Capacity Building Series

Teaching and Learning in the Core French Classroom

Fostering conversation, building vocabulary, supporting higher-order thinking

Across the province, professional learning networks are engaging increasing numbers of classroom teachers in conversations about effective literacy instruction. Core French teachers are taking part in these discussions, bringing their unique perspectives to the table. As an integral part of the French as a Second Language program, they connect with students in all divisions at the elementary level across the instructional day. No other teacher in the school has this opportunity to work daily with so many students – and to experience both their successes and their challenges quite so consistently over time.

As part of Ontario's collaborative focus on literacy, school leaders are supporting Core French and classroom teachers in planning together for the students they share. The purpose of this monograph is to help provoke these professional conversations at the school level by identifying some potentially rich themes and promising starting points.

Focusing on oral proficiency

An underlying set of literacy skills is common to both English and and French language teaching and learning. Phonological and phonemic awareness, thinking/processing skills and comprehension strategies are required for – and are strengthened by – all language learning. Jim Cummins' "interdependence hypothesis" focuses on this concept. It explains that students who have some basic literacy skills in their first language are likely to be advantaged in the acquisition of a second and why those who speak two or more languages are likely to be more successful academically (Cummins, 1998, Cummins, et al., 2005).

Empirical studies have also established the important role that oral language plays in learning. As students practise listening and speaking skills, and acquire knowledge of

What is the key to student learning?

"The key to student learning is rich talk – opportunities to talk, opportunities to hear, opportunities to listen … choral chanting, repetitive talk, structured talk – talk, talk, talk."

(*Leaders in Educational Thought* Allan Luke, 2012)

reach every student

Ontario

how language works, they build not only basic literacy but problem-solving and reasoning skills as well as the capacity for creative thinking. That is why the most powerful language programs are not so much about "grammar drills and translation exercises" but rather about engaging students in authentic interactions and purposeful conversation (Ketch, 2005; Wells, 2007).

In a recent address to Ontario educators, Lucy West suggested that many classroom conversations consist "of rote expression, recitation and instruction." She emphasized that "while each of these has their place, dialogue should be the ultimate goal," a recommendation that finds extensive support in the research on literacy and language acquisition. Second language researcher and educator Stephen Krashen insists, based on multiple studies over many years, that language instruction requires "meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding" (cited in Schütz, 2007, 2004).

Focusing on oral proficiency is a natural common ground for Core French and classroom teachers in professional conversation.

Sharing Strategies

"From the teacher's point of view," Fred Genesee writes, "planning and providing instruction on the basis of children's existing competencies and using experiences and knowledge that are familiar to the learner provides a solid foundation for extending children's skills and knowledge in new directions." Language acquisition theory developed by Genesee and others supports the Vygotskian notion that since the learner improves and progresses along a "natural order," the learning task should be just one step beyond his/her current stage of competence (Schütz, 2004). This insight is relevant for planning authentic classroom conversations, providing intentional teaching of vocabulary and developing higher-order thinking skills in both Core French and regular classrooms.

1. PLANNING AUTHENTIC CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS

"When teachers open up a conversation that allows students to take the lead, the classroom becomes a place where learning from one another is the norm, not the exception."
Capacity Building Series, Grand Conversations in Primary Classrooms, 2011

Students who are engaged in their learning want to learn more – they are committed to acquiring skills, solving problems and developing understanding. Grand conversations can get the sparks of student interest flying and foster the real-world connections that bring learning alive. Student inquiry, built on student interests and planned around curriculum expectations, is one approach to learning that fosters authentic classroom conversations.

In collaboration, Core French and classroom teachers can determine student interests and learning needs, and then develop strategies to foster meaningful conversations in their respective classes. When students see their teachers making connections to topics that matter to them – and valuing both languages in authentic learning – they engage more deeply in substantive conversations. This helps create the conditions for the reciprocal transfer of literacy skills from English to French and from French to English.

Taking Action ...
Core French and classroom teachers can collaboratively plan the creation of authentic classroom conversations through exploration of questions such as:

- What topics and issues are students interested in talking about?
- What learning opportunities can we plan so that students will have purposeful conversations about these interests?
- How can we connect student interests to expectations and learning needs across the curriculum?
- What learning opportunities promote student risk-taking in using French as the language of communication?

- How can we ensure that the developing language skills of all students are recognized and valued?
- How can we develop student understanding about the similarities of the learning strategies that they use in both French and English?

2. INTENTIONALLY TEACHING VOCABULARY

"Teaching students word-learning strategies such as using context and word parts to unlock meaning is tremendously important. With tens of thousands of words to learn, it is absolutely necessary to help students become more proficient, independent word learners. (*Capacity Building Series*, A World of Words, 2010)

Core French teachers have long recognized the importance of vocabulary development in both oral and written communication. Their ongoing goal is to have their students develop vocabulary and use their expanding oral language to understand and be understood – to use language as a tool to connect with others. When students learn a second language through Core French programs, they are deepening their overall literacy skills as they learn to gather information, construct knowledge and communicate understanding in French. And when Core French teachers share their knowledge and understanding about vocabulary development and language learning with colleagues in open-to-learning professional conversations, learning is enriched for all.

TAKING ACTION ...
Core French and classroom teachers can collaboratively plan vocabulary development through discussion based on questions such as:

- What skills and practices do teachers need to model and teach explicitly in both languages to support students in developing their oral language skills?
- What types of instructional strategies and tasks/questions engage students in expanding vocabulary and learning how words work?
- What learning opportunities will include all students in practising oral language in both French and English conversations?

3. SUPPORTING HIGHER-ORDER THINKING SKILLS

"Children's capacity for thinking is nearly limitless if we create the learning conditions to support it, if we provide a language to define and describe thinking, and if we simply ask, 'What else?', or 'I know you don't know, but what would you say if you did know?' There is always a deeper idea, an idea well beyond the superficial, if we have the patience to ask, and the faith that they will answer." (Keene, 2008, pp. 244–245)

When teachers create the conditions for "grand conversations" about real and meaningful topics of interest to students, they are creating the conditions for deep learning to flourish – learning that students remember because it matters to them. Students engaged in these conversations are eager to share their thoughts and perspectives and are interested in hearing those of others. They are learning to understand that there can be more than one way of looking at a topic. They are learning to think critically about the world. And their teachers are stretching their thinking through intense and deliberate dialogue that questions what they read and think and digs deep for meaning.

TAKING ACTION ...
Core French and classroom teachers can collaboratively plan the conditions for conversations that lead to higher-order thinking through discussion based on questions such as:

- What learning can we plan to ensure that our students have instruction in both languages that focuses on higher-order thinking skills (e.g., critical analysis, making inferences, making comparisons)?
- What planning approach can we use to ensure that talk in our classrooms goes beyond rote responses to conversations?
- How can we create safe, respectful and inclusive conditions in our classrooms that will encourage students to talk about topics and issues of interest to them?
- How might taking an inquiry stance to learning help us to create rich learning experiences and varied opportunities for students to think deeply about topics and issues of interest to them?

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Using the Four Roles Model

The Four Roles of the Literate Learner offers one model that Core French and classroom teachers can use to collaboratively plan literacy instruction for the students they share. Building on the two fundamental research insights cited earlier – that second language learning strengthens an underlying set of literacy skills and that the development of oral proficiency is the key to language learning – teachers can use the four roles model to analyze literacy learning in their classrooms. This analysis can then be used to provoke professional conversations that inform instructional planning and enrich teaching repertoires.

All students who are acquiring literacy skills need experience and practice in each of the Four Roles of the Literate Learner.

MEANING MAKER
- uses background knowledge and experiences to construct meaning of texts (oral, written, visual)
- makes connections between knowledge and skills acquired in English and/or one's first language to make meaning of texts encountered in French

CODE USER
- transfers and applies code-breaking knowledge and skills from English and/or one's first language, when applicable, to recognize and use features and structures of written, visual and oral texts in French, and understands that there are both similarities and differences when comparing languages
- understands how both verbal and non-verbal cues support understanding of oral texts (e.g., volume, intonation, gestures, facial expressions)

THE FSL LITERATE LEARNER

TEXT USER
- transfers understanding from English and/or one's first language that both purpose and audience help to determine the way a text is constructed
- uses this knowledge and a variety of thinking processes to listen, speak, view, read, write and represent ideas

TEXT ANALYZER
- understands that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views, perspectives, values and beliefs and that they serve different interests
- understands that texts can be interpreted and challenged, that alternative views may be considered

(Adapted from Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1990)

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE EXERCISE

TO BEGIN …
- Reflect on the model and identify the characteristics of each of the roles.
- Design a rich task that requires students to work/think using more than one of the four roles.

THEN …
Use the analysis to frame conversations based on questions such as:
- Are the students in my classroom gaining experience in and practising all of the four roles? Or are we spending the majority of our time on one role?
- How can this analysis inform my instructional practice? What do I need to do next?
- How can current issues of interest to my students be used to expand their learning experiences within the Four Roles of the Literate Learner?