
Personal insights on a postsecondary immersion experience: Learning to step out of the comfort zone

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Abstract

Postsecondary immersion programs reflect a growing demand for educational programs designed to allow learners to develop advanced levels of literacy in a second language through content and discipline-based language interactions. Little is known about the impact of these programs on students. Drawing on data collected through individual interviews and focus group interactions, this paper focuses on the insights and personal reflections of students at the University of Ottawa, site of the largest tertiary French immersion option in Canada. The data gives voice to first-hand accounts of what it means to study in these programs and offers a valuable glimpse at the challenges, risks and distinctive incentives associated with the completion of one's undergraduate education through the medium of a second language. Implications focus on recommendations for the design of successful university immersion programs.

Key words: French immersion, university-level immersion, student perceptions, risk management, implementation of immersion programs

Résumé

L'immersion universitaire répond à une demande croissante pour des programmes permettant aux élèves canadiens de poursuivre à un niveau avancé un apprentissage linguistique et disciplinaire dans leur langue seconde. Au Canada, l'impact de ces programmes sur les étudiants reste un sujet peu étudié. S'appuyant sur des données recueillies par le biais d'entretiens individuels et de groupes de discussion, cet article se penche sur les perspectives et les réflexions personnelles d'étudiants de l'Université d'Ottawa, institution offrant le plus grand programme d'immersion

en français au Canada. Les données laissent la parole aux étudiants qui relatent leurs parcours dans ce programme, apportant un éclairage sur les défis, les risques et les incitatifs distincts associés à la poursuite d'études universitaires en langue seconde. L'article conclut avec des recommandations pour la mise en place réussie de programmes d'immersion universitaire.

Mots-clés : immersion française, immersion universitaire, perceptions des étudiants, gestion du risque, mise en œuvre des programmes d'immersion

Introduction

In 2006, the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) implemented an immersion program: the French Immersion Studies (FIS). This program offers immersion courses available with adjunct language courses for students in 60 academic programs. The FIS program was designed to build on the original tertiary immersion models developed at uOttawa (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 2003; Hauptman, Wesche and Ready, 1988). Adopting a content-based language learning approach (Lyster, 2008; Lyster and Ballinger, 2011), students in the FIS are required to take a number of content courses in their second language. These courses are matched with adjunct courses that use the course content to develop students' receptive and productive skills, strategies and language proficiency. Consequently, immersion courses serve simultaneously as discipline-specific learning and a medium for language development by maximizing learners' exposure to authentic communicative situations, texts and members of the target language community (Wesche and Skehan, 2002).

Unlike the standard immersion programs that exist in Canada in public elementary and secondary schools, the FIS stands out as the largest tertiary French immersion option in Canada available to students seeking to pursue post-secondary studies in their second official language. In this context, students can combine the pursuit of advanced literacy and disciplinary skills in a second language. These skills lay the ground work for their entry in the work force and society. Moreover, by studying at uOttawa, Canada's largest bilingual university, students can drastically increase their degree of exposure to French. Here in Ottawa, where French is a language of daily communication, the campus and the city are integral players in the immersion experience. This stands in sharp contrast to immersion students' typical experience in Canada where their exposure to the target language is frequently limited to the immersion classroom itself. In other words, French stops when students leave their classrooms, resulting in a case of language programs "hors contexte" (Fraser, 2012) and a limited sense of connection with French communities in Canada (Bournot-Trites and Carr, 2012; Marshall and Laghzaoui, 2012).

Furthermore, in the FIS, students are developing advanced literacy goals in

a second language at a crucial junction in their lives. Philippe, Romainville and Willocq (1997) note that transitioning from high school to university equates to “s’engager dans l’inconnu [encountering the unknown]” (p. 309) and that this process is by default mysterious, unpredictable and extremely challenging. It is noteworthy that as these students take their first steps towards adult life, they are also willing to make the leap of faith represented by an investment in university immersion studies.

As such, although there may be rewards associated with this particular educational choice, because of its unique nature, the FIS raises a number of questions. What motivates students to enter a university immersion program? What difficulties do they encounter? What helps address or manage these difficulties? And, how successful do they feel these programs are in the long run? This paper reports on a study designed to answer these questions by drawing on students’ own accounts of their experiences within the FIS and focusing on what students see as key to making what will be argued is the ‘courageous decision’ to become a university immersion student.

Methodology

The data collected for this study stems from a corpus of individual semi-formal interviews (Merriam, 1998) and two focus group sessions (Johnson and Christensen, 2004) held with students and graduates from the uOttawa Immersion program. These sessions were conducted with a total of 21 students (15 females and 6 males) coming from different areas of study (Table 1) and at different moments in their academic careers (Table 2). The students in this study were representative of the larger population of students in the immersion program; that is, they included a majority of students who had attended immersion programs during their elementary and/or secondary schooling with a smaller population of students coming from core and extended French language programs.

TABLE 1
Program of study

Program of study	Number of participants
Arts	4
Education	2
Health Sciences	3
Law	3
Social Sciences	9

TABLE 2

Participants by year of study

Year of study	Number of participants
Second year	3
Third year	6
Fourth year	6
Graduate studies	4
Completed the program and presently working	2

As is typical of small-scale case studies in the tradition of qualitative inquiry in the fields of anthropology and applied linguistics, we were not concerned with working with a randomly selected sample of students that could be used to produce statistically valid generalizations. Rather, the objective was to identify, through the rich details made available in these discussions, principles and analytical concepts that can be applied to our understanding of the design and realization of immersion programs in universities (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The interviews and focus group discussions were videotaped and originally planned by the Office of the FIS in the summer of 2011 as part of a project to produce testimonials about the FIS. Volunteer students were recruited by the Director of the FIS to share their thoughts on a variety of topics including: their prior experiences with French and other languages, their decision to pursue French studies at the University of Ottawa, and their understanding of its impact on their lives.

These recordings were conducted by a team of two professors (the authors), two FIS administrators and two research assistants who took turns as interviewers. The interviews were conducted in English and French with an invitation to the students to respond in the language of their choice. The first objective of this project was to share with parents, high school students and the larger public first hand insights and perspectives of what it means to study in the immersion program at the University of Ottawa. Moreover, a second objective assigned to the project sought to analyze the data stemming from these interviews and focus groups to produce for research purposes a rich and detailed description of students' participation in university French immersion programs.

This research is seen to address a research gap in the literature. Indeed, even if there has been a call for more research on university level immersion students' experiences in Canada (Bureau du Commissaire aux langues

officielles, 2009), such reports remain rare in the literature despite their importance for the understanding of this latest development in the evolution of immersion in Canada (Séror and Weinberg, 2012).

Data analysis of the recordings was conducted drawing on qualitative case study methodology (Duff, 2007; Yin, 2003). Each interview and focus group was transcribed and coded with the use of Transana,¹ a qualitative data analysis software (Séror, 2005) used to organize, sort and search the videos and transcriptions for key themes guiding students' understanding of their overall experience as immersion students (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Silverman, 2004).

Findings

This article focuses on four key themes that have emerged from the above described data set and which are discussed in detail below.²

Theme 1: Trusting in the benefits of immersion

The first of these themes includes students' confidence and belief in the benefits of an immersion approach. In particular, when discussing why they had chosen to enter the immersion program at the university, all the students expressed their belief that the FIS program would be an effective means of reaching advanced levels of proficiency in their second language and improving their future career prospects. When discussing for instance the reasons why he was encouraging his sister to also join the FIS, Matthew³ focused on the career opportunities such a move would allow.

Je lui disais de s'inscrire en immersion ici à l'université d'Ottawa ... et je lui ai dit de penser ... à son avenir, aux opportunités d'emplois après les études. Quand on est bilingue, cela ouvre plusieurs portes ici au Canada. (Matthew)

[I was telling her to register in the immersion program here at the University of Ottawa and I told her to think about her future, her opportunities for work after her graduation. When you are bilingual, it opens many doors here in Canada.]

Additionally, students' accounts of what motivated their decision to pursue immersion studies in university reflected a vision of bilingualism as a core component of their Canadian identity.

As suggested by Sharon: "I grew up always feeling like I wanted to know more about what being Canadian was all about, and for me, exploring the

¹See www.transana.org/.

²Additional findings stemming from the larger body of data collected for this study are also available in Séror and Weinberg (2012).

³The names of the students in this paper have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

French language and culture was a huge part of that". Of interest, thus, is that university immersion was not simply about reaching advanced levels of proficiency in their second language or improving their career prospects in the future, it was also about the realization that French was an integral part of being Canadian.

Since the majority of these students were graduates of public school immersion programs, this positive orientation towards the recognized benefits of immersion studies is perhaps not so surprising (Lazaruk, 2007). Their views of bilingualism generally echo the positive orientation to bilingualism found in the larger narrative constructed in federal government policy documents which actively promote official bilingualism as a strength and symbol of Canadian identity (Fraser 2012; Marshall and Laghzaoui, 2012).

Theme 2: Benefits but also risks

A second theme emerged associated with the concerns students had despite their belief in the benefits of immersion. More specifically, while FIS was considered valuable and was in some cases the main reason to come and study at uOttawa, students also made it clear that this decision entailed serious challenges and risks. They stressed that studying in immersion in a university setting often required greater effort, time and resources than simply choosing to complete one's studies in English — the students' dominant language.

Falling in the category of risks associated with participating in the FIS were references to the "strangeness" and "lack of comfort" experienced when initially entering this program.

Students commented on the shock resulting from finding oneself, often for the first time, as minority language speakers in classrooms designed for and populated by francophones.

J'étais absolument certain que j'me suis, je m'étais pris dans l'mauvais salle de cours. (Tom)

[I was absolutely sure that I was in the wrong classroom.]

Immersion courses could also be a source of a great deal of fear and amplified the fact that these students were transitioning from high school to the very different environment of the university.

Um the content course I was very afraid, the first class I was like: Oh my, this is so hard, hum I was completely terrified. I was unsure whether I was going to stay ... it's a big difference from high school to university ... you're just kind of dumped in the first day. (Alanna)

Indeed, during their first days in the program in particular students suggested they were not always sure they had made the right decision. They were

especially nervous when they realized their mark in a content course could be seriously affected by their ability to fulfill class requirements and assignments in their second language (with all the extra time and effort entailed).

You have to work harder because you are learning to read French faster or to pick up quicker or to speak more quickly. (Max)

En particulier, les cours de mon programme comme la communication en santé ou la sociologie en santé, c'était plein de terminologie que j'ai pas compris en français. Alors, j'ai dû faire comme, plus de travail pour comprendre ce que le prof disait et même pour lire les textes. (Leila)

[In particular, the courses in my program of study such as health communication or sociology of health are full of terminology that I did not understand in French. So I had to do a lot of extra work to understand what the prof was saying and even to complete the readings.]

In sum, although the immersion program represented a desirable path for these students, it was one which students readily recognized as difficult, challenging and definitely taking them out of their “comfort zone”.

Facile. Ici ? Hum, je ne dirais pas vraiment facile parce que la première année c'est pas vraiment facile, c'est hum, ça prend beaucoup d'adaptation. (Karina)

[Easy. Here? Well I would not say that it is really easy because in your first year it is not really easy and, well, it takes a lot of adaptation.]

In a few words what this immersion program did for me was it took me out of my comfort zone. (Sharon)

Theme 3: Managing risk and making the leap of faith

In discussing their fears and the risks associated with immersion, students also identified a number of factors that had contributed to their ability to overcome these challenges. Specifically, in the analysis, four elements were identified as helpful: a) a multi-level array of support, b) long- and short-term incentives and rewards, c) elements of personalization and choice embedded within the structure of the program and d) the context surrounding the immersion programs themselves. Each of these is described in greater detail below.

Multiple levels of support

All students in the study pointed to the wide array of support structures in place as part of the immersion program. Specifically, in the interviews students listed for instance the usefulness of mentorship programs, partnering activities (Weinberg, in press), the immersion club, and the presence of a dedicated office clearly identified as the place they could go to ask for help.

These program elements, although not perfect, helped students connect with each other as well as with members of the target community and established a sense of a support network ready to help and to make sure that they did not feel alone or left behind.

I've received some very good advice from those mentors at the Immersion Advising Center. I remember in first year I was going to see the same mentor over and over. (Cathy)

I registered as a Political Science student, and the Political Science Department is fairly large, so you don't know your profs, you don't know the administrative staff, you don't know anybody ... With the Immersion Program, if you take advantage of it, ... Marc [the FIS Director] may recognize you ... it's more like a small department and I find that's very helpful. (Allan)

The immersion personnel are really there to help you. They take an interest in each of the students and whether it be the administrative staff or the student mentors, there's always one on one contact. You're not just a number in a file somewhere; they know who you are by name, they are familiar with you. (Nancy)

Yeah, so in my History class, we were partnered up with a Francophone student ... I was in a group of five and only one actually would make time to actually meet with me, but he was very understanding and he was very nice and he was willing to get together, to go over notes and things before the exam, or even the essays and stuff that were due. We'd go over and if I had any questions about a certain paragraph, he was willing to help so it was great. (Alana)

Another key element of support identified included the impact of the adjunct language courses. These allowed students to work once a week with a language instructor who would focus on the language elements of the discipline they were studying. These courses offered a chance to better prepare, review and revise content, and work on specific language skills, including for instance, specialized vocabulary (Weinberg, Boukacem and Burger, 2012) or note-taking skills in a second language (Weinberg, Knoerr and Vandergrift, 2011).

C'est assez difficile pour l'anglophone qui saute à des cours en français orientés vers les francophones dans un certain domaine spécifique sans un peu d'encadrement. Donc dans un premier temps, c'était plus facile, pour avoir un peu d'aide, même juste des exercices pour nous rappeler certaines bases et nous aider à améliorer notre français ... [dans le cours d'encadrement], on a pu apprendre ensemble, il n'y avait pas le niveau de pression, y'avait juste l'opportunité d'améliorer notre français, de faire des présentations, de faire de la lecture et d'être mieux préparé pour un cours. (Max)

[It is fairly difficult for an English speaker who jumps into courses in French geared towards French speakers in a specific domain if they do not have some

kind of help. So at the beginning, it was easier to have some help, even if it was just some exercises to review basic rules and to improve our level of French. ... [in the adjunct language class] we could learn together and there was not that level of stress. We simply had the opportunity to improve our French, to do presentations, to do readings, and, be better prepared for the course.]

Finally, students noted the importance of the support received from their professors as a key to success.

Je suis allée voir les professeurs quand j'avais des questions, ils étaient vraiment, compréhensifs de toutes mes questions parce que j'étais en immersion et ils étaient toujours là pour m'aider; tous les professeurs. (Alana)

[I went to see my professors when I had questions. They were very understanding about all my questions because I was in immersion and they were always there to help me, all of my professors.]

Long-term and short-term incentives

Long- and short-term incentives also emerged as powerful motivating forces for students. Falling into the category of long-term incentives were multiple references to the knowledge that being bilingual and obtaining a certification of that bilingualism would represent a competitive advantage on the Canadian job market.

Quand on arrive sur le marché du travail et qu'on a un diplôme qui atteste notre bilinguisme cela ouvre maintes portes. Parce que ici à Ottawa, étant la capitale nationale, il y a plusieurs concours d'emploi qui recherchent des candidatures bilingues et les recruteurs dans les directions de Ressources Humaines savent que, quand on voit le Régime d'immersion, que cette personne a le profil de bilinguisme BBB ou CCC ce que le gouvernement fédéral recherche assez souvent. (Matthew)

[When a graduate comes looking for work and has a university diploma stating they are bilingual, it opens many doors. Here in Ottawa, being the nation's capital, there are many job competitions seeking bilingual staff and the HR recruiters know that a graduate from the Immersion Studies program will have a bilingual profile of BBB or CCC — the level which the federal government is looking for.]

Short-term incentives mentioned by students included scholarships, study abroad opportunities, and the credit recognition of the adjunct language courses taken by students. All of these were viewed as important, concrete and immediate motivators for the students. Although being an immersion student required effort and entailed difficulties, these incentives helped reinforce, particularly at the beginning and middle of the program, the idea that their investment was worth it and would lead to benefits. It seems that without these incentives, the long-term rewards of immersion might have felt too distant to keep students motivated.

Une bourse qui peut t'aider à payer la plupart des frais de scolarité, c'est
definitely a motivation to come here as well. (Leila)

[A scholarship to help you pay for most of your university fees. It is definitely
a motivation to come here as well.]

The fact that you take only one and a half hours for the French courses as
opposed to three hours and get the three credits is huge. Because, I mean, it
might take you longer to do your assignments in your French courses, so it's
spending more time outside the classroom and less time inside the classroom.
And that's a really good factor as well. (Alison)

Flexibility and choices

Another element referred to in the interviews as an important component of
how students were able to manage the stress and risks of the FIS was the high
degree of flexibility and personalization embedded in the program structure.
Indeed, although forced to take a certain number of courses in French, the stu-
dents retained the choice of which content courses they would take and whether
or not they would register for the adjunct language course linked to it. These
various options were essential in creating a sense of order in an environment
where so much was out of their control.

Crucial elements appreciated by students included being able to decide
whether or not to submit a final assignment in English or French, as well
as choosing in their first two years of study whether to receive a qualitative
pass/fail grade for a class, or a numeric grade. These decisions allowed students
to contribute to the planning and the execution of their immersion experience.

L'approche du régime d'immersion, c'est vraiment personnalisée, même dans
l'organisation de la, du programme, c'est personnalisé, les choix sont à vous à
décider ce que vous voulez. (Nancy)

[The approach used in the Immersion program is really personalized for each
individual student. Even in the organization of the program, it is personalized.
It is up to you to decide what you want to study.]

Une chose qui m'a aidée à rester dans le programme d'immersion, en plus
d'améliorer mon français et la bourse, c'était que vous pouvez avoir des notes
S/NS. Et si vous avez des difficultés dans un certain cours vous pouvez prendre
une note qualitative : S/NS et c'est, vous n'avez pas la note numérique, et ce
n'est ce n'est pas dans votre moyenne. (Alanna)

[One thing which really helped me stay in the program, on top of improving
my French and the scholarship, was that you can choose to receive Pass/Fail
marks. So if you have difficulties in a course, you can choose a qualitative
mark: Pass/Fail and that replaces the numeric mark for the course and it does
not affect your GPA.]

The city as a learning partner

Finally, students made multiple references to the role played by the city and the campus itself. They were clearly identified as key learning partners in their immersion experience.

OttawaU is Canada's university, and Canada is bilingual, and this campus represents that so well just because you walk by and hear both languages wherever you are. And I think that's something you really can't get anywhere else. (Noemi)

When you have a bilingual university, the options are limitless. You can take in the French aspects of different clubs, the bilingual aspects. Even if you are not completely at ease in the language you can get along. As we say : 'on se débrouille ("We make do"); then it really, really makes the experience a lot better.' (Max)

Living in Ottawa and studying on a bilingual campus helped reassure students that their contact with the French language would not be limited to the classroom. With a minimum level of investment on their part, students could access on a daily basis rich, authentic opportunities to either actively or passively use French. These interactions, particularly when successful, motivated students and reinforced their sense of progress with French.

En mai j'ai rencontré un couple. Je ne connaissais pas leur langue, mais il regardait une carte, puis j'ai dit: "Can I, Can I help you with something?", "Oh, vous parlez français?", "Oui oui, je parle français", "Oh! vous êtes bonne en français", "hum merci!". Puis, je les ai aidés à trouver leur chemin. They were so happy that someone had talked to them in French. And I think that meant a lot to them, and it meant a lot to me because five years ago I wouldn't have been close to being able to do that. (Rachel)

[In May, I met this couple. I did not know their language but he was looking at a map. I asked "Can I, Can I help you with something?", "Oh, vous parlez français? (Oh, you speak French.)", "Oui oui, je parle français (Yes, yes, I speak French.)", "Oh! vous êtes bonne en français (Oh, you are good in French.)", "hum merci ! (Yes, thank you.)". Then I helped them find their way. They were so happy that someone had talked to them in French. I think that meant a lot to them, and it meant a lot to me because five years ago I wouldn't have been close to being able to do that.]

Theme 4: Consequences of making the leap

To summarize, varied levels of support, incentives, contextual exposure to French, and a degree of flexibility and choice scaffolded and helped manage the perceived risks identified with entering a university level French immersion program. Although it would not be easy, studying in French with Francophones was not only possible, it was an investment that would pay off. Indeed, a fourth

theme found in the discourse of participants, particularly those who had completed or were about to complete their studies, focused on the opportunities and doors that had opened up for them as a result of participating in the FIS.

Mon bac ici, m'a ouvert beaucoup de portes et je n'aurai pas pu imaginer comment ça pourrait être utile. (Sharon)

[Doing my undergraduate degree here, it has opened many doors for me and I would never have imagined how helpful it would be.]

Premièrement, je comprends que c'est difficile de continuer avec le français, surtout à l'université, mais ça en vaut vraiment la peine ... Speaking another language, being able to be exposed to another culture or a different language, a different way of life, it's invaluable. C'est difficile de temps en temps, ça prend du temps, ça prend de l'effort, mais ça en vaut la peine. Oui, ça en vaut vraiment la peine. (Nancy)

[Firstly, I understand that it is difficult to continue with French, especially in university, but it is really worth it. Speaking another language, being able to be exposed to another culture or a different language, a different way of life, it's invaluable. It is difficult from time to time, and it takes a lot of time, it takes effort, but it is worth the trouble. Yes, it is really worth the trouble.]

The FIS was qualified as “life-changing”, offering “completely different perspectives” and even “new identities” as students used their immersion experience and enhanced bilingualism as a launch pad for travel, work, cultural exploration and increased ties with the French community.

Ça vous donne une perspective de vie complètement, complètement différente, puis ça vous donne une nouvelle identité culturelle aussi. Non seulement t'es anglophone, non seulement t'es Ontarien, tu viens d'Ontario, mais t'es Canadien au niveau fondamental. You speak both languages, you can work for the government, you can technically communicate with anybody across the entire country. (Pearl)

[It gives you a completely different perspective on life. It also gives you a new cultural identity. Not only are you an English speaker, not only do you come from Ontario, but you are Canadian in a fundamental way. You speak both languages. You can work for the government. You can technically communicate with anybody across the entire country.]

If I had not gone to the University of Ottawa, I wouldn't be doing anything in my life right now, I wouldn't be going to Senegal, I wouldn't be going to France, I wouldn't feel ready to do those things. So it's completely, it's made my life what I wanted it, whereas I don't know if that would have happened in the same way. (Maureen)

Whether it be an upcoming marriage to a Francophone, the expressed desire to represent and defend French minority rights or obtaining a job where the dom-

inant work language is French, these student were clearly going beyond developing academic level French skills. Rather, they were becoming bilinguals capable of imagining themselves and being recognized as active and legitimate members of the French community.

L'année prochaine, je vais me marier avec un franco-ontarien et aller à la table de cuisine avec sa sœur qui habite proche de Hawkesbury, avec toute sa famille, euh, c'est toujours pas confortable. Mais j'apprends comment être dans le milieu franco-ontarien. . . . Si vous commencez dans la salle de classe, ça vous donne la confiance de faire ça dans les autres milieux. (Rachel)

[Next year, I will marry a Franco-Ontarian and sit at the kitchen table with his sister who lives near Hawkesbury with his family. This is still not always comfortable. But I'm learning how to feel comfortable in a Franco-Ontarian milieu. If you start speaking French in the classroom that gives you the confidence to do it in other settings.]

Maintenant après six ans d'étude universitaire en français mon niveau linguistique ou mon profil au sein du gouvernement fédéral c'est EEE, exempté." (Matthew)

[Now after six years of studying French at the university, my French language profile within the federal government is EEE, exempt.]

Question: Je voudrais savoir si vous seriez assez confortables pour exiger des services en français dans une communauté?

[Question: I was wondering if you would be comfortable enough to request French language services in a community?]

Max: Je dirais que oui, absolument. Je pense que les étudiants, les francophiles de l'Ontario peuvent donner de l'aide aux francophones de l'Ontario et à travers le pays en réclamant des services en français. Et des services en français, ça a un lien direct avec la culture, avec l'identité, se sentir à l'aise avec qui nous sommes, chez-nous et donc chez-soi. Je pense que nous pouvons jouer un rôle en réclamant de notre gouvernement, avec notre force, notre voix politique . . . de dire que les services en français sont essentiels surtout au Canada et dans un Canada bilingue qui nous bénéficie tous.

[Max: I would say yes, absolutely. I think that students, Ontario francophiles, can provide assistance to francophones in Ontario and across the country by requesting services in French. And these services have a direct link with French culture and identity. They make us feel comfortable being who we are, wherever we are and, therefore, in a place we can call home. I think we can play a role in demanding action from our government. Using our strength and our political voice we can say that French language services are essential especially in Canada. A strong bilingual Canada that benefits us all.]

Discussion

This paper has presented an overview of students' perspectives of the experience of participating in a university-level immersion program. Findings highlight the opportunities these programs create as a means of promoting and extending bilingualism beyond the scope of elementary and secondary schooling. They also underscore the risks and challenges perceived as coming hand in hand with these opportunities and the different elements of support that help mitigate these.

These findings have a number of implications for the design of postsecondary immersion programs. First, a number of components have been identified in the literature as key areas to focus on when designing immersion programs. Genessee (2011), for instance, refers to the importance of looking at issues surrounding advocacy, the role of parents, assessment and accessibility. In addition to these issues, our findings suggest it may also be important to consider students' perception of the risks involved with immersion programs, especially in a university context where it is the students themselves, rather than their parents, who are more likely to decide to enter or exit an immersion program.

One recommendation would, therefore, be to add to the above list of key areas of focus the integration of a risk management component to the design of these programs. In other words, it is important for universities to focus on both what attract students to participate in university-level immersion programs as well as what might deter them from pursuing bilingual studies at a post-secondary level. In doing so, universities will be better equipped to respond to the unique needs of this population and ensure that students not only enter these programs, but ideally remain motivated to finish them with success.

In particular, this risk management component should include an analysis of the incentives and support systems that enable students to find the courage and determination to make the leap of faith required to accept the challenge of a university experience mediated in two or more languages. Clearly, students are capable of enlightening us on the nature of these forces and the fact that despite the challenges, success in a university-level immersion program is possible. To date, however, in contrast to some of the work conducted in other bi/multilingual universities world-wide (e.g., University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Walt and Steyn, 2004), or the University of Basque Country in Spain and Cardiff University in Wales (Garret, Cots, Lasagabaster and Llorca, 2012) research has yet to fully address this issue in Canada. As such, this is an area of future research that can contribute significantly to an understanding of the forces that shape university level immersion programs. Additionally, what stands out in the findings is that success is not seen by students as solely the

result of individual work. Rather, success in immersion programs is seen as the culmination of a collective, orchestrated effort. It is a journey that requires institutional support, multiple levels of interactions and a sense of community to reassure, encourage and motivate students. Quite simply, the ability to feel “comfortable being uncomfortable” is a process that cannot be achieved on one’s own.

In suggesting that the obstacles they face in immersion university programs cannot be separated from an institution’s ability to manage the sense of risk that comes with the pursuit of advanced bilingual studies, these findings reinforce arguments in favour of a more socially contextualized understanding of second language development (Duff, 2010; Norton and Toohey, 2001; Ricento, 2005; Siegel, 2003). Part of what has been referred to as the social turn in the field of applied linguistics (Block, 2003), this work echoes a growing recognition of the importance of acknowledging in studies of language development formally understudied factors such as social contexts and networks, students’ identities and degree of investment in the target language and the impact of institutional forces and power relations on students and instructors as key elements that help shape the success or failure of language learners. In the specific case of this study, institutional factors identified by students are shown to help define in important ways what will be deemed possible, risky and/or impossible by students. From this perspective, we gain a greater understanding of the program elements that underlie the perception and experience of immersion students and are thus presented with potential models of curriculum and policy design that can be studied further when considering how to promote, in conjunction with students’ and instructors’ individual actions, advanced bi-multilingual literacy development in universities.

This more socially situated view of language learning is also echoed in students’ accounts of the relationship between their success and their ability to study in an environment that offers daily opportunities to interact with members of the target language. Both in their classes as well as in every day conversations and activities on a bilingual campus, situated in a bilingual city, students’ accounts detail the importance of a context where one can remain in constant contact with Francophones. Once again, these interactions and the relationships they establish reassure students in their decision to study in French.

Whereas it would be unrealistic to expect that all university immersion programs be able to offer a level of community bilingualism such as the one found in the Ottawa region, these findings do highlight the value of establishing exchange programs and study abroad opportunities within these programs. We recommend that these be seen as an essential component of university immersion programs. Indeed, there is evidence that such exchanges contribute to the experience of students in Canadian universities situated in contexts where

contact with French speakers is limited (Bournot–Trites and Carr, 2012). Such exchanges, which sadly remain rare in Canada, have a powerful role to play in enabling immersion students to experience at least once in their university programs a vital sense of truly living in their second official language (Fraser, 2009). Indeed, investigations of study abroad and exchange programs and their impact for students' learning outcomes and attitudes suggest these experiences can play an important role for the development of second language skills and cultural knowledge (Allen, 2010; Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan, 2008). In particular, the value and relevance of these exchanges and the "substantial immersion experience" (Davidson, 2007, p. 277) they offer students has proven to be a particularly powerful learning experience in the European context with over 20 years of Erasmus exchanges (Llanes, Tragant and Serrano, 2012).

French immersion in Canada has always represented many things: nation building, promoting linguistic and cultural understanding, equipping a future generation to lead both within Canada and as part of a global community in French and English. While Canadian universities have only just begun to offer these types of programs, this paper makes it clear that they have a fundamental role to play in combining the transmission of disciplinary knowledge with advanced literacy development in one's second official language. As suggested by the students in this study, this may not be easy to do for either students or the institutions who host these programs, but should it not be the mission of universities to help students step out of their linguistic comfort zones and in the process learn to be active citizens of the world who will not be turned away by the risks and challenges of interacting with others and the unknown?

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