



COMMENTARY OPENING THE DOORS TO OFFICIAL LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR ALLOPHONES

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INTRODUCTION

French is referred to as a second language in Canada due, in part, to the importance placed on official language bilingualism. However, with approximately two-thirds of Canada's population growth coming from immigration, French is an additional language for many immigrant students. Such an increase in numbers, accompanied by a greater diversity of language backgrounds, changes the landscape and thus calls for further investigation into the allophone experience of learning French.

Is French an appropriate area of study for recently arrived immigrant students who are – at the same time – improving their English-language skills? That was the overarching question guiding my masters and doctoral research. My motivation came from my experience teaching introductory core French to recently arrived allophone students in three different secondary schools in two different cities. In each location, it was my experience that allophone students were successful in learning French. Interested in the reasons for their success, I examined their motivation to study French with my master's thesis (Mady 2003). In comparing the allophone participants' motivations to study French to their Canadian-born peers, I discovered that, in general, allophone participants were more motivated to learn French than their Canadian-born peers. Yet despite my years of perceiving the success of allophone students in French and the accompanying research, it remained a challenge to persuade administrators in the school system to include allophone students in core French at the secondary level. Therefore, in order to gather more evidence to respond to the question of the suitability of core French for allophone students, I designed a four-step investigation of secondary allophone students studying core French for my doctoral research.

METHODOLOGY

This study had four objectives:

- to investigate present practice regarding the inclusion of recently arrived ESL students in CF classes at the secondary level
- to compare the French proficiency of recently arrived ESL immigrant students at the secondary level to that of unilingual, English-speaking, Canadian-born students
- to compare the French proficiency of recently arrived ESL immigrant students at the secondary level to that of multilingual Canadian-born students
- to explore the contributions ESL students bring to language learning based on their former language-learning experiences.

First, I surveyed principals and heads of student service departments regarding their practices pertaining to the inclusion of allophone students in core French. Second, I compared allophone students' performance in French to that of their Canadian-born peers, both unilingual and multilingual. Finally, I collected qualitative data in the form of journals and interviews with a subset of allophone students. A subset of allophone parents was also interviewed. To provide the broader context, a general description of the testing follows with a more detailed description of the surveys and qualitative data from the journals afterward.

FINDINGS: MULTI-SKILLS TESTS

I compared the French performance of the three groups using a multi-skills test. The allophones completed the test five months into their French studies whereas the Canadian-born students completed the test after having studied French for five years. The allophone students outperformed both groups of Canadian-born students in the listening and reading sections, in one of the two written sections (see Table 1). In two of three speaking sections the allophones outperformed one of the two Canadian

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

			M	SE
Listening Component	allophone	Unilingual Canadian-born	2.30*	.58
	allophone	Multilingual Canadian-born	2.37*	.58
Reading Component				
Combination of sections	allophone	Unilingual Canadian-born	4.86*	.63
	allophone	Multilingual Canadian-born	4.82*	.65
1st composition:	allophone	Unilingual Canadian-born	1.11*	.31
	allophone	Multilingual Canadian-born	1.11*	.31
Speaking section				
2nd section	allophone	Unilingual Canadian-born	2.20*	.86
	allophone	Multilingual Canadian-born	1.50	.79
3rd section	allophone	Unilingual Canadian-born	1.25	.61
	allophone	Multilingual Canadian-born	2.04	.56

Note. * The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

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participant groups. The results from one written section and one speaking section are not present on the table as there were no significant differences among the groups.

In general, then, allophone students outperformed their Canadian peers despite the Canadians' previous extensive French-language learning experience.

Such success is not surprising. It is commonly said that prior language learning experience can facilitate further language learning. In fact, Canadian research has demonstrated that minority-language students can outperform their unilingual peers (Bild and Swain, 1989; Cummins, 1981; Hart, Lapkin and Swain, 1988; Swain, Lapkin, Rowen and Hart, 1990). Such success has been attributed to shared language typology, the minority language students at the time coming from romance language backgrounds. However, with this study in particular as seen in Table 2, and with today's countries of origin in general, the same shared typology between the participants' first language and French did not exist.

In addition to typology then, what other explanation could clarify the allophones' superior performance? The level of competence in languages known could have influenced French competence as Cummins (1981) suggests. The vast majority of allophone participants in this study not only were literate in their first language but they also indicated in the questionnaire that they continued to use their first languages each day whereas only 23% of the multilingual Canadian-born participants indicated that they could read and write in their home languages. Language competence, then, could have been one of the factors that positively influenced the allophone students' French acquisition.

TABLE 2
ALLOPHONE PARTICIPANTS' AGE, LENGTH OF TIME IN CANADA, LANGUAGE BACKGROUND AND ESL LEVEL

Age of arrival in Canada	N	Length of time in Canada	N	Language background	N	ESL level	N
10–13 years of age	15	Less than one year	4	Indo-Aryan	34	low beginner	0
14–16 years of age	21	One year	20	Afro-Asiatic	2	beginner	17
17 years of age	2	Two years	14	Sino-Tibetan	2	intermediate	7
Incomplete	2	three years	2	Austro-Asiatic	1	high intermediate	3
				Romance	1	advanced	13

FINDINGS: PRINCIPAL AND GUIDANCE HEADS QUESTIONNAIRE

Allophone students can meet with success in French, but do they have access to the opportunity? A second objective of the study was to investigate present practice involving the inclusion of recently arrived allophone students in core French classes at the secondary level. I developed a questionnaire and used it to survey present practices of secondary school principals and heads of guidance departments in one urban board of education.

The survey of the principals (N=13) and guidance heads (N=16) revealed that none of the schools consistently required allophone students to take French. In fact, the majority of the respondents (54%) reported that allophone students were never required to study French, with the remaining minority indicating that allophone students were sometimes included in the French program. The principals cited age of the student, lack of English knowledge, and lack of capability to offer a separate core French course for ESL students as reasons for excluding ESL students from core French. Some principals clarified their exclusion by offering the following explanations:

“We usually exclude much older students (18–20) and students who are at a very low ESL level.” (secondary school principal A)

“Exclude – due to lack of English language knowledge at the time of entry to the school.” (secondary school principal B)

“They (*ESL students*) have a second language – English – and they are challenged dealing with one new language.” (secondary school principal C)

“Core French is an option based on numbers so we can offer it to the extent of the interest shown by ESL students.” (secondary school principal D)

However, when the allophone students were included, all of those principals recognized that they were more successful in French than in their other subjects. Simply put, allophone students meet with success studying French but, in general, administrations do not provide them with the opportunity.

FINDINGS: JOURNAL ENTRIES

A third objective of the study was to explore the contributions allophone students bring to language learning. A subset of the allophone participants kept journals in class. During the 18-week semester, they wrote seven entries into their journals. Although participants were allowed and encouraged to write freely, they were also provided with guiding questions because they were allophone students. Although the participants were given the option to write in the language of their choice, they chose to write in English.

The purpose of the journals was to elicit information about the allophone participants' present language-learning experiences.

I read through the journals to highlight and code potentially pertinent information. I, then, put like-themed data together (Glesne, 1999). It became evident in the categorizing of the highlighted information that the categories corresponded to the four themes identified in Breen's learner contributions.

Learner Attributes

In exploring why learners might differentially achieve additional language competency, Breen (2001) encouraged an investigation of learner contributions under his first category of learner attributes, which includes attributes the individual learner brings to the language-learning process. In my study the influence of languages known on the learning of French was particularly pertinent. Contrary to the views expressed by the principals, confidence in the participants' ability to learn French was evident in the journal data. In fact, no participant viewed the learning of French as a difficulty or a burden; rather they described the ease with which they learned it:

I like to learn French in Canada because I know English in India. I learn French during presentations and conversation. French is not difficult to learn. (ESL participant A)¹

It's easy (to learn French) here because we can talk. (ESL participant B)

It was easy to learn (French) here because...here we learned to speak. (ESL participant C)

It is lot easier to learn French because there is a lot of people who's learning the same language you can speak that language with them. (ESL participant R)

The participants linked the ease of learning French and their competence to the opportunity to speak French in class. Similarly, the students seem happy with their French progress. Even though the students did not explicitly express it, it seems that the ability to speak and be understood in several languages was more important than being able to express oneself as a native speaker.

Learner Action

Breen's second category, learner action, refers to the learners' participation in language-learning activities. More specifically, Breen highlighted the learners' use of language-learning strategies. Studies (e.g., Jessner, 1999; Gibson and Hufeisen, 2006) have revealed the transfer of language-learning strategies as another positive contribution multilinguals may bring to additional language learning. Although the allophone participants did not specifically refer to their class activities as strategies, the allophone participants claimed that they found some activities helpful to their language learning.

We have to listen carefully to any French word so we learn a lot of French. (ESL participant E)

She (the teacher) lets us repeat after her to help pronunciation. (ESL participant B)

She (the teacher) makes us practice more. (ESL participant D)

She practice to learn french her students. (ESL participant A)

We repeat things at least twice during lesson so we can have a stronger memery about the knowledge. (ESL participant O)

First, the allophone participants reported the use of the metacognitive strategies of direct and selective attention. Second, the allophone participants also indicated using and appreciating cognitive strategies to improve their French learning. Their recognition and use of repetition as a strategy is also evident in the above statements.

Context of learning

The investigation of context of acquisition is complex when applied to allophone students learning FSL in Ontario. For example, allophone students come from a variety of learning contexts: from rote learning of English as a subject to attending an English-medium school, to no English instruction at school. They also come with experience from a variety of other language-learning contexts, such as home and community. It is thus necessary to investigate how allophone students' present language-learning context affected their learning of French that is, for the most part, formal. The participants highlighted not only the time spent on speaking French, but also their desire to do so. One participant even identified French speaking as a cause-and-effect relationship: if one speaks French, one will learn it.

I did a lot of speaking' talking activities in your country. (ESL participant A)

We speak French in class. (ESL participant C)

I like to doing speaking activities because I makes the class "live" and we don't feel boring. (ESL participant N)

We do work in French. We speak in French. (ESL participant M)

When you go to class you have to speak in French so you have to do learn French. (ESL participant E)

Wider Community

Beyond the micro context of the classroom, Breen recognized the influence of the macro context of the wider community with his fourth category, wider community identity and participation. In this category, Breen suggested that the entirety of the learner's experience must be considered – the communities to which they previously belonged, to which they currently belong, and to which they seek to belong.

¹ Quotes taken from student journals were reproduced here as written by the students.

continued

Similarly, Lambert (1977) claimed that in order to profit from the learner contributions, the learner must consider the language to be learned prestigious. The language must not only be of prestige to the learner, but also to the learner's family and the broader community. In addition, the status of the students' other languages can also influence the degree of additional language development. Applying the principle of linguistic status to allophone students studying core French in Ontario, one might assume that allophone students' motivation to study English might de-motivate them to study French. However, in my study (Mady, 2003) of allophone students studying core French at the secondary level, I found not only that the allophone students' motivation to learn French was greater than that of their anglo-Canadian counterparts, but also that the allophone students believed that the ability to function in French was part of being Canadian.

In my doctoral study, the journals revealed that the participants were motivated to learn French in Canada for a variety of reasons.

You get to meet more people in our new country and you get to speak more (if you know French). (ESL participant K)

It is better to learn a language in another country because you get to meet another people that you talk all kinds of different languages. (ESL participant J)

I like to learn French in Canada because I like to learn about Canada. (ESL participant L)

As per their descriptions, two participants indicated that they wanted to learn French to meet new people. Two others linked learning French to nationalism.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that allophone students are capable of meeting with success in CF while continuing to study English. In fact, given the high achievement of the allophone participants as compared with their Canadian-born peers, French may provide a subject area in which the allophone students succeed, whereas they may be faced with failure in other content areas. I determined that the success of the allophone students was influenced by a multitude of factors. First, the allophone participants' achievement in French was positively enhanced by their self-confidence and positive beliefs about multilingualism. Second, the allophone participants identified language-learning strategies that may have proven advantageous in additional language learning. Third, the novelty and practicality of the French class context may have enhanced their motivation and thus language learning. Lastly, the perception of the importance of French in the wider community of Canada served as inspiration for the allophone participants who were seeking to belong to their new country. Is CF suitable for recently arrived allophone adolescent immigrants? My study's examination into their ability and desire suggests a positive response and the dissemina-

tion of such information may begin to provide for gains in equality of access to the advantages of official language bilingualism in Canada.

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