

# Standards for the Language Competence of French Immersion Teachers: Is There a Danger of Erosion?

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We examined standards used by Canadian universities and British Columbia school districts to verify the language competence of French Immersion (FI) teachers in a time of teacher shortage, confirmed by 56 per cent of school districts surveyed. Parents and Directors of Human Resources agreed on their minimum expectations about French teachers' qualifications in FI schools. We found no guarantee for this level of teachers' competence because of heterogeneity in universities and school districts language measures and lack of validity and reliability for many of those measures. This may result in lowering teaching quality in FI programs.

Key words: teachers' qualifications, parents' expectations, language testing, second language, teacher shortage

Nous avons examiné les standards utilisés par les universités canadiennes et les commissions scolaires de Colombie-Britannique pour vérifier la compétence linguistique des enseignants d'immersion française (IF) alors qu'une pénurie d'enseignants a été confirmée par 56% des commissions scolaires interrogées. Les parents et les directeurs des ressources humaines ont des attentes minima similaires au sujet des qualifications des enseignants en IF. Cependant, le niveau de compétence n'est pas garanti à cause de l'hétérogénéité des mesures employées et de leur manque de validité et de fiabilité dans bien des cas. La qualité de l'enseignement dans les programmes d'IF pourrait s'en ressentir.

Mots-clés : qualifications des enseignants, tests de compétence langagière, pénurie d'enseignants, attentes des parents d'élèves

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Academics (Day & Shapson, 1996; Flewelling, 1995; Frisson-Rickson & Rebuffot, 1986; Moeller, 1988; Obadia & Martin, 1995) have long raised concern about the level of French competence of French immersion (FI) teachers in Canada. Teachers may not think it entirely appropriate to

discuss the matter because questioning teacher-colleagues' competence is an ethical taboo. Those outside the teaching profession have more freedom to discuss the issue of language competence, and the subject has appeared in the media. For example, a recent CBC News segment about FI teachers' language competence showed an Alberta FI student teacher delivering a lesson in very broken French, after which the reporter called her level of speech "infantile babbling" (Côté, 2004). Apart from access to authentic materials such as books, videos, and the Internet, teachers are usually the sole language model in FI classrooms. However, a core question remains: What is the quality of French spoken in FI classrooms? How is this quality measured?

Calls in the literature for national benchmarks of French language competence for FI teachers indicate that academics are worried about French language competence of some FI teachers (Day & Shapson, 1996; Flewelling, 1995; Frisson-Rickson & Rebuffot, 1986; Moeller, 1988; Obadia & Martin, 1995). With the current teacher shortage, the temptation to lower the standards for French competency becomes greater (Macfarlane & Hart, 2000). From a historical point of view, scholars such as Moeller (1988) thought that as FI grew, so would the screening of teachers' French competence. Fifteen years ago, Moeller wrote, "It is highly predictable that as the gap closes between supply and demand of French as a Second Language (FSL) teachers or as boards of education implement more stringent selection criteria, there will be a more clearly defined criterion of competence associated with various FSL teaching positions" (p. 9).

However, the original minimum standard of French competence expected by the school districts has not been stated or studied. Thus, there is a need to determine the minimum standard expected from FI teachers by universities, school districts, and parents and whether all parties agree on that standard. There is a further need to find out how this standard is measured.

The purpose of this study was to reexamine standards for language competence of French Immersion teachers. To complete this study, we determined the level of teacher supply in British Columbia FI programs to determine the nature of the problem. We surveyed school district directors of human resources (DHRs) and parents to determine their

minimum expected level of French competence of FI teachers. We then analyzed these data to consider whether the systems in place provide adequate assurance of a highly qualified teaching pool in FI. We have used British Columbia as an example because many of the findings in this province are applicable to other provinces and to the general problem of teachers' qualifications in specialized subjects in times of teacher shortage.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the following section, we present an overview of subject-specific qualifications for teaching in French immersion with an emphasis on French language competence. Then, we describe the three levels at which FI teachers' level of French competence could be evaluated before obtaining employment: first, at the university level before entering the FI stream; second, at the certification level; and third, at the school district level during the hiring process.

### *Necessity of Specific Qualifications for FI Teachers*

FI teachers need a high level of French language competence for four main reasons. First, to use the communicative approach in FI classrooms, teachers require a high level of language competence (Flewelling, 1995; Swain, 1996). Serious deficiencies in French language skills impair teachers' ability to plan and teach language lessons and content-area lessons. Second, because teachers must teach content area curriculum in French, a small vocabulary, poor discourse skills, or low oral fluency limits the range of ideas they are able to express and reduces their confidence to express those ideas. Third, teachers are virtually the sole model of French language for most FI students because they have limited exposure to the language from authentic materials. Finally, teachers must be fluent and knowledgeable enough to be aware of their students' grammatical errors and to provide them with corrective feedback. Thus, a minimum level of French competence and familiarity with FI methodology complement each other and are necessary for high quality of French language instruction in the immersion classroom.

*University Qualification Requirements in British Columbia*

The British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT) acts as an advisory body to the degree-granting universities in British Columbia. The BCCT makes general recommendations to the universities about the content of their teacher-education programs. For example, to implement these policies, the University of British Columbia requires secondary teachers to have two undergraduate concentrations<sup>1</sup> (one in French and one in another teachable subject) or a major in French to enroll in the FI stream of the Bachelor of Education program in addition to meeting general admission criteria. And, prospective elementary teachers must complete nine credits of French at the second-year level, including three credits each in French literature, French grammar, and French composition. Like most universities in Canada, the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia evaluates the French language competence of prospective FI student teachers.

The University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University use the *Test de Compétence Communicative de SFU et de UBC* (Bournot-Trites, Obadia, Roy, Desquins, & Safty, 1989) to screen prospective FI teachers. This French language test<sup>2</sup> has a communicative orientation. Although overall oral and written competences are assessed, the following competences are evaluated analytically through the use of an elaborate correction grid: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic, and receptive competences.

The pass levels for the test vary according to the stream into which student teachers wish to be admitted (see Table 1). For example, a higher level is required for teaching FI at the secondary level than in core French at the elementary level. These levels were adjusted based on observations of the minimum level required to successfully complete a practicum in FI classrooms without criticism of student teachers' French language competence. Test administrators state they have received phone calls from school districts pressuring them to lower the pass levels to admit as many candidates as possible to the FI streams so that there would be a greater number of fully qualified FI teachers graduating from the universities. Currently, to accommodate such a demand, the University of British Columbia offers a French language course for

students who narrowly miss the cut-off for admission to the FI stream.

*Table 1*

*Five Levels of French Competence*

Level	Description	Programme
1	Speech is halting. Vocabulary is basic, repetitive and error-laden. Makes many grammatical errors although some simple sentences are correct. Accent, pronunciation and intonation are poor.	Failure
2	Speech is generally hesitant. Able to get message across with repetition and rephrasing. Grammar is generally correct but makes some errors. Is able to hold basic conversations but cannot discuss topics requiring specialized vocabulary. Errors in pronunciation and accent do not interfere with comprehension.	Core French Elementary only
3	Able to discuss some topics fluently but is often left searching for words. Cannot use complex sentence construction and level of vocabulary limits the amount of precise information conveyed. Pronunciation is clear though not native-like. Although many topics can be discussed, the level of language is not always appropriate to the audience or situation.	Core French Secondary or lower
4	Speech is generally fluent with occasional hesitations. Makes few written and spoken errors. Makes few pronunciation errors. Vocabulary is sufficient to discuss most topics. The level of language is usually appropriate to the audience.	FI Elementary or lower
5	Speech and writing are fluent, free of grammatical errors and equivalent to that of a native speaker. Vocabulary is broad and level of language is always appropriate to the audience.	FI Sec. or lower

*Teacher Certification in British Columbia*

Once students have completed their teacher-education programs, all prospective teachers must obtain a teaching certificate through the BC College of Teachers to teach in British Columbia. This unrestricted permanent teaching certificate allows them to teach any subject for

which a school district chooses to hire them. The BCCT does not test French competence; rather, the school districts are delegated the authority of determining whether a potential teacher possesses adequate qualifications for specific assignments including French immersion.

*FI Teacher Supply and Teachers' Qualifications*

FI teacher shortages have been noted for years (Day & Shapson, 1993; Grimmett & Echols, 2000; Hood, 1990; Macfarlane & Hart, 2002; Majhanovich, 1990; Obadia, 1989; Obadia & Martin, 1995; Ullman & Hainsworth, 1991). Two studies show links between FI teacher shortages and the lowering of standards: Grimmett and Echols (2000) and Macfarlane and Hart (2002). According to Macfarlane and Hart (2002), 67 per cent of British Columbia school districts had "many fewer than needed" (p. 106) FI substitute teachers, the province's greatest area of shortage in FI. Only one of nine school districts reported having "about the right number" (p. 106) of FI substitute teachers. One third of school districts cited a "fair level of difficulty" (p. 110) in recruiting FI teachers with adequate language skills. Some 67 per cent of school districts reported having compromised "a little" (p. 111) on the minimum expected level of French language skills for FI teachers. The FI teacher shortage reported in British Columbia (Grimmett & Echols, 2001) leaves many school districts struggling to fill some FI positions or to maintain an adequate supply of FI substitute teachers. In their study of 12 BC school districts, Grimmett and Echols interviewed school district officials, local union presidents, teachers, and administrators on questions of teacher supply and demand and related concerns. They found shortages of specialist teachers in a variety of subject areas, including French, and that districts have been compelled to "relax [hiring] criteria for speciality positions because they could not get enough people with the requisite academic qualifications and additional preparation" (p. 334).

Because teacher shortages have justified modifying teacher certification arrangements in some jurisdictions (Pipho, 1998), it is crucially important to define exactly what a "shortage of teachers" is. To some, a teacher shortage means an absence of applicants, whereas to

others, it may mean increasing difficulty in recruiting applicants who fully meet qualifications for FI teaching. To have a shared meaning of the concept of teacher shortage and to identify whether there is a teacher shortage, the term must be given a quantifiable operational definition.

#### *Selection and Hiring of Teachers*

The selecting and hiring of teachers is generally done by a DHR and staff in larger districts or by the Superintendent of Schools in British Columbia's smaller school districts. According to Webb and Norton (1999), school district directors of human resources generally perform the following duties before hiring teachers: verify certification, verify qualifications, read official university transcripts, call references, perform background checks, and conduct pre-employment interviews. DHRs are therefore charged with the responsibility of ensuring that prospective FI teachers have appropriate qualifications for their placements before recruitment, including the verification of French language skills. No research work has described the procedures used by school districts to verify the French competence of FI teachers, nor the level they consider to be minimally acceptable.

#### *The Role of Parents in FI Schools*

Parents in French immersion programs are usually involved in the education of their children and have a strong influence on the FI policies through their national association, Canadian Parents for French. Therefore, we wanted to find out what minimal level of French competence they were expecting of their children's teachers and to compare their expectations with those of DHRs. We conjectured that parents would be more idealistic and therefore have higher standards than DHRs who are on the front line and possibly confronted with teacher shortages.

#### METHOD

For this study, we collected information on Canadian universities' pre-admission French competence measures, on the expectations of DHRs

and parents on the qualifications they considered necessary for FI teachers, and on the procedures used by school boards to verify those qualifications, specifically in the area of French language competence of the FI teacher. We used the following questions to guide our study:

1. What is the state of FI teacher supply, according to directors of human resources?
2. What is the minimum expected level of French competence of FI teachers according to school district DHRs and FI parents in BC?
3. What language competence assessment verification measures are in place upon admission to Canadian universities, at the point of teacher certification in BC, and on recruitment to school districts in BC?

Our data come from different sources: archival documents, interviews of professors in charge of language competence standards in Canadian universities, surveys sent to all British Columbia school districts comprising FI schools, and parallel surveys sent to 100 British Columbia parents, who were members of the Canadian Parents for French Association.

#### *Procedure*

We telephoned eight Canadian universities among those offering FI teacher-education programs to elicit information about their pre-admission French competence tests. We chose these universities purposefully to represent a broad spectrum of geographical regions in Canada. We obtained additional information about admission requirements at these universities from websites and a research article (Bayliss & Vignola, 2000).

We obtained information regarding British Columbia teacher certification through the BC College of Teachers, both by telephone and from published policy documents and from the BCCT website.

We also sent questionnaires about expectations of FI teachers' French language competence to all British Columbia school districts offering FI programs and to a sample of 100 parents chosen randomly among members of the Canadian Parents for French Association in these districts. Although questions about procedures to screen French competence at the district level were only sent to school districts, the

other questions were the same for parents and DHRs. The response rate was of 64 per cent for the school districts and 48 per cent for the parents.

We conducted seven follow-up interviews with DHRs and parents who indicated on their questionnaires that they were willing to discuss the questionnaire further.

School districts reported the supply of teachers on a seven-point scale ranging from 6+ fully qualified applicants per typical vacancy (7) to no qualified applicants (1). (See questions in Table 2).

*Table 2*  
*Relevant Survey Questions*

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1. For the purpose of this question, a fully qualified candidate is defined as one who has a very good command of French, has very good teaching skills, and has training in second language methodology.

On average in the 2001 - 2002 school year, we had the following type and number of applicants for each FI teaching vacancy... (circle one)

6+ fully qualified applicants	4-5 fully qualified applicants	2-3 fully qualified applicants	one (1) fully qualified applicant	applicants who satisfy two of the three above criteria	applicants who satisfy one of the three above criteria	no qualified applicants
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2. For the purpose of this question, a fully qualified candidate is defined as one who has a very good command of English, has very good teaching skills, and has training appropriate to his or her classroom assignment.

On average in the 2001 - 2002 school year, we had the following type and number of applicants for each English stream teaching vacancy... (circle one)

6+ fully qualified applicants	4-5 fully qualified applicants	2-3 fully qualified applicants	one (1) fully qualified applicant	applicants who satisfy two of the three above criteria	applicants who satisfy one of the three above criteria	no qualified applicants
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3. Does your district check the level of French competence of FI teacher candidates? Yes No  
If you answered yes to question 3, please answer questions 4 and 5.

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4. Please describe how this is done (letter of reference, practicum report, written test, etc.)

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Although we provided a definition of a fully qualified teacher, as shown in Table 2, we did not reveal our pre-determined cut-off of what constituted a teacher shortage. We asked respondents to indicate the

state of teacher supply in their school district in the 2001-02 school year. Table 3 gives our operational definition of teacher shortage, which states that a teacher shortage occurs if only one fully qualified teacher applies on average for each position advertised, or when applicants satisfy two or fewer of the three qualification criteria to be fully qualified. The three afore-mentioned criteria for a fully qualified FI teacher are (a) full, general teacher qualifications; (b) second-language instruction education; and (c) an acceptable level of French language competence.

*Table 3*  
*Teacher Supply Scale*

Supply Status	Operational Definition
No shortage	6+ fully qualified applicants* 4 - 5 fully qualified applicants 2 - 3 fully qualified applicants
Shortage	1 fully qualified applicant Applicants who satisfy two of three qualifications criteria Applicants who satisfy one of three qualifications criteria No qualified applicants

This scale is based on the reported average number of applicants per typical job posting in a given year.

## RESULTS

### *The Nature of FI Teacher Supply, as Defined by DHR (Question 1)*

In the survey regarding teacher supply using the Teacher Supply Spectrum, 56 per cent of school districts reported a shortage of FI teachers. On average, school districts in BC had one fully qualified applicant per FI job opening in the 2001-02 school year ( $M = 4.08$ ;  $SD = 1.47$ ). A breakdown of school districts according to their urban or rural situation showed that fully qualified FI teachers are more readily available in urban areas ( $M = 4.71$ ;  $SD = 0.99$ ) than in rural areas ( $M = 2.75$ ;  $SD = 1.49$ ). A one-way ANOVA of the supply of FI teachers yielded

a significant difference between urban and rural districts,  $F(1,23) = 15.42$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Comments from follow-up interviews with DHRs corroborated our operational definition of a teacher shortage. In a school district that typically had on average one fully qualified applicant per FI job opening (corresponding to our definition of a teacher shortage), a DHR said, "We are experiencing a 'choice shortage.' We get an applicant, but we might not get the right applicant." In another school district that generally had only partially qualified applicants, the DHR said, "It would be great to have a surplus of FI teachers like in the regular track. Now we have to take a chance on candidates. . . . If it is apparent that they are good teachers with experience, we start hiring on speculation."

*Parents' and DHRs' Expectations (Question 2)*

Parents and DHRs were asked to indicate the minimum level of French language competence that they expect of a FI teacher, using a five-point scale that corresponded to pass and failure levels of the *Test de Compétence Communicative de SFU et de UBC* (see Table 1).

Contrary to our conjecture, both groups had highly homogeneous expectations. Most respondents chose level four or five as the minimum acceptable level of French competence. The parent group had a slightly higher but not statistically significantly higher mean score ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) than did the DHR group ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ). Some 37 per cent of DHRs and 46 per cent of parents expected a minimum of a level 5 of French competence, while 59 per cent of DHRs and 52 per cent of parents expected a minimum of a level 4. Only 4 per cent of DHRs and 2 per cent of parents expected a minimum of a level 3.

*French Competence Quality Control Assurances for FI Teachers in British Columbia (Question 3)*

In this section, we present a snapshot of the teacher education, certification, and recruitment process in British Columbia, with a focus on the verification of language competence. Because teachers may come from anywhere in Canada, we first present the result of our inquiry about the French language assessment in national universities.

*Canadian universities' teacher education French language assessment.* A survey of the French language competence tests for preservice FI teachers at eight Canadian universities representing the different provinces having French teacher-education programs revealed a high degree of heterogeneity in the pre-admission French competence evaluation methods, rigour, duration, item types, correction methods, and orientation. Most universities indicated that they tested their candidates before entry to the teacher-education program, except for one that had a four-year program and tested at exit time. The least rigorous screening method took place at one university where students were not screened according to their level of French. That university relied on the students' self-identification as having the appropriate level of French to teach in FI. Among the universities which tested the level of French competence of applicants, the shortest test was a dictation and an 80-question multiple-choice test. The other six universities contacted used tests with oral and written components, including a selection of the following types of items: segmented dictations, reading comprehension (multiple choice), cloze tests, editing tasks, compositions, short answers, and role-plays. Some scoring methods used analytical scales, whereas others used global scales. Furthermore, some tests had a structural orientation, whereas others had a communicative orientation. These data indicate an absence of homogeneous testing methods for assessing the French language competence of pre-service FI teachers entering Canadian universities.

*French competence screening at the school district level.* All districts in the survey reported that they checked the level of French competence of FI teacher candidates. School districts differed in their choice of French competence assessment tools. Each district mentioned using one or more of the following informal tools for this purpose: an oral assessment, a written assessment, or reliance on external bodies or persons for their report of a candidate's level of French. Seventy-eight per cent relied partially or fully on transcripts, practicum reports, or references for their assessment of a candidate's French competence, and 48 per cent of respondents mentioned that they had a designated person (or persons) responsible for checking the level of French competence of prospective FI candidates in their comments, usually a French-speaking school

principal.

Ninety-three per cent of school districts assessed oral language skills, using an oral test, a pre-employment interview conducted in French, or a conversation in French. Some anecdotal comments underscored the informal nature of the assessments conducted by school districts. For example, one DHR wrote, "It is a check not a thorough evaluation."

Fifty-nine per cent of school districts also assessed writing skills, asking candidates to write a short composition or to present a written sample. In addition to oral or written assessments, school districts relied upon letters of reference, phoning references, practicum reports, and transcripts for their indication of a candidate's level of French language competence. Fifty-nine per cent of school districts relied on letters of reference, 48 per cent relied on reference checks by phone, 48 per cent relied on practicum reports, and 22 per cent used transcripts as indicators of a candidate's level of French language competence. Respondents were asked if they used the same procedure with every FI teacher candidate to ensure uniformity: 92 per cent of school districts stated that they used the same procedure for every applicant.

In a follow-up phone interview, one DHR described how applicants can highlight their French skills to obtain employment in FI. In the following quotation, the DHR states that even a candidate who has not used French since grade 12 should be hired to teach in French immersion.

Some applicants have started FI in grade six. But the big challenge for them is that they haven't spoken French since grade twelve. Then they realize, "Oops, there are no jobs out there. Let me see if I can improve my French to see if that will get me a job." Even in a forty-five minute interview, I can see these students who went through the FI program becoming more confident in their French. It comes back to them. They realize they said "le" instead of "la." They should be encouraged to teach in FI. (District Human Resource Director)

In summary, heterogeneity is the defining characteristic of French competence assessment at the school district level as it was with the French tests used at Canadian universities. Furthermore, the tests used by the districts are informal and have no demonstrated validity and reliability.

## DISCUSSION

Our results show that a teacher shortage exists and is expected to worsen, while at the same time expectations of parents and school district personnel remain high. To address this contradiction, what quality control assurances are in place to make sure that under-qualified teachers don't fill the vacancies occurring due to the teacher shortage?

### *Danger of Erosion of the FI Teachers' Qualifications*

Our study demonstrated a danger of erosion in the qualifications of FI teachers. Our results clearly confirm other studies and reports stating that a teacher shortage exists for FI, especially in the rural areas. A minority of districts had an adequate supply of FI teachers, while others were experiencing a "choice shortage." In some more extreme circumstances, school districts ended up hiring teachers who lacked either second-language methodology or did not have an adequate level of French or both. Once these teachers obtain a first contract in FI, they are considered to be experienced FI teachers and their seniority in the district will give them priority over fully qualified newcomers who might apply the following year.

Compounding the problem of the teacher shortage is the small number of graduates from the FI streams of preservice teacher-education programs in Canada. For example, in British Columbia in the 2001-2002 academic year, UBC and SFU produced a total of 19 teachers specializing in FI, and 31 in 2002-2003.

It seems problematic that at a time when many school districts are reporting shortages of FI teachers, enrolment in FI is rising, especially in British Columbia and the federal government has officially announced a goal of "doubling within ten years the number of high school graduates with a working knowledge of both English and French" (Dion, 2003). Furthermore, the general demand for teachers in Canada is expected to increase significantly in the coming years (Grimmett & Echols, 2000; Macfarlane & Hart, 2002; Parker & Byfield, 2001; Shafer & Byfield, 2001).

No clear plan exists to meet the FI teacher shortage to make the goal of the Canadian government workable. Some may therefore advocate

alternative certification, a practice of giving emergency credentials to those with bachelors' degrees but without teaching degrees as practised in the United States (Pipho, 1998). This solution has been found highly detrimental to student learning in the United States (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003).

Our results show that high standards continue to be expected of FI teachers in the realm of French competence by parents and school district directors of human resources; therefore, it is improbable that Canada would follow the same fruitless path to solve the teacher supply problem. Veilleux (2003) has found that parents and school district personnel were unwilling to lower standards even in the face of a shortage. Rather they thought that under-qualified teachers should take additional courses in French or second language methodology. These findings corroborate the results of a Vector poll that found that 80 per cent of Canadians surveyed were opposed to lowering standards of general teacher qualifications or of university admissions to teacher-education programs, even to address a future teacher shortage (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1999). However, is there a way to guarantee that standards will remain high despite a teacher shortage?

#### *Quality Control Gatekeepers*

Teacher education, certification, and recruitment represent three stages at which a prospective FI teacher level of French could be verified.

The first gatekeepers of high teachers' qualifications are generally the universities. At the teacher-education level, the rigorous screening process for French competence of some Canadian universities ensures a high quality of French of the FI teachers, corresponding to the expectations of DHRs and parents. However, these standards are not consistent across Canada because some of the instruments to test French competency have no demonstrated validity or reliability. Of course, all prospective teachers must obtain a teaching certificate or equivalent credentials to teach. But, we have shown, using the British Columbia example, those in charge of such credentials do not use tests to verify the level of French competence of FI teachers. Therefore, this second type of gatekeeper ensures high general qualifications for teachers but not

highly specialized qualifications such as French language competency or teaching methods to teach in FI.

In addition, some prospective teachers are allowed to teach without a teaching certificate in some provinces if they obtain a letter of permission from the institution granting teaching certificates (for example, the BCCT in BC). This practice may be considered a form of alternative certification and therefore constitute a danger of erosion of teachers' qualifications. However, at the present time, the low numbers do not warrant undue worries. For example, in the 2002-2003 school year, 72 teachers were teaching on letters of permission in British Columbia, two of whom were teaching in FI, according to the registrar of the BCCT (Personal communication, D. Smart, March 19, 2003). These numbers, small relative to the total number of certified teachers, suggest that alternative certification is not, at the moment, the path of choice in Canada. However, teaching with only a letter of permission remains a potentially undesirable possibility in the case of a worsening teacher shortage, depending on which formal qualifications have not been met.

The last place where French language competency of FI teachers could be verified is at the point of recruitment by school districts. Prospective FI teachers may come from the English stream, from other provinces where preservice teachers' French competence may be untested. Because many applicants can apply without verified qualifications to teach in FI, DHRs have the important and ultimate responsibility of making sure that applicants for FI positions are qualified for those specialized positions. Our results show that all districts verify this qualification in some way. However, oral French was the primary focus for most districts, and just over half of the districts reported checking written skills. The danger in not testing written skills is that DHRs may assume a highly proficient French speaker also has adequate writing skills. Yet the results from the *Test de Compétence Communicative de SFU et de UBC* often identify candidates who are heritage language learners and have a fluent oral but poor written competence. It is thus important to verify written as well as oral competence when hiring a FI teacher to ensure an adequate level of competence to teach the written components of French language arts.

In addition, a heterogeneous array of informal tools is used to test

French competence at the level of the district, not demonstrated to be valid or reliable. Typical tools used were informal conversations, phoning references to ask if an applicant's level of French was adequate, or verifying course work.

The opportunity to screen a candidate's level of French before hiring is critical because, once hired, a candidate is generally en route to permanent employment (Grimmett & Echols, 2000), and the potential damage of hiring teachers with inadequate French cannot be undone. "The selection process represents one of the quickest ways to initiate change and improvement in the services of a school organization. Every vacancy offers an opportunity to improve the quality and effectiveness of the organization's services" (Webb & Norton, 1999, p. 301). If this statement is true, is its opposite also true? Is a poor selection the quickest way to diminish the quality of a school's services or program? Poor choices in recruitment may have long term consequences.

#### *Applications and Implications for Further Research*

The FI teacher shortage adds pressure and urgency to a hiring scenario where reliable and measurably valid assessment tools of the French competence of immersion teachers are not currently being used. Although valid and reliable tests such as the one used by UBC and SFU exist, they are too costly, time consuming, and require a extensive training of proctors to be administered by school district on a regular basis. Consequently, FI teachers with high competence may teach alongside colleagues with a much lower level of French competence. Because school districts and parents are unanimous in expecting a high level of French competence of immersion teachers, more care should be given to developing sound, reliable, and practical tools for evaluating the French competence of immersion teachers. Although adequate French skills alone do not make a good FI teacher, common sense tells us that the level of French of the immersion teacher will affect students' acquisition of French.

School districts who have hired partially qualified teachers trained to teach French as a first language (such as francophones with an adequate level of French) need to provide second language teaching methodology

in-service to ensure that the best teaching practices are being used in FI. Similarly, teachers with inadequate French competence skills may also benefit from financial support to improve their oral and/or written skills in French such as the payment of tuition fees for French course or plane tickets to attend French language programs in francophone communities.

Because of constraints of time and cost, we did not study in depth the tests and methods used by districts to screen the French competence and relied only on the DHR's responses to our questionnaire. Therefore, the results of this study should be taken with a degree of caution. However, this study was exploratory in nature and the rich insights into current practices and trends would merit further study. Another area for further exploration would be to track the long-term improvement or deterioration of the French language skills of FI teachers with varied levels of French competence from the point of recruitment onward.

## CONCLUSION

The results of our study should be a catalyst for igniting a discussion around the implementation of uniform standards and the development of reliable and valid testing methods at the school district level for FI teachers across Canada. School districts might use outside agencies that have already developed reliable and valid tests to test prospective teachers. Another solution to this problem may be the development of pan-Canadian standards and a Canadian test that could be administered by universities or school districts that may wish to determine their own pass and fail cut off levels. A reliable and valid testing method would allow school districts to make a more informed choice about the candidates they are hiring.

Educators have an ethical responsibility to ensure the French competence of teachers as well as the adequacy of their knowledge of FI teaching methodology. They should therefore adopt rigorous language testing methods with high rates of validity and reliability. They should also provide in-service to teachers who may need it and take steps to provide better service to FI students. Without expecting perfection, it is imperative that high standards be maintained to protect the quality of

education in FI schools and the success of the program.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A concentration consists of 18 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year credits in a single teachable area during the Bachelor degree. A major consists of 21 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year credits in a single teachable area during the Bachelor degree.

<sup>2</sup> The oral portion of the test is audio recorded and includes a seven-minute extended role-play and ten short situations. The written portion consists of a dictation, ten short-answer questions, a cloze test, and a composition of 150 to 200 words. There are four equivalent forms of the test. The test validity has been established through a review done by a panel of Modern Language experts from across Canada. A high rate of inter-rater reliability was found, with  $r$  values ranging from .69 to .95, depending on the form used. This level of reliability is maintained through the intense training of proctors, on-going communication among proctors, and continuous updating of the correction key

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