

10 CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT RETENTION IN FRENCH IMMERSION

As a program leader of a French immersion program in a secondary school, retention of students is often top of mind. Having a rich program, engaged teaching staff, and connected support staff helps the student to feel valued and supports their academic well-being as they work towards their post-secondary goals. With many programs available to students at the secondary school level, remaining in a French Immersion program can be a challenge especially when each unique program may provide opportunities that are enticing to the student. In collaboration with the team of French Immersion professionals in my school, we consider how to support students in understanding that the road to bilingualism does not end at the end of grade 12. Our role is to build confidence and competence in the use of French in a variety of contexts helping students see the benefits of their continued growth towards becoming plurilingual.

In my work, there are ten considerations for student retention until graduation in grade twelve that have helped frame the growth of the program at our school in southwestern Ontario.



Alexander Skene

Instructional Program Leader : French as a
Second Language / English as a Second
Language (grades 9 - 12)
Member of the ACPI Board of Directors



1- FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMMING

As students leave elementary school and transition into high school, French Immersion policy requirements change. In Ontario, in elementary school, students must complete a minimum of 50 percent of their day in French and earn a minimum of 3800 hours of instruction in French by the end of grade 8. In secondary school, students must complete a minimum of 10 credits; 4 language courses and 6 courses where the subject is taught in French. In the past ten years, the profile of students in our French Immersion program has changed and as a result we changed our program to meet the needs of our students. We worked to include a balance of theoretical courses which meet Ontario Secondary School Diploma requirements while providing students some opportunities for hands-on, active courses where rich oral language development is the focus.

A successful first year of high school allows students to build connections with new friends, teachers and to further build identity within a program they are following. Our goal was to include programming where students would earn a grade 9 credit in an elective which might inspire them to continue in a variety of program areas outside of the French Immersion requirements. When redesigning the course offerings within French Immersion, the department chose to include Dramatic Arts, to focus on oral expression and Food and Nutrition (Family Studies), to focus on conversational use of language. Both courses have final performance oral tasks where students use voice and expression, either where students use their voice and expression by staging a short adaptation of a reimagined fairy tale or in an action-oriented task where the students take part in a cooking competition and present their culinary creation to a panel of judges (the French Immersion teachers). These courses are found to be engaging by the students and open doors to program areas and/or courses within the school that provide wider post-secondary opportunities.

2- TRANSITIONS BETWEEN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY PANELS

As students leave their elementary school to come to secondary school, I have worked with the student services departments (Guidance and Special Education) to ensure that the voice of the French Immersion department be included in the support offered for transition. The partnership between the elementary schools, the guidance department, the special education department and the French immersion department ensures that misconceptions about continuing in French Immersion until grade 12 are dispelled. As the profiles of the French Immersion students have changed, so have the programs. The focus on skills and confidence and the use of content as a tool can require explanation to all parties who are supporting transitions to ensure that families understand program requirements and course offerings..

As a department, we have been able to visit elementary schools to assist with course selection and to present program options. Program viability is often determined by the number of students who select a course; without students in the program, rich program offerings might be challenging to offer. In order to engage future students, we have often included a student who has just completed grade 9 or 10 French Immersion to attend the visit along with a FI teacher. Wherever possible, we also try to bring a graduate of the elementary school so that there is a familiar face and the ability to make a connection with the incoming students and their future experience. Students like to hear the experience of their peers and to understand any nervousness they felt and how that went away once in the new setting. This has become a successful tradition that ensures all parties (Elementary teachers, Guidance counsellors, Special Education resource teachers and students) learn about the realities of the program experience and are able to support informed decision making with students and their families.



3- PARENT/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS

Engaging parents/families in conversation about the benefits of developing confidence and competence in French is important. Families have made a choice to include their child(ren) in French Immersion programming, however may seek/explore different or new programming options at the secondary level. When families start considering various options in secondary schools, I often ask questions about the initial goals of why French Immersion was chosen in grade 1. In many cases, families believe that these new programs cannot be completed in parallel within the scope of a French Immersion program. In having rich discussions about student pathways and opportunities in secondary school, there may be the possibility to include French Immersion alongside other various programs (ex. apprenticeship). Developing skills in both official languages is one of the primary goals of the French Immersion program and is a transferable skill that is for life.

The Ontario Teachers' Federation has produced a resource guide (2015) and a website entitled [Parent Engagement : supporting elementary and secondary teachers and educators working with parents and guardians](#). Within this resource there are many strategies to support positive interactions between parents and guardians and teachers who are working together to support academic success in students. These practical suggestions are divided between considerations for elementary and secondary school and support student mental and academic well-being through an asset lens. When speaking with parents, I always speak as though there is no option but to complete French Immersion in grade 12 and then explain how as a collective, our department seeks to develop the skills of our students. Speaking about the assets the students bring into the classroom and take with them once they leave our classes often reassures parents that the choice they made for grade one will be a benefit by the end of grade 12.

4- INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

It is a common misconception that adding French Immersion programming to a student with special education needs is too much and therefore removal from the program is necessary. "Many students ... have no inherent difficulties with learning a second language, as their individual needs are not specifically related to receptive or productive language." ([Including students with special education needs](#), p.11)

Research shows that students are able to transfer language learning strategies between languages and can see academic benefits such as phonological, morphological and metalinguistic awareness and an enhanced ability to use reading strategies (ibid, p.11).

It is important that the French Immersion teacher be included in discussions with various decision makers (parents/guardians, guidance counsellors, special education resource teachers) to ensure that context for language acquisition be provided for appropriate and necessary accommodations. In many cases, I've had the opportunity to partner with colleagues from the Special Education department during parent conferences to explain how we can support the development of skills in French language classes and subjects taught in French, while respecting the necessary accommodations of an individual education plan. These conversations have often led to collaborative support from the teachers within the department to support a student and their confidence in remaining in the program until grade 12 graduation. Understanding that there are opportunities to accommodate learning and evaluations for success can help to support the belief that French Immersion is for all students and all students can benefit from learning an additional language.



5- INCLUSION OF STUDENT IDENTITY

Students in French immersion programs represent many social and cultural identities. It is important that we create pluricultural spaces so that students see themselves represented in the material we provide. Although provincial and territorial curriculum objectives may outline expectations for cultural awareness and understanding (such is the case in the Ontario Curriculum policy document), we need to be responsive in our choices of texts, videos and material we provide in our immersion programs, language and content courses alike.

In some cases, budgetary restraints may impede the purchase of new material for the classroom and it may be necessary to re-imagine how certain texts are treated in a course. For example, in our department, we study the novel “L'étranger” by Albert Camus. In order to present material to students through an anti-colonialist perspective we now teach it in tandem with excerpts of “Meursault, contre-enquête” by Kamel Daoud to show an anti-colonialist perspective. In this second text, there is intentional inclusion of a voice of a character who was not present in the original work.

In a Canadian History course, approaching the truths of Canada's past through culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy will provide opportunities to apply the concepts of Historical Thinking in an intentional manner. In addressing topics of anti-colonial racism (ex. residential schools) or anti-black racism (ex. Africville), as a department, we have evolved our practice to ensure we also investigate and include the positive contributions that have been made by various treaty and equity seeking groups so that students who have been impacted by intergenerational trauma can see uplifting and positive contributions and impact to Canadian society.

Providing choice to students to investigate, learn or make connections to their social and/or cultural identities has become a goal whereby students are led to think critically and communicate their newly acquired knowledge. Allowing students to be challenged and engaged with a material that encourages them to think critically and consider various perspectives has allowed them to develop agency over their learning. As a team of teachers, we have been able to work together to share anecdotes between our courses to leverage engagement by making connections of topics with the goal of sustaining interest in our program.



6- TARGETING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS (WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME...)

As French Immersion professionals, we know that being plurilingual is a skill that is transferable to many contexts. I have found it important to keep this discussion ongoing with students so they remain motivated towards opportunities that they may not even know are possible in their future. In 2018, the Council of Ministers of Education (<https://www.globalcompetencies.cmec.ca/global-competencies>) created a list of six global competencies which have helped in collaborative planning in my department. They are :

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship
- Learning to learn/self-aware and self-directed
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Global citizenship and sustainability

Although these skills are not directly related to language acquisition, functional use of an additional language is important for students to see how and when their acquired knowledge and skills will serve them outside of the classroom. As I plan a skill to be developed, I think about how it will be received by a student through the question “What’s in it for me?” If a student can see the importance of being able to think critically and creatively about a topic, potentially to solve a problem, it can allow the student to understand how there are many different ways to communicate as well as the importance of collaborating to share different ideas and perspectives on any given topic. It can also help develop metacognitive skills on how to approach tasks differently with the goals of being more resilient and what next steps might be necessary for greater success in a task.

In chapter 4 of the the Common European Frame of Reference for Languages (CEFR) companion volume (<https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>) released in 2018, includes descriptor scales for plurilingual and pluricultural competences. I have benefitted throughout my education and career of having additional languages and have experienced how this has helped me when presented in situations where the languages I speak were not an option. Using the CEFR to guide the development of these competences can help students understand that languages are interrelated and interconnected. I have also witnessed when students make connections to additional languages they speak in the French Immersion class and how that has sparked added confidence in gaining newly acquired vocabulary. Inspiring students to become global citizens will afford them the understanding to see the importance of creating inclusive spaces when they encounter and interact with others who may not share the same linguistic or cultural background as they have.



7- MINDSETS IN THE CLASSROOM

Establishing a growth mindset in students about their abilities in an additional language is key for intrinsic motivation. Especially after years of inconsistent instruction (online, hybrid, face to face), as a department, we have worked to ensure that we are working to build a culture of success within our classrooms and understanding that students are acquiring skills at a different pace. Since returning to a regular delivery model, much of my instruction starts with the “why”. I have found that transparency has helped students understand the direction we are taking in learning a new skill, but has also afforded me a chance to have some intentional check-points for understanding and evaluation readiness.

Students can easily fall into the trap of thinking that they cannot “do” a targeted skill. During online or hybrid learning, students gained confidence by having the ability to seek understanding at their fingertips. Now, we as French Immersion professionals are tasked at building resilience with students who are challenged with new and/or lagging skills. “When students consciously take the opportunity to learn from their errors, they will approach the unsuccessful task in a new way or with more effort.” (Ricci, p.68) I hope that if my students see that I am interested in discussing errors as opportunities rather than deficiencies, they will also see that I have a valued interest in seeing their pride in progress.

In my class, I aim to develop metacognitive skills with my students so that they can reflect on their level of proficiency against tools such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). By doing so, it has helped them understand what steps are needed to progress in both their confidence and competence as users of the French language. My personal goal is to create a safe environment for risk-taking to allow students to practise their newly developed skills and take pride in their growth.

8- LIFE AFTER FRENCH IMMERSION (BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL)

Language learning is a lifelong skill. A graduate of French Immersion has acquired many productive and receptive skills, however it's important that they understand how these skills can continue to be developed beyond secondary school. As students plan their transition to postsecondary, the understanding that keeping French in their education plan might need support and guidance from professionals in French Immersion.

As my students in grade 12 receive acceptances to their post secondary destinations, I keep asking “are you doing a minor in French?”, “did you know that there is a need for bilingual employees in this sector?” or “did you ever think how continuing in French in university will open career opportunities for you?” Most of my students were unaware of the opportunities that exist to combine French studies with another major of study (ex. Engineering or Business). These are options that are not often presented in course guides and results in the students needing to seek information from the post secondary institution.

Recently through social media, I've found universities have started to offer French language certificates if a student completes a bundle of courses in tandem with their degree requirements. University of Waterloo's French Studies department recently posted on Instagram (@uwfrenchstudies) that “Opting for a French diploma is an accessible way to learn more about French language and culture. Bilingualism can open many doors and lead to amazing opportunities; from the French diploma to so much more - French Studies is a great way to build up your skills and make the most of your future.” (March 23, 2023). This diploma is awarded to students who successfully complete two academic course units (four courses) with a minimum cumulative diploma average of 65%. When I shared this with my grade 12 French Immersion class, there was definite interest in researching this as an option. This is but one example where helping students see continued opportunities to retain French in their education plan can lead to enriching experiences for our graduates.



9- BUILDING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY WITHIN AND ACROSS DEPARTMENT(S)

“When teachers believe that together they and their colleagues can impact student achievement, they share a sense of collective teacher efficacy... Collective efficacy is high when teachers believe that the staff is capable of helping students master complex content, fostering students’ creativity and getting students to believe they can do well in school. (Donahoo, p3). I am fortunate to work with a team of engaged professionals who have a collective belief that all students can succeed in a French Immersion program. Whether they teach language courses or subject areas where the instruction is in French, there is a common desire to inspire students to become confident users of French. When a team of professionals who share a common belief about student achievement and development of skills, students will feel more confident to take risks in class. Setting a culture of high expectations that are attainable for all students can be motivational for students. This collective desire for success as well as building relational trust in the classroom will encourage risk-taking and can create a context where students understand what skills they are working to develop. They will see the importance of taking risks and knowing that their successes will be celebrated and valued. With my course teams, we work to build time together to moderate our evaluation to ensure consistency and transparency with our students. When I provide descriptive feedback to a class, they see value and trust the journey when I am able to say “In grading this task with Mme X, we noticed between our classes that our next step should be ... “. By being transparent and showing that all teachers in the department have the vested interest in their success, students understand the importance of the feedback and know that we will accompany them on the journey.

10- PASSION... SHARING THE WHY?

Sharing one’s passion and one’s own personal journey in learning French with students can be motivational. Students may only be able to set their sights on opportunities they can access while in high school, but might not be able to set the scope of their personal goals beyond grade 12 and where French Immersion can take them. Learning about their teacher’s experiences of resilience, opportunities and successes can act as a way to help students see that there is benefit to remaining in French Immersion until graduation at the end of secondary school. When a teacher shares their journey, it opens a door for a student to speak about their goals and aspirations, thereby building relational trust. By sharing my journey to become a French Immersion teacher and speaking about my experience of being in French Immersion, French Minority Language school, and finishing high school in Core French and then choosing to major in French in university allows students to understand that there is not one path to reach a goal. When I speak about my work experience prior to becoming a teacher, they often have questions about how French played a part in my seeking employment, in my decision to work abroad and how I continue to develop my French as an adult.

The relationship that forms by sharing one’s passion allows the students to explore, question and understand the opportunities that proficiency in French can hold for them in the future. This dialogue allows students to form their own identity as a student/future graduate of French Immersion and to determine their intrinsic “why FI?”. If students can answer why they are in the program, what they hope to achieve by the end of graduation and how they hope the program will serve them in their future lives, they are more likely going to set the completion of the program as a prime objective.



10 CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT RETENTION IN FRENCH IMMERSION

REFERENCES

Common European Framework of Reference Learning, Teaching, - Rm.coe.int. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework.../16809ea0d4>.

Parent Engagement: Supporting Elementary and Secondary Teachers and Educators Working with Parents and Guardians. Ontario Teachers' Federation, 2015, p.56-59.

Ricci., Mary Cay. *Mindsets in the Classroom*. Prufrock Press, 2013, p.68.

Donohoo, Jenni. *Collective Efficacy: How Educators' Beliefs Impact Student Learning*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2017, p. 3.

