



About Boys and Remedial Measures in French

Article

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January 2003

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The research document titled *Les garçons et les mesures d'aide en français* (Boys and Remedial Measures in French) by Lynn Lapostolle, teacher in the French Department at cégep du Vieux Montréal (CVM), François Massé, teacher in the Illustration and Design Department at CVM, and Jorge Pinho, teacher in the Community Recreational Leadership Training Department at CVM, was made possible by, among other things, a grant from the Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage (PAREA) of the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (Lapostolle, Massé and Pinho, 2003). It draws a profile of the motivation for learning French of boys whose linguistic competence is judged unsatisfactory at the time of college entry, and it conceives pedagogical tools according to the qualities that participants in the study wish to find in the remedial measures offered in French. Between autumn 2000 and winter 2002, a total of 506 CVM students, most of them registered in the French remedial course, took part in one or more steps of the experiment: questionnaires, assessment of academic files, interviews in small groups and in large groups.

From primary school to secondary school to college, *ad nauseam*

*he takes 30 percent off
for the gaps I had in secondary school
for things I didn't learn in primary and in secondary school.*
(Boy registered in literature at college entrance and receiving help in French)

There's no point in concealing reality: no matter what the institutional level, in Québec schools more boys than girls currently have difficulty meeting or do not meet the requirements in language skills (Gouvernement du Québec, 1999). In primary school, only a minority of boys possess *sufficient* or *superior* writing skills, while the majority of girls have one or the other. At the secondary level, the situation worsens somewhat for the student population as a whole, and the gap between the boys' skills and the girls' skills remains, still to the boys' disadvantage. In college, the problem persists: when students fail the *épreuve uniforme de français* (uniform ministry French examination) — one of the

¹ This article is available in the original French version as well as in German and in Spanish translation.

compulsory conditions for obtaining a DEC (diploma of college studies) — the lack of command of the language is usually the cause for this failure, and once again, the boys are outclassed by the girls. Given these circumstances, the balance sheet drawn up by the Commission des états généraux sur la situation et l'avenir de la langue française au Québec (Commission of the Estates General on the Situation and Future of French) is not unexpected: “The educational system in Québec does not fulfill ... its responsibility to assure the command of French, both spoken and written” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2001, 39). How to turn the tide for these boys who undertake higher education with dreams of obtaining a French-language DEC? To be sure, a first step involves examining the boys' results, perceptions and thoughts as this enables an understanding of the context before taking action.

After at least one year of pre-school, six years of primary school and five in secondary, in short, after twelve years of State-sanctioned studies, the quality of French is so flawed in some students that secondary five results at CVM force one boy out of five to take a remedial course upon entering college. These boys make an average of one error every eight words, which makes them *very weak* writers. Speaking as students for whom mastering the French language is difficult, and as students unable to meet college entry requirements, the boys denounce the incoherence of the educational system. Establishing a connection between their French marks in secondary five and their mark at the end of the French remedial course makes it possible to understand why they question the coherence of the system that trained them. In reality, only the overall French mark obtained in secondary five seems to explain the mark obtained in the remedial course. Admittedly, when obliged to take the course, they improve and become *moderately good*, thus just slightly exceeding the objective set for the course, e.g., the acquisition of minimal autonomy as a writer. However, this is true only if they persist to the end of the remedial course — and their persistence does remain an unresolved problem. Indeed, the improvement observed hides a more sombre reality: the average mark obtained in the remedial course by the boys who took part in this study is barely 55 percent. This group of boys therefore faces bitter failure, despite graduating from secondary school and despite the will-to-remedy manifested by the college level. Being required to take a course that forces regression — because it bears on content which should have been acquired since primary or secondary schools — leads to success only under certain conditions, as shown by statistical tests and comments. And so the fissures accumulate.

In their comments, boys take a swipe at the primary and secondary levels, and, though fully aware of their degree of responsibility in the situation, they don't hold back about college level education either. In their view, the efforts, the energy and the strategies deployed to ensure the success of the French remedial course must be accompanied by support extending far beyond the course itself. For example, what about French in the common core or complementary courses, in the concentration courses? In boys, the importance of value as a source of motivational dynamics is echoed in their questioning of the role of written French in relation to success at school, as well as in personal and professional areas. What some people hold as a given seems highly debatable in the eyes of others; the values conveyed by the words or actions of the various school staffs, especially the teaching staff, therefore take on an importance that should or could be used to advantage with full knowledge of the facts.

■ Motivation and pleasure: a fertile amalgam ■

if I see the smile becoming more and more vivid during the meeting with the student, then I can tell my goal is being reached, somewhere. The marks always go up, automatically, when the student is motivated. You end up finding the point that interests him in the subject matter. He'll end up embroidering something around this interest of his.
(Tutor)

Within the group of students taking the French remedial course, there is a significant difference between boys and girls as concerns the degree of motivation to improve their French, with boys showing less motivation than girls. In boys, this degree is a key predictor of the mark obtained at the end of the course; in fact, it constitutes the most relevant variable in explaining this mark, as revealed by examining the connections between the answers to a questionnaire on motivation in French and the mark in the French remedial course. In order to get a picture of the motivational dynamics (Viau, 1999) and of certain concepts of success (Rivière, Sauvé and Jacques, 1997) held by young people, comments by young people made during group interviews were used to complement the motivational profile already established during a first step, which involved an assessment of the academic profile and answers to a questionnaire on motivation. What value do boys assign to writing, to reading, or to the remedial help aimed at their success in French? Do they see themselves as competent in terms of writing, reading or receiving remedial help in French? Do they feel they have some control over the activities linked to writing, reading or the help they receive with written French? Is French a source of pleasure for them?

The result is telling: the higher the boys' perception of their degree of motivation to improve their French, the more their remedial course mark increases. In practical terms, in order to improve their French enough to pass the course, they must perceive this degree of motivation as *high* or *very high*; failure awaits those in whom this degree is *nil*, *very weak*, *weak* or *average*. Taken as a whole, the degree of motivation is a fruitful element, one which can serve as the basis for many proposals to support success in French. However, certain elements prevail when it comes to exerting a positive influence over the forces comprising motivation, including even an invitation to pleasure.

Of the concepts studied which relate to the motivational dynamics when it comes to French and the pleasure experienced when in contact with French, boys and girls show differences in half of them. An examination of the most important source of motivation — e.g., the value students assign to a task or an activity — reveals distinctions between boys and girls, be it about reading, writing or getting help with French. The learning objectives students set for themselves — whether linked only to reading or only to writing — also reveal a significant difference between boys and girls. The same goes for performance objectives tied to reading and to writing. Moreover, the learning strategies used and the pleasure

experienced differ according to gender. And finally, for each concept where a significant difference exists, the answers provided by the students reveal a lower degree of motivation in boys than in girls.

The boys whose linguistic competence is unsatisfactory upon college entry show real generosity when discussing the factors that motivate their resistance to improving written French. They demonstrate a real openness about the help that the establishment can offer them, and admit that they are seeking help that will take their needs into account, of course, but which also possesses qualities they can quite readily name. Motivation, the decisive element in linking the academic file with the answers to the questionnaire, also emerges from the boys' discourse: even though they don't know how to go about improving their motivation relative to French, they realize that the value they assign a task or an activity, their competence in executing this task or activity and, finally, the control they exert over this task or activity — especially in terms of reading and writing — are all forces that could contribute to their involvement and perseverance and, ultimately, their ability to produce output that will lead to success.

■ Intersubjective relationships above all else ■

between secondary and cegep, there's a wall, a real wall. Like, in secondary, I think they really wanted our ... that the teacher wanted to force us almost to work, and all that. But here, nobody's forcing us. We're independent. And we're sort of put aside. That's what I think was the big shock. You get here, you expect to get some help, but hey, you have to ask for help, and we're not used to asking for help. We're used to hearing: "Do you want some help?"
(A boy registered in remedial French at college entrance and who failed the course)

Asked about the help received outside the remedial course, boys and girls say they receive it in the same proportion. For both genders, the number of students who receive help is lower than the number of those who do not. A good profile of boys who get no help in French outside the course must take into account that one boy out of four states lack of time as a reason for not getting help. In fact, time emerges as a factor to be considered both from the boys' written answers and interviews. In addition, whether they are registered in remedial French or not, boys question the organization of school time and the number of hours of continuous presence in class, making time one of the school-related factors which they discuss at length. In order to eliminate the maximum amount of resistance possible from boys' motivational profile, their comments on school-related factors influencing motivational dynamics must be taken into consideration.

One boy in five receives no extra teaching in French outside the remedial course for the following reason: the desire to go it alone. This response — which apparently respects the conventions ruling the male social code, or 'boy' code (Pollack, 1998) — nonetheless calls for a look at yet another

aspect of the boys' profile. Indeed, when the seven types of help reportedly employed by these boys are clustered together — the Learning Center Language being the most frequently cited one — interpersonal relations prevail, and two out of three boys report calling upon members of their natural support network for help in French. In addition, recognizing the insistence with which the boys repeatedly ask for relationships based on human qualities — and this is true at every step of the journey aimed at improving the quality of their written French, whether this support comes from members of their natural network, from their peers or from members of the college-level teaching or non-teaching staff — can only bear fruit. Because they feel a real need for human support, they lament the excessive number of students per class — the size of the group can, for example, act as a brake when the time comes to ask questions. This breach of a code which, in many eyes, forecasts an academic career rife with difficulties, or troubles or even failures appears as an invitation to thwart the more alienating dispositions of male socialization (Dulac, 2001).

While they speak at length of this need for human relations as a possible springboard for their improvement, the boys invite a cautious approach. It is essential to take into account the male characteristics which say that, for them, creating ties rests upon gesture and action rather than on words and communication, and that the “power of connection” must be present in these gestures and actions (Pollack, 1998). Instead of emphasizing the limits of the efforts made to allow the maximum number to succeed, such data make it possible to avoid being duped by the code and its traps.

■ Pedagogical objects, boy-coloured ■

I think something needs to be done in cegep, like creating something to help boys in French. I think it's maybe a bit too late. I dunno. That's what I think, it's maybe a bit too late to act. It should have started in secondary or in primary even. I dunno, if you compare boys and girls, it's easier for girls, maybe because of the way the course is given, the boy is gonna pay less attention. And the girl, she's gonna be more interested in the course. That's maybe the problem too.

(A boy registered in literature at college entrance and who passed the course).

The motivational profile of boys showing unsatisfactory linguistic competence at college entrance leads us to believe that certain pedagogical objects (Van der Maren, 1999) could help these students improve their French, provided of course that these objects integrate the qualities noted in the quantitative and qualitative sections of the study *Les garçons et les mesures d'aide en français*, given the importance boys assign to these qualities. These pedagogical objects include a diagnostic tool focusing on the decisive factors relative to the improvement of the quality of language in boys at college entry,

including factors related to motivational dynamics, concepts of success, linguistic competence and areas of interest; “grammatical jogging,” that is to say, a set of activities allowing a constant, medium-paced progression of boys’ linguistic competence from college entry until their competence becomes satisfactory from their viewpoint as well as that of the institution; dialogue aimed both at promoting the coherence of academic organization as concerns boys’ education in French and at supporting their success in French, more specifically, a dialogue between the primary, secondary and college levels on the one hand, and, on the other hand, this dialogue with regard to the measures for succeeding in French and in terms of college education as a whole. The elaboration, experimentation and evaluation of these objects constitute the follow-up study entitled *Pour une amélioration du français chez les garçons* (Toward an Improvement of French in Boys) (Lapostolle, Bélanger and Pinho, 2002–2004).

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