

## Oral Proficiency: The Communicative Competence of Early French Immersion Students

Lisa Michaud  
University of New Brunswick

The Oral Proficiency Interview as a provincial oral language assessment in New Brunswick is at odds with research-based communicative competence approaches to language teaching, which disadvantages many early French immersion (EFI) students in their attainment of the Advanced level of proficiency—the anticipated level prescribed by the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (NB EECD). At the 2020 Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference (AEGSC), I presented the context of my research and reported on one aspect of the findings of my M.Ed. thesis. My research was focused on early French immersion student performance in relation to the communicative competence model developed by Celce-Murcia (2007). At the time of my presentation, I was well into the analysis phase of my research and preparing to write the Data Analysis and Results chapter of my thesis. Although my research included multiple stages of analysis, the findings presented at the AEGSC centred on the student performance profiles developed at the third stage of the interview analysis. This paper, in providing a written record of my presentation, follows the traditional format of an academic presentation, with “Context,” “Problem,” “Theoretical Framework,” “Research Question and Methodology,” and “Results” featured as subtitles. Additional considerations prompted me to include a brief reflection on my research from the days following my presentation in “Post Conference Reflections” before the article’s conclusion.

### Context

My research focused on EFI students and their performance in the OPI—a provincial end-of-program assessment administered to Grade 12 students studying French as a second language (FSL) in New Brunswick. The EFI program gives students the opportunity to learn French at an early age—learning French both as the object of learning (in language courses) and as the medium of instruction (in subject courses). This approach provides a unique opportunity for students to develop their French language skills while following a curriculum that parallels the one used in English Prime, the alternate program for all non-immersion students.

Early French Immersion fosters “additive bilingualism” (Lazaruk, 2007), meaning that students develop their second language skills in French with no negative impact on their first language. Instructional time in French decreases as students proceed to higher grade levels. Although students have 90% of their time in French in Grades 1 and 2, this is reduced gradually to only 25% once they reach Grades 11 and 12. Whereas the intensive concentration of time and exposure at the early stage of the program enables the development of strong functional language skills, the focus on academic requirements at the higher grade levels explains the reduced exposure to the target language. Given this distribution of exposure to the target language, time at the high school level in terms of language development may be viewed as maintenance years (Dicks, 2008; Lazaruk, 2007).

The OPI constitutes an end-of-program assessment through which students' oral proficiency is assessed according to levels from the OPI scale. The scale comprises six main levels, where student proficiency is ranked as either Unrateable, Novice, Basic, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior. To be rated at a given level, students must meet all the criteria listed within that level. A "Plus" may be added to a student's ranking either to indicate a partial attainment of the criteria at the subsequent level or a student's inability to maintain the performance at that higher level throughout the entire interview. The scale thus comprises nine levels: Unrateable, Novice, Basic, Basic Plus, Intermediate, Intermediate Plus, Advanced, Advanced Plus, and Superior.

For the OPI, EFI students meet with an evaluator—a representative from the NB EECD—who visits the schools and meets with students individually to conduct a 20–30-minute interview, a conversation from which their oral proficiency level is determined. Early French immersion students should rank at the Advanced level of proficiency on the OPI assessment scale, a level confirming the interviewees' ability to use the language with sufficient accuracy in both formal and informal conversations (EECD, 2019).

### **Problem**

Not all EFI students reach the anticipated Advanced level of proficiency at the end of their program of study, despite the provincial reports showing the modest increases in the percentage of students reaching the Advanced level in recent years (EECD, 2020). In 2018-2019, 50.7% of EFI students reached the Advanced level or higher, whereas 33.5% reached Intermediate Plus—a half-level below the Advanced proficiency target. For EFI students, those who rank at Intermediate Plus are in between the Intermediate and Advanced levels of proficiency. This means they have met the criteria at the Intermediate level of proficiency but do not fulfill the requirements marked by an Advanced-level speaker, possibly falling short of meeting each of the Advanced-level criteria or being unable to maintain their performance at an Advanced level of proficiency for the duration of the interview. With the proficiency target set by the NB EECD, my research sought to identify linguistic differences between oral interviews ranked at the Intermediate Plus and Advanced levels of proficiency.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The model of communicative competence developed by Celce-Murcia (2007) was used as the theoretical framework underpinning my research because of its commonalities with the communicative language abilities framework (Bachman, 1990) that is anchored in the assessment and evaluation of language. Celce-Murcia presented a model of communicative competence containing six interrelated components: discourse, sociocultural, formulaic, interactional, linguistic, and strategic competence. These components develop concomitantly with the learner's language abilities. Having been conceived for the teaching and learning of language, Celce-Murcia's model offered a more practical approach for my research than Bachman's assessment model. Several oral taxonomies complemented my use of Celce-Murcia's model in exploring my research problem, notably the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001); *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* (Goh & Burns, 2012); and a taxonomy developed by Le Bouthillier (2018). Finally, I used the list of criteria from the OPI scale as a reference tool to analyze the oral interviews.

### Research Question and Methodology

In this paper, I focus on the first of two research questions in my study: What linguistic evidence can be identified in the oral interviews to explain EFI students' attained language proficiency placement in relation to the performance criteria as identified in the OPI scale? This portion of my research will demonstrate the potential in teaching languages holistically and suggest that communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007) can inform teaching practices and support French language advancements for Anglophone students in New Brunswick.

I explored this question through a comparative discourse analysis of six oral interviews retrieved from the NB EECD. To ensure their relevance to my study, I selected audio recordings of EFI interviews dated within the last five years; my sample of oral interviews included three at the Intermediate Plus level (Susan, Troy, and Louis)<sup>1</sup> and three at the Advanced level of proficiency (Gabriel, Celine, and Mathias). Through my analysis, I sought to identify differences and commonalities in student performance, including the strengths and weaknesses between and within each set of interviews. In this paper, I report the students' performance profiles depicting communicative competence to reflect my analysis in relation to the communicative competence model (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

I grouped the interviews by levels of proficiency, forming two groups. It is important to note the range of abilities within each interview despite their grouping in a specific level on the OPI scale. The interviews within a level, therefore, do not necessarily share the same strengths and weaknesses. To assess the level of communicative competence in each interview, I paired each transcription with a photocopy of Celce-Murcia's model of communicative competence (2007). I went through the interviews, coding transcriptions and extracting evidence that corresponded to each of the six competencies; I then noted my findings for each OPI on its own respective model (see Figure 1). Upon filling each student's profile with information relating to each individual competency, I added a dot to identify recurring evidence of the competencies that manifested in each interview. The presence and frequency of the represented competency—where frequency implies that the competency was not limited and isolated to a single occurrence throughout the performance—influenced my placement of a dot as an indicator of an established or emerging competency.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to ensure student confidentiality.

Results

Figure 1

Communicative Competence Illustrated in Early French Immersion Students' Oral Proficiency Interviews Based on the Celce-Murcia (2007) Model

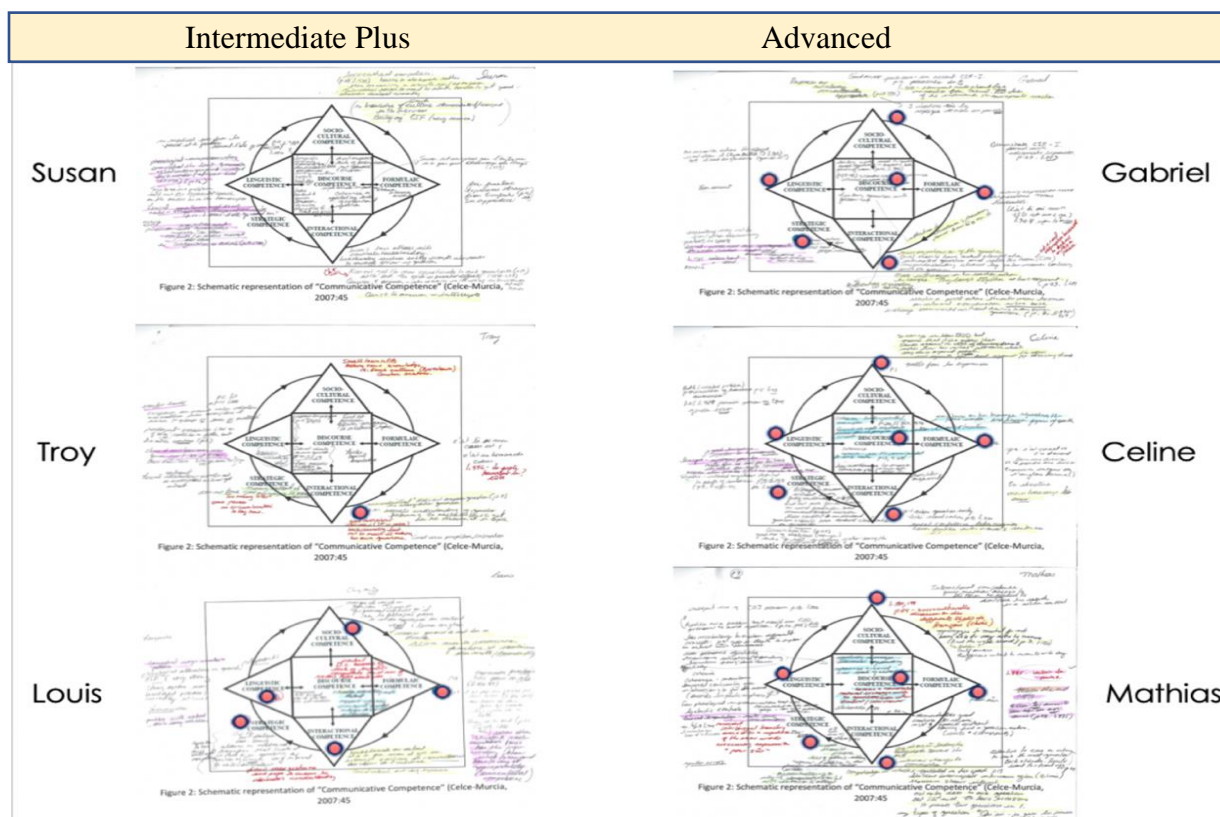


Figure 1 captures and illustrates differences in student profiles according to proficiency levels, and three important findings can be drawn. First, Mathias's profile, in containing the most data, secured his interview as the strongest of the six analyzed oral interviews. Second, Louis and Mathias had the strongest interviews in their respective categories, judging by the density of the information displayed. Finally, with the dots added to reflect the communicative competencies that were observed in each student's interview, it became apparent that students performing at an Advanced level of proficiency demonstrated a higher level of communicative competence than students rated at an Intermediate Plus level. Although the dots confirming communicative competence did not appear uniformly in the Intermediate Plus interviews, which had been the case for the Advanced interviews, it is important to keep in mind that all students still demonstrated some competence.

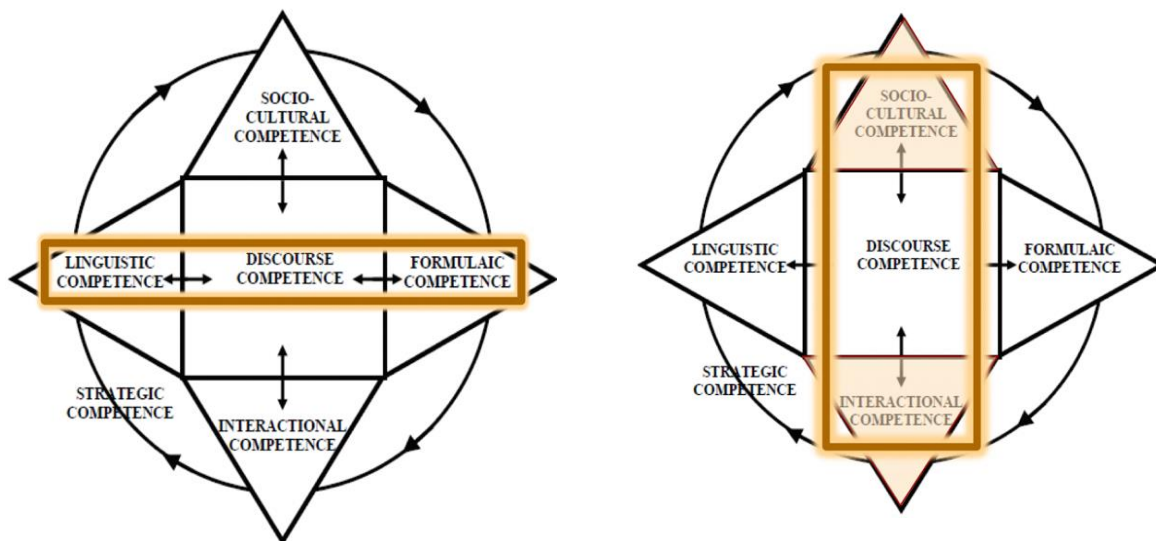
Comparing students' profiles enabled me to document what each competency looked like in the oral interviews. Students who demonstrated discourse competence, for example, drew from all other competencies to form a unified spoken message. They answered more elaborately using examples and details. They illustrated a range of topical knowledge and could also discuss more abstract topics, a characteristic evident in all Advanced-level interviews and one Intermediate Plus-level interview. In these four interviews, students could have continued the conversation regardless of the topic discussed. In addition, the data revealed that students who demonstrated

linguistic competence did not have patterns of errors. They used and maintained a French language repertoire taught in school and also made fewer noticeable mistakes. Their mistakes affected parts of their speech but ultimately did not negatively impact coherence. I observed that students who demonstrated formulaic competence had more formulaic expressions (i.e., prefabricated structures of language) included in their language repertoire, and they integrated them more freely in their speech. They also used these formulaic expressions strategically to fill pauses that may have otherwise disrupted fluency. In addition to using formulaic language and fillers as stalling strategies, students who demonstrated strategic competence used better strategies to produce longer segments of uninterrupted speech to uphold their speech production. They resorted to circumlocution and approximation when they could not recall the needed vocabulary, and they limited their use of English terms in their speech. Furthermore, students who demonstrated interactional competence asked clarification questions when necessary. They conveyed their understanding and engagement through backchanneling, using phrases like “Uhum,” “OK,” and “oui,” for example. They actively participated in what seemed like a conversation rather than an interview. It was interesting to see how the interaction evolved between the interviewer and the interviewee. Finally, students who demonstrated sociocultural competence responded appropriately to the interviewer’s comments and revealed cultural awareness through colloquialisms in their speech and in the topics discussed. Sociocultural competence—the ability to adapt speech to a specific situation or cultural context—remained the least apparent competence in all interviews.

The tridimensional model of the OPI assesses function, content and accuracy in students’ use of language (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019). Figure 2 illustrates how this seems to reward stronger performances in the horizontal axis of the Celce-Murcia (2007) model. Sociocultural competence and interactional competence, situated at the opposing ends on the vertical axis, are just as essential in maximizing students’ use of language and in fully supporting their performance during the interview.

**Figure 1**

*The Horizontal Axis in the Celce-Murcia (2007) Model of Communicative Competence Showing Predominant Competencies Featured in the Oral Proficiency Interview*



The illustration of student profiles (Figure 1) highlights the presence of all components of communicative competence in interviews rated at the Advanced level. These interviews, with the inclusion of all competencies, resulted in a stronger performance. This does not suggest, however, that the other interviews did not demonstrate any communicative competence. Instead, it implies that language teaching and learning should be done using a holistic approach if teachers are to develop language abilities that will enable EFL students to reach higher levels of oral proficiency. A holistic approach to language teaching would require that equal importance be given to all of the competencies during language learning and instruction rather than a disproportionate focus on any single competency. It would also highlight the competencies' intertwined nature and the need to draw from each competency to create a unified message.

### **Post-Conference Reflections and Additional Considerations**

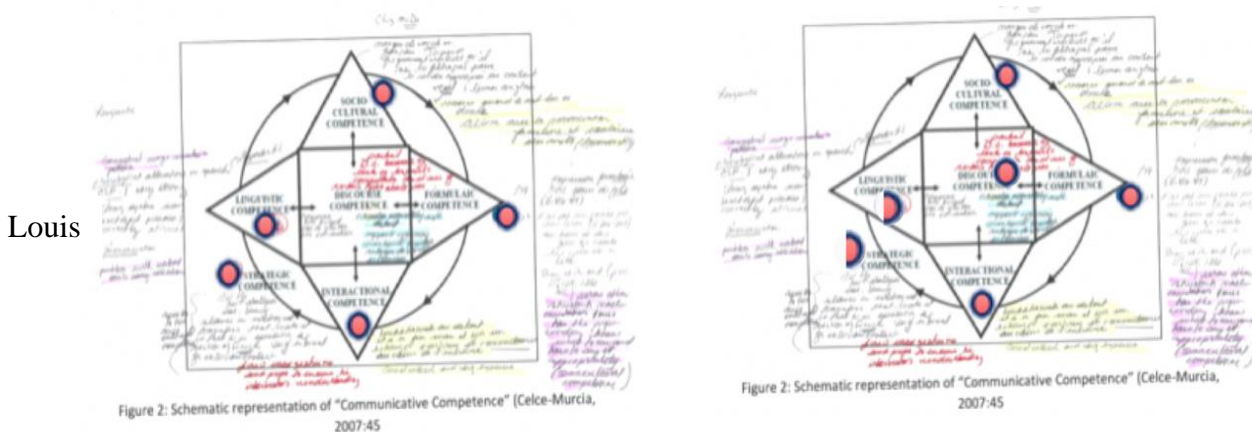
At the time of this presentation in June of 2020, I was in the analysis phase of my research. Having now completed my research, I have since adjusted Figure 1, bringing minor changes to one of the six interview profiles.

Shortly after my presentation, I started thinking about the dots in Figure 1 and, more specifically, how they represented my perception of students' communicative competence. I questioned whether this figure adequately portrayed the communicative competence of one student in particular: Louis. Louis's profile prompted this deeper reflection, mainly with regard to the near-total absence of dots in the other two profiles rated at the Intermediate Plus level. I reconsidered my initial illustration with the understanding that Intermediate Plus students essentially demonstrate similar skills as Advanced students, with the exception sometimes being the length of time they are able to sustain an Advanced-level performance. There had to be a difference between the number of dots contained in the diagrams to distinguish between the Advanced and Intermediate Plus performances.

Louis demonstrated great fluency and ease in conversing with the interviewer. He could have continued conversing beyond 30 minutes, often formulating long responses, yet I had not added a dot to highlight his strength for this competence. The absence of a dot to highlight his discourse competence (Figure 1) was therefore an oversight. Simply adding a dot to highlight his discourse competence would have brought his profile on par with those of the Advanced-level speakers. I thus had to reconsider how his performance differed from those at the Advanced level and how this could be made apparent in his linguistic profile. Key differences in Louis's performance rested in his profusive use of English terms while speaking French (codeswitching) and a linguistic profile that revealed his use of French regionalisms, with engrained linguistic variances diverting from the norm of standard French, specifically in his choice of the auxiliary verb in the past tense. That is to say that Louis, on many occasions, spoke French as it would have been spoken by locals in his geographic area of the province, replicating some distinct pronunciations, expressions, and verb errors. Upon closer consideration, I concluded that Louis still demonstrated strength in his strategic and linguistic competencies, but they remained defining factors that distinguished his performance from the other Advanced-level interviews and thus could be neither ignored nor represented by full dots in the revised figure. My revision to Louis's linguistic profile is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3**

A Revision of Louis's Linguistic Profile, Illustrated Using the Celce-Murcia (2007) Model of Communicative Competence



My alteration to Louis's profile involved adding a dot to discourse competence, highlighting his ability to speak coherently and to expand his answers while providing details. I then replaced the full dots representing his linguistic and strategic competencies with half dots as a way to indicate that, although he demonstrated strength in those areas, engrained patterns diverting from the OPI scale remained very noticeable in his overall performance.

### Conclusion

My research has shown that Celce-Murcia's (2007) model of communicative competence can be a useful framework that considers language use in context. Students' linguistic profiles, illustrated in Figure 1 and analyzed in light of the model of communicative competence, show how used in the language classroom, the model could aid in narrowing the gap between current and desired student achievement on the OPI. Because few research-based publications relate to student performance on the OPI in New Brunswick, I hope this model of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007)—given its practicality and its implications for the EFI classroom—will be supported and serve to inform French as a second language instruction in New Brunswick's public education system. The annual publication of student performance results and the use of these results to suggest how to improve program efficiency have provided little guidance to New Brunswick educators as to how to better support EFI students' language learning experience. My research can contribute to knowledge in the field of bilingual education in a New Brunswick context and support future EFI students in their attainment of an Advanced level of oral proficiency.

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*Lisa Michaud is a Faculty Associate and member of the research team at the Second Language Research Institute of Canada (L2RIC) at the University of New Brunswick. She completed her Master of Education degree in Curriculum & Instruction in December of 2020. Her thesis examined the communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007) of early French immersion students at their Grade 12 oral proficiency interview. Lisa also taught French immersion for many years at Oromocto High School. Having completed her research, she seeks to advance the teaching and learning of French for Anglophone students in New Brunswick and to support students' progress in their performance on the provincial oral proficiency interview. Lisa Michaud can be reached at [l.michaud@unb.ca](mailto:l.michaud@unb.ca)*