

Research in Core French

Executive Summary

1. PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND OUTCOMES

This category covers a wide range of issues related to core French programs and is concerned primarily with organizational issues. It deals with such program characteristics as daily time allotment for French, the optimal starting age for core French and class size. The outcomes investigated include French proficiency, proficiency in other subjects such as mathematics, and attitudes.

1.1. Time Allotment per Day for Core French

The research shows a general tendency for students who receive a greater daily allotment of French instruction to perform better on French tests. Most studies of this kind have compared students' French achievement in 20- versus 40-minute-per-day programs, at the same grade level, with the latter generally outperforming the former (e.g. Manitoba Department of Education, 1981a; Morrison et al., 1979a). However, a number of exceptions are reported where no differences were found in French speaking skills (Pawley & Bonyun, 1981b) or in student attitudes (Stennett & Isaacs, 1979b). In Stern et al. (1976), teachers were reported to have more negative attitudes toward the 20-minute-per-day program.

1.2. Starting Age for Core French

It has been found that older learners generally do better in French than younger learners with the same amount of classroom exposure to French (e.g. Carroll, 1975; Feeney & Patnaik, 1973). On the other hand, it was found in some studies that students who started learning French at a younger age tended to have more positive attitudes toward French (e.g. Burstall et al., 1974) and continued to study French longer (e.g. Reid & Fouillard, 1982).

1.3. Length of Program Exposure

Other studies have shown that, within the same core French program, student achievement generally increases significantly from year to year (e.g. Pawley & Bonyun, 1981a). Nevertheless, there were a few exceptions where no significant differences were found between grade levels (e.g. Morrison et al., 1979b). Students with more years of exposure to core French in school have tended to do better on proficiency tests than students with fewer years of exposure (e.g. Carroll, 1975; Ullmann et al., 1983).

1.4. Class Size

The effects of class size have been addressed in three studies (see Burstall et al., 1974, and Stern et al., 1976). Only one of the studies found any effect of class size on student achievement. In this case, students who had received 20 minutes of French per day in a small class achieved the same level of French proficiency as students who had received 40 minutes of French per day in a regular size class. While the other studies showed no effect for class size, one also found that teaching practices did not differ in the two types of classes.

1.5. Instructional Characteristics

Two studies investigated the effect of instructional characteristics on French achievement. These compared an experiential versus an analytical approach (Allen et al., 1987), and an audio-lingual versus a traditional, grammar-translation program (Smythe et al., 1972). Neither study showed a clear advantage for one approach over the other. Other studies which observed classroom interaction were unable to relate the observational data to student or program characteristics (e.g. McEwen, 1976).

1.6. Core French Compared with Extended French and French Immersion

Comparisons of the French proficiency of students in core French, extended French and French immersion programs indicate that at any specific grade level, immersion students have generally performed better in French than extended French students who, in turn, have generally outperformed core French students (e.g. Barik & Swain, 1976; Morrison et al., 1979b; Shapson & Kaufman, 1978). Nevertheless, a number of studies have found no differences between the proficiency of core French students and extended or immersion students on particular tests, especially on reading tests in the later grades (e.g. Genesee, 1981; Swain & Lapkin, 1977) and in particular situations, as when the core French students have been living in a French neighbourhood (Adiv & Doré, 1982). Other studies have compared core French and immersion students in terms of their use of linguistic cues in reading (Cziko, 1978) and their grammatical errors in writing (Tatto, 1983).

1.7. Retention of Language Skills

Three studies of the retention of language skills found little loss of language skills over a short period of time such as the summer (Gardner et al., 1985; Smythe et al., 1973), but significant, although not large, loss over a greater period of time such as six months (Smythe et al., 1973).

1.8. Attitudes and Program

Students' attitudes toward French and French culture have been assessed within individual programs (e.g. Krohn, 1982; Parkin, 1984) and have also been compared across programs such as immersion, bilingual and core French programs (Cziko et al., 1977) or 20- and 40-minute-per-day programs (Stern et al., 1976). Stability and change in student attitudes have been examined in a number of studies. Some of these studies found that attitudes toward French language, culture and instruction remained relatively stable throughout the school year (e.g. Crawford & Brenner, 1973; Ferguson, 1977) and over the summer (Smith, 1985). Other studies found that student attitudes decreased over the course of the school year (Shapson et al., 1978), as students got older (Burstall et al. 1974), and with increased exposure to French instruction (Ullmann et al., 1983).

1.9. Effect of Core French on Other Subjects

More time devoted to core French has been found to have little, if any, effect on achievement in other areas of the curriculum such as English or mathematics (e.g. Burstall et al., 1974; Stennett & Isaacs, 1979a).

1.10. Optionality of Program

Two studies have directly addressed the issue of optionality in core French and exchange programs. In one study, students in an optional core French program were found to have higher French proficiency scores than those in a compulsory program (Krohn, 1982). Willing participation in cultural and linguistic exchange programs has also been associated with more positive attitudes (Cziko & Lambert, 1976).

1.11. Objectives and Outcomes

A few studies have considered the relationship between program objectives and outcomes in terms of proficiency and attitudes. Some studies have found that French proficiency was below expected levels in certain areas, but above expected levels in other areas (e.g. Crawford & Brenner, 1972), while other studies have reported that program objectives were being met in all skill areas (Sudbury Board of Education, 1982).

2. PROGRAM SUPPLEMENTS

This category includes three kinds of supplementary French programs: excursions to French speaking regions, cultural and linguistic exchange programs with native French speakers of the same age, and supplementary linguistic and cultural programs at school, such as those involving French monitors or animators. The principal variable assessed in these studies was student attitudes.

2.1. Program Supplements and Attitudes

Positive relationships have been found between students' attitudes and participation in cultural and linguistic exchanges (e.g. Kormos, 1978) and excursions (e.g. Clément et al., 1977). Students' attitudes toward the French program have been positively related to exposure to cultural and linguistic activities at school, including an animator program (McInnis & Porebski, 1985), a monitor program (McLean et al., 1983) and the *Francobus* program (McInnis & Donoghue, 1976). Nevertheless, measured attitudes have sometimes been found to decline, for example, following participation in an intensive French summer program (Gardner et al., 1977), and following an exchange program (Cziko & Lambert, 1976).

2.2. Program Supplements and French Proficiency

One study found no relationship between participation in a monitor program and French proficiency (McLean et al., 1983). In another study, participation in an exchange program was positively related to French proficiency, especially among students who had been successfully twinned with a francophone student (Hanna et al., 1980).

3. LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

Studies contained in this category have examined the relationship between various student characteristics such as aptitude, sex and additional exposure to French on the one hand, and proficiency and attitudes on the other. Studies included here have also surveyed student interests and related students' behaviour to their attitudes.

3.1. Cognitive/Personality Factors and Proficiency

IQ has been related to written French proficiency (McEwen, 1976), but rarely to French listening or speaking skills (e.g. Genesee, 1976a; Morrison et al., 1979a). Linguistic aptitude, on the other hand, has generally been related to French proficiency (e.g. Carroll, 1975; Hartmann & Feeney, 1977). Other cognitive and personality variables, such as field independence, have sometimes been found to be related to successful language learning (Naiman et al., 1978), although at times no relationship has been found (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1977).

3.2. Sex and Outcomes

Girls have frequently outperformed boys on measures of French proficiency (e.g. Pawley & Bonyun, 1981c; Wightman, 1981), even occasionally when they have received less French instruction (e.g. Morrison et al., 1979a). Girls have also frequently had more positive attitudes than boys toward French (e.g. Burstall et al., 1974) and have continued to study French longer (e.g. Pack, 1979). Although there are studies in which no sex differences have been found (e.g. Wightman, 1984b), there are none in which boys surpassed girls in either French proficiency or attitudes.

3.3. Demographic Variables

This category includes comparisons between rural and urban students, and studies which have examined the relationship between socio-economic status and French proficiency. The two studies that looked at socio-economic status found that it was positively related to achievement (Burstall et al., 1974; Hartmann & Feeney, 1977). Several studies compared rural and urban students. These studies found that rural students had more positive attitudes toward French (Reid & Fouillard, 1982) and toward francophones following an exchange program (Hamers, 1984). Rural/urban differences in performance on French proficiency tests

have been less consistent (Burstall et al., 1974; Manitoba, 1981a).

3.4. Parental Languages

There have been several studies which examined the relationship of students' home language background to their French proficiency. Students from homes where a third language (other than English or French) is used have occasionally performed significantly lower in French proficiency than their anglophone peers initially (Wightman, 1982), but have usually caught up to them after a few years in the program, and have even surpassed them on selected tests of French proficiency (e.g. Hartmann & Feeney, 1977; Wightman, 1981).

3.5. Parental Attitudes and Encouragement

Studies contained in this section indicate that students who have received higher French proficiency scores have had parents with positive attitudes toward French and high expectations for their achievement in French (see Stern et al., 1976), and that they have had greater perceived parental encouragement for studying French (Pack, 1979; Ullmann et al., 1985).

3.6. Additional French Exposure and Use

Exposure to French outside of school such as living in a French neighbourhood (Adiv & Doré, 1982) or speaking French at home (Wightman, 1980), as well as previous participation in a French immersion program (Pawley & Bonyun, 1981c) have been found to be significantly related to French proficiency in the core French program. Students' willingness to use French outside the classroom has generally been found to be minimal, although also significantly related to French achievement among core French students (Genesee, 1978b; Hamayan et al., 1977). In one study, core French and French immersion students differed little in their reported use of French outside of school (Genesee, 1978a).

3.7. Student Attitudes and Proficiency

Several studies have indicated a positive relationship between students' attitudes toward French or the French program and their proficiency in the language (e.g. Genesee, 1978b; Randhawa & Korpan, 1973; and Ullmann et al., 1983).

3.8. Student Attitudes and Behaviour

One study found a positive relationship between students' attitudes and their behaviour in class (Gliksman et al., 1982), while another found no relationship between the two (Massey, 1984).

3.9. Learning/Communication Strategies

The relationship between learner strategies and French proficiency has been examined in a few studies. Some studies found a significant relationship between French proficiency and the use of certain strategies, such as relating English and French cognates (Hammer, 1975), while others reported that certain strategies, such as *formal* and *functional practising*, were rarely used (Bialystok, 1979), and that the use of some strategies, such as *deduction*, did not have a significant effect on French proficiency (e.g. Cooke, 1974).

3.10. Topics and Learning Activities of Interest to Students

Several studies have surveyed students' interests in terms of topics, such as sports or television interests, preferred classroom activities and the content of the French course. One study of elementary students in Quebec found that some of the students' interests lie in adventure and science fiction television shows, animals, sports and popular music (Laurin et al., 1979). Other studies found that students generally preferred learning to speak French to learning other French skills (e.g. Comeau et al, 1981), and expressed a desire for an increased amount of attention to culture in the classroom (e.g. Heffernan, 1981). One study found that, in terms of culture, student interests lie in aspects of the daily lives of francophone students (e.g. Vanier, 1980).

4. FACTORS AFFECTING ENROLMENT

This category comprises studies which have examined factors affecting enrolment in core French programs, particularly at the high school level. The research on enrolment patterns has shown that the prevalent reasons cited by students for dropping French have been attitudinal and include a dissatisfaction with the amount of French learned, too great an emphasis on grammar, and insufficient attention to speaking skills and cultural aspects of the language (e.g. Heffernan, 1981; Parker, 1975). As discussed in section 1.2. above, students

beginning French in the early elementary grades have been found more likely to continue taking French when it becomes optional (e.g. Reid & Fouillard, 1982; Roy, 1981). The research also shows that high-achieving students with positive attitudes toward learning French, and who feel encouraged by parents and teachers, have been more likely to stay in high school French programs than students without these characteristics (Pack, 1979; Ullmann et al., 1985).

5. TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS

Though few in number, the studies in this category have addressed the issue of the relationship between students' and core French teachers' attitudes and French proficiency.

5.1. Teacher Attitudes

Two studies have found a positive relationship between student and teacher attitudes (Burstall et al., 1974; Shapson et al., 1978). One study also examined teachers' attitudes toward standard and non-standard varieties of French (Marrin-McConnell, 1978).

5.2. French Proficiency of Teachers

A positive relationship between students' and teachers' French proficiency has been found in two studies (Carroll, 1975; Shapson et al., 1978).

6. OPINION SURVEYS ON CORE FRENCH PROGRAMS

Student, teacher, school administrator and parent attitudes toward French instruction and specific core French programs have been examined in a number of opinion surveys. Some of these studies have found strong administrator and parental support for the core French program (e.g. Manitoba Department of Education, 1981c), while others have found negative perceptions of the core French program (e.g. Parkin, 1984). Some surveys have included analyses of the type of language skills and content matter that parents, teachers and students feel should be included in the core French program (e.g. Reid & Fouillard, 1982; Roy, 1980).

7. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND ADMINISTRATION

Studies in this category have evaluated the implementation and administration of particular programs. One study found a lack of coordination between the elementary and secondary core French programs at the individual school board level (Buteau et al., 1985). Some studies have identified problems in implementing a new ministry curriculum guide (Waters, 1985), in the execution of a program (Parkin, 1984), and in fully realizing program goals (Ullmann et al., 1983).

8. DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF TESTS AND MATERIALS

This research includes studies involving the development and validation of standardized tests (e.g. Gliksman et al., 1979; Harper & Kieser, 1977), and local tests (Wightman, 1980), as well as the evaluation of teaching materials (Stern et al., 1980).