

LES SÉANCES FRANCO: IMPROVING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE OF FUTURE TEACHERS



Research summary

What can we do to help future teachers build their professional identity?

- Why do we need a collaborative approach to teacher recruitment and retention?
- What are Canadian universities doing to help recruit and retain FSL teachers?
- What has been the impact of the University of New Brunswick's initiative?
- Implications for classrooms and schools
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WHY DO WE NEED A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION?

French immersion programs in Canada are victims of their own popularity. The number of students enrolling in these programs is constantly growing, and as a result, teaching vacancies are increasing in both immersion and French as a second language programs. As a result, there is a shortage of long-term teachers in all French programs. In its Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023, the Government of Canada affirms the implementation of teacher recruitment and retention strategies. Among other things, it offers funding to Canadian universities to increase the number of students in pre-service programs, and funding to various professional associations such as ACPI to introduce research projects or take action on the teacher shortage (Masson et al., 2019).

Several researchers, including Wernicke (2017) and Masson and colleagues (2019), have argued that the lack of validation of L2 teachers' professional identities undermines retention efforts, as does linguistic insecurity stemming from ideologies privileging native speakers and a variety of so-called standard French. Developing a professional identity is a long-term process that begins in the initial training program and continues throughout a teacher's career. It is therefore important that various stakeholders such as the Department of Canadian Heritage, academic institutions, professional associations such as ACPI, provincial and territorial ministries of education, school districts and schools work together to support the construction of a healthy and positive professional identity among FSL teachers.

WHAT ARE CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES DOING TO HELP RECRUIT AND RETAIN FSL TEACHERS?

Several universities with initial training programs in teaching French as a second language are trying to support their students through various initiatives. For example, the University of Alberta has developed a francopass to promote cultural experiences in French in Edmonton's francophone community (Cavanagh et al., 2020). The University of Ottawa offers a linguistic risk-taking passport to its students (Slavkov and Séror, 2019), while pre-service teachers at the University of Regina complete an internship at Université Laval (Boutouchent, 2016). At the University of New Brunswick, we offered language development sessions on the Zoom platform to help increase our pre-service teachers' language skills and confidence. Students divided into three groups according to their level of oral proficiency and availability met once a week with a facilitator who provided corrective feedback and live clarification to participants. The facilitator targeted group-specific language objectives based on the New Brunswick Oral Proficiency Interview scale. Beforehand, participants had access to a description and contextualization of the topic covered in each session, as well as support materials such as vocabulary cards, grammar sheets and Internet links.



WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK'S INITIATIVE?

To find out the effects of our Franco sessions, we recorded three different focus groups on Zoom. Over the course of an hour, members of each group shared their impressions and feelings about their language skills and confidence. We transcribed the three focus groups and drew out recurring and common themes. Four main themes emerged: 1. confidence and language skills, 2. space for oral interaction, 3. safe and supportive space and 4. Mediation space.

Confidence and language skills. Participants reported a perceived improvement in their language skills. Those in the intermediate range reported more perceptible and extensive perceptions of improvement (vocabulary, fluency, sentence structure, grammar). Others, at advanced level and above, expressed more limited perceptions of improvement (fluency and deepening of already acquired knowledge). FSL teacher candidates explained that an increased sense of competence translated into an increased sense of confidence. Participants placed a high value on linguistic accuracy, but recognized the role played by communication strategies, discourse markers, contexts of use, registers, culture and metalinguistic knowledge. Participants reported that they felt less confident with native speakers and that, although they feared the latter's judgment, their main concern was offending native speakers by making mistakes. Another reported concern was that teaching in an L2 was more complex, as they needed to be proficient in L2 pedagogy and the French language itself.

Spaces for oral interaction. Participants perceived their oral interaction skills as weaker than listening, reading and writing skills. They reported a lack of oral interaction opportunities in their previous school or university experiences. For them, the weekly scheduled oral interaction opportunities were important, as they provided a structure for their language learning. In addition, participants appreciated the opportunities for extended oral interaction, focusing on meaning construction and linguistic forms in "real" contexts of language use for FSL teachers.

Safe, supportive space. Participants reported that a space of trust and support had been created during the sessions, and that they had benefited from opportunities to practice in small peer groups. They developed a sense of belonging to a learning community. According to the participants, they felt encouraged and emotionally supported by their peers and the facilitator, and were able to talk about their language insecurities. Participants also stressed the importance of corrective feedback in a context resembling a real interaction. This safe and supportive space fostered a sense of readiness and autonomy.

Mediation space. The language support sessions served as a mediating space in relation to the participants' courses, their Francophone peers and the Francophone community in general. For example, knowing the language of the required content and having the opportunity to practice it during these support sessions enabled teacher candidates to better understand and participate in their required FSL pedagogy courses. The sessions also helped them to build relationships with their French-speaking peers through greater confidence in interacting with them. According to the participants, their French-speaking peers became allies in their FSL learning process. Feeling more empowered, participants also increased their number of interactions with the francophone community. There was a general increase in positive language risk-taking.



IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS

More and more of our FSL teaching candidates come from our immersion programs. In our immersion classrooms, we see many future immersion professionals. Our study highlights the importance of a sense of belonging to the greater French-speaking community. In the classroom, it would be important to discuss and reflect on the ideology of the native speaker and the question of "good" French. Talking openly about ideologies and the language insecurity they bring helps to break the silence and sense of insecurity experienced by our students and future teachers. In the classroom, we can provide a safe and supportive space to foster the development of a healthy, positive bilingual identity and a sense of belonging to a community of Francophones. Our classrooms serve as a stepping stone to FSL education for some students, and it's we as teachers who partly nurture this passion for the French language and its teaching.

What's more, we're on the front line in our schools when new teachers begin their careers. We can help them in the transition from university to school by supporting them and serving as allies. By sticking together and serving as mentors, our schools can become spaces of oral interaction, safety and encouragement, and mediation. As immersion professionals, we are fortunate to be their teacher, their placement teacher and their colleague. We can accompany them throughout their career.

CONCLUSION

Our study reveals the need for safe and productive spaces in which preservice teachers can reflect on and discuss native speaker ideology and language insecurity. It also demonstrates that language support sessions can be integrated into a pre-service FSL teacher training program, enhancing it by creating links with required courses, francophone students and the wider francophone community.

Our study also highlights some of the specific language support needs of future FSL teachers:

- Emphasis on oral language and interaction
- Multiple opportunities for extended production
- Small, homogeneous groups to create a safe, positive space
- Interaction with real-life "teacher" topics that meet professional needs and enable practice of professional language register.
- Opportunities to consider both meaning and form - oral or written corrective feedback.

For pre-service FSL teachers, the positive effects of language support sessions, not only on confidence and language skills, but also on a sense of belonging to a community, could have a favorable impact on recruitment and encourage retention.

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