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Article abstract

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## School Districts' Assessment of the French Language Proficiency of Prospective FSL Teachers

Stefan Merchant<sup>1</sup>, David Jack, & Laura Hermans-Nymark<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>Queen's University, <sup>2</sup>Niagara University

### Abstract

It is a widespread practice among Canadian school districts to assess the French language proficiency of candidates applying for French as a Second Language (FSL) teaching positions. This pan-Canadian study used surveys, interviews, and website data to examine the French language proficiency assessment practices and processes used by Canadian schools when hiring FSL teachers. The findings show that almost 90% of Canadian school districts assess French language proficiency when hiring FSL teachers and that the most common form of assessment is to ask one to three questions in French (with candidates responding in French) during the employment interview. Evaluation of the candidates' responses is rarely informed by a language proficiency framework or rubric; instead, evaluators' decisions are informed by their overall impressions of the candidate's language proficiency. Other promising assessment practices are described, along with suggestions about how districts may improve their French language proficiency assessments when hiring FSL teachers.

*Keywords:* language assessment, French proficiency, hiring, French teachers

### Introduction

For years, school districts across Canada have identified a persistent shortage of French as a Second Language (FSL) teachers (Alphonso, 2019; Jack & Nyman, 2019; Karsenti et al., 2008; Masson et al., 2019). Most Canadian jurisdictions have mandatory French language instruction for some portion of K-12 schooling (e.g., Ontario, New Brunswick), and in all provinces, French immersion is an increasingly popular program (Dicks & Genesee, 2017). Between 2015 and 2019, the growth rate of Canadian students enrolled in French immersion grew by almost 2% (approximately 70,000 students), with annual growth rates topping 5% in some large urban centres (Jack & Nyman, 2019).

Alongside concerns about the shortage of FSL teachers come concerns about the French-language proficiency of the applicant pool of FSL teachers (Canadian Parents for French, 2018; Faez, 2011; Veilleux & Bournot-Trites, 2005). French-language proficiency would likely not be a concern if most FSL teachers were French first-language speakers, but the majority of FSL teachers in Canada have learned French as a second language (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Wernicke, 2020). This may be one reason many school districts feel compelled to conduct French-language proficiency assessments as part of their hiring procedures. Data from Ontario school districts show that up to 1 in 4 FSL teacher applicants do not meet the French-language proficiency expectations of the district they are applying to (Jack & Nyman, 2019). The low French-language proficiency of some FSL teacher applicants further amplifies the difficulty many districts have in filling FSL teacher positions. Additionally, emerging research suggests a link between language hesitancy and teacher confidence (Cooke & Faez, 2018; Swanson, 2012; Viswanathan, 2019), leading some early career FSL teachers to seek non-FSL teaching positions (Wernicke,

2020). These combined findings point to challenges with FSL teacher supply and retention.

Effective FSL teaching requires many skills, but target language proficiency has long been discussed as fundamental for effective second language (L2) teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980; Faez & Karas, 2017; Richards et al., 2013). The association between low target language proficiency and low teaching effectiveness, combined with the evidence that FSL teachers with low French-language proficiency tend to leave FSL teaching, means that the French-language proficiency assessments conducted when hiring FSL teachers can be high stakes both for the applicant and for the district. The applicant wants a job, and the district wants to know if the teacher they are considering hiring has the requisite skills to be comfortable and effective in the classroom. For these reasons, how districts assess the French-language proficiency of prospective FSL teachers warrants exploration.

The purpose of this study is to understand how Canadian school districts assess the French-language proficiency of applicants to FSL teaching positions. It is part of a three-year initiative led by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and funded through the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Department of Canadian Heritage to seek solutions to the FSL teacher shortage issue. While the data reported here focus on Canadian school districts, similar data were also gathered from faculties of education in all provinces offering FSL teacher education programs<sup>1</sup>.

### *What is Language Proficiency?*

When asked, people often answer that someone who is proficient in a second or foreign language sounds fluent (De Jong, 2018) or like a native<sup>2</sup> speaker. This definition of language proficiency is not only inaccurate (Sandoval, 2019) but also not helpful in the context of FSL teaching as many factors apart from target language proficiency contribute to effective L2 pedagogy (Aoki, 2013). In fact, there is some evidence that native speakers can be less effective second language teachers (Kissau & Algozzine, 2017). Nuanced understandings of language proficiency specific to L2 teaching are needed to develop assessment tools suited to hiring L2 teachers. Unfortunately, models of language proficiency specific to the teaching profession are rare. In Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC, 2013) created a language proficiency framework for teachers that included functional uses of language such as providing instructions, facilitating student interactions, and communicating with peers. However, this is a general framework for all K-12 teachers working in their first language and so has limited utility for developing language proficiency assessments for FSL teachers. We have yet to find a language proficiency framework specific to L2 teaching, although many researchers have described the different language skills used in L2 teaching (e.g., Elder, 2001; Farrell & Richards, 2007; Freeman et al., 2015; Richards, 2010; Salvatori & MacFarlane, 2009).

### *Why is Language Proficiency Essential for FSL Teaching?*

Proficiency in French is an essential component of successful FSL teaching (Boutin et al., 1999; Painchaud, 1990; Richards et al., 2013). This is true because the subject matter is also the language of instruction (Borg, 2006; Cooke & Faez, 2018). This means that not only is knowledge of the language required for teaching purposes but proficiency in the language is also needed for communication and modeling purposes. As Sullivan (2011) noted, “all can agree that the French teacher who cannot speak French will not be a successful teacher of French” (p. 241). FSL teachers are often the most immediate, if not the sole, model of French speech available to FSL students (Veilleux & Bournot-Trites, 2005) and thus expected to communicate as competent users of French.

Teachers' target language proficiency not only contributes positively to student learning (Kim & Elder, 2008) but is also associated with a teacher's confidence in the classroom (e.g., Murdoch, 1994; Wernicke, 2017). The emphasis on communicative language teaching (i.e., a focus on teaching so that students can use language for communication purposes instead of a focus on teaching grammatical, syn-

<sup>1</sup> Findings from both school districts and faculties of education can be found at [https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency\\_a.pdf](https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency_a.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The term native is used regularly to express a degree, sometimes desired, of language proficiency, but we recognize that using the term “unreflectively is to engage in a gesture of othering that operates on an axis of empowerment and disempowerment” (Bonfiglio, 2013, p. 29). The term native is used in this study while acknowledging uses in other contexts that privilege and oppress identified groups.

tactical, and other language patterns) may have intensified this relationship (Freeman et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2013). At the very least, communicative language teaching has broadened the language skills required by L2 teachers. FSL teachers who are using French to give instructions, provide feedback, create authentic communication opportunities for students, and create a supportive learning environment require the same broad linguistic repertoire as teachers in L1 contexts. They also need language skills specific to L2 teaching, such as the ability to explain rules of the language, recognize common errors, and relate the target language to the student's first language (Elder, 2001; Richards, 2010).

The majority of FSL teachers in Canada are second-language French speakers (Faez, 2011; Wernicke, 2020), but not all have developed the linguistic agility required to effectively facilitate the learning of French (Carr, 2007). Under-developed target language proficiency coupled with the language demands of communicative language teaching can have negative consequences on teachers' feelings of competence and confidence which affects their ability to provide effective instruction (Nishino, 2012; Swanson, 2012; Thompson & Woodman, 2019). This creates problems for school districts as feelings of lower professional efficacy may contribute to higher attrition rates, compounding the FSL teacher shortage (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016).

### *Assessing Language Proficiency for Teaching*

As language proficiency is foundational to effective language teaching, it is critical that language proficiency assessments are of high quality and align with accepted assessment standards and practices. As with any assessment of a specific skill or competency, effective language assessment combines general assessment practices with those that are domain and purpose-specific. A review of the American Educational Research Association's (2018) *Standards for educational and psychological testing* identified general assessment guidelines. These include:

- The types and methods of assessment should allow the person being assessed to demonstrate the targeted skills and knowledge.
- Assessment practices should be monitored and revised to improve their overall quality.
- Information about the purpose, content, format, and scoring of the assessment should be given in advance.
- Factors not relevant to the domain being assessed should not affect the score or rating.
- Assessors should be trained and competent in delivering the assessment.

Language assessment experts, too, accept the above guidelines and offer several domain-specific recommendations when assessing language proficiency. Douglas (2000) wrote that assessment tasks and content should be "authentically reflective of the target situation" (p. 46). Creating such tasks and content means that assessment creators need to understand and identify the language skills in the target situation to create an authentic assessment context that will elicit those skills (Elder, 2001; Purpura, 2016). Notions of authenticity in language assessment recognize that language is always context-dependent and used for different communicative purposes. Thus, any authentic language assessment needs to cater to the purpose of the intended language use, e.g., teaching French in a classroom. Bachman (1991) argued that authenticity in language assessment tasks can be divided into *situational authenticity* (tasks designed to reflect situations that are likely to be encountered) and *interactional authenticity* (tasks requiring the speaker to use relevant language abilities). Carefully constructed assessment tasks, therefore, reflect authentic language-use situations while prompting the speaker to use the target language sufficiently to make a reasonable evaluation.

The first step in designing any assessment is to define the construct. In this case, the construct is complex—the language skills needed for effective FSL teaching. This complexity may be one reason why we found much discussion in the literature about the language skills needed by L2 teachers, but no operationalizable frameworks or models. The lack of language proficiency models or frameworks would explain why we were not able to find any French-language proficiency assessments founded on a language proficiency framework specific to L2 teaching. The absence of such frameworks means that assessments of language proficiency for FSL teachers must either be based on general language proficiency frameworks or have no framework at all. Thus, we were curious about how school districts designed and implemented their own assessments of French-language proficiency for prospective FSL teachers. This provided the rationale for our exploratory study to investigate how Canadian school districts assess the French-language proficiency of those applying to FSL teaching positions.

## The Study

The key research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What French-language proficiency assessment tools and practices are currently used by school districts for purposes of hiring?
2. What processes have school districts put in place to review their assessment results and refine their assessment protocols?

## Data Collection Methods

We obtained data in some form from 112 school districts in all provinces and territories and from rural and urban school districts. As is appropriate for an exploratory study (Creswell, 2014), we used three methods of data collection—website scans, surveys, and interviews. A description of each method of data collection is given below (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Data Collection Summary*

Province or Territory	Website Sample	Survey Sample	Interview Sample
Alberta	10 (17%) *	5	1
British Columbia	10 (17%)	7	3
Manitoba	10 (27%)	3	1
New Brunswick	4 (100%)	3	1
Newfoundland	1 (100%)	1	1
Northwest Territories	3 (37%)	1	1
Nova Scotia	7 (100%)	2	1
Ontario	21 (29%)	15	6
Prince Edward Island	1 (100%)	1	1
Quebec (English boards only)	9 (90%)	4	2
Saskatchewan	8 (31%)	9	2
Yukon	1 (100%)	1	1
Total	85	52	21

\* Number in parentheses is the percentage of districts sampled from that province or territory.

## Website Scans

We scanned 85 district websites in total. All provinces and territories except Nunavut were included. For provinces or territories with fewer than 10 school districts, we examined the website of every district in the province with one exception, Northwest Territories, where we sampled only three districts. This was done because the other districts either did not have a website or their website had no employment or human resources information. For provinces with more than 10 districts, we chose a sample of 10 districts that included the largest cities, some suburbs, and some rural districts. We looked for information on the website about applying to FSL positions and associated French-language proficiency assessments.

## Surveys

A survey was deployed to collect fine-grained data that were unlikely to be on district websites. Examples of such data include the history and rationale of the French-language proficiency assessment, satisfaction with the assessment tools, and contextual factors surrounding the assessment<sup>3</sup>. A first draft of the survey was presented to two groups of independent researchers who completed the survey online and offered feedback. This feedback was incorporated into a second draft which was then trialed by five

<sup>3</sup> The survey instrument can be found at [https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency\\_a.pdf](https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency_a.pdf)

school districts. Changes made to the survey based on districts' feedback were minor, and so we included the data from the trial sample in our data set.

Most survey participants completed the survey online, but 13 surveys were delivered over the phone at participants' request. In all, we received 52 usable surveys from districts in all provinces and territories except Nunavut. This represents approximately 19% of the 276 publicly funded English-language school districts in Canada. Since our sample encompasses all provinces, two territories, and rural, suburban, and urban districts, we feel confident we have captured a wide range of contextual factors likely to influence the hiring (and consequent French-language proficiency assessment) processes of FSL teachers. One area of challenge for this study was determining which personnel in a district were best positioned to complete the survey. Our recruitment email suggested the survey should be completed by someone with a knowledge of the French-language proficiency assessments used when hiring FSL teachers. We did not ask survey respondents to identify their role within the district and so cannot report exact demographic data for our respondents. However, we note that our recruitment emails initially targeted superintendents and human resources leaders. We also note that in our follow-up conversations, all respondents we spoke to were either human resources personnel, a FSL coordinator or resource person, or district administrator (e.g., superintendent).

### **Interviews**

Interview protocols were designed to gather more nuanced information not easily reported through the survey. Interviews were conducted with 21 school districts from nine provinces and two territories. The sample size incorporated geographically diverse participants operating in a variety of legislative and policy contexts. As there was considerable overlap between survey and interview information, no analysis specific to the interview data<sup>4</sup> is offered here. Instead, references to interview comments are made periodically for illustrative purposes.

Two interview protocols were created. The first was for participants who wanted to complete the survey orally. This protocol included the survey items but asked for additional detail. For example, the online survey had an item that asked about participants' level of satisfaction with their assessment process. The interview protocol included this item but had a follow-up question about what could be done to improve the assessment tools and processes. The second interview protocol was for participants who had completed the survey online. This protocol asked for additional detail about responses to certain items. As an example, the online survey had an item that asked about qualities or traits the district looked for when hiring FSL teachers. The interview protocol asked for additional detail, such as whether those qualities and traits changed depending on the teaching assignment (e.g., Core vs. French Immersion or primary vs. secondary). Functionally, all interview participants were asked the same questions, but those who had completed the online survey provided some responses through the online survey and others through the interview, while those who were interviewed only provided all their responses through the interview.

### **Findings**

Four themes emerged from our data: pre-assessment communication, assessment tools, assessment processes, and formative use of assessment information. We present each theme individually before discussing the overall implications of these findings.

#### **Pre-assessment Communication**

The dominant finding is that information about the French-language proficiency assessment is rarely available to FSL teacher applicants before the assessment occurs. Among the 85 school district websites we scanned, approximately 90% offered no information about their French-language proficiency assessment. Among the remaining nine district websites, three communicated they accepted results from the Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française (DELFL) or Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française (DALFL) tests as evidence of French-language proficiency. DELFL or DALFL tests are founded on a general language proficiency framework known as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). While other standardized tests of French-language proficiency exist, the DELFL and DALFL are the only two that

<sup>4</sup> For complete analysis of the survey and interview data, please see the full technical report at [https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency\\_a.pdf](https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HeritageCanada-FSL-Proficiency_a.pdf)



were used by more than one school district as an assessment of French-language proficiency. Another two school districts said that DELF or DALF test results were among the different types of evidence of French-language proficiency the district would accept. The other pieces of evidence were internally developed French-language proficiency assessments, and in one case, successful completion of a practicum in a French immersion classroom. One district mentioned that applicants must complete an online assessment, but no detail was given about that assessment, and another asked applicants to submit a 2-minute video of themselves speaking French. A district in Atlantic Canada communicated that a standardized French proficiency interview would be used to assess applicants' speaking skills.

None of our respondents described a formal communication plan to help applicants understand the French language assessment tools and processes that would be used during the hiring process. There was some mention that, once selected for an interview, applicants were told that some of the interview questions would be posed in French, and responses in French were expected. There were also cases where applicants were told what language skills (e.g., speaking and writing) would be assessed as part of the hiring process, but we found no instances where detailed information was shared with applicants, such as the number of assessment items or the evaluation rubric. No respondent indicated their district had sample assessment items or exemplars to help applicants prepare for the assessment.

There was slightly more communication related to the level of French proficiency expected by the district, with 24 district websites offering some information. Sixteen of these websites stated applicants needed to be fluent in French but did not offer any detail about what "fluent" means. Four districts expressed the expected proficiency level as a DELF score (e.g., DELF level B2), and two districts listed required achievement levels on a provincially mandated Oral Proficiency Interview. Two districts from Western Canada provided detailed, descriptive criteria for expected French-language proficiency along with the corresponding teaching level (elementary and/or secondary) and French program type (Core/Basic or Immersion). The descriptions were sufficiently detailed for potential applicants to be able to self-assess and make an informed judgement about their suitability for the position.

The survey data revealed similar trends: the only districts that communicated proficiency expectations in advance to potential applicants were those who used an external examination (most commonly the DELF). However, this was only five (9%) of our survey respondents.

### **Assessment Tools**

**Frequency.** Among 52 survey respondents, 32 (62%) indicated their district always assesses applicants' French-language proficiency, and another nine (17%) stated their district sometimes made this assessment, depending on circumstances. Four (8%) of the respondents answered that no assessment is conducted in their district but later indicated that they ask questions in French during the employment interview. We interpreted this as at least a partial assessment of the applicant's French-language speaking ability, increasing the proportion of districts (87%) in our sample that have some sort of assessment of French-language proficiency during their hiring process for FSL teachers. One respondent whose district did not conduct language proficiency assessments stated that few FSL candidates apply to this district, and those that do can almost be guaranteed a FSL position provided they are willing to teach in French and demonstrate a sound understanding of effective teaching pedagogy during the interview. Therefore, an assessment would have minimal impact on hiring decisions.

Districts that reported sometimes assessing French-language proficiency most often described a circumstance where francophone applicants, and those with external evidence of French-language proficiency (e.g., DELF score or degree specializing in FSL teaching), were exempted from the assessment. One district mentioned it assesses only for French Immersion positions, another that the assessment depends on the availability of the French language coordinator (who conducted all assessments for the district), and another assessed only if it had concerns about the applicant's level of French proficiency.

**Source.** Assessment tools were usually developed by the school district, with 41 (78%) of the districts in the survey reporting the use of an internally developed instrument. Four districts (8%) reported using DELF/DALF results, and another four (8%) reported using an external Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)<sup>5</sup>. One district reported using comments made about applicants' French-language proficiency in their reference letters as an assessment, and another used a writing test developed by an external agency.

<sup>5</sup> All four OPI districts came from a province where an OPI was mandated by the province for graduates from teacher education programs.

Among interview participants, two districts used the DELF/DALF test, while another accepted a DELF score of B2 or above in lieu of the internally developed assessment. The only other external assessment mentioned was a provincially mandated writing test (CEFRANC) used by a district in Quebec. As this test is designed for francophones seeking work in French-language schools, its use as an assessment for FSL teachers seeking employment in English-language schools made it an interesting outlier.

**Skills Assessed.** Speaking and writing were the most common language skills targeted by the assessments. Among districts that conduct a French-language proficiency assessment, all reported they assessed speaking, and 33 (72%) assessed writing, whereas 5 (12%) reported they also assessed reading and 13 (28%) indicated they assessed listening. It should be noted that unless a district used an external test, listening was always assessed by judging whether applicants understood the oral interview questions that were posed and not by separate items designed to assess listening skills. The prevalence of assessing applicants' oral language skills indicates that districts prioritize speaking over other language skills when hiring FSL teachers. As such, we limit our reporting to the oral language components of districts' proficiency assessments.

Of the 28 districts that gave details about how they assessed applicants' speaking skills, 25 (89%) indicated they asked the applicant questions in French during the hiring process, but the details of this process varied from district to district. Just over half (15 or 57%) of the districts posed three or fewer questions in French, and the response was evaluated using general impressions of the quality of the response and the language use. This evaluation was conducted by someone on the interview team (usually a school administrator) who was identified as having sufficient French language skills to conduct the assessment. Holistic, impression-based evaluation of applicants' French-language proficiency was the most common rating method used, with 21 districts (75%) evaluating in this manner.

In cases where rubrics were used, most were developed internally by district staff. Only three districts reported grounding their rubrics in a known proficiency framework such as the CEFR. Interestingly, one interview participant admitted that while a rubric was available and expected to be used, evaluators often rated the candidates based on the overall impression they formed during the interview.

A few districts had more fine-grained assessment approaches. These included asking questions designed to elicit certain verb tenses or vocabulary and using rubrics to guide evaluative judgements. One interviewee in a remote school district shared that much of her assessment of an applicant's speaking ability was done through the multiple telephone conversations she had with the applicant while discussing the job application, organizing the interview, and arranging for the applicant to travel to the district. She felt that the ongoing, interactive nature of the telephone conversations gave her a strong enough assessment of the applicant's speaking skills that the assessment conducted during the interview became a mere formality.

**Assessment Context.** Among the districts that assess French-language proficiency, 34 (76%) indicated that the employment interview was the most common setting in which applicants' French-language proficiency was assessed. The next two most popular responses were "after selection for an interview but before the interview takes place" and "after the interview takes place, but before hiring decisions are made" (11 districts or 24% in both cases). Eighteen districts (40%) indicated they did not always conduct their French-language proficiency assessment at the same stage of the hiring process. This occurred either because the district had more than one assessment component (e.g., a written assessment and then some questions asked in French during the interview) or because the timing of the assessment varied depending on the applicant and the timing of the job posting.

Districts in remote or northern communities indicated that travel to the district office for a job interview was often logistically and financially challenging. These respondents felt there were some advantages to conducting language assessments prior to job interviews. Early identification of applicants who did not meet district expectations in French proficiency meant these applicants could be removed from the pool of candidates to be interviewed later. It also allowed the employment interview to focus on factors other than language proficiency, such as pedagogical knowledge.

**Proficiency Expectations.** One survey item asked what level of French-language proficiency was expected by the district. The descriptors used in the item were adapted from the CEFR descriptors so that we could align responses to the CEFR levels. Descriptors matching CEFR levels B2 and C1 were the



ones most often selected<sup>6</sup>. This finding agrees with our website data, but we note that these expectations were rarely communicated to applicants in advance of the assessment.

**Rating “Proficiency.”** Given that job interviews were the most common setting for French-language proficiency assessment, the finding that school administrators were the ones most often (61% of the time) responsible for assessing applicants’ French-language proficiency was expected. Fifteen respondents (34%) said their district uses a district-level French-language specialist or consultant to conduct the assessment, while six respondents (14%) indicated their district uses an external expert/consultant (e.g., government personnel, a local college French instructor). The reliance on district personnel to conduct assessments corresponds with the preferred use of district-developed assessment tools. One interesting outlier was a district in British Columbia that collaborated with a team of university professors and with personnel at another district to produce their assessment. This district’s goal was to improve the quality of their current assessment and make it available to neighboring districts, thereby providing some consistency for applicants to FSL positions in that part of the province.

Respondents were asked to describe the process they used to ensure that applicants’ French-language proficiency ratings were consistent among raters. The results were coded as “Not Applicable,” “Rubric,” “Consensus,” or “Rater Training.” Because a single person conducts most assessments and not a team, “Not Applicable” was the most common response (selected by approximately 50% of respondents). Using a single evaluator meant there was no need to ensure consistency among different evaluators. “Having different evaluators come to a consensus through discussion” was the most popular method of achieving consistency, with 13 districts (30%) using this method. Only two respondents (4%) mentioned any type of rater training to facilitate consistent decision-making.

One promising practice to achieve more consistent applicants’ French proficiency evaluations came from two large districts that used online interview platforms with pre-set questions and evaluation rubrics. These districts described several advantages of using these platforms. First, the removal of the French-language proficiency assessment from the employment interview meant that interview teams need not include a French speaker or assessment person, allowing them to maintain the same composition as teams for other teaching positions. Second, the online interviews also eliminated the need for applicants to travel for the assessment. This reduced barriers to applicants who lived far from the district and allowed a greater number of candidates to be considered for the position. Finally, recordings of the applicant’s responses allowed multiple raters to review the recording at their convenience and to discuss any variations in raters’ perceptions of the applicant’s performance prior to finalizing their evaluation.

### **Assessment Processes**

We were curious to know how school districts came to use their current assessment process. Twenty-three people (45%) responded with “I don’t know” or some variation thereof, whereas five people (10%) responded that the current assessment process was a continuation of past practice. Comments from interview participants included phrases such as, “developed organically,” “developed over time,” and “just happened.” It appeared that assessment processes and practices evolved for a variety of reasons that were local to the school district. These reasons include complaints from parents about the French proficiency of teachers, hiring conditions created by the introduction or growth of French Immersion programs, the desire to develop more objective measures of French-language proficiency, concerns from school principals, avoiding dependency upon a single individual for all French-language proficiency assessments, and a push towards online assessment. In the few cases where participants described changes to the assessment, these changes were always in response to an identified operational problem. No change was due to a regular review of the assessment protocol.

Fourteen respondents (31%) indicated they had a process to review or validate the assessment. Most of these were internal processes, and changes were made to the assessment based upon satisfaction (or lack thereof) with the current process and instrument. Two districts described review processes that could be considered validation processes. The first tracked the teaching performance of its French Immersion teachers and correlated those ratings with the language proficiency ratings the teacher was given

<sup>6</sup> Descriptions of the CEFR language proficiency levels can be found at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>.

<sup>7</sup> The “Not Applicable” category applied to any response that either answered “Not Applicable” directly or had a single evaluator rating applicants’ performance on the assessment.

during the hiring phase. The second district used language experts from a university to help refine its instrument.

The 36 districts that reported no review or validation process were asked why that was the case. Fourteen respondents (39%) indicated they had never considered doing so. Other reasons included: the assessment process was working well so that there was no need to review it; the district used an external instrument (or their internal instrument was based upon an external instrument) so that no review was necessary; there were insufficient resources to conduct a review, and the district's small size did not warrant a review process.

### ***Formative Use of Assessment Information***

The most significant challenge cited by all study participants was the low number of applicants for FSL teaching positions. This included districts in Quebec and New Brunswick where, on the surface, it would seem there should be a plentiful supply of FSL teachers. The combination of few applicants, with many not meeting proficiency expectations, created significant challenges in filling FSL teacher vacancies. The need to fill positions resulted in hiring teachers with lower-than-expected levels of proficiency. One respondent told us that "most FSL teachers who apply are successful, but we've lowered our [French-language proficiency] standards in the past few years." Four districts mentioned that teacher retention is an issue. Two of these stated that teachers with low French-language proficiency have the highest level of turnover among staff.

Some districts used the lower-than-expected proficiency results to trigger processes to support new hires' language development. Seven respondents mentioned their district supported the development of teachers' French-language proficiency in some way. For instance, one district partnered with the local university in an initiative to help practicing teachers improve their French by assigning them a mentor. This mentor designs an individualized French language learning program for the teacher and helps them with the program. At the end of a 2-year period, the teacher can retake the OPI required for certification.

An interesting example came from a participant whose district required FSL teachers to have a DELF B2 level to be hired. There is a clause in the collective agreement stipulating that if the district is unsuccessful in finding a candidate with the required level of French, the position may be given to a candidate who does not meet the proficiency requirement, but opportunities to enhance their language skills must be provided. Thus, this district hired some FSL teachers without the DELF B2 accreditation and partnered with the province's Second Language Council to offer French pedagogical counselling and courses to prepare for the DELF exam. Sessions were offered online, which was described as helpful since numerous teachers needing this support are in remote areas. These supports were free of charge to the teacher.

### **Discussion**

Assessing the French-language proficiency of applicants to FSL teaching positions is commonly done in Canadian school districts. This practice may reflect a belief among districts that a FSL specialization from a B.Ed. program, especially among second-language French speakers, may not be a reliable indicator that an applicant possesses a level of French-language proficiency sufficient for classroom teaching. The prevalence of French proficiency assessment among school districts reflects a widespread belief that these assessments are necessary to safeguard the quality of FSL instruction in their schools. However, our findings raise questions about the quality and utility of the assessment tools and processes used in many districts to achieve this goal.

Without samples of the assessments used, it is not possible for us to offer a detailed critique of their content and fitness for purpose. However, we can offer some important questions worth considering. For example, would one or two questions asked in French during the interview provide an adequate sample of candidates' French language speaking abilities? Is it possible to cover the wide range of language abilities that L2 teachers need to be effective with such an approach? Even in cases where much of the interview is conducted in French, there are questions about whether such an assessment will yield useful information. Some applicants may be skilled at guiding the conversation in such a way as to hide weaknesses in their language skills, making them seem more proficient than they are. There is some evidence for this as one participant commented on instances where teachers who had been hired displayed

French-language proficiency in the classroom that was weaker than observed during the employment interview. Alternatively, it may be that some applicants are nervous during the interview, resulting in a performance that offers assessors a pessimistic view of their French-language proficiency.

Typically, FSL teacher applicants can find out little information about districts' proficiency assessment protocols before the assessment takes place. While greater transparency about the process (e.g., via district websites) is consistent with general assessment principles, it would be difficult to achieve in districts where the evaluation of applicants' French proficiency is left largely to individual school administrators' impressions during a job interview. This may partially explain why few participants in our study could describe the rationale or development of the French-language proficiency assessment and leads us to question the item development process and how well items target specific language skills or proficiencies. The fact that most evaluation was impression-based and not done according to pre-determined standards indicates that even if items were designed with a specific function (i.e., targeting a specific language skill or competency), the way the responses are rated would subvert that function.

Participants whose district did not have a rubric often used the term *holistic* to describe their district's approach to rating participants. Their description of holistic assessment relates to assessors making evaluative judgements of a candidate's French-language proficiency based on an overall impression created during the interview. What informs these impressions is not known. Clearly, one or more of the many constructs that underpin language proficiency would be included, but other factors such as appearance, accent, or personality may also come into play. There is an extensive body of research that shows impressions made during job interviews include many factors unrelated to performance (Judge et al., 2000) and that impression-based ratings are inescapably subject to individual assessors' biases regarding proficiency in French (Giles & Billings, 2004).

Even when rubrics are available, Cappelli (2019) found that without clear training and expectations, assessors were inclined to ignore rubrics in favor of their individual or collective impressions. We saw some evidence of this in our data, with one interview participant admitting the final ratings were influenced by overall impressions of the applicant's French and the rubric was not applied consistently. As she put it, "Not all assessors are using the same standards even though they are using the same tool." Not using rubrics or not providing training on how to apply rubrics decreases the likelihood of hiring the best candidate for the position and opens districts to challenges of inequitable hiring.

The district whose interview questions were designed to prompt applicants to speak about past, present, and future events as a way of assessing the applicants' use of different verb tenses demonstrate that thoughtful design of the interview questions can require applicants to demonstrate a broad range of relevant language skills. We cannot definitively comment on the quality of the items used to assess French-language proficiency during employment interviews; most interview questions were developed by school administrators and often doubled as explorations of applicants' pedagogical skills and knowledge. However, we note that assessment experts advise caution when using one assessment for different purposes (Kane, 2013).

Despite the increased presence of the CEFR in the Canadian FSL landscape (Arnott et al., 2017), the CEFR was only mentioned by two of the districts that developed their own assessments. No other language proficiency frameworks or models were mentioned by our participants. Districts without a framework to describe language proficiency are left with an informal definition of language proficiency created by their assessment tools. For most districts, this definition was the ability to answer a few interview questions in French and the ability to write one page on a topic. While both of these abilities are indicators of French-language proficiency, they fail to capture the many language skills required for effective L2 teaching.

With reference to Bachman's (1991) notion of situational authenticity, this study also raises questions about the suitability and validity of the assessment tasks used by many districts. We can think of a few situations where FSL teachers would be writing a single page of text in French on an unknown topic with little advanced warning. More situationally authentic tasks, such as correcting examples of student work, completing open-ended Cloze passages, or giving written feedback in French, will likely provide more useful information about an applicant's written French. Our data tell us that two districts use situationally authentic tasks, leading us to be optimistic that other districts might consider adopting this practice.

Perhaps the most promising finding in our study was the formative use of French-language proficien-

cy assessments. Using the results of French-language proficiency assessments for language development purposes seems a sensible option in a labor market where it is difficult to find FSL teachers. This is a recognized strategy in other industries (Cloutier et al., 2015). If districts continue to use French-language proficiency assessments in this way, greater thought will need to be given to their design. Accurately measuring whether someone's language proficiency is above or below a certain threshold requires a different approach and set of assessment tools than diagnosing strengths and weaknesses in a (potential) teacher's language proficiency. In the research literature, we could find no discussion of school districts using language proficiency assessments for teachers for formative purposes. This may be an emerging use of French-language proficiency assessment that is a response to the current pressures in filling FSL teaching positions.

## Conclusion

Our data provided an initial understanding of how Canadian school districts assess the French-language proficiency of prospective FSL teachers. While there is a range of tools and processes, the most common approach is to ask a small number of questions in French during the employment interview and use the responses as evidence of the applicant's French-language proficiency. The prompts are typically developed by school administrators who also evaluate the responses. Most evaluation is impression-based and not grounded in a shared rubric or conceptual framework. Conducting a high-stakes employment assessment in this manner raises concerns about the reliability of the information gathered about an applicant's French proficiency and the utility of this information for informing hiring decisions. There is emerging evidence that districts are beginning to use French-language proficiency assessment for formative purposes. The formative assessment information is used to develop language development plans for the applicant after hiring. This may prove to be a promising strategy for districts in addressing the shortage of FSL teachers.

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