

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of International Studies
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

September 2012

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Title: Student Attitudes Toward Multilingual Education

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Degree awarded September 2012

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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September 2012

Title: Student Attitudes Toward Multilingual Education

This research focuses on student attitudes toward multilingual education. Although much work has been done on multilingual education pedagogy and policy, almost none has been child-centered. Little consideration has been given to first-hand accounts of children in immersion programs. Through participatory observation, surveys, and focus group discussions with third grade students at a public, French immersion elementary school in the Pacific Northwest, I have found many common threads within student experiences of multilingual education. Specifically, students' fear of failure and peer-to-peer shaming when learning a new language can leave them feeling ambivalent toward French. This is not to say that the student experience is overwhelmingly negative; however, student attitudes seem to fall somewhere between their learned value for multilingualism and their lived experiences. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the importance of student narratives and the ways in which they can inform the development of immersion education programs.

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Lefebvre, E. E. (2011). Teaching, Learning and the Construction of Self:
Education, Language and Culture in Morocco. *Papers, Essays, and Reviews*,
3.2, 295-306.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Kathie Carpenter for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of this thesis, as well as my committee members Dr. Surrendra Subramani and Dr. Donnie Hale. Special thanks to 'Mme. Margo' and her 3rd grade class, who allowed me to spend the school year with them and whose insights were invaluable as I began to write about multilingual education. Finally, I'd like to thank Roland for countless trips to Prince Puckler's, evening walks, and his love and support...

To my former 1st & 2nd grade students at Clinton Elementary School & George Washington Academy, who inspired this research from the very beginning.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Whether or not you’ve actually seen Dora the Explorer, you’re probably aware that many parents are jumping on the bandwagon of exposing their child to a second language. Whether it’s Latin, Spanish, Mandarin, or any other language, parents everywhere are insisting that bilingual children have an edge over kids who speak only one language. And, this isn’t some elitist craze, the overwhelming consensus of the experts is that children should really be learning a second language.”

– Skila Brown, “Parlez-Vous Français? The Case for the Bilingual Child”

“With the summer holidays looming, and possibly a trip to France or Spain planned, just how easy is it to teach your children the local lingo? The earlier you start, the better. Making the process fun with games, music, and a taste of the local culture (chocolat chaud and croissants will tempt even the most reluctant children), also helps.”

– Harriet Addison, “Parler français? C’est facile.”

Bilingualism is the next guarantee your wee one will get into Harvard. Or that is the idea, anyway. A recent article in *The New York Times* captures the essence of a discussion that has been circulating mommy blogs and parenting magazines for the past few years (Looft, 2012; Skila, 2011; Addison, 2008). Published in March 2012, Yudhijit Bhattacharjee’s opinion piece examines “Why Bilinguals are Smarter.” As is often the case in this body of literature, the article states that bilingualism improves a learner’s ability to focus, as well as the brain’s executive function, heightens one’s ability to monitor the environment, and even delays the onset of dementia (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The irony of this whole-hearted embrace of bilingualism, particularly as it is often practiced in the growing number of immersion education programs around the country, is that it often omits the most important element: the child. Popular literature on the benefits of multilingual education is paralleled by academic discourse on the topic. Some rely on young adults for their findings on student attitudes, such as Payne (2006) and Tse (2000). Authors, such as Hayashi (2005) and Gerena (2010), focus on the outcomes of immersion programs. When these researchers do ask elementary school-aged children about their attitudes, they carefully balance them against test scores and language fluency

measurements, suggesting that students' attitudes are not intrinsically valuable on their own. It seems as if everyone asks researchers, policy-makers, principals, educators, parents, occasionally high school students—namely, adults—about multilingual education.

Articles written for an exclusively adult audience ask “Why, How and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?” but never if (Center for Applied Linguistics [CAL]). These articles and studies include exhortations about the importance of “students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad” (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project [NSFLEP], 1999). They discuss ways that parents can easily encourage their children to learn different languages, and expound on the benefits of learning a second language at such a young age. Read together, current, popular and academic discourses on multilingual education present an idealized version of elementary school in which French and English speaking youth float through childhood with ease because of their advanced cognitive functioning, virtually guaranteeing their success in our increasingly multilingual society.

As a former elementary school teacher, both in Louisiana and Morocco, I have read countless articles arguing for multilingual education. I have also noticed what these articles say and what they do not say. What has become apparent to me through my experience as a teacher and researcher in elementary school classrooms is that the student experience is ignored, to the detriment of multilingual education. Things are never so simple. As a teacher, I saw the shortcomings of multilingual education quite clearly. I had students who struggled to learn a second, third or sometimes fourth language; they expressed confusion and occasionally frustration when switching between languages. Although one could argue that my students were learning many languages and were all the better for it, in the present—in my students' day-to-day, lived experience—things were not nearly so rosy. In response, I began to search for elementary school student voices and perceptions and found very little.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to apply child-centered research methodologies, written about by authors such as Christensen (2004) and Warming (2011), and ask students about their attitudes toward and perceptions of multilingual education. Additionally, this study will contribute to “[developing] practices which are more inclusive of learners’ knowledge of language and literacies” (Martin, 1999). To address this line of inquiry, I spent six months participating in and observing a third grade French-immersion classroom in College Corner, Oregon. Although there are countless immersion programs around the world from which I could have chosen, including the one at which I taught in Morocco, I felt that it was important to begin with the familiar. The students and teachers I observed were of a similar cultural background to my own. Additionally, they spoke French and English, two languages I speak. We shop at the same grocery store, check out books from the same library, and have some mutual acquaintances. These parallels allowed me greater insight into the students’ experiences and life styles. The students I chose to observe are also relatively privileged. As I point out in greater detail in chapter four, the students are primarily white, middle-class individuals with strong family support. This too served a particular purpose. If these students were happy and successful, they would be exactly as we would expect them to be. However, if these students struggled to make sense of French, expressed frustration and concern, or disliked learning another language, the findings would be significant. To put it simply, I wanted to pursue the ‘hard case’.

Through my research I found that the cracks I noticed as a teacher at a trilingual school in Morocco were also apparent in a bilingual school in Oregon. Students struggle with learning another language. Although many of the students I interviewed at Marie Curie Elementary School expressed strong support for language in the abstract, they became frustrated as they tried to learn French.¹ When asked, “Which language do you prefer?” students would respond that they liked French. But when asked how they felt when listening and speaking, reading and writing in French, students consistently responded more negatively than when they spoke about English. Additionally, most

¹ The name of the elementary school has been changed to protect confidentiality.

surprising about my research was finding that students spoke of fear of failure and peer-to-peer shaming when asked about learning French.

As such, this study is a unique addition to literature on multilingual education, first and foremost because it privileges the student voice. It also adds to our understanding of student experiences and attitudes, as they relate to immersion education, and thereby helps to inform immersion pedagogical practices and policies. My hope is that similar studies will continue to add to this growing body of research. I hope that my findings will inform classroom pedagogy and make the multilingual education experience more positive for students. Additionally, throughout my research I have sought to divest myself of adult privilege to gain a better understanding of the student experience. In this thesis, I have sought to preserve student voices largely as they are, and by doing so to privilege their experiences over my own interpretations. Finally, I have sought to write as simply and as ‘readably’ as possible, avoiding jargon when I can—and whenever using jargon, explaining it clearly—to reach as wide an audience as possible. Student experiences can only be improved when researchers, teachers, parents, *and* students are able to participate in a dialogue about language learning on equal footing. As such, more than anything, I hope that this will be an ‘opening statement’ in this discussion.

CHAPTER II

LENSES ON CHILDHOOD

“I have been criticized throughout the course of my career for placing too much faith in the reliability of children’s narratives; but I have almost always found that children are a great deal more reliable in telling us what actually goes on in public school than many of the adult experts who develop policies that shape their destinies. Unlike these powerful grown-ups, children have no ideologies to reinforce, no superstructure of political opinion to promote, no civic equanimity or image to defend, no personal reputation to secure. They may err sometimes about the minuscule particulars but on the big things children rarely have much reason to mislead us. They are, in this respect, pure witnesses...”

- Jonathon Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation*

CHILD-CENTERED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Child-centered research methodology, focusing on children’s participation in ethnographic research, is a small but growing field in anthropology, linguistics, and education studies. Despite its relatively recent “disciplinary” status, the field has much deeper historical roots, in the work of Jean Piaget for example. Central to Piaget’s work on childhood development was reflection on children’s actions coupled with direct conversation with child research subjects (Piaget, 1969). However, more recently, in psycholinguistics in particular, there has been the feeling that to study children researchers must employ a variety of indirect, and sometimes complex, means to get at student attitudes. In part because of the article published in the *Harvard Education Review* by Roger Brown and Ursula Bellugi (1964) entitled, “Three Processes in the Child’s Acquisition of Syntax,” researchers have shied away from direct conversations with students. The authors wrote this of their toddler-aged research subject:

We wondered if he could make grammatical judgments about the plural, if he could distinguish a correct form from an incorrect form. “Adam,” we asked, “which is right, ‘two shoes’ or ‘two shoe’?” His answer on that occasion, produced with explosive enthusiasm was, “Pop goes the weasel!” The two-year-

old child does not make a perfectly docile experimental subject. (Brown & Bellugi, 1964, pp. 135)

It would seem from this that researching children would be a process fraught with complications. If asking a simple question like, “Which is right?” failed to elicit an intelligible response, then how much more difficult could it be to ask abstract questions like, “Why was that difficult?” “How do you feel about...” or “Why do you prefer...?” But it would be a mistake to discount the possibility of gaining real insight from these questions asked of children. In a sense, to truly understand children, we must return to the Piagetian idea that the ‘wrong’ answer can tell us as much as the ‘right’ answer.

Pia Haudrup Christensen’s 2004 article “Children’s Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation,” points out that researchers should see children “primarily as fellow human beings” (p. 165). She also argues that “[t]his approach does not assume that particular methods are needed for research with children just because they are children” (Christensen, 2004, p. 165). Based on her extensive experience researching children, Christensen believes that the most serious hurdle to researching children is in negotiating the power dynamics between children and adults. Rather than circumnavigate this in a roundabout way, Christensen confronts this head on. She begins her research by explaining her purpose to her research subjects, children, and by emphasizing the value of their own perspectives. Christensen goes on to explain that the most important practices in researching children are to observe and “let the possibility of participation to flow from that” (2004, p. 169). The author adds that listening attentively and building rapport with children is a significant part of that (Christensen, 2004, p. 169). Perhaps the most important part of researching children, then, is the most important part of researching anyone – building a relationship. As Christensen puts it, “This means that one-off interviews with children, whether these be qualitative or quantitative, or with the use of task oriented tools or not, are at risk of not providing the context within which children can respond in accordance with their own views” (2004, p. 169).

Sonja Grover, author of the article “Why Won’t They Listen to Us? : On Giving Power and Voice to Children Participating in Social Research” (2004) published in *Childhood*, builds on the arguments made by Pia Haudrup Christensen. She points out that in addition to the fact that children are rarely regarded as individuals with valid points of view, children are rarely given the opportunity to be co-researchers. Although methodologies focusing on research with adults often explicitly mention the importance of voice in the research context, this is a forgotten aspect of research with children. Just as much as minority populations can be marginalized by extractive research techniques, even more so can child populations. Grover writes that even older children are *not* asked to suggest research problems, to do research of their own, to contribute to interpretations of findings, to give personal reflections, or to inform the policy implications of research (2004, pp. 81-93). The author goes on to argue that because of this, more research should allow “subjects to communicate their experience without having it transformed by the researcher so as to alter its meaning in any significant manner” (Grover, 2004, p. 84). The result of this type of research is the validation of the lived experiences and dispositions of children.

This validation is particularly important because of the unique temporality that is intrinsic to all humans. Emma Uprichard (2008) specifically addresses the two, seemingly diametrically opposed notions of children as “being” or “becoming” (pp. 303-313). Uprichard begins her article by first defining these terms. She writes,

[T]he ‘being’ child is seen as a social actor in his or her own right, who is actively constructing his or her own ‘childhood’, and who has views and experiences about being a child; the ‘becoming’ child is seen as an ‘adult in the making’, who is lacking universal skills and features of the ‘adult’ that they will become (2008, pp. 304).

Uprichard argues that children, and in fact all humans, are both ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. All individuals have a past, present, and future that inform their perspectives and attitudes toward the world. As such, the author argues that we are all “interdependent beings” who are more or less competent at performing various tasks throughout our lives (Uprichard, 2008, pp. 307). When children are seen as active agents in constructing their

own knowledge and daily lives, their subjective experiences become an important focus of research.

Unfortunately, there are few studies that actually focus on the subjective experiences of children. As Hanne Warming points out in her article “Getting under their skins? Accessing young children’s perspectives through ethnographic fieldwork,” most studies “typically aim to document children’s agency and represent children’s culture and learning processes rather than children’s perspectives *per se*” (Warming, 2011, pp. 39-53). As such, adult-centered interpretations, right or wrong, become the focus. To avoid this common pitfall, Warming, like Haudrup, argues for the importance of “adopting the ‘least adult role’” (Warming, 2011, p. 42; Haudrup, 2004, p. 173). Participant observation, predicated on building a strong relationship with children, forms an essential part of this type of research. Warming writes that, “[t]his approach allows space for children’s multiple, fluid and depersonalized perspectives, and thus also supports the empowerment of children’s voices...” (Warming, 2011, p. 51). To summarize, to access children’s perspectives, adults should pursue their research in a similar manner to which they would pursue research with other adults: they should approach children as peers, and allow them the opportunity to become co-researchers, whose thoughts and opinions are validated throughout the experience.

Childhood studies methods become even more relevant and timely when researching children in their social contexts. Heather Montgomery, author of *An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children’s Lives*, highlights the fact that until recently few anthropological studies have been conducted that “look more broadly at children’s own cultural worlds amongst their peers” (Montgomery, 2008, pp. 133). The research that has been conducted, primarily in the field of psychology, underscores the importance of peer socialization. Perhaps most dedicated to the significance of peer relationships in identity formation, is Judith Rich Harris who argues that children’s groups, in particular, enforce unspoken rules of behavior, causing within-group differences to wane (1998, p. 133). She later goes on to say that:

The most important years for group socialization are the years of middle childhood, from six to twelve. During all that time, children in our society—a society that provides them with a plethora of potential companions—spend much of their free time with peers of their own sex. They are socialized—that is, they socialize each other, they socialize themselves... (Harris, 1998, pp. 226).

This is important because it speaks not only to the significance of studying children, but also to the significance of studying children in their predominate social contexts: in elementary school peer groups and classrooms.

RESEARCH OF STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE

LEARNING

Despite the fact that language learners form a fast-growing subsection of school populations in the United States, rising from 4.7 to 11.2 million between 1980 and 2009, or from 10 to 21 percent of the school-aged population, very few qualitative studies of students' experiences in multilingual learning environments have been conducted (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). Even more importantly, of the studies that have been conducted, most focus on outcomes and test data, rather than solid descriptions of student experiences. Mark Payne is one of the few researchers who has made an original contribution to the study of student attitudes toward multilingual education, taking a child-centered approach. Payne starts from the position that students should be able to give their personal reflections and to inform policy, which Sonja Grover advocated. Accordingly, Payne (2006) interviewed secondary students aged eleven to eighteen. His paper "Foreign Language Planning in England: The Pupil Perspective," "explores how school pupils in English secondary schools could contribute to the shaping of the foreign language (FL) curriculum in their institutions through the choices they make and their underlying rationales" (Payne, 2006, p. 189). To capture 'pupil voice,' Payne primarily used focus group discussions, as a contrast to the voices of teachers, managers, and policy makers, who work within the existing educational framework. He argues that students should be included, as "[p]upil voice is also seen as an important

element in promoting the ideas of democracy and democratic education” (Payne, 2006, p. 197). He studied two schools, both with a multilingual student body (Payne, 2006, p. 200).²

Based on his findings, Payne highlights the maturity and insight of the students he interviewed and states that students “converge toward fairness and equality of choice” (Payne, 2006, p. 209). As an example, one female student commented, “I think in an ideal world everyone should have the opportunity to learn a language they want” (Payne, 2006, p. 206). In her group, the students went on to emphasize the importance of language instruction in lower-elementary school as well. Ultimately, Payne’s research highlights an important consideration for policy makers and educational leaders: the student voice, albeit particularly in its most ‘mature’, adult form. Additionally, his research refutes the idea that young adults are somehow unable to give valid, insightful input into research questions and policy concerns. Payne’s arguments for the inclusion of students’ perceptions in multilingual education planning are important, but his research did not include elementary school students. As such, there remains a need for collaborative research with even younger students.

Similarly to Payne, Asako Hayashi’s work focuses on student attitudes, although her research examines the attitudes of elementary school students, specifically fourth and fifth graders. She examines attitudes toward bilingualism among Japanese schoolchildren in the United States in “Japanese English Bilingual Children in Three Different Educational Environments” (2005). The purpose of her study was to examine influences on student language proficiency, which reflects the dominant discourse on outcomes of multilingual education; one of the variables investigated by Hayashi’s study was student attitudes toward bilingualism. To investigate student attitudes, Hayashi did engage in participant observation and informal interviews, but primarily relied on the Attitudes to Bilingualism scale questionnaire with students in the fourth and fifth grades at all three schools (2005, p. 1013). This particular instrument was developed for

² Payne notes that over sixty-five languages were spoken by the students he researched.

children ages 10 years old or older and inquired about students' attitudes toward bilingualism, as well as toward the Japanese language. She also used the Bilingual Language Assessment Record (BLAR) and writing samples to measure student proficiency in both English and Japanese (Hayashi, 2005, p. 1013). Hayashi found that language usage, self-evaluation of language skills, and writing skills were strong predictors of language proficiency in both English and Japanese. Hayashi also confirmed earlier research and stated that "children develop good attitudes toward bilingualism if they think bilingualism is an advantage for them" (2005, p. 1030).

Based on her findings, Hayashi argues that immersion programs should work cooperatively with families and communities to create balanced, supportive bilingual environments, which will ultimately help students gain proficiency. These findings are significant for researchers examining multilingual education, as they provide criteria by which to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular program in investing students in the language learning process. Specifically, effective programs must communicate the value of bilingualism, in particular by working with the larger community. This type of research is important, especially as people weigh the effectiveness of one form of bilingual education against another. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of research reliant on questionnaire results, weighed against language assessment data and writing samples to determine the effectiveness of various programs, the results only show that student attitudes are important. Based on her observations, surveys and language proficiency measurements, Hayashi reports that student attitudes influence the acquisition process, but she does not report on what those attitudes are in any detail. The logical next step, then, is to research and write on children's own voices, captured by free-response opportunities and co-investigation of a particular research question, as advocated by Haudrup, Grover, Uprichard, and Warming, to build on Hayashi's work and provide a more detailed view of the student experience.

Linda Gerena (2010) begins to fill in more detail with her research on "Student Attitudes Toward Biliteracy in a Dual Immersion Program," by focusing on the attitudes

of students toward biliteracy in a dual immersion Spanish-English program. Specifically, Gerena measured student attitudes relating to their “(1) personal values of English and Spanish literacy, (2) perceived competence in English and Spanish literacy, (3) perceived social values of English and Spanish literacy, and (4) perceived personal and social values of biliteracy” (2010, pp. 55-56). Gerena administered a survey to thirty-three students in first and second grade and analyzed responses as a total score, as well as by eight separate categories, such as “Personal Value of Spanish,” and “Personal Value of English” (2010, p. 59). She asked questions such as “How important is reading in Spanish to being a good student?” and “How important is writing in English to being a good student?” Overall, she found that the social value for Spanish diminished over time, while English gained momentum. In other words, students were less likely to rate Spanish as “very important” on a Likert scale as time went on. Gerena found that by second grade, “both Spanish and English dominant students overwhelmingly and significantly value English reading as an indication of being a good student” (2010, p. 68). She argues that the reason why this occurs, despite the emphasis on Spanish in the dual-immersion program, is the hegemony of English in the United States (Gerena, 2010, p. 68).

Gerena concludes her study by making several recommendations for teachers, parents, and communities with dual immersion programs. Most importantly for the school community, she recommends that administrators and teachers address the perceived values of each of the languages in the program. Additionally, she argues that there is a need for more student surveys to be conducted on a much larger scale to get feedback on establishing positive learning environments (Gerena, 2010, p. 68). Gerena’s hope is that dual immersion learning environments in which both instructional languages are equally valued will be the result. Finally, Gerena writes that interviews should be conducted with students in multilingual educational settings to further understanding of their attitudes as well as to encourage positive learning experiences for all students (2010, p. 70). This last recommendation is one of the most important, as it hints at the overarching need for better understanding of the student experiences, attitudes and

perceptions in the narrative form. Additionally, it suggests that allowing students the opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes, may affect their perceptions and investment.

Lucy Tse (2000), although writing a decade before Gerena's research, also highlighted this gap in the literature. She writes that "[l]ittle systematic study has been made of how students perceive their [foreign language] experiences when given an open opportunity to comment on them, unrestricted by surveys or forced-choice questionnaires." She goes on to say that because of this, we have little idea of "student attributions of success or failure" (Tse, 2000, p. 69). Quite correctly, she argues that it is important to address this because students' perceptions of the language learning process have important implications for program development and teacher pedagogy. Additionally, as Hayashi found, student attitudes have important implications for student success. Accordingly, Tse studied the attitudes of a group of post-secondary level foreign language learners through the use of foreign language autobiographies. Tse found that students were, on the whole, more critical than laudatory of their classroom experiences (2000, p. 75). Additionally, a majority of the students felt that they were either unsuccessful or only marginally successful in their foreign language study (Tse, 2000, p. 77). When students did feel successful, they largely attributed it to their teacher or classroom environment, their family or community, or their own personal drive to learn another language (Tse, 2000, p. 79).

In the same way that Tse's study gives greater insight into student attitudes toward foreign language learning at the post-secondary level, interviews with elementary school students would give greater insight into immersion education. If anything can be said of the existing studies on student attitudes toward language learning cited here, there is a tremendous need for more narratives of the immersion student experience. Thus far, there has been little, if any, research that gives greater insight into language and education during childhood. As such, this thesis has three main purposes: first, to apply the child-centered research methodology advocated by Haudrup, Grover, Uprichard, Warming, and others, to sociolinguistic studies of immersion education. Specifically, this research will

avoid adult-centered analysis and discussion of children's perspectives when possible, by engaging children as co-researchers and by highlighting the issues they deem as important in open-ended focus group discussions. Second, this research continues the work of psychologists and anthropologists, such as Harris and Montgomery, on students' identity formation, by looking specifically at issues relating to language and education, and by researching students in one of their primary social contexts, the elementary school classroom. Third, this thesis will build on previous research conducted by Payne, Hayashi, Gerena and Tse, which has assessed student attitudes primarily through surveys and questionnaires, by interviewing students and allowing their narratives of their educational experiences to speak for themselves.

CHAPTER III

FOCUSING IN ON IMMERSION EDUCATION

“La langue française. La rigueur scolaire. La compétence culturelle. Ça c’est la joie de l’apprentissage dans la famille Marie Curie.”

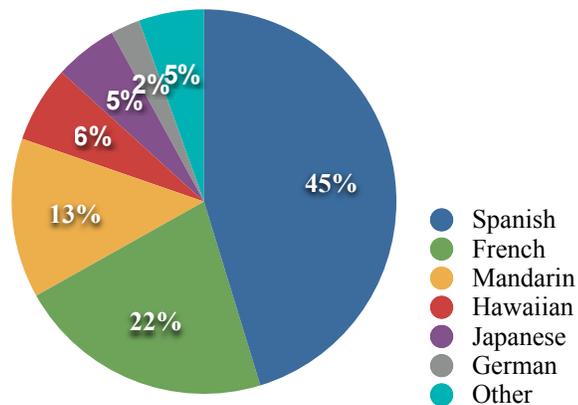
“The French language. Academic rigor. Cultural competence. That’s the joy of learning as a part of the Marie Curie family.”

- Marie Curie Elementary School Motto

HISTORY OF IMMERSION EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The concept of immersion education originally gained popularity in Canada in the 1960s as a way to incorporate both English and French into the national curriculum (Cummins, 1998, pp. 34-47). Immersion programs were then introduced in the United States in 1971 (Lenker, 2007, p. 1). Today, according to the data provided by the *Directory of Foreign Language Immersion Programs in U.S. Schools*, which are self-reported, there are now 448 foreign language immersion programs in the United States, up from only three programs in 1971 (Directory of Foreign Language Immersion Programs in U.S. Schools [DFLIPUS], 2011). Of the foreign languages represented by these programs, as shown in Figure 1, the most common are Spanish, French, Mandarin, Hawaiian, and Japanese. There are currently 114 French Immersion Programs in the United States, representing 21.6% of the total number of programs. This is half the number of Spanish Immersion Programs, which represent 45.3% of the total number of programs (DFLIPUS,

Figure 1. Languages of Instruction



2011).³ In Oregon, there are twenty-seven language immersion schools, the fifth highest number of immersion schools in the U.S. States with more immersion schools are: Utah, Minnesota, Hawaii, and Louisiana (Language Immersion Schools by State, 2011). The motivations behind the development of these programs are varied. Some states are simply trying to meet the language needs of a diverse local population. Other states, such as Hawaii or Louisiana, are motivated by a desire to continue to educate students in the states' heritage languages. In a recent interview with Utah's World Languages & Dual Immersion Specialist Gregg Roberts, from the State Office of Education, he stated that his state's motivations were primarily economic:

Utah is a small state, so for our economic survival and the national security of our country we MUST educate students who are multilingual. In these tough budget times, the only reason why the State Legislature continues to fund this program, while all others have been cut or reduced, is because this program is tied directly to the future economic development of Utah (Speaking In Tongues, Blog Entry, 2010).

It is also important to note that foreign language immersion education programs, and statistics relating to these types of programs, are distinct from two-way immersion programs, which are also known as bilingual education programs. In 2011, there were 389 two-way immersion programs in the United States, 361 of which instruct in Spanish and English (Languages of Instruction in TWI Programs).

In a 2007 report entitled "Foreign Language Immersion Programs: Features and Trends Over 35 Years," Ashley Lenker and Nancy Rhodes attributed the tremendous growth of immersion programs in the United States to five key factors. First, parental pressure and support for quality language programs with the goal of native-like fluency has grown in recent decades. Second, this has been accompanied by an increased focus on multicultural education. Third, an increase in schooling options and a move away from neighborhood schools to magnet schools, charter schools, and school choice, has made immersion programs viable. Fourth, recent research affirming both the

³ "Other" includes: Ojibwe, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Dine, Greek, Norwegian, Yup'ik, Cantonese, Chinook, Dakota, Danish, Inupiaq, Salish, Swedish, and Vietnamese.

effectiveness of immersion education and the potential for increased academic achievement has also fueled this growth. Finally, similar to the increased focus on multicultural education, a growing emphasis on the need for Americans to be proficient in foreign languages for personal, economic, political and national security reasons, has focused attention on the possibility of gaining native-like fluency from early childhood (Lenker & Rhodes, 2007).

Although many upper class parents have long encouraged their children to learn multiple languages, and various immigrant communities have had education programs in languages other than English throughout American history, the inauguration of foreign language immersion in 1971 marked the beginning of what is considered to be modern immersion education. As immersion programs have grown in popularity, the terms associated with immersion education have also proliferated, and definitions vary from author to author. For the purposes of this thesis, I have attempted to synthesize the various definitions.

DEFINING ‘LANGUAGE’

First, to begin to talk about immersion education it is important to define ‘language.’ Although ‘language’ would seem to be easy to define in some intuitive first approximation—it is the compilation of the words, sentences, grammatical patterns, and rules that we use to communicate with each other—in fact, there are several definitions. Jessica Ball, author of a report commissioned by UNESCO entitled “Enhancing Learning of Children from Diverse Language Backgrounds: Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual or Multilingual Education in the Early Years,” lists several different ‘categories’ of language. First, a *national language* is the language (or language variant, i.e. dialect), which has some connection—*de facto* or *de jure*—with a people and perhaps, by extension, the territory they occupy (Ball, 2010, pp. 7, 59). In the United States there is no *de jure* national language, although English is the *de facto* national language, despite the fact that some politicians may think otherwise (Seelye & Parker, 2012). For the purposes of this study, English is the national language of the large majority of students

surveyed, with the notable exception of a few students who are personally, or through their parents, associated with French or another language. A minority of the student or parent population at Marie Curie Elementary are from France, Quebec, Mali, and elsewhere. Thus their national language could be considered, for all practical purposes, to be French. In contrast to a national language, which has some association with a particular nation or country, a *majority language* is simply the language that the majority of the population of a particular place speaks. In most cases the majority and national language are the same, although there are some exceptions. In Morocco, for example, the national languages are Arabic and Amazigh (Berber), but French could be considered a majority language in cosmopolitan areas. The majority language in College Corner, Oregon is English, although there is a small, but significant minority that speaks Spanish; according to the 2010 United States Census, 12.8% of College Corner's population speaks a language other than English at home. Thus, Spanish is a *minority language* in College Corner, Oregon, or a language spoken by a minority of the community (Ball, 2010, p. 58). In fact there are two Spanish-language immersion programs of varying kinds in the Southern Willamette School District (SWSD) that serve this population.

Home language is a term widely used to describe a language spoken in the home; the term is often used when one's home language is different from the main language spoken in society, although this is certainly not always the case (Ball, 2010, p. 57). This term is closely related to another, *heritage language*, which refers to a language associated with an individual's heritage, ethnicity, or cultural background. Interestingly, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, "French" or "French Canadian" is the fifth most common self-reported ancestry in the state of Oregon. At Marie Curie, some children's home or heritage language would be French, which is different from the main language spoken in and around the community of College Corner, which is English. Additionally, some of the students at Marie Curie Elementary have other, different home or heritage languages as well. Finally, the term *native language* also appears with some frequency in immersion education literature, and often refers to the language that a person has spoken

from earliest childhood; this term can also be referred to as the learner's 'mother tongue' or 'home language' (Ball, 2010, pp. 8, 60).

These overlapping, and sometimes competing, definitions have arisen because researchers often want to distinguish how a language is learned from the consequences of different ways of learning, as well as the extent of competency in one language or another. Because of the complexities surrounding all of these various definitions for the languages used by individuals, there is a need for a term that is not laden with the baggage associated with 'native language,' which implies a certain authenticity of the first language over the second 'alien' or 'foreign' language, or with 'home language,' which implies a connection to family, community, and to a larger sense of a personal history. Thus, in this study, I prefer to use the term *default language*, which was coined by Karen Evans, a high school teacher with extensive experience working with a predominately English Language Learner (ELL) population in Morocco (personal communication, 2009). A default language is simply the language a speaker chooses to use, given the fact that the listener(s) will understand any of the languages they could choose to speak. For example, many of the students at Marie Curie Elementary School will default to French when speaking to their French instructors, but will default to English when speaking to their peers. The term default language also hints at the extremely contextual nature of language usage suggested by the title of Joshua Fishman's 1965 article, "Who Speaks What Language to Whom and When?"

(INSERT PREFIX HERE)-LINGUALISM

To add to the confusion over what to call a single spoken language, there are as many, if not more, definitions for individuals who can speak more than one language.

Bilingualism and *multilingualism*, at their simplest, refer to the ability to speak two or more languages, respectively. Although linguists debate the issue of whether or not an individual can have more than one native language, for the purposes of this study, it will be assumed that a person can be a native speaker of one or more languages. However, linguists and educators often refer to varying kinds of bi/multilingualism; Erika Hoff

expands on these varying kinds in her book, *Language Development*. *Simultaneous bilingualism* is when children acquire two languages at the same time. This is often the case for children who are born to parents who are native speakers of two different languages, or for children who are born into bilingual cultures (Hoff, 2001, p. 368). Only a few of the students at Marie Curie acquired a language other than English during early childhood. There are a few, however, who acquired both English and French (or English and another language) and would fit into this category.

In contrast, *sequential bilingualism* is when children acquire a second language after the first has begun to develop (Hoff, 2001, p. 368). Most of the students at Marie Curie would be considered sequential bilinguals, having begun the French language learning process during preschool or kindergarten. This type of language acquisition can result in a sort of *sub-coordinate bilingualism*, in which a first language is used to think through and define words in the second language (Romaine, 1989, p. 77). Finally, *biliteracy* specifically refers to the acquisition and learning of decoding and encoding print skills in two distinct languages. Someone who is *biliterate* can communicate in two languages as it pertains to written materials (Gerena, 2010, p. 56). The goal of the program to be examined by this thesis is both bilingualism and biliteracy. Thus students should be able to speak in French and English, making them bilingual, and read and write in both French and English, making them biliterate as well.

A MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION TYPOLOGY

Like Marie Curie Elementary School, there are many programs throughout the world that emphasize education in two languages; some programs even offer trilingual education, although they are the exception. These types of education make formal use of at least two languages for literacy and instruction in a school context (Ball, 2010, p. 61). All of the various types of programs fit under the umbrella of *multilingual education*, which is education in multiple languages at some point during a student's academic career. It is particularly important to clarify exactly what is meant by 'immersion' or 'multilingual education' because of how loaded the terms have become. In recent years,

some communities have rallied against *dual-immersion* programs in particular, in an effort to ‘preserve’ English instruction. For example, California Proposition 227, passed in 1998, restricted the extent to which languages other than English could be used as a medium of instruction, even for children who do not speak English as a first language (Cummins, 1996, p. vii). Authors such as Jim Cummins and Paulo Freire have written extensively on the fact that “when students’ language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage” (Cummins, 1996, p. 2).

In contrast, public discourse has been relatively supportive of languages other than English when used to instruct ‘native’ English speakers. As a result, what is classified as ‘positive’ is immersion education for an already privileged population, while immersion education for minority populations in a home language and English is purposefully excluded from this category. While not the focus of this thesis, this bias toward language ‘enrichment’ for children who are likely already at an advantage, and against language instruction for existing multilingual populations, such as the Spanish speaking population in California disempowered by Proposition 227, is a serious inequity at best. That said, most immersion programs in the United States are examples of *bilingual education*, of one kind or another, which involves teaching academic content in two languages (Hoff, 2001, p. 385; Ball, 2010, pp. 9-10, 56). One example of this, which will be explained in more detail below, would be *first-language-first education*, or schooling which begins in the mother tongue and transitions to additional languages (Ball, 2010, p. 7). As with languages and types of multilingualism, multilingual education can be divided into several different categories.

Erika Hoff gives one of the better typologies in her book *Language Development*, a summary of which can be found in Table 1. The first type of multilingual education, hereafter referred to as *Type I*, makes use of indigenous or native languages, often with the goal of preserving endangered languages (Hoff, 2001, p. 385). Bilingual programs in Hawaii or on some Native American Reservations would be examples of Type I

multilingual education. The second type of multilingual education, or *Type II*, makes use of national minority languages in instruction. These languages have some official status in a country and are included because of their importance to minority groups within a country (Hoff, 2001, p. 385). The French-English immersion programs in Canada are an example of this type. These first two types of multilingual education could be loosely grouped together as examples of *additive bilingual programs*. Additive bilingualism is instruction in a second (or another language), which ‘adds’ to student knowledge, without replacing the student’s first language.

Table 1. Multilingual Education Typology

Type	Other Associated Terms	Language of Instruction	Purpose
Type I	Additive Bilingual Education	Use of Indigenous or Native Languages	Preservation of Endangered Languages
Type II	Additive Bilingual Education	Use of National Minority Languages with Some Official Status	Preservation of Languages Important to Minority Groups within a Country
Type III	Transitional Bilingual Education, Subtractive Bilingual Education	Use of a Transitional Language for Non-Native Speakers of the Majority Language	Acquisition of the Majority Language
Type IV	N/A	Uses Sign Language & Spoken Language	Multilingualism for Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Students
Type V	Immersion, Two-Way Immersion, Dual-Language Immersion	Use of a Minority Language for Speakers of a Majority Language	Fluency in Multiple Languages

The third type of multilingual education program, *Type III*, uses an international language as part of a transition for students who are non-native speakers of the majority language (Hoff, 2001, p. 385). These programs are sometimes referred to as first-language-first education, *transitional bilingual education*, or pejoratively as *subtractive bilingual education*. Although these programs are sometimes criticized for their lack of support for the international language throughout a student’s career, these programs are certainly preferable to ‘submersion’ education programs in which non-native language

learners are enrolled in all-English (or another dominant language) programs that do not incorporate systematic, sustained strategies for accommodating students' particular instructional needs; programs are often compulsory and the goal is fluency in a non-native language (Ball, 2010, pp. 17, 63). The goal of Type III programs is not necessarily bilingualism, *per se*. Instead, a majority language, like English, is used in conjunction with another minority language, like Spanish, to acquire the majority language. The fourth type of program, *Type IV*, refers to those in which deaf or hard-of-hearing students are instructed in sign language in addition to a spoken language (Hoff, 2001, p. 385). These two programs are similar in that a students' default language is used to facilitate instruction in the majority language.

Finally, in the fifth type of program, *Type V*, minority languages are used for instruction of speakers of a majority language. This definition is, of course, dependent on the linguistic context of a particular region. In the United States, French immersion programs for English speaking populations would fall into this category; conversely, in France, English immersion programs for French speaking populations would fit within this category. These types of programs are often referred to as *immersion*, *two-way immersion*, or *dual language immersion* programs, and are considered to be enrichment, or additive bilingualism (Hoff, 2001, p. 385; Gerena, 2010, p. 57). Immersion programs are often elective and are widely considered to add to the quality of education (Hoff, 2001, p. 400; Ball, 2010, pp. 17, 58). Interestingly, although there is often push-back against instruction in minority languages for bilingual student populations, for example there is often a lack of support for Spanish-English dual immersion programs for native Spanish speakers, there is considerable support for Type V programs in which native English speakers are instructed in a second language. While native Spanish speakers learning in Spanish are seen as 'rejecting' the majority language of the United States, native English speakers learning in French, Japanese, or Italian are seen as 'embracing' their roles as global citizens. Perhaps most importantly, the program at Marie Curie would fall into this category.

Usually, Type V immersion programs in the United States are divided into two categories: *total immersion programs* and *partial immersion programs* (Lenker & Rhodes, 2007). Total immersion programs are those in which students from kindergarten through second grade, typically, are immersed in the target language, often the non-native language. Instruction in English increases in upper elementary grades, typically grades three through five, from approximately 20-50%. This roughly corresponds to the grades in which students are required to take standardized tests and as such there is often concern that students need additional instruction in the language of the test to be successful. These programs sometimes continue in middle and high school with classes taught in the target language (Lenker & Rhodes, 2007). The second type of program, partial immersion, is one in which approximately 50% of the day is spent in the target language, while the other part of the day is spent in English. Initial literacy instruction can be provided in either language, or can be taught in both languages simultaneously. As with total immersion programs, partial immersion programs can continue in middle and high school (Lenker & Rhodes, 2007). Most of the immersion programs in the Southern Willamette School District, including Marie Curie Elementary School, fall into the second type and spend 50% of their instructional time in a minority language (“2012 Schools Guide”, Southern Willamette School District [SWSD]).

IMMERSION EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

The Southern Willamette School District is a K-12 Public School District that serves the a mid-sized university town in the Pacific Northwest, as well as a few small towns to the north. Formed in 1854, the district serves a student population of over 16,000 through eighteen elementary schools, two K-8 programs, seven middle schools, four comprehensive high schools and other alternative programs. The Southern Willamette School District has had a school choice policy, which allows students to attend SWSD schools other than their neighborhood school, since 1973 (“2012 Schools Guide”, SWSD, p. 1); the French immersion program was begun at the beginning of the 1984-1985 school year. School choice requests are submitted annually during the spring and are entered

into a lottery. These requests are allowed based on available space. Parents may also request to have their child transfer after the annual lottery has ended if there are openings (“2012 Schools Guide”, SWSD, p. 8).

The Southern Willamette School District is unique in that it includes four elementary school immersion programs of varying types: Nueva Vista Spanish Immersion Elementary School, which is a full immersion program, Marie Curie French Immersion Elementary School, which is a partial immersion program, Los Amigos Elementary School, which is a dual immersion program, and Soko Gakuen Japanese Immersion Elementary School, which is also a partial immersion program (“2012 Schools Guide”, SWSD).⁴ Although any student in the Southern Willamette School District could, conceivably, apply to attend any school in the district and be admitted provided there was space, the elementary school immersion programs at Marie Curie and Soko Gakuen are not considered ‘neighborhood’ schools like the other fourteen elementary schools, but are referred to as “alternative schools” (“School Choice Request Form, 2012-2013”, SWSD). They operate somewhat uniquely within the school choice system because there is no ‘neighborhood’ student population and as such admissions are determined by application only. All students must apply to attend Marie Curie and Soko Gakuen during the annual lottery.

The school lottery is evaluated based on three criteria, although the school board may establish additional attendance priorities at each individual school. First, priority is given to students who moved out of the attendance area to another SWSD school and are considered to be returning students.” Second, priority is given to students who request a transfer to a school that is attended by another member of his or her household. In other words, siblings are given higher priority during the school lottery. Third, priority is given to students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, which means that they are economically disadvantaged according to the federal and state governments. Names are

⁴ As was mentioned before, there are approximately 448 immersion programs in the United States, for an average of just under ten per state. To have three programs in a mid-sized town in the Pacific Northwest, then, is quite interesting and shows a dedication to language, uncommon for similarly sized school districts.

selected from the general list of students, then the list of those who qualify for free or reduced meals, and so on. Although not explicitly addressed in the literature provided by SWSD, the purpose of this “alternating basis” is to increase the diversity of the student body at certain schools. Of the immersion programs, Nuevo Vista, Marie Curie, and Soko Gakuen are all schools who give free/reduced meal priority, because of their relatively wealthy student populations; four other neighborhood schools also give free/reduced meal priority. Finally, students who live in other school districts may apply to fill the remaining spots (“School Choice Request Form, 2012-2013”, SWSD).

Despite free/reduced meal priority, Marie Curie, Nuevo Vista, and Soko Gakuen in particular have been criticized for creating inequity. Two local newspapers have run articles on SWSD’s school choice policy. The immersion programs have been criticized because on average they serve fewer minority students, fewer students who receive special education services, and fewer students who would be considered economically disadvantaged. Alan Pittman writes in his article, “In [College Corner], the long-festering school choice debate is growing inflamed...usually like-minded south [College Corner] progressives are bristling and dividing up based on where their kids go to school amid charges of racism, classism, and lies” (Pittman, 2012). This debate has become increasingly heated as school budget cuts reduce available resources for all schools. Even much needed improvements to facilities have come under fire (Baker, 2012). Although strong arguments can be made on both sides, most importantly for this research, these debates create tensions and thus impact the students in subtle ways.

MARIE CURIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Marie Curie French Immersion Elementary School is nestled in the hills to the south of the town’s center, a wealthy part of the city of College Corner. Perhaps because of its location and lack of busing, or perhaps because of its French focus, the school has an ‘elitist’ reputation, which is reinforced by its relatively socio-economically advantaged student population. To its supporters, Marie Curie is successful and rigorous, one of the best schools at which students can begin their school careers. To its detractors, Marie

Curie is elitist and snobby, one of the biggest black marks to the district's school choice policy.

The program is located in a former neighborhood school, which was called Emerson Elementary School. The school's mission is to "provide a rigorous French/English bilingual education that enables every student to demonstrate the academic and interpersonal skills necessary to contribute to and succeed in a caring, cohesive learning community" ("2012 Schools Guide", SWSD, pp. 16). As is indicated by the free/reduced meal priority for the admissions lottery at Marie Curie, the student body is relatively wealthy and white. Of the 126 students in grades three through five who took state reading and math benchmark tests, in 2010 twenty-three, or 18%, were considered to be "economically disadvantaged," nine, or 7%, were considered to be "students with disabilities," and seventeen, or 13%, were considered to be "multi-racial/multi-ethnic" (Reading and Math Achievement Index Data, 2010-2011). This is as compared to 38.1% of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch and 28.6% of students who are considered to be "minorities" in the Southern Willamette School District. In fact, Marie Curie has the lowest percentages of disadvantaged, disabled, or minority students within SWSD (Oregon Department of Education Reports: Students).

The Elementary School Staff

As with all elementary schools, the principal is one of the most important figures in the development of multilingual education programs both because of his or her leadership of the staff, but also because of his or her role as the primary liaison between teachers and the larger school community. For the past two years, Jim O'Reilly has been the principal of Marie Curie Elementary.⁵ Formerly a middle school principal elsewhere in the Southern Willamette District, O'Reilly is not fluent in French, which is common among principals of immersion programs in the United States (Met & Lorenz, 1997, pp. 243-264). Beyond communication with parents and staff, one of the primary responsibilities of all principals is to ensure their school's success on state benchmark

⁵ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

tests, which are administered yearly. In the wake of No Child Left Behind, significant pressure has been put on schools to raise test scores; immersion programs, which spend part of the day in a language other than English, have felt these demands keenly. Although Marie Curie Elementary has typically done very well on state tests, this duality of purpose can create tensions between the principal, whose primary goal is to guarantee high test scores and to serve as a liaison between the teachers, parents, and larger school community, and the teachers, whose primary responsibility is to ensure that students receive the necessary instruction in both languages to become fluent and to be successful in their future academic endeavors.

In addition to the principal, Marie Curie has ten full-time teachers, one part-time Special Education teacher, and four part-time instructional assistants. One of the challenges that faces all U.S. immersion programs, Marie Curie included, is staffing. It is rare to find elementary school certified teachers who are also fluent in French. Additionally, most of these individuals are nonnative speakers of the language (Met & Lorenz, 1997). One way similar schools have addressed this challenge is by hiring teachers from abroad, which can have several advantages. First, these teachers are, assumedly, native speakers of the target language with a strong command of both spoken and written language, and are well acquainted with the culture of another country, a significant asset in a program that emphasizes multicultural education. These teachers also bring a unique pedagogy to education, which is often quite different from that in the United States (Met & Lorenz, 1997). However, these same assets can also cause problems. Philosophies about the classroom environment, instruction and discipline are often problematic for parents, who have certain expectations of public education in the United States, based in part on their own experiences. Additionally, teachers from abroad must make cultural as well as professional adjustments to be successful. Much of elementary education depends on a strong understanding of topics ranging from Halloween and Thanksgiving, to bulletin boards and the PTA (Met & Lorenz, 1997). Perhaps due to these factors, among others, all of the teachers at Marie Curie Elementary School are U.S.-born, native English speakers. Although some may have learned French

from an early age through parents or immersion programs, most, if not all, default to English for daily communication.

The Elementary School Site

Another important factor is the school site itself. As was stated before, Marie Curie Elementary School occupies the building which formerly housed the Emerson Elementary neighborhood school. It is surrounded by middle class neighborhoods and many students walk or bike to school. Unlike some immersion programs, Marie Curie has its own building, which can be both good and bad, as Myriam Met and Eileen B. Lorenz (1997) point out in their essay on “Lessons from U.S. Immersion Programs.” The advantage of having a school-wide immersion program is that it allows the program to create a physical environment that reinforces the target language. The physical facilities of the school reflect its French Immersion focus. Signs are often printed in French and English, school staff are encouraged to use French when speaking to students, and posters, books, and other materials are often printed in French as well. One of the most significant assets to Marie Curie’s immersion program is its relatively well-stocked French-English library, which allows students to check out books and read in both languages. Many of the teachers play French music during P.E. and other parts of the day. Some of the French teachers also pass out a “chapeau” for good behavior or a “damage” for bad behavior. Although the expenses of maintaining a library and supplying classroom materials in both languages can be high, Marie Curie has an active parent group. This year, the parents planned to raise \$110,000, to be used for various purposes including paying for additional staff members and purchasing materials in French, among other things.

There are several disadvantages to this structure, however. As was discussed before, facilities that are devoted exclusively to immersion are often the target of misunderstandings and envy, which is certainly true of Marie Curie Elementary School. Because the program is isolated from the rest of the district in terms of its French focus, there is less understanding of its purpose and execution (Met & Lorenz, 1997). This is

compounded for Marie Curie by its location in a relatively affluent area of the city, with no public busing, as is provided for neighborhood schools. As indicated before, the program is often perceived as elitist. Additionally, because immersion programs exist outside the regular district curriculum, resentment due to the allocation of resources to the program can build (Met & Lorenz, 1997). Recent school budget cuts have had a large impact on immersion programs around the country. At Marie Curie Elementary in particular, recent budget projections will require that one additional teacher be cut, so that there will only be nine fully funded full-time staff positions, despite the fact that there are two classes of students at each grade-level in kindergarten through fifth grade, which would typically require eleven teachers to be fully staffed. The budget shortfall is to be raised through fundraising.

Balancing Dual Identities: Language, Curriculum & Instruction

As was stated before, Marie Curie Elementary School is an example of a partial immersion program. In Kindergarten through fifth grade, students are instructed in both English and French. In third grade, for example, students learn Math, Science, and French Language in French, and learn Reading, Language Arts, and Social Studies in English. Because Marie Curie is a public school, it must fulfill all of the requirements of a ‘typical’ American elementary school, as determined by the school district. The choices that are made about the curriculum, schedule, and testing requirements can create unique tensions. For example, beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, the district mandated the use of not one, but two math curriculums. Teachers were required to synthesize and instruct from both throughout the year, neither of which were available in French, the language of instruction for math. Rather than use French resources from previous years, teachers had to employ various strategies to make the curriculum more relevant to their students. Some teachers chose to translate the text books to make them available in English, while others instructed in French, but gave tests and worksheets in English. Neither solution, of course, was perfect.

Teachers are also required to spend certain amounts of instructional time on each subject area, and school days are planned accordingly by the district. However, immersion teachers must find extra time for instruction in French language in addition to Reading and Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Finally, all state standardized tests and district progress monitoring tests are administered in English, in spite of the fact that instruction is often in French. Although teachers may instruct in French during science, they have the dual responsibility of ensuring their students' comprehension in a second language as well as their success on state and district mandated tests. The choice to elevate one language over another may short-change instruction in another. Like the staff and physical space, choices about language usage reflect the tensions inherent to the type of liminal space a public immersion school must occupy.

All of these factors ultimately impact classrooms, and more importantly, students. Building a strong immersion program requires different considerations of the many 'institutions' of the American education system, which are often taken for granted. The linguistic backgrounds of the schools' staff, standardized testing, site selection, curriculum choice, pedagogical practices, and even the program's continuation and articulation must all account for the distinct needs of an immersion environment. Marie Curie is not at all unique in its negotiation of its dual identity as a French Immersion Program and an American Public School; there are many other schools that have certainly made similar decisions. However, examining the intricacies of 'immersion in action' is an important part of understanding the context in which Marie Curie students learn French. Additionally, the negotiation of these competing interests can have an influence on students' perceptions of both the French language, as well as the language acquisition process.

CHAPTER IV

STUDY DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

“So what would you tell someone who wanted to interview kids?”

“Don’t ask them anything that scares them.”

– Conversation with a Third Grade Student, January 2012

INTRODUCTION

As discussed previously, researchers often shy away from asking students about their own perceptions and attitudes. But as Kozol writes, children are “pure witnesses,” without agendas, political opinions, and defined images to defend (2005). For multilingual education programs, student attitudes are particularly important because success is dependent on student investment (Hayashi, 2005). Perhaps even more importantly, children’s attitudes are intrinsically valuable because they allow researchers access to a unique point of view, which is grounded in the temporal nature of childhood (Uprichard, 2008). With both of these frames in mind, the purpose of this study is to answer the question: What are student attitudes toward multilingual education? Quite simply, how do students feel about French and English? Of course, these questions could be seen as deceptively simple, but based on my own background as an elementary school teacher in a multilingual environment I find that a direct approach is often the best.

Additionally, there are several sub-questions or variables within my larger field of inquiry. What factors influence these feelings and attitudes? Do the language attitudes and practices of the school community affect the student learning process? Do peer attitudes affect the student learning process? Finally, how might the interplay of these factors affect the student learning process? Of course the list of questions could go on and on, but as this is a first foray into direct conversation about student attitudes toward the multilingual education process, I wanted to allow for flexibility to avoid the sort of adult-centered reductionism that often occurs when researching children. It is important

to allow room for children's authentic responses and experiences, rather than trying to anticipate every detail ahead of time. Accordingly, I wanted to learn about student experiences and to allow their experiences to inform my project. In some ways, these questions fit better in the category of 'case study' than a thesis with a hypothesis, research, and analysis of results.

I conducted participant observation, surveys, and focus group discussions in the third grade at Marie Curie Elementary School, which is located in a mid-sized university town in the Pacific Northwest. During the 2012-2013 school year, from September through March, I spent ten to sixteen hours per week at Marie Curie Elementary working with small groups on enrichment and re-teaching activities, working with individuals to develop certain skills, participating in whole-class activities, and building relationships with students, teachers and staff members. By interacting with the students and engaging in their day-to-day lives at school, I gained valuable insight into their experiences and perceptions. This time also allowed me to build rapport with my students and to circumvent traditional child-adult power structures (Christensen, 2004; Grover, 2004; Warming, 2011). I also conducted informal interviews with teachers, students, and parents about the multilingual learning experience. I distributed questionnaires asking about languages used at home, along with a permission form for students to participate in a focus group. I also used a survey with participating students in class, adapted from the one used by Gerena (2010) in her study of student attitudes toward biliteracy in Spanish and English, to assess attitudes toward multilingual education. Finally, I conducted focus group interviews with small groups of students. All of these methods were used to better understand student and community attitudes toward multilingual education. The various instruments I used will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter and are included in their entirety in the appendices.

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

College Corner, Oregon is unique in that its public school system includes immersion programs in French, Spanish, and Japanese. Although there are a growing number of

schools in other districts around the country that are implementing immersion programs, the program in College Corner is relatively well established. Because the program in College Corner is public, it allows for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds to participate, making it less selective than an expensive private school. Additionally, as a public school, Marie Curie Elementary School must provide services for students with disabilities, again making the school open to a more diverse population. Because of my own background teaching at a French-English school, as well as my fluency in French, I chose to study a French immersion program, rather than a Spanish or Japanese immersion program. I was able to understand conversations that occurred in the classroom in both languages and was able to get a better sense of the authentic student experience.

One of the other unique aspects of the program at Marie Curie is that it has a reputation for its highly involved, motivated parents. It is common to have parents volunteer in the classroom, run after-school activities, host special events, and put on fundraisers. Additionally, there is no public busing to Marie Curie, which is in a non-central location, so a parent's commitment to sending his or her son or daughter indicates a certain level of commitment above and beyond what is typically expected. It can be assumed, then, that for the most part students have a strong support system that is fully invested in the immersion process. This case study, then, is the 'hard case.' If students here are successful and fully invested in the language learning process, perhaps it is unremarkable; however, if the students at Marie Curie Elementary show negative attitudes, it raises the question: what might we find in other programs?

As mentioned before, Marie Curie Elementary School serves students in grades K through five. I chose to study the students at the 3rd grade level, which marks a mid-point in their elementary school career, for three reasons. First, the students are well-acquainted with the language learning process, most having enrolled in kindergarten or first grade. Consequently, student attitudes will not be negatively impacted by the 'newness' of the experience. Second, third grade marks an academic shift. Although basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic are reviewed throughout the lower

elementary school grades (kindergarten, first, and second), third grade requires that students apply those skills in a new way. All students are expected to read fluently, to write more than one paragraph, to begin multiplication and division, as well as to study science and social studies in a more systematic way. Thus the language skills required at the third grade level are well beyond basic. Finally, third grade is often a water-shed year for students. Although many students opt not to continue the immersion program in middle school, third grade can also serve as an ‘exit year.’ Parents who have seen their students struggle see third grade as a good time to transition to another elementary school.

Another unique aspect of the third grade program at Marie Curie is that the French teacher, Margo Jones, is one of the most experienced immersion teachers in the program.⁶ Having first begun her teaching career at Marie Curie fifteen years ago, she is well-acquainted with the demands of the immersion process. It is not uncommon to see the principal consulting ‘Mme. Margo’ before the school day to ask about ‘how things are done’ at Marie Curie. Her exuberant teaching style and obvious compassion toward her students are cited as reasons why parents go through the process of first applying for the lottery, and then enrolling their student at the school. Mme. Margo has proved to be an invaluable resource in collecting information and evaluation results.

RECRUITING RESEARCH SUBJECTS

To get the best sense of student attitudes toward multilingual education, all fifty-two students at the third grade level were asked to participate. Letters were sent home to parents explaining the research project, along with permission forms. Parents were given the option of allowing their students to participate in the following: a home language survey, which asked about the languages spoken in the home as well as their own reasons for enrolling their children at Marie Curie; a student language survey, which asked about student attitudes toward French and English in the school setting; and a focus group discussion, in which four students were asked various questions to gauge their attitudes

⁶ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

toward the language learning process and to allow for more authentic responses. Thirty-seven parents agreed to participate in the home-language survey; thirty-eight parents agreed to allow their children to participate in the student language survey; and thirty-two parents agreed to allow their children to participate in the focus group discussions. As a result, the surveys and focus group results represented the attitudes at least 62% of the third grade students.

Students were also asked to give consent. Validating the student voice has been one of the explicit aims of this case study. As such, it was of the utmost importance that students were informed about the purposes of this study and given the opportunity to give their own consent. Before beginning the student language surveys or focus groups, I discussed my research project with students and allowed them to ask questions. Students who were hesitant or uncomfortable were given the option to opt out and reminded throughout that they could stop at any time. One student expressed that she felt “too stressed,” and decided not to participate. Another student indicated that he was not sure what he wanted to do. I suggested that he look at the survey and told him if he did not want to do it, he could quit at any time. After completing the survey, I followed up with the student and asked if he wanted to continue to participate. I showed him his fellow focus group members and he indicated that he would like to talk with them present. Encouraging students to control their own participation validated their own feelings and gave them control of the project; in a certain sense the students became co-researchers.

Encouragingly, students expressed interest in my research project from the beginning. One day, as I sat observing the class, Isabella stopped to ask what I was doing.⁷ She interrupted me almost immediately. “Did you know that children have rights? There is a paper about it.” I paused for a moment and then asked, “Do you mean the Convention on the Rights of Children?” She nodded. “Yeah, something like that. Children have the right to a home and an education.” I asked Isabella how she knew about the CRC and she said she had overheard her mother discussing it, then added for emphasis to make sure I

⁷ All students have been given aliases to protect their confidentiality.

understood her, “Children have rights.” And so, in line with Isabella’s concerns for children’s rights, this study is a validation of those rights and in particular, of children’s voices.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

As stated earlier, I began my study with participant observation in September 2011. From the very beginning of the school year, I spent ten to sixteen hours per week in Mme. Margo’s third grade classroom. During this time, I organized shelves, graded papers, taught lessons on rock climbing for P.E. class, met with individual students to go over lessons, proctored re-tests, and gathered research on various topics for Mme. Margo. This time was essential, as I was able to make a great deal of observations on the daily experiences of students at Marie Curie Elementary School. In some sense, I became part of the regular rhythm of the classroom, a fixture as ‘normal’ as the number line on the wall or the name tags on their desks. Students asked when I would be back again to ensure that I would be able to participate in important events, to wish them a happy birthday, to witness their failures and triumphs. Perhaps most importantly, this allowed me to build relationships with students.

As a former teacher, I am well aware of the importance of building relationships with students slowly. Children are naturally wary of adults who feign friendship. Because of this, it is essential to adopt the ‘least adult role,’ and to wait for opportunities for a friendship to develop naturally. To insert yourself into a situation is to assert your dominance as the ‘adult’ in the relationship (Christensen, 2004; Warming, 2011). Because of the extensive time I spent in the classroom, I was able to build authentic friendships with students. Although the slow pace of child friendships can seem frustrating and unfruitful to a harried adult researcher, it is important to allow the necessary time to build rapport. It was not until October, a full two months after my visits began, when the students asked me to join a game of four square and taught me the rules of ‘Mario Cart’ and ‘Cherry Bombs’, that I began to make in-roads.

Another important part of participant observation was meeting students where they were. Accordingly, early on in the year I made the decision to read all of the ‘OBOB’⁸ books that students were reading themselves, in preparation for reading quiz competitions held in January. As I read through the fifteen-book list in the back of the classroom, students would stop. Their questions and conversations developed along a certain pattern: “What are you reading? I read that already. Have you come to the part where the kids die? It’s really scary.” Although I would protest their not-so-subtle hints at the plots of these books, I was glad to hear what they thought and they were glad to tell me. In a sense, the OBOB books allowed us to reverse our roles, as they were the most informed, the most knowledgeable, and I was the one playing catch up. These conversations and experiences ultimately informed the way I developed the surveys and focus group questions to use with students. Additionally, our preexisting relationships helped students feel more comfortable with the research process. Rather than be an alien-interloper, I was a familiar face and friend, who genuinely cared about their opinions and thoughts. As such, I progressed from participant observer to discussion contributor and co-researcher.

GATHERING SURVEY DATA

After spending six months in Mme. Margo’s third grade classroom, I began gathering survey data. To better understand student attitudes toward multilingual education and to gain insight with as much detail as possible, I chose to survey both students and parents. I sent home language surveys to parents in the students’ homework folders. These first surveys were fairly basic; their purpose was to gain further insight into the students’ backgrounds. On these home language surveys I asked:

- What languages do your family members speak at, at least, a basic level?
- How did you learn those languages?
- How long have you known those languages?
- In what language(s) do you feel the most comfortable?
- As a family, what language(s) do you use most often at home?

⁸ Oregon Battle of the Books

- What language(s) do you use most often with your extended family?
- What was your motivation for enrolling your child in a French Immersion program?

With the responses to these questions, I hoped to get a sense of the students’ linguistic background, as well as their parents’ purposes for enrolling them in the program.

The student language survey’s purpose was to serve as a bridge between the home language survey and my own observations, as well as to inform the focus group discussions. For that reason, some of the information duplicated the questions on the home language survey and in the focus groups. First, I asked questions about language usage, to gain a better understand of the student’s default language, as well as their language habits depending on particular contexts:

- What languages do you speak?
- What language do you speak the most at home?
- What language do you speak the most at school?
- What language do you remember knowing the longest?
- What language do you remember knowing the shortest?
- Where did you learn English?
- Where did you learn French?
- What language do you use most often with your parents?
- What language do you use the most often with your brothers and/or sisters, if you have any?
- What language do you use most often with your friends at school (for example, when you’re on the playground)?
- What language do you use most often with your friends at home (for example, when you’re playing at your house)?

The second half of the survey asked students about their feelings about particular languages, using a modified Likert scale, an example of which can be found in Image 1.

Students were asked to indicate their response by coloring in the face that looked “the most like them.”

Image 1. “Smile” Modified Likert Scale



After consultation with Mme. Margo, the students’ third grade teacher, this seemed to be

the most appropriate way for students to relay their attitudes in an understandable and authentic way. The following prompts were given:

- Color in the face that looks the most like you when your teacher is speaking in English.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when your teacher is speaking in French.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in English.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in French.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are reading in English.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are reading in French.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are writing in English.
- Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are writing in French.

The survey was conducted during class time with all participating students. Using a document camera, I explained how to respond to each type of question, although students were given the option of working ahead on their own. Students often asked questions about how to answer, particularly on questions about the languages they spoke. A few students also opted to color in two ‘half’ faces after indicating that they felt that two of the faces showed their feelings in response to a particular question, or wrote comments, indicating an answer beyond those solicited by the survey. Interestingly, one of the commonly-held beliefs about the limitations of survey data is that responses are confined, and may not be ‘authentic’. The two classes of third grade students I surveyed, however, did not seem to be bound by a more ‘adult’, structured approach to the survey and routinely asked if they could circle multiple responses, or write their own free response when they felt their answer was not represented accurately by one of the choices.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The final piece of my data collection process was small group interviews. Based on my list of participating students, I divided the students into groups of three or four. To garner conversation, I took two variables into consideration when forming the groups: existing friendships and students’ personalities and willingness to respond to questions.

Because the purpose of the focus group was to elicit free response, I wanted students to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and views. As such, I grouped friends as much as possible. I also grouped students who were likely to dominate a conversation together, so as to avoid the possibility of having only one student respond to each question. Likewise, I grouped students who either take longer to respond, or are less likely to speak up or interrupt to make sure that all voices were heard. My own experience in the classroom was essential in determining the groups. I also consulted with Mme. Margo, the students' third grade teacher.

The focus groups were conducted in a small teacher workroom, which is sandwiched between the two third grade classrooms. I chose to conduct the interviews in that room for a variety of reasons. First, students regularly work with small groups in that room. Accordingly the space is both familiar and comfortable. Additionally, the space is relatively quiet and does not necessitate cross-traffic, like the adjoining computer room. Students were asked to come after completing their work. A video camera was already set up in the room and I discussed its purpose with students at the outset. I also mentioned that students would need to speak in an audible voice so that I could hear and remember the conversation. For the most part, students seemed comfortable in front of the camera and were not bothered by its presence.

Additionally, focus groups were conducted in English, the default language of the students at Marie Curie Elementary School. I had chosen English, as opposed to French, based on my observations, in hopes that students would be more comfortable conversing about their attitudes. Interestingly, when I asked the first group to join me in the workroom, they asked, "Do we have to speak in French?" their voices dripping with concern. I stated that we would be using in English and they responded with relief, "Oh, good."

For the focus groups, I used the following list of questions as a starting point:

- What is your favorite subject in school?
- Why is _____ your favorite subject in school?

- What language do you speak when you are studying _____?
- Do you think it would be easier or harder for you if you spoke in French/English instead? Why?
- Do you think you would like it more, less, or the same, if you spoke in _____ instead? Why?
- What languages are you learning in school?
- Which language is your favorite? Why?
- How important is reading and writing in French to being a good student?
- How important is reading and writing in English to being a good student?
- How important is reading and writing in both languages important to being a good student?
- If you were going to ask your mom or dad a question, what language would you use? Why?
- If you were going to ask your friend a question, what language would you use? Why?
- If you were going to ask your teacher a question, what language would you use?

Many of these questions were similar to those asked on the student language survey, however I wanted to ensure that I had an accurate view of the students' language preferences. Additionally, asking about how important literacy skills in French and English were to being a good student allowed me greater insight into the students' own investment in the language learning process.

The next set of questions was asked using the images of two boys, shown in Image 2, one of whom had a sad expression, the other of whom had a happy expression. Both images, reproduced in black and white, were the same size and were printed on yellow tag paper, to avoid any potential bias toward one particular image. Using these pictures I asked the focus groups the following questions:

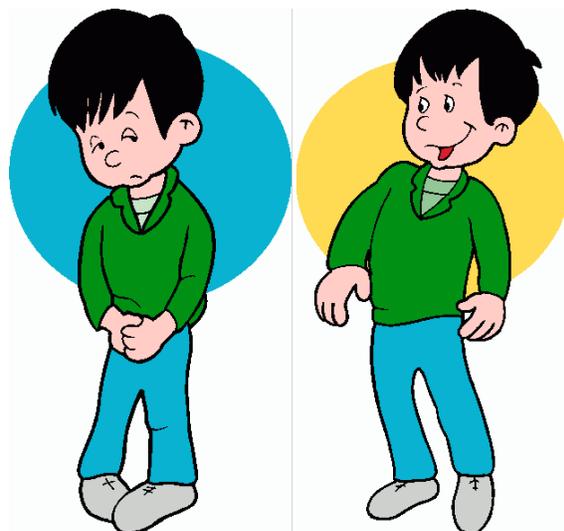


Image 2. Fictional Boys

- Which student probably just said Bonjour/Hello?
- Which student was probably asked a question in French/English?
 - Why do you think he feels that way?
- Which student is probably listening to a story

in French/English?

- Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
- Which student is probably working on math in French/English?
 - Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
- Which student is probably reading in French/English?
 - Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
- Which student is probably writing in French/English?
 - Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
- Which student is probably the best at French/English?
 - Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?

I alternated my use of French and English in each question and group to gain a better understand of how students perceived each language. For instance, for the first group I asked, “Which student probably just said Bonjour?” I followed with, “Which student was probably asked a question in English?” With the second group I began, “Which student probably just said, Hello?” and followed by asking, “Which student was probably asked a question in French?” I continued in this way throughout all ten focus groups. Students were also prompted to expand on their responses and explain why they felt a certain way. The purpose of asking these questions, as well as using the images, was to get at underlying attitudes toward the languages and to allow for authentic response.

Finally, I concluded each interview by asking two open-ended questions: “How do you feel about French?”, “How do you feel about English?” and “Is there anything else I should know?” I chose to end, rather than begin, the interviews this way for a few reasons. First, students were more comfortable at the end of the interviews and often had more to say. Asking the questions at the beginning may have elicited responses like, “I like French,” whereas asking at the end of the interview often elicited more complex, nuanced answers. Second, students were able to think about their use of the languages and often had sophisticated reasoning for their responses. Asking at the end gave students the opportunity of self-reflection. Finally, asking a broad question allowed for students to follow up on any ideas they may have had and allowed the entire group to tie up any loose ends.

Throughout all of the interviews I tried to let the conversation flow as naturally as possible. Although there were cases in which I would interject another question, if students continued to talk about a certain idea, I would allow them to do so. Additionally, when they would respond simply, I often asked them to expand on their ideas further. For example, when a student stated that recess was his favorite subject in school, I responded by asking, “Why is recess your favorite subject in school?” The focus groups were also light-hearted and informal. When students brought up a tangential conversation about “lame jokes” in French, we shared some of the lame jokes we knew and laughed together. By allowing for tangents and keeping atmosphere relaxed, students were comfortable. Additionally students were given control, to some extent, over the direction of the interview, which allowed for more equal participation of both the researcher, myself, and the subjects, the students. Finally, students were informed of the purposes of the interview at the outset, which ensured that they understood the goals of my project, and also treated them as equal participants, capable of understanding and participating on their own terms.

WRITING & SYNTHESIZING THE DATA

As I analyzed the data, I followed a few standard practices. First, at the outset all students and staff members were given aliases to protect their identities. Second, in transcribing, I preserved all of the students’ comments in their original form. Mispronunciations and made-up words were preserved to avoid forcing adult grammatical standards on children’s dialogue. Their responses are presented in this paper to preserve their original structure and context as much as is possible. Finally, all French translation is my own, and is included in this thesis where relevant.

Because students responded in many different contexts, I was able to compare their survey responses to both their participation in class throughout the year, as recorded in my field notes, and to their conversations with me during the focus groups. Students were also given the opportunity to explain their responses and to expand on their own ideas. Finally, because there were multiple participants in each discussion group,

students commented on the responses of their friends, often giving greater insight into their own thoughts. Interestingly, by designing the study this way, students often analyzed their own reactions to the French language.

Ultimately, using a variety of research methods—participant observation, surveys, and focus groups—allowed me to gain a better understanding of student attitudes. My mixed methodology builds on the research of others who have studied student attitudes toward multilingual education. It adds to existing survey data of student responses to questions about language attitudes. Additionally, this research expands on existing studies because it includes focus groups and free response. Finally, it is unique because of the amount of time spent building relationships with students and working with them in a variety of settings and activities throughout the year.

CHAPTER V

ANSWERING MY QUESTIONS

“French just kind of seems pretty. It’s a really pretty language,” Kayla said.

“It’s like a bird sitting in a tree, but it’s somebody talking with French...” Riley continues her thought.

Liliana picks up where she left off. “Because it’s one of the romances languages. Not that I like romance,” She quickly adds, looking a bit embarrassed.

MARIE CURIE’S STUDENTS & THEIR FAMILIES

Who Learns French?

The student population at Marie Curie Elementary School is overwhelmingly white and comfortably middle class. Of the fifty-two third grade students, thirty-three are female and nineteen are male. To briefly review the demography of Marie Curie, according to the 2010-2011 School Report Card from the Oregon Department of Education, of the 126 students that were tested in the third through fifth grades, 100 were reported as “White (not of Hispanic origin),” accounting for just under 80% of the student body. Seventeen were listed as “Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic,” or approximately 13% (Marie Curie at Emerson Elementary, School Rating Summary Data [SRSD]). The remaining nine students were not included in any racial category data. Despite the fact that the district has a school lottery which preferences low-income students who want to enroll at Marie Curie Elementary School, twenty-three students were categorized as “economically disadvantaged,” accounting for less than 20% of the total student population in grades three through five. Nine students were categorized as “students with disabilities,” accounting for 7% of the total population (Marie Curie at Emerson Elementary, SRSD). Coming from relatively privileged backgrounds, most of the students come from two-parent families. Parents are engaged, highly motivated, and supportive of their students’ education. One particularly amusing anecdote from my participant observation best illustrates the attitude of the larger school community. Early

in the fall, one parent asked a fourth grade teacher if their student could be allowed to take the “Hard CBM” test, rather than the “Easy CBM”, which is the SWSD district-wide student test to monitor progress. The “Hard CBM” test, of course, does not actually exist.

As would be expected, students at Marie Curie are very successful. As a school, Marie Curie has been rated as “Outstanding” by the State of Oregon, according to its test scores. In 2010-2011, 98.5% of students tested “Meets or Exceeds” expectations on the state reading test, and 94.4% of students “Meets or Exceeds” expectations on the state math test (Marie Curie at Emerson Elementary, SRSD). These results are all the more impressive when one considers that 89% of students in the entire district meet expectations in reading and 69% of students in the entire district meet expectations in math. Only 84% of students in the state meet reading expectations and 63% of students meet math expectations (Marie Curie at Emerson Elementary, SRSD). In fact, Marie Curie Elementary School is the highest performing elementary school in the Southern Willamette School District. Accordingly Marie Curie is a lightning rod for public opinion, both good and bad, in College Corner, Oregon. Public opinion aside, though, the school is clearly successful at instructing students and enabling them to be successful on state-wide tests, which are of course administered in English. But Marie Curie is not only an elite elementary school, it is also a dual-language immersion program which has the purpose of producing fluent French and English speakers. Given this context, I will discuss the results from each of my questions, primarily from the survey results, but also from the focus groups, in turn.

What Is the Language Background of Most Students?

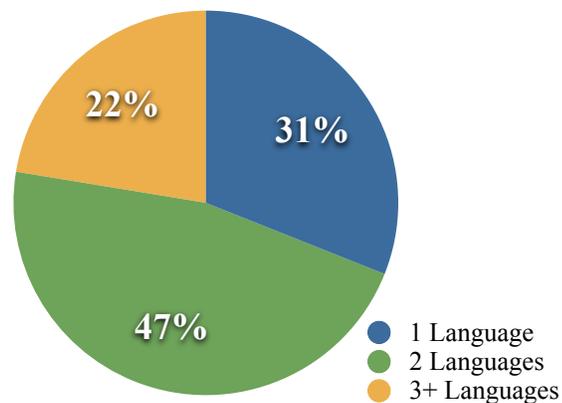
Parents and families are often a students’ first experience with any language. They are also the biggest supporters for any student, whether they are part of an immersion program or not. As such, I interviewed parents as a part of my research process to gain a better understanding of who attends the school and why they were motivated to go through the selection process to enroll at Marie Curie. Of the fifty-three students who

were invited to participate in this research project, twenty students from the “Blue Class” and twenty-two students from the “Red Class” agreed to participate in some way, a total of forty-six students. Of those students, thirty actually completed and returned the survey, fifteen from each class. Thus the response rate for the home language survey was approximately 57%. Some of the most significant results from the home language survey were the responses about parents’ language abilities, the languages spoken in the home, as well as the motivations parents had for enrolling their students at Marie Curie.

First, on average, parents at Marie Curie speak many languages. Of those surveyed, eighteen, or 31%, speak only English, while twenty-seven, or 47% speak two languages at, at least, the basic level, as shown in Figure 2. Thirteen respondents, or 22% of those surveyed, speak three or more

languages at, at least, the basic level. Of the 69% of parents who speak a language other than English, most learned it in school or through travel or an extended stay abroad. Overall, this gives us a clear picture of the families from which Marie Curie students come. Over two-thirds of

Figure 2. Linguistic Backgrounds

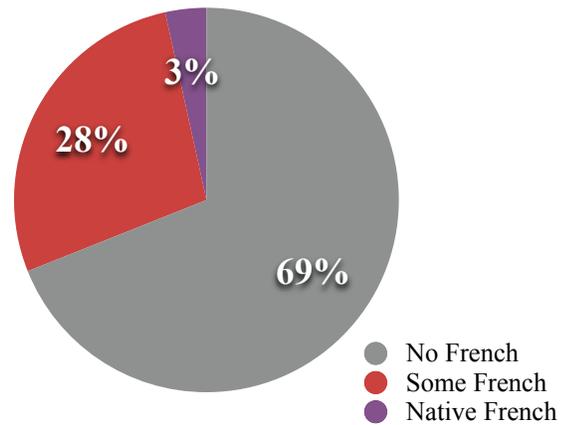


the students have parents who speak another language and who are most likely invested in opportunities to learn another language, such as school or travel, based on their own experiences.

The parents of Marie Curie students speak a diverse list of languages other than English, including Bambara, Czech, French, German, Greek (both ancient and modern), Italian, Japanese, Lao, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, and Urdu. Of the parents who responded to the Home Language Survey, two respondents, or 3%, are native speakers of French, sixteen, or 28%, speak some French, and an overwhelming 69%, representing forty of the respondents, speak no French at all, as shown in Figure 2.

However, despite this rich linguistic heritage, parents report that they use English almost exclusively at home. Of the thirty parents who responded, twenty-seven indicated that they use primarily English in the home. Three of those families also use another language (namely Spanish, Urdu and German). Only three of the families

Figure 3. French Fluency



surveyed indicated that they *do not* use English, but instead speak in Italian, in one family, and Spanish, in two families. It is important to note that I did not ask parents to quantify their language ability or to submit to a language test, so I cannot account for the depth of their knowledge. However, what is important about this information is that students have been exposed to many languages and have seen them ‘performed’ throughout their lives. Just like students who come from literacy rich family backgrounds tend to gain literacy skills more quickly and value them highly, we would expect these students to be invested in learning other languages.

Students who participated in the Student Language Survey and the Focus Group corroborated these findings. On the Student Language Survey thirty-seven of the thirty-nine students who participated indicated that they spoke English at home. Seven students indicated that they spoke French, and six students indicated that they spoke another language (namely Italian, German, Tagalog, Russian, Spanish, and Tamil).⁹ During the focus groups students discussed the languages they spoke at home in more detail. When asked which language they might use with their parents, students responded:

Um, probably English, just because my mom, she, she only knows not that much French and a lot of Spanish, I think she went to a Spanish school, or no she, at her work a lot of people are Spanish and she talks... But I usually talk to her, talk to my parents in English. My dad and my mom are really bad in French and I don't

⁹ Numbers may add up to more than thirty-nine because some students indicated that they spoke English and another language at home.

know Spanish that much, and I don't know German. My dad speaks a little bit of German. – Cameron

Well, um, sometimes, sometimes we use French just to help practice it. But, um, normally we use English. – James

Um, my parents know like one word of French, but I actually have to remind them too, that's why I think it would be better to use English, that's why I ask questions in English. – Taylor

What was also interesting was that although only three of the families surveyed do not use English at home, five families indicated that they wanted their children to learn French because they have French-speaking relatives, indicating that for them, French is a heritage language. Additionally, eight of the families surveyed indicated that they speak a language other than English with those relatives, although only two of those families actually use French. So where are the other three families? Three families indicate that one of their motivations for enrolling their students in a French immersion program is to speak French with relatives, and yet they speak English. This difference speaks to a larger theme that became apparent throughout my research: a high value for learning a language does not necessarily correlate with usage of that language outside of the requirements of a dual-immersion environment.

Why Immersion?

In some ways these demographic patterns parallel the motivations parents gave for enrolling their children at Marie Curie. The most common motivations for enrollment were the location of Marie Curie (i.e. its proximity to the student's home) and the parent's desire to enroll their child in an immersion program of some kind to learn a second or third language. Some parents even went so far as to say that the French language did not matter *per se*, so much as it was important that their students were learning another language. A summary of all of the parents' responses can be found in Table 2.

Other common motivations included the high academic standards at Marie Curie and its reputation in the community, as well as at the Middle and High Schools through which the French program tracks. In fact, when added together these three factors form the

single most common response, accounting for seventeen responses. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, as Marie Curie boasts the highest test scores for any Elementary School in the Southern Willamette School District, followed by Stewart, the neighborhood school for the same geographic area. Additionally, parents mentioned the importance of ‘scientific’ research on immersion education in their decision making process.

Table 2. Motivations for Enrolling at Marie Curie

Stated Motivations on Home Language Survey	Number
Importance of Learning a Second Language (i.e. Immersion for Immersion’s Sake)	13
Location (i.e. Proximity to Home)	13
Rigorous Program/High Academic Standards	11
Parents’ Knowledge of French	7
Family Heritage	6
Science/Immersion Research	5
Recommendations/Reputation	4
Globalization (i.e. Importance of Knowing Multiple Languages to being a Global Citizen)	4
French Program Tracks through Ripley Middle School & South Central High School	3
Relationship between French and other Romance Languages	2
Other Opportunities to Learn Spanish Later	2
Already Speak Spanish at Home	2
Other Immigrant Families in the School Community	1
Previous Exposure to French (i.e. Living in a French-Speaking Country)	1

None of the parents indicated that their child’s preference was a motivation for enrolling in the program. Parents seemed to consider the students’ best interests as perceived by adults, but did not mention that their child had asked to be enrolled or that they had asked to stay in the program, or to leave the program for that matter. Only one student even approached the topic.

No, just, um, my parents buy, like, they buy baguettes all the time and they were suggesting that I learn French so that if I ever to go France... Because I did ballet I was always saying that I wanted to live in Paris and so my parents dropped me in a French school. – Ava

Although Ava credits her French school enrollment to her love of baguettes and ballet, her parents wrote only that they chose the program because “[i]t was close and had a good recommendation.” This is not to say that parents do not care about their children’s thoughts or feelings, but it does highlight the need for the child-centered perspective to be addressed, as both popularly and academically there seems to be an overwhelming lack of the child voice.

One other significant factor to emerge from the survey data is that there is strong support for immersion education at Marie Curie Elementary School. Parents wrote:

I like the idea of an immersion program because I like the challenge and the opportunity for my child to learn another language. I feel this strengthens children’s abilities to learn overall. – Hailey’s Parents

Wanted exposure to second language. Marie Curie has an excellent education history. Best of both words. – Ashley’s Parents

I feel that learning a second language at a young age is extremely beneficial to brain development. I think it is positive to be bilingual. We chose Marie Curie because of its great reputation and we are very happy there. – Daniel’s Parents

This is significant because it is consistent with what Gerena (2010) and Hayashi (2005) argued were important characteristics of a successful immersion program, namely, that students are supported by invested parents and the larger school community. If anything, parents expressed a desire for greater exposure to the French language and felt that the amount of French language instruction at Marie Curie could be increased:

We are very happy with Marie Curie, although I feel that the amount of French the kids receive has decreased significantly over the years. I would love to see a more fully immersive program. – Ryan’s Parents

We have considered switching back to our neighborhood school because cuts to music, PE, lack of art, etc. are justified by the fact that we have French. Yet, each year our children seem to get less French. A vigorous debate about full

immersion has been quietly suppressed, it seems. And, frankly, if we aren't getting excellent French instruction, Marie Curie doesn't have anything exceptional to offer... – Anna's Parents

Interestingly, support for French immersion is clearly something that the students themselves have also picked up. Although not common to all students, several students in the focus groups mentioned similar reasons for learning French as their parents. During one conversation, three boys discussed the importance of learning French:

“How important do you think reading and writing is, in French, to being a good student?” I asked.

“Mmmm... I think it's important because... because, umm... because this is a French school and you're meant to learn French here,” Kayden thinks out loud.

“So if you were at another school it wouldn't be that important?” I push further.

“Yeah,” Kayden nods his head.

“I think... I think that, um, if you're reading it's important to read because then you're learning a different language. Because what if, like, if you go to church and you have like a mission, and what if you need to go to France, then you could go to France and you would already know French and you could read stuff to people, that some people rit down or, you could just–” Cameron starts to explain.

“Also, also, um... um, the more languages you know, you expand your memory and...” Kayden stops and nods his head, as if to affirm his interjection.

“Yeah,” Cameron agrees. “You [Anthony], haven't said one thing about this.”

“Well you guys kept talking!”

“Well how about now? What do you think? How important is French to being a good student?” I ask.

“We-ell, it's good to develop your mind. But it would be, it's more or less the same for every immersion language [...] Pretty much, just, learn that language and that's an important part of it.” Anthony explains his perspective.

The boys specifically reference the importance of language immersion as an end, in and of itself. This was clear from their parents' responses on the survey. Cameron's parents stated that they enrolled him at Marie Curie because they, “[s]ee the need for increased language knowledge/bilingual ability in our world, [which is] getting flatter and more

international.” This is similar to their son’s response, as he cites the importance of learning French because of the potential for future travel. Likewise, Anthony’s parents indicated that one of their motivations for enrolling their son at Marie Curie was that, “[l]anguage and specifically foreign languages open one’s mind to an entirely new way of understanding the world and the people that inhabit it.” The students also cite the importance of learning French for brain development; Anthony in particular highlights this point, stating that “it’s good to develop your mind.” Throughout the focus group discussion, students’ responses to the question, “How important is learning French to being a good student?” paralleled their parents’ reasons for enrolling their students in an immersion program.

There were some important ways in which students differed from their parents, in their conclusions about the language learning process as well as the importance of learning a second language. Almost two-thirds of students interviewed made a connection between language and place when asked about the importance of learning English. They emphasized that you should learn English because you live in an English-speaking country and stated that it would be the same as learning French if you lived in France, or German if you lived in Germany.

I think it’s pretty important [to learn English] if, if– you’re from Oregon or the United States you should know English, so you, you should know about like, English, so um, I think it’s pretty important. – Kaitlyn

Yeah, if you were in China, you would have to, uh, know Chinese, like you could get around in an emergency. That’s the number one thing you have to know in [China], to speak Chinese. – Isabella

Interestingly, students do not think of learning French in the same way as they think of learning English. Almost a third of students said that English was important for later life, for college and future employment. Beyond that, though, two distinctive perspectives emerged during the Focus Groups. Six students did not see themselves as learning English, stating that they already knew English.

Since we already know English it's still important, but not as important as writing in French, writing and reading in French, because if you already know English then it wouldn't be so... so it wouldn't be as important. – Lauren

Four students went one step further and made an implicit connection between place and the ability to speak a particular language. Although the students who made this claim were a bit fuzzy as to the particulars, they seemed to try to explain their evidence for this belief during our conversation.

“But we—our memory—but our memory in English—” Kayden began to explain.

“—and our memory in English is just huge and we live in the U.S. A. and mostly people speak English.” Cameron continues, trying to help out his friend.

Kayden finally finishes his explanation. “Um, I was say that our memory is better for English because, because this is like, um... Maybe I can talk to my friends at school in French. But I'm more likely to talk to them in English because I, because the memory of English... if you're born in the U.S.A. you're going to have a better memory for English. And let's say you were born in Mexico. You have a better memory for Spanish.”

This particular point was often emphasized when students were speaking about knowing English. Because students conceive of language in this way, it is natural, in their opinion, to struggle more with French because they are not ‘born’ in a place that would naturally enable them to speak French. This conception is particularly interesting because it is not one that would have been consciously communicated to them by their parents, who believe that language is something that is acquired, not inherent. This concept is, instead, reflective of their observations: people in the United States speak English, just as people in France speak French and people in Mexico speak Spanish.

Whether the students are parroting their parents or forming their own conclusions about the importance of immersion education, it is evident that both parents *and* students have thoughtfully considered the importance of learning a second language. Students have strong external support for learning a second language, backed up by their own investment in the learning process. As a result, students are motivated to learn French and believe that it is important because of the potential for future travel and work. They

are also invested in learning French as a way to expand their brains and develop their skills as students, echoing their parents' motivations for enrolling them in the program. Beyond those two points, students are motivated to learn English because they live in an English-speaking country and believe that it is important for future, jobs, school, and more importantly, for daily life. Many also believe that English is easier either because they already learned the language, or because they are specially equipped to learn English because of their place of birth. The ways in which these perceptions of and attitudes toward language play out in the classroom are even more interesting.

LANGUAGE PATTERNS

What Languages Do They Speak at School?

All of the students who were interviewed indicated that they also spoke English with most of their friends. They often commented that it would not make sense for them to speak French since most of their friends only speak English. Despite this qualification, students primarily default to English, even with friends who also speak French. When asked about speaking French with their friends at school twelve students indicated that they would use French. However, after making these claims, sometimes their friends would protest. For example, Ashley explained that switching between French and English sometimes made speaking in one or the other more difficult.

“Yeah, switching makes it hard for me, because when I’m in the hallway talking to MacKenzie and I’m talking in French—”

“No, you’re not [speaking in French],” MacKenzie interjects.

“Sometimes I am,” Ashley protests

“Actually, never,” MacKenzie states this even more emphatically than the last time.

“No, sometimes I do.”

“Actually, yeah, you did it once,” MacKenzie says, as if to explain her friend’s error.

Another group of friends had virtually the same conversation.

“With most of your friends what [language] would you use?” I ask.

“Well, it depends. If they went to my school, if they went to the French school, um... I would talk to them in French.” Kayla volunteers.

“You talk to each other in French?” I ask again, to make sure.

“Well, sometimes.” Kayla explains. Liliana, who is sitting next to her shakes her head vigorously.

“Liliana says no.” I say.

“I sometimes do! And then I mostly speak English.”

“Liliana, what do you think?” I turn to her.

“English.” She replies.

These conversations, although certainly unique to these friends, expressed an underlying theme. Students claim to speak French, but they often refer to each other as speaking French infrequently. Additionally, when asked to give examples, students are rarely able to be specific about their French usage. This evidence, as self-reported by students, was corroborated by my participant observation during the six months that I spent at Marie Curie Elementary School. Although students are consistently exposed to spoken French as they listen to their instructor, they only occasionally use the language. In practice, they primarily reserve French for a few memorized phrases, such as “Qu’est-ce que vous faisez?” “Comment dit-on...” and “Je peux aller aux toilettes?”¹⁰ Additionally, students speak French during a few specified times: L’Expression, Le Dicté,¹¹ and when reciting numbers during math or responding to Mme. Margo during a choral call-and-response review activity. In fact, when asked to perform a new activity, the first question to be asked is often, “Do we have to speak in French?” their voices dripping with consternation. This seems to suggest that students’ motivations to learn French, as discussed earlier, are a cognitive assent to what is ‘good’, while in daily practice they would rather speak what is quick, easy, and comfortable.

¹⁰ Translated as: “What are you doing?,” “How do you say...” and “May I use the restroom?,” respectively.

¹¹ Translated as: “Verbal Expression” and “Dictation,” respectively.

The most telling example of students' French usage in the classroom is L'Expression, an activity in which Mme. Margo introduces students to a new French phrase, such as "tous les matins..." or "j'ai beaucoup de..." and students practice it by creating and performing a short skit in groups of three or four. Throughout the school year, Mme. Margo dedicates thirty minutes, three to four times per week to practicing specific French phrases and to increasing the students' comfort with spoken French. Students enjoy L'Expression quite a bit, as their planning period and performances are raucous and well received by their classmates. Practicing for the skits the students almost exclusively use English unless they are rehearsing their lines. Additionally, during the performances themselves, rather than speak in French, students often substitute "blah, blah, blah," for actual dialogue, preferring to only use the required phrases. In February, Mme. Margo created a rubric to grade students on their skits and this practice was curtailed for the most part. However, this shift only serves to reinforce the original observation: students will go to great lengths to avoid speaking French, unless specifically required to do so.

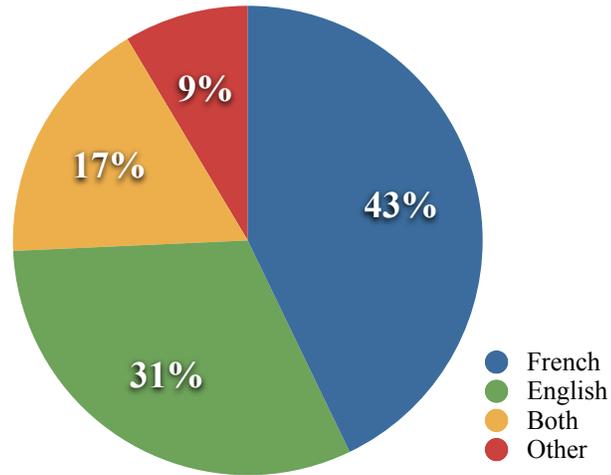
This aversion to the spoken language is particularly true at recess and lunch, unstructured times when students are allowed to do as they please. Students do not speak French. Although teachers and students alike jokingly refer to "franglais" as the *lingua franca* of the playground, aside from required phrases like "Je peux aller aux toilettes," students use English. In the thousands of informal conversations that make up the school day, students almost exclusively use English. Even amongst native-French speakers, there is very little French used. One student, Aminata, who recently emigrated from a French-speaking country this year, quickly learned English so that she might be included in games and activities where English is the *lingua franca*.

Student Attitudes

When asked directly, students often responded that they prefer French, as is shown by Figure 4. During the focus groups, I asked students which language they preferred. Fifteen responded that they liked French the most. Eleven responded that they preferred English. Six indicated that they liked both languages equally, and three responded that

they preferred another language (namely German, Spanish, and Russian). Altogether, over half of the students stated that they liked French as much as or more than English. This contrasted with the responses Gerena found when she surveyed students at a dual-immersion, Spanish-English elementary school; students there preferred English to Spanish increasingly over time (Gerena, 2010).

Figure 4. Which Language Do You Prefer?

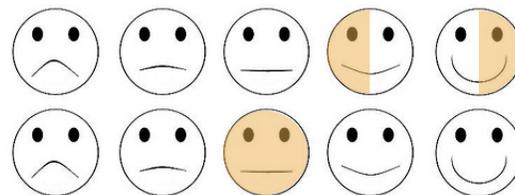


Interestingly, this also contrasted with the results on the Student Language Survey, as well as the responses to later questions. I was surprised by students' stated language preferences, as I had already analyzed a seemingly conflicting set of results from the Student Language Survey. On the survey, students were asked to color in the face that looked the most like them when they were: listening to their teacher speak English or French, asked a question in

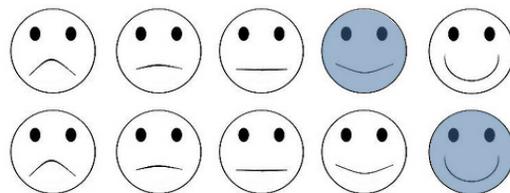
English or French, reading in English or French, and writing in English or French. Students responded in a variety of ways, as shown in Image 3. Although most chose one face, some students chose more than one face to reflect their feelings in different circumstances.

To calculate the average, the faces were converted to numeric

Image 3. Student Language Survey Responses



Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in English.



Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in French.

values, the happiest face was scored as a 5.0, while the saddest face was scored as a 1.0. In instances where students chose more than one face, the responses were averaged and then scored. In all cases, students responded that they felt worse when they were using French than English. To borrow my terminology from Logan, Jacob, and Ryan, who summed up their feelings toward both languages at the end of our focus groups, students felt “good,” “insanely awesome,” and “proud,” about English, but “okay” or “miserable” about French. Although not all students felt that French was “torture,” as Jacob commented at one point, on average, the students’ feelings about English were 0.46-1.11 points higher in each category, as is indicated by Table 3. This indicates a decided preference for English when both languages are compared.

Table 3. Students’ Feelings About Language

Survey Prompt	Average Response
Color in the face that looks the most like you when your teacher is speaking in English.	4.51
Color in the face that looks the most like you when your teacher is speaking in French.	4.05
Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in English.	4.60
Color in the face that looks the most like you when someone asks you a question in French.	3.91
Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are reading in English.	4.69
Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are reading in French.	3.58
Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are writing in English.	4.47
Color in the face that looks the most like you when you are writing in French.	3.82

When asked situationally, student responses during the focus groups were much more consistent with the survey data, if not even more negative. Students often referred to others as feeling embarrassment, shame, or worrying about the responses of their classmates when speaking French. For example, when students were asked to indicate which boy (from the pictures used during the focus group discussion) looked the most

like them when someone asked them a question in French, they pointed to the sad boy. Emma stated that, “I’m not saying who, but one of my friends, she struggles with, um, different things, and I try to help her, but sometimes she’s just like, ‘Oh man, I just can’t do this.’” After the interviews, when asked again, Emma said, “I work with Kaylee, but she gets discouraged. I do too. Sometimes I don’t understand, but I don’t want other people to know.” Emma’s response was similar to those given by others. She was unwilling to ‘out’ either herself or a friend as someone who struggles with French, but instead, expressed her own concerns and frustrations about the difficulties of learning French in the abstract.

Student responses to the question “How do you feel about French?” asked at the end of the focus group discussion, were also more consistent with the survey data. Most students indicated that they felt that they liked French, but in the day to day practice of learning the language, they sometimes felt less confident.

I think... I’m happy to speak [English], but I’m happy to speak French too. But, like, to speak English– I feel like I know what it means. And then in French, sometimes, I don’t always know how to say it. – Lauren

I feel, I feel French is kind of difficult. I don’t really have a reason, but I’m going to make one up... Because you could, you can talk to your friends in French, but then they wouldn’t really– they wouldn’t really talk back, because we don’t really know French that well. We can talk in it, but we don’t really understand it that much. Like, when Mme. Margo was telling the lame jokes, we were like, “What?!” Because we didn’t really know what she said, so she had to repeat it in English and we understood. – Cameron

None of the students came out and said, “I don’t like French.” But what was perhaps the most telling was the way in which students responded. When asked, “How do you feel about English?” students almost unanimously smiled, sat up straight, put their thumbs up, and stated that they liked it, they felt comfortable speaking it, and generally enjoyed the language. When asked about French, however, students took much longer to respond. They would usually equivocate in their responses, indicating that they “liked it, but...” and would then explain the various things about the language that made them feel less comfortable.

One of the most interesting contrasts was between student responses about themselves and the “two boys” that we pretended attended our school. As was mentioned before, during the focus groups I showed students pictures of a happy and a sad boy. I asked a number of questions about how the boy might feel if he were reading, writing, listening, speaking or doing math in French or English. I also asked students which boy was the best at either French or English. Two noticeable patterns emerged from the data, summarized in Figure 5. First, students were much more positive about English, giving more positive responses than negative responses at an almost three-to-one ratio. Second, students’ had a lot more to say about French, but were much more ambivalent in their feelings, if not slightly

more negative. The

contrast between

students’ positive

attitudes toward

English and

ambivalence towards

French were clear.

Although students

attributed both positive

and negative feelings to the fictional students

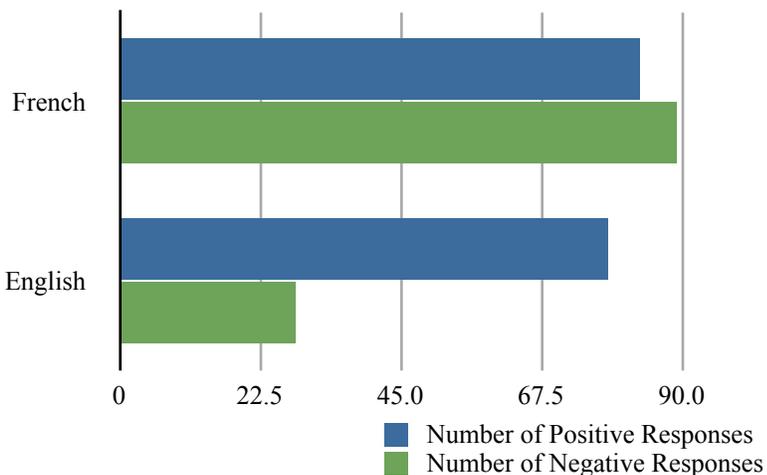
when asked about French, they rarely attributed negative feelings when asked about

English. Even with these nuanced results in mind, however, what became apparent was

that students’ discussions of their concerns were much richer than any of the questions

and subsequent results I had anticipated.

Figure 5. Feelings Ascribed to the Fictional Students



CHAPTER VI

LISTENING TO THEIR CONCERNS

“I normally [speak] in English, but... I have these moments in my life when I feel like I can do anything, so sometimes I speak French—like to ask a question—but I stop and then say [it in] English because I don’t know the words.”

– Kaylee, Third Grade Student

WHAT DO YOU REALLY THINK? UNDERLYING ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE LEARNING

Despite their investment in learning French and their connection between learning a second language and future success, students almost uniformly explained that they felt some level of stress, confusion, embarrassment or discomfort when speaking French, sometimes because of a teacher, but most often because of fear of failure and peer-to-peer shaming. Although students were not explicitly asked about either topic, when explaining why they, or the fictional students, might feel sad, a significant minority made reference to failure and shame. Of the students interviewed, approximately 17% mentioned fear of failure as a reason for negative feelings toward French, and almost a third, approximately 29%, mentioned peer-to-peer shaming. Although these percentages could be considered small, they are significant for three key reasons. First, with regard to failure, specifically, Marie Curie Elementary School does not fail or ‘hold-back’ students. Accordingly, ‘failure’ is impossible, at least in the way adults conceptualize it. Second, these comments were entirely unsolicited. Had students been asked directly about either failure or peer-to-peer shaming, as they were about language preferences, these results could have been much different. Third, at a school that boasts 95-98% success rate on state testing, it is notable that as much as 29% of the school population feels fear or shame. I will discuss students’ concerns in more detail throughout this chapter.

I Guess I Like French: Underlying Attitudes Toward English & French

Students' feelings about the English language, for the most part, are uncomplicated. As Anthony commented during a focus group conversation, "Their first language is English, so they feel more comfortable with English." The third grade students like speaking English, they feel comfortable with the language, and see it as useful for life in a predominately English-speaking community. In many ways, they bring with them an unconscious connection between English and daily life, family, and friends. As was indicated before, for most students, English is their 'native language'. One student, Kaitlyn, referred to English as the language she and the other students were "born with." Students also 'default' to English, preferring to use it for daily conversations when French is not explicitly required. During my participant observations, many of my conversations began like this:

"Bonjour, Mme. Beth."

"Bonjour, ça va?"

"Oui, ça va." The student pauses for a moment... "Are you going to the symphony with us today?"

Although students often initiate conversations in French with basic phrases, particularly greetings like "Qu'est-ce que vous faisez?"¹² or "Bonjour!" they invariably switch to English afterward. Even students who have native-French speaking parents default to English with their friends at school. Clearly, despite its French immersion charter, Marie Curie Elementary School is a place in which English is the *lingua franca*.

This, of course, does not go unnoticed by the teachers and staff members, who by and large support immersion education and would like to see their students become more fluent in the language. Teachers try to encourage French usage by requiring the language in certain classroom settings, by speaking it with their students even during recess and lunch, by requiring its use for certain memorized phrases like "Je peux aller au

¹² Translated literally as: "What are you doing?" or more situationally, "How are you doing?"

bureau?”¹³ but even they slip into using “franglais” or even English. When asked about French usage at Marie Curie, Mme. Margo indicated that she had noticed the program change over the past few years from “French immersion” to something more akin to “French enrichment,” echoing the frustrations of some of the parents who responded to the question about why they enrolled their children at Marie Curie on the Home Language Survey. As with many immersion education programs, there are tensions between empowering students by validating their preferred language and encouraging them to speak in another language. How exactly does one encourage students to use a language they may not enjoy speaking, while maintaining a positive learning environment?

As explored in chapter five, students’ feelings about the French language are much more conflicted than their feelings toward English. There are a few primary contributing factors to this conflict. First, students stated that they find it difficult to learn new material in a new language. Second, students often attribute negative feelings to speaking, listening, and using French when speaking about others, or the fictional students in the focus groups, often revealing more about themselves. Third, students ascribe negative experiences in the classroom to French, even when it may not be appropriate. Each will be examined in more depth below.

At Marie Curie Elementary School, students begin their immersion experience by learning math in French, with the idea that students are able to make many connections between English and French because of the number of cognates, as well as the heavy focus on numbers, rather than words, in lower elementary school grades. As an example, when learning about angles, students are able to make the connection between “an obtuse angle,” and “un angle obtus,” without much difficulty. Additionally, students do not seem to make negative associations between their dislike of math, if they do indeed dislike math, and their ambivalence toward French. Although it might seem logical to assume that student attitudes toward French are heavily influenced by the subject matter, students

¹³ Translated as: “May I go to the office?”

repeatedly remarked that math was “the same in any language,” and that their dislike of a certain subject was predicated on the subject itself and *not* the language. As third-graders, they were careful to point out the nuances between language and subject matter throughout the interview; it would be an adult projection of the “simplicity of childhood” to assume otherwise.

However, when students are asked to learn a new subject—especially a text-heavy subject—in French for the first time, they balk. Alexis commented that somebody who was learning something completely new might think, “Oh no, wait! It’s over but we’re starting something new? I don’t think that I know that well? I don’t think I can do this! I don’t think I can do that!” This became an issue in fourth grade during the middle of the school year. Although the majority of my participant observation occurred in third grade, I was able to work with the fourth grade teachers as well, because of a shared hallway and lunch breaks.

In fourth grade, Mme. Peterson teaches Language Arts and Reading in French for the first time, as these subjects are usually taught in English in the previous three grades. In November she began to use French during Social Studies as well. Students almost immediately protested. They stated that they felt comfortable with Language Arts because they were able to make connections between the skills they had already learned in English and what they were reviewing and building on in French. Language Arts, by nature, slowly spirals, building on previous skills. However, in Social Studies they were learning content that they had not previously covered in school. The students summed up their feelings by saying that they understood spoken French and liked learning it for the most part, but that learning new content in a new language, French, was too much. They felt most comfortable in the classroom when they could learn one skill at a time rather than trying to acquire both French and regular content. This is problematic because it seems to be in direct opposition to the content-based instructional approach on which immersion education programs are predicated.

This resistance can be seen in third grade as well. As Alexis commented in an imagined internal dialogue, “Oh no wait, it’s over but we’re starting something new? I don’t think that I know that well! I don’t think I can do this! I don’t think I can do that!” Although third grade students have not registered a similar collective complaint, their passive resistance to French can be seen in their responses. Although Mme. Margo routinely speaks in French to students and they will repeat her, they choose not to ask questions in French. They choose to insert “blah, blah, blah” into a French skit rather than come up with other dialogue. They choose to whisper to each other in English while doing work in French. In fact, on occasion Mme. Margo has resorted to offering “chapeaus,” or a “good note,” which are entered into a drawing for prizes on Friday, to students willing to respond in French. Although this is not an everyday occurrence, it does say something about the distinctly English-dominant school environment and the students’ unwillingness to fully participate in the language learning process. Students’ choices about when and where to speak the language reinforce their decided preference for English, despite their cognitive assent to the importance of French.

During the focus groups students often expressed this ambivalence through the emotions they ascribed to the two boys, one happy and one sad, throughout the questions. I asked about who might be listening to a story in French or English, for example, or who might have asked a question in French or English, among others. Students often made comments like these that follow:

[The boy who is listening to a story in French] feels sad, he’s like “Awww...” and then, like, all the other kids are laughing and stuff and he doesn’t have a clue what they’re talking about. – Kaylee

Well some people don’t know French as much as they know English. When they speak it they have no idea what they’re saying. – Madison

Another interesting indication of the students’ hesitancy and even negative feelings toward the French language, can be seen in their response to failure in the classroom. One afternoon in early February during my participant observation, Mme. Margo asked me to help some students retake a test they had failed. The test, which covered fractions,

was in English, although the directions were in French; students were asked to “Montre tout le travail – un dessin, les math, on les equations. Ecris un phrase complete.”¹⁴ Mme. Margo explained the directions in French, then again in English, as she always does for tests, to ensure that students understood. The individual questions were in English and students were supposed to respond in English. One student, Alyssa, had struggled. When I asked her why she felt that she had a hard time, she said it was because she had to answer in French. This was interesting because it was not actually true. The test was in English and all of the students had responded in English. Yet, Alyssa’s excuse for her failure was French.

By attributing failures to French, students may reinforce negative feelings they have about the language. If this is the case, as it seems to be, French becomes a “whipping boy” for students’ frustrations about school. Although students seem ready to distinguish between their dislike of French and their dislike of a particular subject area, they are not as able to distinguish between their failure to perform and their failure in French. This undercurrent of resistance and ambivalence ties into one concern a vocal minority of students expressed during the focus groups: fear of failure.

I Might Fail and Then I’d Have to Repeat a Grade: Students’ Fear of Failure

Throughout my interviews at Marie Curie Elementary School, students consistently expressed a fear that they might fail. As Isabella put it quite succinctly in one interview, “For me, I’m nervous about flunking out.” In fact, fear of failure is often tied up with fear of not knowing *enough* French.

[French is] also [important] so you can progress, ‘cause if you just didn’t learn you’d be in third grade next year, third grade next year, third grade next year... You’d never get to fourth grade. You’d never get to another grade anymore, ‘because you’d just keep knowing this much, ‘cause you’re not going to learn any more, so you’re never going to know. – Emma

I understand French perfectly well, but if you don’t know French, you won’t go anywhere, you won’t understand anything, and you’ll pass in English, but in

¹⁴ Translated as: “Show all your work – drawings, math, and equations. Write in complete sentences.”

French you'll just keep going, going, and... and you wouldn't understand what they were doing or saying because you don't understand French. – Isabella

During the interviews, Emma, and other students specifically referenced fear of having to repeat a particular grade. Although students denied that they were in any particular jeopardy themselves, they often talked about having this fear in the past, or when referring to others. When asked about how the two imaginary students of the focus groups might feel when asked a question in French, one group of students brought up the example of Thomas, a boy who had 'failed,' in their eyes.

“Thomas in first grade, this [pointing to the sad boy] would be for both languages.” Isabella states this to explain how a student might feel about French.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because at the end of the year, like at the end of the year, he only knew le, la, un, une—” Isabella continues.

“Yeah, he wasn't very good, but he wasn't there the next year, so...” Emma interjects this, as if his absence the next year proves their point.

“He stopped going [to Marie Curie]?” I am very curious now.

“Yeah.” Emma says.

“He probably went to a different school.” Alexis states. “I saw him at a birthday party... I saw him bowling.” This last comment is made as if birthday party and bowling are in the outer-reaches of the Marie Curie universe, waste-lands reserved for those who couldn't make it.

“Hmm...” I want to clarify. “But you think it's because he had a hard time in French?”

“Yeah.” Emma says.

“Yes!” Alexis and Isabella confirm together.

“Some people do that, like, they want to learn another language—” Alexis begins to explain.

“—they'll go for one year—” Emma continues.

“—but after that, they'll just, they might—” The girls are now talking together, like they are explaining one giant group thought.

“–they might give up even *trying*–”

“–I kind of think it’s partly because he’s afraid–”

“–they might be all, ‘I don’t like this... it’s really hard and I don’t want all the teachers being all weird to me in 2nd grade, and everybody [else] knows French.’”

“Yeah, and maybe... maybe he’ll be like... but I kind of feel like he’s like, ‘I don’t want to go back in 1st grade, I want to... I want to go back in 2nd grade. I’m scared I’m going to have to re-do this then because I don’t know anything in French.’”

At this point in the conversation I asked the girls if students failed often. They instantly switched tracks and began to explain that they had never failed personally, that things were easy for them, but that it depended on who the students were. Students were quick to point out this fear in others, or to ascribe it to a picture of a “third grade boy,” but not to recognize it in themselves. From time to time, however, their narration of a third person’s thoughts would slip into first person.

This, then, begs the question: why are students worried about failing? Perhaps it would not be unreasonable to expect high-performing students from high-performing families who are incredibly invested in their educational success to fear failure. Remember, when motivations for enrolling at Marie Curie were grouped by type, the single most common response was related to academic rigor and future academic success. So we could attribute this fear to one cultivated by the résumé-building, test-fueled academic culture that seems to permeate modern elementary schools; fear of failure, quite probably, could be found at other, all-English, schools as well. And we might be right, to a degree, except for one lurking variable. Students almost exclusively discuss failure in terms of not knowing enough French. Some do point out that lack of knowledge in French may not be enough by itself to cause ‘failure’. However, in the example above, and in others during the focus groups, students give examples of others who have ‘failed’ to learn French or who are struggling and might ‘fail’ to learn French. Seen from a third-grade perspective, failure to learn French seems to equate failure on a more general level. What is significant, then, is that students’ fear of failure gives insight into the ways they process and conceive of learning a new language on an emotional level.

The consequences of this failure, as discussed in the focus group interviews, are typically two-fold. First, students might be ‘held back,’ in a grade. As MacKenzie noted in an interview “Maybe [the sad boy] wasn’t listening in classes and he had to stay back in second grade.” This of course, as I noted above, is impossible. Second, students might have to leave the school and attend another local, neighborhood school, with the implication that the individual is not ‘smart’, ‘hard-working’, or ‘talented’ enough to continue on in the program. This is very possible. Anecdotally, a University of Oregon professor, whose sons went through the Southern Willamette French Immersion Program, indicated that approximately one-third to one-half of the students leave the program before the end of high school (personal communication, November 29, 2011). Although she suggested that this may be because students wanted to pursue other interests, some do leave because they are struggling with French. During the focus group discussions students gave three separate examples of friends who had attended Marie Curie but had left for one reason or another. Seen on a third-grade level, failure to perform at Marie Curie and the subsequent transfer that could follow would mean leaving friends, leaving teachers, leaving after-school activities, essentially restructuring their entire lives. In this context, fear of failure, as well as stigmatization, is a very real threat. In one focus group session, a student mentioned that one person she knew struggled with French quite a bit and would get discouraged. She said that she tried to help, but did not want to say who her friend was because she did not want anyone to know. After the interview ended and the other students left, she whispered to me the name of this friend, in strictest confidence of course. She then went on to say that sometimes she felt discouraged too.

The Other Students Might Laugh at Me: Peer-to-Peer Shaming

The secrecy tied to the fear of failure discussed above, is connected to another common concern among the third grade students I worked with: peer-to-peer shaming. Although I did not ask about peer-to-peer interactions with regard to French, students often mentioned specific instances in the past, or experiences the imaginary third grade students might have had, with this phenomenon. Even Isabella, a native French speaker, commented that what makes her most nervous in class is “the other kids.”

When I was here in K, I... or 1st grade when we were just learning French, I didn't know French at all and a lot of other kids were like, "Oh, I studied French so much over the summer!" And they're all like, "Oh, I think French is so easy." I'm like, "I don't know any French," and they might be like, "Ha, ha, you don't know any French," and I was just sort of like [pointing to the picture of the sad boy], when I ask the teacher a question in French class, or in English class, I'd be sort of shy because everybody would be whispering about me... – Emma

I think [the sad boy is listening to a story in French] because, well, he's really sad because he doesn't understand anything. And he's like, uh, what's going on, and they're like, "Didn't you know?" And then he'd be like, "No, I don't really understand it," and they'd be like, "Ha, ha, ha!" And so he's really sad.
– Cameron

Because [the happy boy] probably knows what the French words mean, but [the sad boy] otherwise... he doesn't know. [He's thinking], "I don't want to do this. I don't want anyone to laugh at me and I don't want a bad grade, so that if people are passing out papers, I don't want them to see, like... like it's a minus or anything..." He could be like— people could be like, "He has a— he's wrong! Oh my gosh, that was so easy!" – Alexis

It's kind of hard for him—it'll be hard for him to—when he doesn't understand and if you read with a teacher, you might get nervous and do bad. [...] And if there's people, they'll think that... they're thinking that he's bad at French.
– Jordan

Close analysis of the examples above, shows some common threads in the experiences of third grade students. Students often feel that others have studied a lot of French and consequently know a lot more French than they do. Some students gave examples of others having studied French in preschool at the "Little French School," an immersion preschool in College Corner, Oregon. They also mentioned students with native-speaking parents and assumed that they would not have the same feelings because they were so much better at French. Based on conversations with students, there seems to be a class hierarchy of French speakers in which individuals attempt to conceal their own lack of knowledge to ensure that others do not find out and laugh at them. Students mentioned shyness and concern about the reactions of others when asking questions because of this concern. Read together, these themes are interesting because they provide a stark contrast to the anecdotal evidence that children are less concerned with failure or fear of embarrassment, so they are more willing to practice a new language.

The wonderful thing about young children is that they will give things a try without necessarily worrying if it is correct or not. This applies to language learning as well. Young children will often jump right in to try out what they have learned without worrying about mistakes. They are eager to see the response they will get from other students and adults when trying out their new words and vocabulary. It is an exciting and empowering experience for children (“6 Reasons Why Children Should Learn Languages As Early As Possible”, Language Lizard Blog)

Although popular wisdom may see children as optimal language learners, when discussing their own attitudes, children clearly fear failure and are reticent to expose themselves to peer-to-peer shaming. Whether students experience less, the same, or more fear than adults when practicing a new language, this finding highlights the pitfall of reading an adult perspective into a childhood experience.

The most salient reason students gave for this fear of being “found out,” having others know that they are not perfect French speakers, is that other students laugh at them when they do not know something. Because of this, students work to conceal their own feelings of inadequacy when learning French.

Um, well, I get discouraged when people are like, “Oh, I’m good at French. Look at my grades, I got ten out of ten on the spelling test.” And I get like, one out of ten? Sometimes I feel a little discouraged. But I feel like I’m okay for the grade I’m in... fine for the grade I’m in. – Emma

As Emma described it, when working in French, students feel ‘overprotective’ of what they’re doing and second guess themselves, while feeling pressure from trying to complete the work on time. Other students discuss strategies they employ to avoid embarrassment, while trying to learn French.

I didn’t know what French was [in first grade], and so I listened to everybody else speak and then I got the idea because I understand, what like I heard. But I didn’t speak very well. So I just used the words that I heard from other people and I understood it... – Alexis

As Alexis explained in our conversation, she did not feel confident in French and made an effort to learn the language by listening to others speak and then copying their responses. In participant observations, students often made use of this strategy. When

asked a question, students would make the most use of memorized phrases, or English, and then when Mme. Margo would supply students with the appropriate French vocabulary, they would repeat what she said in French.

The most unfortunate thing about peer-to-peer shaming is that it is limiting. Students are ambivalent toward French and reluctant to practice. Brianna commented “I was going to say that, um, if we’re required to speak French, I would speak French, but usually I don’t feel comfortable speaking French.” As a result, they spend most of their day listening to the language, but rarely using it themselves. Students made mention of this in the focus group setting, often saying that they understood French, but could not speak or write it. Additionally, because of the limits of the American education system, most of the books and tests they are required to use by the district are in English. As such, students do not practice French as much as they could, which limits their acquisition of the language.

French Makes You Sound Smart

Although three common experiences students mentioned during our focus group interviews were ambivalence toward French, fear of failure, and peer-to-peer shaming because of a lack of knowledge of French, this is not to say of course, that students never perceive French in a positive light. They do. Students often state that speaking French “makes you sound smart,” that they hope to understand it in the future, that it is important and makes your brain grow.

You kind of feel special when you know a bunch [of languages], because you know you can... like... I don’t know, but it just kind of feels special when you know more than one language. – Kayla

But, when you listen to what students are saying closely you quickly realize that they often speak of French in a negative context from personal experience. When students speak of French in a positive light, they tend to use the conditional or future tense, or use distancing language and speak in third person.

Because if you know a lot of French, I think you should be proud. – Daniel

He's proud of saying something in French. He's just sort of happy and, like, talking. – Liliana

I think, um, the boy is happy because usually people are happy when they're learning a language. – Madison

“So do you think you will start to feel about French the way you feel about English?” I ask Daniel. “Like once I'm in fifth grade... or fourth. I don't know... maybe this year?” He responds, adding that last part almost as if to ask a question.

The use of conditional and future tenses to speak of French in a positive light highlights questions raised by academic discourse on being versus becoming. Are elementary school children in a state of being, and should we recognize childhood as a significant phase on its own? Or are students in a state of becoming; are their experiences merely a stepping stone on the way to adulthood? To relate this argument to language, are the current, often negative, feelings and experiences students have as they learn a second language important? Or do the benefits of 'becoming' a multilingual adult outweigh the current lived experiences of a child? Although the answers to these questions can only be answered by this particular research in the hypothetical, the most important thing to teachers and researchers alike is that we now know what to ask.

CHAPTER VII

SHIFTING OUR PERSPECTIVE & LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES: CONSEQUENCES FOR PRACTICE

“The key to good decision making is not knowledge. It is understanding. We are swimming in the former. We are desperately lacking in the latter.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

IMPROVING IMMERSION PROGRAMS

Listening to Children's Voices

As I have discussed in the previous sections, soliciting students' voices, in general, is valuable because they shift our perspective. They are also important to discussions within the field of multilingual education because we can use students' perspectives to help improve immersion programs. Often research looks at teacher pedagogy or focuses on outcomes. Existing studies in these areas can inform us in important ways; certainly we should evaluate teacher effectiveness, or the long-term effects of immersion education. However, these studies cannot tell us about the student attitudes in the midst of their immersion experience. Thus, we need research that addresses this topic as well.

What is evident from student responses throughout this thesis, is that peer relationships are equally if not *more* important, than teacher relationships. Students consistently express the fact that their peers' opinions matter. This parallels what Judith Rich Harris (1998) writes in her book *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*:

My theory unites three different realms of academic research: socialization, personality development, and cultural transmission. All of these things happen in the same way and in the same place: the peer group. The world that children

share with their peers is what shapes their behavior and modifies the characteristics they were born with, and hence determines the sort of people they will be when they grow up. [...] A child's goal is not to become a successful adult, any more than a prisoner's goal is to become a successful guard. A child's goal is to be a successful child (p. 198).

Although entirely unsolicited during the focus group discussions, 17% of students indicated that they are concerned about failing, and consequently, losing friends and being ostracized or forgotten by their peers; 29% of students explicitly mention peer-to-peer shaming. Both of these responses, related to learning French at school, highlight the significance of student relationships within a classroom. As Emma commented,

Yeah, I think [knowing English is] important that not only you, and—well, you think that you're good at something—that, that other people know what you're doing think it's good. Because one, that makes you feel better and two, that makes you know that you're actually doing a good job, not just that you think you're doing a good job.

Compared to the relatively few instances students brought up the importance of teachers in shaping their attitudes, peers matter. Students are much more concerned with what their friends think than what their teacher thinks. They talk about how good their peers are at speaking French; how their peers might react to their “failures”; how their peers have succeeded or failed themselves; how similar or different they are from their peers. These thoughts, along with many of the others I have discussed throughout this thesis, can ultimately help improve immersion programs.

Building a Supportive Immersion Environment from ‘the Ground Up’

The concerns students voiced about learning new material, about the possibility of failing, and about peer-to-peer shaming, lead to specific suggestions to improve immersion education programs, based on this research. First, there is a need to emphasize the importance of being allowed to make mistakes when learning, as well as to build a classroom environment that encourages the attempt. Second, there is a need to address students' fear of failure and to emphasize the spiraling aspects of the curriculum, to help students overcome their resistance to learning new things in French. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, peer relationships must be addressed.

First, students must be encouraged to make mistakes. Students, and in particular high achieving students, often feel pressure to be perfect; anything less than an “A” can be perceived as failing. In fact, there was one episode during the school year when a student came to class crying because another student had told him he would never be able to go to Stanford, as if admissions were determined based on third grade progress reports. With the increased emphasis on high stakes testing and college-readiness, even young children are affected. Making mistakes is an integral part of learning, particularly when practicing a foreign language. To overcome this, teachers must set the example by making mistakes and modeling the appropriate response. Additionally, classroom peers should be encouraged to offer support in a positive way. For example, in the English class, when students read aloud in small groups and one of the listeners hears a mistake, he or she simply puts his thumb up. The listener may *only* comment if the reader asks for their help. Ultimately, whether this strategy or others are employed, the important thing is that students are made to feel comfortable with the more experimental aspects of learning.

Second, teachers must address students’ fears regarding failure and learning new things. As I discussed earlier, students commented that they feel most comfortable in the classroom when they can learn one skill at a time rather than trying to acquire both French and regular content. Because immersion education is predicated on the idea that students are learning a second language through regular classroom instruction in subjects such as math and science, it is important to make explicit connections between what students already know, and what they are going to learn. Quite simply, students need ‘access points’ to help them relate to new material; we cannot assume that investment in learning a second language will make up for a lack of knowledge. Students indicated that they felt more comfortable even hazarding a guess when they had some previously learned concept to build on. Although as adults we are often able to see connections between abstract concepts and ideas, these connections are learned.

Because students in immersion programs must process both the new language and the new content, we can address this issue one of two ways. First, we can introduce new subjects in English, or provide English resources for students to read at home, that connect with instruction, which is conducted in French. Second, we can build the curriculum such that students are able to review content, previously learned in English, and build on it in French, perhaps by going into more detail or expanding our knowledge of the subject to other related areas. There is a temptation to forego either of these options in an attempt to cover as much as possible while maximizing exposure in French, but this occurs to the detriment of the students. Additionally, in either case we must ensure that teachers' knowledge of French is deep enough that they are able to fine tune content delivery to a language level that is accessible to students. Ultimately, if students are not motivated to learn either because they are confused or because they do not enjoy the instruction, they will refuse to learn, often passively, as in the "blah, blah, blah" skit example.

Finally, because of the importance of peer relationships, if we are to improve the immersion experience, we must facilitate more positive peer interactions. To do this, we must work to build students' comfort by working with a cohort of students, rather than individuals. Often we attempt to tackle language issues, and really all academic issues, on an individual basis, but it would be more effective to tackle these particular issues in a group setting. Students indicate that they are most concerned about what other people will think if they fail to use French correctly. Certainly addressing the fear of failure is a part of the solution. In addition, however, we need to address students' harsh critique of each other. In her discussion of peer relationships, Harris writes,

Those who will not or cannot conform to the rules, or who are different in any way, may be excluded, or picked on, or made fun of. "The nail that sticks up will get hammered around," they say in Japan. The nyah-nyah song is heard all over the world (1998, p. 257).

Teachers can be classroom leaders who help channel students' drive to compare themselves with one another in more positive ways. Additionally, teachers must provide

opportunities for students to practice where they feel free to make mistakes. For all its shortcomings in expanding students' knowledge of French, the L'Expression activity is effective in that students, for the most part, enjoy performing for their peers. Instead of laughing *at* someone, the students laugh together. Ultimately, by implementing these changes we can begin to overcome the ambivalence students feel toward practicing a new language. And we can begin to build a supportive classroom community.

THE CHALLENGE OF SHIFTING OUR PERSPECTIVE

Where Is All of the Research?

I began this project with the explicit goal of “highlighting student voices.” As I wrote my prospectus, I outlined my methodology. Specifically I planned to rely on a combination of surveys and focus groups to learn more about student attitudes as well as to compare them to standardized test scores in French and English. Despite my best intentions, I planned to do the very thing that I initially wanted to confront: the assertion of the importance of ‘outcomes’ over ‘experiences’. Although I realized this early on, it highlighted the significant challenge that adults face when researching children. We assume that our knowledge of the ‘big picture’ makes us fundamentally better equipped to analyze the student experience, rather than allowing for the fact that students’ responses are intrinsically valuable.

When examining existing research on student attitudes toward multilingual education, this tendency becomes overwhelmingly clear. First, there are very few studies on student attitudes toward multilingual education in general. A cursory search of WorldCat.org found one book relating to “student attitudes,” “immersion education,” and “elementary school”; expanding the search to include those words, rather than phrases, found 490 results, which would seem promising. However, most examined outcomes, teacher attitudes, and program implementation, none of which explicitly address the students’ attitudes. The work of Payne, Hayashi, Gerena, and Tse, while significant, reflect this bias toward asking adults or relying on outcomes. So the question becomes, why has this occurred?

First, the modern concept of immersion education is relatively new. As indicated earlier, programs of this kind first emerged in 1971. Despite enormous growth over the past forty years, even today there are only 400 programs of this kind (DFLIPUS, 2011). When one considers the fact that there are 67,148 public elementary schools, which does not include private or charter programs, this means that immersion elementary programs represent, at most, 0.6% of all elementary schools in the United States (NCES, 2011). Part of the reason why few studies have been conducted is that immersion education programs, like the one at Marie Curie Elementary School, are extremely rare.

Occupying the ‘Least Adult Role’ & Building Rapport

Another reason, I suggest, that this type of study is so rare, is that researching children is difficult and slow. As Christensen, Grover, Uprichard, and Warming assert in their articles on child-centered methods, children do not necessarily behave in the ways that we might expect. Additionally, children are naturally wary of adults. They are unlikely to express their inner-most thoughts to a relative stranger. Accordingly, as researchers, if we are to truly learn about student attitudes, which I argue we should based on the overwhelming lack of existing studies, we must spend a significant amount of time building rapport with our research subjects. To do this, we must occupy the ‘least adult role.’ In my research I found that this pursuit played out in a few distinct ways.

As researchers, we must plan to invest more time than initially considered for a child-centered project. In my field notes, the first opportunity I had to truly begin to build relationships with the students on an equal level was in October, after approximately sixty hours of observation and participation in the classroom. After commenting that I did not understand the complicated set of rules the students were using in a game of four-square, I was invited to participate. The players commanded me to watch a few rounds, as I would likely “get out too quickly” to make playing worthwhile. Additionally, although I was given a short explanation of rules, my understanding of the game was to come primarily through observation. Despite the fact that this ‘in’ seemed promising, I was still an outsider and had very few ‘friends’. The moment at which I realized that I

had successfully integrated myself came later, in early December, when Isabella said she wanted to ask something that “might not be a good question”. When I indicated that it was okay if she continued, she asked “if a black person came back [to America] from Africa, would they turn white?” Her willingness to seek me out, rather than her parents or a teacher, suggested that I was a ‘safe’ person, someone who was knowledgeable, but who would not judge her in the same way another adult might. My experiences and observations confirm the fact that it takes time to become fully integrated into a child’s community of friends, particularly as an adult.

This process can be fraught with complications. On more than one occasion, a student teacher in the third grade class I was researching asked why I did not discipline students for talking out of turn or getting out of their seats. As someone who was struggling with classroom management, I suspect that she found my role as an observer frustrating, which I understand. However, had I taken on the role of teacher’s aid, I would have been asserting myself as an ‘adult’. Just as children expect you to behave as an adult, adults expect you to do the same, and do not always understand why you would choose to act otherwise. However, the results of this careful navigation of traditional child-adult relationships can be rewarding. During focus group discussions I was a confidante, in many ways more than I was a researcher. I carefully explained that I would not share the results of our conversations with anyone, unusual for an adult, as teachers, aids and parents alike readily share information about students without their consent. Additionally, I allowed students to respond as they wished. Although students would occasionally ask for clarification when I asked confusing questions, for the most part students answered however they pleased. This allowance for free-form response resulted in my second most important methodological discovery: the importance of tangents and ‘wrong’ answers.

Tangents & ‘Wrong Answers’

Talking to students can result in some funny anecdotes, consistent with the famed “Pop Goes the Weasel” comment, mentioned in chapter two. Transcripts from my focus

group conversations are peppered with “Comment dit-on, pineapple?” “What’s the longest word in English?” and “Is there glow in the dark rock?” None of these questions have anything to do with the topics we were ‘supposed’ to cover. Taken out of context they would seem to support the underlying belief many researchers have: children make unreliable subjects. They do not behave in the ways that we expect them to behave. But perhaps the problem is the reverse: we expect *them* to behave in the way *we* want them to. A common pitfall of researching children is that we think we know what they are going to say. We structure questions such that there is a right answer and we measure student responses based on our own rubric. As I mentioned earlier in chapter five, 60% of students indicated that they liked French as much as or more than English; therefore the assumed student attitude could be that they like French and that immersion programs are successful. But as I have shown, this reduction of all student attitudes to a single statistic results in a complete misunderstanding of the reality of student experiences. Accordingly, we must reframe our conceptions relating to the importance of asking questions.

Questions are important for exploring ideas, for building rapport, and for creating an opportunity to get authentic details of student experiences. One of the most important elements that I found during my focus group discussions is that the responses students gave toward the end of our discussion were much more nuanced than those at the beginning. For example, near the beginning of a discussion with Daniel, James, and Lauren, all three students indicated that French was their favorite because “it’s fun” and “it makes you sound smart.” I ended our conversation by asking how they felt about French. Again, the students indicated that they liked French and that it made them sound smart. However, they also indicated that they were better at and more comfortable with English, suggesting a seemingly conflicting preference for the language. Lauren commented,

I feel good about speaking [French]. I still feel like happy speaking it, but then I don’t know, like as much as what I used to. Like I know about... just like, I don’t

know all the words I'm saying, so sometimes I have to ask somebody, how do you say this. And then, I know the other words to say it.

Daniel also commented that he was “not as fluent and as good at [French]” when compared to English. He indicated that he thought that perhaps he would feel as good about French as he did about English, but only later on in his school career.

Certainly not all students had contrasting responses. However, many students began to clarify their responses and to give much more detail about how they felt as our conversations progressed. This could have been because the students became more and more comfortable with the process as time went on; many were nervous at the outset. One girl told me that she heard “you lose your brain and your mind in here [the focus group].” This difference could also have been because the opportunity to participate in the focus group itself enabled students to process their feeling toward French, revealing a much more nuanced view than what may have seemed to be the case at the outset. Whether for the first reason or the second, this fact underlies the importance of building rapport and allowing a conversation to flow naturally. Some conversations took twenty minutes, while others took forty-five. Some conversations were much slower, while others were filled with interruptions and fast-paced dialogue. Some conversations were simple and direct, while others ranged in topics, covering subjects beyond the confines of a simple response to one of my questions. The reality is that the open-ended structure of the focus group allowed for child-focused, child-led, child-empowering discussions that ultimately gave me much greater insight into the students' thoughts and experiences.

Reversing Our Roles

Asking open-ended questions like “why” and “how” results in an inherent reversal of roles. Typically children ask why and adults answer. The structure of the focus group discussion elevated the students to the status of ‘expert’, and allowed students to explore topics I could not have anticipated. As I mentioned before, the elementary school I researched has a strict no-retention policy. Because of this, I never anticipated the fact that students would be afraid of failure and that their hesitancy to fail would influence their perceptions of the French language. Another example, asking questions such as

“How important is French to being a good student?” rather than “Is French important?” allowed the students to determine the direction our conversation might go. In response to this question in particular, students discussed a wide range of language-related topics, including:

- the fact that French is not important, but learning a language is
- that French is important for progressing to each subsequent grade level
- that French is important for learning a language that you will know for the rest of your life
- that French is important only because it is required at Marie Curie Elementary School
- that learning French can develop your mind
- that learning French is important for taking spelling tests in the language, and for reading and writing
- that knowing a second language makes you feel special

Similar lists of responses could be made for each of the questions I asked during the focus groups. What is significant is that these answers give us greater insight into children’s attitudes toward multilingual education. What is also important is that none of these responses could be captured on a survey. Even some of the ‘wrong’ answers, like the claim that French is important for progressing to each subsequent grade, which is not true, tell us something about the way in which students process the value of learning a particular language and the fears they might have about their failure to learn that language. As Piaget suggested with his research, authentic responses are much richer and much more nuanced than any that we can anticipate, and that children’s experiences and perceptions matter whether or not they correlate with outcomes.

CHAPTER VIII

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“At the very least, the educator must keep account of the existence of his or her educands’ ‘here’ and respect it. Let me put it this way: you never get there by starting from there, you get there by starting from some here. This means, ultimately, that the educator must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the ‘knowledge of living experience’ with which educands come to school.”

– Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*

It is important to take the time to examine the child’s perspective because as adults we unconsciously minimize childhood as a state of being. We hear students talk about their fears of starting at a new French immersion school in the last two weeks of kindergarten and worrying because they do not understand what their teacher is saying, and our own thoughts immediately cloud our perspective. “Yes, but I was afraid of the dark when I was five. And I worried about whether or not there was a spider in the corner of the bathroom.” In so doing, we minimize the importance of the lived experience of childhood. But let us, for a moment, try to walk in the shoes of a five-year-old or an eight-year-old. Does the fact that you may not be afraid of the dark at the age of thirty-five mean anything? Can it mean anything? Will it ever make you any less afraid in that particular moment? We need to be careful of what we say *for* children and how we treat their experiences. We need to consider their feelings in the moment.

This is certainly not to argue that immersion education should be disbanded immediately because a five-year-old might be nervous. Arguably a five-year-old will be nervous at any new school, issues of language aside. But we do need to keep these questions in constant view as we consider immersion education: are the long-term goals of language fluency worth it? Are negative childhood experiences of peer-to-peer shaming and fear of failure when learning a second language a small enough risk? And, if we answer in the affirmative, how might we minimize those experiences and prevent seemingly high attrition rates? As such, we need to rethink the way in which we

approach language. We cannot send our kids off to immersion programs, pat ourselves on the back because we have ensured their future success, and end the discussion. We need to be much more critical, or at least more aware, of the ways in which we teach languages and the ways in which learners experience that process. If nothing else, there is some benefit to facing one's anxieties and empowering children by discussing their language immersion experiences, including their fears.

Through my research, I have found many common threads within students' experiences of multilingual education. Specifically, while students might prefer speaking English to French, they have still internalized the importance of learning another language and are invested in the multilingual education process. Unfortunately, the abstract idea "it is good to learn another language," is often bogged down by students' day-to-day experiences. Students' fear of failure and experience of shame when learning a new language can leave them feeling ambivalent toward French at best, and can cause them to attribute their failure to French even when inappropriate at worst. Because of these competing interests, student attitudes could be best described as occurring at the intersection of learned value and lived experience.

When I began this research, I wanted to know what student attitudes were toward multilingual education. Noting a gap in the field, I wanted to ask students to talk about their feelings and experiences. As Freire points out in the quote above, as educators—and I would argue as researchers—we "must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the 'knowledge of living experience' with which educands come to school." Because of this, my research is as much exploratory as it is explanatory. Accordingly, my findings fall into three new directions: observations on childhood studies methodology, insights into multilingual education from the child's perspective, and implications for education and research on both a theoretical and a practical level.

First, it opens up new areas of research, as yet unexplored in multilingual education literature. This study proves the efficacy of authentic dialogue with students to learn

more about their experiences. While reading an article on research methodology relating to children in the back of a classroom, a girl stopped to ask about it. “What advice would you give someone who wanted to research kids?” I asked. She thought for a moment. “Don’t ask them things that scare them.” “Like what?” I prompted, wondering what she was thinking. “Like, don’t ask them when they think they might die.” To me, this topic seemed unusual, but it does not matter if *I* think it is strange; what matters is why that topic might be scary to an eight-year-old. We need to approach research with children much more slowly. We need to set aside our own suppositions based on our own histories, divest ourselves of our adult privilege and just listen, particularly because children’s experiences are inherently valuable. If we are able to do this, we can begin to understand the narrative fabrics of their childhoods.

What we do with this knowledge is also important. As I discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to address students’ fears of failure and concerns about peer-to-peer shaming on a community level. When fourth grade students bring up their frustration with learning new content in a new language, we should look for new approaches. Do we have time to instruct in both English and French? Are there ways to integrate both languages? Could we repeat material? Could we introduce some ideas earlier so that students have something on which they can build? Could we send home readings on the same topics in English for homework, but instruct in French? To all of these questions, I would answer yes. We cannot assume that students’ investment or prior knowledge alone will overcome their fears of learning a second language. As instructional leaders we must help students make connections between abstract ideas and concepts, particularly when they are in an unfamiliar language. I do not want to tell teachers how to teach, but I do want to encourage teachers and principals alike to allow for the kind of political and pedagogical flexibility that ensures a creative, and successful, approach. I do want to encourage a dialogue where there may not always be one.

Finally, this thesis is the beginning of what I hope is a significant expansion in children’s voices in research on multilingual education. This particular study was limited

in scope as I only interviewed one group of third grade students, but I hope others will spend time in elementary school classrooms asking students of all ages open-ended questions rather than confining their responses to surveys, and most importantly, *listen*. Comparative studies could be done to search for commonalities among multilingual student experiences. Additionally, I hope that more longitudinal studies will be conducted to examine changing perspectives over time. Personally, I would like to reinterview the students from this study in middle and high school to see how they have fared, how their opinions have changed, and what they plan to do with their immersion background in the future. In pursuing this type of research, as adults—and teachers, researchers, and parents—we will gain a more well-rounded and nuanced perspective of childhood, and in particular, multilingual education. Ultimately, I hope that through this type of dialogue and study we will gain a clearer understanding of student experiences, which can contribute to the development of immersion education programs.

APPENDIX A

HOME LANGUAGE SURVEY

1. What languages do you speak (please list all that you could use at least at the basic level)?

- 1.1. Parent/Guardian #1 _____
- 1.2. Parent/Guardian #2 _____
- 1.3. Student _____
- 1.4. Brother/Sister #1 _____
- 1.5. Brother/Sister #2 _____
- 1.6. Brother/Sister #3 _____
- 1.7. Brother/Sister #4 _____
- 1.8. Other Household Member _____

2. How did you learn that/those language(s)?

- 2.1. Parent/Guardian #1 _____
- 2.2. Parent/Guardian #2 _____
- 2.3. Student _____
- 2.4. Brother/Sister #1 _____
- 2.5. Brother/Sister #2 _____
- 2.6. Brother/Sister #3 _____
- 2.7. Brother/Sister #4 _____
- 2.8. Other Household Member _____

3. How long have you known that/those language(s)?

- 3.1. Parent/Guardian #1 _____
- 3.2. Parent/Guardian #2 _____
- 3.3. Student _____
- 3.4. Brother/Sister #1 _____
- 3.5. Brother/Sister #2 _____
- 3.6. Brother/Sister #3 _____
- 3.7. Brother/Sister #4 _____
- 3.8. Other Household Member _____

4. In what language do you feel *most comfortable*?

- 4.1. Parent/Guardian #1 _____
- 4.2. Parent/Guardian #2 _____

- 4.3. Student _____
- 4.4. Brother/Sister #1 _____
- 4.5. Brother/Sister #2 _____
- 4.6. Brother/Sister #3 _____
- 4.7. Brother/Sister #4 _____
- 4.8. Other Household Member _____

5. As a family, what language(s) do you use *most often at home*?

6. What language(s) do you use *most often* with your extended family (i.e., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.)?

7. How often do you read to or do homework with your child in English?

- 7.1. Often
- 7.2. Sometimes
- 7.3. Occasionally
- 7.4. Never

8. How often do you read to or do homework with your child in French?

- 8.1. Often
- 8.2. Sometimes
- 8.3. Occasionally
- 8.4. Never

9. If you would like, please write about your motivation for enrolling your child in a French Immersion program. Why did you choose Marie Curie as opposed to another immersion school (like Nuevo Vista Elementary) or another neighborhood school (like Stewart Elementary)?

APPENDIX B

STUDENT LANGUAGE SURVEY

1. What languages do you speak?

- French
- English
- Other languages that are not included here: _____

2. What language do you speak the most at home?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

3. What language do you speak the most at school?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

4. What language do you speak the most at home?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

5. What language do you remember knowing the longest?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

6. What language do you remember knowing the shortest?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

7. Where did you learn English?

- (a) At home
- (b) At school

(c) I don't remember

8. Where did you learn French?

- (a) At home
- (b) At school
- (c) I don't remember

9. What language do you use most often with your parents?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

10. What language do you use most often with your brothers and/or sisters, if you have any?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

11. What language do you use most often with your friends at school (for example, when you're on the playground)?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

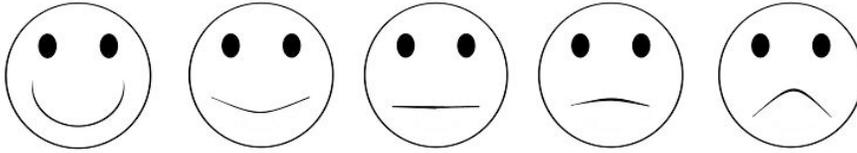
12. What language do you use most often with your friends at home (for example, when you're playing at your house)?

- (a) French
- (b) English
- (c) Both
- (d) Other languages that are not included here: _____

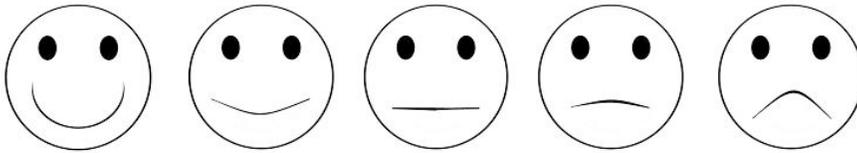
13. Color in the face that looks like the most you when your teacher is speaking in English.



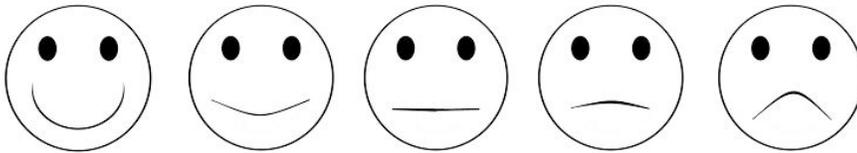
14. Color in the face that looks like the most you when your teacher is speaking in French.



15. Color in the face that looks like the most you when someone asks you a question in English.



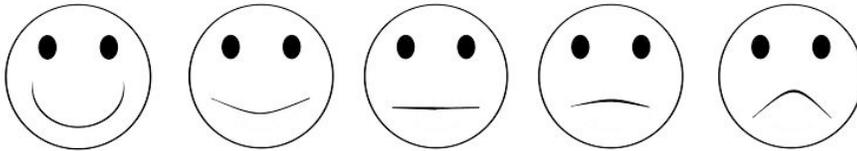
16. Color in the face that looks like the most you when someone asks you a question in French.



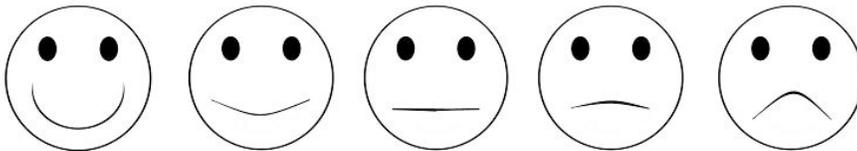
17. Color in the face that looks like the most you when you are reading in English.



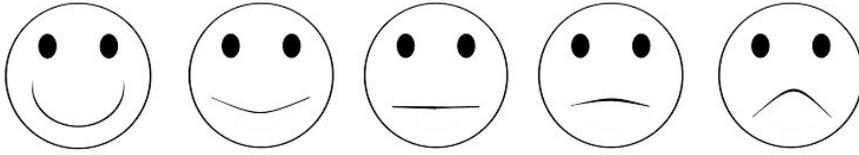
18. Color in the face that looks like the most you when you are reading in French.



19. Color in the face that looks like the most you when you are writing in English.



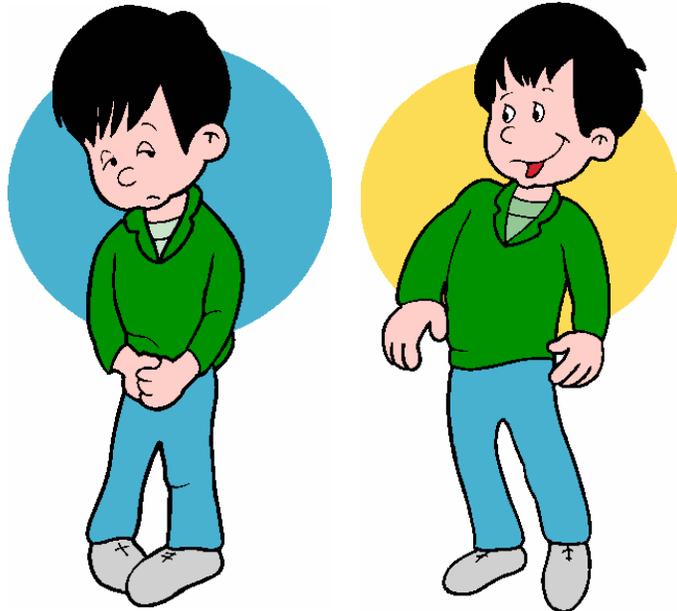
20. Color in the face that looks like the most you when you are writing in French.



APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

21. What is your favorite subject in school?
 - 21.1. Why is _____ your favorite subject in school?
 - 21.2. What language do you speak when you are studying _____?
 - 21.3. Do you think it would be easier or harder for you if you spoke in (French/English) instead? Why is that?
 - 21.4. Do you think you would like it more, less, or the same, if you spoke in (French/English) instead? Why is that?
22. What languages are you learning at school?
 - 22.1. Which language is your favorite? Why?
 - 22.2. How important is reading and writing in French to being a good student?
 - 22.3. How important is reading and writing in English to being a good student?
 - 22.4. How important is reading and writing in both languages important to being a good student?
23. If you were going to ask your mom or dad a question, what language would you use? Why?
24. If you were going to ask your friend a question, what language would you use? Why?
25. If you were going to ask your teacher a question, what language would you use? Why?
26. Which student probably just said, ("Bonjour!"/Hello!)?
27. Which student was probably asked a question in (French/English)?
 - 27.1. Why do you think he feels that way?
28. Which student is probably listening to a story in (French/English)?
 - 28.1. Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
29. Which student is probably working on math in (French/English)?
 - 29.1. Why do you think he



feels that way?/Why do you say that?

30. Which student is probably reading in (French/English)?
 - 30.1. Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
31. Which student is probably writing in (French/English)?
 - 31.1. Why do you think he feels that way?/Why do you say that?
32. Which student do you think is probably the best at (French/English)?
 - 32.1. Why do you think that is?
33. How do you feel about (French/English)?

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