

Understanding Learning Timelines for Adults in Second Language Training

PROVINCIAL EMPLOYMENT ROUNDTABLE



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They do not purport to reflect the views of the SRQEA.



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Executive Summary

This report examines the length of time it takes for adult learners to become functionally proficient in a new language, as well as the factors that can impact learning timelines. With the 2022 adoption of Bill 96 in Québec, French was recognized as the common language, the only official language, and the working language in the province. Within this new linguistic policy framework, the learning timelines for individuals to learn enough French to navigate Québec society and workplaces is now an area of increased research and policy debate. Through mixed primary and secondary research methods, we investigate learning timelines for adults to learn a second language, including for adults looking to integrate into the labour market. We find that there is no consensus among the existing literature and language teachers regarding the specific amount of time it takes an adult to learn a language. Learning times differ due to a variety of learner-specific and environmental factors such as the learner's prior language, their target language and the frequency of language learning sessions. We examined existing language programs that aim to have participants reach functional proficiency and found that they offer a range of instructional times. These programs often aim to support participants to achieve a specific goal, such as passing a specific language test or finding employment in their field.

Our key findings are:

- The **amount of time** allocated for individuals to reach functional proficiency in their second language varies significantly across language learning programs. The programs examined had 250 to over 1000 hours of instructional time.
- Various **learner-specific factors** impact learners' experiences and outcomes in regard to second-language acquisition. These include motivation, time devoted, prior languages, age, disability and neurodivergence.
- **Environmental factors** such as socioeconomic status, the structure and goal of language programs, and a supportive learning environment impact learning outcomes.
- **Immersive experiences** tend to improve spoken proficiency since learners typically engage in spoken exchanges with more proficient speakers.
- **Classroom instruction** positively impacts written proficiency as learners have more opportunities to practice written communication and receive feedback.
- In workplaces, **employers and coworkers** can positively impact learning outcomes by developing a workplace culture that embraces language learning.

Our recommendations are:

1. **Expand the scope of French-language training programs to include immersive and informal learning experiences**

The literature highlights that formal French-language training is most effective when complemented by immersive and informal learning experiences. Experiences such as language-learning trips, language cafés, meetups, workshops based on hobbies, participating in the arts (such as theatre), and volunteering are examples of activities that can be included in language training programs.

2. **Expand the accessibility of French-language training programs that address various learner factors**

There is a diverse array of factors that affect language learning experiences and outcomes. The Québec government already provides financial assistance to learners to address issues such as lack of time, childcare and transportation. This financial assistance should continue and be assessed to examine whether it meets the needs of the most vulnerable learners.

Additionally, the Québec government should invest in further ensuring that program designs accommodate more learner factors, such as learners with negative experiences with education, low literacy, and those facing mental health challenges.

Programs should also be promoted to increase their reach to learners, and registration and program information should be simplified and available in multiple mediums (online and offline) and languages.

3. **Invest in work-integrated French-language learning programs for specific industries**

Invest in industry-specific programs (i.e. healthcare, social services, information technology, construction) spanning 600 - 1000 or more hours of work-integrated instructional time in partnership with employers and workplaces to create supportive work environments that enable language learning.

Introduction

Language training for adults requires significant resources, including the financial investments, time, and human resources necessary to enable individuals to reach functional proficiency. Despite the costs, the benefits of acquiring a second language, particularly French in Québec, are larger for both the individual and society.¹ Learning the majority language makes integrating into the labour market easier. There is also a social benefit, as learning the majority language facilitates civic engagement and participation in all aspects of society. New speakers can also become consumers of that language's cultural production, contributing to its growth and vitality. However, the question of how long it takes and how many resources are required for individuals to learn the majority language has become a point of contention, particularly for Québec policymakers trying to determine which language training policies and programs will best meet their objectives of protecting and promoting the French language.

This report examines adult second-language acquisition to understand the time and effort required to reach functional proficiency for adult learners. We pay special attention to learners in the labour market who face time and resource constraints when learning a language and navigating labour market pressures. In this report, we aim to contribute to the ongoing public discussions in Québec on the French-language training policies and programs that best support linguistic minorities to learn French.

We use interviews with subject matter experts in Québec and existing literature on adult second-language acquisition. This is followed by a discussion of factors that impact language acquisition for the individual, including language acquisition in workplace settings. Lastly, we examine three case studies of on-the-job language training programs and conclude with recommendations to inform the development of adult language training programs.

¹ See, for example, Rebecca Fox, Olga Corretjer and Kelley Webb, "Benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism: An analysis of published empirical research 2012–2019," *Foreign Language Annals* 52 no. 4 (2019): 699. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12424>

Methodology

This report primarily relies on a qualitative methodology. First, researchers conducted 11 informational interviews with subject matter experts knowledgeable in the field of French second language acquisition for adults in Québec, including language instructors and administrators of language programs. Second, we supplemented these interviews with a literature scan of peer-reviewed academic literature on second language acquisition for adults.

1. Informational Interviews

Researchers conducted 11 semi-structured informational interviews with subject matter experts between July and August 2023. The interviewees were:

- 2 French second language researchers
- 2 pedagogical consultants
- 2 administrators of French language training programs in educational institutions
- 1 educational technology specialist in French language training
- 1 associate vice-president of French language programs in an educational institution
- 1 director of a French language program in an educational institution
- 1 director of a work-integrated learning organization
- 1 director of a French language on-the-job training program for the workforce

Subject matter experts were interviewed regarding the factors that influence French language competency and fluency for adults based on their experiences researching and delivering French language training to English speakers in Québec. Interviewees were queried on:

- Time and effort required for second language acquisition in adults
- Factors that encourage or impede successful second language acquisition for adults
- Second language acquisition as an employability skill
- Language training in the workforce
- Bi- and multilingualism in the workplace
- Case studies on work-integrated language acquisition for adults

Researchers conducted 1-1.5 hour interviews online via Zoom, which were recorded and transcribed. Responses were sorted thematically and used to develop responses to the research questions.

2. Literature Scan

Researchers conducted a literature scan of peer-reviewed academic research on second-language acquisition for adults, government reports on program evaluations and

reports on pilot projects for work-integrated language training. We consulted over 65 studies which covered the following topics:

- Time and effort required to achieve functional proficiency in a language and integrate into the labour market
- Second language acquisition for adults
- Work-integrated learning programs and their results
- Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) methods for adults in vocational education and training, postsecondary programs, and the workplace
- Learning times for language training programs

Findings

This section provides a brief overview of studies investigating the time and effort required for adults to achieve functional proficiency in a second language, including the training hours offered by leading language training programs. Notably, there is no consensus on the time and effort required to achieve a level of competency that allows individuals to navigate social and workplace contexts comfortably.

Definitions of Functional Proficiency

Definitions of functional proficiency differ across jurisdictions and depend on language-learning goals, norms, and contexts. The Québec government utilizes the *Échelle québécoise des niveaux de compétence en français* to measure four foundational competencies for French-language learners (oral comprehension, oral production, written comprehension, and written production).² The *Échelle* measures proficiency according to 12 levels under each of the four competencies but does not offer a general definition of proficiency. The Canadian government also utilizes a tiered system to define proficiency for written comprehension, written expression, and oral proficiency in Canada's official languages. They categorize second language speakers in Canada's two official languages as A, B, or C level, with C being the most advanced.³ Individuals with a 'CCC' classification are considered to have advanced reading, writing, and speaking skills.

In this report, we draw upon various definitions of 'functional proficiency' to advance a general understanding of functional proficiency as an intermediate to advanced level of spoken, written, and reading competencies in a target language that enables the speaker to effectively navigate contexts such as the workplace and day-to-day social interactions. Subject matter experts interviewed also had different definitions of functional proficiency, highlighting how it can change depending on the context.

² "Échelle québécoise des niveaux de compétences en français," Le Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, the Ministère de l'Éducation, et l'Université de Montréal, Government of Québec, (June 2023),

https://cdn-contentu.quebec.ca/cdn-contentu/adm/min/langue-francaise/fr/publications/referentiel/echelle_niveaux_competence_2023.pdf

³ "Qualification Standards in Relation to Official Languages," Government of Canada, last modified July 21, 2016,

<https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/staffing/qualification-standards/relation-official-languages.html>

Time and Effort Required to Attain Functional Proficiency

Average Learning Times

Around the world, there are diverse SLA programs that seek to bring language learners to a specific proficiency level. The following studies illuminate the different timelines and intensities of programming and their success in supporting learners in meeting the program goals.

The School of Language Studies (SLS) at the US Department of State measures the average learning time for an English speaker to achieve functional proficiency (what they refer to as speaking level 3) in a target language.⁴ In this case, functional proficiency is defined as “able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social and professional topics.”⁵ The SLS also clusters second languages by their proximity to English. For example, Category I comprises languages that are culturally and linguistically closely related to English, such as Italian, French, Swedish and Spanish. Conversely, category IV lists languages that are exceptionally hard for native English speakers to learn, including Arabic, Mandarin, and Korean. Based on the SLS’s language-learning scale, an English speaker’s average learning time for ‘general professional proficiency’ in French is 30 weeks of full-time instruction, equivalent to 750 hours.

The USA’s National Centre on Immigrant Integration Policy conducted a study on 12 million immigrants to investigate the time required to achieve proficiency in English-as-a-second-language to pass its naturalization exam.⁶ The report lists an average of 660 hours of learning time to pass the test. In a similar study, Pearson, an organization that provides English-language testing for worldwide study applications, concluded that 760 hours of learning are required for a fast learner to gain an intermediate (B2) proficiency in a language on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) scale.⁷ B2 proficiency is defined as: “Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.”⁸

⁴ “Foreign Language Training,” School of Language Studies (SLS), US Department of State, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/>

⁵ “Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions - Speaking,” Interagency Language Roundtable, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.govtillr.org/Skills/ILRscale2.htm>

⁶ Margie McHugh, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Fix, “Adult English language instruction in the United States: determining need and investing wisely,” *Migration Policy Institute* (2007): 5, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/NCIIP_English_Instruction073107.pdf

⁷ Veronica Benigno, John de Jong, and Alistair Van Moere, “How long does it take to learn a language? Insights from research on language learning,” *Global Scale of English Research Series*, Pearson (May 2017): 9, <https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/english/SupportingDocs/GSE-learning-hours.pdf>

⁸ “Global scale - Table 1 (CEFR 3.3): Common Reference levels,” Common European Framework of References for Language, last modified 2024, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

In 2018, Cambridge University Press produced a summary of guidelines on the duration of instruction for English-as-a-second-language acquisition. These guidelines also emphasize the importance of the conditions in which an individual learns.⁹ In a positive learning context with “good levels of motivation and access to good learning resources and well-trained teachers,” it takes an average of 530-750 guided learning hours for an individual whose first language is similar to English to reach B2 proficiency in English. In a context of mixed conditions, such as good teachers but low learner motivation, it takes 750-950 hours.¹⁰

Saito and Hanzawa (2015) suggest that at least 875 hours of pedagogical instruction positively impacts the development of oral proficiencies in a second language but note that proficiency is increased when learners optimize their efforts outside of the classroom.¹¹ This optimization includes extracurricular activities in the target language, such as media consumption and conversations with native and non-native speakers.

Table 1: Average learning times for second language learners in various studies

| Study Author | Starting point/assumption | Learning Hours | Learning Goal |
|---|---|----------------|---|
| School of Language Studies | English speaking learning a language proximate to English | 750 | Speaking level 3; “Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social and professional topics” |
| United States National Centre on Immigrant Integration Policy | Diverse learners' times averaged out | 660 | Proficiency in English-as-a-second-language sufficient to pass the naturalization exam |
| Pearson | Fast learner | 760 | Intermediate (B2) proficiency in a language on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) scale |
| Cambridge University Press | Individuals whose first language is similar to English; | 530-750 | B2 proficiency in English |

⁹ “How long does it take to learn a foreign language?” *Cambridge University Press* (January 2018): 10. <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/How-long-does-it-take-to-learn-a-foreign-language.pdf>

¹⁰ Cambridge UP, “How long,” 11.

¹¹ Kazuya Saito and K. Hanzawa, “Developing second language oral ability in foreign language classrooms: the role of the length and focus of instruction and individual differences,” *Applied Psycholinguistics* (2015): 17. <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/13314/>

| | | | |
|-------------------|--|---------|-----------------------------------|
| | Positive learning environment, high motivation, access to good learning resources, well-trained teachers | | |
| | Individuals whose first language is similar to English; mixed learning conditions | 750-950 | B2 proficiency in English |
| Saito and Hanzawa | Engagement in extracurricular activities | 875 | Development of oral proficiencies |

In comparison to studies that discuss the amount of learning hours necessary to achieve a specific SLA goal, there are studies that examined existing language-learning timelines and whether they were sufficient. Papazian-Zohrabian et al. (2021) find that a 6-month French-language learning program for immigrants with low-literacy in Québec fails to support its students in reaching the stated goal of functional proficiency.¹²

Impact of Program Design on Average Learning Times

Serrano and Muñoz (2007) analyzed the proficiency gains of three groups of adult second-language learners according to the duration of instruction time: extensive instruction (110 hours over 7 months); semi-intensive instruction (110 hours over 3-4 months); and intensive instruction (110 hours over 5 weeks).¹³ Their results demonstrate that intensive instruction is more beneficial for adult learners than extensive instruction over several months.

In Koylu and Tracy-Ventura's study (2022), they compared the second language proficiency levels between two groups of learners: those who studied abroad in immersive environments and those with at-home formal instruction.¹⁴ The amount of instruction for the group studying abroad was 9-12 hours per week for one semester. The at-home group received 18 hours per week for one semester. The study results indicated that the learners in immersive environments abroad developed more oral proficiencies in the second language, such as conversational aptitude. Those with at-home instruction measured more proficiency in formal competencies,

¹² Garine Papazian-Zohrabian et al., "Rapport de recherche: Projet de recherche menant au développement d'un programme-cadre gouvernemental de francisation pour les personnes ayant des compétences peu développées en littératie et en numératie," Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, (2021).

¹³ Raquel Serrano and Carmen Muñoz, "Same hours, different time distribution: Any difference in EFL?" *System* 35, no. 3 (2007): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.02.001>.

¹⁴ Zeynep Köylü and Nicole Tracy-Ventura, "Learning English in today's global world: a comparative study of at-home, anglophone, and lingua franca study abroad," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 44 (2022): 1, doi:10.1017/S0272263121000917

such as presenting and essay writing. The authors suggest that the increased amount of “authentic nature [within] spoken interactions” during an immersive study abroad experience supports the theory that language learners absorb speaking procedures in practice. Despite the at-home learners receiving more instructional hours (18 hours per week), this did not correlate with increased oral proficiency. This study indicates that immersive experiences favour oral proficiency in informal speech, while in-class instructions favour formal writing and reading proficiencies.

In Québec, most universities offer French-as-a-second-language degrees, including options for certificates, minors, majors, and specializations in French. These qualifications can vary from 540 hours of guided learning for a microprogram¹⁵ to 1,350 hours for a certificate¹⁶ or 2,700 hours for a specialization in the French language.¹⁷

The studies above indicate that learning time can be highly variable, with some programs offering over 1000 hours depending on the language, learning goals, and program. Most studies do not examine language-learning efforts since this varies across individual learners. This was echoed by subject matter experts we interviewed.

Subject matter experts also confirmed that, generally, immersive experiences enhance oral proficiency, while written proficiency is associated with more in-class instruction time. Several studies also discuss the role of technology in language learning and how language-learning technologies and applications can boost language acquisition when the interaction is frequent and of quality.¹⁸ Golonka et al. (2011) find that computer-assisted pronunciation training is especially effective in accurately providing feedback to learners and improving their pronunciation.¹⁹ Some subject matter experts interviewed indicated that acquisition is accelerated when there are informal and low-stakes activities for the language learner to participate in and practice in the target language. The studies demonstrate that multiple factors impact adult learners’ learning times.

Factors Affecting Learning Times

This section outlines several factors that can affect the learning times of language learners based on our interviews with experts and our literature scan. We identify learner-specific factors

¹⁵ See, for example, “French as a Second Language Micro-Certificate Bishops,” Bishop’s University, last modified 2023, <https://www.ubishops.ca/academic-programs/faculty-of-arts-and-science/humanities/etudes-francaises-et-quebecoises/courses-programs/micro-certificates-in-french-as-a-second-language/>;

“Certificat en français langue seconde,” Université du Québec à Montréal, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://langues.uqam.ca/francais/>

¹⁶ “Certificat en français langue seconde : culture, études et travail,” Université de Montréal, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://admission.umontreal.ca/programmes/certificat-en-francais-langue-seconde-culture-etudes-et-travail/structure-du-programme/>

¹⁷ “Études française,” Département d’études françaises, Concordia University, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.concordia.ca/academics/undergraduate/etudes-francaises.html>

¹⁸ See, for example, Afsaneh Ghanizadeh, Azam Razavi, and Safoura Jahedizadeh, “Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL): A Review of Resources and Upshots,” *International Letters of Chemistry, Physics and Astronomy* 54 (July 3, 2015): 7. <https://doi.org/10.56431/p-z6sj8g>; Mei-Mei Chang and Hsiu-Ting Hung, “Effects of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning on Second Language Acquisition: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 22, no. 4 (2019): 1. <https://www.istor.org/stable/26910181>.

¹⁹ Golonka, Ewa M., Anita R. Bowles, Victor M. Frank, Dorna L. Richardson, and Suzanne Freynik. “Technologies for Foreign Language Learning: A Review of Technology Types and Their Effectiveness.” *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 27, no. 1 (2014): 70–105. doi:10.1080/09588221.2012.700315.

and factors related to the learner's environment with the acknowledgement that there are many more factors that can be included here depending on the types of learners and context.

Learner-Specific Factors

- **Motivation:** Motivation affects how adult learners approach language learning and the attrition rate in language-learning courses. For example, learners facing economic and family pressure to work may be less motivated to engage in intensive language learning, viewing this as less of a priority.²⁰ Other learners may feel motivated to engage in language learning as a prerequisite to finding work.²¹
- **Time devoted:** Adult learners typically have significant time constraints due to work, family, and life circumstances, limiting the time they can dedicate to language learning. For language learning, everyday language practice is one of the strongest predictors of achieving functional proficiency.^{22 23}
- **Prior languages:** The language(s) already spoken and the proximity of a first language to the target second language have a significant impact on the learning time and effort. Knowledge of a language that may share a similar alphabet to the target language can accelerate language acquisition. Cultural knowledge also has a positive impact in cases where cultural similarities exist between the previously known language(s) and the target language. This allows for familiar bridges to learning the second language's concepts and norms. Learners with an aptitude for learning new languages also benefit from having an advantageous starting point, allowing them to achieve functional proficiency with less time and/or effort.²⁴
- **Education and learning experiences:** Education and previous learning experiences can impact the learner's progress in language learning.²⁵ For example, positive prior experiences in an educational setting, such as success with post-secondary education, can contribute to higher performance.²⁶ Previous bad experiences can impact learning habits, such as being unable to develop a plan or strategy for learning or being unable to cope with negative emotional responses to learning based on past experiences.²⁷ General academic aptitude in certain areas, such as musicality, also appears to have a positive impact on an individual's ability to acquire new languages.²⁸

²⁰ Dixon, L. Quentin et al. What We Know About Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis From Four Perspectives. *Review of Educational Research* 82, no. 1 (2012): 40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41408677>.

²¹ Čatibušić et al. "Syrian Voices: An Exploration of the Language Learning Needs and Integration Supports for Adult Syrian Refugees in Ireland." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 25, no. 1 (2021): 30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1673957>

²² Fanny Forsberg Lundell, Klara Arvidsson, and Andreas Jemstedt, "The importance of psychological and social factors in adult SLA: The case of productive collocation knowledge in L2 Swedish of L1 French long-term residents," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 45, no. 2 (2023): 560, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263122000419>.

²³ Strong, Michael. Social Styles and the Second Language Acquisition of Spanish-Speaking Kindergartners. *TESOL Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1983): 249. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586652>.

²⁴ Hyltenstam, Kenneth. "Language Aptitude and Language Awareness: Polyglot Perspectives." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 41 (n.d.): 57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000027>.

²⁵ Larsen-Freeman, Diane. "Looking Ahead: Future Directions in, and Future Research into, Second Language Acquisition." *Foreign Language Annals* 51, no. 1 (2018): 66-7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12314>.

²⁶ Fanny Forsberg Lundell and Klara Arvidsson. "Understanding High Performance in Late Second Language (L2) Acquisition—What Is the Secret? A Contrasting Case Study in L2 French." *Languages* 6, no. 32 (2021): 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6010032>

²⁷ Forsberg Lundell and Arvidson, "Understanding High," 4.

²⁸ Franco Delogu et al. "Beneficial Effects of Musicality on the Development of Productive Phonology Skills in Second Language Acquisition." *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 14 (2020): 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2020.00618>.

- **Age:** Age may be an important intrinsic factor in language acquisition. The “critical period hypothesis” posits that there is an age (i.e. 17 years old) after which language acquisition is harder. However, other studies indicate that learning depends more on social and psychological factors than age.²⁹ Results of studies on the relationship between age and fluency are varied, indicating that age can have different impacts on language learning.³⁰
- **Identity and attitudes:** The identity and attitudes of the learner and their relationship to the target language’s culture can impact language acquisition. In some studies, adult language learners expressed wanting to be perceived as native speakers of the target language for “instrumental and existential” reasons, such as social mobility and cultural identification with the host country.³¹ The ability of adults to “self-regulate,” their open-mindedness, and cultural empathy are factors that have been identified in contributing to better second language acquisition.³² In children, certain dispositions can impact the quality and type of language skills developed.³³ For example, shyness can result in less developed language skills.³⁴ Additionally, different demographic groups, such as women, experience language-learning differently.³⁵
- **Disability and neurodivergence:** Disability and neurodivergence can impact individuals’ learning experiences and outcomes in their mother tongue, and these impacts can be carried over into second-language acquisition.³⁶ The impact of disability and neurodivergence on language acquisition varies greatly, resulting in positive and negative impacts across a range of competencies.³⁷
- **Literacy:** Literacy can positively and negatively impact learning times. A learner with low literacy skills can face challenges in engaging with learning material, particularly if the material is not specifically adapted to learners with low literacy skills.

Environmental Factors

- **Structure and goal of language programs:** The structure and goals of language learning programs can significantly impact learning outcomes, including the intensity of the programs and opportunities for learners to immerse themselves in the target language.³⁸ Given the heterogeneity of learners, teachers face challenges in designing appropriate programs for various learners that permit adult learners to stay motivated and engaged with the learning material.³⁹ The design of programs and implementation of programs are also impacted by the training and teaching capacity of teachers.

²⁹ Forsberg Lundell and Arvidson, “Understanding High,” 1.

³⁰ Bardel et al. *Third Language Acquisition. EuroSLA Studies*. Berlin, Germany: Language Science Press: (2020): 24-5.

³¹ Forsberg Lundell and Arvidson, “Understanding High,” 1.

³² Forsberg Lundell et al., “The importance of psychological,” 559.

³³ Strong, *Social Styles*, 255.

³⁴ Keller, Karin, Larissa M. Troesch, and Alexander Grob. “Shyness as a Risk Factor for Second Language Acquisition of Immigrant Preschoolers.” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 34, no. 6 (2013): 329-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2013.07.001>.

³⁵ Čatibušić et al. *Syrian Voices*, 23.

³⁶ See Lee Gunderson, Reginald da Silva, and Louis Chen, “Second Language Reading Disability: International Themes,” in *The Handbook of Reading Disability Research*, eds. Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard L. Allington (New York: Routledge, 2016), 20.

³⁷ Piper Hutson and James Hutson, “Neurodiversity and Inclusivity in the Workplace: Biopsychosocial Interventions for Promoting Competitive Advantage,” *Journal of Organizational Psychology* 23 no. 2 (2023), 2-3.

³⁸ Dixon, L. Quentin et al. *What We Know About Second Language Acquisition*, 38, 43.

³⁹ Duff, Patricia A. *Social Dimensions and Processes in Second Language Acquisition: Multilingual Socialization in Transnational Contexts*. *The Modern Language Journal* 103 (2019): 11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45172038>.

- **Socioeconomic status:** Socioeconomic status can impact a learner's ability to access resources for language learning. Limited resources can affect not only language learning but also skills training, access to services, professional advancement, and career options.⁴⁰ These issues can compound one another, where low proficiency in the language of the majority further acts as a barrier to increasing social capital.⁴¹
- **Supportive environment:** An intentionally designed learning environment and wraparound supports to support the learner during language learning can positively impact language acquisition, such as supportive employers, support from native speakers, government subsidies for taking courses, access to childcare, access to health services, and positive relationships with language teachers and peers.⁴² A supportive environment also extends to the home life of learners; for example, parental second language skills heavily impact those of their children.⁴³

Learner-specific and environmental actors can interact to have differing impacts on adult language acquisition. For example, one's socioeconomic status may position an individual such that they must work long hours and cannot devote adequate time to language learning, which can negatively affect their labour market and socioeconomic mobility as a result.⁴⁴ PERT's previous research (2022) has also demonstrated a link between race and negative learning experiences among Black English-speaking Quebecers, underlining the importance of considering factors such as identity and learners' starting points in program design and implementation.

Similarly, researchers and practitioners have found that traditional classroom setups do not account for the needs or learning styles of disabled and neurodivergent learners, yielding negative learning experiences and outcomes. Learning environments that are designed to account for learners' disabilities and neurodivergence can positively impact their learning outcomes.⁴⁵

Factors can vary greatly depending on learner types and contexts. For example, learners' mental health and immigration status can be important factors in their language training process. Papazian-Zohrabian et al (2021) identified various factors impacting the French language-learning process for immigrants with low literacy, including positive and negative past experiences in school, financial difficulties, trauma from the migratory experience, acculturation, and fear of deportation.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Torres, Kelly M., and Meagan C. Arrastia-Chisholm. "Second-Language-Acquisition Developmental Differences: Exploring Migrant Children's Language Production in a Daycare Setting." *Early Child Development and Care* 189, no. 11 (2019): 1827-8.

⁴¹ Forsberg Lundell and Arvidson, "Understanding High," 9.

⁴² Duff, *Social Dimensions*, 7-8.

⁴³ Dixon, L. Quentin et al. *What We Know About Second Language Acquisition*, 36-7.

⁴⁴ Morgan Gagnon and Sta Kuzviwanza, "Mapping Employment Supports for Québec's Racialized and Immigrant English-speaking Communities," *Provincial Employment Roundtable*, (2023), 47-48,

<https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Mapping-Employment-Supports-for-Quebecs-Racialized-and-Immigrant-English-speaking-Communities.pdf>

⁴⁵ See, for example, Massiel Pereira Chaves, "Pedagogical Strategies to Teach Neurodivergent Students in the English Language Classroom," *Universidad Nacional Costa Rica*, (September 2021), <https://repositorio.una.ac.cr/handle/11056/21845>;

Erika Piazzoli and John Kubiak, "'The only learning I'm going to get': Students with intellectual disabilities learning a second language through performative pedagogy," *Scenario* 13, no. 1 (January 2019): 21-41, <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.1.2>

⁴⁶ Garine Papazian-Zohrabian et al., "Rapport de recherche: Projet de recherche menant au développement d'un programme-cadre gouvernemental de francisation pour les personnes ayant des compétences peu développées en littératie et en numératie," *Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration*, (2021).

Within workplaces, employers often have significant influence over the language learning conditions (whether facilitating, punitive, or ambivalent) and play a pivotal role in establishing a culture of learning.⁴⁷ The workplace is a unique context where communications are characterized as hierarchical, goal-oriented, technical, and focused on building rapport and exchanging knowledge.⁴⁸ Strong communication skills are increasingly considered an important soft skill, and they are associated with collaboration, conceptualization, and critical thinking.⁴⁹ For language learners, particularly those learning the majority language, language barriers can affect their ability to utilize, develop, and demonstrate their communication skills in the workplace. Employers and peers within the workplace can help lower language barriers by creating an environment that supports the language-learning process through activities such as workplace language training and developing a welcoming culture for language learners. One example is impromptu “language brokering,” which can develop between language learners and their more linguistically proficient coworkers who provide support by helping correct errors made by the language learner in spoken and written communications. Language brokering is usually performed by someone with knowledge of the learner’s and the workplace’s culture and languages, acting as an intermediary.⁵⁰ Impromptu language brokers can also function as cultural mediators, bridging the gaps between their coworkers’ and employers’ cultural competencies.

The time and effort it takes for a language learner to reach functional proficiency in their second language are not independent variables; they are strongly affected by learner-specific and environmental factors, highlighting the importance of accounting for these factors in the design and implementation of second-language acquisition programs.

Case Studies

J’apprends le français: mentorat linguistique entre personnes commerçantes et étudiantes

In 2016, the *Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal (CCMM)* developed a pilot program, “J’apprends le français”⁵¹ for French language learning. The program pairs small business owners (those with 10 to 25 employees) in the service industry with university student “mentors” to deliver workplace French language training to employees who are not proficient in French. This training is available to all employees of the business, including the business owner themselves. The mentor collaborates with the business owner to develop personalized language learning approaches that align with the business operations and customer service objectives of the establishment.

⁴⁷ Lynda Yates, “Language Learning On-the-Job,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Language in the Workplace*, ed. Bernadette Vine (Routledge, 2018): 427.

⁴⁸ Yates, “Language Learning,” 429.

⁴⁹ Denise Jackson, “Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice,” *Studies in Higher Education* 40, no. 2 (2015): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842221>.

⁵⁰ Anna-Elisabeth Holm, et al., “Employers could use us, but they don’t”: voices from blue-collar workplaces in a northern periphery,” *Language Policy* 19 (2020): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-019-09513-4>

⁵¹ “J’apprends le français,” *Chambre de commerce du Montréal métropolitain*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.cmm.ca/fr/services/japprends-le-francais/>

The language-learning business owner/employee must advance one level on the *Échelle québécoise des niveaux de compétence en français* for each 3-month session in the program.⁵²

This program aims to develop workplace-relevant language competencies by focussing on French terminology and phrases that can be applied directly in the workplace. The business owners can advertise their participation in the program to customers, permitting customers to interact with employees with the awareness that they may be language learners.

The university students selected to be mentors in the program typically study in relevant fields such as linguistics, communications, translation, literature, and law.⁵³ Mentors receive training to participate in the program and are hired to work on 3-month renewable contracts. The pedagogical plans they develop must meet the program objectives and be approved by program administrators and business owners. A key element of this program is that the mentor brings French language training directly to the workplace and works in collaboration with the employer to facilitate an environment conducive to workplace language learning.

This program also focuses on outreach campaigns to involve the community in language training. The community is sensitized to the needs of the French language learners when interacting with them, helping to contribute to a positive learning environment. A resident of Montréal states in a YouTube clip promoting the program:

Ces gens là sont déjà au travail et ça leur permet d'apprendre le français à un rythme plus agréable. [Translation: These people are already at work, so they can learn French at a more comfortable pace.]⁵⁴

In fact, the man in the clip appears delighted that the shopkeeper is motivated to learn French, and this encourages him to go into the store.

The program started in Montréal's Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, eventually extending to other neighbourhoods in Montréal. It is partly financed by the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration within the framework of Francisation Québec. The program was paused for 3 years due to the COVID-19 pandemic but renewed in 2023 until July 2024. It has had over 900 participants, and in 2018-2029 reported the recruitment of 200 mentors, and 800 local retailers paired with university students.⁵⁵ At present, the program has hopes for expansion into new businesses across Montréal.

⁵² The *Échelle Québécoise de niveaux de compétences en français* is produced in collaboration with the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, the Ministère de l'Éducation, and the Université de Montréal (2023). The *Échelle québécoise*'s objective is to identify, assess, and standardize the language skills of adults for whom French is not their first language. For more details, see Appendix 1.

⁵³ "J'apprends le français," Université de Montréal, accessed November 20, 2023,

<https://www.umontreal.ca/en/universite-citoyenne/japprends-le-francais/>

⁵⁴ "Jumelage linguistique : un programme profitable pour la communauté," @CcmmQcCa, Chambre de commerce du Montréal métropolitain (CCMM), YouTube channel (2018), accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f50fgsxXpA4&t=40s>

⁵⁵ "Rapport annuel 2018-2019," Chambre de commerce du Montréal métropolitain, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.ccmm.ca/fr/publications/developpement-d-affaires/le-rapport-annuel-2018-2019-de-la-chambre/>

Hospi' Jobs

Le Monde des Possibles ASBL, a French language learning centre, partnered with *L'Institut de Recherche, Formation et Action sur les Migrations (IRFAM)*, a continuing education association aiming to promote diversity, to implement a pilot project to accelerate the labour market integration of migrant workers in the healthcare sector of Liège, Belgium, through language and professional training. The program is ongoing and aims to address a higher unemployment rate among migrant workers, especially women,⁵⁶ and the labour shortages in the healthcare sector.⁵⁷

The program consists of 15 weeks of skills training, including 90 hours of French language training, 120 hours of job training in different healthcare skills, and 178 hours of employment assistance (CV writing, job search, professional development, and networking).⁵⁸ The participants were trained on the job with the support of employers. The program also provides participants with subsidies for transportation and childcare.

The program has a multi-stakeholder framework that includes employers and teachers, with a designated coordinator managing all parties to ensure the program objectives are met.

The program was developed out of the recognition that some newcomers to Belgium already had sufficient French competencies and the motivation to integrate into the labour market but were instead required to take compulsory language training courses that took them further from the labour market. This could result in a loss of time, resources, and motivation for newcomers who want to enter the labour market and improve their French while working.

Preliminary evaluations of the program showed significant success: 91% of participants reported that their linguistic skills permitted them to understand instructions and carry out required tasks.⁵⁹ They also noted a significant increase in their technical vocabulary, from 49% before participation to 91% at the end of the program and more ease in conversing with coworkers. Half of the participants in the program were offered work contracts by healthcare employers after the program. The program's impact on the healthcare facility was also noteworthy - employers indicated that it promoted an improved perception of migrant workers and their contributions to the economy, particularly in an essential sector experiencing labour shortages.⁶⁰ The program's initial recommendations include developing more French language training programs that involve multiple stakeholder collaboration to facilitate on-the-job training.

⁵⁶ Paola Guillén Crespo, « « Je veux travailler ! » Barrières à l'insertion professionnelle des femmes immigrées, » Analyses de l'IRFAM, no. 3 (2021), <https://www.irfam.org/je-veux-travailler-barrieres-a-linsertion-professionnelle-des-femmes-immigrees/>

⁵⁷ Altay Manço, Leïla Scheurette and Joachim Debelder, « Inclure les personnes d'origine étrangère à l'emploi en Wallonie Bruxelles : quel bilan ? » Études de l'IRFAM, (2021), <https://www.irfam.org/inclure-les-personnes-dorigine-etrangere-a-lemploi-en-wallonie-bruxelles/>

⁵⁸ "Hospi' jobs," *Le monde des possibles*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.possibles.org/hospijobs/>

⁵⁹ Altay Manço, "Insertion accélérée de personnes migrantes peu qualifiées, faiblement francisées : une expérience durant la pandémie, dans le secteur hospitalier wallon en pénurie de main-d'œuvre," Institut universitaire SHERPA, midi atelier : Introduction à l'intervention en contexte de diversité culturelle, (October 17, 2023), <https://sherpa-recherche.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Experience-dinsertion-dans-le-secteur-hospitalier-en-penurie-de-main-doeuvre-PPT-30-min.pdf>

⁶⁰ Manço, "Insertion."

Dialogue McGill

Dialogue McGill supports initiatives that improve access to social and healthcare services for English speakers in Québec.⁶¹ They have implemented three programs to help train, recruit, and retain healthcare professionals who provide services to Québec's English-speaking minority community.

One of these initiatives offers tailored English and French language skills training for healthcare professionals. The training is delivered in two parts. First, a part-time teacher-led instruction course (24 hours over 8 weeks) is delivered to participants in a hybrid format. The course focuses on developing speech competencies in French. This course is complemented by self-learning modules (24 hours over 8 weeks), which include language-learning exercises, lessons, and access to a tutor. The classes are offered at five fluency levels: basic, elementary, low intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced. A language proficiency test determines the appropriate level for each participant to begin instruction. Additional language activities, such as conversation circles or lunches led by a facilitator, are available across a network of community partners.⁶²

Dialogue McGill researcher Dr. Sarah Bowen emphasizes that language barriers in healthcare are an issue of equity, safety, and quality for linguistic minorities across Canada, and “those facing language barriers also face increased risk of medication errors and complications, and adverse events.”⁶³

The Dialogue McGill language training for healthcare professionals increases the amount of bilingualism in healthcare workers. By recruiting more English speakers and training them in French (and vice versa), they increase employment opportunities and ameliorate access to healthcare in minority linguistic communities.

Discussion

Learning an additional language as an adult can be challenging and time-consuming, particularly among adults who face resource and time constraints. In the studies we reviewed, we found that the time and effort required for second language acquisition for adults varies greatly. Using the studies reviewed, we estimate that the learning time for an adult language learner can range from 250 to more than 1000 hours, depending on various factors. Learner-specific factors that affect learners' outcomes, such as motivation, age, language learning experience and attitude toward language learning, are highly variable. This presents a

⁶¹ “Dialogue McGill,” Dialogue McGill, McGill University, last modified 2023, <https://www.dialoguemcgill.ca/en/home>

⁶² “Language Activities,” Dialogue McGill, McGill University, last modified 2023, <https://www.dialoguemcgill.ca/en/language-activities#activities>

⁶³ Sarah Bowen, “The impact of language barriers on patient safety and quality care,” *Société Santé en français* (2015): 5, <https://sante-closm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SSF-Bowen-S.-Language-Barriers-Study-1.pdf>

challenge for language program instructors, administrators, and policymakers whose objectives are to increase functional proficiency among adult language learners but must account for the diverse needs and profiles of learners seeking language training. However, some learner-specific factors, such as motivation and attitude, can be addressed through the environmental factors we identified. For example, the structure of language training programs and a supportive learning environment can positively influence learners' attitudes and motivation for language learning. Wraparound supports provided by the state, such as childcare and transportation assistance, can help learners dedicate more time and effort to learning, decreasing their likelihood of dropping out of language training programs.

Language policies and programs for adult second language acquisition designed for labour market integration must also account for the socio-linguistic dynamics of the workplace. Workplace communications can be highly specific, requiring a unique set of language skills often best acquired on the job. This means that achieving functional proficiency in the workplace can pose additional challenges for learners in a work environment where employers and peers are unsupportive or punitive of their language learning process. This can lead to learners developing anxiety or fear around practicing the target language and making errors. This anxiety from second-language workplace interactions can extend the learning time and complicate language-learning efforts due to learners hesitating to practice the language. This emphasizes the impact that workplaces, specifically employers and colleagues, have on the language learning process and highlights the benefits of workplaces as a positive and safe learning environment.

The case studies suggest that language learning time and effort vary significantly depending on the program's design. In the *J'apprends le Français* program, learners are given a broad timeline of 3 months to progress one level on the *Échelle québécoise des niveaux de compétences en Français*, indicating a tailored approach to integrating workplace training and language training that focuses on learners applying their knowledge in real-life interactions, rather than in an in-class guided learning environment. The program also distributes the responsibility of language learning to various stakeholders, including employers and the broader community, who can interact with language learners in French and contribute to them gaining functional proficiency.

Similarly, the Hospi' jobs program focuses on the involvement of different stakeholders in helping learners gain workplace-specific French language skills for the healthcare sector. The program also emphasizes the importance of learners gaining language skills while working in recognition of the time, resource, and motivation constraints that adult learners face. This approach can be preferable to hundreds of hours of in-class learning as it prepares language learners to integrate into the labour market. The Dialogue McGill program focuses on speech competencies and healthcare-related terminology with 48 hours of guided and unguided learning time. The varying learning times among the programs demonstrate the importance of tailored and goal-specific approaches to language learning. Whereas the general literature points to 600-900 hours of learning time to reach functional proficiency, the workforce-oriented

language training approaches appear to have a shorter training time and focus on learners acquiring sufficient work-oriented language skills to navigate the labour market.

Large-scale government-sponsored adult language training programs tend to offer fewer hours. A 2018 survey of 40 member states by the Council of Europe showed that states were providing free or low-cost programs to immigrants ranging from 250 hours to over 1000 hours.⁶⁴ Thirty-two countries offered courses provided or financed by the government. Of the countries providing courses free of charge, 11 countries offered 0-250 hours of language training, 8 countries offered 250-500, 4 countries offered 500-1000, and 1 country offered 1000-1500 hours. Resource and cost constraints, such as the lack of sufficiently trained language teachers and the costs of running programs, play a key role in the delivery of government-sponsored programs. Other factors, such as participants dropping out and lacking the capacity or motivation to complete intensive and long-running training programs, should also be considered.

Québec's Francisation Québec department is the single government access point for French learning services for adults living in Québec, those who plan to settle in Québec, and workers within companies.⁶⁵ It offers in-person and remote courses, part-time and full-time, and courses for specific fields of employment. Courses range from 32-300 hours, with financial assistance available for participation in a course, childcare, caregiving, and transportation.

Conclusion

In this report, we interviewed experts and examined the existing literature to estimate the required time and effort for an adult learner to reach functional proficiency in a target language. Achieving functional proficiency is highly dependent on learner-specific and environmental factors for the learner, with experiential data from language programs and literature indicating it could take 250 to more than 1000 hours.

Factors such as immersive learning, motivation, age, and prior languages can impact learning times. Québec has dozens of government-sponsored adult French language training programs with the goal of helping learners fully participate in Québec society, particularly in the job market. To support the ongoing development and improvement of these language training programs, we offer some recommendations for policymakers and program administrators who design language training policies and programs:

Recommendations

1. Expand the scope of French-language training programs to include immersive and informal learning experiences

⁶⁴ Rocca, Lorenzo, Cecilie Hamnes Carlsen, and Bart Deygers. Linguistic integration of adult migrants: requirements and learning opportunities. Council of Europe, 2018. <https://rm.coe.int/linguistic-integration-of-adult-migrants-requirements-and-learning-opp/16809b93cb>

⁶⁵ "L'organisation et ses engagements," Le Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration last modified June 6, 2024, 2023, <https://www.quebec.ca/gouvernement/ministere/immigration/francisation-quebec>

The literature highlights that formal French-language training is most effective when complemented by immersive and informal learning experiences. Experiences such as language-learning trips, language cafés, meetups, workshops based on hobbies, participating in the arts (such as theatre), and volunteering are examples of activities that can be included in language training programs.

2. Expand the accessibility of French-language training programs that address various learner factors

There is a diverse array of factors that affect language learning experiences and outcomes. The Québec government already provides financial assistance to learners to address issues such as lack of time, childcare and transportation. This financial assistance should continue and be assessed to examine whether it meets the needs of the most vulnerable learners.

Additionally, the Québec government should invest in further ensuring that program designs accommodate more learner factors such as learners with negative experiences with education, low literacy, and those facing mental health challenges.

Programs should also be promoted to increase their reach to learners, and registration and program information should be simplified and available in multiple mediums (online and offline) and languages.

3. Invest in work-integrated French-language learning programs for specific industries

Invest in industry-specific programs (i.e. healthcare, social services, information technology, construction) spanning 600 - 1000 or more hours of work-integrated instructional time in partnership with employers and workplaces to create supportive work environments that enable language learning.

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Appendix 1. Comparison of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the *Échelle Québécoise de niveaux de compétences en français* learning levels

To evaluate linguistic competencies, Québec has developed the *Échelle Québécoise de niveaux de compétences en français*, produced in collaboration by the minister of Immigration, Francisation and Integration, the minister of Éducation, and the Université de Montréal (2023).⁶⁶ The *Échelle québécoise*'s objective is to identify, assess, and standardize the language skills of adults for whom French is not their first language. It has four categories: orale comprehension, oral production, written comprehension, and written production, with each category sub-divided from levels 1 to 12. According to the descriptor, the *Échelle québécoise* establishes a framework for evaluating competencies in French for stakeholders: the education workforce, community organizations, program and policy developers, and employers.⁶⁷

The *Échelle québécoise* is a tool that provides a common metric on levels of proficiency in French that inform tracking one's language learning progress, develop pedagogy and evaluation tools, support employees and employers with labour market integration, and facilitate access to public services. There are various language frameworks of reference, including the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*, which is commonly used across European countries and in other countries.⁶⁸

Table 2: Comparison of levels in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages & *Échelle Québécoise de niveaux de compétences en français*

| | Beginner | | | | Intermediate | | | | Advanced | | | |
|---------------------------|----------|---|----|---|--------------|---|----|---|----------|----|----|----|
| Échelle québécoise | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| Common European Framework | A1 | | A2 | | B1 | | B2 | | C1 | | C2 | |

⁶⁶ "Échelle québécoise," le ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, le ministère de l'Éducation, et l'Université de Montréal (2023). https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/langue-francaise/fr/publications/referentiel/echelle_niveaux_competence_2023.pdf

⁶⁷ "Échelle québécoise," 6.

⁶⁸ "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)," Council of Europe (2023). <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>



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