

**GIVING VOICE TO OUR CORE FRENCH STUDENTS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR ATTRITION AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE  
BENEFITS OF LEARNING FSL IN ONTARIO**  
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IMPLICATIONS POUR L'ATTRITION ET LE DISCOURS SUR LES  
AVANTAGES DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DU FLS EN ONTARIO**

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This article explores student motivation to learn French as a second language (FSL) in school. Ontario Grade 9 students (N = 63) were surveyed on their intention to (dis)continue studying French in the Core French (CF) program in Grade 10 when FSL becomes optional. Survey participants shared their reasoning, and a subset (n = 7) took part in a focus group. Although motivating factors to (dis)continue in CF align with previous studies, participants openly contemplated the relevance of these factors to their lives. In response, this article explores the discourse on the benefits of learning French and debates its applicability to adolescent FSL learners. The implications for efforts to address CF attrition and promote FSL learning are also discussed.

# GIVING VOICE TO OUR CORE FRENCH STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ATTRITION AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING FSL IN ONTARIO

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**ABSTRACT.** This article explores student motivation to learn French as a second language (FSL) in school. Ontario Grade 9 students ( $N = 63$ ) were surveyed on their intention to (dis)continue studying French in the Core French (CF) program in Grade 10 when FSL becomes optional. Survey participants shared their reasoning, and a subset ( $n = 7$ ) took part in a focus group. Although motivating factors to (dis)continue in CF align with previous studies, participants openly contemplated the relevance of these factors to their lives. In response, this article explores the discourse on the benefits of learning French and debates its applicability to adolescent FSL learners. The implications for efforts to address CF attrition and promote FSL learning are also discussed.

**DONNER LA PAROLE À NOS ÉLÈVES DE FRANÇAIS DE BASE : IMPLICATIONS POUR L'ATTRITION ET LE DISCOURS SUR LES AVANTAGES DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DU FLS EN ONTARIO**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article explore la motivation des élèves à apprendre le français, langue seconde (FLS), à l'école. Des élèves de 9<sup>e</sup> année de l'Ontario ( $N = 63$ ) ont été interrogés sur leur intention de continuer ou de mettre un terme à leur étude du français dans le programme de base (CF) en 10<sup>e</sup> année lorsque la matière devient facultative. Les participants à l'enquête ont partagé leur raisonnement, et un sous-ensemble ( $n = 7$ ) a participé à un groupe de discussion. Bien que les facteurs de motivation pour continuer ou cesser le CF sont conformes aux études précédentes, les participants ont ouvertement envisagé la pertinence de ces facteurs dans leur vie. En réponse, cet article explore le discours sur les avantages de l'apprentissage du français et débat de son applicabilité aux adolescents apprenant le FLS. Les implications pour les efforts abordant l'attrition des élèves du CF et la promotion de l'apprentissage du FLS sont également discutées.

The majority of Canadian students who are eligible to study French as a Second Language (FSL) in school enroll in Core French (CF), where FSL is taught daily or a few times a week (Canadian Parents for French [CPF], 2017).

In Ontario, CF is a mandatory subject from Grade 4 (9–10 years old) to Grade 9 (14–15 years old). Federal and Provincial policies characterize CF as a program that should retain students and produce graduates with functional French knowledge (Government of Canada, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). However, research about FSL programs across Canada shows that CF students exhibit limited basic communication skills (Netten & Germain, 2005), feel dissatisfied with their progress (CPF, 2004), and tend to drop out when French is no longer a mandatory subject of study (CPF, 2017).

In response, researchers (Lapkin, Mady & Arnott, 2009) and the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013a) have called for studies examining student engagement in FSL programs. However, while student perspectives have been investigated in other Canadian FSL programs (e.g., Carr, 2009; Germain & Netten, 2004; Mady, 2015; Mady, Arnett & Arnott, 2018; Makropoulos, 2010a, 2010b), research focusing on the CF student experience remains relatively scarce. Since 2000, only 23% of Canadian FSL research investigating students in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 context has focused on CF learners (Arnott, Masson & Lapkin, 2019). This lack of empirical interest in CF, coupled with high attrition rates, make it clear that the pivotal transition point when CF study is no longer mandatory requires more thorough research. This article reports on a study investigating adolescent CF student motivation as they considered whether or not to continue studying French when it was no longer obligatory.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections synthesize relevant literature on Canadian CF programs, student motivation in these programs, and the current discourse on the benefits of additional language learning, both in Canada and abroad.

### *CF in Canada*

Recent enrolment statistics show the majority of Canadian (76%) and Ontario (78%) students learning FSL in English-speaking school boards are doing so in a CF program (CPF, 2017). While beginning and end grades for CF may vary across provinces (see Red Deer Public Schools, 2014), characterizations of CF remain consistent – students learn *about* French, while attempting to acquire basic communication skills, language knowledge, and an appreciation of Francophone culture practiced in Canada and around the world.

A recent synthesis of CF research (Lapkin et al., 2009) highlighted the impact of specific contextual factors that continue to plague the success of CF, including student dissatisfaction with their French skills, negative community attitudes towards French, and persistent marginalization of CF in schools (e.g., no classroom dedicated to CF, generalist teachers forced to teach CF

without sufficient training or support, CF teacher exclusion from school meetings, CF cancelled to accommodate other school priorities). The authors argue that “understanding these aspects of the CF context is key to exploring ways of improving CF programming” (p. 23), as they work to perpetuate negative stereotypes about CF and risk rendering it “invisible” in Canadian schools. Pedagogical efforts made to circumvent these contextual factors have been documented (e.g., Arnott, 2011, 2015; Dicks & Leblanc, 2009; Early & Yeung, 2009), with more recent research showing the potential for strategies from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to positively impact FSL students’ French language confidence (Rehner, 2014) and reorient the FSL classroom towards a more action-oriented approach (Rehner, 2017, 2018). However, if student retention in CF were an indicator of program success (amongst other possible criteria), then it would likely be characterized as unsuccessful. In Ontario (i.e., the context of this study), only 12% of students continue studying French in the CF program to the end of secondary school, with the transition from Grade 9 to Grade 10 showing the biggest decline (CPF, 2017). This reality emphasizes the need to examine CF student motivation (or lack thereof) in particular in greater detail.

### ***Student motivation in CF***

In the field of L2 education, the most recognized theory to date used to explain and predict the motivation of L2 learners has been the dichotomy of integrative and instrumental motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1972) contrasted integrative motivation (defined as a learner’s “sincere personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group” [p. 132]) with instrumental motivation, reflecting more practical reasoning for additional language learning (e.g., increased salary, better job, promotion, admission to university). More recently, the re-conceptualization of English as a global language has broadened the once static external reference group underpinning the traditional conceptualization of integrative motivation to include an expanding global community of English language users. This paradigm shift has brought the notions of self and identity to the forefront of L2 motivation theorizing (e.g., Ushioda, 2006), necessitating a re-conceptualization of the original concept of integrative motivation. Responses to this need for re-theorizing have included proposals like Dornyei’s (2005) “Motivational Self-Systems Theory” (MSS), positing that behaviour and motivation related to second language learning are governed by the dynamic interplay among three self-representatives (i.e., *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, *L2 learning experience*). While old and new theories continue to be cited by Canadian researchers investigating motives for L2 learning in Canada (e.g., Mady, 2010; MacIntyre, MacKinnon & Clément, 2009; Davidson, Guénette & Simard, 2016), their use in elaborating on the motivation of Canadian CF students remains limited.

Existing research has either investigated factors impacting CF student motivation broadly, or specifically linked to the choice to continue / discontinue CF when it is no longer a mandatory subject of study. Research on CF student motivation broadly has shown that implementing communicative teaching practices with CF students in elementary (e.g., Naumovski, 2017) and secondary (e.g., Dicks & Leblanc, 2009; Early & Yeung, 2009; Rovers, 2013) grades can result in a positive change in student attitudes toward studying French. Interviews with CF students (Kissau, 2006) and teachers (Chan, 2016) also highlight the complexity of male CF student engagement. Newcomers to Canada and those with multilingual backgrounds are significantly more motivated to study CF than their Canadian-born unilingual counterparts (Mady, 2010), as they often associate studying French as adding to their multilingual repertoire, enhancing their Canadian identity and improving job opportunities (Mady, 2012).

When deciphering why students continue/discontinue their secondary CF studies, studies have examined this from a retrospective perspective (i.e., looking back after deciding to continue/discontinue).<sup>1</sup> In 1994, Massey interviewed 24 Grade 10 students from two different Canadian cities (Ottawa and Kingston, Ontario) after they had chosen to continue/discontinue their CF studies. The predominant motivating factor across both groups for continuing CF centred around improved job prospects. Participants who discontinued were unsatisfied with their progress (e.g., having received bad grades in CF), and lacked interest in French class and the French language generally.

Potential employment as a (de)motivating factor for continuing CF study has emerged in subsequent studies as a noteworthy theme, amongst others. In 2004, the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (APEF) conducted a survey of 2989 Grade 11 students who had discontinued their CF studies. While over 70% of respondents agreed that being able to speak French would improve a person's future job prospects, only 31% agreed that this applied specifically to them in light of their desired career plans. Factors convincing them to drop out of CF included the inability to express themselves in French, CF being too difficult or boring (therefore risking one's grade point average), priority given to linguistic aspects of French, lack of help, poor explanations, and large class sizes (p. 19). In response, the authors recommended that a paradigm shift in CF teaching was "the most obvious first step towards motivating students to continue their study of French" (p. 19).

In the same year, CPF (2004) surveyed 105 Canadian university students about their CF experiences. All participants were asked about the utility of CF for future employment prospects, with "most conclud[ing] that the core French program would not lead to job possibilities" (p. 41). Of those who continued CF all the way to the end of secondary school, 38% reported that

French would be an asset for them finding employment. The majority who had discontinued CF in secondary school reported regretting their decision, citing that they could now see the utility of French in their lives regarding business, travel and communication with Francophones. The most popular reason offered by those who stopped studying CF was that French was too difficult or boring, despite data showing that “a majority (69%) recalled receiving an ‘A’ in the course” (p. 39). Other reasons for student attrition included timetabling conflicts, or that French was not perceived as important or useful.

Research conducted in British Columbia (BC) highlights the (de)motivating power of student representations of bilingualism, particularly when considering retention in CF (Desgroseilliers, 2012, 2017). In BC, students in Grades 5 to 8 from English school boards must study a second language (L2) (French or another language). Interviews with 12 high-school students who had continued their CF studies revealed convergence around the belief that they were not bilingual, despite having studied in the CF program for many years. Participants stressed that their motivation to continue in CF was inextricably linked to engagement in FSL instruction to date, leading Desgroseilliers (2017) to conclude by identifying L2 best practices as a primary motivator for retaining CF students. The role that students perceived French playing in their future (e.g. post-secondary studies, employment) and support they received to gain confidence in speaking French were additional factors influencing their decision to continue studying CF. These factors differ somewhat from those identified by other secondary school students’ retrospective accounts of what had motivated them to stay in CF (McGregor & Arnott, 2015), where reasons centred on the desire: 1) to maintain the French skills and confidence they had already acquired, 2) to assist new arrivals who only spoke French, and 3) to optimize preferred employment opportunities.

Collectively, these studies show the trend in existing research to investigate the perceptions of those CF students who have already chosen to continue/discontinue their CF studies. Still, findings reveal a variety of (de)motivating factors contributing to student choice to continue learning French in the CF program (see Table 1).

### *Discourse on the benefits of language learning*

Discourse and research aimed at retaining students in L2 programs has tended to focus on sharing the benefits of additional language learning. One noteworthy effort in this regard was undertaken by Gallagher-Brett (2004) in the United Kingdom, comparing existing literature on the benefits of additional language learning with students’ reasoning for learning an additional language (in this case, a language other than English). Gallagher-

TABLE 1. *Summary of existing research on motivating and demotivating factors for studying CF in school*

| Motivating factors   | Demotivating factors   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enhanced job opportunities</li><li>• Engagement and success in previous FSL instruction</li><li>• Enhanced post-secondary prospects</li><li>• Importance accorded to French and English</li><li>• Confidence gained from taking risks with French</li><li>• Desire to maintain French skills and assist new Francophone immigrants</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perceived lack of (oral) proficiency</li><li>• French is too difficult or boring</li><li>• Risk of bad grade in French</li><li>• No room in timetable</li><li>• French not perceived as important or useful</li><li>• No role for French in future</li></ul> |

Brett organized into a taxonomy the more than 700 different reasons given for studying languages (pp. 6–17). Over 80% of participants expected language learning to help their future career goals; however, “the prospect of gaining an employability advantage was less important for these learners than the personal satisfaction resulting from language learning” (p. 6). Interestingly, this theme of personal satisfaction was not prominent in the existing literature. Also, certain keywords (e.g., citizenship, democracy) were only present in the literature and not used by the learners themselves when talking about the benefits of learning an additional language. Gallagher-Brett suggests that this is indicative of a disconnect between what is marketed in the discourse versus what learners themselves are reporting as being the main benefit of language learning.

In Canada, the Second Languages and Intercultural Council of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, in partnership with the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT), recently commissioned a literature review on the impact of learning an additional language on the following areas: cognition, academics, personal life, society at large, economics, and intercultural understanding (see O’Brien, 2017). Some notable examples of benefits include improved memory, enhanced academic achievement (in terms of literacy and math in particular), creativity, intercultural awareness and sensitivity, higher earnings, greater mobility, and heightened understanding of diversity in their communities and abroad. The Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages (2015) also advocated that the federal government actively promote bilingualism by raising awareness of such recognized benefits, both in terms of the individual (e.g., cognitive) and the “entire public sphere” (e.g., economic).

Other sources reveal trends related to Canadians’ perception of the benefits of learning English and French. For example, Canadians agree with the idea that knowing both official languages improves one’s chances of finding a job (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2012; Patterson Langlois Consultants,

2012) and that “bilingual individuals are clearly in demand on the labour market; they usually have little trouble finding a ‘job’” (Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, 2015, p. 41). This belief is prominent in the public sector, with promotion typically targeting FSL students (e.g., Government of Canada, 2018) with the view that:

If employment prospects are better and the path is relatively clear, young Anglophones will more readily choose to learn French rather than another language. (Standing Committee on Official Languages, 2009, p. 8)

Interestingly, a recent study (Workopolis, 2015) revealed more about the complexity of this perceived bilingual advantage in the Canadian job market. Canadian postings seeking bilingual candidates received 20% fewer applications than those without this requirement, suggesting that bilingual applicants face less competition for jobs than their unilingual counterparts. Furthermore, this bilingual advantage applies to a small, decreasing proportion of the job market: “of all Canadian job postings in 2014, 8.8% required French-English bilingualism ... there has been a slight decrease in job postings requesting candidates be bilingual in English and French since 2007” (Workopolis, 2015). Bilingual benefits for employment also apply predominantly to jobs of specific types (e.g., public service, customer-service), in specific locations (e.g., English-speaking provinces versus Quebec), requiring varying language proficiency levels (e.g., written versus oral proficiency). For the purposes of this study, the question is not the extent to which bilingualism is an asset (as this has been well-documented), but rather whether the types of benefits promoted in the relevant discourse cited above resonate sufficiently with Canadian learners of FSL to motivate them to continue studying French in schools.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given policy highlighting the need to retain students in FSL and promote bilingualism in Canada and abroad (e.g., Government of Canada, 2018), such an inquiry into the CF student experience is warranted. Accordingly, this article addressed the following research questions:

- What factors do Grade 9 Core French students identify as motivating their decision to continue/discontinue their FSL studies in Grade 10?
- What insights can be gained from these findings to inform continued efforts to motivate CF students to continue studying French when it is no longer an obligatory subject?

## METHODOLOGY

Participants, instruments, and procedures for data collection and analysis are described in the following sections. While the larger study used a mixed-



methods approach based on Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006), the present article reports on findings from two of its qualitative data sources (i.e., open survey and focus groups). Using these two methods to measure a single phenomenon—in this case, student motivation—conforms with the rationale of triangulation (Greene, 2006; Mathison, 1988).

### *Participants*

Grade 9 students enrolled in CF during the fall semester (September to January) were invited to participate. Participants were recruited from eight different schools within two school boards in Eastern Ontario (Canada). A total of 63 students completed an online survey and a total of seven students (six females and one male)<sup>2 3</sup> participated in three separate focus groups. Two focus groups ended up with a mix of students who planned on continuing or discontinuing CF, while the third was comprised of students who were all discontinuing their CF studies. More specifically, three students indicated that they were continuing in CF next year (i.e., pseudonyms starting with “C” for “continue”—Carmen, Charlotte, and Courtney), while the remaining four had not (i.e., pseudonyms starting with “D” for “discontinue”—Danica, Danielle, Denise, and Diane).

### *Instruments*

The survey asked participants to indicate their intention to continue/discontinue studying French next year and explain the reasoning behind their choice. Focus group participants elaborated further on their reasoning for continuing/discontinuing French study in Grade 10, and described their experience learning French to date, their desire to learn it in the future, and their opinions about French being an obligatory subject of study.

### *Procedure*

The online survey was administered during CF class time at the end of the fall semester in order to obtain data as close as possible to the time the students would actually be selecting courses for the following year. Upon completion, students were invited to take part in a focus group. At least four students from three different schools originally indicated interest; in the end, two students participated in two of the schools, while three participated in the other.<sup>4</sup> Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded for subsequent transcription.

For analysis, percentages were first calculated to ascertain the proportion of participants who intended to continue/discontinue studying French in Grade 10. Then, open-ended responses outlining their reasoning were analyzed for emergent themes. In some cases, these responses touched on more than one theme, meaning that different parts of their response could be

applied to different themes. Focus group data were analyzed following the procedures outlined in Krueger and Casey (2009, p. 120–122), facilitating insight on whether participant views converged and/or diverged around the predetermined topics, or whether others emerged as the focus group progressed. Critical incidents were also identified where students discussed and compared each other's logic and reasoning related to their FSL studies.

Analyses of both data sets began in isolation from each other; then, emergent themes and patterns were integrated looking for convergence, expansion, and contradiction of findings across different method types (Caracelli & Greene, 1993). This approach to data analysis told a more coherent story that reflected the data, with the focus group data providing noteworthy points of convergence and expansion related to (de)motivating factors that emerged from the survey.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings related to the proportion of participating students ( $n = 63$ ) who intended to (dis)continue their French studies are first presented below, followed by survey and focus group findings that shed light on (de)motivating factors influencing their prospective intentions.

### ***Intent to continue/discontinue learning FSL in Grade 10***

More than half of participants (i.e. 54%) indicated that they would be continuing CF in Grade 10, while the remaining 46% intended to discontinue CF. These findings are encouraging, given provincial statistics showing that only 29% of Ontario CF students continue in FSL in Grade 10 (CPF, 2017). While one may speculate that these findings are an anomaly based on the context in which this study was conducted (i.e., Eastern Ontario, close to the border between Ontario and Quebec), no research exists to support this conclusion. In fact, the motivators identified by students in this study closely resemble those from previous research and adolescents from predominantly Anglophone communities (Massey, 1994).

### ***Motivating factors***

Analysis of students' open-ended responses yielded 52 reasons for wanting to continue studying CF. These reasons centred around four themes (ordered from most to least frequent): *enhanced job opportunities*, *desire to communicate with others in French*, *hypothetical travel*, and *positive attitude toward the learning situation*.

Just over half (54%) of all reasons offered for continuing CF studies centered on the idea that learning French was key to enhancing participants' future job prospects:

Because you should take French to get a good job.

I don't want to continue, but I have to if I want a good job.

Everybody says you *need* [student emphasis] French to get a job in Canada. I don't entirely believe it to be true; but me continuing with French is for this reason.

These last two quotes mirror a key finding emerging from the focus groups, where students were openly contemplating the relevance of knowing French for their future job prospects. As the following excerpts show, students seemed torn between their belief that learning French leads to better job opportunities and the extent to which they saw this as being true and/or applying to their own future, regardless of the presence of French in the employment context where they lived:

(Focus Group 1)

Researcher (R): How do you see the role that French will play in your future?

Danielle: I think that it'd be easier to get a job and more opportunities ... it would probably lead you to something better, if you can speak two languages, but ... I think that you can do the equal jobs if you didn't know French ... so I don't think it should be that much easier.

Danica: If I go to the clinic or something there is always someone who speaks French and English so I think that it's a good thing to be able to speak two languages but I don't think it's necessary for jobs ... when I get older I don't see myself doing anything really that I need French for ... so, I just don't see the point in taking it if I don't enjoy it.

(Focus Group 2)

R: Some of you have talked about jobs. Is that something that is important to you?

Courtney: Well, it would help. For me, I want to get several different jobs, but I know if I want to be a veterinarian, you have to know French because your clients won't be all English.

Denise: I was told a lot growing up that in order to get a job here in Canada you need to know French. As I've grown up ...I hear a lot of people saying, "Oh you *need* [emphasis] French" and French is a benefit but it's not mandatory ... and it kind of makes me feel really bad because I really, really struggle with French. Then you say, "oh you *need* [emphasis] it," and I'm like, "Oh you *don't* [emphasis]". So, what can I say? It's a benefit but there's a lot of ...

Courtney: Like you are not always going to need it.

Denise: Yeah. The thing is that in Canada, you can't get a job if you don't know English. English is spoken everywhere and if you have a job, pretty much you have to speak English. So as long as I know English, I'm good.

The second most popular motivator for continuing CF studies expressed via the survey reflected a belief that continuing learning French would allow them to communicate better with others:

Understanding French would enable me to communicate with more people and understand different cultures.

To be able to speak French fluently to people who cannot speak English.

The final two themes that emerged from the survey were of equal frequency. First, participants saw CF as a chance to expand their communicative skills if they ever travelled abroad:

I will choose to take French class in Grade 10 because, it will be helpful if I travel to French-speaking countries.

Equally motivating was the fact that students had developed a positive attitude toward the French language and their FSL classroom-based learning experiences to date:

I want to take French because this language is very interesting and encouraging to learn and I'm also enjoying learning French.

### ***Demotivating factors***

Analysis of students' open-ended responses yielded 28 reasons for discontinuing CF studies. These reasons centred around three themes (ordered from most to least frequent): *negative attitude toward the learning situation*, *no relevance to their future*, and *perceived incompetence*.

Just over half (57%) of all reported reasons for discontinuing CF demonstrated that students had developed a negative attitude toward the French language and their FSL classroom-based learning experiences to date:

Because I don't like French.

Some of my worst school memories have been in a class taught in French. I don't think that's a coincidence.

I can speak French and understand it, but once I start getting into the technical things, such as verbs and past and future participles, I find myself having difficulty. For those reasons, I doubt I'll be taking French again.

Overall, I find that most Core French teachers have given up on their students. They feel like if students wanted to learn anything they'd be in immersion. They treat us like second graders.

Focus group discussion around attitudes toward the learning situation mirrored the survey, in that it can be both a motivating and demotivating factor for continuing FSL study:

(Focus Group 3)

R: You mentioned that you're either continuing or not in Grade 10. Were there any factors or experiences that influenced that decision?

Carmen: My teacher because she is really helpful, she is cheerful. I talk to her. The first time in the class that I found [something] really difficult, she encouraged me, [saying] you can do it. I talked a few times with her after that and I found that I could do it. Yeah, my teacher really helped me well. She has really been nice to all the students, so I think that's the main reason why I will take French.

R: Did you have a similar experience that factored into your decision?

Diane: My past two years I've had the same teacher and she would put us up on the spot a lot, like we had presentations probably every other week ... we would have to speak for five minutes in French. We had to memorize our lines and everything. So, I didn't find that very motivating. I mean, you are in front of your peers who are laughing when you mess up so, yeah, I didn't find that very enjoyable.

R: So that influenced your decision not to take French?

Diane: Yeah, a lot.

Other focus group participants also cited their CF teacher and the FSL teaching they had received as integral factors influencing their decision to discontinue CF:

(Focus Group 1)

R: Have you decided whether you're going to continue to study French after Grade 9?

Danielle: Yeah, no I'm not going to.

Danica: I'm not either, but when I look at the option sheet and see what I'm able to take, I might change my mind ... it's not a course that I enjoy taking. So, I probably won't.

Danielle: I think my experience this year has changed what I thought.

Danica: Yeah, for sure

Danielle: ... because I was going to take it but like after so much confusion with the course, the teachers like I feel ... I don't know. I don't think I'd do as well because I didn't learn as much as I should this year.

Danica: I agree ... I think it's getting more difficult to understand and I just didn't have a good experience with my teacher this year. I know not all teachers are like that, but I'm worried that I'll take the course and then the teacher will end up not being able to explain it well, so I don't want to be stuck with French.

(Focus Group 2)

R: Have you decided to continue in French or not and what factors influenced your decision?

Denise: I have decided to drop French entirely I don't want to do core and don't want to do immersion. I want 100% English, English, English.

R: And what influenced that decision?

Denise: One is just that it's bringing my overall average down. Two, I have flip-flopped back and forth [between core and immersion], so I have a good idea of what it's like in both areas. Something I found is that immersion teachers on average are more motivated, they're better teachers ... the teacher I have right now is probably the best teacher I have ever had because she<sup>5</sup> speaks French but all the Core teachers I've had would say something in English and they'd say it in French and then you listen to the English and you tune out the French.

Charlotte: Yeah. So, you don't get the point to understand what ... you'll keep it in your head. Like, I prefer my old teacher. She refused to speak English even if you were in Core. She would only speak French and you had to figure out what she said so you had to pick up the idea yourself.

Denise: I feel like this is the best tactic. Still, one thing is that in Grade 3 and Grade 4, I had the same teacher and she was a really bad teacher. But she still spoke all French.

Charlotte: Was it Mme. X.?

Denise: Yes, yes!

Charlotte: She was amazing. I really liked her.

Denise: She spoke a lot of French, but she spoke really quickly.

Charlotte: Yeah, she did ... that really helped me though.

Denise: But it was like above our level ... I think if you understand it, she's a great teacher but if you don't understand it you're left in the dust, and I was one of the kids who was left in the dust.

The second most popular demotivating factor expressed via the survey was a disconnect between continuing CF and students' future as they envisioned it:

I feel French won't help me in the future.

I don't need [French] for what I want to do.

The third most popular demotivating factor reflected a perceived incompetence in French, resulting in a lack of motivation to continue in CF:

I don't understand French at all.

I have always struggled with French. I feel like a failure when I can't use [French] or do bad in French, a subject I doubt I'll ever be able to succeed in.



learning experiences to date) were more of a demotivating factor than a motivating one, as seen by the dominance of this theme as the most frequent reason provided for choosing to drop out of the CF program. Negative attitudes about French being too difficult or boring have been documented in the existing research on CF student motivation (e.g., APEF, 2004; CPF, 2004). Similar to these participants, CF graduates from other studies (CPF, 2004; Massey, 1994) have also reported struggling to see the link between the usefulness of learning French and how they envisioned their future selves when deciding whether or not to continue their CF studies. Lack of confidence in one's French abilities (particularly oral proficiency) offered by participants as the third most popular reason for discontinuing CF studies has also been identified as a key factor leading students to drop CF (APEF, 2004; Massey, 1994). Unlike other studies (e.g., APEF, 2004; CPF, 2004), school-based barriers like scheduling issues or more appealing course offerings did not emerge as a key factor influencing these participants' demotivation.

Considered collectively, it cannot be ignored that the same themes continue emerging from research targeting student (de)motivation in the Canadian CF program. Ten years after Massey's 1994 study on this topic, the authors of the APEF (2004) survey characterized this same "striking similarity" between their findings and the existing research as being "fascinating" (p. 19). Given these findings and the consistent CF attrition rates seen over the last 14 years, this trend is now more troubling than intriguing.

### ***Future efforts to motivate CF students***

Considering these findings and the existing literature, including the prevailing discourse around the benefits of L2 learning, it is clear that future efforts to motivate CF students to continue their FSL studies requires serious consideration of students' lived experiences. Henceforth, I argue that efforts to motivate CF students should first attempt to address and/or reverse the well-documented trend of CF students developing negative attitudes toward French and French class. Such efforts must be paired with a critical reconsideration of the emphasis placed on enhanced job opportunities in the current discourse, and its power to override these negative attitudes and translate into increased retention in CF throughout the secondary school years.

***Address negative attitudes toward the learning situation.*** Negative student attitudes toward the CF learning situation have continually emerged as a significant factor affecting student retention, suggesting that student motivation is inextricably linked to the way that CF programs are delivered. The powerful influence of this factor on student motivation has been documented in other L2 contexts (e.g., see Davidson, Guénette & Simard, 2016; Dörnyei &



Murphey, 2003). Future efforts to motivate CF students to continue studying French should include a firm commitment to changing the delivery of the program and aligning it with students' needs. Three key areas mentioned in previous research (and in these findings) are worth mentioning here again.

First, like several participants in this study, learners from previous studies have stressed that there is too much emphasis in CF on "the linguistic aspects of the language (e.g., verb conjugations, grammar, irrelevant vocabulary lists)" (APEF, 2004, p. 20) and not enough on speaking French (APEF, 2004; Massey, 1994). While promising CF teaching practices have been documented (e.g., Comeau, 2002; Dicks & Leblanc, 2009; Turnbull, 1999) and updated FSL curricula emphasize oral proficiency development (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018; Manitoba Ministry of Education, 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b, 2014), the extent to which these shifts translate into increased retention in FSL classrooms has yet to have been researched in detail. Some recent research (e.g., Rehner, 2018) shows potential for provoking change in CF teacher beliefs around the importance of oral proficiency and the practices they can employ to translate their newfound belief into action, whilst improving student attitudes toward CF and its potential for developing their oral French skills. Some provinces have also shifted towards offering students the opportunity to write the *Diplôme d'études en langue française* (DELF) as part of their FSL studies, which has shown promising impacts on CF students' perceived competence, confidence, and overall motivation for learning French (Vandergrift, 2015). Certainly, more research is warranted in this area. At the very least, these findings suggest that such efforts could reinforce the impact of motivators (e.g., desire to communicate with others in French) and potentially reverse the influence of demotivators (e.g., negative attitudes toward the learning situation, perceived incompetence in French).

Second, focus group participants highlighted that they did not like CF because French was not spoken as often as they would have liked, echoing observations from existing research (e.g., Calman & Daniel, 1998 Turnbull, 1999). For these participants, teachers not speaking French or providing English translations to help them understand the French they were exposed often led to them "tuning out [any] French", since they knew the English translation was coming. Finding ways other than translation to connect to students' existing language repertoires aligns with recent research documenting plurilingual practices being implemented in Canada (e.g., Krasny & Sachar, 2017; Lotherington, 2013) and in the FSL context in particular (e.g., Prasad, 2012, 2016; Taylor, 2016). Ballinger, Lyster, Sterzuk, and Genesee (2017) further emphasize that plurilingual pedagogy in Canadian FSL contexts must move beyond an increased use of English (the majority language) and instead focus on cross-linguistic, biliteracy and

language awareness activities that maintain distinct spaces for French (the minority language) to remain the predominant language used by students in the classroom. Such practices could possibly change adolescents' attitudes about CF and the role their language knowledge can play in the learning of French.

Finally, potential exists for the aforementioned suggestions to have a limited impact if the chronic marginalization of CF programming in Canadian schools is allowed to continue. Research has shown that CF teachers struggle to deliver their preferred programming as a result of structural (e.g., not having their own classroom) and attitudinal (e.g., devaluing of French as an important subject) school-based challenges (Lapkin, MacFarlane & Vandergrift, 2005; Lapkin, Mady & Arnott, 2009). Administrators also play a role in perpetuating this trend (Cloutier, 2018; Milley & Arnott, 2016). Ignoring this chronic problem risks allowing the types of negative attitudes about French and the CF program that participating students shared here to reproduce at the system level, while communicating to students that the system does not value CF and has given up on its potential to help students learn French.

***Reconsidering emphasis on enhanced job opportunities.*** Enhanced job opportunities emerged from the survey as the main motivating factor influencing participants' decision to continue CF. However, focus group findings demonstrated that these same students were debating the relevance of this employment motive to their own future goals. Findings from Mady (2010) echo this perspective, with enhanced job opportunities emerging as a strong motive, but with "none of the Grade 9 Canadian-born participants mention[ing] any jobs for which French would be useful [to them]" (p. 572). Graduates also felt doubtful that continuing in CF would have led to employment opportunities that they were interested in at the time (hence, why they dropped CF when it was no longer mandatory; CPF, 2004). This disconnect points to the need for reflection on the implications of promoting our FSL programs as a gateway to better job opportunities. It also calls into question its power to motivate students to continue learning French in school—or perhaps more importantly—to override the demotivating factors that students identified related to the delivery of CF programs. Focusing future efforts on promoting enhanced job opportunities to motivate students to continue CF risks marginalizing CF students who are not interested in bilingual employment and who may be motivated to continue studying French for alternative reasons. Such potential for marginalisation has been documented in the secondary FI context (Makropoulos, 2010a). Unpacking the complexity of the bilingual employment advantage revealed in Workopolis (2015) could open up conversations around other benefits of learning additional languages that may resonate more with Canadian adolescents (like

those listed in O'Brien, 2017). Another possible risk links to Gallagher-Brett's findings (2004); if efforts focus exclusively on what stakeholders *think* motivates students and not on what students *actually report*, the CF student voice will not be heard, leading to no significant changes to the trend of attrition.

## CONCLUSION

Future efforts to motivate CF students need to respond concretely to what demotivates students and connect more relevantly to what motivates them. Asking students what they want out of their CF class would be an ideal place to start. Pedagogical strategies that encourage such inquiry could also help students to make the connection between the role that additional language learning could play in their future and how participating actively in CF can help them get there (e.g., see Hadfield & Dornyei, 2013). Instead of giving up on CF students, we need to empower them as change agents in the pursuit of reducing the high rates of attrition in CF across Canada.

## NOTES

1. A review of the literature revealed one study (i.e., MacIntyre & Blackie, 2012) that looked at adolescent CF students' intention to continue their language studies (amongst other non-linguistic outcomes); however, the details on the exact proportion of the sample of 117 students who were taking CF because it was mandated (i.e., in Grade 9) and those who had already chosen to continue in the optional CF program (i.e., Grade 10 and beyond) was not included in the publication. Nonetheless, their findings did conclude that "positive attitudes best predicted intentions to continue studying French" (p. 540).
2. Pseudonyms for the focus group participants are all female so as to protect the identity of the lone male participant.
3. At the end of the online survey, participants were redirected to a separate website to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group. For this reason, the demographic information related to the focus group participants is limited, as such questions were not included in the focus group protocol.
4. While at least four participants are ideal for a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2009), the decision was made to proceed with the smaller number of participants, as subsequent access to the participants was limited after that time.
5. To maintain anonymity, all teachers will be referred to using "she" or "her".

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