Capstone Project Introduction

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**Motivating Boys in High School French**

**Rationale**

Issues surrounding attrition in French programs have been a topic of discussion for the past two decades. Parent advocacy groups, senior administration, principals and teachers propose various interventions at various levels (Obadia & Theriault, 1995). Over the past 20 years as a core French teacher, I have attended professional development conferences on motivating students in French, but always found the material aimed at elementary school levels. Now in my seventh year as a grade 8 through 12 French Immersion teacher, I have noticed certain specific issues for which I seek a solution. My school’s grade 8 classes arrive from elementary school with often one or two boys missing because they have chosen to drop the program. Of the students that stay in Français 8, many express that they are tired with the program; however, by the end of grade 8 all of the girls and a few boys have changed their minds and embrace their language development. It is with the other boys that my struggles begin. Despite having tried every strategy that I could think of, I have not found success with motivating the handful of boys who declare that they hate French immersion and they want to quit. They become behaviour problems, refuse to speak French, and make a concerted effort to fail in order to force parents to allow them to quit.

Struggles between boys and the traditional classroom have been well documented for decades. Research has shown that they have different learning styles and learning struggles (Reichert & Hawley, 2014). Adolescent boys go through immense physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes, and an understanding of this is crucial for educators trying to guide them to success (Audet & Royer, 1993). While there are many studies on boys and their particular learning issues, those that target issues of high school boys and boys in second language classes are scattered. With this presentation I bring together research on teaching adolescent boys, helping boys to read, and motivating high school boys in French programs with the goal of sharing insight with my colleagues on how to help our male students better succeed in French, stay in French, and be motivated to continue to speak French after they leave high school.

**Theoretical Framework**

I began my research within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), as this theory explains much about the influence of peers on boys’ behaviour, effort, and motivation (Kozulin et al. 2003). “In order to understand L2 learning from a radically social perspective, one must focus on experience that is lived, made sense of, negotiated, contested and claimed by learners in their physical, interpersonal, social, cultural and historical context” (Ortega, 2009, p. 218). This theory explains much about the struggles that boys have with french classes that are not pertinent to their life and their social interactions.

My research also reflects theoretical frameworks involving motivation as I sought possible solutions to the problem of motivating boys. I began with achievement goal theory by Nieswandt and Shanahan (2008), which offered insight into lack of effort in cases where boys see tasks as ‘hoops to jump through’ to achieve the credit (Nieswandt & Shanahan, 2008). This led me to self-determination theory, where Deci and Ryan (1985) discuss how learners who are motivated intrinsically (by the learning itself) will learn faster and retain more than learners who are extrinsically motivated (by external rewards or consequences) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). I then began to look for theories that discuss how to create intrinsic motivation, and I found Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow theory which looks at how intrinsic motivation can begin and grow as the individual experiences a state of Flow, where he loses awareness of the world around him and is motivated by the achievement of each successive step of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

All of these theories are relevant when designing effective education for boys, and my presentation involves concepts from each of them. Boys are social learners who use language to accomplish relevant tasks. Learning about topics of interest is of utmost importance. Boys respond to intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation can be activated by experiencing a state of flow during an activity so that the activity becomes motivating in itself. These concepts should be kept in mind throughout course and activity planning in order to maximize success.

**Research**

As a high school French immersion teacher I am always seeking to improve my practice and find ways to overcome issues that negatively affect the success of my students. My biggest challenge has been with grade 8 and 9 boys. Too often my cases have ended up in the boys dropping the program after a year of conflict that affects the other students as well. In light of this, I posed three research objectives:

1. To become familiar with research on motivation, success, and attrition of boys in French immersion programs in Canada.

2. To learn about strategies that motivate boys in language learning.

3. To develop a bank of resources of reading materials that boys will enjoy reading.

My goal is twofold: one, to improve my own practice and success with boys through a deeper understanding of their motivation, and two, to share my findings with colleagues who face the same struggles.

1. With regard to attrition I found interesting studies that looked at factors related to boys underachieving in French, such as stereotypes that learning French is not a masculine trait and that peer pressure to conform to society’s definition of masculine is at its highest in adolescence (Callaghan, 1998; Chan, 2016; Kissau, 2006; Laporte, 2006). The topics studied are often not those that appeal to boys, particularly if the teacher is female. Changing the topics of study can greatly affect boys’ interest (Callaghan, 1998; McCall, 2011). Interest and motivation are key; these are two big factors in boys dropping the program, along with lack of achievement (Obadia & Theriault, 1995).

2. While reading of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through the lens of self-determination theory of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), I read of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow theory, and I feel that it is relevant here. Indeed, as Deci and Ryan (1985) indicated boys motivated extrinsically will not succeed as well as those who are intrinsically motivated. Therefore, if we help them find an activity in which they become so involved that they seek more out of full enjoyment with the learning (flow), intrinsic motivation develops (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In addition, Dornyei (1994) explains that there is not one recipe for increasing motivation. He proposes to create successful learning in a French course through three factors that are interrelated: the course, the group and the teacher. The teacher must consider the course itself: material, topics of study, activities, and assessment practices. Each cohort group must be looked at separately, as groups have different dynamics and interpersonal experiences and learning styles. Lastly, teacher personality, attitude, and teaching style is very important. Self-reflection and critique may be uncomfortable for teachers, but it is necessary to eliminate any subconscious bias that may be creating barriers between boys and the language learning. I was fortunate to find many strategies from all three perspectives (Dornyei, 1994; McCall, 2011; Riechert & Hawley, 2009/2010).

3. Reading is a central part of any language program. Unfortunately many students, boys in particular, struggle with reading comprehension, learning through reading, and finding enjoyment in reading (Cartier, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This struggle occurs in both first language and second language classes (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Cartier (2007) provides an in-depth overview of the issues in learning through reading at the secondary level, applicable to all students. Reading struggles specific to a boy’s perspective are well researched and I found excellent references for successful strategies (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Brozo, 2006; Cartier, 2007; Sanford, 2006; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

At the beginning of my study, I had hoped to create a list of reading resources aimed at boys in high school, but this is a topic too large to fit into a project of this scope and better left to a further research project.

**Design**

In order to meet my goal of sharing my learning with colleagues I will develop a PowerPoint presentation for a professional development workshop, which outlines the main issues to consider and then presents suggestions for best practice. While it is necessary to present some theory and a framework for understanding the problem, I intend to condense such information as best I can. When teachers go to a workshop, they want to hear solutions and strategies that can be immediately implemented.

**Impact**

The issue of motivating boys in high school French immersion is faced by many educators in British Columbia. While there are many workshops aimed at elementary school issues, few are for high school issues. The information that I will present will be helpful to secondary principals and teachers of both French and English language arts, as many of the issues will touch on learning styles and preferences that apply to both languages. I hope to provide relevant information for my colleagues in secondary French immersion.

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**Annexe**

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