

Setting the Context: Literacy in FSL

Introduction

Integrating literacy practices in French as a Second Language (FSL) teaching and learning is an effective way to motivate and engage students and to help them achieve success in French. Current research indicates that exploring a variety of aural, visual, and written texts leads to increased language proficiency in both students' first and second languages (Elley, 1991; Guthrie, 2004; Krashen, 2004). Students, teachers, administrators, and parents may all benefit from seeing more clearly how FSL contributes to and builds on students' literacy development, second-language learning, life skills, knowledge, and general education.

We have chosen to use the term “French as a Second Language” (FSL) in this resource to recognize the various contexts in which French is taught across Canada. Our primary audience is the professional community of French teachers who teach French as a subject area, in some cases called Core or Basic French in elementary FSL. The amount of time and intensity dedicated to FSL in these contexts vary from province to province. The general term FSL may also be used to refer to Immersion and Intensive French programs. What unifies all these contexts is the central concept that almost all elementary FSL students in Canadian schools today can develop literacy skills in first- and second-language learning.

How is Literacy Defined in FSL?

Literacy is an important educational concept around the world. However, there are many definitions used to define this complex concept. To understand literacy within the FSL context, the following definition proposed by the Ontario Ministry of Education is clear and useful:

“Literacy is... the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas. It enables us to share information, to interact with others, and to make meaning. Literacy is a complex process that involves building on prior knowledge, culture, and experiences in order to develop new knowledge and deeper understanding.”

Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004

This definition provides an excellent frame of reference for literacy in FSL, in part, because of the clear parallels it draws with the overall goals and outcomes of FSL curriculum documents from all Canadian provinces and territories and beyond (e.g., B.C. Ministry of Education, 2001; Atlantic Provinces Educational Foundation, 1996; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). Though elementary FSL students are limited in their ability to articulate critical thinking in French, the goal of all FSL programs across Canada is to engage students with texts aimed at developing their abilities to listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent in French. In addition, all programs promote a communicative-experiential approach to language learning in which interacting with others, making meaning, and sharing information are important. FSL programs across Canada, therefore, already promote literacy instruction.

When FSL students develop literacy skills in French, they become not only stronger literate learners in French, but also in English and in other languages. The FSL teacher plays a key role in helping students understand that the FSL classroom is indeed part of their literacy environment. In fact, FSL teachers *are* literacy teachers just like their colleagues in first language programs; many are already integrating literacy practices in their classes and developing students' literacy strategies. In some cases, these teachers may not feel conversant with literacy concepts used by their colleagues; this resource provides them with the literacy vocabulary and describes the concepts in FSL terms.

As a literacy teacher, the FSL teacher plays many roles in the classroom: organizer, facilitator, motivator, guide, information source, and language model. This resource provides many concrete examples of techniques that allow teachers to recognize the literacy practices they are already using. It also allows them to integrate additional literacy teaching into their FSL classes as they engage students with a variety of meaningful, age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and cognitively challenging texts.

What is a Literate FSL Student?

A literate FSL student does more than interpret and understand words when he or she interacts with a text, or tries to communicate in any language including in their second or additional language. Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1990) propose a useful model to describe the four roles of the literate student. This model was developed in a first-language context, but can be modified and applied in FSL for many reasons (see page 20, Figure 2). Although learning a second language is similar in many ways to first-language learning, there are also differences that impact literacy development.

Many elementary FSL students are already literate in at least one other language. This previous language learning experience is advantageous for students who already know how to decipher the alphabet, understand how letters combine to make words, and how words work together in structures to express meaning in sentences. These students normally have developed literacy skills that they can transfer to French. In addition, elementary FSL students can generally grasp and communicate somewhat complex ideas in

For more on the role of the FSL literacy teacher, see Big Idea 1, p. 34.

While there are many similarities between L1 and L2 learning, the variation in situation and other factors also produces many differences. One difficulty is filtering out differences that are accidental rather than inevitable. L1 children mostly acquire language in different settings with different exposure to language than L2 learners and they are at different stages of mental and social maturity.

(Cook, 2000)

For more on transfer between first, second, and additional languages, see Big Idea 5, p. 64.

their first language. We believe it is crucial for FSL teachers to make explicit connections to students' literacy skills in their first language, which they can activate and transfer to French class.

However, elementary FSL students do not have the vocabulary base, or understanding of how the French language works, to allow them to function at the same cognitive level as in their first language. Moreover, FSL is generally offered in short, non-intensive blocks of time. These challenges underline the importance for teachers to activate students' prior knowledge of, and experiences with, the themes and content that they develop in French class.

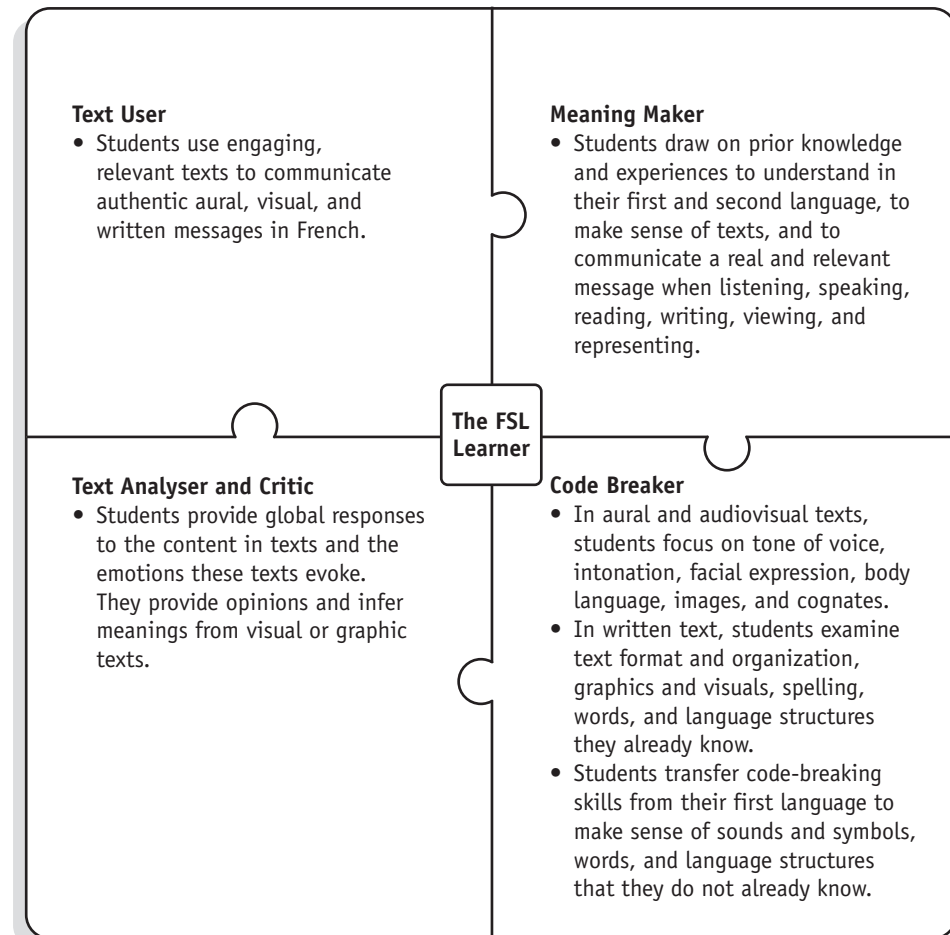
Despite the challenges of the FSL context, the Luke and Freebody model is a useful way to understand what a literate FSL student does to understand texts of all kinds. When FSL students encounter meaningful, age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and cognitively challenging texts at their linguistic level, they break the code in these texts and do much more than just focus on words and structures. However, in order to communicate effectively, students must also make meaning or sense of these texts; they must use these texts for concrete and real purposes. Students must analyse and critique them within the constraints of time and intensity, and their age and developmental level.

For more on breaking the code, see Big Idea 3, p. 47.

“Any program of instruction in literacy, whether it be in kindergarten, in adult second language classes, in university courses, or any points in between, needs to confront these roles (i.e., the four roles of the literate learner in FSL) systematically, explicitly, and at all developmental points.”
(Freebody, 1992)

Figure 2

The Four Roles of the Literate FSL Learner



Adapted from Freebody, P. "A Socio-Cultural Approach: Resourcing Four Roles as a Literacy Learner." In Watson, A. and Badenhop, A. (Eds.). *Prevention of Reading Failure*. Gosford: Ashton Scholastic, 1992.

Literacy Strategies Linking First- and Second-Language Learning

Research evidence shows how students who develop literacy skills in their second language are able to transfer these skills to their first language, and vice versa. Turnbull (1999) shows, for example, how Grade 9 Core or Basic French students engaged in a project-based and text-rich teaching approach outperform those who don't.

Admittedly, research in elementary FSL contexts is limited. However, research from other FSL contexts is relevant and has implications for elementary FSL. French immersion students learn foundational literacy skills in French before English instruction begins at school. These students successfully transfer these strategies when they use text and communicate in their first language (Swain et al., 1990; Turnbull, Lapkin, and Hart, 2001).

Similarly, students from Intensive French programs (Germain and Netten, 2004; Carr, 2007) spend one intensive school semester in French while the regular English curriculum is compacted into the second semester. Research shows that the literacy strategies these students develop in French are successfully transferred to English and to other school subjects taught in English. Regular Core or Basic French programs that have been modified as a follow-up for these intensive programs also include explicit literacy instruction. These students successfully develop literacy skills in French, which they transfer to English and other school subjects.

Research about “how learners learn best” also influences what we know about the potential of second-language learning to contribute to effective literacy development in general. In their recent book entitled *Literacy, Technology and Diversity: Teaching for Success in Changing Times*, Cummins, Sayers, and Brown (2007) draw upon Bransford's research to affirm that learning is greatly enabled when several key principles are followed. Bransford and colleagues emphasize three conditions for effective learning: engaging prior understandings, integrating factual knowledge into existing frameworks, and taking active control over the learning process. A fourth principle, which is equally important, involves learning in a supportive community.

These key principles of learning are reflected in recent educational practices around language and literacy in both English and French first-language settings in Canada. These same educational practices could be useful in second-language contexts such as FSL. The table on the following page (Figure 3) considers how these principles may be applied, keeping in mind the limitations of time and intensity imposed on FSL programs.

“The effect of learning a second language (e.g., French) on first language skills has been virtually positive in all studies. Although most studies on the effect of second language learning on first language literacy have been done in the area of French immersion education, one can also apply the findings to Core French and Intensive French programmes.”

(Bournot-Trites and Tellowitz, 2002)

Figure 3

Principles of Learning: Second-language Literacy

Students learn best when they...	Second-language students...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engage prior understandings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make connections between the text and their personal identities and background knowledge. • build on prior knowledge so that they can identify what they “need to know.” • learn new information in context. • acquire and practise vocabulary and basic structures in order to access texts. • make connections between their own language and other languages.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate factual knowledge into existing frameworks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seek out patterns and connections. • follow a model and practise with teacher coaching. • break new content into manageable chunks, and process one chunk at a time. • read for overall comprehension, not for word by word understanding.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gradually, with scaffolding, take control of the learning process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gradually become more autonomous in their learning. • apply key comprehension strategies. • become aware of language patterns in order to apply them to new situations. • talk about learning processes along the way. • use critical literacy skills, albeit in a limited way, depending on their language level. • generate new meanings and texts, and represent them in a variety of ways. • take ownership of their learning as they complete projects or tasks. • track their progress in the language through a portfolio or learning log. • reflect on learning. • self-assess to set further language learning goals.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participate in supportive communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follow a model and practise with a partner or in trios with teacher guidance. • work in pairs or groups on authentic tasks. • share new knowledge and demonstrate language learning to a real audience. • interact in a meaningful way with people who speak the target language. • take risks with the language in order to express meaning. • learn to ask questions and seek clarification to assist with meaning-making. • learn to self-monitor and self-correct. • develop an awareness of the relationship between a language and the cultures of those who live in the language.

For more on scaffolding, see Big Idea 2, p. 38.

For more on assessment opportunities, see Big Idea 4, p. 55.

Additional Benefits of Literacy Instruction in FSL

Learning a Language: Another Form of Literacy

Learning another language opens many doors. Those who believe that literacy extends beyond text-based literacy in the dominant language consider that learning an additional language means developing a new form of literacy—another bonus for students!

The concept of multiliteracies, a term first coined by a group of international scholars who formed the New London Group (1996), recognizes and validates the multilingual practices of citizens around the world. Multilingual citizens are more literate and better prepared than unilingual citizens to make sense of and communicate the variety of culturally specific forms of literacy available in complex pluralistic societies, such as those found in North America (Genesee and Cloud, 1998).

Organizations across Canada and around the world promote the cognitive, social, emotional, and economic benefits of learning an additional language. By promoting FSL education and helping students develop literacy strategies, we are empowering FSL students to become stronger multilingual citizens of the world. In addition, learning French in Canada equips students to communicate with Francophone Canadians within their own country and with the over 300 million French speakers around the world. Learning French and learning about Francophones promotes an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, essential for full participation in today's bilingual and multicultural Canada, and throughout the world.

“...there is a value-added benefit of not only developing a second (or third) language but also building cross-cultural skills at no cost to other educational goals.

(Genesee and Cloud, 1998)

For 700 reasons to study another language, refer to this Web site: <www.pearsonprofessionallearning.ca>.



“ Literacy is about more than reading and writing—it is about how we communicate in society... literacy takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted—but those who cannot use it [or don't know how to use it] are excluded from communication in today's world... literacy is freedom.”

(UNESCO, Statement for the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2003–2012)

Information, Communication, and Multimedia Technologies: Multimodal Literacy

The concept of multiliteracies also highlights the relevance and importance of helping students engage with texts associated with information, communication, and multimedia technologies (e.g., electronic text messages and Web sites, simple Web blogs, e-mail, PowerPoint®, and texts made using mind-mapping software like Inspiration® and Smart Ideas®). This resource promotes literacy instruction in FSL that engages students in a multimodal way—that is, literacy instruction that helps students make sense of texts produced in a variety of modes: aural, audiovisual texts; electronic, artistic and graphic texts; and written texts. This multimodal approach will help students function, in French and in their first language, as well as in a globalized, technologically sophisticated, and knowledge-based society.

In Summary...

- Implementing literacy practices in junior FSL programs is both feasible and desirable.
- Integrating a literacy focus in FSL constitutes added value for students' overall education.