

## **Profile of a Group of “Successful” Bilingual Senior High School Students**

Rosemary Foster  
University of Manitoba

### **Abstract**

Student enrollment in French immersion programs in Canada is declining (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1997). This article addresses the issue of attrition and retention in secondary school bilingual programs through the presentation of a descriptive profile of a group of “successful” French immersion high school students. The construction of this profile is supported by the major findings of a qualitative study that investigated reasons why a group of Anglophone students of varying abilities made the decision to continue and complete their high school studies in French immersion (Foster, 1992). By offering this perspective of “success,” the contention here is congruent with what other researchers have claimed (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Tardif & Weber, 1987); consideration must be given to factors other than academic achievement and program limitations when probing the issue of participation levels in this bilingual alternative in high school programming.

### **Context of the Study**

Often referred to as the “immersion phenomenon,” French immersion programming in Canada is an innovation in public schooling that has been “one of the most studied programs in the educational field in Canada” (MacIsaac, 1991, p. 36). Classrooms where students learn their second language “by use while learning something else and not by formal language instruction, is an experiential approach which has had a revolutionary impact on second language learning and teaching” (Stern, 1984, p. 4). According to Krashen (1984):

Canadian immersion is not simply another successful language teaching program—it may be the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature. No program has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no program, to my knowledge, has done as well. (p. 61)

The advantages of bilingualism have been equally well documented. In a recent article, Latham (1998) claims that “numerous research studies in the past 30 years have concluded that fluent bilingualism contributes to the cognitive growth of children,” and that “most researchers believe that knowing two languages and perspectives gives bilingual children a more diversified and flexible basis for cognition than their monolingual peers” (p. 79).

What started as a pilot project, an “experiment” in bilingual schooling (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) proposed by a small group of parents in the province of Quebec in 1965, has now become an integral part of every Canadian province’s educational system. In 1991 it was estimated that over 288,000 elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in French immersion programs throughout Canada (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217).

More recent studies and statistics, however, have indicated a leveling off and a drop in participation in this program, particularly at the secondary level (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1996, pp. 98-101). A study conducted in the Carleton Board of Education in the province of Ontario, for example, found that 50 to 75 % of French immersion students there dropped out of immersion (but not out of their studies) during high school (cited in the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217). With the aim of investigating the variables associated with attrition, a national study involving over 350 school districts throughout Canada was undertaken in 1991 (Halsall, 1991). Chief researcher Nancy Halsall reported in the document that between 20 and 80 % of French immersion students left the program upon entering high school for a variety of reasons (p. 3). Even though numerous empirical studies conducted over the past 30 years have reported on the positive association “between bilingualism and both general intellectual skills and divergent thinking” (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 10), the widespread perception persists that students who undertake secondary school studies in their second language may be disadvantaged. Significant numbers of students enrolled in bilingual programs are choosing not to continue study in their second language at high school.

The issue of attrition and retention of students in senior high school French immersion programs in Canada presents one of the greatest challenges in providing a comprehensive bilingual program, Kindergarten through grade 12. The reasons associated with students leaving high school bilingual programs have been well documented (Annual Report of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992; Halsall, 1991). Little has been written, however, about why some students make the choice to continue their participation in the program at the high school level. The study reported on in this article was conceived and designed within this context (Foster, 1992).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study reported here was to contribute to the knowledge about student retention in high school bilingual and immersion programs. This was undertaken through the investigation of the perceptions and experiences of a select group of Anglophone Grade 10 students enrolled in the first year of a French immersion program in a suburban high school in Alberta, Canada. This group of students had become involved in a French immersion pilot program in elementary and junior high school, and had made the choice to take the core courses of their high school credit program in their second language. Specifically,

the purpose of the study was to provide an interpretation of how the “lived experiences” of these students had influenced their decision to continue in the program after junior high school. Because parents helped make the initial choice for French immersion in elementary school, and many were involved when these children chose to continue the program in high school, it was assumed that the perspectives of the parents would assist in contextualizing the students’ understandings of their experiences.

The general research question guiding this inquiry was: Why did this group of students choose to continue in a French immersion program at high school when the provincial and national trends indicated that their peers were choosing not to continue? Other questions that were central to the study included the following:

1. Why did these Anglophone parents and children initially choose this French immersion pilot program?
2. What had been the “lived experience” of these French immersion students in senior high school?
3. Why had these students selected to take the core courses of their high school credit program in French, their second language?

This article also suggests implications for future study; however, its main purpose is to contribute to current knowledge about student retention in senior high school bilingual and immersion programs by presenting a profile of this group of “successful” learners. “Successful” within the context of this article is used to describe this group of students who made the choice to continue French immersion study at high school.

## **Methods**

This study adopted an interpretivist research methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The study followed an emergent design to allow for the greatest understanding of the subjective reality of this group of Anglophone students and parents involved in this French immersion pilot program. Furthermore, it was assumed that an inductive inquiry of this nature which . . .

. . . allows us to glimpse the universe of immersion as it is perceived by a few of those who have seen it first hand and, more importantly, who have lived it, might allow for a more complete understanding and a richer insight into the immersion phenomenon. (Sloan, 1991, p. 38)

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Data collection and analyses occurred over a period of 10 months, which corresponded to the student participants’ first year within the high school. The students were selected from the 27 students comprising the pilot class housed within the composite secondary school of one thousand students. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews allowing for the inclusion of questions which had not been anticipated, but which were relevant to the different individual experiences.

The six students selected to participate in the study were all Anglophones for whom French was a second language. Two of the respondents had transferred into the program from another school, one when the pilot group was in grade seven and one when the class had reached Grade 10. The homeroom teacher of this Grade 10 pilot group aided in the selection of the six student respondents once the purpose and scope of the study had been explained. In order to capture the diversity of perspectives within the group, two students achieving at an average level, two at an above average level, and two at a below average level were selected from within this class of 27. The six student respondents varied similarly in their second language proficiency. Four of the respondents were female and two were male. The parents of each of the respondents also participated in the semi-structured interviews. Mothers and fathers were interviewed together in four of the six cases, and mothers only were interviewed in the remaining two instances. Each respondent was interviewed on two separate occasions over the ten-month period in which the study was conducted. The transcribed interviews were submitted to member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) before being analyzed. Data were also gathered through field notes made from school and classroom observations, and from relevant school and school district documents (St. Albert Protestant Board of Education, 1989).

Documents, field notes, and interview transcriptions were subjected to content analysis using procedures outlined in Bogdan and Biklen (1982). An audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis stages of this study. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and data analysis, an on-going discussion with university educators knowledgeable in the French immersion phenomenon was maintained during the construction of specific categories and as relevant themes related to the research questions emerged.

The responses to the three guiding questions of this study were re-organized into a category and theme structure in order to allow for meaningful interpretation of the data. The following categories were constructed from the data. They relate to the factors which students and parents found important when they made their choice to continue in the French immersion pilot program at the senior high school level:

1. Attitudes Toward the French Immersion Program and Experience:

- (a) the students' reasons for initially choosing the French immersion program
- (b) the parents' reasons for initially choosing the French immersion program
- (c) the criteria students used to "judge" their experiences in the French immersion program
- (d) the criteria parents used to "judge" their experiences in the French immersion program

(e) the commitment to continue in the French immersion program at high school

(f) the value placed on the French language culture while learning in the immersion setting

(g) the role of the French language and culture in these students' lives after completing the French immersion program

(h) recommendations for the French immersion program based on experiences

## 2. Perceptions and Significant Memories of the French Immersion Experience:

(a) perceptions and memories associated with instruction, the classroom, and the school

(b) perceptions and memories of the group with whom these students shared this experience

### Commitment to Continue and Complete the French Immersion Program at High School

The sense of commitment observed in these students who had chosen to study their core courses in French for high school credit appeared to have developed out of their positive experiences. The two students achieving at an above average level did not believe that their grades would be any better if they were studying in English, their mother tongue; their strong achievement they perceived to be due to their self-discipline, study habits, and effort. The two participants performing at an average level believed that their grades would not be any better if they were studying in English. Indeed, both claimed that the core subjects might be more difficult, at least initially, if they “switched” to English instruction. The two students who were performing at a below average level felt that if they “tried harder” their grades would improve. Neither saw language of instruction as a deciding factor in what they were achieving. Even though both of these students experienced difficulty in learning mathematics, neither thought that changing to English instruction would make mathematics “easier.”

All six student respondents outlined the following six benefits of French immersion study; the order of importance varied according to the individual student:

(a) Being fluent in their second language. All student respondents felt that they could “speak French,” even if their grammar was not excellent. The unilingual parents of the four students achieving at the average and below average levels ascribed a great deal of importance to their children’s bilingualism. The unilingual parents of the two students

achieving at above average levels spoke about their children's overall scholastic achievements and did not ascribe particular importance to their children's bilingualism.

(b) The ability to think in the second language. Two student respondents referred to this ability as a "dual way" of viewing the world.

(c) Feeling supported by a close knit group of peers with whom they had shared several formative years. The four students who were achieving at the average and below average levels talked a great deal about the "friendships" that had developed within the group. The two student respondents achieving at an above average level spoke about their shared learning experiences but did not use the word "friendship" as they described their relationships with the other students within the group.

(d) The sense of pride at having completed a challenging alternative program. All student respondents believed that they had paved the way for others through their participation in this program. The sense of pride derived from being the "first" French immersion class in the high school as much as from having become bilingual.

(e) Feeling supported by parents who were committed to the French immersion program even when they did not speak or understand French. The parent respondents were committed to "getting these kids through" this pilot program because they believed in the intellectual, academic, social, and personal benefits of learning French through immersion. All six students recognized and appeared to appreciate their parent's support, even if all admitted to moments of frustration over feeling "pushed" by parents to continue.

The sense of commitment to continue in French immersion until the completion of the program had grown out of what these student respondents had "lived" and were "living" at home as well as at school. Scholastic achievement in the core subjects was not the only or principal factor in these students' choice to continue French immersion study at high school. All six students felt "successful" regardless of their level of achievement.

### Limitations of the French Immersion Experience

Students and parents also underscored what they perceived to be the limitations of the French immersion program in general and this pilot program in particular. Eight or more of the 16 respondents believed that the following limitations had been, or would become, issues as the French immersion program continued. The limitation that was mentioned the most often is listed first, and the least often mentioned last.

(a) A shortage of qualified teachers with an expertise in the high school subject discipline as well as in the French language. Both of the students achieving at an above average level mentioned this as their greatest concern.

(b) A restricted selection of course offerings and teachers. At the secondary level, the students had no options to select from in French. They had the same teacher for at least two or three of their core subjects. All six student respondents mentioned this limitation. The two students achieving at a below average level stressed the importance of having a “good teacher” in mathematics, the subject with which they both struggled. A “good teacher” for these two students was one who was “understanding,” who “didn’t make you feel stupid,” and who “gave extra help.”

(c) A lack of “interesting” learning resources for high school aged French second language learners. All high school textbooks in French had been written for Francophone learners. Although the vocabulary and syntax were challenging for all student respondents, the texts reflected “French” culture and did not always appeal to second language learners. The texts were also written with younger Francophone learners as the intended audience.

(d) There was limited program support for French immersion students who were experiencing difficulty. Counselors, administrators, and tutors within the predominantly English high school did not speak French and did not have training in bilingual education or first-hand experiences with second language learning. None of the students, not even the two students achieving at a below average level, mentioned program support as a limitation. This was a concern, however, expressed by the parents of the four students achieving at the average and below average levels.

(e) An apparent lack of recognition of the French immersion program within the large, predominantly English high school. This was a concern for the four students as well as one or both of their parents achieving at the average and below average levels. The two students and their parents achieving at an above average level were less concerned with recognition of the program within the large dual track school. Both spoke of the potential advantage of their acquired language skills as they sought to establish themselves in a competitive job market. Although not conclusive, this suggests that their

reasons for staying involved in the French immersion program in high school were perhaps more “instrumental” than “integrative.” (Foster, 1992, p. 98)

In spite of these perceived limitations and underlying issues, all student and parent respondents indicated that they would recommend French immersion high school study to others. Many of the respondents felt compelled to share their insights and to offer what two parents and two students referred to as “constructive advice to those in charge” and “those who would follow.”

I undertook this study during the 1991-92 school year when this select group of students was in their first year of high school. Through a series of on-going communications with the school administration, I learned that by the end of the school year in June of 1994:

(a) Twenty-six of the twenty-seven students in this lead pilot group completed the requirements for high school graduation by successfully passing the standardized Ministry of Education examinations. The twenty-seventh student had moved to an urban center where she continued to study French as a second language but was no longer in French immersion.

(b) Twenty-four of the twenty-six students remaining in the lead group had taken their core subjects in French for their three years at high school. This entitled them to a Bilingual Certificate of Merit as well as a High School Graduation Diploma in June 1994. Five of the six respondents who had participated in the study graduated with a Bilingual Certificate in 1994. Through a personal communication with a parent respondent, I learned that her daughter, the sixth respondent, received a Bilingual Certificate in June 1995.

(c) One of the respondents had been selected from over 250 graduates as the valedictorian of the 1994 graduating class. He delivered his address in both English and French. Based on his overall academic achievement, this same student was later determined to be the top high school scholar in the province of Alberta in 1994.

One of the major findings of my 1992 study was that “this group of grade ten student respondents who had chosen to continue in the French immersion program at high school were second language learners who, in spite of their varying levels of language proficiency and academic achievement, ‘felt successful.’” Indeed, all six of the respondents were in objective terms, “successful” (Foster, 1992, p. 111). Each had graduated from high school and had received a Bilingual Certificate in recognition of their participation in this alternative program. This evidence suggests that during an era of dropping enrollments and high levels of attrition in high school French immersion

programs across Canada, these six students and their classmates comprised a genre of anomaly. Furthermore, their academic success and completion of the French immersion seemed to support the contention that consideration must be given to factors other than academic achievement and perceived program limitations when probing the issue of participation levels in this bilingual alternative in high school programming.

### Descriptive Profile of these “Successful” Bilingual High School Students

The “feeling of success” to which all students and parents made direct or indirect reference during the interviews which were conducted during that first year of high school appears to have been a significant factor in the decision to remain in this language program of choice. The profile of these students which was constructed from data analysis conducted during the original study is presented here in order to probe the possible relationship between that feeling of success and the retention of this group of bilingual high school learners.

Content analysis of the interview transcriptions of both parents and students revealed the importance that all placed on family conversations. These parents and children talked to each other about life in general and school as a part of “life’s experiences.” During the interviews with all of the parents it became clear that family dialogue was valued, but that there was recognition of, and respect for, the adolescents’ expressed need for privacy and independence. The interviews with the six adolescent respondents indicated that these students considered themselves individuals quite independent of parents. The confidence, maturity, and “success” of these students were attributable, at least in part, to the positive and supportive relationships, which they had with their parents.

The following is a collection of key phrases that were repeated by at least three of the students and parents during the interviews. They describe common attributes of the student respondents and constitute what I have called a descriptive profile of the “successful” bilingual high school student.

### Adolescents’ Views of Themselves as French Immersion Students

The students’ perceptions of themselves had to be distilled from what they said about self or about others within the group. Although the exact word or phrase varied, content analysis and member checks established that the intent and context of the remarks were similar.

Phrases repeated by three or more of the student respondents are listed according to the frequency with which these phrases were repeated. These phrases underscored:

- (a) Their confidence in their own language proficiency or that of the group. All six student respondents, but particularly those achieving at the average and below average levels,

were proud of their ability to speak French. They said: “We speak French;” “We speak better than we write French;” “I am bilingual.” One of the students achieving at a below average level was still very proud of her bilingual status. She claimed that having the ability to dream in French was a measurement of success, even if she carried her English accent into her dream world. In French she stated, “Je rêve en français mais avec un accent” (i.e., I dream in French, but with an English accent).

(b) Their confidence in their ability to learn core subjects in a French immersion setting. Five of the students made comments like: “I am doing well;” “I can learn in either English or French;” “I would find learning in French harder than in English now;” “Learning in French is a dual way of thinking;” “Speaking French is second nature.” One of the students achieving at a below average level did not appear as confident as the others. She believed that studying in English would probably be “easier,” but did not indicate any intention of leaving the program.

(c) The importance they attached to learning with others within the group. They said: “Our French class is comfortable;” “We are relaxed;” “We are all friends;” “We are like brothers and sisters;” “We are more mature in some ways and less mature in other ways;” “We help each other;” “We could do better.” The four students achieving at an average or below average level made the above claims. The two students achieving at an above average level did not mention “learning with others within the group.” Although not conclusive, this seems to once again underscore the instrumental nature of the reasons for these two choosing the French immersion program at high school.

#### Parents’ View of their Child as a Developing Adolescent and as a French Immersion Student

The 10 parent respondents described their children in similar ways. Although the exact word or phrase varied from one respondent to the next, through content analysis and member checks it became clear that the intent and context were similar. When speaking about their fourteen- or fifteen-year-old child, parents tended to differentiate between what they perceived to be their child’s strengths and weaknesses as a developing adolescent, and as a French immersion student.

Phrases that were repeated by three or more of the parent respondents are listed according to the number of times parents repeated them, starting with those most frequently repeated. Analysis of these phrases revealed:

(a) Parents' belief that their child had strengths and weaknesses as an individual. All 10 parents spoke about their children as individuals first and students second. Over the course of the study, it became apparent that parents had been, and continued to be, highly involved in the lives of their children. They said: "He/she is secure;" "He/she is confident;" "He/she is capable of making decisions;" "He/she is level-headed;" "He/she speaks his/her mind;" "He/she is courageous;" "He/she is loyal to friends;" "He/she is out-going;" "He/she fits well in the group;" "He/she is affected by peer pressure;" "He/she is influenced by friends;" "He/she is impatient;" "He/she can be stubborn."

(b) Parents' belief that their child had strengths and weaknesses as a French immersion student. All 10 parents commented on what they believed to be the academic abilities of their children. They said: "He/she is bright;" "He/she is motivated;" "He/she needs challenges;" "He/she does well at school;" "He/she is average in an above average group;" "He/she doesn't feel that he/she is bright in this above average group;" "He/she is not as dedicated a student as he/she could be;" "We don't worry about him/her;" "He/she likes school;" "He/she likes French immersion."

(c) Parents' awareness of their child's second language proficiency. Parents of students who were achieving at the average and below average levels made evaluative comments about their children's abilities in French. They said: "He/she is proud of being a French immersion student;" "He/she is good at speaking French;" "He/she is bilingual;" "He/she speaks better than he/she writes;" "He/she speaks better than he/she listens." Parents of the two students achieving at the above average level tended to focus more on their children's overall success at school. Having become bilingual was only one of many accomplishments about which these parents spoke.

Although this descriptive profile is neither exhaustive nor conclusive, it does outline certain traits common within this group of students who successfully completed high school French immersion study. The above profile suggests that these bilingual students were retained in this high school French immersion program because of the intellectual, academic, personal, and social benefits, fueled by feelings of confidence and success evolving out their individual and shared experiences.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Future Study**

This study focused on the perspectives of a select group of students who were successfully retained in a French immersion program, Kindergarten through grade 12. Consideration was also given to the perspectives of these students' parents as it was assumed that the parents had been involved in the students' choice to continue in the French immersion program at high school. The following themes emerged which relate to the students' choice to remain in the program:

1. Commitment to continue and complete the French immersion program at high school.
2. Limitations of the French immersion experience—the issues.
3. A profile of students who choose to remain in the French immersion program at high school.

Although it is the third theme that is the focus of this article, a brief discussion of the first two themes was presented to further contextualize the descriptive profile of this group of “successful” French immersion students. In spite of perceived limitations and issues, both parents and students expressed an appreciation of the challenge of being involved in this alternative program. All student respondents, regardless of their scholastic standing, expressed a sense of pride in being bilingual and a commitment to completing their French immersion study at high school.

Students achieving at the average and below average levels attached importance to learning in a French immersion setting with this group of students and were disturbed by the lack of program support and recognition within the dual track secondary school setting. Those achieving at an above average level appeared to attach less importance to the group. As well, the high achieving students and their parents tended to be less concerned with program limitations and recognition within the school. Their reasons for choosing the French immersion program were more instrumental in nature than those expressed by the other student and parent respondents. This finding raises a concern about the future of French immersion programs. With the disappearance of nation states and the predominance of the English language in the international community, learning French as a second language may lose its prestige and seem less valuable to young people who must make their way in a global market place. A possible question for further research is: During the current era of globalization, to what extent has the declining status of the French language affected participation levels in French immersion programs?

Given the dropping enrollments in French immersion high school programs in Canada (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1997; Alberta Education, 1996), and the dominance of English within the international community, further study of “successful” high school French immersion students and programs could provide a greater understanding of the potential linkages between contextual variables and student retention. Further, qualitative investigations

of programs with elevated rates of retention have the potential of contributing to the current theoretical and practical knowledge of

... how and why immersion works, the factors that inhibit or promote the achievement of additive bilingualism, and the conditions under which proficiency and educational achievement can be optimized. (Johnson and Swain, 1997, p. 241)

### References

- Alberta Education. (1996). *Education in Alberta: Facts and figures 1996*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Government.
- Bogdan, G., & Biklen, S. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Commissioner of Official Languages. (1997). *Annual report 1996*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Commissioner of Official Languages. (1996). *Annual report 1995*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Commissioner of Official Languages. (1992). *Annual report 1991*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Cummins, J., & Swain, M. (1986). *Bilingualism in education*. New York: Longman Group.
- Foster, R. Y. (1992). *The French immersion choice at high school*. Unpublished master's project, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Halsall, N. (1991). *Attrition/retention of students in French immersion with particular emphasis on secondary school*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Parents For French.
- Johnson, R., & Swain, M. (1997). *Immersion education: International perspectives*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1984). Immersion: Why it works and what it has taught us. *Language and Society*, 12, 61-64.
- Latham, A. (1998, November). The advantages of bilingualism. *Educational Leadership*, 56 (3), 78-80.
- Lambert, W., & Tucker, R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- MacIsaac, J. (1991). Immersion in retrospect. *Language and Society*, 36, 34-36.
- St. Albert Protestant Board of Education. (1989). *S'entraider, c'est cheminer—reaching out*. St. Albert, Canada: St. Albert Protestant Board of Education.
- Sloan, T. (1991). Five graduates of French immersion. *Language and Society*, 36, 38-39.

- Stern, H. (1984). The immersion phenomenon. *Language and Society*, 12, 4-10.
- Tardif, C., & Weber, S. (1987). French immersion research: A call for new perspectives. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 44 (1), 67-71.