

FRENCH SECOND LANGUAGE EXEMPTIONS



SHOULD STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES BE EXCUSED FROM FRENCH CLASS?

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In Canada, French Second Language (FSL) study is compulsory in five provinces (Ontario, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island), and the province of British Columbia requires that all students study a second language – French being one of those options. Within five of these provinces (except Nova Scotia), it is possible for students to be exempt from the requirement because they have a language-related disability or other type of exceptional need.

Is this sound policy? What are the pros and cons of FSL exemptions for students with exceptional learning needs? Both my research and my experience as a teacher have led me to conclude that FSL education can benefit all students and

that exemption is unwarranted. And yet, in the current system, I believe there are rare instances when exemption may be the “lesser of two evils” for individual students.

The case against exemption

It’s my belief that, 95 percent of the time, exempting students with exceptional needs from compulsory FSL programs[1] or compulsory second language study should be discontinued. I believe the exemptions are problematic because they perpetuate the idea that FSL study is not for all, and particularly that exceptionalities and FSL cannot coexist.

Because of research within the context of French immersion and with children being raised in bilingual households,[2] we have known since the

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The “system” (teacher education, school districts, policies, school leaders, Ministries of Education) has got to **do more to support FSL teachers in making their classrooms inclusive, if we hope to keep FSL programs vibrant and relevant for years to come.**

1980s that a disability, in and of itself, does not preclude a child from developing competency in another language. We also know that even in situations where a child only gets additional support in the home language (and not in the second language), the child’s skills in the second language benefit from the cross-lingual support. In other words, it should not be assumed that English-only support is a detriment to developing FSL proficiency. [3] Thus, research has shown that disability is not a barrier to language study and that any support for an individual with an exceptionality benefits all languages the student knows.

As well, there are changing conceptions of what success looks like in language education. Though there are still programs (and policies) that are tied to the idea that the student must be working toward the “ideal” of native/native-like proficiency, the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to language study in Canada has promoted the idea of framing success through what students “can do.” [4] This approach defines success as progress in the language, not attainment of a single standard like “native speaker.” This paradigm shift within second language education, while still underway in Canada, is consonant with the ideas of inclusion for every type of language learner in the classroom.

It is not the case that second language instruction is especially unsuited to students with learning disabilities. In fact, I have been struck by the compatibility between the pedagogies promoted for

good language teaching and the strategies I have discovered are beneficial for students who have a harder time understanding and expressing language. My research has shown that many of the strategies recommended to support students with special education needs are consonant with good FSL pedagogy in core French. [5] A newer model of FSL pedagogy, Intensive French, [6] has been touted as naturally inclusive of all learner needs and an improvement over core French. Some preliminary research has seemingly confirmed this, [7] though there is still a need to learn more about how teachers are responding to learner needs in this program. So in framing our questions about exemptions, we have to be mindful of the methods used to teach. Methods can create barriers and provide supports, and we need to recognize the role of the actual pedagogy in framing the educational experience for students. If it is the case that our teaching methods are exclusionary, then I do not see this as a sufficient reason to exempt a student from the class: The methods can (and should) change.

Finally, the practice of FSL exemption may actually weaken FSL education itself. To the best of my knowledge, FSL is the only subject area in Canada from which students can be exempted from compulsory study because of a disability. Students with disabilities are not exempted from other compulsory courses, like math, physical education, or language arts courses, even in situations when the disability is in “opposition” to the content under study (e.g., a student with a physical disability is still involved

in physical education courses; a student with hearing loss still participates in music classes). Perpetuating exemptions within FSL helps to spread the idea that FSL study is not important or worthwhile – an attitude counterproductive to the goal of retaining students beyond the point when FSL study ceases to be required, and to the goal of promoting favourable views of second language study among parents and others in the wider community. It is a reasonable concern that many students who have been exempted from FSL study will eventually become parents who are skeptical about FSL for their own children, perhaps leading to new generations of students unmotivated to pursue FSL.

Is there a case for exemption?

There are rare instances when I do believe an exemption from FSL study is a “necessary evil,” because of limitations within the system and because of the FSL program’s deep-rooted cultural history.

There is a stream of research that has confirmed that when principals and teachers view disability as “unfixable,” as something totally within the child (and therefore not receptive to support), fewer efforts are made to actually include the child in the learning context. [8] Thus, if a child with a more unique set of learning needs is in a setting where there is more doubt than belief in his or her potential for success, I think it may sometimes be best to find a meaningful alternative for the student. In arriving at this conclusion, I am not trying to imply that there are teachers and principals out there who are “anti-kids-with-disabilities.” But I would argue that how disabilities are viewed by key stakeholders can impact what happens in the classroom. While this is not true only of FSL classrooms, there is a cultural history in the context of FSL that has promoted the idea that disability and FSL do not mix. This culture persists even in today’s “inclusive” era of education. I realize that favouring exemptions in settings where this belief is pervasive could be perceived as giving in to the naysayers. But as I learned through a case study I conducted with a colleague, [9] it can be really hard on the family of a child with a learning difficulty to fight against the belief that FSL and exceptionality are incompatible. Sometimes, it is more

and beneficial to all learners. I challenge my colleagues within the profession to maintain that verve, because all educators should always believe in the possibility of doing better. ■

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