**French as a Second Language (FSL)**

# STUDENT PROFICIENCY AND CONFIDENCE PILOT PROJECT 2013-2014

## A Synopsis of Findings

September, 2014

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# CONTEXT

The *French as a Second Language (FSL) Student Proficiency and Confidence Pilot Project 2013-2014* is one of a number of Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives focusing on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* as a reference resource to inform FSL practice.

In support of its commitment to "improving the effectiveness of FSL education" the Ministry of Education released A Framework for French as a Second Language in Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12 in February, 2013 (p. 3).[1] A Framework for FSL, K-12 articulates three provincial goals for FSL, the first of which is to increase student confidence, proficiency, and achievement in FSL. With this goal in mind, this pilot project sheds light, through an external lens, on the proficiency and confidence of Grade 12 FSL learners from Core, Extended, and Immersion programs and highlights areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

In this pilot project, 434 Grade 12 FSL learners enrolled in Core, Extended, or Immersion FSL programs were drawn from 14 of the 60 public and Catholic English-language school boards across the province. Participation in the pilot project was voluntary and confidential, and written parental consent was obtained. Participants completed self-selected levels of the Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELF), an internationally recognized exam, and responded to a survey examining student confidence.

The DELF exam is aligned with the CEFR proficiency levels and consists of four key components that distinguish between the ability to produce and comprehend the target language, as well as between oral and written skills. These components are referred to in the DELF exam as oral comprehension (OC) and written comprehension (WC), the two receptive skills, and as oral production (OP) and written production (WP), the two productive skills.

The receptive skills are evaluated in the DELF exam through the completion of multiple exercises, while the productive skills are evaluated based on a wide range of discrete sub-skills, such as use of grammatical structures and forms in context, controlled use of vocabulary, and sociolinguistically-suitable language, in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of communicative proficiency in that area.

Three DELF levels were challenged by the participants, namely A2 (84 students), B1 (207 students) and B2 (143 students). Globally, these levels can be described as follows (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). Level A2 represents the "basic user" who can "communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters." Levels B1 and B2 represent "independent users." B1 learners are able to "produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest," while B2 learners can "interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party." While B1 and B2 learners are both referred to as "independent users," Level B2 is as far above Level B1 as Level A2 is below it (p. 35). The descriptors for B2 represent "quite a break" from the content of the descriptors of the previous levels (p. 35).

Students from Core, Extended, and Immersion programs challenged each of these DELF levels. Among the Core French participants, 40% challenged Level A2, 56% challenged Level B1, and 4% challenged Level B2. Among those from Extended French, 6% challenged Level A2, 77% Level B1, and 17% Level B2. Finally, 1% of the Immersion participants challenged Level A2, 35% challenged Level B1, and 64% challenged Level B2.

The four-sectioned student survey, inspired by previous research in the field, but designed specifically for this pilot

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[1] This framework is henceforth referred to as A Framework for FSL, K-12.

project, provided basic background information on the participants' experience with and exposure to French, as well as their confidence both in relation to their French language skills and to their performance on the DELF exam. The same skills targeted by the DELF were examined in relation to confidence via the survey, using the student-friendly terms of listening, conversing, reading, and writing were used.

# FINDINGS

## A. Proficiency

The average overall DELF score was 69.94/100 (70%). The students scored highest on the written comprehension component, followed by oral production, then written production, and finally by oral comprehension. Within each DELF level, the overall mean scores were 79% for Level A2, 72% for Level B1, and 62% for Level B2. The students' performance varied for each DELF component within the three levels challenged. The A2 students scored highest on written comprehension, followed by oral comprehension, then oral production, and finally by written production. The B1 students scored highest on written comprehension, followed by written production, then oral production, and lastly by oral comprehension. The B2 students scored highest on oral production and written comprehension, followed by oral comprehension and written production. All four of the mean scores for the A2 students were within or above the 70-79% range. For the B1 students, three of the four mean scores fell within this range, while none did for those students who challenged DELF Level B2.

Taken together, the proficiency-related findings suggest that the students who challenged Level A2 stayed most firmly within the limits of their proficiency, while those who challenged Level B2 pushed themselves much further outside of their comfort zone. These findings also reflect the increased demands of the exam from Level A2 to Level B1 and from Level B1 to Level B2.

Concerning the DELF sub-skills, overall, regardless of DELF level challenged, the sub-skills on which the students demonstrated the greatest proficiency had to do with the presentation of information (introducing it, responding to it, giving one's own impression, being precise in the presentation of ideas) and the ability to follow instructions. Furthermore, there was the greatest room for improvement in the contextualized use of grammar across the three DELF levels, as well as in the area of contextualized vocabulary use

for the B1 and B2 students. This form of applied grammatical and vocabulary knowledge differs from their treatment in isolation. The noticeable exception to these trends was for the oral component of Level B2, where the presentation of information in a coherent fashion proved most challenging despite the fact that the B2 students' highest overall scores were for oral production. This may indicate that the B2 students were concentrating more on form than on content in this situation. Also of note is that within Level A2, for the written component, activity two (writing to a friend) was consistently better-achieved than activity one (writing to an unfamiliar person). This finding demonstrates a difference in performance when the audience changes, even if the task itself remains the same.

With respect to proficiency, the findings suggest that increased focus could be encouraged, in particular, on oral comprehension and written production abilities, specifically as related to the application of grammar and vocabulary. Such application involves using grammatical forms and vocabulary items in context for specific purposes rather than treating them in isolation. The focus for improvement could potentially be related to the need to further develop learners' competence in using grammar and vocabulary in context, their ability to translate such competence into effective performance, or both, and perhaps the need to broaden the types of pedagogical strategies and specific interventions used in teaching these skills in the various FSL programs.

## B. Confidence

Overall and within each DELF level challenged, the students were shown to be most confident in their French reading skills, followed by listening, and then by writing, with confidence in conversing falling markedly below the other skills. The findings demonstrated that the students are more confident in their receptive skills than in their productive skills, and more confident in their written skills than in their oral skills. Looking across the DELF levels, the A2 students' confidence in their productive skills was consistently the lowest. The B1 students' confidence in their oral skills was significantly lower than that of the B2 students, while their confidence in their written skills was not. The B2 students' confidence in their conversing skills was significantly higher than that of both the A2 and B1 students.

With respect to the students' confidence in various types of situations with different interlocutors, the students were found to be more confident in their French skills in communication with non-Francophones than with Francophones, with individuals than in large groups, and with friends than with strangers. This held true regardless of DELF level challenged or skill area, suggesting that these socio-situational factors outweigh the impact of any difference resulting from the underlying differences in confidence documented for the skills themselves. Looking skill by skill, the students across the three DELF levels were most confident conversing with non-Francophones individually and in community and workplace settings, and with classmates in class and at school as well as outside of school. They were least confident when conversing with Francophones in large groups and individually, and in community and workplace settings.

For listening, the students across all three DELF levels were most confident in class with their teachers and classmates, and in the community with friends. They were least confident listening to Francophones individually and in large groups, and in community and workplace settings.

For writing, the students across all DELF levels were most confident writing to non-Francophones in at-work, community, classroom, and individual communication and least confident writing to Francophones in at-work, community, and large group settings.

For reading, unlike for the three other skills, the three DELF levels did not pattern together. The A2 students were most confident reading in class with their teachers and classmates during school work, while the B1 and B2 students were most confident reading with non-Francophones in community, work-place, classroom, and individual situations. Having noted these socio-situational differences, it is important to keep in mind that reading was the only skill for which there was not a significant difference in terms of the students' overall confidence by DELF level challenged. This suggests that while the students in all three levels reported being equally confident in their reading abilities, they may have had different contexts for reading in mind when judging their overall feelings, with the A2 students picturing classroom-based reading and the B1 and B2 students imagining primarily extra-curricular situations. Having said this, it is important to note that the students across the three DELF levels did not differ in terms of the situations in which they felt least confident in their reading abilities, namely with Francophones in at-work, community, and large group and individual settings.

Increased interactive exposure (i.e., students' extra-curricular exposure to French via, for example, time spent in a French-speaking environment, time living with French-speaking people, exchange programs, and travelling) was related to greater confidence in conversing for the A2 and B2 students. For the B1 students, this positive relationship was found for all skill areas except for writing. Increased receptive exposure (i.e., the students' exposure to French through various forms of media and extra-curricular reading for pleasure) was related to greater confidence in writing and reading for the A2 students. It displayed this type of relationship with conversing and writing confidence for the

B1 students, while no such relationships were documented for the B2 students.

These analyses showed that the role of these two types of exposure differs greatly according to the students' proficiency. At the lower end of the proficiency scale (A2), the results revealed that the students' confidence in their oral skills is more greatly impacted by interactive exposure, while their confidence in their written skills is more significantly impacted by receptive exposure. In contrast, at the upper end of the proficiency scale (B2), these two types of exposure have very limited, if any, impact on confidence. Interestingly, it is at the mid-point of the proficiency scale (B1) where these two types of exposure appear to have the greatest impact on student confidence.

The students' range of receptive vocabulary knowledge (i.e., the words they reported knowing for two different objects, regardless of whether or not they used them) was not equal for the two objects examined, and this held true for the three DELF levels. However, the B2 students reported a greater range of words for both objects than did the B1 students, who in turn have a greater range than did the A2 students. Interestingly, despite these differences in range across the three DELF levels, this measure of vocabulary was generally not related to the students' confidence, except for the B1 students' listening confidence and, to a lesser degree, to the B2 students' writing and reading confidence.

With respect to confidence, the findings suggest that, while students' confidence is fairly well developed in certain ways, like in relation to reading, there is considerably more room for improvement in other areas. For instance, considerable gains in confidence could still be made in addressing the students' confidence in conversing. Gains in confidence could be made in relation to the types of socio-situational contexts explored in this pilot project by addressing how the students perceive the nature of and expectations present when communicating in various settings with interlocutors from different linguistic backgrounds and with various types of relationships to the students.

## C. Connecting Confidence and Proficiency

The degree of connection between the students' reported confidence by skill area and their corresponding DELF scores differed from Levels A2, to B1, to B2. For the A2 students, there was a positive relationship between greater confidence in the written skills and higher DELF scores for those components. In contrast, at Level A2, greater confidence in the oral skills did not translate into significantly higher corresponding DELF scores. Regarding Level B1, there was a positive relationship between greater confidence in all skill areas and higher related DELF scores, except for written production. For Level B2, the connection between confidence and proficiency was not as clear, with a significant positive relationship found only for oral production.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to keep in mind that the B2 students challenged a more difficult level of the DELF that likely pushed them closer to the edges of their competence. Thus, it is possible that they may have passed a certain threshold beyond which it is more difficult to reflect the impact of greater confidence in exam performance.

No significant relationship was found between interactive exposure and DELF component scores for the A2 students. However, there was a positive relationship between increased receptive exposure and higher DELF scores for their two productive skills. For the B1 students, a significant relationship was documented between greater interactive exposure and higher DELF scores for oral production and a relationship with higher oral comprehension scores that approached significance. On the other hand, receptive exposure was significantly related to the B1 students' DELF scores for written production. For the B2 students, there was no significant relationship between interactive exposure and DELF scores for any of the skills or between receptive exposure and DELF scores for any skill except for oral comprehension.

Situational confidence for the A2 students in each of the four skill areas in the contexts in which they felt most and least confident was not significantly related to their DELF scores for the same skills, with the exception of written production. For the B1 students, situational confidence by skill area was significantly related to corresponding DELF component scores for five of the eight contexts: the least comfortable situation for written comprehension (with a large group of Francophones), oral comprehension in the most and least comfortable situations (in class with their teacher, and a large group of Francophones, respectively), and oral production in the most and least comfortable situations (in a community setting with a non-Francophone friend, and with a large group of Francophones, respectively). For the B2 students, situational confidence for each of the four skill areas was not significantly related to the students' DELF scores for the same skills. Taken together with the fact that socio-situational confidence was shown to be shared in highly similar ways across skill areas and DELF levels challenged, the additional finding that socio-situational confidence was not strongly tied to the students' proficiency for two of the three DELF levels suggests that it may be the characteristics of the situations, rather than the students' French proficiency, that are more strongly connected to the students' confidence. In other words, in order to improve students' socio-situational confidence, work addressing how the students interpret different kinds of situations might be needed in addition to skill-based proficiency work.

A strong positive relationship was found for the A2 students between reported ease of the oral comprehension, written comprehension, and written production components of the DELF exam and the students' scores on these sections. Interestingly, those A2 students who reported finding the oral production component harder did nearly as well as those who reported finding it easier, suggesting that there may be a lack of confidence in oral production skills among some of the A2 students that does not reflect their demonstrated proficiency. For the B1 students, a strong positive relationship was found between their reported ease of each of the four DELF components and their scores for each of these sections.

As for the B2 students, this type of relationship was documented only for the two comprehension-based skills.

Finally, a very strong, consistent positive relationship was documented between the A2, B1, and B2 students' self-assessed performance on each DELF component and their score for that section. All such comparisons produced a statistically significant result, except for oral production for the A2 students. As was the case with their reports of perceived ease or difficulty of the oral production component of the DELF, the oral production DELF scores of those A2 students who felt they had not performed well on this component were not statistically any lower than those of the A2 students who felt they had performed well. This finding further strengthens the suggestion that, among the A2 students, there are individuals whose confidence in their oral production skills is clearly not in line with their demonstrated proficiency in this skill area.

The findings concerning the relationship between confidence and proficiency suggest that these two areas are significantly connected, but in complex ways. For instance, the proficiency of the students in each DELF level was positively connected to their confidence, at least in some of the skill areas. Increased interactive and receptive exposure was linked to greater confidence and proficiency in the productive skills for the A2 and B1 students, but not for the B2 students. Situational confidence was connected to various aspects of the A2 and B1 students' proficiency, but was not for the B2 students. What produced much more uniform results was the consideration of the relationship between the students' actual DELF performance and their reported confidence as related to the difficulty of the exam and how they felt they had performed on it.

# CONCLUSIONS

An overview of the main findings of the pilot project is provided in Table 1. This overview highlights the areas of greatest strength related to the students' proficiency and confidence and the connections between the two, as well as the areas for potential improvements. Any considerations of ways forward would be best designed to focus on changes in those areas identified as ones for possible improvement.

With respect to proficiency, Table 1 shows that, overall, the students' written comprehension skills are the most advanced. Within the productive skills, the sub-skills related to the ability to follow instructions and to the provision of information in various ways are particular areas of strength for the students across the levels challenged. Table 1 also shows that increased focus could be encouraged, in particular, on oral comprehension and written production abilities, specifically as related to the application of grammar and vocabulary. Such application involves using grammatical forms and vocabulary items in context for specific purposes rather than treating them in isolation. The focus for improvement could potentially be related to the need to further develop learners' competence in using grammar in context, their ability to translate such competence into effective performance, or both, and perhaps the need to broaden the types of pedagogical strategies and specific interventions used in teaching these skills in the various FSL programs.

With respect to confidence, Table 1 reveals that the students across the DELF levels challenged were found to be most confident in their reading skills and markedly least confident in their conversing skills. They are more confident in their written skills than in their oral skills and, generally, more confident in their receptive skills than in their productive skills. In terms of socio-situational confidence the students are more confident in their French skills in communication with non-Francophones than with Francophones, with individuals than in large groups,

and with friends than with strangers. This holds true across the DELF levels and skill areas, suggesting that the students' degree of confidence is impacted more by these socio-situational factors than it is by their proficiency or by whether the communication is oral or written, both productive and receptive. Further, interactive exposure primarily supports confidence in conversing, while receptive exposure has the greatest impact on confidence in writing.

These confidence-related findings suggest that, while students' confidence is fairly well developed in certain ways, like in relation to reading, there is considerably more room for improvement in other areas. For instance, considerable gains in confidence could still be made in addressing the students' conversing confidence. This would be particularly important at Level A2, where findings have shown that confidence in this skill area for over two-thirds of the A2 students are well below their demonstrated proficiency. Further, gains in confidence could be made in relation to the types of socio-situational contexts explored in this pilot project by addressing how the students perceive the nature of and expectations present when communicating in various settings with interlocutors from different linguistic backgrounds and with various types of relationships to the students.

For the connections between increased confidence and greater proficiency, Table 1 demonstrates that for the A2 students, the areas of strength involve the links between various forms of confidence and proficiency in written production, while the connection with oral skills shows the most room for improvement. For the B1 students, higher confidence in the oral skills was connected to higher proficiency in these skills, while this type of connection was not evident for written production. Finally, the B2 students appear to have a fairly uniform positive connection between their confidence and proficiency.

**Table 1: Summary of strengths and areas for improvement related to student proficiency, confidence, and the connections between the two**

| Focus | Levels | Strengths | Areas for Improvement |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Phase 1: Proficiency** | | | |
| Overall proficiency | All | Written comprehension | Oral comprehension |
| Proficiency by level | A2 | Written comprehension | Written production |
| | B1 | Written comprehension | Oral comprehension |
| | B2 | Oral prod. & written comp. | Written production |
| Proficiency by sub-skill | A2 | Following instructions | Use of grammar in context |
| | B1 | Following instructions, information | Grammar and vocabulary in context |
| | B2 | Following instructions, information | Grammar and vocabulary in context |
| **Phase 2: Confidence** | | | |
| Skill-based confidence | All | Reading | Conversing |
| Situational confidence | All | Non-Francophones, individual communication, friends | Francophones, large groups, strangers |
| Interactive exposure supports confidence* | A2 | Conversing | |
| | B1 | Conversing, listening, reading | |
| | B2 | Conversing | |
| Receptive exposure supports confidence* | A2 | Written skills | |
| | B1 | Productive skills | |
| | B2 | -- | |
| Range of receptive vocabulary | A2 | -- | Narrowest vocabulary range |
| | B1 | -- | -- |
| | B2 | Widest vocabulary range | -- |
| Connection between receptive vocabulary range and confidence* | A2 | -- | |
| | B1 | Connected to listening | |
| | B2 | -- | |
| **Phase 3: Connecting confidence and proficiency** | | | |
| Confidence and proficiency | A2 | Written skills | Oral skills |
| | B1 | Oral skills | Written production |
| | B2 | Oral production | -- |
| Exposure and proficiency* | A2 | Productive skills | |
| | B1 | Oral skills | |
| | B2 | -- | |
| Situational confidence and proficiency | A2 | Written skills | Oral skills |
| | B1 | Oral skills, written comprehension | Written production |
| | B2 | All skills | -- |
| Ease of DELF and proficiency | A2 | Written skills, oral comprehension | Oral production |
| | B1 | All skills | -- |
| | B2 | Receptive skills | Productive skills |
| DELF confidence and proficiency | A2 | Receptive skills, written production | Oral production |
| | B1 | All | -- |
| | B2 | All | -- |

\* The results related to the impact of exposure and vocabulary range on confidence and proficiency do not lend themselves well to a distinction between strengths and areas for improvement. As such, they are not divided in this way in the table. The double dash (--) indicates a focus for which the findings do not point to a clear strength or area for improvement.

# SUMMARY

The findings have identified a number of areas of strength and opportunities for improvement related to the French language proficiency and confidence of FSL learners in Core, Extended, and Immersion programs in Ontario. In moving forward with the Ontario Ministry of Education's continuing initiatives to enhance learners' FSL confidence and proficiency in order to support their related achievement, efforts could be undertaken to target those specific areas identified for improvement through this pilot project, while current practices could be continued in those areas identified as strengths.