

Attracting and Retaining English Second Language Teachers

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Article abstract

The benefits of learning an additional language are wide-ranging. In addition to the advantage of being able to communicate in an additional language, there are cognitive and academic benefits for the learner, such as increased ability to solve problems, multitask, and enhanced first-language literacy skills compared to monolingual students. Language learning also offers benefits for society : Second-language learners demonstrate enhanced empathy, awareness of diversity, tolerance of difference, and a greater sense of social justice (O'Brien et al., 2017). Given the numerous benefits of learning an additional language, it is important to ensure the quality of second language teaching in Canada and Quebec.

Attracting and Retaining English Second Language Teachers¹

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The benefits of learning an additional language are wide-ranging. In addition to the advantage of being able to communicate in an additional language, there are cognitive and academic benefits for the learner, such as increased ability to solve problems, multitask, and enhanced first-language literacy skills compared to monolingual students. Language learning also offers benefits for society: Second-language learners demonstrate enhanced empathy, awareness of diversity, tolerance of difference, and a greater sense of social justice (O'Brien et al., 2017). Given the numerous benefits of learning an additional language, it is important to ensure the quality of second language teaching in Canada and Quebec.

Les avantages d'apprendre une autre langue sont multiples. En plus de celle de pouvoir communiquer dans une deuxième langue, d'autres gains cognitifs et mentaux se greffent tout au long du parcours de l'apprenant, telle la capacité accrue à résoudre des problèmes, à effectuer plusieurs tâches à la fois et à améliorer ses compétences en lecture et en écriture dans sa langue maternelle par rapport aux élèves qui ne maîtrisent qu'une seule langue. L'apprentissage des langues présente également des avantages pour l'ensemble de la société : les apprenants d'une deuxième langue font preuve d'une plus grande empathie, une compréhension de la diversité, une tolérance à l'égard des différences et un plus grand sens de la justice sociale. Compte tenu des nombreux avantages de l'apprentissage d'une nouvelle langue pour un apprenant en langue seconde, il est important de maintenir la qualité de l'enseignement au Canada et au Québec.

Unfortunately, attracting and retaining qualified teachers of all subject matters is a long-standing global problem (Madigan & Kim, 2021). In particular, there is a critical shortage of French Second Language (FSL) and French Immersion (FI) teachers across Canada and a shortage of English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in Quebec specifically. To meet the high demand, some English language school boards in Quebec have even taken the drastic step of recruiting FSL and FI teachers directly from France (Spector, 2023).

Creative recruitment strategies are one way of mitigating teacher shortages, but they will not solve the crisis alone. High rates of teacher attrition, that is, teachers leaving the profession before retirement, are a primary contributor to teacher shortages, accounting for close to 90% of annual teacher demand in the United States, for example (Sutcher et al., 2019). To solve the teacher shortage, policymakers and administrators must take action to reduce teacher attrition. Of all teachers, ESL and FSL teachers are among the most vulnerable to attrition (Ryan & Sinay, 2020). French and Collins's (2014) survey of second language teachers, for example, revealed that "close to half of the ESL (QC) teachers (47%) and almost 40% of FSL teachers [nationwide] indicated that they had considered leaving the profession within the last 12 months" (p. 5). High rates of teacher turnover have been associated with lower quality of education for students, which in turn can significantly lower student academic achievement (den Brok et al., 2017; Kelchtermans, 2017). In this article, we draw on information from our research and the scholarly literature to present a portrait of some of the reasons why ESL teachers in Quebec leave the profession and how stakeholders can encourage them to stay.

Why they leave

Our research into second language teacher attrition in Quebec confirms previous work done by French & Collins (2014) and Swanson (2012) into why ESL teachers leave. The reasons that teachers leave include the existence of isolating and unsupportive work environments, lack of opportunities for professional collaboration, poor work-life balance, lack of agency, limited room for advancement, and high expectations coupled with low support and inadequate teaching resources.

In our research into the experiences of ESL teachers in Quebec, teachers reported that their subject seemed to have a low status and that they did not feel respected by their colleagues (Riches et al., 2022). For instance, primary school ESL teachers in Quebec typically do not have their own classrooms and are forced to travel from class to class and school to school with their supplies, a phenomenon known as *trolley teaching* (see also French & Collins, 2014). The lack of designated space to do their work and to organize, display and store their teaching materials can be stressful, intensifying feelings of isolation and low status in the school community. In addition to these logistical strains, ESL teachers occasionally experience hostility from colleagues as historical tensions relating to the French and English languages and identity resonate in the workspace. As one of our pre-service ESL teacher participants explained, "The first rule an ESL teacher becomes aware of upon entering a French language school is, '*Ici on parle français.*' It was pretty clear that any other language was not tolerated" (Riches & Parks, 2021, p. 43). This intolerance is most prominent in Quebec primary schools, where the specialist ESL teacher is often the only English-speaking person.

Why they stay – building resilience in ESL teachers

Building Quebec ESL teachers' resilience is an essential strategy for mitigating the attrition that exacerbates teacher shortages. Resilience is grounded in the opportunity for connection with others, a robust professional identity, and a supportive working environment (Andrew et al., 2018). We have found, for example, that in schools with larger student populations, such as secondary schools, there are often several ESL teachers who are likely to form linguistic and professional communities of practice that promote rich collaboration (Riches et al., 2022). They are even more likely to form these collaborative communities in shared office spaces. These findings tie into what previous research has shown: that some of the most effective ways to build teachers' resilience are by creating communities of practice, either informally in shared office spaces, or more formally through participation in professional associations or conferences. Teachers who belong to a community of practice feel more resilient and are more likely to stay in the profession (Le Cornu, 2009). In addition, participating in professional communities and activities allows teachers time to reflect and share strategies, bolster their professional identities, and bring new ideas to their teaching, further enriching their practice and the experience of the students they teach.

Conclusion

If we are to make any headway into solving the problem of ESL teacher shortages in Quebec, governments and educational stakeholders need to address factors leading to second language teacher attrition and implement strategies that build teacher resilience. An excellent place to start would be to support the most vulnerable teachers, i.e., ESL primary teachers, by finding them designated spaces where they can teach, display and store materials without resorting to trolley teaching. Additionally, administrators can improve ESL teachers' resilience by facilitating the creation of professional learning communities, providing them with communal office spaces, actively encouraging them to join professional associations, and supporting them in attending conferences. When administrators dedicate time and resources to promoting meaningful collaboration and professional development opportunities for their teachers, they not only increase teacher resilience; they also improve outcomes for their students (Gu & Day, 2013).

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