



“How am I supposed to teach them French when they can’t even speak English?”: Unpacking the Myth of English Proficiency as a Prerequisite for French Immersion

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ABSTRACT. French immersion in Saskatchewan has traditionally served predominantly Anglophone student populations; however, recent trends in immigration have contributed to increasingly diverse linguistic backgrounds of students throughout the province. The high levels of motivation, family support, and academic achievement of Allophone students learning French as an additional language in Canada have been documented extensively (Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Mady, 2013b, 2015). However, Allophone learners often face greater obstacles accessing French immersion programs throughout Canada than their Anglophone peers, and such students are sometimes excluded on the basis of their supposedly lacking English proficiency (Roy, 2015). Indeed, many teachers believe that French immersion is an unsuitable program for Allophone students, and school administrators sometimes discourage families from enrolling due to limited English language ability (Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006; Mady & Masson, 2018). Through online surveys and semi-structured interviews, this mixed-methods study explored educators’ perspectives on the perceived suitability of French immersion for Allophone students in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and the extent to which English proficiency is perceived as a determinant of success in the program. In this article, I share the findings of this study, unpack the beliefs of French immersion educators in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and offer recommendations for such programs in order to provide a diverse student population with equitable education and support.

RÉSUMÉ. Historiquement, les élèves anglophones nés au Canada sont ceux qui ont le plus fréquenté les programmes d’immersion française en Saskatchewan dans le but de développer des compétences langagières et scolaires dans les deux langues officielles du Canada. Cependant, on observe une hétérogénéisation de la population d’élèves inscrits dans ce programme grâce à une augmentation récente de l’immigration dans la province contribuant à sa diversité grandissante tant sur le plan linguistique que culturel. Plusieurs études ont examiné la motivation des élèves allophones envers l’apprentissage du français au Canada, leur capacité à acquérir simultanément le français et l’anglais, et l’importance que leurs familles accordent au multilinguisme (Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Mady, 2013b, 2015). Malgré leur succès bien documenté en immersion, les élèves allophones sont parfois exclus de ces programmes à cause de leur niveau jugé insuffisant en anglais (Roy, 2015). Plusieurs enseignants considèrent que l’immersion française n’est pas un programme approprié aux besoins des apprenants allophones, et les administrateurs d’écoles vont parfois jusqu’à décourager leurs familles de les y inscrire (Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006; Mady & Masson, 2018). Cette recherche vise à explorer divers discours au sujet des élèves allophones en immersion française ainsi que l’importance accordée à leurs compétences langagières en anglais. L’étude adopte une méthodologie mixte, menée par l’entremise de questionnaires et d’entretiens, afin



d'examiner les perspectives d'enseignants et de directeurs, tous provenant de plusieurs écoles de Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Cette étude disséminera les résultats de la recherche, ainsi que certaines recommandations pour les programmes d'immersion dans le but d'offrir une éducation équitable à une population de diversité croissante.

Keywords: *FSL, French immersion, Allophone, inclusive education, multilingualism.*

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the diversity of languages spoken by Indigenous communities and newcomer populations throughout Canada, the country's linguistic identity has been shaped significantly by a national discourse of dualism between its two official languages, English and French (Haque, 2012). Thus, language programs in Canada have traditionally provided French instruction for students whose first language is English (Anglophones) and English instruction for students whose first language is French (Francophones) (Roy, 2010). However, the imagined binary of Anglophones and Francophones in Canada has been criticized within the field of sociolinguistics for failing to recognize the growing number of citizens who speak a first language that is neither English nor French (Lamarre, 2002). The increase of such students (hereafter referred to as Allophones) in Canada has critical implications for French immersion; indeed, such learners are sometimes excluded from immersion on the basis of their limited English language proficiency, as documented by Roy (2015) in the province of Alberta. In this article, I explore the perspectives of educators (teachers and principals) on the suitability of French immersion for Allophone students in Saskatchewan, and examine the widespread myth of English fluency as a prerequisite for success in French immersion programs.

FRENCH IMMERSION IN SASKATCHEWAN

French immersion originated in St. Lambert, a predominantly English-speaking suburb of Montréal, Québec, in 1965, in response to the concerns of Anglophone parents who felt that their children were ill-equipped to compete in the increasingly French-dominant workforce of the province (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). In addition to serving the political goal of preparing Anglophone children to work in French, the program embodied a pedagogical shift towards content-driven language education, which has yielded positive learning outcomes. Specifically, Lyster (2008) noted that French immersion students develop curricular knowledge and skills that are equivalent to those of non-immersion learners studying in English; Genesee and Lindholm-Leary (2013) found that French immersion students regularly outperform core French students in areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking; and Lindholm-Leary and Genesee (2014) reported that immersion students attain English language abilities similar to or greater than those of learners in regular English programs. In Saskatchewan, there are currently 85 public schools offering French immersion, and demand for the program is increasing (Bonjour SK, 2018). Learners often begin French immersion in Kindergarten or Grade 1, but some



school divisions offer late French immersion programs in Grades 6 and 7 (Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2017). French immersion programs are united in their endeavour to provide French language instruction to learners of diverse linguistic backgrounds, and prior exposure to French is not required for enrolment or success.

LANGUAGES IN SASKATCHEWAN

Anglophones make up the vast majority of Saskatchewan's population (82.4%), whereas Francophones represent only 1.4% of the province; thus, French is clearly a minority language in Saskatchewan, demographically (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017). In terms of Indigenous languages, Plains Cree and Dene represent the third and seventh most commonly spoken first languages in Saskatchewan, respectively (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011). Importantly, the number of Allophones is rising throughout the province, largely as a result of increased immigration. Specifically, the population of Saskatchewan residents who claim a first language other than English or French is 14.5%, up from 12.7% in 2011 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017). The five most common first languages of Saskatchewan newcomers in recent years were Tagalog (26%), Chinese (8%), Punjabi (8%), English (8%), and Gujarati (6%) (Government of Saskatchewan, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Official Language Education Policy for Allophone Students

The Government of Canada has stated that increasing the number of citizens who are bilingual in the country's official languages, French and English, is a high priority. To this end, three federal policy documents, *The Next Act: New Momentum for Canada's Linguistic Duality* (2003), *Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2008-2013: Acting for the future* (2013), and *Action Plan for Official Languages - 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future* (2018), advance the goal of increasing the rate of official language bilingualism throughout the country. Nevertheless, there is little policy in place to support Allophone students learning both official languages (Galiev, 2013). Specifically, Mady and Turnbull (2010) noted that in English-dominant regions of the country, "immigrants must learn English, but their access to also learn French at school is not guaranteed by Federal policy documents" (p. 5). Indeed, although the Government of Canada promotes official-language bilingualism for its citizens, the extent to which it has addressed this goal for Allophones is negligible. Likewise, official language bilingualism as it pertains to Allophone learners is seldom discussed at the provincial or territorial level, and there is significant discrepancy amongst provinces and territories as to whether French education is mandatory or optional (Mady & Black, 2011). Notably, Saskatchewan students are not required to study French or other languages beyond English, and there is no policy that ensures the inclusion of Allophones in the study of languages other than English.

Allophone Perspectives and Outcomes in French Language Education



Regardless of the absence of policy support, the motivation and success of Allophone students studying French in English-dominant regions of the country have been documented extensively in recent studies. Mady (2010) found that newcomer Allophone students in core French programs viewed official language bilingualism as an indispensable element of Canadian identity, whereas their Canadian-born Anglophone peers were less likely to espouse this view. Similarly, Carr (2013) noted that many Allophone parents considered French-English bilingualism a valuable avenue towards their children developing a sense of Canadian identity, due primarily to the official status of the two languages. Moreover, Allophone learners are more likely than their Anglophone counterparts to believe that official-language bilingualism will provide employment opportunities in the future (Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Mady, 2003). In summary, Allophone students and families are often highly motivated to learn both French and English in Canada, both for intrinsic reasons pertaining to identity, and for extrinsic reasons, such as economic opportunity.

In addition to the strong motivation of Allophone families to pursue official language bilingualism, Allophone students often attain noteworthy academic achievement and language proficiency. Carr (2007) found that Allophone students who study French and English simultaneously developed higher English language proficiency than those who were only studying English. Bérubé and Marinova-Todd (2012) concluded that Allophone students with alphabetic first languages were at no disadvantage learning French compared to Anglophone learners. Mady (2007) reported that the French language skills of newcomer Allophone students in core French programs in Ontario were stronger than those of Canadian-born students, even though the Allophones in question had received significantly less instructional time. Subsequently, Mady (2015) observed stronger French language abilities amongst newcomer Allophone students in French immersion than their Canadian-born Anglophone and Canadian-born multilingual classmates, both at the elementary and secondary levels. Mady's study advanced the important notion of there being an advantage to learning languages, not only for Allophone students in immersion, but for newcomer Allophones in particular. Thus, the language repertoires of Allophone students should not be viewed through a lens of deficiency in language learning programs (García, 2002); rather, such learners tend to have distinct advantages compared to their Anglophone peers, including high motivation and prior language learning experience.

Perspectives of French Language Educators

In light of Allophone families' high motivation for attaining official language bilingualism through French immersion, and the demonstrable successes of such their children in the program, it would seem to follow that educators would embrace the growing presence of Allophone learners in French-language programs. However, several studies that have examined the perspectives of French teachers and principals have found that educators sometimes espouse exclusionary views towards Allophone students. In a survey that examined the beliefs of 1,305 teachers in different French language programs throughout Canada, participants indicated that student diversity was among the greatest challenges they faced as educators, noting specifically the increase of Allophone learners (Lapkin,



MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006). Furthermore, Mady (2013a) found that, in Ontario, immersion teachers were generally less inclusive of Allophone students than were core French teachers. Specifically, several French immersion teachers believed that immersion was too difficult for Allophone students and would instead recommend core French for such learners, with the rationale that the students should develop English language skills before studying French (Mady, 2011). In a more recent study that examined the perspectives of principals in Ontario, Mady and Masson (2018) found that participants expressed divergent views with respect to their roles as gatekeepers in French immersion programs. Notably, principals interviewed in their study disagreed as to whether Allophone students should attain a high level of English proficiency before beginning immersion programs, and some corroborated previous research by suggesting that core French would be more appropriate for such learners. Evidently, the diverse perspectives of teachers and principals regarding the perceived suitability of French immersion for Allophone students underscore the contentious nature of this issue. In terms of research on Allophone learners in immersion programs, it is also noteworthy that, as Mady and Turnbull (2012) indicated, “the few studies that exist have almost all been completed in Ontario or in larger urban centers where many immigrants live” (p. 134), and that many regions of Canada remain unexamined.

Mady and Arnett (2016) explored the perspectives of teacher candidates for French language programs and compared the experiences of teacher candidates in core French and French immersion programs with their university curricula. This revealed significant learning gaps about Allophones, as “the vast majority (7 out of 9 or 78%) could not access any scientific knowledge about these students and their learning needs” (p. 87). Indeed, the disconnect between the theoretical learning and practical experience of French-language teacher candidates in regards to Allophones is disconcerting and must be addressed in light of the increasing student diversity in such programs today.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

In this article, I report on a subset of the data from a broader research project that explored the perspectives of diverse stakeholders concerning the perceived suitability of French immersion for Allophone learners in Saskatchewan (Davis, 2017). The juxtapositions between the beliefs and experiences of educators and Allophone parents are documented more fully in Davis, Ballinger, and Sarkar (in press). In this article, I focus specifically on educators’ beliefs with respect to the importance of English proficiency in immersion and respond to the following research questions:

1. What are the beliefs of educators regarding the importance of Allophone students attaining English language proficiency before beginning French immersion?
2. How do the beliefs of educators regarding the role of English proficiency affect gatekeeping decisions for Allophone students in French immersion?



In order to respond to the selected research questions, I used the methodological framework of a convergent parallel methods design (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, I used online surveys and semi-structured interviews concurrently to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. The rationale for this mixed-methods approach was that the questionnaires would provide quantitative data from larger populations of the stakeholder groups—in this case, teachers and principals—whereas the interviews would generate qualitative data for more thorough analysis of the perspectives and experiences of smaller samples of French immersion educators.

Survey Methods

I was invited to recruit teachers and principals from five elementary schools that offer French immersion programs within the same school board in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Subsequently, I distributed the survey to educators by email. The survey was completed by 56 participants. The following definitions were included in the questionnaire to ensure a mutual understanding of terminology: “In this survey, the term ‘Anglophone’ refers to a student whose first language is English, whereas the term ‘Allophone’ refers to a student whose first language is neither English nor French.” The survey consisted of three demographic questions and 20 five-point Likert-scale statements. Each survey item included a comment box where participants could elaborate on their answers.

Interview Methods

During the same time period that teachers and principals were completing the online questionnaire (i.e., October to December 2016), I conducted 43 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with educators from the same survey population. Participants were interviewed in their respective schools, with the exception of one teacher who was interviewed via Skype. I transcribed and analyzed the interviews with NVivo and assigned pseudonyms to participants. With respect to analysis, I interpreted the survey and interview data concurrently for the purposes of triangulation. I used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative questionnaire data, and thematic coding to interpret trends that emerged from the qualitative survey comments and interview data. Specifically, the four themes that emerged in the analysis were as follows: first, the importance of learning English and French in Saskatchewan; second, the perceived role of English language ability in Allophone language learning; third, gatekeeping practices and beliefs in French immersion; and fourth, English language support for Allophone students in immersion.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

The survey began with demographic questions about the educators’ teaching experiences and careers. Participants were asked to select the answer that best represented their professional position, presented in Table 1 below. Participants included teachers from different grade levels, as well as six principals or vice principals.



Position	Count	Percentage
Primary Years Teacher (Kindergarten – Grade 2)	17	30.36%
Middle Years Teacher (Grade 3 – 5)	14	25.00%
Senior Years Teacher (Grade 6 – 8)	10	17.86%
Administrator	6	10.71%
Resource Teacher	3	5.36%
General/Specialist Teacher	3	5.36%
Teacher Librarian	1	1.79%

Table 1: Educators' Current Position

Respondents also specified the number of years they had been teaching in French immersion programs, as seen in Table 2 below.

Years Teaching	Number of teachers	Percentage
1 – 5	30	53.57%
6 – 10	12	21.43%
11 – 15	3	5.36%
16 – 20	5	8.93%
21 – 25	1	1.79%
26 – 30	3	5.36%

Table 2: Number of Years Teaching

French immersion teachers from a range of grade levels participated in the study, in addition to six principals or vice principals. Moreover, although participants had varying experience teaching in French immersion programs, the majority had been teaching for fewer than six years at the time of the study. In the next four sections, I present the interview and survey findings according to the four themes that emerged in the analysis.

The Importance of Learning English and French in Saskatchewan

The questionnaire included two items on the beliefs of French immersion teachers and principals with respect to the importance of learning English and French (Table 3) for Allophone students in Saskatchewan.

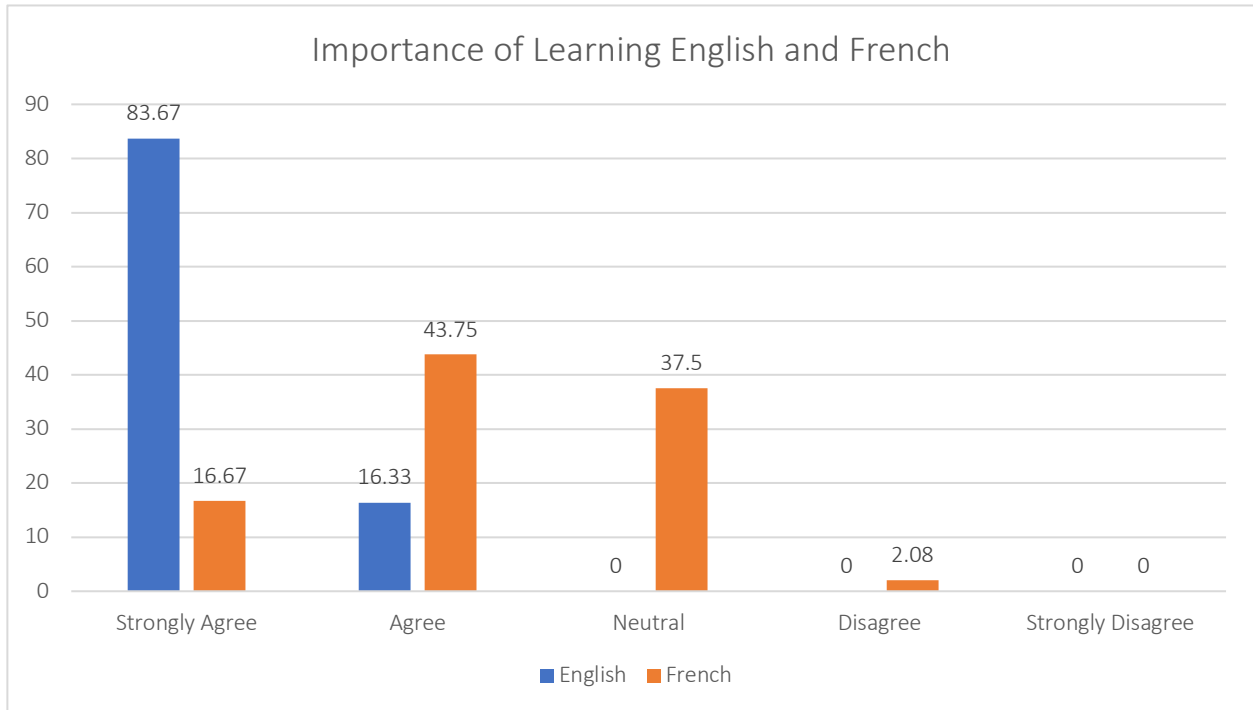


Table 3: Importance of Learning English and French

Evidently, the educators demonstrated that although it was beneficial for Allophone students to learn both languages, the importance of learning English was paramount. In the interviews, participants added nuance to the belief that learning English was considered to be of greater importance than learning French, as seen below:

I just think, give them a head-start in the language that they're going to hear and use most of the time in Saskatoon, which is going to be English, and then let them get to grips with that, get ahead with that, see how well they're succeeding in the learning. (Andrea, Grade 2 Teacher)

I think it makes sense to first master the language that you need to get by in Saskatchewan. And French is awesome, and it's going to be really useful in life. So, get it, but just make sure that you get that one that you need to survive first, I think. (Jocelyne, Grade 2 Teacher)

The data from both the survey and interviews indicate that certain teachers believe that although it is worthwhile for Allophone students to learn French, there is greater urgency to learn English because of its pervasiveness throughout Saskatchewan.

In the interviews, I asked teachers and principals why they thought Allophone families were enrolling their children in immersion. Several of them stated that Allophone families



were interested in French immersion because of the official status of the language in Canada:

I think that when they come to this country, they really believe that, you know, we have two official languages and that it's important—very important—for them to learn those two languages. I don't know, like, people that are from this country—it's not that they forget about the French, but they just—I don't know. It's almost like people coming from these other countries value it way more, coming in. They go, 'Oh, it's French and English! You need to do both! This is important!'. (Britney, Grade 2 Teacher)

You know, they want to embrace the culture of Canada, and they say, 'Well, we are a dual-language country and so we feel like it's important for our child to learn the two official languages of this country. That's often the statement that I get, like, 'This country speaks French and English. We want our children speaking both of those languages'. (Josephine, Vice Principal)

In summary, French immersion educators generally considered learning English to be of greater importance than learning French for Allophone students in Saskatchewan, but also noted the significant motivation of such families to learn both official languages.

The Role of English Proficiency in Allophone Language Learning

The second theme that emerged in my analysis of the data was the role of English language ability in the language learning of Allophones in French immersion. Survey results indicated that the respondents were divided in their belief that Allophone students require a high level of English proficiency before learning French and that Allophone students should focus on learning English before learning French (Table 4, below).

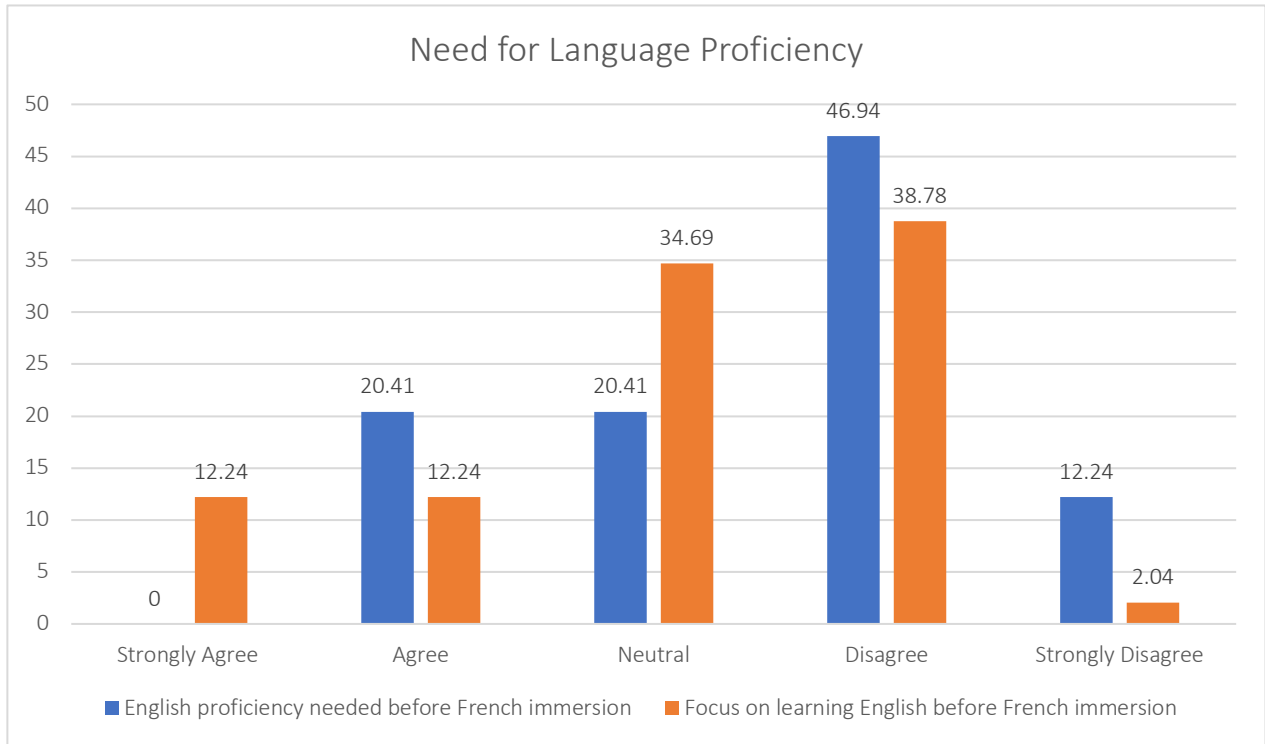


Table 4: Role of English Proficiency in Allophone Language Learning

Interview responses corroborated the survey results, as seen in the following excerpts:

Well, I think if they're, if they're increasing their fluency and doing a lot better with their reading, I think that fosters a love for reading, right? So, if they're doing well in that, I think it's just going to transfer over to English as well. (Wallace, Grade 2 Teacher)

I'm not of the opinion that languages confuse each other; I think languages clarify each other, you know? (Darius, Principal)

Furthermore, some participants stated that Allophones with limited English proficiency often made a greater effort to speak French in class than their Anglophone classmates:

Generally, I find those students actually speak in French more at school than English-speaking students because they don't necessarily have the English to revert to. (Lindsey, Grade 3 Teacher)

I think, too, they know that most of us teachers are also English speakers, and so they default to that quickly, whereas I do not speak Urdu. I do not speak multiple languages other than French or English, and so to default to that doesn't really help us converse or understand each other better. And so, I just find that they try



harder in French, because it's the one thing that we might have in common. (Jada, Vice Principal)

Indeed, many participants affirmed the language learning aptitude of Allophones, citing the motivation of such students to speak in French and their ability to transfer their learning between languages.

Conversely, several interview participants argued that, in fact, Allophone students should focus on developing some English language proficiency before enrolling in immersion. For instance, some teachers suggested that the late French immersion program was a more prudent choice for Allophone learners than early immersion, insofar as students would acquire English abilities over several years before studying French in Grade 6:

I think the ideal would be core French and then do late French immersion. I think that's a perfect transition. Like, get your English, which is, like, what you need to survive in Saskatchewan, and then you can still get French immersion and catch up. (Jennifer, Grade 2 Teacher)

With an English language knowledge base, we're able to relate a lot of the sentence structures and stuff like that to English, which can help them scaffold into their knowledge of French. And I think not having that common base can prove challenging. (Jesse, Grade 6 Late French Immersion Teacher)

There is some leaning upon English that is used, and if you have no English, then, you know, you don't have that crutch. (Carl, Grade 7 late French immersion Teacher)

Finally, one participant even shared that his colleagues believed it was impossible to teach a student French who had no prior English language abilities:

I've heard some teachers in the staff room here saying, 'How am I supposed to teach them French when they can't speak English?'. (Kevin, Resource Teacher)

Indeed, there was a notable range of opinions amongst educators with respect to the necessity of prior English language proficiency for Allophones in French immersion.

The Inclusion of Allophones in French Immersion

In this section, I share the results of teacher and principal perspectives regarding the inclusion of Allophone learners in immersion. Participants were asked whether they believed that Allophone students should be included in immersion and whether they believed that immersion was a suitable program for such learners (see Table 5, below).

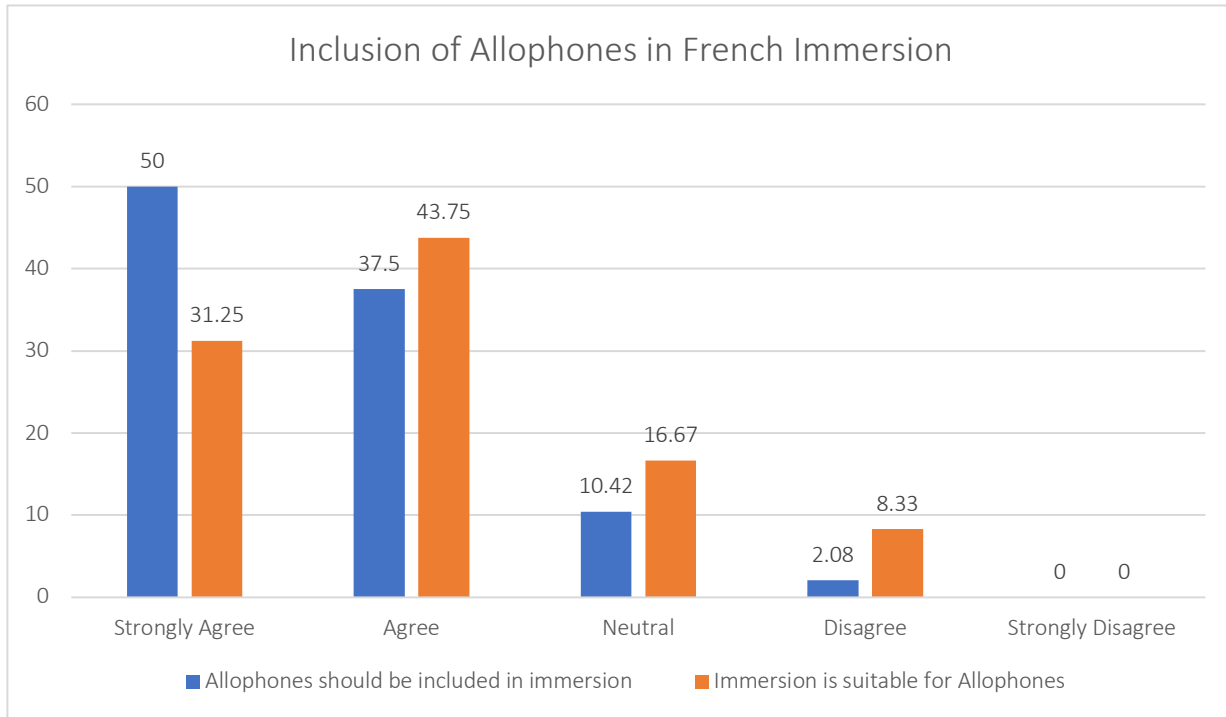


Table 5: Including Allophones in French Immersion

The data indicate that the vast majority of educators believed that Allophone students should be included in French immersion and that this was a suitable program for such learners. In the interviews, several principals shared that French immersion was historically an elitist instructional stream that excluded Allophone learners, but that such students were included in immersion programs today:

And the attitude of French immersion not being just an elite program—regardless of what we said it was—it was always kind of an elite, you know, upper-middle-class program. And, you know, if a kid struggles, then you just move them out of French immersion, and if you don't speak English, well, then you can't come into French because you don't speak English. And I still have dealt with that here in the last few years where teachers say, 'Oh, it would be better if they went and learned English first'. (Darius, Principal)

I'm seeing it being less and less of an elitist program. I've lived that, you know, that whole attitude for the last 15-20 years. I'm seeing it less and less, and I like that. I think that as long as we're providing the proper supports for these children, like we would for any program, then there's no reason why we can't have students with special needs or Allophones coming in and learning another, like, learning French as opposed to just English. (Josephine, Vice Principal)

In summary, most participants expressed that French immersion was a suitable program for Allophone students, and several educators indicated that the acceptance of such



learners was indicative of a recent trend toward more inclusive attitudes about Allophones in immersion programs.

In the survey, I also asked participants about their beliefs regarding their roles as gatekeepers in immersion, such as whether they would discourage Allophone families from enrolling their children in French immersion and whether they would recommend immersion to a student with limited English proficiency (see Table 6, below).

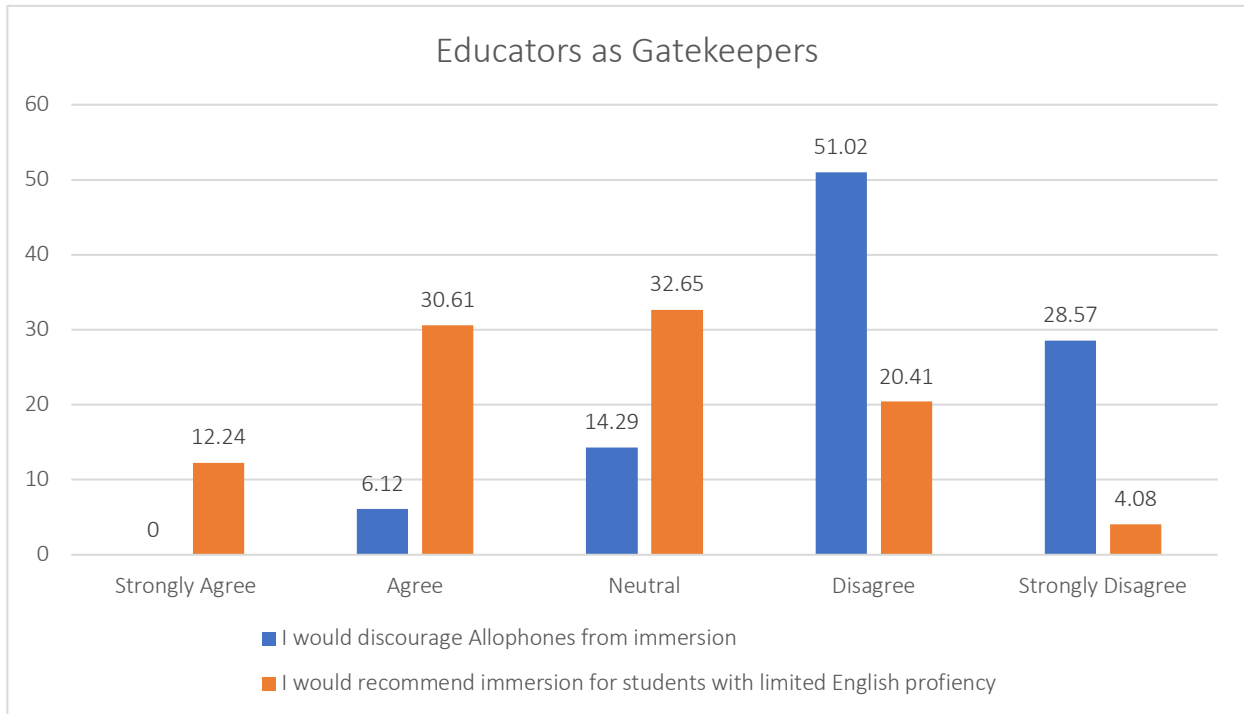


Table 6: Educators as Gatekeepers to Immersion

While responses to the first question suggest that the majority of educators affirm the inclusion of Allophones in immersion, the next question generated more negative responses.

In the interviews, some participants noted a disconnect between the school board's inclusion of Allophones and their own beliefs, as seen in the following interview excerpt:

But then the other thing is that they, oftentimes in many divisions, push French immersion as being for everybody. 'French immersion is for everyone! French immersion is for everyone! Anyone can take French immersion!' I just don't think that's true! As I said, if you're already struggling with your first language or your second language, we're not doing you any favours by starting you on a third, in my opinion. You know? Like, if you're already struggling with English, or you're already struggling with Spanish or Urdu, or whatever language you speak, then adding a



third is just making less space in your brain, you know? (Billy, Grade 7 late French immersion Teacher)

Additionally, some educators stated that they would not recommend French immersion for Allophones facing challenges beyond the classroom, such as Syrian refugee students:

I think a lot of the ones we've been getting, like, we've gotten lots of families from Syria at this school. I think they're just struggling to, you know, have proper clothing and lunches. I just think they think, you know, let's. . . I mean, it's an old fact, I mean, obviously if they're teaching in French, it's just another stress at home, and I think we should just look at it as 'Let's learn English first'. (Britney, Grade 2 Teacher)

The survey results seem to indicate that participants were generally supportive of including Allophone learners in French immersion, but interview data suggest that the inclusion of Allophones in immersion should be contingent upon their English language proficiency.

Language Support for Allophones in French Immersion

Participants' views concerning the language learning support offered to Allophone learners in French immersion also emerged as a theme in my analysis. First, participants were asked whether they believed that Allophone students received sufficient homework support in immersion (Table 7, below).

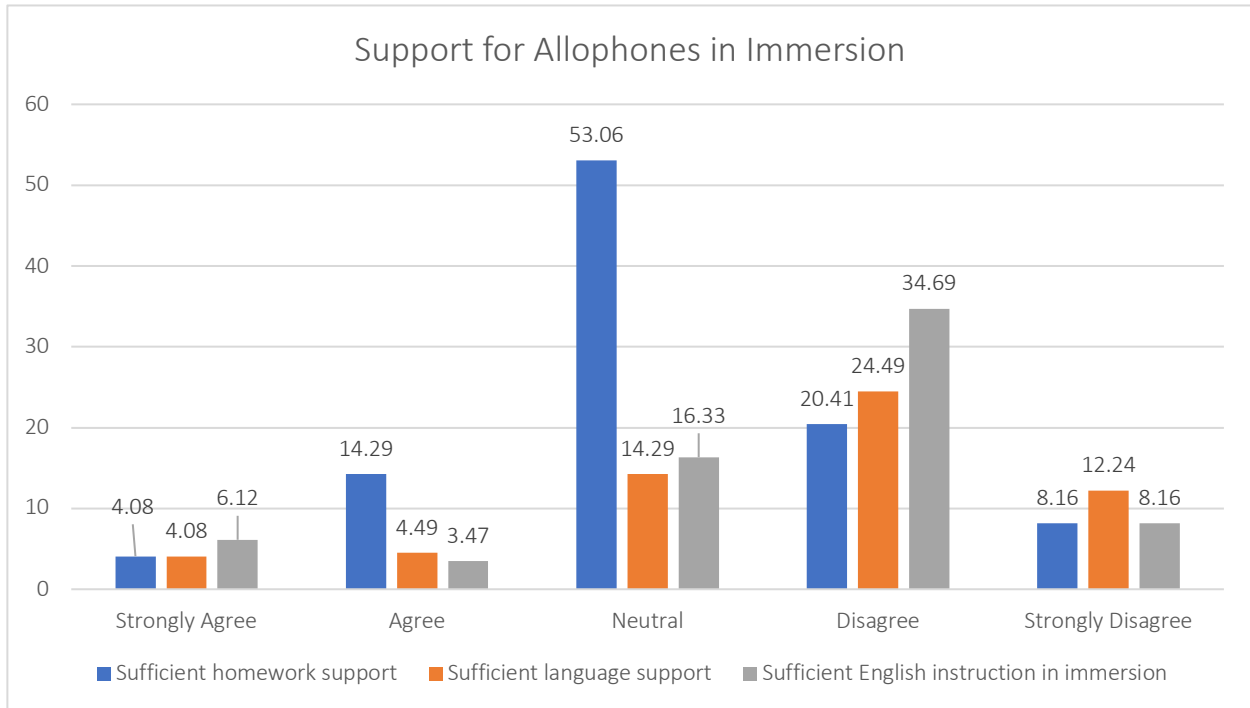


Table 7: Support for Allophones in Immersion

Responses varied with respect to the homework support Allophone students received. The divergent results regarding support for homework were reflected in the interview data as well. Notably, some educators affirmed the ability of Allophone families to support their children with their learning, whereas others believed that such families struggled to provide meaningful support, as seen in the following example:

I would say that there would be some difficulty for families to support them in French and in English, because most of our Canadian families have a little bit, *Sesame Street* French, at the very least, you know? And I think that they can support a little bit differently. Even if they don't feel bilingual or fluent, they still have knowledge of the French language, whereas some of our Allophone families may have none. (Yolanda, Principal)

Evidently, although some participants believe that Allophone families supported their children in their language learning, others felt that such families were unable to provide adequate support due to their own lack of English and French proficiency.

In a similar vein, the survey asked participants about their beliefs with respect to the language resources and support Allophone students received in French immersion programs (see Table 7, above). Whereas the results for this item were divergent amongst survey respondents, interview participants were united in their concern with the limited Resource teacher support provided for at-risk students in French immersion:



You know, the struggles that some of our kids have are very real, and, you know, the teachers within the classroom, the framework of the classroom, can only do so much, and are doing their very best. But I would definitely advocate for more Resource within French immersion, for sure. (Phoebe, Grade 2 Teacher)

I would love to be able to say to every family, 'Absolutely, French is the right place for you,' and the reason I think that some people can't say that is because we don't have as much Resource support. (Julie, Grade 3 Teacher)

The perception that French immersion learners do not receive sufficient Resource teacher support was a central finding of the present study and was underscored by many participants as a major shortcoming of the school board's efforts to create more inclusive immersion programs.

Moreover, participants were demonstrably divided as to whether Allophone students received sufficient English instruction in French immersion (see Table 7, above). Specifically, some teachers agreed that students were given sufficient support, whereas others suggested that the lack of formal English instruction was mitigated by ample exposure to the language beyond the classroom. In contrast, more participants felt that Allophones should receive greater English language support in French immersion and that this instruction should begin before Grade 3, the accepted practice of the school board. The survey comment below provides greater insight into this pervasive belief:

English is not even provided until grade 3, and at that point it is less about the mechanics of the language and more about how to analyze stories, how to present, etc. The program assumes that students are English speakers who are simply refining their English skills, as opposed to Allophone students receiving instruction for the first time, and for only 50 minutes a day. (Jennifer, Grade 2 Teacher)

Similarly, there was a common belief that English as Additional Language (EAL) support, an educational service intended specifically for Allophone learners, should be offered to such students in French immersion programs prior to Grade 3, as seen in the following interview excerpts:

We tried accessing it [EAL] this year for a boy in Grade 2 who does not speak English really well or French. His first language is Serbian, so he has difficulty expressing himself in English and French, which is the two languages we speak here. So, there are some communication gaps with him. We tried seeing if we could access EAL services for him, but we can't access that until Grade 3. (Carmen, Resource Teacher)

Support in EAL would be huge for these families. And all it really does is become a disincentive for them to go into French immersion. When a new family, when Syrian families are arriving, and they say, 'We'd like to go into French immersion,' and I say, 'You're more than welcome, but just so you know, there's no English



language support until the end of Grade 2,' that becomes a roadblock to them, you know? (Darius, Principal)

In summary, my study found divergent views regarding the English language support Allophone students receive in immersion, and a feeling that the lack of English instruction dissuaded Allophone families from considering French immersion.

DISCUSSION

In this article, I explored the perspectives of teachers and principals concerning the perceived suitability of French immersion for Allophone learners with respect to the role of English language proficiency and whether these beliefs impact their beliefs about the inclusion of Allophones in immersion programs in Saskatoon. The survey and interviews began with questions measuring the perceived importance of learning English and French in Saskatchewan. Although participants indicated that it was worthwhile for Allophone students to learn both languages, there was significantly more urgency expressed for the learning of English than for French. This distinction was due to the prevalence of English in Saskatchewan and the perception that the language is essential for everyday life; in contrast, participants noted that French might afford advantages in terms of employment opportunities, but that proficiency was not necessary for survival in the province.

There are several interpretations of participants' prioritization of the learning of English over the learning of French for Allophone learners. First, several educators expressed that it was advantageous to learn multiple languages sequentially, rather than simultaneously. For instance, some participants suggested that learning English and French concurrently would be overwhelming for Allophone learners, as the two languages would be competing for finite cognitive resources. Additionally, for some educators, there is a specific order in which Allophones should learn the two languages, and that English should be used for scaffolding in French immersion. This belief is at the root of one teacher's question: "How am I supposed to teach them French when they can't speak English?" Finally, some educators stated that Allophone students should attain English fluency before beginning immersion in order to better communicate with their English-speaking classmates, citing the example of Syrian refugee children. The notion that communication barriers might preclude Allophone families from enrolling in French immersion seems particularly dubious; indeed, any challenges Allophone learners might experience communicating in English would be equally present in non-immersion programs.

Whether participants believe that languages are better learned sequentially than simultaneously, or that English is necessary for scaffolding when learning French, such views likely stem from educators' personal experiences with language learning (Cicurel, 2011). Insofar as all teacher interview participants were either Anglophones who had learned French as a second language or Francophones who had learned English as a second language, it follows that they would likely advocate for sequential language learning over simultaneous language learning. Additionally, some teachers might use



English for scaffolding in French immersion simply because English and French are the only two languages in which they can reliably make cross-linguistic connections. Thus, educators who recommend that Allophones learn English before French may believe they are acting in the best interest of the students. However, such beliefs unfairly exclude learners from French immersion for reasons entirely unsubstantiated by research, disregarding the growing body of empirical research that demonstrates that Allophone students often experience distinct advantages learning additional languages because of their diverse linguistic repertoires (Bérubé & Marinova-Todd, 2012; Carr, 2007; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Izquierdo & Collins, 2008; Mady, 2007, 2015). Therefore, while certain multilingual instructional strategies have been effective in French immersion programs and merit further consideration, the extent to which some pedagogical practices privilege English to the detriment of other languages could be considered inequitable and discriminatory.

As it pertains to the second research question that focuses on the inclusion and exclusion of Allophone students in French immersion, there were several findings about the gatekeeping roles that educators play. First, most participants affirmed that Allophones should be included in immersion, and that the perception of the program as suitable for such learners is a recent trend in the school board. Nevertheless, participants were conflicted about whether they would recommend French immersion for a student with limited English proficiency, which suggests that, for some educators, the perceived suitability of immersion for Allophone students is contingent upon their English abilities. This belief corroborates Roy's (2015) findings with respect to the exclusion of Allophones on the basis of ostensibly insufficient English proficiency. Furthermore, there are evidently divergent beliefs amongst teachers and principals regarding the perceived suitability of the program for such learners and the gatekeeping roles that educators believe they should play. This discrepancy of views amongst educators is symptomatic of a school board and province with no discernable policy for the inclusion of Allophones in language education (Mady, 2007). Indeed, the creation and implementation of evidence-based policy for Allophone students would ensure the inclusion of such learners in language education programs and prevent the arbitrary and inequitable practices endemic to Saskatchewan today.

This study has shown that the relationship between the resources provided for Allophones in French immersion and the gatekeeping practices of educators present an interesting dynamic. Specifically, several participants stated that they were reluctant to recommend immersion for Allophone students because of the lack of resources allocated to the program, citing minimal Resource teacher support and EAL support in particular. It is important to note that Resource teacher support is not offered exclusively for Allophones, but rather provides support for learners of all linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the notion that insufficient Resource teacher support in French immersion should preclude Allophone families from enrolling in the program is without merit. However, the fact that French immersion programs often provide less Resource teacher support than non-immersion instructional streams is still deeply problematic insofar as the disparity serves to perpetuate the perception of elitism that has long characterized immersion. To the extent



that participants believe that students receive less Resource teacher support in French immersion than they would receive in other programs, and to the extent that some educators perceive Allophones as at-risk learners, it follows that certain teachers consider immersion to be unsuitable for Allophone learners. Additionally, several participants stated that the school board policy that prevents Allophone students from accessing EAL support before Grade 3 deters such families from considering immersion in the first place. Thus, educators argued that EAL support should be provided for students in earlier grades to ensure their inclusion and success in the program. In summary, the data I have shared in this article suggest that many teachers and principals are theoretically supportive of the inclusion of Allophone learners in French immersion, but that the lack of resources offered for such students leads educators to consider excluding them under the assumption that Allophone learners require greater support than is offered in immersion.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined the beliefs of French immersion teachers and principals in Saskatoon, vis-à-vis the perceived suitability of immersion for Allophone learners and the role of English language proficiency in the program. The findings of the study contribute to the growing body of research that examines Allophone students in French language programs throughout Canada. Although the number of survey participants in the present study is quite small compared to previous questionnaire-based research, such as Lapkin, MacFarlane, and Vandergrift (2006), this limitation is mitigated by the fact that the majority of French immersion teachers and principals in the school board participated in surveys and interviews. Furthermore, the research site was itself important, insofar as the perspectives of educators regarding Allophones in immersion had not previously been explored in Saskatchewan (Mady & Turnbull, 2012).

In this article, I have advanced several important recommendations for the future of French immersion programs in Saskatchewan. First and foremost, it is critically important for the school division and the Government of Saskatchewan to create policies to ensure equitable access to immersion and other language education programs for Allophone learners throughout the province. Furthermore, my research found that educators believe that greater support is needed for students in French immersion programs. Thus, I strongly recommend that the school board allocate a full-time French immersion Resource teacher in all schools with immersion programs, which would provide learning support for all learners, irrespective of home languages. Furthermore, several educators advocated for Allophone students to be able to access EAL support prior to Grade 3. The extent to which the school division does not offer full-time Resource or EAL support for all French immersion learners erroneously suggests that such support systems are unnecessary in the program, further perpetuating the elitist notion that French immersion is most appropriate for academically gifted, English-speaking learners. If indeed French immersion is suitable for all students, it is high time for school boards to provide the necessary support for all learners to succeed.



In future research, I would suggest that further attention be given to the perceived suitability of French immersion for Allophone learners, both in Saskatchewan and beyond. Whereas some studies have documented the gatekeeping practices of French immersion principals and kindergarten teachers (Mady & Masson, 2018), researchers might consider exploring this topic in late French immersion programs, given that such programs are also common entry points for immersion students. Moreover, the perspectives and practices of French immersion teachers and principals at the secondary level also warrant further attention. Additionally, research examining policy creation and implementation in French language programs is required (Mady & Turnbull, 2012). Finally, future studies must also explore the underrepresentation of different student demographics in French immersion programs, such as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learners. Specifically, French immersion programs should be examined through the lens of LangCrit, or Critical Language and Race Theory (Crump, 2014), which would shed light on the intersection language and race in exclusionary practices or ideologies in school boards and classes. Finally, I hope that the present study might encourage researchers and educators alike to explore and implement policies and practices that would foster a more diverse and inclusive immersion in the future.

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