

## INTENSIVE FRENCH – INTRODUCTION

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In order to introduce this special issue dedicated to Intensive French, we would like to give a brief overview of the development of Intensive French in Canada. This summary will give the important characteristics of the program and explain the major principles in the research undertaken during the three-year period from 1998-2001, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

To understand the beginnings of Intensive French we must go back to the period just before the proclamation of the Official languages Act in Canada in 1969. Once this Act was passed, parents began to look for more effective ways for their children to learn to communicate in French and English as second languages in school. At this time, a group of anglophone parents on the South Shore in the Montreal area convinced the school board in St. Lambert to begin the first French immersion classes (Rebuffot, 1993). The success of these classes, which was reported by Lambert and other researchers from McGill University (Lambert and MacNamara, 1969; Lambert and Tucker, 1972) caused francophone parents on the north-west shore of Montreal to develop an interest in English immersion. Classes were begun in the 70's based on the St. Lambert model (Billy, 1980).<sup>1</sup>

In 1974, the school district in Mille-Îles, a suburb in north Montreal, undertook an evaluation of its French immersion classes and compared the results to those of the *classes*

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<sup>1</sup> A few years later, because of the restrictions imposed by the *Charter of the French language* about teaching English in the French schools of Québec, immersion classes in English were declared illegal (Government of Québec, 1977).

*d'accueil* for children of immigrants at the Montreal Catholic School Commission. In these classes, which Quebec instituted in 1969, children learned French orally for five months, without the addition of any subject matter (quite different from French immersion) and then entered the regular stream French classes to learn all their subject matter in French. Given the quality of the results in the *classes d'accueil*, the Mille-Îles school district decided to begin a similar type of program for teaching FSL for the students in the anglophone sector. Two experimental groups were formed, one at the grade 1 level (students aged 6) and one at the grade 6 level (students age 11). After five months of language learning, the students in both experimental groups were to return to their regular program of studies. AS this program met with considerable success, the school district decided to do the same with English, initiating a five month intensive English program at grade 6, as English was not taught in grade 1. After two years, the results of the experience were summarized: *Teaching a second language by an intensive period can be done with small children as well as older ones, but the younger ones require more time to achieve results comparable to those of the 11 year olds* (Billy, 1980).

The results of the effectiveness of these intensive classes were evaluated by researchers from Concordia University for English and UQAM for French (Billy, 1980). The findings indicated that the creation of an intensive period of language study was a valid option for improving communicative abilities, and that this option was more viable at the end of the elementary cycle<sup>2</sup> (grade 6) than with students at grade 1 (Billy, 1980). When these experiments were undertaken, trying out an intensive program for learning an L2 in Canada, the program was called *bain linguistique*.

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<sup>2</sup> In Newfoundland and Labrador, as in most of the other Canadian provinces, the term *primary* is used for grades 1, 2 and 3, while the term *elementary* is used for grades 4, 5 and 6. In Québec, the term *primary* is used to designate the grades from 1 to 6.

From that time on, developments were different for intensive French and intensive English. In the case of Intensive English, its success caused other school districts to implement the program and its spread has continued. At the end of 1993, there were 153 classes of intensive English in Quebec, over 31 out of 141 school districts. In 1993, nearly 22,000 students had benefited from intensive English classes (Dussault, 1997; Watts and Snow 1993). In 2002-3 there were more than 175 classes of intensive English in Quebec, 85% in grade 6 and 15% in grade 5. After the publication of the Larose report (2001), which arose out of a commission investigating the state of French in Quebec, the Minister of Education of Quebec announced his intention of encouraging school districts to increase the number of intensive English classes at grade 5 and 6, after 25 years of success of the program. Overall, the intensive English program in Quebec may be said to have been highly successful since its beginning.

Intensive French did not enjoy the same kind of development. French immersion was already growing rapidly by this time, and quickly became the most popular means of developing communicative competence in French for anglophone children (Rebuffot, 1993), overshadowing the possibilities of intensive French.<sup>3</sup> As a result when we began our research on Intensive French there was no equivalent anywhere in Canada in French of the kind of program for English that existed so widely in the province of Quebec.

Our efforts to find ways of improving the communication skills of students enrolled in the core French program in Canada began in earnest in 1997. In Newfoundland and Labrador the

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<sup>3</sup> Since that time there have been a very few attempts to implement an intensive French program in Canada, as, for example, around 1975, an experiment in intensive French was undertaken in Montreal for several years, in grade 7 (Coutu-Vaillancourt, personal communication) and another in Coquitlam, British Columbia, which lasted for 15 years in grade 9 and 10 (Daneault, personal communication); also in 1993-1994, in the Carleton Board of Education in Ottawa research was undertaken in to the use of block scheduling, comparing core French at grade 7 (Lapkin, Harley and Hart, 2001); in 1995-1996, an experiment with the *bain linguistique*, modeled on intensive English in Quebec was undertaken in the Ottawa School Board with 29 students in two classes (Wesche, MacFarlane and Peters, 1994a, 1994b). However, in all these cases, while the experiments were interesting and encouraging they were also isolated instances, closely associated with a few specific teachers and aimed at selected students.

percentage of students who chose to continue their study of FSL in grade ten, once the program became optional, was dropping rapidly. A survey undertaken with 380 students in the Western Avalon region asking why they did not continue with their study of French gave, as the principal reason, their inability to communicate in French, even after 6 years in the program (Netten, Riggs and Hewlett, 1996). After studying other types of programs and visiting intensive English classes in Montreal, it seemed that, with several important adjustments, the success which had been obtained in the intensive English classes in Quebec should be possible in intensive French classes in the other Canadian provinces. Thus, at the beginning of 1997 we began our conceptualisation of the Intensive French program.

In order to experiment the program permission from the Department of Education of NL to undertake a research project on intensive French. In the spring of 1998 we received the consent of the NL government to undertake a three-year research project to improve the communication skills of students in the core French program and to determine the administrative consequences of the implementation of such a program (intensive French) for the Department of Education, the schools districts and the schools. Our research project began in the schools in September, 1998, and continued until August, 2001.

*Characteristics of the research project on intensive French undertaken in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1998-2001.*

In order to highlight the features specific to the research on intensive French we will first develop our research objectives. Then we will describe the context in which the research took place.

*Research Objectives of the intensive French project*

The two major reasons for undertaking the research were to find out if the implementation of intensive French would indeed bring about a major improvement in the communication abilities of core French students, and to determine what changes would be required in the school system to introduce intensive French. In addition, as it has generally been contended that immersion tends to develop fluency, while the core program tends to develop accuracy, we were interested in investigating whether it would be possible to develop the two at the same time. Consequently, our research objectives were to determine:

1. what level could be attained in oral and written production by students participating in an intensive French program for five months,<sup>4</sup>
2. what relationship there would be between the number of hours given to instruction in intensive French and the results achieved in the oral and written production of the students, that is, if there would be a minimal number of instructional hours that would be necessary in order to achieve a major improvement in communication skills;<sup>5</sup>
3. if it would be possible to develop at the same time a balance between accuracy and fluency in the oral and written production of the students through the use of appropriate teaching strategies in the classroom;<sup>6</sup>
4. the degree of satisfaction with the program by those involved in its implementation;<sup>7</sup> and
5. the conditions required to implement intensive French for all students, no matter what their motivation, attitudes and intellectual abilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This objective is addressed through the research hypotheses 1 and 3 in the articles in this issue on the evaluation of the oral production and the written production of students in the intensive French research project.

<sup>5</sup> This objective is addressed in the research hypothesis 2 in the articles in this issue on the evaluation of the oral and written production of students in intensive French research project.

<sup>6</sup> This objective is addressed in Netten (2001) and also discussed in the final report to Canadian Heritage on the Intensive French Research Project (Netten and Germain, 2002- Chapter 9 entitled *Étude de cas : observation des classes*.

<sup>7</sup> This objective is treated in the article in this issue entitled *L'étude qualitative du régime pédagogique du français intensif*.

### *Context*

Two school districts were chosen to participate in our research, one in an urban milieu and one in a rural one. As we were interested in developing a program that could be implemented in all milieus and for all students, it was essential to include a rural milieu where the realities of school life are quite different from those in the urban milieu. In the first year (1998-99), four classes, two in each of the milieus participated in the project. In the second year (1999-2000), there were eight classes, four from each of the two milieus, and in the third year (2000-2001) there were eleven classes, six in the rural milieu and the remaining ones in the urban milieu. During the three year period there were 110 students, then 218 students and finally 259 students in the project for a total of 587 students in 23 classes distributed in 11 schools. The average number of students per class was 26.

At the beginning of the project there were differences between the two school districts, but these differences became less pronounced during the three years. In the urban milieu in the first year the participating students came from a relatively high socio-economic background; their parents were generally professional, or held positions in business. In the rural milieu the parents were workers or fishermen. Since the parents in the urban milieu had more opportunities to travel, as well as their children, they were more aware of French and its use than those in the rural milieu. However, in neither case did the parents speak French, but they were happy to see their children involved in a project which would help increase their communicative abilities in French. Indeed, both groups of parents were very much interested in the education of their children and wanted to prepare them adequately for their future. All

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast with immersion classes, intensive French does not include the learning of academic subjects in French, but concentrates on the learning of the second language alone. This objective is also treated in the article in this issue entitled *L'étude qualitative du régime pédagogique du français intensif*.

the parents supported the participation of their children in the intensive French project, although some parents who had children experiencing difficulties in school expressed some concerns; these concerns were later dissipated.<sup>9</sup> In the following two years, the differences between the characteristics of the socio-economic levels of the students participating in the project became less pronounced due to the fact that students in the urban milieu came from a much more diverse background as the program was implemented in a wider variety of schools.

### *Student Selection*

One of the greatest differences between the two milieus was the selection of students in the first year. Previous studies of intensive English in Quebec that explored the question showed that all types of students are apparently capable of profiting from an intensive program (Dussault, 1997; Simard, 1995). For this reason it seemed to be reasonable to think that the same results would occur for intensive French. Nonetheless, in the case where there was more than one grade 6 class in the same school, students were, to a certain extent, selected in the sense that they were free to opt out of the program at the beginning if they so desired. Although school principals attempted to ensure that the intensive French classroom reflected as closely as possible the variety of students in all grade 6 classes in the school, in the first year it was somewhat difficult to achieve the distribution. In the second and third years, after experiencing the results of the program, principals had much more success in enabling all students to participate in the program; in some cases, where there were two grade 6 classes in the school, both classes participated in the program; in others, the intensive French class was chosen after the students had been assigned to their classrooms; in still others, selection was on a random basis. In the cases where

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<sup>9</sup> See article entitled *L'étude qualitative du régime du français intensive* in this issue.

there was only one grade 6 class in the school, however, as is the case with small rural schools, all students in the class participated in the program, including those who had special needs.

#### *Selection of teachers*

In all cases, it was the school district which chose the teachers for the intensive French program. The three major criteria for the selection of the teachers which was agreed upon were the following:

- a good command of French,
- the ability to use effectively interactive teaching strategies in the classroom, and
- a desire to use innovative teaching methods.

For the first year of the research project it was also required that the teachers assigned to the intensive French classes have experience teaching the regular curriculum at grade 6 in order that they would be able to make a valid general assessment of whether the outcomes of the regular curriculum for grade 6 were met. However, in the second and third years of the program, once these expectations had been confirmed, it was no longer necessary to require this experience. In the second and third years of the project, some teachers of intensive French were newly certified teachers without any previous experience, some were experienced core French teachers, and others were French immersion teachers who had had experience at levels other than grade 6. In the course of the summer that preceded their teaching intensive French, all the prospective teachers were given an introduction to the program, including its theoretical foundations, curriculum and recommended teaching strategies.

#### *Number of hours of French instruction before grade 6*

In Newfoundland and Labrador, in most schools, the study of FSL begins in grade 4; the recommended time for the program from the Department of Education is 90 hours per year to the

end of grade 6. Nine of the 11 schools (18 of the 23 classes) began French in grade 4; they had received an average of 180 hours of FSL instruction. For the 9 schools, the average number of hours of instruction varied from 138 to 200 for the two years preceding intensive French; this number represents an average of 90 hours per year (89.61), excluding schools 1, 6 and 9. In two schools (1 and 9), instruction in French began in Kindergarten, which represents a total of 360 hours instruction in French before the intensive French program for school 1 and 483 for group 9; while for school 6, where FSL instruction began in grade 2, the total was 279 hours.

Despite these differences in the number of hours of instruction before beginning intensive French, no pre-test was given to the students. According to the assessment of the French consultants in the two school districts involved, all the students had attained the grade 5 outcomes for FSL. The students who began earlier did not demonstrate substantially higher communicative abilities in speaking or in writing.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Number of hours of intensive French*

Undertaking research in a school system necessitates the acceptance of the realities, and the complexities, of how the system functions. This factor explains the tremendous variety in the number of hours that each school in the two school districts was able to assign to the five months of the intensive French program. In general, this variation comes from the necessity which principals face of ensuring that each teacher has an appropriate course load and that all the required courses are offered for the appropriate amounts of time. For example, in the situation where there were classroom teachers who were also qualified to teach French, or where there were several French teachers in a school, a higher number of hours could be given to the intensive French students (more than 350), or about 80% of the school day in the five months of

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, this point of view was later confirmed by an analysis of results after intensive French and by pre-testing undertaken in another jurisdiction.

the program. On the other hand, in schools where there was only one teacher of French, who necessarily taught the French classes at the other grade levels in the school (grade 4, 5, 7, etc.), and was often responsible for teaching some other subjects as well, a much lower number of hours (in one case, 150) could be given to the intensive French program, a number which usually represented about 50% of the school day for the five months of the program. This is the reason why one of the objectives of the research project was to determine if there were a minimal number of hours of instruction necessary to attain a major improvement in the communicative abilities of the students involved in intensive French. As a result of these exigencies, at the beginning of the project intensive French was defined in terms of the percentage increase in the time devoted to French, and schools were required to assign at least three to four times the number of hours regularly devoted to core French in that school to the program in order for the program to be considered an intensive one<sup>11</sup>.

#### *Results and expansion of intensive French*

The results of the intensive French program are presented in detail in several of the articles in this issue<sup>12</sup>. In general, the results have been very positive, and have confirmed that it would be quite possible to improve communicative skills for the 90% of students in Canada who learn French through the core program.

As a consequence of the findings of the intensive French research project, the program has been adopted by Newfoundland and Labrador as an official alternative program to regular core French in grade 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Other provinces have also shown an

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<sup>11</sup> Netten and Germain, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> See the articles entitled *L'évaluation de la production orale: critères et résultats*, *L'évaluation de la production écrite : critères et résultats* and *L'étude qualitative du régime du français intensif* in this issue.

interest in the program, and several have already established pilot classes.<sup>13</sup> There are a number of school districts in other provinces which are planning to institute pilot classes for September, 2003 or September, 2004.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Minister of Education of Wales visited classes in intensive French in Newfoundland and Labrador, and after an investigation by a parliamentary committee has recommended that pilot classes in intensive Welsh be instituted based on the model developed in Canada. A committee of representative of the education sector from Belgium also visited Canada to study the FSL programs, especially in Québec. After this visit, discussions were undertaken to implement a program of intensive Dutch, also based on the model of intensive French. Thus, the model seems to have great potential for improving the core programs for teaching second languages.

The articles in this issue describe, first of all, the characteristics of intensive French as it has been conceived and developed, with particular reference to differences from core French and from French immersion and other intensive programs, in the article, *Theoretical and Research Foundations of Intensive French*. Then the way in which these theoretical principles were translated into a curriculum for use in the schools is presented in the article, *Developing a Curriculum for Intensive French*. Next, the most important results of the research with respect to the development of oral and written production skills are given in the articles, *L'évaluation de la production orale : critères et résultats* and *L'évaluation de la production écrite : critères et résultats*. Following this, three of the four teachers who were involved in the first year of the research project in Newfoundland and Labrador, and who are still teaching intensive French,

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<sup>13</sup> New Brunswick (4 pilot classes, 2002-2003; 9 classes, 2003-2004), Saskatchewan (2 pilot classes, 2002-2003; 2 classes, 2003-2004)

<sup>14</sup> The provinces in which these experiments are planned are : Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Québec.

present their conception of the program by showing how their teaching strategies differ from those used in core French in the article, *Rethinking Teaching Strategies for Intensive French*. Afterwards, the researchers involved in implementing an experiment, based on the intensive English model in Quebec, in Ontario in the mid 1990's give the results of that program from the point of view of the reactions of the students to the experience in the article, *Le bain linguistique: programme intensif de français langue seconde à Ottawa*. Then, in the article, *L'étude qualitative du régime pédagogique du français intensif*, the reactions of those affected by the implementation of intensive French in Newfoundland and Labrador are explored. The last article is a comparison of the intensive French program as it was developed in Newfoundland and Labrador and intensive English as it has been implemented in Quebec in the article, *Intensive French and Intensive English: similarities and differences*.

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