

Narrative: Part 1

Using Strong and Positive Leadership to Increase the credibility and motivation to learn French in the core French Program

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Abstract: At the high school level there are three streams in which students are able to learn French - French immersion, core French or intensive French. Depending on the stream that is chosen content, skills as well as teachers vary, however the need to increase and maintain motivation to learn a second language is imperative. Through the use of effective leadership strategies, such as subject expertise and the power of our person, French teachers are not only able to motivate and inspire students to find their own want and drive to learn a second language but improve the credibility and public views of learning French as a second language in their communities.

Key Words: French Immersion, Core French, Leadership, Motivation, Credibility.

My research interests are in the area of Core French. In particular, I am interested in exploring why some students' perceptions of this course are negative and what can I do to change it? This is a question that I brought with myself when choosing the research topic for my thesis. How can I as a teacher change student's, parent's and society's images of the core French program?

After much research I formed my conclusion. Core French needs strong leadership to change the way it is perceived and to create the motivation for students to learn and continue within the program. As a former immersion student in YRDSB and as a teacher in the French immersion program, parents, administration, and boards have great leadership and guidance for its growth. There is a large amount of advertisement and support as well as a great social view. People see French Immersion as positive and support it. There is also a huge amount of research to back up the program. With current research conducted by Netten and Germain (2005) proving that immersion students have increased cognitive skills with no negative side effects on their other courses or similar research by Lazaruk (2007) confirming these results, showing that students in the immersion program gain linguistic, academic and cognitive benefits from learning two languages, why would parents not want to promote and sign up their children?

In direct comparison to immersion there is core French. Unlike French immersion, students in the core stream may not find as much value in learning the French language. Although it is not the case for everyone, there is a big stigma that follows learning core French in Ontario. As a result, this leads to a lot of classroom management issues and a lack of support from parents. Research conducted by Lapkin et Al. (2006) interviewed core French teachers across Ontario asking about the resources, supports, teaching conditions as well as professional development that they have available to them. After collecting the data, it was found that teachers not only felt that they did not have as many resources available to them, but the communities surrounding the schools were not very supportive of the programming. This lead to teachers feeling less supported by parents and students. These findings are similar to what other

research has found. In research conducted by Callie Mady in 2010, two groups of students (students who were not born in Canada and started learning French in grade 9 and students who were born in Canada and started learning French in grade 4) motivation levels for learning French were compared. The two groups of students were analyzed and it was found that the allophone students used learning French for a wider purpose (jobs etc), they were more positive about learning French and identified knowing French as a part of their Canadian identity. They were more motivated to learn French and helped create a positive learning environment. This again points out the need for strong leadership in the core French classroom. French teachers need to use their leadership abilities throughout elementary and secondary school to help reduce this negative image that has been created and help create a positive view and climate of their classrooms. Using leadership as a tool, we can undo these false ideas!

Why is leadership the solution?

Social stigmas about core French lead to the issue of “truth” versus “perception”. Students entering grade 9 core French, may have previous expectations of what “French” is all about. Having heard bad comments from other students or maybe having a bad experience with their elementary school teacher, students may have created their own personal stigma against French class. However as English explains, a person’s “perception” may not exactly be the “truth”. (English, 50) What a person sees or “perceives” is based on what they have already experienced and how they have been taught to interpret what they are seeing. “Culture shapes perception from the moment of birth. One has to know what one is seeing to know what it is and to learn the language needed to identify it.” (English, 56) People, our students, are raised to understand and interpret certain language and actions in particular ways. Every person interprets what they have seen based on how they have been taught to interpret it. (Eco, 1990) This can either be a positive or negative to the core French classroom. Students’ previous experiences, what their parents have taught them and their personal views of French, influence the way that they perceive their current class to be. Without the proper leadership to change stigmas and to lead within the class, how can we expect to change perceptions to match the truth? Every single individual core French teacher needs to be the strongest of leaders to change these misperceptions. They need to guide their classes with leadership techniques that promote students to find their own motivation and truth behind the course.

As teachers we have to recognize that we are all leaders. We may not be department heads, principals or superintendents but we have the most important jobs because the way we represent our courses is the way our students remember them. It is the way that we use the leadership skills that we are given and are able to learn, that changes the way our students learn and what they believe about our class. French and Raven (1968) divided leadership into five power bases: position power, reward power, coercive power, expert power and personal power. In position power, teachers lead with their authority or their ability to use the position that they are in to influence students. Reward power uses their ability to give students something in recognition for what they have accomplished and coercive power is based on teachers ability to have a punishment as a way to influence students decisions. Using expert power in leadership taps into teachers knowledge and ability to give students the knowledge they have in a particular knowledge area and finally personal power uses teachers charisma, personalities and their

attractiveness to students to motivate them to learn. Research conducted by Cheng (1994), looked at these different forms of leadership. It was found that using subject expertise and the power of our person, teachers can help students find their own motivation to learn as well as create a positive learning climate. Similarly reward and position types of leadership were found to be the least effective; both of which are frequently used to manage behavior in the core French classroom. Leadership techniques lead to the issue of “managing” versus “teaching”. After working in several Moderns departments across York Region, I have seen that as time progresses with no changes, core French teachers can start to lose their motivation to teach and inspire students to continue to take French. Fighting stigmas can become very straining, leading to a lack of inspiration to lead, creating more of a pull to become a manager. They simply do what they “should” be doing as predetermined by administration or the curriculum, instead of creating, making changes in their teaching routines and leading in a way that inspires and helps their French departments grow in a positive direction. As English states: “Managers are conservative about changes. While they may embrace change within schools, they may be reluctant to engage in alterations where the fundamental borders of schooling are concerned.” (English, Pg.18) Instead of trying to make changes in the perception of their programs and courses, some teachers can fall upon management since it is an easier alternative. Why fight for change when you can simply teach only what is necessary and earn your salary?

Within my own classroom, instead of forcing students to simply do what the curriculum is stating, I try to use the way I teach to motivate students to want to have the skills that I am teaching them. I lead by example, using my power of person to intrigue and gain their interest. I show students “me” as an example, that I was once sitting in their places and that these programs work and will give you the ability to learn a second language. I respect all my students and try my best to reach their needs through communication and the use of differentiated instruction. I do not use my power of position over my students, I let them know that they can come to me so that I can better help them learn. I use technology, various types of resources and I give them choice so that I do not lose my students simply because they were bored. I try to be innovative and come up with new topics and activities that meet the needs of my students in the year 2014.

I use my power as the leader of my classroom, not to overpower my students, but to give me the ability to alter what I am doing to best suit their needs and find a way that lets them find their own connection to French so that they remain motivated and want to come to class. These changes and choices that I have made as the leader of my classroom has not only inspired students to continue to take French but has kept my French classroom dynamic and a fun and safe place to be. Research conducted by Rovers (2010) found that using innovative approaches works to help motivate students to learn French. In her research Rovers used the arts as a way to inspire a group of applied French students to want to learn French. Using music, activities and dramatizations, Rover was able to change students attitudes towards the French language making them more motivated to learn and speak in French. She used her power as a leader to tap into the interests of her group of students, making them find their own motivation and interest in the language.

Although some students may perceive French class in a negative manner, it does not need to be the truth. The truth, compared to perception, is based on combining facts with what was seen or experienced. “...the act of observation has become the dominant mode of determining ‘the truth’ ”. (English Pg. 54) The truth will never be the same from person to person since

everyone's perception and interpretations vary. However, with the proper leadership and direction within the core French classroom, the truth can be created and seen by students. By creating a positive environment and giving students concrete leadership and positive growth within the French department, the "truth" behind French education can be positive and inspiring rather than leaving students only with their negative perceptions.

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