school in the Lower Mainland. The research project measured and compared the results in French and English literacy (Reeder, Buntain and Takakuwa, 1999) and in mathematics (Bournot-Trites and Reeder, 2001) of the low- and high-intensity cohorts. The purpose of the present study was to probe learners' metalinguistic abilities about their writing processes and production. Specifically, we wanted to find out what their perspectives were relative to the "plateau effect" at the intermediate level, the differences between sentence structure and discourse in their writing development, the relationship between writing and grammar teaching or writing practice, and the link between improvements in writing and reading.

### ***Speaking versus writing in French immersion***

Rebuffot (1993) showed that French immersion students are able to communicate in the L2 without negative consequences on their L1, and that their academic achievement in all subjects is at least as good as that of students in regular English programs. Genesee, Holobrow, Lambert, Cleghorn and Walling (1985) found relatively few differences between a French L1 control group and early immersion students, with the main differences being in oral production. The early immersion students were less proficient than the control group in oral production and in some measures of written production. However, other researchers have obtained different results. Although studies found that French immersion students' oral production was close to the level of native speakers, this was not the case for written expression, with the difference becoming greater as grade levels increased (Harley and Swain, 1984; Lyster, 1987; Pellerin and Hammerly, 1986; Spilka, 1976). Hammerly (1989) offered as one

explanation the possibility that errors could “fossilize”, a process by which errors become so ingrained that it becomes difficult to correct them.

Hart, Lapkin and Swain (1991), who reviewed the results of two evaluations conducted in several secondary schools in Ontario, concluded that “the comparison of junior and senior secondary level immersion students revealed few differences, providing evidence of a plateau in French achievement” (p. 250). In addition, Bournot-Trites (2003) analysed the structural and discursive structures of the compositions used for the present study written by students in Grades 5 and 7. Results showed evidence of a plateau effect in vocabulary and conjugations between the two grades. The quantitative analysis of the compositions showed that Grade 7 students scored significantly higher than those in Grade 5 on all measures, especially on discourse and organization, but not on vocabulary diversity and verbs correctly conjugated. In an article on French immersion programs, Cummins (1987) suggested that differences between native French speakers and French immersion students may be more evident in grammatical skills than in discourse skills, stating that “when components of proficiency are considered in terms of grammatical, discourse and socio-linguistic skills, it is found that differences between immersion and native French speakers are greatest in grammatical skills and least in discourse skills” (pp. 194–95). Therefore, one question in the present study was whether or not the students would differentiate between discourse and grammatical skills in their interviews and notice a plateau effect in grammatical skills and vocabulary.

In an effort to address the lag in French immersion students’ French writing compared to L1 students, research has focused on learning strategies and teaching strategies in writing (Chamot and El-Dinary, 2000, for example). Moreover, there has been an important debate about focus on forms versus focus on meaning or incidental learning in second language acquisition (Doughty and Williams, 1998). Many articles about French immersion relate to grammatical skills and strategies. A case in point is Lyster’s “corrective feedback” — a constructivist way to teach grammar and help students focus on forms — a notion he and others have elaborated on in a series of articles during the last decade (Aarts and Verhoeven, 1999; Lyster, 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 1999a, 1999b). There has been disagreement among researchers on how to teach language structures to French immersion students, and this question remains unresolved (Hansen, 1969; Lyster, 1999b; Nassaji, 1999, 2000; Rhéaume, 1997; Sheen, 2000; Truscott, 1999). Furthermore, the link between grammar instruction and gains in writing proficiency has not yet been clearly shown (Reichelt, 2001), although some authors advocate for more grammar teaching and indicate that grammar is coming back into the classroom (Devet, 2002). Several studies have investigated the effect of explicit grammar instruction on writing (Cooper, 1981; Cooper and Morain, 1980; Frantzen, 1995; Manley and Calk, 1997, for example) with mixed results. According to Reichelt (2001), “students appear to

show improvement in grammatical accuracy with practice, whether or not they receive explicit grammar instruction” (p. 581). Reichelt also indicated that researchers must employ a control group and measure the overall communicative success of the writing produced in order to obtain clearer results. Consequently, it would be insightful to find out whether students think that explicit grammar teaching or other teaching strategies are useful to them. Therefore, another goal of the present study was to explore what French immersion students after seven years of instruction have to say about the question of form-focused instruction.

### *The relationship between L2 reading and writing*

In addition to teaching writing strategies and grammar, reading has also been linked to the development of L2 writing skills and literacy skills in general. For Krashen (1985, 1993) for example, reading is a valuable source of input exposing students to authentic communication in the L2. This includes reading in the classroom but also a wide variety of other opportunities for reading in the L2 outside the classroom, including reading for pleasure at home and in the community. More recent work has also raised awareness of the close relationship between reading and writing and the interaction of these processes as they support each other (Grabe, 2001; Tierney and Shanahan, 1991). In the case of French L2 learners, reading has been linked to developments in their vocabulary, fluency and accuracy in the L2 and more directly to the acquisition of French-language writing skills (Bélanger, 1991; Chmilar, Kendall and Obadia, 1984; Elley, 1981; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; LeBlanc and LeBlanc, 1980; Romney, Romney and Braun, 1989; Wright, 1996).

Yet, despite the stated importance of reading for L2 acquisition and improvement in writing, evidence suggests that one of the challenges faced by L2 teachers is motivating students to read in their L2 (Romney and Menzies, 1995). For example, Maguire (1987) found that students put little value on L2 resources made available to them such as books, magazines, movies, television programs and music. Studies have also found that French L2 students preferred reading in English to reading in French since it was easier and more comfortable (Chmilar, Kendall and Obadia, 1984; Genesee, 1978, 1981; Romney and Menzies, 1995; Roy, 1996). Hence the notion that there is a relationship between reading and writing, so that reading habits of L2 learners could possibly be linked to success in writing in the L2, is an interesting one for second-language educators. This remains however, according to Grabe (2001), an area to be more fully explored. Consequently, of particular interest were students' perceptions of any such relationship between reading and writing.

In summary, in the present study we expected that French immersion students' level of language awareness would enable them to reveal to us their ways of learning and their perspectives about the utility of different teaching and learning strategies. First, we wondered if they could differentiate between

discourse and grammar in their compositions and if their conclusions would be different from Bournot-Trites' (2003) structural analysis of their compositions. Second, we wanted to know if they saw a relationship between writing proficiency and both grammar teaching and writing practice. Furthermore, we wondered if they saw a relationship between writing and reading habits. In addition, we were curious about the advice they would offer to their teachers. Finally, we wanted to know if the perceptions of the teachers and the students would differ on these questions.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Fifty-seven Grade 7 early French immersion students (26 boys and 31 girls) from the high and low intensity cohorts mentioned above participated in the study. In the earlier research project, two cohorts of early French immersion students were followed from Grade 4 to Grade 7. The first group (low intensity) had followed the regular French immersion program with 50% of their subjects taught in French and 50% taught in English from Grade 4 to Grade 7. Starting in Grade 4, the second cohort (high intensity) followed a revised program with 80% of their subjects taught in French and 20% taught in English. This was achieved by using French instead of English to teach mathematics. From kindergarten through Grade 3, students from both cohorts had received all of their instruction in French. Table 1 shows the number of boys and girls in each cohort who were interviewed as well as the numbers of boys and girls who were not interviewed because they were absent at the moment of the interviews. The number of girls was slightly larger than the number of boys in each cohort (14 versus 11 in the low-intensity group and 17 versus 15 in the high-intensity group) and the high-intensity cohort was larger than the low-intensity one (32 versus 25).

**Table 1:** Breakdown of subjects by gender and cohort

Cohort	Boys interviewed	Girls interviewed	Not interviewed	Total in cohort	Total interviewed
Low intensity 50% French	11	14	2	27	25
High intensity 80% French	15	17	4	36	32
Total	26	31	6	63	57

Two teachers, one male and one female, each with more than 10 years of experience teaching French immersion, who had taught the students in French in Grades 5, 6 and/or 7 were also interviewed individually when the students

had completed Grade 7. One teacher was not interviewed as he had left the school by time of the interviews.

### *Tasks*

#### *Compositions*

In the present study, students compared compositions they had written in Grade 5 with a new set of compositions they had written at the end of Grade 7. Each student had written a composition in Grade 5 as part of a language proficiency test entitled "Où est Nicou?" (Lapkin, Argue, Levy, Scane and 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 "*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.)*" ('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.)'). 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 was used to mark the compositions. Only the topic and the accompanying slides 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 for the first composition there was no time limit set for this task, and students took between 30 and 45 minutes to complete it.

#### *Interviews*

After rewriting their compositions at the end of Grade 7, the students and their two French teachers were interviewed separately and individually. A semi-structured type of interview was used. The questions explored what differences students observed in their compositions between Grades 5 and 7, what they had learned between Grade 5 and 7 that had helped them make their compositions better, how they had learned to write better and what the teachers could have done to help them improve even more (see Appendix A). Follow-up questions were asked during the interviews depending on what the students said.

The two teachers were asked if they had seen any improvement between the two compositions and in what domains. They were also asked whether the progress they had noticed corresponded to any of their learning objectives and vice versa, as well as whether they felt some of their objectives had not been achieved. We also asked for their recommendations relative to teaching in

French immersion between Grade 5 and Grade 7 based on their observations of the compositions. Finally, they were asked to state the factors that they believed had contributed to students' progress in written production (see Appendix B). Follow-up questions were also asked during the interviews to clarify ideas that came up in the interview.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In order to protect students' and teachers' anonymity, all were randomly assigned a letter of the alphabet to identify them. However, in many cases teachers could be identified from their comments; therefore we will not report these comments. Furthermore, since only two teachers were interviewed and since our focus was the students' perceptions of their learning experience, we will report mainly the results of the students' interviews.

### *Analysis*

A qualitative analysis of the data guided by the steps described by Bogdan and Bilken (1998), Merriam (1998) and Silverman (2000) was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews with the students and teachers. The main questions of the interviews directed the analysis and were used to create the first main coding categories. These categories, and the data they contained, helped inspire further questions and subcoding categories which were used to analyse the data in greater detail. The data were re-read repeatedly and themes and patterns we identified were arranged in analytical tables, hierarchical trees and text summaries (see Table 2 for an example). Results of the analysis of the students' and teachers' comments were compared to each other as well as to the current theoretical frameworks dealing with literacy in French immersion. The analysis was conducted by one of the researchers and its accuracy verified by the second researcher, who re-read the original data and transcripts as well as reviewing the analytical process. Consensus was then reached by both researchers concerning the main themes identified in the data and their significance to the study. The interviews from the two cohorts were initially analysed separately, but we found no significant differences between them. Similarly, when comparing the two intensity cohorts in Grade 7, Bournot-Trites (2003) found no statistically significant differences in writing quality between the two cohorts except for the percentage of correct prepositions, where the high intensity group was stronger. Consequently, we collapsed the results of the two cohorts and will report them together.

### **Results**

Since the interviews followed a semi-structured schema with follow-up questions, and since main themes were identified following the various levels of analysis, the results are presented by themes rather than in order of the interview



**Table 2:** Sample of the Hierarchical Representation of the Emerging Themes for the Question: “What Differences Were Identified Between the Two Compositions by the Students?”

● <i>What differences did students identify between the two compositions?</i>			
General comments	The writing is different The writing is definitely better		
● <i>Explaining why the second composition writing was better</i>			
Organization	Old one didn't make sense		
	Better organization	Less like a list; better introductions and conclusions; improved readability; sounds better; more structure; less repetition; better paragraphs; better endings; less confusion; improved sense of completeness; improved chronological sequencing	
Better French	Better sentences Better spelling Better grammar  More vocabulary  Better punctuation	More complicated, fewer mistakes, better verbs  Less or no English; new and more variety of words	
Improvements in lengths	Longer overall texts Longer sentences		
Content	Ideas   More logical Better expressions of intended message More interesting	Less simple; more sophistication. Improved and expanded ideas; make more sense	Change explained as due to older age, and more sophisticated thinking

questions. In addition, we gave the number of students giving a comment when possible; however, due to the qualitative nature of this study, in many cases it was not possible to give numbers because the students did not express the same idea in the same way. Furthermore, some ideas came from the follow-up questions within the interview, and these were not identical for all students.

### *Students' Perceptions of Improvement in Compositions*

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 up the point that he had expanded his original idea of going to Whistler (a mountain resort near Vancouver) by creating a topic sentence followed by examples of what he and Nicou the guinea pig 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 had 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 first 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 they had been in when they had written the 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 composition 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 the 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* 'immediate future'. 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".

### *What helped them improve?*

#### *Role of reading and its impact on writing*

When students were asked to explain how they had improved their writing, one theme which emerged was reading. Only a few students who liked to read and who read a lot in French mentioned explicitly that it helped them write. For these students reading helped their spelling and vocabulary learning, and one of them explained that reading helped one learn language rules naturally. However, of the 57 students interviewed, 34 mentioned that reading might have helped their writing improve *if* they had read more in French, something that

they did not do as much as they did 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 high- and low-intensity groups 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 were first allowed to read English books at school.

Despite doing little reading in French, students did say interesting things about the perceived benefits of reading. It was perceived by some 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 them 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, as shown by the interview with Student R:

**Interviewer:** But you think reading would help a lot if you were able to . . .

**R:** Yeah I think so especially reading out loud helps a lot.

**Interviewer:** Why does that help?

**R:** 'cause you sound out the words and your teacher is there to tell you that you're pronouncing it wrong.

#### *Why reading did not play as important a role as it could have*

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 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 reading. 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.

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 and movies.

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 and when we watch those French movies they are really different. I've never seen anything like that in Hollywood movies.

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.

Student H mentioned that she was interested in fairy tales but that none could be found in the library. Student J suffered from a similar problem and stated that he simply did not know where else besides the library to look for good French books. In these cases, students appeared to believe that good French books were out there to be read, but that they were simply unavailable to them. Student T stated that: “If they had a library with lots of nice good books like in English, I would probably read them. But I don't have time to go

to a big French 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.

#### *Role of rhetorical strategies and editing skills*

Students mentioned which writing strategies reflected directly the improvements they had noticed in their compositions. They indicated that they had learned to structure their compositions by having been taught explicitly about introductions and conclusions. They had also benefited from learning to use opening and closing sentences for each paragraph, and titles to state clearly what was being talked about. Learning to simply reread and edit their texts was also reported as a valuable skill they had acquired between Grade 4 and Grade 7.

#### *The role of grammar*

Based on the comments of the students, at the intermediate level grammar instruction was the most helpful for their writing. For example, Student T responded:

**Interviewer:** In your opinion, what kinds of things did you learn between Grade 5 and Grade 7 that helped you make your second composition better?

**T:** Probably the most the grammar, yeah maybe some of the spelling, nothing much more than that.

At the end of Grade 7, students felt more confident than they had 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, how to combine sentences and how to give more detail by adding clauses at the end or at the beginning of sentences. As Student R indicated: "We learned how to make sentences sound better instead of just doing lots of short choppy sentences. We learned how to put in commas and paragraphs instead of making run-on sentences".

#### *The role of vocabulary*

Some students felt that an increased vocabulary from Grade 4 to 7 had also helped improve their writing. In their opinion, learning more French vocabulary 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 low-intensity cohort even felt that her vocabulary had regressed because the students were not speaking French enough, and that not being in the intensive French program had been detrimental to her vocabulary acquisition.

### ***Reflections on how they learned***

#### *L1-L2 transfer*

Students learned some skills in English, some in French and some in both. However, they indicated that in general, morphology and conjugations had been learned in French whereas sentence structure and organization (presence of an introduction and a conclusion or paragraphing, for example) had been learned in English and transferred to French. Vocabulary learned in French consisted mostly of verbs acquired through *dictées* ‘dictations’ and verb tests, whereas in English the teacher gave multiple-choice tests where the students had to choose the right definition for the words. Reading was also reported as a source of new vocabulary, “because you just find more words you don’t understand, then you get like help or something, and then you know more words” (Student C).

Twenty students mentioned explicitly that what they had learned in English about organization could be applied to their French writing. For them, the structure of writing remained the same across languages and once learned in English it was easily transferable to French: “They didn’t really teach us in French because they had already taught it to us in English and it’s exactly the same thing” (Student N), or as Student V put it: “I learned it in English, but after I learned it in English it was easy to use it in French”. Many students indicated that practice through writing and *dictées* ‘dictations’ helped, but that most of the writing practice was done in English. Morphology and conjugations appeared to have been emphasized in French, as well as story and report writing, whereas the English teachers seemed to have focused more on writing skills at the sentence and paragraph level. Similar writing skills were also taught in French but seemingly to a lesser degree.

#### *Grammar instruction*

Morphology and especially conjugations were taught in Grades 6 and 7, but in different ways, with more emphasis in Grade 6 on memorizing while understanding and applying knowledge was stressed in Grade 7. It was this latter type of grammar instruction that students found most beneficial. Student R mentioned for example that:

We did grammar and verbs last year but I didn’t understand it as well as I do this year. I don’t think many people did. We understood it a bit, but it

was almost clearer this year . . . I think last year it was more for tests and stuff. It was more memorizing, because last year it was always the same. It was a table with a verb, and you just write the verb with the endings. You could just memorize the endings. I started understanding more this year. It's not memorization. Each test is different so you have to know the verbs.

Some students mentioned that writing practice helped them learn the verbs: "You have to learn how to apply them, because if you don't know how to use them, then there's no point in just knowing them" (Student J). Student V explained how direct grammar teaching was difficult and unpleasant, but really useful.

I think I've learned so much over the three years. It has helped me a whole lot . . . definitely improved my writing a whole bunch. So it's useful to teach those verbs directly, conjugations and everything. I hated it, but now I am really glad that I know them because I can conjugate them. I don't have any trouble knowing what tense to use. (Student V)

The same student emphasized the importance of attitude in learning such grammatical concepts.

I think in order to grasp the concept and learn, you have to have an open good attitude and like open mind to learning or else if you don't have a good attitude and shut your mind then you won't learn anything. I think that you should have an open mind and a positive outlook and then you learn.

#### *Materials*

Many also mentioned the usefulness of the *Bescherelle* (1998) and *Majuscule* (Goyette, Bouthillette-Sansoucy, Éthier and Grossinger-Divay, 1992) an exercise book which is based on the discovery method. Homophones for instance were learned through exercises in *Majuscule*: "Well, for vocabulary we've been doing *Majuscule*, and that helped a lot. It taught me about homophones" (Student T).

#### *Cooperative learning*

Cooperative learning was perceived as important by some students: "If you are with your friends, it influences you a lot to speak French and everything. If your friends are doing it, you want to do it too, so you want to be together" (Student B). Different cooperative writing exercises were mentioned. For example, the students had to write the most complicated sentence they could think of on the board, and then the whole class corrected the sentence. Several of those sentences made up the weekly dictations.

*Their advice to teachers*

Students generally felt that their teachers had done a good job: “They do everything perfect” (Student A), or “They did a pretty good job” (Student L), or “Teachers did fine” (Student C). However, they also had many comments on how to improve the teaching of writing, and other areas related to it, such as grammar, reading, homework and tests.

*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 “Even if we don’t like it, it helps with our writing. We need teachers who can explain how to write” (Student G). Student S suggested a need for “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 up 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).

*Grammar instruction*

Regarding grammar, students asked for 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 *et al.*, 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.

### *Reading instruction*

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: "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)

*Tests*

Interestingly, the word “test” came back again and again in the interviews with the students. They noted that they had taken a variety of tests between Grades 5 and 7, mostly focusing on grammar, verbs and vocabulary. The students considered them useful, and 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. Some students also suggested that the teachers should give more vocabulary lessons and French vocabulary tests in addition to dictations and verb tests. To our surprise, students found tests useful and considered them good practice. Some of them even recommended more frequent and harder spelling tests.

*Teachers’ Interviews*

Although the sample of teachers was limited, it was interesting to compare what they had to say with the students’ reflections. To protect the anonymity of the teachers, it was not often possible to quote them directly as we did for the students.

*Improvement in Writing*

Like the students, the teachers felt that the two compositions revealed the students had indeed progressed both linguistically and cognitively from Grade 5 to Grade 7. They noted marked differences in the amount of information provided in the stories and in their organization. Stories were more elaborate and detailed, revealing the students’ greater depth of thinking. Stories also showed improved sentence structure as well as a greater mastery of French grammar, with students being somewhat more accurate, using more tenses and generally taking more risks with grammar. As Teacher X said:

In Grade 5, their text was much shorter, and centered around two ideas.  
In comparison, stories of Grade 7 students are longer, more elaborate and they have more ideas. It is not just the French, but also more imagination.  
I noticed their organization has improved a lot, vocabulary not that much, grammar a lot, and Anglicisms, I notice fewer.

Unlike the students, who did not focus on their weaknesses, teachers did add that despite the evidence of students’ progress, there was still room for improvement. Also contrary to the students’ opinions about their vocabulary improvement, teachers mentioned that this area in particular could be enhanced: “Vocabulary is okay, but not that extraordinary,” said teacher Y. There was also a strong sense that despite the fact students were now showing a better sense of organization,

sentence structure and morphology, they did not apply this new knowledge consistently: "They used more the future and conditional. I also notice notions that I taught, like pronoun complements, that they tried but did not acquire yet," said Teacher X. One teacher suggested that students needed to be encouraged to make use of resources such as dictionaries and library books which were available to them. More importantly, both teachers stressed several times that constant reinforcement of grammatical and lexical knowledge was needed in order for the notions to be applied more consistently in their writing in the future.

#### *Strategies for improvement in writing*

When asked what would help the students improve, teachers echoed many of the learning and teaching strategies mentioned by the students. Teachers talked for instance of the importance of vocabulary and writing practice, as well as recognizing that elements learned in English could be applied to French. Moreover, teachers confirmed that direct instruction such as working with verbs, pronouns and vocabulary had an important role to play in the students' writing accuracy. This aspect of the class was deemed important due to the perceived need by teachers to constantly reinforce and practice French grammar. Like the students, teachers felt, however, that exercises focusing on form should be more than simply filling in the blanks, involving more thinking and interaction with the language as a tool of communication. As Teacher Y said:

Direct teaching, especially grammar, but taught one thing at a time. I do one notion daily and after that they do something concretely. I find the books in which they fill in the blanks [referring to *Majuscule*, which the students seemed to appreciate], they forget. They think they are good in grammar because they fill in the blanks, they fill in the space, but they know absolutely nothing. So, more exercises where they have to think.

Students had also mentioned this in their interviews. They referred to the benefits of exercises that made them think about what verb to use versus simply copying down verb paradigms as well as the way teachers pointed out recently studied grammar points in authentic French passages read aloud to the class.

#### *Lack of Time*

In spite of the fact that teachers stressed the importance of constantly reinforcing grammar points, insisting on repetition and practice with attention to detail, they also expressed concern about how time-consuming directly focusing on forms could be and how difficult it would be to integrate such exercises into other aspects of language without infringing on class time needed for other worthwhile activities such as reading and writing.

In particular, teachers appeared to have had difficulty in finding time to apply all the teaching strategies they had identified. One teacher, for example, after recommending several strategies to increase the level of proficiency in French said: "And this would take too much time, and they would complain. I don't have the time". The other teacher commented: "We didn't do the reflexive verbs in depth enough, this year I did not have enough time". Writing short stories and journals, and peer and teacher-student conferencing were perceived as important ways to help students correct and hence improve their writing. Little, however, was said about other kinds of writing: there was no mention of essays, letters, free writing or report writing, for example. Apparently, exercises aimed at helping students acquire basic vocabulary, sentence structure and a grammatical base left little time for actual writing in the French class.

### *Reading*

Like writing, reading was also recognized by teachers as an important activity that helped students gain vocabulary, a sense of organization and creativity in their writing. However, its actual realization in class appears to have been limited, confirming students' statements that they did not actually do much reading in French with the exception of what they read in class. One teacher provided a possible explanation to this stating that "reading was useful only if it was done with a purpose in mind." According to that teacher, tasks assigned with readings were necessary and there was little use for reading for pleasure: "I find that the reading they do at home isn't worth anything . . . I'm not convinced there is acquisition during reading. They read and skip over. You have to force them to do things concretely during reading." The other teacher questioned the effectiveness of reading as a way to help students with grammar, adding that, perhaps reading had not been encouraged enough. Interestingly, this contradicts students' perceptions of the value of reading for pleasure in their second language. Finally, both teachers echoed students in stating that students did not read much for pleasure anyway due to a lack of "good and interesting" French books available to the students in their school and community.

### **Discussion**

#### *Language Awareness*

As had been found in previous research (Jones and Jones, 2001, for example), students showed a high level of language awareness. Language awareness per se was not measured; however, students were able to remember, reflect on and think critically about their learning experiences, and give advice about the most effective methods of teaching. Most of the comments brought to light their motivation to do well in French, and although students differed in their levels of language awareness, most had insightful comments.

*Writing practice versus grammar teaching*

Students talked a lot about learning grammar, especially conjugations and use of pronouns, and said that it helped them to improve their writing at the level of the sentence. Unlike the students, teachers focused more on students' remaining weaknesses in grammar, especially with verb tenses, attributing these in part to a lack of effort on the part of the students. They also talked about the gap between the students' knowledge of the concepts and their actual accurate use in writing. Consequently, they recommended more practice to reinforce what students knew but could not yet apply systematically. The perceptions of both teachers and students confirmed what Bournot-Trites (2003) had found in the structural analysis of the same compositions: a plateau effect in vocabulary and grammar but not in discourse. However, the interviews uncovered a development in usage, if not in accuracy, of different verb tenses and moods. As students and the teachers indicated, the study of conjugations started only in Grades 6 and 7 and although the students tried to use the more complex verb forms they had learned, such as the conditional, they had not completely mastered them and still tended to make mistakes.

Student B confirmed this idea in his comment about subject-verb agreement: "We did that in Grade 7, so maybe it's not all integrated." Long's (1991) assessment of the interlanguage (IL) of language learners also suggests

Although most syllabi and methods assume the opposite, learners do not move from ignorance of a form to mastery of it in one step . . . Typically, when a form first appears in learners' IL (interlanguage), it is used in a non-target-like manner, and only gradually improves in accuracy of use . . . It quite often declines in accuracy or even temporarily disappears altogether due to a change elsewhere in the IL. (p. 44)

In addition to the importance of grammar, students made a strong link between actual writing practice and the quality of writing. Writing practice with genres other than narratives seems to be missing at the intermediate level. Teachers did not mention doing other types of writing in their French classes despite the fact that students felt that more practice with essays and reports using collaborative techniques with peers and teachers would have helped them improve their descriptive and expository styles of writing. It seems that for students the overall quality of their writing depends more on amount of practice with different genres than on explicit grammar teaching. To clarify whether writing practice or grammar teaching or both contribute to second language writing proficiency, more studies on the influence of form-focused instruction on writing must be conducted (Reichelt, 2001).

*The role of reading in writing*

Reading emerged as an important theme in the interviews. Students' reflections supported claims in the literature that reading can help French immersion students develop vocabulary, fluency and accuracy in their second language (Chmilar, Kendall and Obadia, 1984; Elley, 1981; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; LeBlanc and LeBlanc, 1980; Romney, Romney and Braun, 1989). However, like the students in Romney and Menzies' (1995) study, the principal challenge seemed to be actually getting students to read in the target language. Students' solutions in regard to this challenge were interesting. They suggested that reading regularly in French from a young age was important and that teachers should also encourage reading for pleasure instead of turning each reading into a written assignment. This last point supports the notion that various literary activities *both* in and out of the classroom can benefit the development of second language writing skills (Anderson, Fagan and Cronin, 1998; Bélanger, 1991; Kelly, Gregory and Williams, 2001).

Students' comments suggest that their lack of interest in reading in French was partially caused by a lack of cultural familiarity with the content of French books. The absence of cultural background has indeed been seen in related literature as a possible deterrent to reading in L2 learners (Kelly, Gregory and Williams 2001). We therefore suggest a need to emphasize the role of culture in immersion and its critical and complex role in the reading habits of students. This could encourage French immersion students to read more French books, and to see reading as a culture-learning tool.

Additionally, it is important to note that the students' interviews suggest that their lack of reading in French, despite its perceived benefits, cannot be blamed solely on the linguistic or cultural challenges. Rather, problems such as finding "an interesting book" to read—one in the right genre, which is well written and which is not simply a translation of an English book, all in a language suited to their level—also need to be considered as factors limiting their amount of French reading. We found some students' suggestions that schools need to spend more time acquiring more interesting books to be relevant, while realizing how difficult this task is for librarians and teachers. In fact, teachers addressed this issue in the interviews, suggesting that schools need to be ready to spend much more time and resources—both financial and human—on the acquisition of appropriate books for students. In addition to exploring the potential of such institutional changes, further research might do well to examine more closely the factors that turn students away from the French resources available to them.

Finally, the belief by the teachers in our study that reading for pleasure was of little use to students may also need to be questioned and reconsidered, because it contradicts students' perceptions of the importance of reading for pleasure. Additionally, research strongly suggests that teachers' beliefs and

attitudes towards reading influence their own students reading habits (Frick, 1986; LeBlanc and LeBlanc, 1980; Romney and Menzies, 1995; Wing, 1989). It would be interesting to see if the results of this study would have been different if the teachers had encouraged the students to do more reading for pleasure at home.

In conclusion, our study suggests that much can be learned by listening to the voices of students and their teachers regarding L2 writing. The experiences and perspectives of students and teachers 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 more 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. Finally, the voice of the teachers who are on the front line should not be neglected either, especially in the development of curriculum. The intersection of students' and teachers' perceptions can provide valuable support for practices when they are in agreement, or evidence for reflection and re-evaluation when they differ.

This study highlights students' perceptiveness concerning their own language learning. Their insightful comments emphasize the need for positive attitudes and cultural awareness, the difficulty in finding suitable French texts, the usefulness of the transfer of skills between the L1 and the L2, the importance of cooperative learning and the usefulness of tests. It leads us to recommend that students' voices be given more weight in future language planning and teaching. Furthermore, students highlighted the importance and challenges of encouraging reading in French, teaching culture in order to improve reading comprehension and teaching linguistic and organizational structures by focusing on form within context while providing various writing experiences with individual correction. These remain important areas for improving French immersion students' level of written production, and should be further explored and pursued.

These areas could be looked at in further studies that would explore whether students in similar programs would provide similar answers about their writing development. A follow-up study could look at the differences between the progress realized by students at two different grades, both in English and in French, and compare the progress made in the two different languages in terms of organization, structure, vocabulary and grammar. This additional information could help determine whether a match exists between the two languages with regard to the progress made from one grade to the next. At the same time it

would be interesting to investigate the degree to which students feel they have made progress in their first language.

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**Appendix A:**

**Questions for Interviews of Grade 7 Students**

1. I would like you to read your two compositions and tell me what differences you see between the two.
2. Could you show me something that was in your original composition that you kept in the second one?
3. Now, show me how you changed it to make it better.
4. Now, show me something that you added in your second composition and tell me why you added it and how it makes your composition better.
5. Is there anything else you want to tell me about the differences and similarities between your compositions and about the thoughts you had when you were editing your original composition?
6. And how did you learn these things? (For example, did you learn from your teachers, your readings, your experiences, your English language classes . . . )?
7. In your opinion, what could have been done by your teachers to help you improve even more? (What could they have taught? In what ways?)

**Appendix B:**

**Questions for Interviews of the Teachers**

1. Do you see progress between the Grade 5 and the Grade 7 compositions?
2. In which domains (grammar, vocabulary, organization, anglicisms)?
3. Relative to your programme, and your objectives, do you see that some notions have been learned and integrated in your students' writing? Which ones?
4. Which ones have not been learned and integrated? For example, you may have taught a concept or emphasized it and you saw that the mistake is still there.
5. How do you explain that?
6. Based on your observation of these compositions, what would you recommend to French immersion teachers between Grade 5 and Grade 7?
7. According to you, what contributes the most to the learning pertaining to written composition quality of French immersion students at the intermediate level? (For example, reading, direct teaching, grammar teaching, writing practice)
8. Do you have other comments?