



**Proficiency Development and FSL Teacher Education
Programs – A Case Study**

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Proficiency Development & FSL Teacher Education

- The paper examines the topic of offering proficiency development opportunities to FSL teacher candidates during their teacher education program.
- The author discusses a *pilot project* which offered proficiency development opportunities to FSL teacher candidates at OISE.
- The paper *builds on existing research* in the area of language teachers and proficiency.
- It is *novel* in that the pilot project enabled the author to evaluate various ways that teacher education programs can offer proficiency development opportunities to teacher candidates.

A brief review of relevant literature

- **Reves and Medgyes (1994):** L2 teachers' limitations in the use of the L2 might influence their self-perception and teaching attitudes in a negative way. The higher the L2 teacher proficiency level, the less self-conscious, hesitant and insecure s/he will be.
- **Amangual-Pizarro (2007):** An inadequate level of English proficiency may be one reason why L2 teachers are reluctant to implement the Communicative approach.

A brief review of relevant literature

- **Obadia (1989) & Majhanovich (1990):** studies first highlighted lack of linguistically proficient FSL candidates in Canada
- **Lapkin, Swain and Shapson (1990):** emphasized need to develop tests to measure the French language ability of candidates applying for pre-service training
- **Flewelling, Gagné, Lewin (1994):** developed an FSL competency test emphasizing communicative competence...test seen as a “better, fairer measure” of competency...encouraged Canada-wide adoption of test

Review of relevant literature cont.

- **Freed (1995):** students who were less orally proficient made important gains in fluency after a period of time spent abroad
- **Bayliss and Vignola (2000):** study explored factors affecting candidates' success or lack of success on the *University of Ottawa Faculty of Education's proficiency test*...study undertaken in an attempt to understand exceptionally low pass rate (only 25% successful and of those half required to take a “cours d'appoint”)

Bayliss and Vignola (2000) conclusions

- Students had most difficulty with **cloze passage**
- *Most important factor in terms of success on proficiency test was time spent in a French environment*
- some correlation between amount of **explicit grammar instruction** received (at the elementary level in particular) and success on written portion of the test
- *no correlation between time spent studying French at university and test results (a degree in French was NOT an indicator of success)*

The OISE Case Study – Context

- **2007-2008**, Ministry of Education offered additional funding to admit more FSL teacher candidates
- **approx. 130 students wrote OISE's proficiency test in 2007-2008 versus approx. 60 year before**
- Proficiency test involved three parts: an oral interview, listening and reading comprehension exercises, a cloze test and written passages (NO error correction section)
- Students needed a **minimum of 75% on each part**

OISE Case Study – Context cont'd

- **2006-2007: 60% of candidates** successful first time around (wrote in April with a rewrite offered in June...no proficiency course)
- **2007-2008: 59 of 130** candidates successful first time (**45% success rate**)
- **21 unsuccessful candidates** opted to complete (6 opted for a fall proficiency course) a 1-month spring proficiency course (unsuccessful candidates who had achieved **at least 60%** on all three parts eligible for course)
- **10 of the 21 candidates (47%)** who completed May-June proficiency course successfully passed proficiency test 2nd time
- **16 students** enrolled in fall proficiency course (Sept-Dec. 2007)
- Of 16 students, only **4 were successful (25%)**

June versus Fall proficiency courses

- Both courses represented an extra load for students
- no formal evaluation of either
- June course more *intensive* (36 hours total for both, June, 6 weeks with two 6-hour Saturday sessions- Fall, 9 four-hour sessions interrupted by a 4-week practicum which was NOT in French)
- Students in Fall also juggling a full OISE timetable
- Students in June had only been **unsuccessful** one time

Instructor impressions – June proficiency course

- Enjoyed June proficiency course...
- students had not started BEd. Program
- focused on improving proficiency
- arrived with a positive attitude

Instructor impressions of Fall proficiency course

- students *disappointed* at having to complete extra course
- Very judgemental of each other's proficiency
- Anxiety level high
- Not entitled to details about their previous test performance which left many unclear on what areas they needed to work on to pass
- Wanted instructor to *teach to the test*
- “Not about proficiency for proficiency's sake”

Feedback from June students

Informal survey of June students' impressions:

- Very positive feedback Almost 50% of those who took June proficiency course were successful on retest
- Felt had improved their French proficiency significantly
- One student so pleased that even though passed proficiency test 2nd time around returned for fall course

Impressions of Fall students at course end

- Most students believed course helped them achieve their goals (improving proficiency and preparing for test)
- Gained a better understanding of their weaknesses
- A minority felt course did not address their specific weaknesses
- Found grammar lessons helpful but would have preferred grammar lessons taught by instructor (rather than students presenting grammar concepts)
- Felt course helped them most to improve their writing, disappointed not more focus on oral

Some *interesting conclusions* in regards to test results & proficiency courses

- Students' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses were inconsistent with their results on the test: most of the students identified **writing** as a strength while test results revealed otherwise
- Many students were less successful rewriting after the fall proficiency course
- The success rate of students taking the proficiency test declined from a pass rate of almost 50% in April and June to **25% in December**

Small-group sessions

- Weekly informal small-group sessions of 1.5 hours were offered in the spring semester to students who were unsuccessful on December rewrite
- Each session led by an instructor teaching in program
- Groups consisted of 3 or 4 students
- At beginning of sessions, students asked to identify areas of proficiency they wishes to work on
- Emphasis on both oral and written practice
- Focus on developing candidates **metalinguistic knowledge**

Feedback from candidates re: small group sessions

- Students knew instructors and felt very comfortable
- Students pleased to be grouped with students specializing at same level (i.e. intermediate/senior) and students with whom they had a close rapport
- felt was a lot of opportunity to engage in both oral and written practice
- Appreciated collegial atmosphere
- Felt made tremendous gains notably *metalinguistic* gains

Grammar & Syntax course

- Course proposed by author to allow candidates to work on proficiency by improving **metalinguistic knowledge, discourse/communicative competence**
- not enough time in methodology course to address above
- Offered to *all* students in program not just those who had passed test
- 8 classes lasting about 3.5 hours interrupted by practicum
- Students in course with **diverse objectives**:
 - some to work on proficiency to pass test (5 or 6 of 30)
 - Francophones interested in improving their metalinguistic knowledge & discourse competence
 - some wanting to better understand how to explain grammar points to students (motivate students)

Instructor impressions of Grammar course

- Atmosphere very positive
- Students received a mark for language but quality of content received highest weighting
- Almost every student who took proficiency test at end of course *successful*
- Helped develop metalinguistic knowledge and discourse competence
- **Impact on proficiency appears positive although anecdotal** (proficiency test results as noted above and instructor noted significant improvement in quality of written assignments)

Student impressions of Syntax course

- Students *rated course content very highly*:

"This was by far the most relevant, useful and informative class I have taken at OISE. So practical!"

"This class should be mandatory for FSL students!"

Internship

- Students with French as a teachable encouraged to complete five-week internship (part of requirement to graduate) in a French-speaking environment
- Students unsuccessful writing December proficiency test strongly encouraged to do internship in a French-speaking environment

Lessons learned

- Accepting students into program who have **NOT** met proficiency requirements can lead to **tension** between candidates successful on test and those who were not
- A **reliable** proficiency test crucial because a concentration or degree in French is **NOT** a reliable indicator of proficiency
- **If students must rewrite proficiency test** and a proficiency course is to be offered, best offered before students enter BEd. Year
- An **intensive** proficiency course more likely to yield positive results
- **NOT offering a proficiency course** but offering a rewrite of proficiency test encourages candidates to take own initiative to build proficiency

Recommendations

- Require students to complete an **internship** in a French-speaking environment
- Course or course materials to allow students to further their **metalinguistic knowledge (work on proficiency)**
- Require students to complete a *linguistic portfolio*
- Require all students to establish a **plan of action** for building on strengths and working on weaknesses throughout 10-month program