



FOUR PROVINCES, FOUR DAYS:

Report on Atlantic Round Table Discussions on the Continuum of
Second-Language Learning Opportunities

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Four Provinces, Four Days:

Report on Atlantic Round Table Discussions on the Continuum of Second-Language Learning Opportunities

Follow-up to the study *Two Languages, a World of Opportunities: Second-language learning in Canada's universities*

Introduction:

The Commissioner of Official Languages' study entitled *Two Languages, a World of Opportunities: Second-language learning in Canada's universities*, published in October 2009, was the basis for a series of round tables organized in collaboration with the provincial branches of Canadian Parents for French in the four Atlantic provinces. The goal of these meetings was to reflect on the issues raised in the report and to initiate a dialogue with the participants to improve second-language learning opportunities in Atlantic universities.

The study:

In 2007, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages initiated a large-scale study to improve its knowledge of second-language learning opportunities available in Canadian universities and to determine existing best practices, challenges and opportunities for improvement.

The study found that while the vast majority of institutions offer second-language programs, there are still significant gaps. While the approaches taken by universities may vary based on their particular situation, the study identified priority areas for attention:

- Increase opportunities for more intensive second-language learning;
- Exploit the full potential of minority-language institutions;
- Improve partnerships, collaboration and use of technology;
- Increase exchanges and real-life opportunities to use one's second language.

In the study, the Commissioner also made a number of concrete recommendations for government and universities, and suggestions for future studies. According to the Commissioner, creating a true second-language learning continuum, from elementary school to the labour market, is crucial. In order to create such a continuum, the Commissioner believes that universities must offer a wider range of learning opportunities that meet the diverse needs of their students.

The round tables:

Each Atlantic branch of Canadian Parents for French contributed to the organization of a round table in its respective province. The round tables, all of which were held on university campuses, took place as follows:

- March 16 at the Université de Moncton, New Brunswick;
- March 17 at Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia;
- March 18 at the University of Prince Edward Island, Prince Edward Island;
- March 19 at Memorial University, Newfoundland.

Participants at the round tables included:

- University representatives at various levels, such as faculty deans and professors;
- College representatives;
- Provincial government representatives, mainly from departments of Education;
- Representatives of federal institutions and federal councils;
- Students participating in the various programs offered;
- Representatives of Canadian Parents for French;
- Representatives of various school boards;
- Primary and secondary second-language teachers;
- Representatives of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers;
- Representatives of Francophone community organizations;
- Other guests, including a private-sector representative and New Brunswick's Commissioner of Official Languages.

The round tables were all organized in more or less the same way in the four Atlantic provinces. After an introduction by a representative of Canadian Parents for French, Gilbert Taylor—the Commissioner's representative for the Atlantic region and the facilitator of the round tables—presented the background and objectives of the session:

- To reflect on the issues raised in the report;
- To pay particular attention to certain previously identified recommendations;
- To initiate a dialogue with key stakeholders to see how, on a provincial basis, it would be possible to improve second-language learning opportunities in universities in the Atlantic region.

Participants then introduced themselves and said a few words about why they were interested in the subject matter included in the study. This very rich discussion, where several issues raised in the study were addressed, was followed by a presentation by study coordinator Mylène Thériault on the general conclusions of the study. This laid the groundwork for subsequent discussions.

The recommendations identified in advance for discussion purposes were as follows:

Recommendation 3: *A new fund*

- The Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that the Government of Canada and the provincial and territorial governments establish a new fund to provide financial assistance to universities to develop and implement new initiatives to improve second-language learning opportunities. This fund should not, however, diminish the existing support as well as the need for additional support of minority-language and bilingual institutions.

Recommendation 5: *Taking action*

- The Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that individual institutions develop strategies and action plans to improve second-language learning opportunities in the context of each institution's own situation and circumstances.

Recommendation 9: *Further study*

- The Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that governments, universities, the private sector and other organizations undertake further research on second-language learning at the university level.

These recommendations did not dictate the course of the discussions but rather were a starting point. While several of the points discussed had a direct link to the recommendations, the discussion was not limited to these recommendations. In general, the discussions covered the issues raised in the study, the participants' experience with the issue in question, and possible approaches for improving second-language learning opportunities in Canadian universities.

Common elements from the round tables:

While certain issues arose in only some provinces, other themes were common to the discussions in all four Atlantic provinces.

The question of demand – how to trigger awareness:

Many participants felt that what seems to motivate students is not necessarily the idea of having a better job in the distant future. While the reality may be that learning a second language will open lots of doors professionally—something that needs to be better conveyed to students—many thought that students' true motivation must be intrinsic and should be linked to the concept of the acknowledgment of self and others. Participants believed that learning a second language gives access to much more than just the language itself; it also allows one to discover the culture that is associated with that language.

As such, several people agreed that we need to promote “special” experiences that trigger this awareness. Students have to get out of the school bubble and be plunged into a context where they no longer have their familiar reference points. Such an experience allows them to open themselves to new things and realize who they are and where they're going. Participants agreed that programs such as Explore and those administered by SEVEC play an important role in fostering awareness, in addition to greatly contributing to building the Canadian identity. Furthermore, even youth seem more and more aware of the contribution of this type of program since, for example, applications to the Explore program are on the rise.

In the four provinces, the majority of participants agreed that it is necessary for youth to have greater access to these types of programs, or at the very least, the opportunity to discover Canada's linguistic communities, both at the secondary and university levels. These programs help build bridges between the two linguistic communities. Students need to have contact with peers who speak their second language. This is often what makes learning a second language relevant for them.

At the four round tables, participants suggested that youth need to have access to success stories about young people like themselves who continued learning their second language and were successful. This, according to participants, would serve to promote a bilingual identity. While in some provinces, participants thought these success stories need to come from peers, other participants believed that these stories should come from people like Sidney Crosby and other Canadian Olympic athletes who have realized the importance of being able to express themselves in both of Canada's official languages.

Promoting second-language learning opportunities throughout the continuum:

At all the round tables, the majority of participants agreed that the messages conveyed to youth from secondary school onwards are somewhat contradictory. Even though they are told that immersion and second-language learning are important, there are very few content courses taught in French at the secondary level. A number of participants even questioned the idea that there is true immersion at the secondary level, due to the low number of real immersion courses offered. This is sometimes combined with the fact that students are encouraged by some to leave immersion programs in secondary school. However, the majority of participants agreed that it is essential from secondary school onwards to create a culture where these opportunities are valued, and not the opposite.

There seems to be a widely held belief that by grade 10 or 11 students will have completed their second-language learning. However, learning a second language is a lifelong process and completing high school is just the beginning. Participants believed that students need to be offered additional opportunities to use the language after they have completed high school. They need to know what those opportunities are, and the people guiding these students need to know and promote the value of learning a second language.

In fact, all participants felt that teachers, principals, guidance councillors, universities and the community should all be sending a clear message to students and their parents about the value of second-language learning. Many participants believed that there is a lot of myth busting to be done in relation to second-language learning.

Importance of content:

Another concept that came up at several round tables is the fact that second-language learning must be more than learning the language itself. It must also involve developing cultural competencies and content.

Students in all four round tables were quite adamant that there is a need for universities to offer meaningful discipline courses in French. Second-language learning courses linked to a particular academic subject, such as business French, were also cited as a good example of the types of opportunities students are looking for. Students felt that it was essential to make second-language learning practical. Students do not necessarily want to study literature; they want content that is relevant to their field of study. There is a need for French departments to better respond to the needs of students.

Partnerships:

In a period where universities are facing tough choices due to financial difficulties, many participants thought that improving second-language learning opportunities was only realistically possible through increased partnerships and collaboration between universities or with colleges. However, the way participants believed such partnerships should be developed in order to achieve better results varied greatly from one province to another.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

The question of having a common measurement framework to ensure a better transition between the different levels was raised in many provinces. In Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, there was a lot of interest among the round-table participants in these provinces in the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages. Nova Scotia is currently investing in using the Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELF) to evaluate students' language skills based on the levels of the framework.

In Newfoundland, many felt that the recent statement by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to encourage provinces to look into the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a rather weak statement. However, they truly believed that the Framework and its different components are here to stay and that the provinces, universities and governments need to get on board if this initiative is to be truly valuable.

Going forward:

In all four provinces, participants agreed that this first discussion is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue on the issue, and that it is important for this dialogue to continue. Most of the participants also believed that it is essential that key people who were not at these round tables be informed of the conclusions of this initiative and that they be encouraged to take part in the ongoing dialogue and the next steps as well.

Issues specific to the four provinces:

New Brunswick:

In New Brunswick, the very lively discussions dealt with several issues that are more specific to this province and its universities. These issues included creating a new fund, student motivation and needs, possible impacts on French-language institutions like the Université de Moncton and potential partnerships.

A new fund:

Participants present agreed that there is a need to fund new initiatives related to second-language learning at the university level. However, they also strongly believed that the creation of such a new fund should not take away from the funding that is already in place. Also, while new money for any second-language learning initiative is welcomed, an accountability process should be in place to ensure that the money is used for that specific purpose. In fact, many felt generally that the federal government should examine the way funds in education are allocated to the province.

Different clients = different needs:

At the New Brunswick round table, it quickly became evident that the universities have two distinct clienteles with very different needs. First, there are students who have the ability to function in their second language and can benefit from programs like the Université de Moncton's Groupe-pont or from spending a semester at a French-language university. Second, there are students who do not yet have this level of language skills and who could benefit from classes in French at an English-language university. It is important to address both these client groups and to avoid doing everything for one and nothing for the other.

Motivation:

Because most Canadian universities no longer have second-language requirements, several participants at the Université de Moncton round table thought that there were no more real incentives for students to continue learning their second language at the secondary and

university levels. In this context, the idea was raised of granting bursaries to encourage students to study at a Francophone university, for example.

Furthermore, according to some of the participants, only by being able to express oneself in both official languages is one able to take part in major national debates and consequently major projects involving Canadian society. Canadians no longer accept that these debates take place only in the language of the majority, and youth must be aware of this.

Impacts on the Francophone environment:

A question asked at the round table was whether the Université de Moncton had received negative feedback about the integration of Anglophone students in its essentially Francophone campus. The response from both university representatives and students was no, since at this point there were only about a hundred Anglophone students on the campus. However, this issue may be part of a more long-term discussion surrounding the university's primary mission, which is to provide quality post-secondary education for the Acadian and Francophone community.

Regarding the learning of English as a second language, the Université de Moncton is in the process of reviewing its undergraduate programs to include proficiency in both official languages as a graduation requirement.

Partnerships:

The partnerships between the province's universities were perceived as an important factor in improving second-language learning opportunities. However, there are already some interesting initiatives underway in this area. For example, the Université de Moncton and Mount Allison University are currently developing a joint bachelor's program in public administration where students would spend three years at one of the universities and one year at the other.

Representatives of the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton also mentioned the possibility of considering a partnership between these two institutions to create more immersion opportunities in the province.

However, some participants thought it was important to promote this idea of partnership even further. They also suggested that a formal second-language collaboration and exchange structure for the province's universities, for both students and professors, be created.

Concrete commitment for moving forward:

The representative of the Department of Education said it would be prepared to meet with representatives of Canadian Parents for French and other stakeholders to discuss how to best promote immersion programs and their advantages at the secondary level. The department would also like to develop more courses in French for secondary-level immersion programs so there is a more tangible link to the university level.

Nova Scotia:

In Nova Scotia, the many universities present and the varied sectors represented by the different participants had an impact on the issues discussed. These issues included what the new fund could look like, how a bilingual workforce is an asset for both the public sector and the private sector, and how to go forward on this issue.

Important questions:

Many participants in Nova Scotia felt that important questions need to be answered in order to better establish how to go forward and improve second-language learning opportunities at every level in the province. One of these questions was “what do we truly want immersion programs to produce?” Answers to this question would help better determine what opportunities should be offered.

Another essential question was do we, as a society, truly value the ability to speak more than one language? If so, many participants felt that actions need to be taken so that society in general understands why this is important. Leadership needs to be demonstrated, whether at the primary and secondary school level, at the university level or in society in general. Public figures need to lead the way and demonstrate that they value linguistic duality. Some participants felt that if we do not embrace this diversity, we will be limited as a society.

A new fund:

Representatives from different universities had multiple questions on the recommendation that dealt with the creation of a new fund. Many questioned specifically the size of the fund. Some thought that this fund would need to be significant if universities are to invest time and resources in preparing proposals. If the fund is too small, universities will simply not go through the hassle of presenting proposals.

Asset for the private sector as well as the public sector:

In Nova Scotia, the participation of a representative from the private sector broadened the discussion. This person reiterated that private sector companies are often looking for employees able to function in both official languages. In fact, many participants criticized the emphasis that is placed on language skills as an asset solely for the Federal Public Service. Rather, language skills should be seen as important transferable skills that are valued as much in the private sector as in the public sector.

Going forward:

There seemed to be interest from the Dalhousie University School of Public Administration to set up a pilot project where master’s students could take certain courses in French. However, funding is needed to set up such a project and the person responsible wondered what funding sources were currently available.

Another important element discussed was how to reach the private sector. Often people working in human resources understand the need for this skill, but the organization as a whole does not necessarily share this perception. In terms of going forward, participants suggested entering into dialogue with umbrella organizations, such as chambers of commerce, to educate them on the importance of promoting linguistic duality and how this can make economic sense.

In terms of concrete steps, universities represented at this round table agreed that an exchange group should be created to discuss how to move forward. This group would consist of representatives from different Nova Scotia universities as well as provincial representatives. In the longer term, participants thought that it might be interesting to see if such a collaboration could be possible with universities in other provinces as well.

Prince Edward Island:

Unlike New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island has only one university, which meant that most of the discussions centred on what the University of Prince Edward Island can do to improve its second-language learning opportunities. Nevertheless, the presence of representatives from the Collège de l'Acadie led to interesting discussions on potential partnerships. The topics discussed varied from the importance of experiencing success to how to increase demand and how to create stronger ties with the Francophone community.

Experiencing success:

In Prince Edward Island participants agreed that students need to feel what it means to be successful in their second-language learning experience in order for them to want to pursue that experience. Participants mentioned how intensive programs offer students the opportunity to experience success. In essence, to experience success, students need to feel good about themselves. They need to know where they are, where they want to be, and how to get there. Failure to experience such success at an early age will often lead students to drop out of French programs. In other words, students need to have a sense of where they stand, which involves evaluation and testing.

The question of demand:

The question of demand was raised somewhat differently in Prince Edward Island. A number of participants questioned the idea that universities must constantly try to best meet their clients' demands. Constantly bending to what students think should be done does not necessarily create positive results. Some said that the university should instead require in its programs that students continue learning their second language. This requirement would necessarily lead to a growth in demand for these types of learning opportunities at university.

For others, a balance between students' needs and expectations and pedagogical objectives must be met. This, however, means that the university must have a vision and understanding of what students need. In this context, the idea of having courses in French or French-as-a-second-language courses that tie in with a discipline was raised.

Learning from the interest in other languages:

Some felt that one issue hindering students' motivation to learn French is the fact that, unlike other languages, French is not perceived as a language of power. As an expression of this tendency, the university has seen an increase in the demand for Spanish courses. Some felt that we had much to learn from this desire to learn Spanish.

The University of Prince Edward Island's contribution:

The majority of participants agreed that it is necessary to have committed leadership at the university to promote second-language learning. For instance, even if the university would like to offer more subject-matter courses in French, preparing this type of course entails having language professors also become professors of other subjects, which can create a heavy burden for them. In this context, the support and leadership of the university becomes crucial.

There was also a lot of talk about the need for qualified language teachers at the primary and secondary level. These people often have a real impact on whether or not students decide to pursue their second-language learning. In order to fulfill this need, the university is presently

looking to offer a bachelor's degree in French education where students would take courses in both French and English, with the opportunity to do their course work in the language of their choice.

Ties to the Francophone community:

Representatives of the university wondered how the University of Prince Edward Island can serve as a bridge between the province's two official language communities. They felt the university should not be perceived as a tool of assimilation. To counter this, the possibility of offering summer courses with a significant cultural component was suggested. This could be done in collaboration with Prince Edward Island's Francophone community. The idea was also raised of having work placements in the Francophone community for students taking the business French course.

The majority of participants agreed that to make the language relevant to youth, the Francophone community should play a major role. Participants also agreed that there should be greater collaboration between the University of Prince Edward Island and the Collège de l'Acadie. For example, the Collège could complement what the university currently offers.

Funding:

Several participants agreed that there is currently not enough funding to offer further second-language learning opportunities at the university level. In addition, if there is an increase in demand, then more resources and therefore additional funding will also be required.

Some thought that the province will invest in second-language learning opportunities only if doing so will not affect the sums invested in K-12 programs. These programs, participants felt, have been and will remain the priority.

Other participants present also raised certain issues related to funding for research. Since Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) does not fund the documentation of best practices, which is necessary in this field of study, research in this field is greatly limited.

Going forward:

One interesting observation made in terms of going forward is the need to amend the *Official Languages Act* in order for it to truly promote the use of both official languages. Some participants felt that the Act, as it stands today, actually undermines efforts made to promote bilingualism (English and French) across the country since it is designed to protect the rights of those who are unilingual.

Many participants thought that the round table lacked the presence of key decision-makers who have an impact on this issue. They felt that the results of the round-table discussions should be brought to the attention of these decision-makers by people who did participate. Here again, many participants thought it important that this dialogue continue in order to determine how existing resources may be used to fill gaps.

Newfoundland:

As was the case in Prince Edward Island, discussions in Newfoundland dealt to a great extent with how Memorial University, the only university in the province, could better respond to the needs of its students in terms of second-language learning opportunities. The issues discussed

were varied and included how technology can be better utilized, the need for more information and collaboration, and concrete suggestions on how to go forward.

Continuum:

As in Nova Scotia, participants felt it important to answer one question: what are the desired outcomes for students? Only by answering this question will it be easier to develop opportunities to meet these outcomes at every level.

Some participants also felt that since, at present, nowhere in Canada is French as a second language required in grades 10 to 12, a very negative message is being sent to students. Such a negative message, they felt, is also having a domino effect at the university level.

Participants believed that recognition is essential—and at every level. By way of example, a participant suggested crediting the Explore program in high school and university. Also, the idea of evaluating students' proficiency levels with a common tool at the end of their programs, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, was perceived as another type of positive incentive for students.

Technology:

An important subject of discussion in Newfoundland related to how technology can be used to offer students diverse second-language learning opportunities. Already this province has developed a particular expertise in this area and has demonstrated that, through the use of technology, it is possible for students to experience success in their second-language learning endeavours. With the programs presently offered at the high school level, students have access to authentic and dynamic resources that enable them to interact with others. Participants who have experienced these programs first-hand felt that, if technology is used properly, this approach can be just as effective as a classroom.

Memorial University has begun using technology to offer second-language learning opportunities. In fact, students from across Canada can currently participate in these courses. However, there was a sense from participants that more needs to be done to explore these possibilities. Also, participants felt that there is still considerable misunderstanding surrounding the use of technology and that more needs to be done for it to be better understood and promoted.

Need for more information:

Participants in the round table believed that there is a great need for more statistics on the different segments of the student population at Memorial University, such as whether students were in early French immersion, late French immersion or Core French prior to entering university. As was also raised in New Brunswick, in a different context, these different groups have different needs and being able to offer them opportunities that respond to their needs is essential.

Participants also believed that there is already a certain capacity for teaching courses in French outside of the university's French department. Therefore, more information on professors who would be able to teach these courses would be very beneficial in determining the capacity for offering different types of opportunities.

Collaboration:

There seemed to be a common agreement among participants that more networking and collaboration needs to take place if Memorial University is to offer diverse second-language learning opportunities. While there are interesting initiatives with Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, there was a sense that the possibility of increasing these opportunities is limited. In terms of developing collaborative working relationships with other universities, some unsuccessful past experiences demonstrated how collaborating can sometimes be quite challenging.

The recommendation of the study to create a type of Canadian Erasmus program to facilitate exchanges between universities across the country seemed to pique the interest of certain participants, especially the student representative present. Such a program was seen as a way of increasing students' cultural awareness in order to create a culture not only of workers, but also of thinkers.

Going forward:

Participants made many suggestions on how the university could go forward in this area. The French department had tried to offer content courses in French in the past, but the project did not go forward due to financial reasons and the lack of demand. However, the majority of participants felt that this does not mean that such an experience should not be attempted again based on the experiences acquired.

In fact, the idea of developing a pilot project through which a second-language stream would be built into existing programs was suggested, and seemed to be supported by many of the participants. However, participating in such a project has to be easy for students and everything needs to be already mapped out for them. For example, when beginning their degree, students need to be told which courses are required in each year of their program. Also, many participants believed that, for such a project to be successful, it needs to be well promoted and marketed. In addition, many thought that incentives could be integrated into the program to enhance student interest. The representatives from the province seemed interested in such a project.

Other suggestions included offering a summer institute at the university or developing a program similar to the Women in Engineering Program to motivate students to pursue second-language learning opportunities. Some participants suggested having bilingual work fairs or summer co-op programs to provide students with information on how pursuing their second-language learning can have an important impact on their future career opportunities.

Here again, many participants felt that a lot of people were missing from the conversation, especially those from other faculties, since collaboration within the university is crucial to offering a broader range of content courses. Participants seemed in agreement that this was only the beginning of a dialogue that needs to continue.

Conclusion:

All four round-table sessions organized by Canadian Parents for French in collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and participating universities proved to be a very effective way of getting people from diverse backgrounds to talk about the issue of second-language learning in universities and, more broadly, the second-language learning continuum and how it can be improved. With the study *Two Languages, a World of Opportunities* as a

backdrop, participants raised some issues that are similar from province to province, and other issues that are quite specific to a particular province.

While all participants recognized the need for more concerted and coordinated action at the national level, they also recognized that local progress will require local action.

One thing is certain: all participants present agreed that creating an ongoing dialogue with all the relevant parties, even those not present for the discussions, is essential to going forward. It is hoped that participants will continue to be key actors of change and contribute to working towards enabling all Canadian youth to have access to a continuum of quality second-language learning opportunities from the primary to the university level.