


Didactization of L2 French variation in a complex context

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Abstract

Even though variation is an inherent element of language and its different aspects have been the subject of numerous studies, its didactization in Second Language classrooms remains, in general, marginal. The context of teaching variation in a French as a Second Language (FSL) classroom in Ontario (Canada) is even more complex. What kind of French to teach: European or Canadian? What is the place of local varieties of Canadian French? This paper investigates the sociolinguistic variation in the speech of first-year FSL students in a Canadian university who have learned their second language primarily in an educational context. A range of social factors that influence sociolinguistic competence are explored. Pedagogical implications of observed results are discussed. Designing didactic materials that value work on varieties of spoken French is emphasized. The role of CEFR-oriented professional development in FSL teaching is highlighted.

Keywords: *FSL, Canadian university, sociolinguistic competence, lexical variation, CEFR.*

1. Introduction

As a component of communicative language ability, sociolinguistic competence refers to the sociocultural factors of language use (Council of Europe, 2018). Geographical, stylistic, and social variation at the lexical and grammatical levels is among the various aspects of sociolinguistic competence.

Although the development of sociolinguistic competence is encouraged by educational (Council of Europe, 2018; CMEC, 2010) and sociolinguistic research (Bayley & Regan, 2004; Mougeon et al., 2010), it is often neglected over linguistic competence in FSL classrooms in Ontario (Rehner, 2010, 2011; Rehner & Mougeon, 2003). The integration of the lexical variation into Canadian FSL classrooms certainly poses some fundamental challenges, especially when French is in a minority context (e.g. Ontario) and the French-speaking population is very heterogeneous ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)). For example, in Ontario, different varieties of French are in diglossic relationships with each other: (i) although spoken by a minority of population, European French is considered the norm; (ii) varieties of Laurentian French (Ontario and Quebec French) are strongly devalued (linguistic insecurity); and (iii) other French varieties (e.g. African French) are not recognized.

Several studies on the speech of FSL learners in Ontario pointed out that the language acquired in the classroom is different from the one spoken outside of the classroom (Mougeon & Rehner, 2015). More specifically, FSL learners in Ontario classrooms are overexposed to (super)formal forms but lack awareness of the authentic language spoken outside the formal setting. This trend is systematic in a French-minority setting among FSL learners where exposure to authentic language is limited (Mougeon et al., 2010). Furthermore, the study by Rehner et al. (2021) points out the relevance of teachers' training based on the principles of the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR) in the development of sociolinguistic competence among FSL learners.

2. Method

The objective of our project is twofold:

- (1) To evaluate the level of sociolinguistic competence among first-year university FSL learners in a Canadian university.
- (2) To propose pedagogical resources and tools to foster students' sociolinguistic competence.

To accomplish the first objective, an online survey was administered to all first-year students in the FSL program at the University of Guelph (Ontario, Canada)¹. Participants included 43 first-year students who took 24 weeks of FSL courses. All participants are English L1 users (native or with high level of proficiency). Participants' French proficiency level approximately equates to an average CEFR level of A2. 83% of participants are female and 17% are male between 17 and 22 years old.

The online questionnaire (30 questions) was created and distributed via [Qualtrics](#). The survey included multiple choice and association questions, Likert items, and an open-ended section. This survey was designed to:

- identify students' sociolinguistic profiles (e.g. gender, age, mother tongue, languages spoken at home)
- investigate students' academic and linguistic backgrounds in French (e.g. participation in exchange programs, type of French program ([Core, Immersion or Intensive French](#)), level of Diplôme d'études en langue française/[DELF](#))
- elicit students' auto-evaluation of their language skills (e.g. oral and written comprehension and production, level of comfort with French in different situations)
- obtain quantitative data about the students' lexical preferences (as a component of sociolinguistic competence).

We also carried out a documentary analysis of teaching resources used in first-year FSL courses. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine instructors teaching first-year courses to understand their attitudes towards the place of sociolinguistic competence in the FSL curriculum.

3. Results

The majority of participants (80.4%) have English as the mother tongue but they constantly speak at home an additional language other than French (e.g. Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Punjabi, or Polish). For all except two students, French is their third language. The majority of participants (74%) use at least two languages at home, none speak French at home. 56% of participants completed either the French Immersion or Core French education system. 70.5% of participants have more than five years of experience in French (34% among them have more than 12 years). An overwhelming majority of participants expressed confidence with reading and writing tasks but much less confidence in oral comprehension and production tasks (analyses results of the Likert items) and reported recurrent difficulties with understanding French spoken outside of the classroom. Most participants expressed feeling comfortable speaking French in the classroom and with teachers, but felt intimidated speaking with native speakers of French, individually or in groups. Participants reported that their preferred activity outside of the classroom was watching movies in French and listening to French music². Our participants are not keen about social media in French or taking part in Francophone communities. Less than 35% participated in exchange programs or traveled to Francophone places in or outside of North America.

For the questions about lexical choices (see Table 1), the results indicated a clear preference for more

¹ Due to adherence to the University of Guelph Research Ethics Boards policies, our project obtained ethics approval to engage with participants.

² In comments sections, students elaborated on types of music they listen to and movies they watch. None of the answers mentioned sources coming from Canadian French (all are exclusively from France).

(super)formal forms, with 65% of participants using exceptionally (super)formal variants and 35% using a combination of formal and less formal forms (but with a significant predominance of more formal ones). The results also show the insignificant use of terms characteristic of Canadian (Laurentian) French (e.g. *allô* 'hi', *jaser/commérer* 'to chat', *chocolatine* 'chocolate croissant', *chicaner* 'to dispute, to fuss', *char* 'car', *tantôt* 'soon, later').

Table 1. Lexical Preference Among FSL Learners [Total – 43 speakers]. **In bold** – informal and vernacular forms.

	Number of Occurrences	%
<i>bonjour</i> 'hello, hi'	29	67%
<i>salut</i>	11	25.5%
<i>allô</i>	3	7%
<i>bavarder</i> 'to talk, to chat'	30	70%
<i>jaser</i>	10	23%
<i>commérer</i>	3	7%
<i>travail</i> 'a workplace'	24	56%
<i>emploi</i>	16	37%
<i>boulot</i>	1	2%
<i>job</i>	2	5%
<i>auto</i> 'a car'	13	30.2%
<i>voiture</i>	30	69.8%
<i>automobile</i>	0	0
<i>bagnole</i>	0	0
<i>char</i>	0	0
<i>pain au chocolat</i> 'chocolate croissant'	38	88%
<i>chocolatine</i>	5	12%
<i>rire</i> 'to laugh'	39	90%
<i>rigoler</i>	4	9%
<i>patron</i> 'manager, boss'	13	30%
<i>chef</i>	23	53%
<i>boss</i>	7	16%
<i>nous</i> 'we'	15	35%
<i>on</i>	28	65%
<i>alors</i> 'so'	19	44%
<i>donc</i>	24	56%
<i>so</i>	0	0
<i>Allons-y!</i> 'Let's go!'	29	67%
<i>On y va!</i>	14	33%

The crosstabulation of the data indicated that students who participated in exchange programs in Francophone places across Canada (e.g. [Chicoutimi](#), [Trois-Pistoles](#)) are more familiar with lexical variability. Compared to students who completed [Core French schools](#) and showed no awareness of [Canadian features](#), French Immersion

students seemed to be more aware of variability but prefer to imitate the instructors' speech and to use language acquired from manuals. Our literature review of the teaching materials used in FSL first-year courses shows that the language taught in the classroom is far from representing the linguistic reality outside of the classroom. This finding replicates Detey (2017) and Rehner & Mougeon (2003).

4. Discussion and Recommendations

Our study investigated the sociolinguistic competence of first-year FSL students in a Canadian university. One important finding was the observation of students' weak (or lack of) sociolinguistic competence. Although, with 5 to 12 years in FLS education, first-year university students have no basic awareness of existing variation across varieties of French language. Sadly, they are not even aware of basic characteristics of Canadian (Laurentian) French. The gap between students' acquired French in the classroom and the language spoken outside of the classroom is significant. As a result, FSL learners have low proficiency in oral comprehension and production and experience important difficulties in understanding French outside of the classroom. They feel highly frustrated and demotivated, with no interest to integrate in Francophones community outside of the formal setting. Our findings are aligned with studies pointing out insufficient educational input of the authentic language (Mougeon et al., 2010; Pöll, 2005).

A combination of factors may have contributed to the observed weak sociolinguistic competence. Firstly, as mentioned above, there is an insufficient input to the authentic language via educational materials. Our content analyses of the didactic materials used in the classroom determined a striking lack of exposure to the authentic use of Canadian French (e.g. no mention of lexical or grammatical variation, limited number of tasks exploring the use of Canadian French, and no explicit instruction of sociolinguistic competence). The analyzed educational materials suggest that students do not receive sociolinguistically-oriented FSL teaching. Secondly, favouring (super)formal variants can be attributed to the imitation of FSL instructors' speech, as many FSL instructors in Ontario have French as L2 or L3, and their speech is not always representative of Canadian French. Thirdly, many FSL instructors are not familiar with sociolinguistically-oriented FSL teaching promoted by CEFR. Also, limited exposure to authentic language outside of the classroom in a French-minority province, such as Ontario, represents a huge difficulty for the development of sociolinguistic competence among FSL students. Finally, negative attitudes (from students and instructors) towards varieties of Canadian French and the preference for idealized French spoken in Europe is an additional challenging factor in French-minority communities in Canada (Arnott, 2016; Arnott et al., 2019). In line with that, interesting findings emerged from our analysis of instructors' interviews: (i) general pro-normative attitude towards the European French norm rather than Canadian French; (ii) avoidance of less formal or vernacular forms; and (iii) the lack of CEFR and sociolinguistically oriented training (auto-perception).

Our results suggest that if the goal of FSL teaching is to form active participants of Francophone communities and to make our FSL learners capable of functioning in Canadian French communities, it is by no means achieved. We urge for a reconsideration of learning objectives and teaching practices in FSL programs for targeting the development of sociolinguistic skills. For example, to raise FSL learners' awareness of sociolinguistic aspects of French we call for more representation of Canadian French in educational materials (e.g. explicit and contextualized awareness of lexical variability via authentic documents and corpora). It could be done by using various free online authentic teaching materials with a high degree of variability targeting oral comprehension and production based on everyday Canadian (Laurentian) French ([FrancoTolie](#); [LISEO](#); [PFC Enseignement du français](#); [Corpus divers](#); [Bazzo.tv](#); [Radio-Canada](#); [Tou.tv](#); [Briser le code](#); [Kebec](#)).

To raise FSL learners' sociolinguistic awareness, real-life language tasks can take the form of brainstorming or research activities on lexical variation. Play activities can take many forms to teach a variety of sociolinguistic skills (e.g. board games, card games, and role-playing). One example of a play activity is the card game [Francophonies: Le grand jeu de toutes les langues françaises](#), which introduces players to lexical variations across the French-speaking world. Short exchange programs in Canadian French communities (e.g. [Explore](#)) should be mandatory and systematic to increase interaction with the target language in order to develop positive

attitudes toward the target language and develop sociolinguistic competence. Finally, systematic extracurricular activities within Francophone communities should be an integral part of the FSL curriculum.

5. Conclusions

The results of our study show that the need for updating educational materials and pedagogical practices in FSL teaching in Ontario is undeniable to better reflect the Canadian reality. Our study emphasized the instrumental importance of the shift toward sociolinguistic-oriented language teaching and learning with the focus on authentic listening and speaking tasks and reevaluated assessment. We proposed a list of pedagogical resources for further developing sociolinguistic competence for first-year students at the post-secondary level. We also call for increased interaction with the target language during exchange programs so that learners are able to be part of Francophone community outside of the classroom.

The results from interviews with university instructors also showed the relevance of providing professional development for FSL instructors to interpret action-oriented pedagogy and sociolinguistic-driven teaching promoted by the CEFR. Finally, we take the opportunity to stress the undeniable importance of collaborative work between sociolinguists working on Canadian French and FSL educators in Canadian classrooms.

It is hoped that this paper might be used to reduce learning barriers FSL students encounter outside of classrooms. Although the study had a limited number of participants, its results replicated several studies on sociolinguistic competence among pre-university FSL students in Ontario, Canada. While this is promising, research investigating the factors driving sociolinguistic competence is a necessary step in further evaluating its efficacy.

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