

## **Offering professional development in French for French as a second language teachers: An opportunity to support their language proficiency and confidence**

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### **Abstract**

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*Discourse around the critical need for French as a second language (FSL) teachers in Canada is widespread, with researchers suggesting that language proficiency and confidence are influential factors. This mixed-methods study reports on the findings from a 4-day professional development session for FSL teachers in Ontario, Canada. Quantitative data from this mixed-methods study revealed that experienced FSL teachers feel confident to carry out educational tasks, use the French language, and make space to improve their French language skills. At the same time, findings indicated a decrease in confidence around creating and using authentic French material with their students. The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews pinpointed the need for more professional development in French to give space to FSL teachers to use French and to collaborate with colleagues.*

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**Keywords:** teacher language proficiency, French as second language teacher proficiency, French as a second language teacher confidence

### **Introduction**

Teacher language proficiency is a factor considered to influence not only second language teaching and learning but also the confidence of the teachers themselves, thereby bolstering their self-assessed proficiency, associated confidence, and career choices (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). Given the ongoing French as a second language (FSL) teacher shortage across Canada, urgent support for teachers' French maintenance/development is warranted, not only to increase their confidence, but also to support their ability to offer heightened language use in the classroom (Braine, 1999). In addition to enhancing language instruction, increased confidence in their language proficiency can also increase teacher engagement and reduce teacher attrition (Richards et al., 2013). Research on the nexus between second language teacher confidence in their language proficiency and the provision of professional development opportunities shows the potential for such opportunities to boost teacher confidence (Freeman, 2020), contributing to increased self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Biçer, 2023). This current study sought to explore the impact of providing professional development sessions in French to FSL teachers regarding their language confidence and their plans to maintain/improve their language skills. Below, we discuss the scholarship surrounding second language teacher proficiency and confidence, and further discuss the findings from our pre- and post-questionnaires and interview data.

### ***1.1 Second Language Teacher Proficiency and Confidence***

An array of research documents the interconnectedness between language proficiency and confidence (Cooke & Faez, 2018; Faez, 2011; Thi Hong Nhung, 2018; Wernicke et al., 2023). Research examining 15 pre-service FSL teachers during a home-stay practicum suggests that these two notions (i.e., confidence and proficiency) influenced FSL students' experience within the classroom (Mady, 2018). Indeed, teachers with lower proficiency tended to use the target language less in the class, contributing to the quantity of target language exposure FSL students may receive. Faez (2011) and Thi Hong Nhung (2018) respectively also described how a teacher's language proficiency not only impacts how they conduct a class, but also found that a lower language proficiency leads to lower self-efficacy for the teacher. With lower language proficiency, research has shown FSL teachers to have "feelings of anxiety and inadequacy" which "undermines [teachers'] ability to teach ...[and] in turn, affects the quality of instruction students receive" (Ontario Public School Boards' Association [OPSBA], 2021, p. 19). In other words, language proficiency plays a role in whether an FSL teacher will be confident enough to effectively teach the language (Choi & Lee, 2016), and, ultimately, stay in the profession (OPSBA, 2021).

### ***1.2 Linguistic Insecurity***

In line with FSL teachers' confidence, how they teach, and the impact of language proficiency on their career choices creates and spurs feelings of linguistic insecurity. The concept of linguistic insecurity was first coined by Labov (1966), positioning speakers of a language as using a "good" language variety or whether speakers lack proficiency (Abtahian & Quinn, 2017, p. 140). In second language research, linguistic insecurity exists when a teacher's "perception that grammar, accent, and choice of words fail to align with standardized language norms, leading to the fear of being discredited and deprived of identity as members of the [language] community" (Jantri & Phusawisot, 2021, p. 37). Drawing from this definition, and in the context of this study, if FSL teachers feel as though they are inept because of their accent, diction, and fluency in the target language, their confidence in teaching the language will diminish too. Similarly, a recent research brief by Canadian Parents for French (CPF, 2019) emphasized how teachers' linguistic insecurity and their "lack of confidence [are] a major contributor to not only existing challenges in teacher recruitment but teacher retention in FSL programs, both of which are exacerbating the growing shortage of French language teachers across Canada" (p. 2). Thus, if FSL teachers feel insecure about their language competencies and abilities, they may feel as though they should not be in charge of teaching it, contributing to the spiral of shortages in FSL teachers nationwide.

Wernicke (2016) raises important questions about the roots of linguistic insecurity among FSL teachers and if such insecurities stem from the hierarchy of varying dialects of the French language. Specifically, in her study of 87 FSL Canadian teachers who travelled to Vichy in France, she revealed how "teachers negotiated discourses of language subordination ... that construct Canadian French as less authentic than French from France" (p. 1). This is key to understanding additional layers of linguistic insecurity and uncovering how factors outside of a teacher's control (e.g., accents), contribute to their sentiments of illegitimacy. Although not wholly focused on accents, similar findings are nested in the dissertation work of Tang (2020) where she unpacked notions of what it means to be a 'good bilingual,' which, since 2020, has sprouted into a pilot project course at Simon Fraser University in their initial teacher education program. In this course, she discusses and provides strategies to combat linguistic insecurity, with a shift in the narrative from insecurity to legitimacy through sitting with and practicing awkward interactions and conflict, all while reinforcing the idea that all teacher candidates, regardless of their level or quality of French, are legitimate. Lines of inquiry from the aforementioned CPF (2019) document corroborated the need to provide strategies to stray from linguistic insecurity to support the confidence of FSL teachers. To circumvent such feelings, CPF (2019) suggested how professional development, support for transitioning from initial teacher education to the workplace, as well as consistent mentorship from tenured FSL teachers can support FSL teachers and their language legitimacy and confidence. Despite such strategies, research showed how L2 teachers may feel insecure about their language skills when "idealized native speaker competency" is prevalent (Wernicke, 2017, p. 213).

### ***1.3 The Native Speaker vs Non-Native Speaker Debate for FSL Teachers***

Related to FSL teachers' language proficiency and confidence lies the highly debated native speaker (NS) vs. non-native speaker (NNS) L2 teacher issue (see Salvatori, 2007, for an exhaustive list of NS vs NNS research). In his 1999 work, Braine contended that this debate regarding which characterization is better has likely existed since English was taught internationally.

For example, Phillipson (1992) argued that “the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker” (p. 185). His rationale for the NS ideal as superior to NNS is because NS speakers, for him, are fluent in the language, understand complex notions embedded in the language (e.g., idioms), and possess cultural understandings and norms that allow for effective L2 teaching. Even though such debates surfaced in the early 1990s, the tension continues to penetrate recent literature. For example, some scholars continue to argue that NS speakers are better suited to teach L2 (Freeman, 2016), which is echoed throughout Wernicke’s (2017) pre-service FSL teachers’ beliefs around NS speakers, some of whom long for the “native-speaker ideal” in terms of their language proficiency (p. 208). This ‘NS ideal’ aligns with other research on L2 teacher confidence, because some L2 teachers perceive their language competencies, and their general language proficiency, to be a major obstacle to their teaching (Tang, 1997). This line of thought is mirrored in Salvatori’s (2007) dissertation work, where he delineates how some pre-service FSL teachers avoid speaking with NSs because of the way it hinders their own confidence as teachers. As demonstrated by existing research, a teacher’s language proficiency plays a significant role in shaping their professional identity (Wernicke, 2017) and level of confidence in teaching FSL. However, achieving NS status for FSL teachers, where the majority of FSL teachers are L2 learners themselves (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007), suggests a reframing of the narrative from deficit NS thinking to purposeful NNS teacher support—with a focus on the unique strengths NNS bring to the FSL classroom.

While being a NNS can impede an FSL teacher’s confidence in their instructional and pedagogical goals (Murdoch, 1994), NNS L2 teachers also bring forward a wealth of helpful and important teaching competencies and techniques. For instance, both Cook (2005) and Medgyes (2001) articulated the ways in which NNS teachers act as better models in the L2 classroom because these teachers have also lived through—and learned—in a similar way, and as such, may have “deeper insights into ... the learning process” (Medgyes, 2001, p. 437). Echoing this research, Cowan (2008) emphasized that NNS likely have a better grasp of more conventional and grammatical components of the language, which position NNS teachers as important leaders in explaining these concepts (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). Similarly, Medgyes (1994) suggested that a NNS teacher is likely more empathetic toward the L2 learning process; Bayliss and Vignola’s (2007) review of their work noted how NNS can “teach language learning strategies more effectively, to supply learners with more information about the L2, to anticipate and prevent language difficulties better, and to make use of the learners’ mother tongue if needed” (p. 388). Drawbacks and successes exist for both NS and NNS. However, most of the research in a Canadian context encourages the provision of support for NNS pre- and in-service teachers to maintain their language proficiency (Arnott & Vignola, 2018; Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Faez, 2011; Wernicke, 2017) instead of such a problematic focus on which is better (Faez, 2011). In doing so, both language proficiency and confidence may be improved, leading to both NS and NNS teachers alike becoming “effective teachers regardless of their status and their language background” (Faez, 2011, p. 42).

## Methods

This study sought to support FSL teachers’ confidence in their language proficiency and pedagogical knowledge with the provision of four professional development sessions delivered in French on the topic of their choosing as selected in discussion with the FSL curriculum coordinator and teachers: developing students’ reading skills in FSL. For the purpose of this paper, we present pre- and post-questionnaire data ( $N = 35$ ) supported by post-interview data ( $n = 11$ ) to explore teachers’ language confidence and their plans to maintain/enhance their language skills.

### 2.1 Instruments

The pre-questionnaire provided the opportunity for teachers to provide demographic information. It also offered three Likert-scale questions that also served as the post-questionnaire. The first Likert-scale question had 10 items that focused on teachers’ confidence to perform pedagogical tasks in French. The second section had seven items pertaining to teachers’ confidence in their French proficiency and the last section had six items to explore the teachers’ plans to maintain/improve their French skills. The semi-structured interview protocol had six questions with one asking about the impact of having the sessions offered in French and another more open-ended asking if and how the sessions met the teachers’ needs while the remaining questions pertained to the content of developing reading skills. For this paper, we focus on comments pertaining to language proficiency and confidence.

## Results

### 3.1 Teacher Participants

All FSL teachers in the board were invited to participate in the first of four full-day professional development sessions as it was offered on a professional development day when there were not any classes. Thirty-five of the forty participants on the first day replied to the questionnaire. Of those 35, 11 teachers continued for the next three sessions. All participants were elementary FSL teachers teaching in core French or French immersion. The majority of both pre- and post-questionnaire participants had over 10 years' experience and claimed English as their first language. Although the pre-questionnaire participants taught at a variety of levels, the post-questionnaire participants taught in the junior division, Grades 4 to 8.

#### *a. Teachers' Pedagogical Confidence*

Table 1 presents teachers' confidence to use selected teaching strategies in French. In all cases, as shown in the pre-questionnaire results, the majority of teachers were confident using all the listed strategies pre-professional development sessions. Post-professional development sessions, the smaller group of participating teachers completed a post-questionnaire. In the section pertaining to teachers' confidence to carry out the same pedagogical tasks post-professional development sessions, all of the teachers remained confident carrying out pedagogical tasks, however they were less confident in 6 of the 10 following items post-questionnaire: 'I am confident teaching learning strategies in French', 'I am confident providing action-oriented tasks to my students', 'I am confident using authentic listening resources in class (e.g., music, videos, news)', 'I am confident providing oral feedback to students in French', 'I am confident using authentic reading resources (e.g., advertisements, posters, event tickets) with my students', 'I am confident providing written feedback on my students' written tasks in French'. While participants confirmed a decrease in confidence in relation to the previous six items, participants highlighted an increase in confidence with two following items: 'I am confident creating action-oriented writing tasks (e.g., email responses, surveys)', and 'I am confident listening to and understanding my students in French'. The following two items remained at the same level of confidence for pre- and post-questionnaires: 'I am confident providing situations that create a need for students to communicate', and 'I am confident speaking to my students in French.'. A Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed no statistically significant differences between the pre-and post-questionnaire results,  $W=9$ , ( $p<.05$ ).

**Table 1. Teachers' Confidence to Carry Out Pedagogical Tasks**

Item #	Questionnaire item	Percentage of agreement Pre-PD	Count	Total	Percentage of agreement Post-PD	Count	Total
1	I am confident teaching learning strategies in French.	94.2	33	35	85.7	6	7
2	I am confident providing action-oriented tasks to my students.	97.1	34	35	71.4	5	7
3	I am confident using authentic listening resources in class (e.g., music, videos, news).	88.5	31	35	71.4	5	7
4	I am confident providing situations that create a need for students to communicate.	85.7	30	35	85.7	6	7
5	I am confident providing oral feedback to students in French.	88.5	31	35	85.7	6	7
6	I am confident using authentic reading resources (e.g., advertisements, posters, event tickets) with my students.	91.4	32	35	57.1	4	7
7	I am confident creating action-oriented writing tasks (e.g., email responses, surveys).	77.1	27	35	85.7	6	7
8	I am confident providing written feedback on my students' written tasks in French.	77.1	27	35	71.4	5	7
9	I am confident listening to and understanding my students in French.	85.7	30	35	100.0	7	7
10	I am confident speaking to my students in French.	100.0	35	35	100.0	7	7

*b. Teacher Confidence in their French Proficiency*

The pre- and post-questionnaire offered seven items to explore teachers' confidence with their French proficiency including items on language comprehension and production. Teachers expressed less confidence post-professional development sessions on five of the seven items ('I am confident speaking spontaneously to French first language speakers', 'I am confident explaining diverse points of view', 'I am confident reading a newspaper in French', 'I am confident reading an age-appropriate novel in French', 'I am confident understanding French media (e.g., TV, podcasts') and more confidence on the remaining two items ('I am confident speaking to my colleagues in French', 'I am confident writing a report in French, offering supporting details') as represented in Table 2. A Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed no statistically significant differences between the pre-and post-questionnaire results,  $W=5$ , ( $p<.05$ ).

**Table 2 Teacher Confidence in Language Proficiency**

1	I am confident speaking to my colleagues in French.	80.0	28	34	85.7	6	7
2	I am confident speaking spontaneously to French first language speakers.	88.5	31	35	71.4	5	7
3	I am confident explaining diverse points of view.	88.5	31	35	85.7	6	7
4	I am confident reading a newspaper in French.	97.1	34	35	85.7	6	7
5	I am confident reading an age-appropriate novel in French.	94.2	33	35	85.7	6	7
6	I am confident understanding French media (e.g., TV, podcasts).	97.1	34	35	85.7	6	7
7	I am confident writing a report in French, offering supporting details.	80.0	28	34	85.7	6	7

*c. Teacher Plans to Maintain/Improve their Proficiency*

The third Likert-scale section asked the teachers to identify ways they plan to maintain/improve their French skills. As shown in Table 3, of the six items pertaining to language skills on the pre-questionnaire, three items had a minority of participants with plans to maintain/improve their skills. The only item where a vast majority of the participants had plans to engage in a language maintenance effort was taking opportunities to speak to adults in French (83%). Post-professional development sessions the majority of teachers had plans to maintain/improve their French skills as revealed in three items. The post-questionnaire results showed an increase in plans in three of the questionnaire items (i.e., I take courses to maintain/improve my French, I seek opportunities to immerse myself in French environments to maintain/enhance my French skills, I take opportunities to speak to other adults in French), two items garnered less agreement post-professional development sessions (i.e., I read to maintain/improve my French, I watch French movies, I listen to French music/podcasts to maintain/improve my French.) and one item garnered the same level of agreement pre- and post-questionnaire. The mixed results suggest that teachers' plans to maintain/improve their French remained similar pre- and post-professional development sessions. A Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed no statistically significant differences between the pre-and post-questionnaire results,  $W=26$ , ( $p<.05$ ).

**Table 3 Teachers' Plans to Maintain/Improve their French**

Item #	Questionnaire item	Percentage of agreement	Count	Total	Percentage of agreement	Count	Total
		Pre-PD			Post-PD		
1	I read to maintain/improve my French (e.g., magazines, novels).	57.1	20	34	42.8	3	7
2	I take courses to maintain/improve my French.	42.8	15	34	57.1	4	7
3	I watch French movies, listen to French music/podcasts to maintain/improve my French.	48.5	17	34	42.8	3	7
4	I seek opportunities to immerse myself in French environments to maintain/enhance my French skills.	65.7	23	34	71.4	5	7
5	I take opportunities to speak to other adults in French.	82.8	29	34	85.7	6	7
6	I take opportunities to write and get feedback (from others and/or technology) to improve my skills.	42.8	15	34	42.8	3	7

#### d. Interview Results

Although the questionnaire results revealed mixed results as it pertains to participants' plans to focus on their French, the interview participants saw the professional development sessions as such an opportunity. All of interview participants associated value with having the professional development sessions offered in French.

It gives me the opportunity to practice a bit more because when I started to teach core I had to really dial back my French. I find that I lost a lot of you know good conversation and good dialogue skills so I enjoyed it for sure gave me the opportunity to practice. Teacher 2

I don't know that the relevance would be there if it wasn't in French. I think it's important that we have these professional conversations in French. And we're used to talking with our students in French at their level. So I think it's really nice to—it puts me a little bit out of my comfort zone sometimes. And I'm either, a) reminded that, well, I can do this of b) oh, I'm kind of lacking in that. Or maybe I'm feeling uncomfortable in that conversation. So it kind of humbles you and puts things into perspective, which I think it's almost necessary to do. I'm trying to relate to my students in that way. If I'm encouraging them to do it [speak French], then I should probably do the same so that I can put myself in their shoes sometimes. Teacher 4

For me it helps to make sure that I can keep up on the lingo at a professional level because often my learning is happening in English, not happening in French, and I have to be translating. And if I don't have that opportunity to use the education jargon, I lose it. Teacher 7

Although not asked directly in the interview, one teacher associated a gain in confidence with having the professional development sessions offered in French:

I feel like it [sessions being offered in French] helped build up my confidence, hearing other educators also speak French. I feel like we're mostly in Anglophone communities, even at school, because we are a dual-track school, it's English in the hallways, English in the staff room, English everywhere. So it was really nice to actually sit down and hear other professionals speak French and discuss their classroom in French and their practices in French. It helped boost my confidence because I feel like the only time I speak French often is in my classroom and that's it. Teacher 6

## Discussion

This study explored the provision of four full-day professional development sessions offered in French to FSL teachers within one school board for the purpose of building pedagogical and language confidence (CPF, 2019), supporting their language proficiency (Arnott & Vignola, 2018; Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Faez, 2011; Wernicke, 2017), and future plans to maintain their language skills. The pre-questionnaire results showed the vast majority of FSL teachers to be confident in their pedagogy and language proficiency. They also had some plans to maintain their proficiency levels by reading, speaking to other adults, and/or immersing themselves. These results are contrary to the research showing FSL teachers in Canada as lacking confidence (Tang, 1997; Wernicke, 2017). Such confidence may stem from the teachers' experience having taught for more than 10 years whereas other research focused on pre-service teachers (Mady, 2018; Salvatori, 2007). Moreover, given the confidence found specifically among experienced FSL teachers, these findings point to the need for more research on the relationship between mentorship and increased language proficiency for less experienced FSL teachers (see Muhling, 2016; Smith et al., 2023). Post-questionnaire results showed no statistically significant differences. It is worth noting that the majority of FSL teacher participants remained confident in their pedagogy and language proficiency although sometimes less so in the post-professional development sessions. For example, the post-questionnaire findings of this study posit that, generally, participants are less confident in building authentic French language materials and activities—in terms of speaking, reading, or listening strands. Future professional development sessions should thus consider the myriad ways in which FSL teachers can engage in creating authentic language materials for their students.

In keeping with the NS/NNS debate, the teacher participants' confidence to speak to NS decreased post-questionnaire. Although the majority felt confident, results reveal that they felt less confident than before the professional development sessions. A decrease in confidence may be due to the delivery of the sessions in French and the participation of a Francophone guest speaker in two of the four sessions. It is also important to note that the results need to be interpreted with caution given the imbalance in pre- and post-questionnaire response numbers. Despite the non-significant quantitative results, the interviews revealed that the FSL teachers recognized and appreciated the value of having the sessions offered in French. The qualitative data also illustrates the absence of professional development sessions offered in French as opposed to English. French sessions are needed, however, in order for FSL teachers to collaborate and interact in French and to learn accurate French educational terminology. Moreover, like any educator, FSL teachers are lifelong learners of the language and practicing the language—especially when pushed outside of their perceived comfort levels—is an important step in improving language proficiency and related confidence. As represented in the qualitative data, FSL teachers are searching for the opportunity to speak and use their French, and these sessions afford them the opportunity to do so.

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