

Exploring the “Situation” of Situational Willingness to Communicate: A Volunteer Youth Exchange Perspective¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the perspectives of youth participating in the Society for Educational Visits and Exchanges in Canada’s Volunteer Youth Experience (VYE) as gathered by way of pre- and post-program questionnaires, observations, interviews, and journals. The pan-Canadian questionnaire results suggest that this short, bilingual volunteer experience enhances participant motivation to learn a second official language and to be part of the target community. Triangulated findings from observations, interviews and journals indicate that participants’ willingness to communicate (WTC) in the second language (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998) may have been influenced by situational factors inherent to the volunteer experience such as access to native speakers of the target language and opportunities for authentic community participation.

Résumé

Cet article présente les points de vue de jeunes ayant participé au programme Expérience bénévole jeunesse (EBJ) de la Société éducative de visites et d’échanges au Canada (SEVEC), tels qu’ils ont été obtenus au moyen de questionnaires pré- et post-échange, d’entrevues et de journaux de bord. Les résultats pancanadiens du questionnaire suggèrent que cette brève expérience bilingue de travail bénévole augmente la motivation des participants envers l’apprentissage d’une deuxième langue officielle et leur sentiment d’appartenance à l’égard de la communauté locutrice de la langue cible. La triangulation des résultats des entrevues et de ceux des journaux de bord indique que le désir de communiquer (WTC, pour *Willingness To Communicate*) dans la langue seconde (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément et Noels, 1998) a pu être influencé chez les participants par des facteurs circonstanciels inhérents à l’expérience de bénévolat, comme le contact avec des locuteurs natifs de la langue cible et l’occasion de participer de façon authentique à la vie de la communauté.

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Introduction

Bilingual exchanges have been viewed as one of the ideal means to sustain and revitalize second language (L2) programs. Offering exchanges for learners of French as a Second Language (FSL) in Canada, in particular, has been identified as a complement to the FSL curriculum and essential to attracting and retaining students in FSL education (Canadian Parents for French, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006; Fraser, 2008). Given the demonstrated impact of exchanges, the Canadian government has continued to draft policies and offer funding packages to associations that organize exchange opportunities for youth looking to learn Canada’s two official languages: French and English. In 2003, the federal government outlined their Action Plan for Official Languages with a mandate to invest \$5 million dollars per year to facilitate L2 learning through linguistic exchanges and youth awareness activities (Government of Canada, 2003). After recently re-examining this policy (see Department of Canadian Heritage, 2009), the federal government renewed its mandate to support initiatives that coordinate opportunities for Canadian youth to use the official languages they are learning outside of the classroom context. Delivery organizations such as the Society for Educational Visits and Exchanges in Canada (SEVEC), which is funded by Exchanges Canada (2009), continue to use this funding to expand experiential learning opportunities and community involvement for youth in their second official language (SEVEC, 2009a).

The study reported here offers the first formal examination of a new exchange model being offered by SEVEC called the “Volunteer Youth Experience” (VYE). The VYE offers a two-week program where Anglophones and Francophones (14–16 year olds) come together to participate in leadership workshops and to volunteer at two local, pre-organized cultural festivals – one in their home community in their dominant official language and the other in their “twin” community in their second official language. Participants in VYE therefore work in both official languages in non-academic settings during their volunteer experience. By integrating volunteerism and leadership skill development opportunities into a bilingual program, SEVEC

aims to extend its traditional L2 homestay exchange model² and continue to significantly impact participants' second language capacities (SEVEC, 2008, p.2).

Relevant Research

The majority of studies investigating bilingual exchanges in Canada have focused either on the experience of Anglophone students in French communities or on the evolution of student attitudes or motivation following direct contact with the L2 community (e.g. Desrochers & Gardner, 1981; Hanna, Smith, McLean & Stern, 1980; Day & Shapson, 1981; Shapson, 1985). The following two studies in particular highlight the impact that both short- and long-term exchange experiences can have on students' attitudes towards L2 culture, their developing L2 proficiency, and their general motivation for L2 learning.

Seeking to gain a deeper understanding of what factors contribute to the success of brief (five to seven days) bilingual school-year exchanges, MacFarlane (1997, 2001) conducted a case study involving two Anglophone and Francophone Grade six French Immersion (FI) classes in two contexts—their L2 classroom and during a SEVEC School-Year Group Exchange in Quebec and Ontario. Participants from both groups in this study were observed using more L2 during free time with their twin counterparts than during L2 classroom activities. While the majority of the Francophone student interview data revealed that learning English (L2) was their primary reason for participating in the exchange, observation data showed that their weaker English skills, coupled with the Anglophones' stronger French skills, resulted in students collectively accepting French as the language of communication. Still, interview and focus-group data revealed that both groups of students felt more confident about themselves and their L2 skills as a result of the exchange experience. This finding has also been supported in the subsequently referenced studies where researchers observed that even brief contact experiences can have positive effects on students' L2 skills, particularly for youth from a core French³ (CF) learning environment (Day & Shapson, 1981; Hanna, Smith, McLean & Stern, 1980). Overall, MacFarlane posits that even brief contact experiences with native speakers complement classroom-based learning, and offer peer models and authentic interaction opportunities for the students.

² Since 1936, SEVEC has organized homestay exchanges where young Canadians between 11 and 18 years live with 'twin' families for at least seven days. SEVEC claims that the VYE program is different in that it provides common stay housing for the participants (i.e., both groups live together for the entire exchange).

³ Core French: French as a second language, generally taught as a subject for one period each day or a few times a week.

Empirical research findings related to more long-term Canadian bilingual exchanges are limited. In 1994, Hart, Lapkin, and Swain conducted a large-scale study evaluating the linguistic and affective impact of a three-month homestay exchange in Quebec. This investigation compared the experiences and L2 proficiency of 119 Anglophone secondary students from FI and CF instructional contexts. Analysis of student questionnaire data revealed that participants felt most confident about the improvement of their oral skills after the exchange, with lower pre-visit proficiency assessments often resulting in the perception of higher post-visit gains (Hart et al., 1994). Diary testimonies regarding linguistic confidence showed a reported trend for students to feel confident in comprehension skills before speaking skills. Overall, these results suggest that proficiency gains can be achieved after a three-month stay in an L2 community (Hart et al., 1994; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995), and that incorporating a student journal component into subsequent studies on the impact of L2 exchanges could provide insight into the language learning taking place during these experiences (Warden, Lapkin, Swain, & Hart, 1995).

As mentioned earlier, the majority of studies focusing on bilingual exchanges in Canada have also tended to examine the experience of Anglophone students in French communities. While there is a strong push in Quebec to have young Francophones become functionally fluent in English by the time they leave secondary school (SPEAQ, 2008), most recommendations made by the Quebec government and other stakeholders are primarily classroom-based, with no mention of bilingual exchanges playing a role. Francophones who have been included in bilingual exchange research have noted that they choose to participate in exchanges so they can improve their English, a language that is better supported outside of the classroom context (MacFarlane, 1997).

Generally speaking, organized volunteer experiences such as VYE could be considered to fall under the definition of service learning offered by Olszewski and Bussler (1993, p. 1), which says that, service learning “is an individual or group act of good will for a person, group or community based on planned educational outcomes.” According to Carver (1997), participating in community-based experiential educational programs is said to develop participants’ personal agency and sense of belonging, and cultivate students’ ability to simultaneously learn and apply newly acquired skills and knowledge to real situations. These types of experiences are also said to enhance students’ personal efficacy and strengthen relationships between the institutions and the communities they serve by fostering a sense of responsible citizenship and compassion that cannot be achieved in the classroom (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2008). McCarthy’s “service learning triangle” (2003, p. 5) highlights the importance of reciprocal participation among students, agencies, and the community. The benefits of service learning are also said to extend beyond the classroom in that they provide learners with the means to develop “critical analytic and personal skills related to their own self-awareness and self-confidence” (McCarthy, 2003, p.1). Evaluations of service learning programs have been conducted to ascertain their

impact on university-level students' academic, social, and leadership development (Des Marais, Yang & Farzanehkia, 2000; Dreuth & Dreuth-Few, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kozeracki, 2000; Prentice, 2009) and to understand the social-psychological stages of a service-learning experience (Rockquemore & Shaffer, 2000). Reflective journals and logs are often used to collect data related to students' progress and perceptions of their experiences.

The body of empirical literature on the topic of community involvement and student engagement, as they relate directly to experiential L2 learning, is limited. Some research indicates that incorporating community service into existing exchange programs can facilitate improved L2 learning (Serow, 1991, p. 544). Developmental gains are also said to be more observable when experiential programs provide more opportunities for social and moral learning, in addition to systematic opportunities for feedback and reflection (Russell, 2007). One of the main objectives of VYE is to provide learners with more authentic L2 community-based opportunities to practice communicating outside of the L2 classroom in the hopes that this will motivate them to continue learning the target language (SEVEC, 2009b). This goal corresponds to what MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) have been claiming should be the goal of the L2 learning process—to encourage a willingness to seek out communication opportunities and to actually communicate in them. In their extension of the willingness to communicate (WTC) model proposed for L1 (McCroskey & Baer, 1985), MacIntyre et al. suggest that a learner's WTC in a second language is determined by a specific set of linguistic, communicative, and social-psychological variables. Some of these factors are inherent to the individual (i.e., trait-like influences), while others are seen as more transient characteristics of the specific context in which a learner functions at a given time (i.e., situation-based influences). Research has demonstrated that a learner's WTC can be affected by enduring trait-like influences like gender, age, and previous immersion experience (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002), as well as the position of the target language in the socio-political context (Tannenbaum & Tahar, 2007). Of relevance to the present study are the more situational factors that have been shown to influence WTC, and that are particularly relevant to communication opportunities occurring outside of the classroom context such as social support networks (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001) and the frequency and quality of L2 contact (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003). Kang (2005) suggested that situational factors are just as important as trait-like predictors when researching WTC, and proposed the following working definition of WTC that takes this position into account: "WTC is an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation which can vary according to interlocutor(s) topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291).

Although we did not measure the degree of WTC explicitly in this study, and did not collect data immediately following specific communicative events as MacIntyre (2007) recommends, this construct is useful in understanding our findings. Accordingly, we used the

WTC model to examine and understand the situational factors that VYE participants' identified as having influenced the quality and frequency of their communication opportunities during their volunteer experience.

Methodology

Research questions

This study examined the VYE program, with a view to achieving a deeper understanding of how living in a group setting and volunteering in a community-based activity might enhance L2 learning and motivation. In this paper, we report on the following two research questions:

1. How do the participants' motivation to learn an L2 and their self-assessment of their L2 skills compare pre- and post-volunteer experience?
2. What aspects of the volunteer experience may have influenced VYE participants' willingness to communicate in French/English?

We addressed the research questions both quantitatively and qualitatively. In order to address the research questions, quantitative data were collected from all VYE participants by means of a questionnaire. In addition, we conducted observations and interviews with the Ontario participants who also kept journals that added to the qualitative data set. According to MacIntyre (2007), qualitative methods in particular are advantageous when examining factors that may influence WTC because they provide "rich descriptions of [the] dynamic process in participants' own terms" (p. 572).

Pan-Canadian participants

VYE was offered in five provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec, with a targeted recruitment of 60 youth. SEVEC recruited students for the program by sending information to schools in the twelve communities where the participants would be volunteering—six Francophone and six Anglophone communities. Once the information was received, registration for the program became the responsibility of the individual student. SEVEC used registration information to determine if an applicant would be a contributing member of the group and, where there were more applicants than spots, responses to registration questions were used by SEVEC in the selection of participants. In total, 49 Canadian youth consented to participating in the 2008 VYE program. A more detailed description of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Pan-Canadian methods

Questionnaire.

All 49 VYE participants from across Canada completed the questionnaire developed for this study to examine factors highlighted by SEVEC. The questionnaire was in English for the English-dominant participants and French for the French-dominant participants. The first part of the questionnaire, requesting demographic information, was completed once during the first morning of participation in the program. In addition to this biographical information, the questionnaire included 34 statements that participants responded to using a Likert scale. This section served as the pre- and post-questionnaire. These statements were grouped in order to measure motivation to learn a L2 (questions 1–4), perceptions of bilingualism in Canada (5–8), community engagement (9–15), leadership skills (16–24), the participants' assessment of their language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing, (25–32) and confidence in speaking and reading (33-34).

Table 1

Description of Pan-Canadian Participants

Participant groups	Number of participants	Gender	Defining characteristics	Completed pre and post questionnaires	Reason for discrepancy
Alberta	5				
		5 female	5 Anglophone	5 Anglophone	n/a
Manitoba	7		6 Anglophone 1 Francophone		
		4 female		3 Anglophone, 1 Francophone	2 left before program completion 1 did not return post-questionnaire
		3 male			1 left before program completion, 1 did complete pre questionnaire
Nova Scotia	10			8 Anglophone	
		9 female 1 male	8 Anglophone 2 bilingual		
Ontario	15			15	None
		12 female 3 male	13 Anglophone 2 bilingual		
Quebec	12			7 Francophone, 2 Anglophone 1 bilingual	2 were excluded because they completed the questionnaire in their second language rather than their first.
		9 female 3 male	2 Anglophone 9 Francophone 1 bilingual		

Focal group participants.

The Ontario VYE participants ($N = 15$) were selected as the focal group for this study, as observing and interviewing one group from one province made the data collection process more feasible and more financially viable for the Ontario-based research team. SEVEC strived to attain an equal distribution of Anglophone and Francophone participants to equalize the L1 and L2 community experiences. For our study, having this ideal distribution of participants would have enabled us to obtain more Francophone perspectives on the exchange experience, which is lacking from the current corpus of studies on bilingual exchanges in Canada. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, none of the VYE groups, including Ontario, met this criterion.

Data collection took place at the two community events located in Ontario. The first was in Fergus, Ontario (a predominantly Anglophone community), for the 59th annual Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games, and the second was in Casselman, Ontario (a bilingual community), where participants volunteered at the 4th annual outdoor Francophone celebration entitled “L’Écho D’Un Peuple.” The choice of volunteer sites was limited to ones that took place consecutively and whose organizers were willing to support the program. SEVEC required that the festivals reflect the culture of the linguistic community (French- or English-dominant) and represent low-risk volunteer jobs for the participants to complete.

Focal group methods**Interviews.**

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol to target participant perceptions relating to the three overarching themes of the VYE program: student leadership, community participation, and L2 acquisition. All interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed. A content analysis was then conducted, looking specifically at the above-mentioned themes.

The researchers offered to conduct both interviews in French or English.⁴ Each of our visits took place during times when participants were preparing for or working at the community event. As a result, we were unable to interview all 15 participants at both sites.

During the planning stages of this study, we had wanted to interview participants in the setting where their L2 was predominantly spoken (i.e. Francophone participants in Fergus; Anglophone participants in Casselman). However, upon arrival in Fergus, we learned that there

⁴ The bilingual student responded to questions in French and English in Fergus, and English only in Casselman.

were no Francophones in the group, despite the fact that two participants had identified themselves as French speaking on the application. During informal conversations with the group leaders and some of the participants, we discovered that one student spoke French at home and English at school, and that another spoke some French at home but considered her first language to be English. Due to the fact that we did not have an equal distribution of Francophone and Anglophone participants, we decided to highlight the experience of the bilingual student who spoke more French at home with interviews at both sites. The other bilingual student was interviewed in Fergus, and we interviewed as many of the Anglophone participants as possible at both sites to maximize the variety of Anglophone perspectives. Accordingly, we randomly selected four Anglophone students and purposefully selected the self-identified bilingual student to participate in the individual interview in Fergus. A semi-structured group interview was also conducted with all of the group leaders ($N = 3$) to inform student responses about leadership skill development and use of French in this context. In Casselman, five additional Anglophone students were interviewed, and two participants who were interviewed in Fergus took part in follow-up interviews (one of the bilingual students and another Anglophone informant who we felt had provided noticeably more detail and insight than the other participants, justifying another interview in her L2 context). In total, 10 students were interviewed. Two of these students were interviewed in Fergus and in Casselman, resulting in a total of 12 interviews having been conducted.

Journals.

All participants and program leaders were asked to keep daily journals; SEVEC had prepared daily guiding questions to direct the journal responses. The questions probed the participants to reflect upon their perceptions of the communities involved in the program and their volunteer experience. The research team added additional questions encouraging the participants to reflect on their leadership and language skills. Following the observations and interviews, only those journals kept by the 15 of the Ontario participants were analyzed for the purposes of triangulation with their interview findings.

Observations.

During each site visit, the researchers took detailed field notes of what the students were doing. In Fergus, the researchers toured the festival site and observed student tasks and duties for approximately 30 minutes. In Casselman, the researchers were able to observe the students volunteering for one hour at the festival site. The researchers also observed the participants assembling props for a Casselman evening theatre presentation, as well as a workshop on goal setting organized by the group leaders. This data was used to inform and expand on patterns that emerged from the interview and journal data.

Findings

Pan-Canadian findings: VYE across Canada

To investigate whether items that were designed to measure a common trait could be combined for further analyses, the internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The motivation scale at Time 1 had low internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha equal to .53. Investigation of item-total correlations showed that items 2 and 8 did not belong with other items on this scale. Therefore, these items were removed from the motivation scale. The remaining items had high internal consistency at both administrations of the questionnaire.

To conduct further analyses, scale scores for each scale were created by computing an average across the items contributing to each scale. The descriptive for the scales, as well as individual items are presented in Table 2. Those results indicate that, at both pre- and post-program, the students on average tended to express agreement with the statements measuring different traits (means are smaller than 3), and that most students in the sample tended to express agreement (small standard deviations). Students tended to express more agreement with the statements measuring motivation, community engagement, and leadership than with the statements measuring different dimensions of language acquisition. Such variety of response in regard to language acquisition may be indicative of the range of L2 exposure and proficiency among the participants. Overall, the average pre- and post-program scores on the scales are similar.

Table 2

*Descriptive statistics for scale scores measured in the questionnaire**

	Time 1 (Pre)		Time 2 (Post)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
motivation score	1.50	0.43	1.35	0.40
community	1.76	0.59	1.80	0.61
engagement score				
leadership score	1.59	0.44	1.55	0.57

general language	2.58	0.95	2.54	0.97
acquisition score language	2.66	1.16	2.62	1.16
acquisition in				
listening score language	2.50	0.87	2.45	0.95
acquisition in				
speaking score language	2.29	1.15	2.19	1.17
acquisition in				
reading score language	2.54	1.36	2.36	1.27
acquisition in				
writing score confidence in	2.93	1.10	2.64	1.27
speaking score confidence in	2.51	1.16	2.05	1.22
reading score				

Note. *The lower the score the higher the agreement with the questionnaire statement.

Paired samples t-tests were also conducted to assess whether student responses to the scales measured by the questionnaire changed significantly between the two administrations. The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of paired t-tests measuring the difference between pre- and post-scores

	<i>T</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>P</i>
motivation score	2.81	41	0.01
community engagement score	-0.36	41	0.72
leadership score	0.56	41	0.58
general language acquisition score	0.47	41	0.64
language acquisition in listening score	0.36	41	0.72
language acquisition in speaking score	0.44	41	0.66
language acquisition in reading score	0.49	40	0.63
language acquisition in writing score	1.03	40	0.31
confidence in speaking score	1.66	39	0.11
confidence in reading score	3.15	39	0.00

The results of the t-tests reveal that for most scales student responses were similar in both administrations of the questionnaire. There were significant differences on two scales between Time 1 and Time 2: motivation and confidence in reading. On these two variables, then, there were higher (more positive) self-assessments at the end of the VYE program. These results also show that by the end of the VYE program the participants were more motivated to learn a second

official language and were more motivated to be a part of that community than they had been at the beginning of the program. They also indicated more confidence in their reading abilities post-program.

Focal group findings

As mentioned earlier, the focal group comprised the Ontario cohort of the VYE program ($N = 15$). In order to construct better explanations for students' experiences in VYE, and to increase the inferential validity of our study (Greene, 2006; Mathison, 1988), a combination of qualitative methods (i.e. interviews, journals, and observations) was used. This design also lent itself well to comparing results from different data sets in an attempt to triangulate student experiences in VYE (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Our findings are reported together using subheadings that represent guiding objectives and additional themes that emerged from the interviews and student journals.

L2 Exposure and Proficiency.

All of the students interviewed ($N = 10$) indicated that the VYE experience had positively impacted their proficiency in using their L2, focusing solely on their improvement in their speaking skills. Qualitative data revealed a perceived impact on improved proficiency; however, the perceived improvement was solely related to oral L2 skills. This perceived improvement in oral language proficiency was consistent across focal group participants, regardless of language level, indicating the appeal of the VYE program for both core and immersion FSL students. The participants also contrasted their use of French in and outside of class highlighting that the VYE program provided them with an opportunity to apply their learned L2 skills in a natural context.

During observations in both settings, the researchers noted that the group leaders often spoke French with the participants, which was the L2 for 13 of the 15 students. In fact, all four Anglophone interview participants highlighted that the group leaders had provided a source of French (L2 for most) in the Fergus/Anglophone context:

The group leaders speak French all of the time, and them speaking it a lot has made me understand it more and try to use it more. So they will speak to me, and then I'll try back, and even if they don't fully understand me they'll help me. So that's been really cool, the constant use of both languages here. (Emily)

Because this is an English festival, I haven't talked too much French. But one of our leaders, their first language is French, so I tend to talk with them in French. I've been learning more – actually, just before I came to this interview we were talking about the grammar of French and English, and everything like that. (Brenda)

The bilingual student who was interviewed twice commented on how the Fergus festival had provided her with opportunities to practice her English skills:

My English has improved since almost all of the people I'm working with in the festival are English. We're speaking English all of the time, especially with the other volunteers here. So it helps my English proficiency. (Fiona)

Both bilingual participants also indicated in the interviews that they spoke English in school and that the VYE experience had provided them with more opportunities to speak French outside of the home. Both also talked about the role the group leaders had played in their improved French proficiency.

One of our leaders is very French, and I think he/she is really helping me with my French, continuing to enrich it. (Diane)

The group leaders speak French and English. I usually choose to speak French, because, well, that's really the language that I like to speak. I'm more willing to speak French. This program has impacted me since there are many more people who speak French. (Emily)

The sole Francophone group leader was identified many times by different students throughout the student journal entries as being an important source of French exposure and L2 support. In their interview, two of the group leaders also said they had noticed participants making an effort to speak in French to this particular person. In response to this comment, this leader felt it was important to teach students about Francophone culture, and commented on the effectiveness of doing so in an informal setting (e.g., playing Francophone music for them while in the van).

While at the French festival location (i.e., Casselman), all of the Anglophone students indicated in their journals that they had had a chance to practice their L2. Interestingly, without being prompted to do so, three CF students and one FI student completed at least one journal entry in French. Being able to speak French with Francophones was significant for Casselman interview informants:

I think it is the community here that is helping me to speak better French. (Alice)
Our group leader told the cashier to speak French to us, and I think that really started it. It's not that I can conjugate my verbs better or anything, but it's more how much of a risk

I take of going out to speak French to people who I know can speak French, and not worrying too much about what they think about it, just hope that they admire me for trying. (Barbara)

In addition to communication with Francophones, five students (33%) noted in their journal entries that the group was interacting more with each other in French while in Casselman. Of these five, two were FIs and the other three were CFs. The two FIs here, as well as one FI student interviewed in Casselman, explained in their journals how they were practising French by speaking with other FIs, while also offering support to CFs:

I'm practising my French a lot with [three other FIs named], mostly because they're in French Immersion. I've also been helping the core French students a lot with words, grammar, etc. (Barbara)

The people in our group vary greatly in their comfort level with speaking French. Because I am in French Immersion, I speak French with people who speak French fluently. For those who are in core French, I help them with vocabulary and comprehension. (Alison).

The remaining three CFs described the diversity of help provided to them by their FI peers:

I have learned that many people in this program are from French Immersion. We help each other out with words we don't know. (Daniella)

I've definitely learned a lot of things from my friends. Carol and Emily [both FIs] are really good at French, so I often listen carefully when they speak French. However, I feel more comfortable speaking with Brenda and Bridgit [both FIs]. So every time I'm stuck in making my sentences, I always ask them...they also give me smiles when I speak in complete sentences. (Christine)

Participating in the community.

In regard to other aspects of the volunteer experience that influenced the participants' WTC, when asked about the leadership role they had during this volunteer experience, 72% of those interviewed made reference to the volunteer jobs they were asked to complete during the festival. When asked the same question in their daily journals on Day 5 in Fergus, 14 of 15 participants talked about their volunteer jobs. According to our observations and informal chats with the group leaders, participants were responsible for completing a variety of different jobs at

each site. In Fergus, all jobs took place during festival hours, and while students chose which job they would do first, all had to do each job at some point during the festival (e.g. welcoming patrons at the geneology tent; helping local kids make thematic crafts; responding to patron inquiries at the information tent). In Casselman, the majority of volunteer work took place before or after the theatre presentation, and most jobs were completed as a group (e.g. sweeping the stage; directing cars to the parking lot; cutting out paper supplies for the play; serving food to volunteers). Participants interviewed in Casselman noted that the volunteer experiences differed from those in Fergus:

Volunteering in Fergus is a lot different than volunteering in Casselman. In Fergus we were in certain areas and there were always supervisors with us and they were always interested in knowing who SEVEC was and to have us help out and everything. (Amber)

The volunteering in the second festival was a lot less community interaction role so there were not many people skills learned, whereas the first festival required the volunteers to have interactions with people. (Alison)

All participants interviewed in Fergus spoke about things they had learned about the Scottish culture at the festival, whether it was from the group leaders, during a free walk around the town, or from the community liaison people. While none of the Casselman participants mentioned having learned anything beyond the language spoken (French) or the small size of the community during their interviews, it is worth noting that two of the five Casselman interview informants said that this experience had made them aware that Francophone communities exist outside of Quebec:

I actually didn't know that there are total French communities in Ontario, which is kind of sad. But now that I know that I can go and tell other people as well because I think that means more realization. (Barbara)

I guess I feel really proud that there are people speaking French and English everywhere. (Alice)

One Anglophone participant also linked the volunteer opportunities to her motivation to continue her L2 learning:

Generally speaking, this two-week experience has really showed me how to get easily involved in my community and how much my contribution impacts the community.

These two weeks have made me realize just how useful and important French is in our bilingual society.... I was considering the option of dropping out of the French Immersion program but have now decided to stick by French Immersion. (Josephine)

Group dynamic.

In addition to the volunteer activities influencing the participants' WTC, the positive group dynamic was something that all participants mentioned during the interviews and in their journals. Many referred to the fact that the group had appeared to bond almost instantly and that everyone seemed to get along. Two student informants specifically attributed the dynamic to SEVEC's recruitment process of selecting student leaders:

I think we all get along because we're all selected because we're the top of our class and we do some extra-curricular activities at school like leadership or student council. And we all have something like that in common. And I think that that's what kind of connected us all together. (Diane)

I was very happy that they were hand picked because everyone here is into the program. Everyone's really bonded with each other in that way. (Alison)

The group leaders also made reference to the strength of the group cohesion in a similar light:

These kids have bonded so strongly after only three days. They're so motivated and gung-ho and very mature for their age. They also know that...other students in their classes applied to do this exchange and didn't get in, so most of them know they're lucky they got picked. (Charlotte)

Throughout the interview, students were asked to reflect on whether they felt they had developed personally and professionally as a result of their VYE participation. On the whole, more than half of the informants said that this experience had helped them to gain more confidence talking to people:

Personally, it's made me more confident talking to people...normally I wouldn't go up to random people and start talking to them about things. (Carol)

It has made me a little more social . . . to go up to people and just talk to them. (Emily)

It developed my people speaking skills. I am just really glad I got to meet all those different kinds of people. (Christine)

Discussion

The discussion is organized using the two research questions guiding this study.

How do the participants' motivation to learn a L2 and their self-assessment of their L2 skills compare pre- and post-volunteer experience?

Based on the pan-Canadian results of the questionnaire, we found two areas of significant change: student motivation and confidence in reading both increased significantly between the beginning and end of the VYE program. Given that the confidence in reading was based on one item of the questionnaire and such an increase was not corroborated by further evidence, we limit our discussion here to the increase in motivation. All students, regardless of province, gender, L2 exposure, and program, were more motivated to learn their L2 and be a part of the L2 community post-program. Previous studies have found similar results related to increased motivation in the Canadian exchange context (Hart et al., 1994; Lapkin et al., 1995; MacFarlane, 2001, 1997). According to Gardner (1985), this type of increased desire to learn an L2 and maintain links to the L2 community is indicative of a high level of integrative motivation. Such motivation is also included in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model as a variable that can influence the decision to communicate in the L2. This suggests that participants' major motivation for L2 learning was to develop a communicative relationship with people from the L2 community, which they felt they could achieve through participating in the VYE program.

These gains in participant motivation following opportunities for authentic communication are also significant due to their potentially positive effects on L2 language acquisition, and implications for CF attrition rates where enrolment numbers have been seeing a steady decline in most provinces and territories when FSL is no longer a mandatory subject (Canadian Parents for French, 2004, 2006, 2007). The observed increases in student motivation are also consistent with Serow's (1991, p. 556) findings that gains are more likely to occur when programs provide appropriate social learning, reflection and opportunities to provide input similar to those offered in the VYE program. Along these lines, it is interesting to note that participants were expected to reflect in journals during their VYE experience, as well as when they were applying to the program. Potential VYE participants were required to indicate why they wanted to participate, and provided written responses to questions about their previous volunteer experience, leadership qualities and motivation to improve their L2 skills. Given the fact that participants were already demonstrating initiative by applying, it would be logical to

assume that there would be little room for motivation gains post-program; however, this was clearly not the case. Participants intended to improve their L2 and engage in L2 communities through volunteering when they applied and wanted to experience the consequences of their “behavioural intention” (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In fact, Kang (2005) attests that L2 learners with high WTC are more likely to extend their learning opportunities and become involved in learning activities outside of the classroom. In this way, the mere action of applying and taking part in VYE could be considered indicative of participants’ high WTC prior to attending the program.

What aspects of the volunteer experience may have influenced VYE participants’ WTC in French/English?

MacIntyre (2007) insists that choosing to communicate in the L2 should be considered to be an act of volition with motivating and restraining processes converging to affect L2 communication. In their interviews, the Ontario participants identified some key situational factors that determined both the frequency and quality of authentic interactions with members of the L2 community, as well as their inclination to approach or avoid such L2 interaction.

Group leaders and friends.

Although the participants had the opportunity for second language communication with a variety of people at the festivals, bilingual and Anglophone participants highlighted the importance of having group leaders who spoke to them in fluent French. The Ontario participants communicated with the group leaders often during the exchange and indicated that they felt as if they could access the group leaders for advice or feedback on their L2 production or logistical decision-making related to the volunteer experience at any time. Research has shown that “the quantity of [L2] communication is a factor in perceiving the interaction positively, at least in the initial period of a sojourn and language learning” (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004). Participants may have also been inclined to speak more French with the group leaders and fellow participants as opposed to members of the L2 community because they were more familiar to them. MacDonald, Clément, and MacIntyre (2003) found that Anglophone FSL learners were least willing to speak in French when they had to speak to strangers, or when they felt like they were being analyzed or critiqued by interlocutors. This may explain why VYE participants from the CF program reported appreciating the non-judgmental linguistic advice offered by their FI friends during the experience. Like the participants in a study conducted by Baker and MacIntyre (2000), our CF participants reported feeling positive when they were able to apply the feedback they had received from their peers to authentic L2 communication situations. Still, the fact that the majority of participants in the group spoke English fluently encouraged them to use English

as the primary language for communication with each other. Research has shown that exchange groups with a more bilingual distribution of participants do revert to using French as the language of peer-peer communication, especially if that is the language that the majority of the group feels most confident with (MacFarlane, 1997, 2001). Perhaps if the targeted balanced representation of French- and English-speaking participants had been achieved, more bilingual student-student interaction would have been encouraged, resulting in less reliance on the group leaders for L2 communication.

Our findings also indicate that participants perceived the Francophone group leader in particular to be an authority in French language and culture and felt more inclined to experiment and take risks in second-language conversations with this leader over the course of the study. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), desire to interact with a specific person is one of the most immediate determinants of WTC. This would suggest that the Anglophone participants in particular were acting on their WTC in the L2 in an effort to increase their affiliation with the Francophone leader and consequently the L2 culture. Non-native L2 speakers have also been shown to get most excited about native L2 speakers when they are perceived as conversation partners who can help them improve their L2 skills (Kang, 2005). This may explain why VYE participants singled out the Francophone leader as influencing their desire to communicate in the L2 in their interviews.

L2 community and volunteer responsibilities.

If we consider the L2 community volunteers and festival attendees in the VYE program as playing a similar role as that played by homestay hosts in other exchange programs, then it is important to acknowledge the supporting function they can play in creating opportunities for WTC to develop. In a study conducted by Yashima (2002), foreign exchange students emphasized the benefits of having homestay hosts who involved them in L2 interactions and helped them to feel more comfortable using their L2 in authentic situations. During the study, participants and group leaders revealed that members from both communities were not made aware that the VYE participants were arriving and were not always informed about their reasons for being there. Participants described instances where community members had approached them asking who they were and what they were doing at the festivals. Had local residents and volunteers been more informed of SEVEC's presence, they may have made more of an effort to engage in communication with the VYE participants.

Ontario participants also reported feeling more important in their volunteer role at the Fergus festival (L1 community for most), describing instances when residents approached them specifically to ask questions and converse in English. Unfortunately, they did not report similar levels of enthusiasm during their Casselman stay, reasoning that their volunteer roles and responsibilities had not facilitated as much communication with members of the community as

had been the case in Fergus. These findings suggest that the types of volunteer roles provided at the L2 community site may have failed to elicit the feelings of “responsibility” and “excitement” that Kang (2005) insisted will significantly impact situational WTC.

According to Kang, L2 learners who exhibit the type of excitement and responsibility reported by Ontario-based VYE participants are experiencing a high level of situational WTC. However, our findings point to specific situational variables inherent to the organization and planning of the VYE experience that influenced the frequency and quality of L2 communicative opportunities. Whether VYE participants’ WTC transformed into communication during their experience appears to be influenced by the following situational factors:

- The degree to which their volunteer experiences require communication, particularly with members of the L2 community;
- The presence of group leaders who speak the L2 and who are also members of the L2 community;
- The inclusion of participants with variable levels of proficiency;
- Whether the balanced representation of French- and English-speaking participants is achieved; and
- Whether the L2 community is informed of the purpose and presence of VYE participants prior to their arrival.

Limitations

We note three limitations to the study design: the questionnaire, student selection, and lack of a comparison group.

First, our questionnaire may not have been sensitive enough to gauge differences as a result of a two-week program where one week is target-language focused. Given that the pre-questionnaire items that were not reliable were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire, we speculate that it may have taken the participants some time to focus on completing the questionnaire and, thus, this inattention may have influenced their responses. In addition, caution must be used in interpreting the significant change in confidence in reading as the findings were based on one questionnaire item.

The student selection process may affect the probability of finding significant gains between the beginning and end of the VYE program. First, only those students who were ambitious enough to fill in the SEVEC application form and wanted to improve their L2 skills applied to the program. Selecting students that are, as they self-described, “top of the class” could have an impact on the generalizability of the results of the study. This evaluation, for example, may not have yielded the same results if a struggling student had been admitted to the program. That is to say, because the participants were already demonstrating initiative as

supported by their agreement with the Likert-scale items (see Table 3), there was little room for gains post-program.

Second, a number of applicants claimed to speak French as the first language at home. Once the program began, it became clear to group leaders (and to us) that the Ontario student group was composed almost entirely of speakers of English in the home with varying degrees of bilingual skills in French. Improved student recruitment to achieve an equal balance of French and English first language speakers will help ensure that the interaction among student participants is not dominated by one language (English). This undermines bilingual communication and L2 acquisition.

Finally, there was no comparison group in our study. As a result, it is difficult for us to know with any certainty that improvements in student motivation were a direct result of the VYE program's three-part focus—on student motivation, community engagement and leadership—rather than another variable such as the caliber of students for this particular program year.

Conclusion

The pan-Canadian results demonstrate the broad, positive impact of the VYE program in regard to L2 motivation. According to Clément (1980), the kind of L2 confidence noted in the questionnaire results from the quality of experience learners had with members of the L2 community. Ontario-based findings revealed several situational factors that influence the quality of VYE participants' interaction with their L2 community that need to be considered, especially if the program aims to engender a higher WTC in the L2. If the VYE program is meant to provide a complementary addition to ESL and FSL programs across Canada, and to improve the communicative competence of program graduates in order to meet the Action Plan for Official Languages objectives (Government of Canada, 2003; Department of Canadian Heritage, 2009), these factors must be taken into account. With a modified program organization, participants will be able to maximize the authentic L2 communicative situations at their fingertips.

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