

Research Perspectives on Core French: A Literature Review ¹

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Abstract

This article reviews the research literature on core French in three main areas: student diversity, delivery models for the core French program, and instructional approaches. These topics are put into context through a discussion of studies on community attitudes to French as a second language (FSL), dissatisfaction with core French outcomes and discontent among core French teachers. A summary of our main findings highlights the need for further research on the design of the program with respect to the entry point for core French and the distribution of instructional time, the inclusion of diverse learners, instructional approaches, and the marginalization of the program and its teachers.

Résumé

Cet article offre une recension des recherches qui ont porté sur trois domaines principaux du programme de français de base: la diversité des élèves, les modèles de transmission du français de base et les approches pédagogiques. Ces sujets sont abordés dans le contexte d'études réalisées sur les attitudes de la communauté vis-à-vis du français langue seconde (FLS), l'insatisfaction face aux résultats du programme de français de base et le mécontentement parmi ses enseignants. Un résumé de nos principales conclusions met en évidence la nécessité de poursuivre des recherches sur la conception du programme de français de base, notamment quant au point d'entrée dans le programme et à la distribution des périodes d'enseignement, l'inclusion des apprenants d'origines diverses, les approches pédagogiques et la marginalisation du programme et de ses enseignants.

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Introduction

Although this literature review was originally commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education in preparation for its revision of the province's core French curriculum guidelines, its scope includes relevant research conducted across Canada, and to a limited extent, abroad. In this article, we describe research conducted primarily over the past 15 years that is of particular relevance to core French programs in three main topic areas: student diversity in core French, delivery models for core French, and instructional approaches in core French.

Methodology

We collected and reviewed relevant literature for this paper in several ways, bearing in mind the three main issues specified above. First, we did a manual search of key journals going back 15 years including *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, *The Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, and *The Canadian Journal of Education*. We did an electronic search of relevant databases including *ERIC*, *Education Full Text*, *CBCA Education*, *Thesis Canada Portal* and *Proquest® Educational Journals and Dissertations and Theses*. We also consulted an extensive collection of FSL reports and documents in the personal collection of the first author. We read all the documents we collected and prepared summaries of those that we considered relevant to the issues discussed in this literature review. Finally, we sent drafts of this paper to several key experts in FSL education across Canada for feedback.

Contextual Factors

Before turning to the three main topics of this review, we discuss several contextual factors that play a major role in the delivery and effectiveness of core French programs. First, often community attitudes towards the L2 are negative (especially outside large urban centres) and students may bring these attitudes to school with them. This may be exacerbated by the fact that FSL programs are often marginalized in schools. Second, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the outcomes of core French programs. In fact, only three percent of Grade 9 core French students stay in the program through to the end of Grade 12 (CPF Ontario, 2008). This dissatisfaction has fuelled the exploration of new instructional approaches and different formats for the program. Related to this are parent and student demands for more emphasis on building communicative skills in the FSL in the classroom. Third, as documented in Lapkin, MacFarlane and Vandergrift (2006), core French teachers are dissatisfied with their teaching assignments and many are considering leaving core French teaching.

Community attitudes to French

It has long been acknowledged that home and community attitudes play a large role in school-aged learners' attitudes towards learning French (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972);² in fact, they can be directly linked to achievement. Dornyei (2001) has pointed out that second language (L2) motivation is a process that can change over time, in contrast with variables such as intelligence or aptitude. Enhancing motivation is a key to promoting improved L2 outcomes; this is also a theme we return to below.

Marshall (2002) explored community attitudes in a rural, North-Central Ontario community toward L2 learning, FSL learning, and Francophones. To elicit parental and community attitudes toward the French language and culture, she distributed 141 community questionnaires (the return rate was 48%). Marshall also interviewed 36 students from Grades 5 to 8, five of their classroom teachers, two core French teachers in the school, and the principal and vice-principal of a K-8 school. Survey and interview responses indicated that most of the students and parents thought the learning of an L2 was important. However, in their opinion, the L2 did not necessarily have to be French. Opportunities to use French out of school were rare; and many parents reported strong negative attitudes towards official bilingualism in Canada. Comments from two Grade 7 students seem to capture negative attitudes reported in this study and more generally:

“Like, I’m not very good at French, like talking and stuff, and I don’t really like the teachers.”

“French...I don’t think when I grow up I’ll need it, what I’ll be doing. Cause you only need it for grade 9 in high school.” (Marshall, 2002, 18-19).

Marshall suggests that such attitudes may be reinforced by the status of the core French program in the school.

Status of core French.

While the official discourse promotes bilingualism in Canada, the study of French in schools is often paradoxically marginalized. Richards (2002) studied the marginalization of core French teachers by interviewing 21 elementary core French teachers in Ontario.³ She suggested that the fact that FSL is delivered in short daily periods positioned the core French teacher as an outsider in the school. The core French teacher may meet hundreds of students in a single day, may teach in more than one school, and may have double supervision duties (i.e., in both schools). (S)he is rarely treated as an integral member of the school staff. Because the core

² Kissau (2006) has also illustrated how society-based perceptions about learning French can negatively impact young Ontario male student interest and motivation in the FSL learning context.

³ Lapkin, Mady and Arnott (2006) provided a summary of Richards' study which we have reproduced here in part.

French teacher is often without his/her own classroom, the general perception is that French is not taken seriously. Core French teachers lack privacy, board space, and control over the organization of their classes.

The majority of teachers interviewed in Richard's study viewed themselves as marginal in the teaching community, asserting that students, parents, and principals considered FSL to be less important than other school subjects. The teachers also reported that they lacked administrative and parental support. Sometimes core French was excluded from the planning process and was cancelled to accommodate other school priorities; core French teachers were not participating in planning meetings and were feeling less valued than other teachers in the school. These themes are echoed in national (Lapkin, MacFarlane & Vandergrift, 2006) and provincial (Carr, 2009; Lapkin and Barkaoui, 2008; Mollica, Philips, & Smith, 2005; Powell, 2002) studies.

To summarize, "because core French teachers are often 'invisible' and not involved in interacting with others in the school community, negative stereotypes may be formed about them and FSL in general" (Lapkin, Mady & Arnott, 2006, p.14). We suggest later in this paper, that making changes in delivery models for core French and adopting effective instructional practices may help to demarginalize FSL in schools and ultimately in the communities they serve.

Core French outcomes: perceptions and expectations

Close to 3000 students in Grade 11 in Atlantic Canada who had discontinued the study of core French completed a survey in 2001-02 (APEF, 2004). They reported being disappointed with "their lack of progress and their inability to express themselves in French" and that they would have liked a greater emphasis on the spoken language including "hands-on fun activities, group work, projects," to be supplemented by trips to the L2 community to interact with Francophones (p. 18). These reactions can be considered typical of Canadian young people who have "dropped out" of FSL study.

In 2004, CPF surveyed university students who stayed in core French.⁴ Almost half reported that they could not understand spoken French, one-third expressed little confidence about their ability to function in a francophone environment, and most said they would not be able to carry on a conversation in French beyond a few set phrases. These findings are at odds with expectations articulated in documents of provincial/territorial governments, including the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Let us consider two examples from Ontario documents. By the end of Grade 8, in terms of oral communication, students should be able to "give an oral presentation of more than twenty sentences in length, adjusting speech to suit the audience" (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1998, p. 20). At the secondary level, for example, Level 3 performance (the expected level of performance) in Grade 12 in "communication" entails, among others, that students "communicate[s] information and ideas with considerable clarity" (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1999, p.49). Such expectations are difficult to assess and, in fact, have not

⁴ Of the 105 students interviewed, all but six were graduates of a grade 12 or OAC (in Ontario) secondary school core French program.

been assessed in formal evaluation studies in the last 15 years or more. This may change if Ontario decides to adopt and/or adapt for use the assessment scales in the CMEC-approved Common European Framework of Reference. These assessment scales have been developed by groups of European language teachers based on their extensive experience with L2 learners; they have been externally validated, could be applied to FSL learners in Ontario/Canada, and would yield internationally recognized descriptors of individual students' L2 proficiency (Vandergrift, 2006).⁵

One might ask what policies or program designs for core French might yield the results that students and parents want. It is noteworthy that there is no empirical evidence to support an early start for core French,⁶ or that gains from year to year at the elementary level are incremental. It appears that beginning core French at Kindergarten or in the primary grades, or even in Grades 4 or 5, makes no difference to achievement in French by the end of Grade 8. Support for this rather surprising statement comes not only from research overseas, but from Canadian research. In 1990, a group of researchers at OISE developed a four-skills test package for Grades 8 and 12 core French (Harley, Lapkin, Scane, Hart, & Trépanier, 1988). They collected information on participating students' starting grades for core French. Twenty-five Canadian classes and 574 students in seven provinces/territories participated in the testing. In general, with some minor exceptions, the scores did not vary significantly at Grade 8, whether the starting grade was Kindergarten, Grade 1, 3, 4, 6 or even Grade 8 (Harley et al., 1988). Relying on data from so long ago highlights the clear need for an update on the research focusing on core French outcomes at both the elementary and secondary levels.

These findings are similar to those of some recent, large-scale European research (Munoz, 2006, 2008). In that Barcelona-based study, English as a foreign language was introduced at age 11 or older instead of the usual starting age of 8. Students in both cohorts – those who had begun the study of English at age 8 and those who had begun at age 11 were tested after 200, 416, and 726 instructional hours on a comprehensive range of English tests (i.e., cloze, dictation, listening comprehension, grammar, written composition, oral narrative, oral interview, phonetic imitation, phonetic discrimination, and role play). Where there were significant differences, they favoured learners who began their study of English later.

It would seem that there is no linear relationship between starting grade, amount of time spent, and core French outcomes. The amount of time is a significant factor, as we will see later when intensive formats are discussed;⁷ but here we are referring to the relatively small increments of time accumulated annually in core French programs as they are currently designed.

⁵ CPF Ontario (2008) has recommended that the Ontario Ministry “continue to collaborate with stakeholders to investigate the adoption of the *European Framework* as a means of establishing benchmarks for oral communication proficiency and written proficiency for FSL programs” (p. 12).

⁶ In the case of French immersion, there are strong arguments for an early start (Kindergarten; see for example, Genesee, 1978). These arguments do not obtain when FSL is delivered in short daily periods; in the latter case, bilingualism is not a realistic goal, and the benefits of early bilingualism do not apply when the exposure to the language is as limited as it is in core French.

⁷ The scope of the present article does not include a comprehensive review of research on intensive French; such reviews are available, for example, in MacFarlane, 2005 and Netten and Germain (2005).

In fact, it is probable that program format and instructional approach interact in complex ways to make a difference in student success. We revisit this observation below.

Teacher perceptions.

Lapkin and Barkaoui (2008) report that of 387 Ontario core French teachers surveyed in 2006, more than one-fifth planned not to be teaching French three years after completing the questionnaire; this trend was more pronounced among teachers of Grades 7 to 9, where one-third of the survey respondents reported intending to leave core French teaching because of dissatisfaction with it. Although the sample of teachers cannot be considered to be representative, the trend remains disturbing, especially in light of the persisting FSL teacher shortage across Canada (CPF, 2006).⁸ Many of the reasons for the widespread dissatisfaction were outlined above, in the section of this article entitled “Status of core French.”

Student Diversity in Core French

In this section, we focus on two areas of diversity— English language learners (ELL) and students with special needs, learning difficulties in particular. Managing classrooms with diverse learners is cited as a problematic area by core French teachers across Canada (Lapkin, MacFarlane & Vandergrift, 2006).

English language learners

In 2007, Mady (2007a) conducted an important study at the secondary level which is also relevant in the elementary context as it shows that ELLs excel in core French and readily catch up to or surpass their Canadian peers. In this case, Canadian peers included students having English as their L1 and bilingual or multilingual students born in Canada.

Mady compared the French proficiency of ELLs ($n=45$) who had studied introductory French for five months to that of Canadian-born students ($n=84$) who had studied core French for five years. Using a multi-skills test, Mady determined that the ELLs outperformed their Canadian-born peers on the listening and writing sections of the test despite the fact that the ELLs had only one year of exposure to FSL instruction. In fact the Canadian-born peers, whether unilingual or multilingual, never outperformed the ELLs. Additional research demonstrating ELLs’ ability to excel in FSL can also be found in the Ontario immersion context (see Bild & Swain, 1988; Hart, Lapkin, & Swain, 1988; Swain, Lapkin, Rowen, & Hart, 1990; Taylor, 1992). Similar success stories have been reported in the extended French program in Ontario (Canadian Parents for French, 2004).

In British Columbia, Carr (2009) compared the English proficiency of two groups of ELLs—one group enrolled in Intensive French ($n=43$), and one in the regular English program taking the usual core French program ($n=43$), to find that the ELLs in Intensive French

⁸ At time of writing, the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers is about to issue a report entitled *Profile and pathways: Supports for developing FSL teachers’ pedagogical, linguistic and cultural competencies*.

outperformed their regular core French peers in the areas of English reading, writing and oral skills. This study suggests that ELLs can meet with success in FSL, and that exposing them to FSL (where French is an additional language) may have a positive influence on their English acquisition.

Despite research demonstrating the abilities of ELLs to succeed in core French, they are sometimes counseled out of or not permitted to take the program (Taaffe, Maguire & Pringle 1996; Mady 2006). Nationally, as we move toward a goal of increasing the number of secondary school graduates who are bilingual in Canada's official language, in a climate of FSL enrollment decline, it is pertinent to address the issue of access to FSL instruction. That to say, excluding ELLs from core French limits our ability to increase enrollment, thus restricting the opportunities to increase the number of functionally bilingual graduates in Canada.

In recognition of accessibility concerns, CPF (2006) commissioned a review of the Agreements on Second Official-Language Instruction, 2005-2006 to 2008-2009, to assess the extent to which the provinces addressed recommendations from the Action Plan for Official Languages (Government of Canada, 2003). Of particular note, here, is the assessment of the provincial plans to increase enrollment in FSL programs. Ontario has the highest number of immigrants: thirty-five percent of permanent residents in this province have neither French nor English as a dominant language (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). When the assessors rated the accessibility to FSL instruction in Ontario, they found a policy gap that allowed ELLs and special needs students to be excluded from FSL programs (CPF, 2004). Lack of direction in this regard has led to exemptions for these students from core French.

One striking (and not isolated) example of this was documented by Taaffe, Maguire and Pringle (1996) in their longitudinal study of ELLs' experience learning French. Within one Ontario school board, Taaffe et al. found that some schools always exempt ELLs from core French; others withdraw them until their English improves; still others include ELLs in the core French program. In the schools where the ELLs were included, Taaffe et al. concluded that the ELLs performed as well as their English-speaking, Canadian-born peers. Mady (2006) recorded similar findings: although ELLs in the board she studied performed well in French, they were not always given access to FSL instruction, as indicated by the results of a survey she administered to administrators and guidance personnel of a large southern Ontario board.

Unlike many administrators and guidance personnel, ELLs and their parents welcome additional language learning opportunities. In her interviews with four such parents, Mady (2006) noted that the parents were confident in their children's ability to learn an additional language. The parents saw French as a means of belonging to the Canadian community. The parents also commented that French would give their children enhanced access to good employment opportunities. Similar parental support has been documented in the immersion context (Dagenais & Day, 1999) and nationally (Parkin & Turcotte, 2003).

ELLs report having similar views. Mady (2003) assessed and compared the motivation to study and investment in studying core French on the part of secondary students speaking neither English nor French as an L1 and English-speaking Canadian-born students. Both the quantitative and the qualitative results showed that allophone students were more motivated to study French than their English-speaking Canadian-born peers. Interviews with two ELLs showed that they

connected learning French to getting a job, forming a Canadian identity and having a good education.

Special needs students

We can gain some understanding of how special needs students can be accommodated in core French in Ontario from Arnett (in press), who reports on the strategies a Grade 8 core French teacher used in order to set her students up for success. In her 230 minutes of observation of the Grade 8 core French class of 29 students, five of whom were identified as special needs, Arnett noted several strategies that are not only beneficial to students with learning difficulties but also advantageous for the class as a whole. Among the various strategies coded on the Teaching Adaptations in the Language Classroom (TALC) schema developed by the researcher, Arnett highlights the advantages of student-centred learning, multi-modal lesson delivery, comprehension monitoring, a focus on communication rather than form, simplification of language, provision of feedback, reinforcement, oral cues, and models as adaptations that serve both the communicative focus of the Ontario curriculum and the needs of the identified students.

Positive responses to these strategies were provided by seven of the Grade eight core French students whose views of their experience in an effective core French class are reported by Arnett (2008). The five identified students plus two additional students identified by their teacher as presenting atypical cases, participated in individual interviews and one focus-group interview. They linked their success in core French to their teacher's use of visuals, gestures, and French in the class. These students also highlighted the importance of a language-rich environment and opportunities to seek help from peers as factors in their success.

Support for the successful inclusion of identified students in core French has also been documented by Arnett (2003) at the secondary level. In her case study of one Grade 9 applied core French class, Arnett noted teacher use of 53 adaptation strategies as recorded on the TALC observation schema throughout the 700 minutes of classroom observation. In the class of 28, with 8 formally identified students, the core French teacher used the following adaptations in order to make her class accessible to all students: use of English for clarification purposes, chunking of tasks, minimizing of distractions, positive reinforcement, multimodal lesson delivery and provision of additional time to complete tests or assignments. It is noteworthy that the teacher was atypical in that she had qualifications in both French and Special Education. These qualifications surely played a role in her successful inclusion of students with special needs.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (1998, 1999), core French is obligatory up to and including Grade 9; however, exemptions have been documented for students with special needs. In Arnett's (in press) study, two of the seven special needs participants in a Grade 8 classroom were exempted from the "obligatory" French credit for their Grade 9 year in secondary school. That such exemptions occur was confirmed by Mollica et al.'s (2005) survey of 1007 elementary core French teachers in Ontario in their open-ended comments on the questionnaire.

Teachers' reactions to diversity in the core French classroom

Do FSL teachers influence exemptions from core French? Lapkin, Harley and Taylor (1993) highlight teacher concerns over the integration of students with special needs. In response to such issues, Lapkin et al. encourage professional development opportunities for core French teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners more effectively. Similar concerns were voiced by the teachers in Calman and Daniel's (1998) review of core French in the former North York School Board. While the teachers recognized the need to use adaptation strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities, they did not have the means or the direction to do so. Thirteen years after Lapkin et al. identified such professional development needs, responses to an open-ended question in a national survey of FSL teachers (Lapkin et al., 2006), showed that teachers viewed diversity in their classes as major challenge, particularly given the lack of support to meet the variety of needs (ELL and special needs included).

FSL teachers in Ontario (Mollica et al., 2005) and in British Columbia (Carr, 2007) were also concerned about their ability to support students with special needs and ELLs. Simply put, teachers do not feel adequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of these students who do not receive the support they require to accommodate their needs – support that is made available to those same students during classes delivered in English. Relevant comments reproduced below are drawn from the Mollica et al. study:

...the FSL teacher is expected to modify appropriately for each child's needs, *without* special education training or assistance. (p. 148)

We have special needs students and ESL/ELD students integrated in my classes, but I never had any educational assistant to provide help. (p. 155)

Special needs students receive assistance by an EA for their other courses. Why is French treated differently? (p. 156)

This situation is exacerbated by teachers' limited access to FSL-focused professional development.⁹ The need for such professional development is also highlighted in the teacher comments as they underscore the lack of professional development at the board level:

Our board does not offer workshops to French teachers. (p. 139)

Our curriculum coordinator has little to no knowledge of French as a language or the curriculum. (p.139)

I don't attend workshops because FSL workshops are always held after school hours, unlike those of the "regular" classroom teachers which are offered during the day and coverage provided. (p. 139)

⁹ For example, about one-third of those surveyed reported attending one professional conference annually and 90 percent reported the absence of L2-focused journals in their schools.

Our Board has an FSL coordinator who is also a coordinator for English and music/Arts. Therefore, this person is difficult to get a hold of and when you are able to is of little assistance. In the past, our board had *one* person designated for each subject area. (p. 140)

The need for professional development for core French teachers to better meet ELLs' needs was also highlighted by Garbati (2007). For her case study of an ELL's experience in core French in Ontario, among other data gathering techniques, Garbati conducted classroom observations and teacher interviews. Through the interviews, the teacher revealed that she was ill-prepared to make modifications to the program and did not receive any support to guide such adaptations. At times, then, the ELL was left to complete other work while in French class. Although Garbati observed that the teacher used some strategies to meet the ELL's needs, she identified others that might have been considered had the teacher been given appropriate training and support.

Delivery Models for Core French

While the total number of instructional hours for core French is specified in Ministry documents, the way in which that time is distributed is not. Since starting grade does not appear to make a difference in eventual linguistic outcomes, in principle one could argue that the 600 hours mandated for core French at the elementary level should be distributed in such a way as to maximize student achievement in the L2.¹⁰

Most of the research done into time and language learning has involved increasing the amount of instructional time in order to enhance learning (Stern, 1985). In their review of language teaching practices, however, Collins, Halter, Lightbown and Spada (1999) highlighted the importance of intensity of time with the language. It may therefore be beneficial to compact the available instructional time for core French so that instructional periods are longer, even if the total time does not increase. In practical terms, this may mean, for example, "semestering" core French so that students are exposed to 80-minute periods for half the school year. As we will see below, this is not the only way time has been concentrated in core French, and where more intensive formats have been implemented, the results are promising.¹¹

Lapkin, Harley and Hart (1995a) conducted a case study involving one teacher who taught Grade 7 core French in three different formats: one class received the usual 40 minutes of instruction per day, a second class received a half day of instruction over 10 weeks and the third class took French in 80 minute periods over a period of five months. Students completed questionnaires and multi-skills French tests, as their program began, as it ended, and the fall of their Grade 8 year. This meant that the fall 80-minute and half-day classes had been away from the study of French for about eight months at the time of the delayed posttest. The Grade 7 teacher kept a journal, was interviewed twice, and selected classes in all formats were observed.

¹⁰ Currently, however, the Ministry mandates a grade 4 start for core French. If this requirement were more flexible, one could consider other ways of distributing the mandated 600 instructional hours (grades 4 through 8).

¹¹ This section of our paper draws on the summary that Mady (2008) prepared for the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers.

Although there were no significant differences between the groups on the pretest, both “compact” classes outperformed the comparison (40-minute a day) class on the reading component of the test. Both compact classes made gains on five of the six test components from pretest to posttest, whereas the traditional class made gains on only two. The half-day class also outperformed the 40-minute a day class on the delayed posttest writing component despite their 8-month absence from French. On other components of the delayed posttest (speaking and listening), there were no significant differences.

The questionnaire data showed that the participants in the compact models self-assessed their French skills more positively than the comparison class. They linked their perceived better speaking skills to the longer class periods. In a later study, Lapkin, Harley and Hart (1995b) reanalyzed the speaking test data using a more refined scoring scheme and found that the half-day group outperformed the comparison class. Across compact formats (80-minute and half-day), participants in compact core French liked the longer periods and thought they learned more effectively.

Returning to the dataset of the original case study, Hilmer (1999) compared two of Lapkin et al.’s three groups: the participants in the comparison (40-minute) class to those of the most compact class taking French in half-day blocks for one-quarter of the school year. In particular, Hilmer analyzed the videotapes of the class to investigate teaching strategies. Hilmer found that there were no noteworthy differences in teaching strategies as the teacher followed commercially produced lesson plans. Interviews with the teacher revealed that she felt that she had to use the same approach in all her classes because of the research. She reported preferring the 80-minute classes. She said that if she were to repeat the “experiment,” she would definitely approach her syllabus planning differently in the longer periods; for example, she would consider adding a novel to the compact period and allowing the students more time for real communication.

Her journal notes indicated that the teacher perceived the students in the half-day class to be more advanced and motivated as compared to the 40-minute group. The teacher also noted that the 40-minute period tended to be eroded so that instructional time was lost; in fact, she completed one fewer unit with the comparison class. Observations suggested also that the comparison students did fewer communicative activities.

In a recent study, Marshall (in progress) attempted to build on the findings of the case study we have just discussed. She had felt frustrated with the short instructional periods for core French in the past. Marshall, too, served as the teacher for three Grade 7 core French classes. Two had 80 minutes of French a day for half a year and the third was a comparison class having daily 40-minute classes throughout the year.

Marshall implemented a collaborative, project-based approach with all classes. She documented this approach in a journal. The participants completed questionnaires and the same test package that had been used in the Carleton case study reviewed above. On most of the proficiency tests, there were no significant differences between the compact core French classes and the comparison group. The experimental classes made more gains over the school year (i.e., improved more in French) than the comparison group.

Delayed posttests administered in the fall of the students’ Grade 8 year indicated a similar level of retention among the classes, although one of the compact classes had not studied French

for seven months. An analysis of Marshall's journal entries suggests that implementing a communicative project-based approach in a 40-minute period is difficult. It is necessary to review daily the activities of the previous period before continuing with the project. Despite her best efforts to use a communicative project-based approach with all classes, Marshall found that she was able to implement more communicative tasks in the two compact classes.

Mady (2008) summarizes similar findings from research on foreign language teaching in the U.S. Hays (1998) interviewed 12 teachers of Spanish, French and German in the United States who taught compact language classes. The teachers did not find students' knowledge retention problematic, nor did they find the gap between semesters when the L2 was offered to have a negative impact on their L2 proficiency. Moreover, they indicated that the longer periods afforded them the opportunity to use more student-centred, communicative activities.

Unlike compact core French, intensive French increases the annual allotment of instructional time for French substantially in one elementary school year (Grade 5 or 6), where French language arts instruction is compacted into half the school year; in the second half of the year, core French is delivered in short daily instructional periods. In that semester, from 60 to 75 percent of instruction occurs in French, although no other subject such as history is included in the French portion of the day (MacFarlane, 2005, p.12).¹² Mathematics is generally taught in English throughout the school year. Other school subjects including English language arts are taught in the second semester. The reduced time in English language arts can be justified because of the interdependence of languages (Cummins, 1979) which ensures the transfer of literacy and related skills across instructional languages.

MacFarlane (2005) and Netten and Germain (2005) summarize the findings of research on the intensive French program as follows. Based on an oral interview administered after the intensive French semester, Grade 5 or 6 students can communicate orally as well as regular core French students in Grades 9 or 10 (or 11, on occasion). Intensive French students who begin the program in Grade 6 write as well as francophone peers in Grades 3 to 4 (Netten & Germain, 2009). According to interviews with administrative and teaching personnel, their achievement in subjects other than French does not suffer and may be enhanced. Listening and reading comprehension do not appear to have been evaluated in the studies on intensive French. Intensive French students tend to stay in French to the end of secondary school in greater numbers than students who have not had the intensive experience.

As Netten and Germain (2005) assert, intensive French is "clearly distinguishable from core French" (p. 185). The considerable increase in instructional time in the first year of intensive French, along with the concentration of that time, allows a "language arts approach to teaching FSL" (Collins, Stead, & Woolfrey, 2004, p. 357), involving a focus on communication (oral and written), literacy, interaction with others, and project-based pedagogical principles. These are among the pedagogical focuses reviewed in the next section.

¹² This constitutes a clear distinction from immersion education, where French is the medium of instruction for all or most school subjects.

Instructional Approaches in Core French

At present, the core French curriculum in Ontario emphasizes the development of oral communication skills in the early years of the program, with reading and writing receiving more emphasis as the curriculum progresses. For the past ten years, Ontario teachers have been encouraged to use their professional judgment when making decisions related to the suitability of instructional approaches for implementing this curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1998, p. 3). The studies reviewed in this section investigate the kinds of approaches that teachers are choosing to use, how they are implemented, and whether they directly impact student performance in core French classrooms. While this line of inquiry remains an important research issue to pursue in Ontario and across Canada (Lapkin et al., 1993), it is worth noting the lack of recent, comprehensive research investigating and/or comparing instructional approaches in the Ontario elementary core French context (Grades 4-8).

In an attempt to identify core French program strengths and areas needing improvement, Calman and Daniel (1998) conducted a large-scale observational study in a large urban Ontario school board. They found that Grade 3-8 teachers were using a wide variation of instructional approaches to implement the Ontario curriculum. Teachers were spending less time on oral skill development than the Board and Ministry guidelines stipulated, and observed activities were predominantly grammar-oriented. They also identified the widespread use of English by teachers and students for classroom communication as a phenomenon that, in their opinion, was plaguing the core French classrooms in their board. Other studies have shown that it is not uncommon for core French teachers, particularly generalist teachers who feel unprepared to teach core French (Carr, 1999), to try out different approaches and reflect on how effective they are with their students. This tendency makes sense given the difficulties core French teachers face in improving their pedagogical knowledge base (Flewelling, 1995). While some researchers have advocated for maximized target language use in contexts such as Ontario, where students' exposure to French is short and limited outside of the FSL classroom (Lapkin et al., 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002), Canadian core French teachers continue to find it challenging to maintain French as the language of instruction in the core French context (Howard, 2006; Salvatori, 2007).

Some studies have revealed that introducing collaborative activities in the core French context can increase student and teacher French production and motivation, while also positively influencing aural comprehension, oral proficiency and target language accuracy. In Nova Scotia, Comeau (2002) observed that implementing cooperative learning modules in two Grade 4 core French contexts enabled teachers to use the target language more with their students, and actively scaffold and support their L2 development. Transcribed audiotapes of student discourse also showed that students who participated in the guided instructional workshops produced significantly more French utterances than those who were not exposed to this cooperative activity. In an attempt to examine how collaborative activities could enhance L2 learning, Careen (1997) compared the aural comprehension and oral proficiency of twenty four Grade 6 core French students who had been exposed to competitive cooperative learning modules (i.e.,

experimental group), and those who had not (i.e., control group). Students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts on all tests; results also suggested that these types of cooperative learning activities could also work to develop students' L2 vocabulary acquisition skills as well. In 1998, Davis transformed the traditionally teacher-centred dictation activity into a more student-centred, interactive activity for her Grade 11 core French students in Newfoundland. She found that completing a dictation collaboratively enhanced students' linguistic accuracy, and that they produced more French when given the opportunity to share their text with peers. However, students were clearly challenged by the task requiring joint production of a text (i.e. dictogloss), and often reverted to English during its completion. Observations of Canadian high-school students participating in the joint construction of an online newsletter with Haitian and French students demonstrated how using email can also afford collaborative opportunities for learners to develop production skills in authentic settings, and learn more about the target culture (Lawrence, 2002a, 2002b; Turnbull & Lawrence, 2001). Aside from this study, and another investigating the use of bimodal video to enhance listening comprehension (Baltova, 1999), few studies have investigated the effectiveness of using technology in core French settings. Nonetheless, stakeholders view it as an innovative pedagogical initiative that warrants widespread professional training, the creation of appropriate support systems, and further empirical examination (Rehorick, Dicks, Kristmanson, & Cogswell, 2006).¹³

Introducing group work with a focus on drama is another emergent approach used in some core French contexts with adolescent students. Looking to increase student motivation to stay in core French, Dicks and LeBlanc (2005) introduced interactive dramatic modules into four different secondary-level core French classrooms. Student questionnaire data revealed an increasingly positive affect towards core French as a result of participating in these cooperative dramatic activities. In their interviews, teachers also stated that they were satisfied with the effectiveness of this approach, and struck by its appeal to high-school students. Documenting the implementation of dramatic games and plays in her intermediate-level oral French class, Masson (1994) also claimed that activities involving dramatic productions present unique opportunities for structured practice of the target language.

On the whole, while these studies point to some productive and affective benefits of instructional approaches that involve cooperative learning, more studies need to be conducted in order to ascertain their long-term feasibility, and their impact on student proficiency in both elementary and secondary contexts.

Following the National Core French Study (NCFS), FSL stakeholders advocated for a curricular and instructional shift away from the teacher-centred, grammatically focused core French pedagogy, towards a more student-centred, project-based, communicatively oriented practice (LeBlanc, 1990). While Ontario has not entirely adopted the NCFS recommendations,¹⁴ some teachers in Ontario and other provinces are using multidimensional project-based (MPB)

¹³ Technology is in wide use for delivering distance education, however, especially in Newfoundland and Alberta.

¹⁴ For a description of province-by-province implementation of NCFS, see Vandergrift, L. (2001). Core French programs: How have they changed? *The State of French Second Language Education in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Parents for French.

approaches to core French instruction. An MPB approach combines a multidimensional curriculum organization (Stern, 1992) with project-based learning as its “guiding pedagogical principle” (Turnbull, 1999b). Rehorick et al. (2006) suggested implementing new pedagogical approaches like MPB for core FSL instruction in New Brunswick because it balances oral and literacy approaches. Other core French studies focusing on secondary students in MPB contexts have highlighted the utility of grammar activities that involve form- and communicatively-focused drills for facilitating accuracy and fluency in French (Jean, 2004, 2005), and proposed that some teachers found the implementation of an MPB instructional approach to be a very rewarding experience (Porter, 1996), while others found it difficult to change their teaching methodology in order to adopt the communicatively-oriented approach outlined in the NCFS recommendations (Buttler, 2002).

In one of the only studies to date that examines the impact of MPB teaching on student outcomes, Turnbull (1998, 1999a, 1999b) investigated the MPB approaches of four Grade 9 core French teachers in a school district in Eastern Canada, and assessed their impact on student attitudes and French proficiency. Similar to Calman and Daniels’ results, Turnbull found that the four teacher participants were implementing MPB in different ways, leading some participant classes to be categorized as “more MPB-like” than others. Students in these “more MPB-like” settings offered more positive self-assessments of their French skills on the questionnaire, while no differences materialized with respect to student motivation to learn French across these two instructional settings. Outcome data revealed that those students in the “more MPB-like” setting outperformed the “less MPB-like” students on a number of test components. However, Turnbull cautioned that the use of MPB cannot entirely account for students’ superior performance in this case study, primarily because of the variable MPB implementation styles observed, and the small number of participants in his study. He concluded by calling for more research into the relative influence of teaching approach on student outcomes, especially in the field of core French where educators are “hungry for empirical evidence which supports curriculum reform in core French” (1998, p. 194).

Another instructional approach being used in approximately 33% of Canadian elementary core French contexts, and 2,400 schools in Ontario, is the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) (AIM Language Learning, 2008). Generally speaking, AIM is a language-teaching methodology that combines target language use with gestures, high-frequency vocabulary and drama to accelerate the development of fluency from the onset of classroom instruction. Frustrated with the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional core French instructional approaches, Maxwell (2001, 2004) developed AIM, claiming that employing this instructional method could rapidly accelerate the development of French fluency from the early stages of L2 acquisition. While the body of research on AIM is growing, to date, clear conclusions cannot be drawn about the effectiveness of this approach based on the limited number of studies available.

In the beginning, Maxwell stated that AIM was designed to be “an *initial step* [italics added] providing students with a language base that will allow them to communicate with a basic level of fluency in the language” (2004, p.8). The AIM approach typically progresses through units of ‘years’ that do not correspond directly to specific grade levels. This has enabled teachers to implement AIM at variable grade levels, making it possible for students to receive FSL instruction in AIM and non-AIM environments throughout their primary and intermediate FSL

learning experience.

At the request of an Ontario school board, Mady, Arnott and Lapkin (2007, 2009) conducted a comparative evaluation of AIM. In this study, statistical comparisons of Grade 8 students from six AIM classes¹⁵ ($n=125$) and six non-AIM classes ($n=135$) showed no differences in achievement on any of the listening, speaking, reading or writing tests of a Grade 8 core French test package (Harley et al., 1988). Qualitative findings revealed that students and teachers in both instructional contexts were quite positive about their experiences.

The researchers observed a wide range of full and partial implementation of resources and elements that are central to the AIM approach across both instructional contexts. Data related to target language use showed that AIM teachers were using considerably more French in their classrooms. In terms of students' L2 use, a larger proportion of AIM students claimed that they spoke French in class, and expressed higher levels of confidence in their listening and speaking skills than their non-AIM counterparts. Some AIM students also commented on how elements of the approach (e.g., gestures) might be more suited for a younger age group. Based on their findings, the authors suggest that the presence or absence of AIM elements in the classroom does not appear to be a key factor in explaining the testing outcomes, and caution that these elements should not be considered as being entirely exclusive to AIM classrooms. As well, they suggested that more research be conducted at the elementary level where AIM is being implemented from the onset of FSL instruction.

The research team also surveyed the same cohort of students one year later to see if they had decided to pursue the study of French beyond the obligatory Grade 9 year. Findings indicated that the continuation rate was the same for both AIM and non-AIM groups.

The majority of the remaining AIM studies are qualitative and Ontario-based, with many focusing exclusively on elementary student outcomes related to oral proficiency. Maxwell (2001) conducted diagnostic interviews in French with two groups of Grade 2 students from an all-girls school in Ontario. The objective of the study was to assess and compare the relative oral fluency levels of one AIM group ($n=9$), and one non-AIM group ($n=9$). Each interview contained a sequence of scaffolded questioning, and participants were also prompted to produce sustained speech by spontaneously creating a story. Interview findings showed that the AIM group displayed significantly higher oral fluency levels than the non-AIM students.

Michels (2008) found similar results in her comparative AIM study that employed the same scaffolded interview from Maxwell's study, coupled with the speaking test from the national French contest of the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). For her master's requirement, she tested and compared the oral fluency levels of male students in Grades 4-6 from an all-boys school in Ontario that had been exposed to AIM ($n=8$) and non-AIM¹⁶ ($n=6$) instructional contexts for a variable number of hours. Statistical analysis of audio samples and transcriptions showed that AIM students significantly outperformed non-AIM students on all oral proficiency measures. Although this study was limited by its small sample size, Michels

¹⁵ Students in the AIM group had experienced two years of non-AIM instruction from Grades 4-6, followed by two years of AIM instruction from Grades 6-8.

¹⁶ Students in the non-AIM sample had been exposed to a variety of instructional contexts: French Immersion ($n=1$); core French ($n=2$) and Extended French ($n=3$)

noted a trend throughout the speaking data for AIM students to outperform non-AIM students who had experienced significantly more hours of FSL instruction.

Recently in Eastern Ontario, Bourdages and Vignola (2009) compared a larger sample of AIM ($n=18$) and non-AIM ($n=16$) Grade 3 students' oral linguistic and grammatical accuracy. Similar to the results yielded by Mady et.al., and contrary to others (Maxwell, 2001; Michels, 2008), statistical analyses of semi-structured interview data revealed no significant differences between the two groups on any measures of linguistic or grammatical accuracy. However, similar to other AIM findings (Maxwell, 2001; Mady et.al., 2007), AIM students produced, on average, significantly more French than non-AIM students, while non-AIM students produced significantly more English than their AIM counterparts. Interestingly, Bourdages and Vignola also made new observations related to AIM participants, claiming that they produced more incomplete utterances and a wider variety of verbs than non-AIM students during the interviews. They interpreted these particular finding as indicative of AIM students' willingness to take risks with French and not revert to English, even if they are unable to communicate their thoughts completely or retrieve the appropriate vocabulary. Ultimately, according to the authors, results nevertheless suggest that there is no inherent advantage to being in either instructional context when it comes to acquiring linguistic and grammatical accuracy in French.

Arnott (2005) also noted a great deal of risk-taking with the target language during her observations of an all-boys class of Grade 4 students in Ontario who were new to FSL instruction, and new to AIM. In their interviews, students described how they were able to cope with the French-only environment, offering explanations for observed student engagement in this unique learning environment. Teacher interviews and classroom observations also led Arnott to contend that teachers are an integral factor in the launch and ultimate success of AIM for beginning language learners. This opinion mirrored earlier findings from a multi-method study conducted by Carr (2001) that focused on the use of AIM in an all-girls school in British Columbia. After observing AIM in action in several primary classrooms (Grades 1-3), Carr highlighted the demanding nature of AIM, stating that it "requires 100% participation" (p.2) from both teachers and students. Based on diagnostic interviews conducted with a small number of Grade 1 students who had only learned French with AIM, Carr found that AIM student oral language production exceeded British Columbia introductory CF expectations, and paralleled those of first year French immersion. However, these same students found it challenging to transfer these oral skills to spontaneous speech contexts. These results led Carr to recommend, "this highly effective approach should continue as part of an overall FSL program" (p.3)

Based on these AIM studies, it is difficult to either confirm or deny the validity of Maxwell's predictions about the effectiveness of AIM. While most small-scale AIM research has yielded positive results related to oral fluency, larger-scale quantitative research has suggested that using AIM is not the only factor that leads students to more proficiency in French. At present, Ontario accounts for over 70% of AIM use across Canada (AIM Language Learning, 2008), and stakeholders continue to advocate for greater implementation of AIM at the elementary level (Ottawa-Carlton District School Board, 2007). This reality emphasizes the pressing need to document and examine the impact this trend is having on students, teachers and other FSL stakeholders, particularly in Ontario.

In summary, core French research to date has documented some instructional approaches

used by elementary and secondary teachers across Ontario, and in other parts of Canada including: cooperative learning approaches; MPB teaching; and AIM. These studies have shown that teachers tend to implement their chosen instructional approach in different ways. Student proficiency outcomes also appear to be affected as much or more by the teacher as by the approach they are using. Certainly, more research needs to be conducted in the elementary core French context to ascertain how these instructional methods impact younger learners and their teachers.

Conclusion

This literature review has focused on three main themes: student diversity in core French, core French delivery models, and instructional approaches in core French. We began by discussing the presence of negative attitudes on the part of the community, fuelled in part by the low status of core French in many elementary classrooms and schools. In this atmosphere, it may not be surprising that core French outcomes have generally proved disappointing to students, parents and other stakeholders, or that many FSL teachers become discouraged and abandon the teaching of core French. Understanding these aspects of the context is key to exploring ways of improving core French programming in Ontario.

There have been valuable action research studies and case studies of various aspects of core French that are included in this review; but overall, with the exception of intensive French, no large-scale studies have been undertaken since the 70s (Stern, Swain, McLean, Friedman, Harley, & Lapkin, 1976). This is regrettable.

Our main findings can be summarized as follows:

1. There are few documented advantages to an early start (during the primary years, for example) for core French. While it is widely believed that more time for instruction in core French is a good thing (certainly this is true in the case of intensive programs), small increments of time accumulated over five to eight years of elementary school do not retain students in FSL after the last obligatory year (Grade 9 in Ontario), and do not yield superior levels of achievement than those recorded for students with relatively fewer hours of core French.
2. Core French teachers are often marginalized in schools and suffer from teaching conditions that are far from ideal (Lapkin & Barkaoui, 2008). If we move to compact formats for core French (see point 4 below), teachers would see fewer students/classes in a semester and might remain in classrooms dedicated to FSL.
3. The available studies suggest that ELLs may flourish in FSL programs; provinces should consider implementing policies that include such learners in FSL programs systematically. Research on instructional adaptations for special-needs students also suggests that these students can be accommodated successfully in core French; the Ministries of Education can help to disseminate information to help core French teachers benefit from relevant research findings in this area. Clearly, accommodating student

diversity in core French is a topic that needs specific attention in pre- and inservice contexts.

4. The issue of time for teaching core French is complex. Amount of teaching time interacts with intensity/distribution of that time in ways that support the newly implemented (in Ontario) intensive French models and encourage us to pursue experimentation with compact formats. Such program formats facilitate project-based learning, collaborative activities, and other instructional approaches that have been shown to lead to improved learning outcomes.
5. Realistic core French program objectives need to be developed, based on research about what students can do in French at various stages in their program, especially at the end of Grade 9 or, if they pursue their FSL studies, at the end of secondary school. Empirical research on outcomes in speaking, listening, reading and writing in French will inform policy development and potentially lead to greater stakeholder satisfaction with the core French program. Exploration of the Common European Framework as one way to achieve a common understanding of what the core French program can produce may be fruitful.
6. Evaluations of instructional approaches (or “methods”) like AIM are inconclusive with respect to students outcomes, but suggest that every teacher exercises his/her own agency in implementing strategies and ideas suggested by published materials and advocates for drama-based, MPB or other approaches. Documenting effective teachers and best practices is important so that this information can be widely disseminated. Research of this nature should be a high priority for the Ministry and boards of education.

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