

Brief to the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages

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From:

Monique Bournot-Trites

University of British Columbia

Department of Language and Literacy Education

Vancouver, BC

The lack of qualified teachers for French as a Second Language programs in British Columbia

Summary:

In this presentation, I will first demonstrate that there is a lack of qualified teachers for French as a Second Language programs (immersion and core French). I will then show that this has negative consequences for students and teachers, and I will put forth recommendations for addressing the problem.

Lack of qualified teachers

Having excellent French as a Second Language programs requires confident teachers who are proficient in the French language and knowledgeable about French culture. However, the context of French as a Second Language instruction in British Columbia, and Canada in general, presents challenges in terms of the lack of qualified teachers (particularly with regard to language proficiency and knowledge of or experience with francophone culture), as demonstrated by a number of research projects since the 1996 Day and Shapson study.

In their study, Day and Shapson sent a questionnaire to 2,000 immersion teachers, and found that approximately two thirds of them indicated “a great need” or “some need” in the area of French language and culture. (Other studies include: Grimmer and Echols, 2001; Ewart, 2009; Veilleux, 2003; Veilleux and Bournot-Trites, 2005; Woo, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014). Other studies have shown that the situation has not improved since.

In fact, in 2007 the newsletter of the British Columbia and Yukon branch of Canadian Parents for French featured an article that was boldly entitled: “Does your Child’s French Teacher Speak

French?" (p. 8). This article informed parents of the lack of French proficiency of a number of teachers in immersion programs.

The problem is exacerbated by the growing number of students in immersion programs in British Columbia. School boards are having difficulty filling vacant positions and maintaining adequate substitute lists. A study I published with Ingrid Veilleux in 2005 found that school boards in British Columbia are often forced to compromise with regard to the level of French required of immersion teachers, particularly in rural areas outside of Vancouver.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for teachers of French as a second language to be given access to programs for improving their knowledge of the French language and culture.

Added to this is the issue of the legitimacy and self-confidence of teachers, which has become a focus of research in the last ten years. In fact, unlike in the past, teachers in French immersion and core French programs are often teaching their second, or even third, language. Even if they have a high degree of proficiency, they feel they lack legitimacy, that they are marginalized compared with teachers who are native speakers, and they do not feel part of that community. In his 2008 study, Bernat spoke of the impostor syndrome. This lack of self-confidence is worse for those who do not have sufficient proficiency and are hired regardless, due to the lack of qualified teachers.

These teachers in particular therefore require professional experience in francophone contexts in order to improve their proficiency and self-confidence.

Consequences of the lack of qualified teachers

By all evidence, the lack of proficiency among some French second language teachers has a number of negative consequences for the teachers and their students.

In fact, the communicative, or action-oriented, approach presupposes that teachers speak the language fluently, but also that they are sufficiently familiar with the rules of grammar to provide corrective feedback to their students. The sciences and humanities present difficulties for teachers with a limited vocabulary or difficulty expressing themselves in French. Such a situation obviously reduces their level of confidence in their teaching, as well their capacity to effectively run the class.

The consequences for the students are just as serious, if not more so. In immersion, the teacher is almost the students' only model. When the teachers lack proficiency in the language, the students' degree of proficiency is diminished. As a result, they have difficulty understanding texts in French, and even more difficulty writing in academic subjects. At some point, the students' level of proficiency may prevent them from learning the content of the curriculum, which can cause problems for them at the post-secondary level. Furthermore, students who have difficulty in immersion will abandon it for English-language programs. This attrition could be limited if a lot more teachers were more proficient.

In core French programs, a teacher who has difficulty speaking fluently cannot make the material interesting, and this has consequences for the students' motivation. The result is that many

students coming out of a core French program indicate that they don't like French, that they aren't good at language studies, and that they can't communicate in French. Not only have they not learned what they should have learned in their French course, they are not in the least motivated to continue or improve later on.

Recommendations:

1. I therefore recommend encouraging more young people to want to become teachers by conducting recruitment through free advertising and by offering more financial support
2. And for existing teachers, grants that could be used for:
 - a. Promoting long-term professional experience or exchanges in Quebec or abroad in order to improve the language proficiency and sense of legitimacy of teachers who need it, as we found in a recent study (Bournot-Trites, M. (2015).
 - b. Providing free access to courses in French and French-language teaching that are specially designed for teachers, like UBC's online Gramligne (Bournot-Trites, 2008) or SFU's oral course.

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