French as a Second Language (FSL) Storytimes: Fostering Language, Literacy and Lifelong Love of Reading

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Abstract

Canada is a unique country with two official languages. While the majority of Canadian children are brought up in the Anglophone school system, they are still taught French at school in the form of core French classes, French immersion or extended French programs. Storytimes at the public library have a time-honoured tradition of introducing children to books, developing early literacy skills and fostering a lifelong love of reading. Combining research on the positive role of storytimes in the development of a child's reading proficiency and success at school with literature on second language instruction, such as French immersion programs, the author explores the value of French as a Second Language (FSL) storytimes in public libraries. FSL storytimes emerge as a tool for introducing children to the French language through fun activities, including stories, songs, rhymes and games. The author discusses early observations based on the experience of running an FSL storytime program on a trial basis in a mid-sized public library in Ontario. She also makes a number of practical suggestions about the evaluation of the program effectiveness in the future. The author hopes that this article will benefit other library practitioners seeking to create educational and entertaining reading programs and activities for their youngest clients and start a dialog on integrating FSL storytimes into library programming.

Keywords

French as a Second Language (FSL); storytime; public library; services to children; Ontario

Introduction

Storytimes have a time-honoured tradition of introducing children to books, fostering a lifelong love of reading and promoting literacy skills. The research and related written documentation on the benefits of storytime programs are extensive. However, very little is written about second language storytimes. Canada, a country with both English and French as its official languages, holds bilingualism in high esteem. While it is difficult to locate research about French as a Second Language (FSL) storytimes, much has been written on second language acquisition programs such as French immersion. By combining research on the positive role of storytimes in the development of a child's reading proficiency and success at school with literature on second language instruction, the author examines the potential value of FSL storytimes in public libraries.
FSL storytimes emerge as a tool for introducing children to the French language through fun activities, including stories, songs, rhymes and games. The author discusses early observations based on the experience of running an FSL storytime program on a trial basis at the Caledon Public Library in Ontario. The author is confident that it will benefit other library practitioners seeking to create educational and entertaining reading programs and activities for their youngest clients. The author also hopes that this article will generate a lively discussion among children's librarians and serve as a launching pad for collaboration in the area of early French-language acquisition through storytime.

**Storytime at the Library**

Storytime at the library dates back to the 1940s. It was originally designed "to begin a child's socialization with peers, as well as to foster a love of books and facilitate a child's adjustment to school" (Albright, Delecki, and Hinkle 13). Storytime programs remain popular today as a means of developing literacy skills and introducing children to the pleasure of reading and books. Generally ranging between 30 and 60 minutes in length, storytimes usually involve a library practitioner reading stories aloud to children while incorporating songs, rhymes, games and other activities into the program.

Storytimes promote the development of literacy skills in children. Literacy, defined herein as the ability to read, write and perform simple numeric calculations, has its roots in childhood. "For individuals, [literacy] is the foundation for academic, financial, and life success; for nations, it is key to a healthy democracy and a flourishing economy" (Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network [CLLRN] 5). Storytimes designed for young children focus on developing early literacy skills which lay the groundwork for reading (Ghoting and Martin-Diaz). Recent research in the field has had a far-reaching impact on the format and focus of public library storytimes. The program "Every Child Ready to Read" (ECRR) by the American Library Association (ALA) has been adopted as the best practice for many library storytimes across North America. The expanded second edition of ECRR emphasises the importance of incorporating various "strategies for developing pre-reading skills within the framework of five early literacy practices: singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing" into storytime (PLA and ALSC para. 10). Exemplary storytimes feature books and activities which promote early literacy skills and, at the same time, teach caregivers different ways to integrate literacy development into the everyday activities of their children.

Storytimes foster a lifelong love of reading: exposing children to books and narratives in an enjoyable and relaxed environment. This creates conditions for early positive encounters with reading and stories. Through the use of songs, rhymes, games and engaging tales, reading is introduced as a pleasurable activity, and early literacy skills develop in the most natural way. These initial experiences related to reading and books have long-term consequences for child development, particularly in terms of academic performance and reading proficiency (Ghoting and Martin-Diaz). Lynne McKechnie summarizes a number of studies on reading proficiency and notes several factors which contribute to developing readers, including the importance of "[h]earing stories read
aloud by a parent or another caring adult" (75). Reading aloud to young children involves them in the reading process and introduces some essential models of reading behaviour, such as holding the book upright, reading from left to right and turning pages (Rankin and Brock). As Saroj Nadkarni Ghoting and Pamela Martin-Diaz note:

[the age at which parents started to read to their child is associated with their child's interest in and enjoyment of reading activities. In turn, a child's interest in reading activities is an important predictor of his or her later reading achievement. The earlier we start, the better (9).

Faye H. Shin and Stephen D. Krashen argue that read-alouds are effective because "they get children excited about books" (39). They also "provide exposure to the written language; they help children acquire the special grammar and vocabulary of stories, which makes actual reading much more comprehensible" (Shin and Krashen 39). In sum, reading aloud is the central activity in storytime, which creates enthusiasm about books, encourages participation in the reading process, furthers literacy development and serves as a model of reading behaviours.

**Acquisition of French as a Second Language**

Canada is a country with two official languages: English and French. In the general population of 31,612,897 people (Statistics Canada, *Population & Dwelling Counts*), only 6,817,655 speak French as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, *Population by Mother Tongue*). As a result, most Canadian children are educated primarily in English with some French language instruction included in the curriculum. Given that French is an official language, and bilingualism is highly valued in Canadian society, some parents opt to enrol their children in French immersion or extended French instead of core French instruction. In these programs, students are not only taught French as an individual subject but also receive instruction for other subjects in French (Ontario Ministry of Education). In a French immersion program in Ontario, children begin in grade one, receiving between 50% and 100% of their instructional hours in French. Extended French is offered to children in grade four where students receive a minimum of 25% of their instructional hours in French (Ontario Ministry of Education).

French immersion exposes children to the French language in context by integrating it with academic instruction rather than teaching the language in isolation. Children acquire and retain language while using it casually and regularly in everyday interactions. Krashen, who has written extensively on language learning, argues that "we acquire language in only one way: by understanding messages, or obtaining 'comprehensible input' in a low-anxiety situation" (Krashen 37). Furthermore, it is commonly accepted by language development specialists that "language is learned most effectively when it is learned for communication in meaningful and significant social situations" (Genesee 186). In French immersion, daily interactions in the classroom become the relevant social setting for language acquisition. Comprehension and communication in French are essential for overall academic success. Unlike traditional second language education, [the "incentive for language learning in
immersion is not getting the linguistic forms right, but rather understanding and being understood" (Genesee 185).

**Second Language Storytimes**

There is a notable lack of scholarly research in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) on the development and impact of second language storytimes. Nevertheless, second language and bilingual storytimes are offered in libraries across North America. Professional literature about the positive effect of bilingual storytimes in public libraries in the United States has recently emerged. These programs are usually offered in English and Spanish and provide an introduction to the second language for English-speaking families, simultaneously serving the Hispanic population in the area (Howrey). One such example, "De Colores," is a monthly bilingual storytime offered at the Kenton County Public Library in Kentucky, which celebrates Hispanic culture through stories, live music, drama and traditional food dishes (Howrey).

Most information about French storytimes comes from electronic media, including newspaper articles, blogs and online communities sharing experiences. Some storytimes described therein are geared towards children raised in bilingual or multilingual homes in which at least one parent speaks French fluently. "Bringing up Baby Bilingual," a popular blog about raising bilingual children, offers detailed recommendations for creating such a program (Dodson-Knight). Library websites and newspaper articles publicizing French or bilingual storytimes (Brampton Library; Corazzelli; “French Story Time”) are also a strong indication of their rising popularity.

While there is scarce research support for the issue of FSL storytime programs designed for children who have a minimal understanding of the language, the author argues that the characteristics and goals of traditional storytimes and the principles of second language acquisition programs, such as French immersion, can be successfully combined to create effective FSL storytimes at the library. Similarly to traditional storytimes, FSL storytime programs will introduce children to books and reading. Developing early literacy skills, building and expanding vocabulary, and engaging children in the process of reading in the most natural and game-like fashion will become a staple of the program. The program leader will not only read aloud to children but also serve as a role model. From a different angle, FSL storytimes will derive from the best practices of French immersion education, which are predicated on the assumption that language skills are most efficiently acquired in meaningful social situations marked by low anxiety levels, rather than in artificial studious environments. The former emphasizes communication and comprehension rather than formal teaching techniques (Genesee; Krashen).

Just as reading aloud to children in their native language is linked to success at school, reading aloud in French to FSL students also has positive impacts on students’ academic achievements. Studies indicate that vocabulary expands and linguistic performance improves when children are read aloud to in French (Romney, Romney, and Braun). Reading aloud in French to FSL children also acquaints them with the
intonation and sound unique to the language in question and nurtures the sense of pleasure derived from reading in general, and reading in French in particular.

"French Fun for Beginners" – Initial Observations

In the Town of Caledon, 52,295 of its 56,840 residents speak English most often at home, whereas only 140 residents speak French most often at home (Statistics Canada, Detailed Mother Tongue). During the summer of 2011, the author ran an FSL storytime on a trial basis at the Albion Bolton branch of the Caledon Public Library. The program, designed for children five to seven years of age, was offered once a week for six weeks. Each session lasted for thirty minutes. The program was free; however, participants were required to pre-register.

In Caledon, a predominantly Anglophone community, French immersion education is very popular, and the FSL storytime program filled quickly. Initially, the program was limited to twelve participants; however, three more spots were added to allow for a total of fifteen children to take part. Parents and siblings of registrants were encouraged to attend and get involved in the storytime.

The name of the program, "French Fun for Beginners," was selected to emphasize that the storytime was not limited to Francophones, but was open to children with varying levels of French-language proficiency. The age of participants was also carefully considered. Initially, it was intended that the program would be geared towards either children who had just finished kindergarten and were getting ready to start French immersion or children who had just completed the first year of the French immersion program. However, when the group composition was finalized, it became clear that children with minimal to no previous exposure to French comprised the majority. Thus, the program was tailored to their needs and provided a basic introduction to the French language. The timing of the storytime was deliberate and allowed the library to offer a literacy-focused activity during the summer break.

The program followed a format typical of storytime and built on repetitions, songs, stories, games and related activities based on the chosen theme. Great care was taken to create a low-anxiety, fun environment conducive to learning and language acquisition. Therefore, the selected stories were lively and rhythmical and encouraged participation. Narratives were familiar, and many children recognized the English equivalent. This, in turn, improved their confidence and comprehension. Each week, the session began and ended with the same songs in an effort to create a stable routine and to enhance the sense of comfort and familiarity.

The six-week program covered a number of basic concepts, including simple greetings, colours, food and animal names, and each week built upon the content of the preceding sessions. Through the opening and closing songs, children practised greeting others and introducing themselves. However, the program was focused on stories rather than concepts, and books were chosen primarily because they were fun, interactive and easy to follow. For example, one session revolved around "Aboie, Georges!" ("Bark, George")
by Jules Feiffer, the story of a puppy who meows, quacks and makes other animal sounds instead of barking. It was selected for its flowing and amusing narrative pattern. Moreover, children were able to become active participants in the story through retelling activities. To be sure, in the process they also learned many animal names; however, the focus of the session was not animal vocabulary. Other interactive books used throughout the program included "Ours brun, dit-moi" ("Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?"), a beautifully rhyming tale that features basic concepts, colours and animals, written by Bill Martin and illustrated by Eric Carle; "Un canard pour dîner" ("The Doghouse"), a funny story by Jan Thomas about a group of animals who go into a doghouse after a ball but do not come out; and Nick Bland's "Sortez de mon livre!" ("The Wrong Book"), which talks about a boy whose book is invaded by a parade of unwanted characters.

During the first meeting, many children were reluctant to participate, and a few openly expressed their frustration when they did not understand what was being said. To deal with frustration and insecurities, the storytime facilitator employed a number of techniques. Although she initially spoke in French, she enhanced her presentation with numerous visual cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, to aid comprehension. If, based on the children’s response, she felt that these were not sufficient, the author translated a key word or phrase into English and repeated it in French. Encouragement and verbal praise were widely used in the instances where children answered questions or otherwise contributed to the program. If they responded to questions, ventured guesses or volunteered ideas in English, they were praised for comprehension and offered a French equivalent of what was said. As children became more acclimated to the program format and structure, even those who had previously expressed frustration enthusiastically joined in the songs and storytelling. One child thoroughly enjoyed "La grenouille qui avait une grande bouche" ("The Wide-Mouthed Frog"), an amusing tale of a curious frog in a bright colourful pop-up book format written by Keith Faulkner, once he realized that he understood the French word "manger." As it turned out, this word sounded similar in the language spoken by his parents. This demonstrated the importance of building on a child’s existing knowledge and familial context. The following week, the same child engaged more actively in the storytime. Improved comprehension boosted his confidence, and his interest was piqued.

Common children's games such as "Simon Says" ("Jacques a dit") and "Red Light-Green Light" ("feu rouge-feu vert") were popular among participants and helped reinforce vocabulary introduced during the program. Music was also an important component of the storytime format. Children’s songs with familiar tunes or adapted from well-known English songs, such as "Bingo," were effective because even children unfamiliar with the lyrics could chime in with "B-I-N-G-O" or clap along. Using well-known stories, songs and games, especially in the first few sessions, helped set the children at ease and boost confidence. This, in turn, was essential to a positive experience and an introduction to the new language.

From the start, parents were very enthusiastic about and supportive of the program. While many parents opted not to participate actively, waiting for their children in other
parts of the library, some remained in the room for the duration of the session. The children appeared to enjoy the program. By the third week, most participants seemed to have a good grasp of basic concepts introduced earlier through songs and activities.

**Limitations and Future Steps**

This paper has addressed a unique, pioneering, and, in a sense, experimental public library program that aimed to develop FSL skills in young children through storytime. To the public library staff, the program felt successful based on positive feedback from the parents of participants, the enthusiastic engagement and learning progress of participants during the weekly sessions, and the ongoing interest expressed by the community members in the continuous offering of the program. A number of useful observations were made. For example, the library staff noted an increased interest by participants and their parents in the children's French collection and other relevant library resources, such as the TumbleBook™ Library, which could further motivate children to master French. TumbleBook™ Library is an electronic resource which allows children to read popular storybooks or follow along as they are read aloud. The stories are enhanced by sound, animation and narration and are available in English, French and Spanish. This resource can be accessed from many public library websites.

A few practical lessons were also learned. For example, it became clear early on in the program that it takes longer to read a book to a group of children unfamiliar with the language than it takes to share the same book with children well-versed in French. Introducing key vocabulary, supplementing storytelling by facial expressions and gestures, and translating phrases into English to ensure comprehension required more time. Therefore, a typical 30-minute library storytime program in English, often comprised of three books and accompanying songs, rhymes and activities, had to be modified to accommodate the extra time and effort associated with working in the second language. As a result, the author chose to include only one or two books in each session, supplementing them with games and activities.

While the overall impression of the program was positive, "French Fun for Beginners" was just a stand-alone experiment of a single library, and a very short-term one at that. When the program was completed, it became clear that its next offerings should be accompanied by the process of formal evaluation in order to determine the efficiency and benefits of the program in both the short and long run. In the first round of the program, evaluation was mostly limited to personal reflections of staff members and the informal feedback provided by parents and children each week. The author sees great merit in employing preliminary surveys and formal assessment techniques in the future that will allow librarians to measure improvements in language proficiency as a result of the program.

Before the next offering commences, it would be useful to survey the parents of children registered in the program to collect more specific data about the extent of French language usage at home and children's prior exposure to French language, culture and
literature. This survey could also gauge, in a more systematic fashion, children's and parents' expectations of the program.

Additionally, it would be useful to employ a carefully chosen post-program assessment methodology that would combine the following elements. First, librarians could adapt some existing assessment techniques developed by educators and child psychologists that would allow them to measure the level of French language proficiency at the initial and final stages of the program (i.e., entry-level proficiency vs. exit-level proficiency). These assessment techniques, properly administered with parental consent, will not detract from the enjoyable and playful character of the program. They will just be 'part of the fun.' Second, it would be useful to develop surveys or interview questionnaires to gather parental observations about the use of the French language by their children at home and in other social settings. Finally, it would be useful to interview the teachers who welcome the program participants into their French immersion classes and solicit their views on the benefits of the program. The latter activity, by extension, will strengthen partnership and collaboration between the public library and local educational institutions.

To be sure, "French Fun for Beginners" was offered during the summer in the situation when free time was plentiful and educational activities for children were scarce. It is not clear whether interest in or enthusiasm for such a program during the school year would be equally high. In the future, it would be interesting to offer the program at different times and to trace whether its popularity would wane as the school year advances. Despite the fact that the aforementioned formal evaluation techniques will require a serious investment of time and effort, the author believes that putting the program on a more scientific footing will benefit the library and its younger users in the long run.

The most significant difficulty in evaluating the program was, and still is, the lack of a baseline, i.e., the rarity of comparable programs in other libraries and the paucity of research and professional literature on the subject. The author hopes that this article will generate interest in FSL programs in the LIS professional community and that other libraries with similar programs will be willing to reach out and share their experiences through scholarly and professional communication. Librarians can turn to blogs and newspaper articles for tips and suggestions about the content and format of second language or bilingual storytimes, but there is dire need for both descriptive accounts and empirical studies in this area.

**Conclusion**

FSL storytimes, similarly to traditional storytime programs, can encourage the development of literacy skills, a lifelong love of reading and positive attitudes towards learning. Moreover, FSL storytimes may be used as a tool to introduce children to the French language through easy-to-follow stories, engaging activities and interactive rhymes and songs in a low-anxiety and fun environment. FSL storytimes offered during the summer have the potential to be especially valuable: they will help prepare children for entering French immersion programs in the fall by making their initial encounter with
the second language easier and more enjoyable. Potentially, these programs can also assist children currently enrolled in French immersion schools in maintaining and improving their language skills in the absence of formal instruction over the summer.

Given the value of bilingualism in Canadian society and the exceptional position of public libraries in offering rich educational and recreational settings and activities, FSL storytimes are an area deserving of further exploration.

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Works Cited


