

## **Imagining core French in the 21st century**

Sharon Lapkin, June 2008

Fifteen years ago, three of us in the OISE Modern Language Centre wrote a paper entitled Research directions for core French in Canada. I am grateful to the organizers of this symposium for giving me this opportunity to reflect on areas where progress has been made in those 15 years, and where changes in program design and more research are needed to push us towards an optimal core French program across the country. We have just heard about one innovation – intensive core French – that is very promising indeed. Now we must consider the case of ‘regular’ core French, a program that may begin as early as Kindergarten and continues at least to grade 9, at which time it becomes optional. The reason that core French needs attention and imagination is that its outcomes, both achievement-related and affective, have been disappointing for many years now.

In this short presentation, I wish to make three, perhaps controversial, points:

1. we should eliminate early/primary core French;
2. we should concentrate or compact the instructional time mandated for core French in the intermediate school years;
3. we should pursue a project-based pedagogy where learner autonomy is encouraged and build in (virtual or real) exchange experiences for all students.

### **Eliminate early core French**

There is no empirical evidence that beginning core French at Kindergarten or in the primary grades, or even in grades 4 or 5, makes any difference to achievement in French by the end of grade 8. Support for this quite unpopular statement comes not only from research overseas, but from Canadian research. In 1990 we developed a four-skills

test package for grades 8 and 12. We collected information on participating students' starting grades for core French. Twenty-five Canadian classes and 574 students in seven provinces/territories participated in the testing. In general, with some minor exceptions, the scores did not vary significantly at grade 8, whether the starting grade was Kindergarten, grade 1, 3, 4, 6 or even grade 8 (Harley, Hart, Lapkin, & Scane, 1991).

This echoes the findings of some recent, large-scale European research (Munoz, 2006). In that Barcelona-based study, English as a foreign language was introduced at age 11 instead of the usual starting age of 8. Students in both cohorts – those who had begun the study of English at age 8 and those who had begun at age 11 were tested after 200, 416 and 726 instructional hours on a comprehensive range of measures. Where there were significant differences, they favoured learners who began their study of English later.

To imagine a concrete example, then, in Ontario we mandate 600 accumulated instructional hours in core French to the end of grade 8. These could more productively be distributed over three years, not five, beginning in grade 6. The time allocation would not have to be even, at 200 hours per year for three years, but would have to be worked out, taking into account timetabling constraints, teacher preparation time, research evidence and relevant theory. In the light of the persistent FSL teacher shortage, such a plan might make better use of existing teacher resources. It would also call for newer approaches to pedagogy in the core French classroom

### **Compacting instructional time for core French**

As we saw in the discussion of intensive French, compacting instructional time for language learning provides intensive exposure to the target language and may produce

enhanced language and affective outcomes. Let's review what we know about the few studies on compact core French which have taken place in Ontario. In compact core French, the total instructional time allocated to core French does not increase; rather it is concentrated in longer instructional blocks of time. This principle is also known as block scheduling.

In the mid-90s, several of us in the OISE Modern Language Centre (Lapkin, Hart, & Harley, 1998) conducted a case study involving one teacher in the Ottawa-Carleton area who taught three grade 7 classes: a 'traditional' 40-minute core French class, a 'semestered', 80-minute compact class for half the year, and a half-day compact class (150 minutes) for a quarter of the school year. All the classes were comparable on a set of pretests. When the classes were tested towards the end of their program format, the compact classes made gains on five of the six test package measures, whereas the traditional class did so on only two of the six tests. On the delayed posttest administered at the beginning of the grade 8 year (when the compact students had been away from French for 8-9 months), one of the compact classes outperformed the traditional class in writing. Compact students reported higher self-assessments of their French skills and that they had enjoyed the longer class periods.

Pam Marshall (in progress) is a grade 7 core French teacher who experimented with semestered double instructional periods for core French. She taught 3 classes, one 'traditional' 40-minute class and 2 80-minute classes, one in first term and one in second term. Although she used the same tests as we had, the focus in her study was on pedagogy. She implemented a collaborative, project-based approach in all three classes and kept a detailed journal. She also had the classes videotaped when they were all doing

the same instructional unit, so that an independent observer could assess to what extent her teaching approach was consistent across program formats.

Once again, the compact classes obtained higher scores on multiple test components than the comparison class. Pedagogically, the study has given us much food for thought. Marshall's journal clearly indicates that implementing a project-based approach in the shorter class period was difficult: review activities had to occur each day to kick-start the project again and time did not permit in-depth collaboration at a reasonable pace. Marshall reported more success in implementing her communicative, project-based approach in the compact format. Students in compact classes reported that the longer periods allowed them to complete their work, work in groups, and undertake more interesting activities.<sup>1</sup>

I recently had the opportunity to see a videotape of an exemplary English class in Denmark in connection with a workshop on the Common European Framework of Reference. English is taught in three 45-minute periods a week; but this teacher had specifically requested one double period so that she could implement the types of collaborative activities that would provide opportunities for extended student talk and target language development. The literature on block scheduling for second/foreign language instruction underlines the importance of the flexibility provided by longer instructional periods for optimal pedagogy, student achievement and attitudes.

### ***Directions for pedagogy***

We have seen that longer class periods facilitate the implementation of project-based teaching and learning. Miles Turnbull conducted his doctoral thesis research in four classrooms where teachers were implementing a curricular unit that included a

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<sup>1</sup> Students in the comparison group reported that they would find compacted periods too long.

variety of activities leading up to a final project. The case study involved four classrooms at grade 10. Turnbull (1999) worked within Stern's (1992) multidimensional curriculum framework as expanded by the National Core French Study. Students in the two project-based classes outperformed those in the classrooms that were more unidimensional on several French tests. Project-based students could be distinguished from the students in the less multidimensional classrooms because:

1. they were more involved in curriculum decisions, such as negotiating the focus of the final project of the teaching unit;
2. their teachers tended to integrate aspects of the language syllabus in the communicative, experiential activities;
3. their teachers spoke more French in class.

These features of effective second language classrooms evoke today's discussions of the applicability of the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Language Portfolio to the FSL scene in Canadian schools. Edmonton Public Schools, for example, have implemented a pilot project in which principles underlying the European Language Portfolio are making their way into second language classrooms. The main principle is that of fostering learner autonomy so that language learners take responsibility for their own learning.

Research evidence from Canadian studies of disaffected core French students supports the call for a more communicative pedagogy. Close to 3000 grade 11 students from Atlantic Canada who had stopped taking core French were surveyed (APEF, 2004); overwhelmingly they expressed the need for more emphasis on speaking French and less emphasis on grammar teaching. In late 2007 CASLT and SEVEC sponsored a Canadian

Youth Forum on bilingualism. Findings included young peoples' desire to be involved in curriculum decisions, to be exposed to an approach that emphasized oral communication, to see French in school corridors, signage and assemblies, and so on. Making French real in core French is a persistent issue that can be addressed in many ways. The best is to provide exchange opportunities and Internet-based activities that are integrated into the curriculum, even if only in electronic form.<sup>2</sup> Key to the success of such opportunities is appropriate professional development for teachers.

### ***Conclusion***

When I imagine core French in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I see students starting at about grade 6, meaningfully engaged in motivating projects that take them beyond the classroom into real-life L2 settings. I see adequate instructional time organized in blocks to prepare students for such projects; the projects should foster productive (oral and written) second language use. I see more information disseminated and professional development regarding exemplary pedagogical practices. I see students aiming for and reaching internationally validated proficiency milestones and students who choose to pursue the study of French when it is no longer obligatory. Let us take the bold steps needed to realize a new vision of core French in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, MacDonald, 2003; Turnbull, Bell & Lapkin (2002).

## References

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