Supporting French as a second language teachers' language proficiency and confidence through professional development

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Abstract— Chronic shortages of French as a second language (FSL) teachers pose challenges to FSL education in Canada. Recent reports emphasize the need for more than 10,000 qualified and proficient users of the language to meet the demands for core French and French immersion's steep enrollment numbers (ACPI, 2021). One factor contributing to the FSL teacher shortage is the need for French proficient teachers who are confident to use – and teach – the language effectively (Masson et al., 2021). Increasing language proficiency is one avenue to contribute to addressing this ongoing shortage (Smith et al., 2022). In response, this mixed-methods study investigated the impact of four professional development sessions delivered in French on FSL teachers' confidence, as well as their plans to continue their language maintenance and enrichment efforts. Findings from our pre- and post-questionnaires and interviews are threefold: i) FSL teachers feel confident speaking to students and colleagues but less so when speaking with individuals whose first language is French; ii) FSL teachers are less confident with writing production than with other strands of language learning; iii) FSL teachers appreciate professional development in French and benefit from collaborating with other FSL teachers. Further research is needed to explore how professional development opportunities can support the enrichment and maintenance of FSL teachers' language proficiency and to investigate if such sessions increase FSL teacher retention.

I. INTRODUCTION

Canada has been facing a shortage of French as a second language (FSL) teachers (Masson, 2018; Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages [OCOL], 2019; Smith et al., 2022) for decades (MacFarlane & Hart, 2002). Although many factors (see OCOL, 2019; Lapkin & Barkaoui, 2008, for a list) contribute to the challenge of attracting and retaining FSL teachers in Canada, FSL teachers' language proficiency (LP) remains a predominant factor that may contribute to their decision to leave the field (Masson, 2018). FSL teachers' LP and confidence shape their practice and career choices, including whether to continue as FSL teachers (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Mady, 2018; Salvatori, 2009). Research (Richards et al., 2013; Ontario Public School Boards' Association [OPSBA], 2021) underscores that when FSL teachers feel as though their LP is weaker or inferior to others, feelings of self-doubt and anxiety may influence their practice, lead them to rely heavily on textbooks, provide inaccurate feedback, and teach in a less spontaneous, more regimented manner. These feelings may prompt FSL teachers to shift their career by choosing to teach different subjects (in the English stream, for example) or leaving the profession altogether (Masson, 2018).

In an effort to support FSL teachers' French LP with the overall goal of FSL teacher retention, this study explored FSL teachers' experience of four professional development sessions offered in French drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative semi-structured interview data.

This paper begins by reviewing Canadian research pertaining to FSL teachers' LP and confidence, first describing LP and its significance, then situating LP in the FSL contexts of the participants (e.g., core French or French immersion).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. What is Language Proficiency?

Within second language (L2) education literature, language proficiency (LP) is a frequently used term. Christiansen and Laplante (2004) described LP in terms of ability and competency, with a particular emphasis on a person's communicative competency to use their L2. They argued that being proficient in an L2 occurs when communication comes with ease in specific contexts. While Christiansen and Laplante briefly defined LP, others have argued that language proficiency differs in each language user's scope and context and is, therefore, difficult to define (Faez et al., 2021; Lantolf & Frawley, 1988; Van Canh &

Renandya, 2017). Faez, Karas, and Uchihara (2021) contended that "proficiency in one variety does not necessarily mean proficiency in all varieties … Hence, the issue of teacher language proficiency and the question of what level of proficiency is required for teachers to be effective is a complicated matter" (p. 755). Education researchers have often described LP in terms of teachers' ability to use the language (Richards et al., 2013), whether they can perform the language (Bachman, 1990), or in terms of how they can interact in the target language (Shin, 2013). In contrast, some scholars have emphasized that LP is defined by how teachers perform on their proficiency test scores (Van Canh & Renandya, 2017). Specifically, and as applied to a Canadian FSL context, Faez and Karas (2017) expressed concern with this approach, suggesting that there is not necessarily "an agreed upon level of proficiency for language teachers" (p. 136), which makes it challenging for FSL teachers and other stakeholders to understand how proficient they should – or need – to be.

In response to this challenge, Arnott and Vignola (2018) offered a suggestion that teacher LP could be used and defined by how the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) envisions proficiency, that is, whether the teacher is a basic, independent, or proficient user of the language (Arnott & Vignola, 2018; Council of Europe, 2001). Although this is a potentially broad starting point that could be applied to teacher LP, Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns (2015) highlighted the need to reconceptualize teacher LP because L2 teachers are specialized teachers with a host of different skills. Similarly, Van Canh and Renandya (2017) recognized that "teachers' language proficiency is anchored in – or drives – particular uses of specific content, which are situated both interactionally and contextually in the classroom" (p. 68). In other words, FSL teachers' LP influences whether they can explain a certain concept or have a conversation around a particular event. With the recognition of the uniqueness of teacher LP, Bachman's (1990) defines LP as the communicative goal of using the language in mind, that is cognizant of "contextual factors, such as the relationship between the two interlocutors, specific content areas and situations, and features of the language system itself, such as grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation" (p. 41). Building on Bachman's work, Richards et al. (2013) revealed how outstanding L2 teachers are those who have "an excellent command of the target language" (p. 5), which, for non-native teachers, supports their confidence in teaching and using the language. Support for use of this definition aligns with the communicative and interactive goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) and its expectations of their teachers. The questionnaire in this study explores LP and teachers' confidence in language comprehension and production.

B.   The Importance of language Proficiency

The vitality of FSL programs in Canada – for students, (pre- and in-service) teachers, and administrators is, in part, influenced by teacher LP. As Faez and Karas (2017) underscored through their analysis of 11 LP-focused articles, LP tends to be "one of the most important qualifications of a language teacher by experts and non-experts" (p. 147). While many factors contribute to this claim, Masson, Battistuzzi, and Bastien's (2021) meta-analysis substantiates that LP is one of four pillars necessary for L2 teaching and learning, teachers' career preparedness, practice, as well as their positive identities as language teachers. In fact, they suggested that LP supports and sustains FSL teachers in Canada, because LP "is closely tied to professional self-esteem and their professional status and impacts how teachers perceive their teaching practice" (Masson et al., 2021, p. 9). Similarly, in a recent report on FSL LP and assessment information, the OPSBA (2021) showcased links between FSL LP and successful teaching, the consequences of poor LP, and urged all stakeholders to think about LP since it has the potential to create "problems for school districts as feelings of lower professional efficacy may contribute to higher attrition rates, compounding the FSL teacher shortage" (p. 19). Focusing on FSL teacher LP through professional development may positively contribute to teacher retention.

Masson et al. (2021) further highlighted that teacher LP is critical for FSL teachers given that the target language in question is not only the object of study, but also the means through which to communicate, making the case for "teachers to have a solid command of the language [in which] they are teaching and working" (p. 8). In this case, when FSL teachers have extensive understanding and use of the language, they are able to offer input to students to improve their learning (Richards et al., 2013), contribute to quality language teaching (Tedick, 2013), and serve as a good model for students (Van Canh & Renandya, 2017). Many researchers also claimed that LP is critically important as teachers' ability to use the target language in the classroom directly impacts the success of the L2 learning space in general (Banno, 2003; Ellis, 2005; Kim & Elder, 2008). The need for oral input aligns well with how Richards et al. (2013) understand LP, and that having a higher level of LP translates to more flexibility and spontaneity in teachers' practice, increasing students' proficiency levels. In a similar vein, Farrell and Richards' (2007) case study of seven L2 teachers demonstrated that higher LP ultimately translates to more proficient L2 teaching. This finding is consistent with Faez et al.'s (2021) work in a Canadian context that noted that while LP is important, a multitude of factors, including self-efficacy, play a role in L2 teaching.

From an administrative perspective, FSL teacher LP in a Canadian context is a critical factor in retaining quality and competent teachers (CASLT, 2023; Jack & Nyman, 2019). Research with various FSL stakeholders (see Jack & Nyman, 2019) stressed that

recruitment and retention are issues influenced by LP. Jack and Nyman (2019) asserted that despite the recruitment efforts of FSL teachers in Canada, limited proficiency is contributing to teachers either leaving the profession or not being able to enter in the first place. OPSBA (2021) suggests that FSL teachers are still being hired to schoolboards despite low levels of LP, which results in "lowering their desired employability standards, or [continuing] their recruitment efforts often with unsatisfactory results" (p. 29). A decrease in FSL teachers' LP may result in teachers who may not use or understand the language they are teaching, which, in turn, affects the health and credibility of the program. Recent work undertaken by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT, 2023) offers similar results. CASLT used the metaphor of an avalanche or build-up of snow within FSL contexts, layering in systemic issues related to FSL teaching (e.g., physical space, available resources, supply teachers, etc.) that contribute to teachers' "feelings of isolation, linguistic insecurity, and marginalization" (p. 1). Eventually, teachers are inundated and intimidated by mass of issues that then interferes with their practice. CASLT (2023), therefore, called for support to get to the core of systemic issues and meet the needs of pre- and in-service FSL teachers. This study answers this call by offering professional development sessions in French that meet teacher-expressed needs and explore the effect of French professional development on teacher LP. The build-up of issues is often a reflection of FSL teachers' varying contexts, which will be discussed in the following section.

C. *FSL Teacher Language Proficiency*

Across Canada, students have the opportunity to study FSL in four ways, depending on their province and school: i) core French (CF); ii) French immersion (FI); iii) extended French (EF); and iv) intensive French (IF). Research within the scope of each program and associated teachers' LP is limited, although some research has compared self-efficacy and LP of FSL teachers in different programs (e.g., Cooke & Faez, 2018). Below, we outline and discuss LP of CF and FI teachers, as these are the programs with the greatest number of students and research; most importantly, the participants in this inquiry are teaching in CF and FI contexts.

D. *FSL Teacher Proficiency in Core French*

CF is a program where the object of study is French itself (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Research shows that teachers whose LP is deemed lower tend to teach in CF programs, which contributes to a marginalization of the program and its teachers (Knouzi & Mady, 2014). Carr's (2007) study illustrated that in British Columbia, FI teachers tend to be screened for their proficiency whereas the same requirement is not extended to CF teachers. Absence of screening for CF teachers demonstrates that there is more emphasis placed on higher LP for those entering or teaching in the FI context. Similar to Carr, Cooke and Faez (2018), in their study of 14 CF teachers in Ontario elementary schools, revealed that CF teachers did not feel confident in their LP. They suggested that CF's confidence levels and ability to teach FSL is due to limited time with their students, lack of designated classroom space, and an abundance of transition time (Lapkin & Barkaoui, 2008). These tensions in research and practice corroborate research findings from MacFarlane and Hart (2002) in their study on FSL teacher shortages that contended that LP, specifically in CF, is one reason leading to a lack of FSL teachers. MacFarlane and Hart's (2002) study revealed how school boards compromised on the quality of LP more frequently with CF teachers than FI teachers, which suggests that the quality of the FI programs (and teachers) are of higher value than CF. In reality, both programs are instrumental to increasing bilingualism in Canada, and there are more CF learners than there are FI learners (CPF, 2021). The expectation of lower LP, inexplicitly stated, was also unveiled through research by Mady (2018): 11 of 15 pre-service teachers felt confident to teach in a CF program, suggesting that CF is perceived as easier, and thus, requires less proficiency to teach the language.

E. *FSL Teacher Proficiency in French Immersion*

Contrary to CF, where the language is the focus of study, in FI, the language is also the means of communication through which other subjects (e.g., science, geography, history, etc.) are taught. As discussed above, there is a perceived need for higher LP among FI teachers (MacFarlane & Hart, 2002; Mady, 2018) since FI educators teach both language and subject-area content (Learning, 2021). LP is not simply a concern for CF; it also affects teachers and programs in FI. Arnott and Vignola's (2018) study determined LP among FI teachers, administrators, and other various stakeholders "as an area of high priority and concern" (p. 332) as identified in previous literature (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Flewelling, 1995; Salvatori, 2009), with growing apprehension toward LP levels for FI teachers. Christiansen and Laplante's (2004) work with pre-service FI teachers in western Ontario showcased how even when students are proficient enough in FSL to gain entrance to the Bachelor of Education program, some struggle throughout their program, and throughout their careers, to improve their LP. Cooke and Faez (2018) revealed shared LP concerns among practicing FI teachers; it is noteworthy that despite these concerns, the "average of self-perceived proficiency of FI teachers was higher than that of CF teachers (8.5 compared to 6.7)" (p. 14). Higher proficiency among FI teachers is also supported in other literature where some pre-service FSL teachers preparing to teach FI noted that they feel as though they are proficient enough to teach FI, even if a bit more exposure is warranted (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Learning, 2021). This is consistent with Learning (2021) who argued

that all 219 FI teachers in his mixed-method study felt confident in their proficiency; he did, however, illustrate that non-native FSL teachers are cognizant that "their French is not perfect" (p. 74). Although the data from Learning's study indicated that pre-service FSL teachers are indeed confident to teach in the FI program, much like Bayliss and Vignola's (2007) pre-service teachers, both studies revealed that

This inquiry explored the experiences of FSL teachers who engaged in four full-day professional development sessions in French. To do so, we used a pre- and post-questionnaire and semi-structured interviews that were conducted following the final professional develop session and transcribed to allow for content analysis.

A. Context

This inquiry took place in one school board in Ontario, Canada where the study of French is compulsory from Grades 4 to 9. The board offers FI beginning in kindergarten. In consultation with FSL teachers, the Board chose meeting the varied needs of students as the focus for professional development sessions. All sessions were offered in French and delivered by a francophone and two anglophones.

B. Description of Participants

We began the inquiry with 26 participants on a professional development day at the beginning of a new academic year. The remaining sessions had 11 participants and were offered once per month during the Fall term. Participants were FSL teachers: most had more than ten years of teaching experience and were qualified to teach FSL; most had English as a first language. All participants taught at the elementary level with the majority teaching in the FI program (*n*=7) and the remaining coming from the CF program (*n*=4).

C. Instruments

We created a pre-questionnaire with demographic questions and eight Likert-style items to explore

confidence in the language does preclude interest in maintaining or developing language skills in an effort to combat issues such as

linguistic insecurity. Regardless of which context is discussed – CF or FI, it is clear that support is needed to boost the LP of FSL teachers.

III. METHOD

teachers' confidence in their LP within their educational context (i.e., CF or FI) and associated language use. Like the CEFR, we included items on language comprehension (three items) and production (give items). The same Likert-scale questions served as the post-questionnaire. The semi-structured interview protocol included five questions that explored teachers' experiences in the professional development sessions. It is important to note that there were no explicit questions pertaining to LP during the interview.

IV. RESULTS

A. Questionnaire Results

Participants were asked to indicate their confidence in their language skills through eight statements in the pre-and post-questionnaire. Table 1 reveals confidence with the eight skills prior to the professional development sessions. While teachers were confident speaking to their students and colleagues, it is worth noting that the level of their confidence decreased when speaking to French first language individuals. Although the majority were confident in writing, teachers were less confident with writing production than the other language skills. The post-questionnaire had mixed results with four of the eight items representing an increase in confidence while the remaining four captured a decrease. A Wilcoxon signed rank test, chosen due to the varied size of the pre- and post-groups, revealed no statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-questionnaire results (W=10, (p<.05)).

TABLE I. TEACHERS' CONFIDENCE IN THEIR LANGUAGE SKILLS

Item #	Question	Confidence Pre-PD	Count	Total	Confidence Post-PD	Count	Total
1	I am confident speaking to my students in French.	92.0%	23	25	100.0%	11	11
2	I am confident speaking to my colleagues in French.	92.3%	24	26	81.8%	9	11
3	I am confident speaking spontaneously to native French speakers.	76.9%	20	26	90.9%	10	11
4	I am confident explaining diverse points of view.	84.6%	22	26	72.7%	8	11
5	I am confident reading a newspaper in French.	88.0%	22	25	90.9%	10	11
6	I am confident reading a novel in French.	84.0%	21	25	90.9%	10	11
7	I am confident understanding French TV, news, and/or films.	92.0%	23	25	90.9%	10	11
8	I am confident writing a report offering supporting details.	72.0%	18	25	54.5%	6	11

B. Interview Results

The interview participants highlighted their appreciation of having the French professional development sessions, recognizing the gaps and limitations of PD sessions that are typically offered in English, which is suggestive of limited awareness of the needs of FSL teachers and an assumption that FSL teaching is no different than teaching English:

This is specific to us, right? Like we're talking French. Teacher 4

Having French PD is also helpful, because we don't usually, it's usually English … I like being able to speak in French. It actually forces me to use my own skills to comprehend and speak even when it's not comfortable for me. Teacher 5

In addition to having the sessions offered in French, participants also recognized the value of collaborating with each other in French:

It gives us a chance to speak French to other people, get to know other people that we wouldn't normally ever meet. So, it's amazing. It's much better than most of the PD that we've been getting. Teacher 1

This is what teachers want. English teachers and French teachers want this. This was a hundred times better because it's the human interaction in French. And then that piece about being able to collaborate in groups is awesome, because we do so much work by ourselves. Teacher 7

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review and subsequent findings, it is clear that LP and confidence underpin how FSL teachers position themselves within the teaching profession and the choices they make while there. The literature review on LP and confidence explored how LP inherently shapes a teachers' practice (Richards et al., 2013). Indeed, if FSL teachers feel inferior because of their LP, their confidence and self-esteem (Masson et al., 2021) influence students' learning (Köksal & Ulum, 2019), the classroom environment (Salvatori, 2007), and FSL programming (Richards et al., 2013; Tsui, 2003). The questionnaire data in this inquiry echoes the complexity of self-reported LP with respondents showing an increase in LP in some items and a decrease in others, with no statistically significant difference between pre- and post-professional development sessions. Data revealed that post-PD sessions, participants perceived an increase in their confidence to speak to both students and native French speakers, but, interestingly, a decrease in confidence when speaking to FSL colleagues. This is encouraging given that one of the goals of the PD sessions was to improve FSL teacher participants' confidence in using French; our data corroborates the need for more PD in French for FSL teachers. The juxtaposition of qualitative and quantitative data

around FSL teachers' desire for collaboration, paired with their decrease in confidence when speaking to FSL colleagues, was salient and points to the need for more collaborative opportunities to boost language use among colleagues. Findings highlight that FSL teacher participants' reading confidence increased while their level of confidence around listening and writing decreased; these findings may be due to insufficient time for teacher participants to observe how their confidence changes over time in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Given their isolation in their schools, the limits of their French use with colleagues, and the uniqueness of this opportunity, offering the sessions in French may have provided a wider context through which to judge their own skills, prompting an adjustment in the post-questionnaire.

Teachers' unsolicited appreciation at having the professional development sessions in highlight the need for professional development sessions offered in French to inform teachers' LP self-assessments, create a community of language practice to address the isolation faced by FSL teachers (Masson, 2018), and demonstrate value for their time and unique needs as FSL teachers; this value may contribute retaining FSL teachers.

In conclusion, professional development sessions offered in French may not only bolster FSL teachers' LP with an increase of target language usage and exposure, but also afford FSL teachers the space to collaborate, as evidenced by participants in this inquiry. More professional development in French by, and for, FSL teachers offers the possibility of building community and collaboration, improving LP, and supporting retention of FSL teachers.

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