

# **Boys and French as a second language: A research agenda for greater understanding**

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Following an extensive and federally funded analysis of literature related to boys learning French as a second language (FSL) in Canada, the authors propose a series of research questions to guide future research related to males in FSL classrooms. To better understand the need for this research agenda, the researchers provide an overview of the current state of male participation in FSL programs in Canada and in foreign language programs internationally and review various explanations for the reported lack of male interest in language learning. While acknowledging the existing literature on the topic, the researchers emphasize the lack of research specific to the Canadian context and the need for more Canadian research to understand why males are disinterested in learning French in Canada.

Suite à une importante analyse subventionnée par le gouvernement fédéral, et relative aux garçons apprenant le français langue seconde (FLS) au Canada, les auteurs proposent une série de questions susceptible de guider des recherches futures liées aux garçons dans des classes de FLS. Pour mieux comprendre le besoin de cette étude organisée, les chercheurs ont donné une vue d'ensemble de l'état actuel de participation masculine dans des programmes de FLS au Canada, et dans les programmes de langues étrangères sur le plan international. Ils ont aussi fourni un survol des différentes interprétations qui essaient d'expliquer le manque d'intérêt des garçons dans l'apprentissage des langues. Reconnaisant la recherche qui existe déjà sur ce sujet, les chercheurs ont mis l'accent sur le manque d'étude approfondie des Canadiens dans ce domaine, et le besoin de plus de recherche canadienne dans le but de comprendre pourquoi les garçons ne s'intéressent pas à l'apprentissage du français au Canada.

## **Introduction**

There has been growing concern over the past decade amongst second language educators across Canada about the lack of male participation in French

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as a second language (FSL)<sup>1</sup> programs across the country. Canadian research indicates that approximately two-thirds of students who drop FSL from their studies after the mandatory years are male (Netten, Riggs and Hewlett, 1999; Allen, 2004; Kissau, 2006).

In a time of vanishing borders, internationalization and multiculturalism, one would expect swift and definitive action to address reported disinterest amongst young Canadian males in learning a language other than English. While the under-representation of males in foreign language<sup>2</sup> classes has received a great deal of international attention, especially in Australia and the United Kingdom (Taylor, 2000; Court, 2001; Maubach and Morgan, 2001; Carr, 2002; Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002; Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Pavy, 2006; Portelli, 2006), little Canadian research has moved beyond providing evidence of a lack of male motivation to learn French.

While the aforementioned international research investigating male participation in the study of a variety of foreign languages may provide useful insights for Canadian educators, the Canadian situation is unique. French is not considered a foreign language in Canada. It is one of Canada's two official languages and is spoken natively by almost one-quarter of the population. The federal government of Canada wishes to promote linguistic duality amongst its citizens in both French and English. However, in spite of the 2003 Action Plan (Privy Council Office, 2003) to double the percentage of bilingual students in Canada aged 15 to 19 by 2013, recent census data indicate that the percentage of bilingual Anglophones in this age group has actually decreased over the past decade from 16.3 percent in 1996 to 14.7% in 2001 and most recently to 13% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006). If the federal government is to meet the goal of the \$787 million Action Plan, greater effort must be directed at promoting the study of French amongst Anglophones, particularly amongst English-speaking adolescent boys. There is clearly a need to better understand why so many English-speaking males in high school do not choose to study French.

This article is the result of an investigation funded in 2006 by a strategic Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council research grant focused on official language education, funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, to investigate the issue of males and FSL education in Canada. The primary goal of the article is to propose a research agenda to guide Canadian researchers who aim to better understand and improve male participation in FSL programs.

The article is organized in such a manner that initial research questions proposed by the researchers relate to the current state of male participation in FSL education in Canada and foreign language education internationally. Questions then proceed to address the various reasons for male disinterest in second and foreign language studies. To situate the proposed research agenda

within the current literature on the topic and thus to better appreciate the need for each set of research questions proposed, a synthesis of related research is provided and threads through the research agenda.

### **Boys studying French in Canada**

A few Canadian studies have drawn attention to the lack of male interest and motivation in core French<sup>3</sup> programs. A study by Netten *et al.* (1999), for example, involving 380 Grade 9 core French students in Newfoundland indicated that boys were less likely than girls to study French in senior high school. While 59% of the participants indicated a desire to continue studying French in Grade 10, the majority of these participants were female by a ratio of 3 to 1. Similar results were reported in a more recent, large-scale study by Kissau (2006) aimed at investigating gender differences in motivation to learn French among 490 Grade 9 core French students in southern Ontario. In this study almost 70% of the students who planned to drop French were male.

Concern over male involvement in French programs in Canada is, however, not restricted to boys in core French. While the proportion of males and females enrolled in regular English programs is relatively equal, girls accounted for 64% of all students enrolled in French immersion programs<sup>4</sup> in 2000 (Allen, 2004). Furthermore, Larocque (2006) investigated student attitudes toward the study of French in francophone schools in Ontario. Even in this first language setting males had more negative attitudes than the female participants towards studying their own language. In this study involving 62 students in Grades 7 and 8, the boys were less interested in getting to know other French-speaking people and were less motivated to learn and refine their knowledge of the language.

While the above-mentioned enrolment data are in themselves cause for concern, they are merely snapshots of certain programs offered in a small number of locations in Canada. The data do not pertain to all types of French programs or to all geographical regions of the country. These data also do not provide theoretical explanations, of any kind, for these phenomena. The following research questions are therefore worthy of investigation:

1. What are enrolment trends, by gender, in French immersion, extended French<sup>5</sup> and intensive French? Is enrolment in early immersion more gender balanced than middle and late immersion programs when students play a larger role in deciding to enroll?
2. What are enrolment trends, by gender, in FSL programs in jurisdictions where FSL is optional as compared to jurisdictions where it is mandatory for part of a student's schooling?

3. Are male participation rates different when students are within geographical proximity of Quebec or Ottawa where French is frequently needed for employment?
4. What are enrolment trends in areas where French is required past Grade 9 (e.g., New Brunswick, Quebec, North West Territories)? Do more males continue in these jurisdictions?
5. When boys do continue to study French in high school, how does their achievement and motivation in French compare to girls'?
6. How does the gender gap in male achievement and motivation in French in optional programs like immersion, compare to male achievement and motivation in core French when it is mandatory?
7. How does male and female motivation and achievement in all FSL programs change over time?

### Boys and foreign languages

International studies investigating male participation in various foreign language programs may provide useful insights into why adolescent males in Canada lack interest in studying French. A recent study conducted by Carr and Pauwels (2006) involving over 200 boys aged 12–18 in Australia, New Zealand, England, Wales and Scotland clearly established that male disinterest in learning languages is not a uniquely Canadian problem. Similar to data involving Canadian students reported in studies by Kissau (2006) and Netten *et al.*, (1999), data from the countries involved in Carr and Pauwels' study indicated that males represent only 23% to 35% of students studying foreign languages at the most advanced levels of secondary school. Only 31% of the 339 students who completed year 12 German in state secondary schools in Victoria, Australia in 2004, were boys. The next year in Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, 5804 students were enrolled in a language other than English. Fewer than 10% were boys (Pavy, 2006).

However, not all foreign languages are equal in the eyes of adolescent males. Carr and Pauwels (2006), for example, reported that many boys enjoyed learning Latin. Asian languages were also reported in the same study to be more popular amongst adolescent boys than European languages like French and Italian. A British study by Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) found further evidence that the degree of male interest in foreign language study depended upon the language. In this study involving 228 students in Grades 7 to 9, the researchers reported that male students had much more favourable attitudes toward the study of German than French. There is clearly a need to better understand why some languages are viewed more positively by boys than others. We propose the following research questions:

1. How does male enrolment in French compare with enrolment in other foreign languages offered in Canada? For example, is the percentage of male enrolment in Spanish or German higher than in FSL?
2. What is it about languages like Latin, Chinese or German that makes them more appealing to certain boys?
3. How could the attributes of popular languages amongst adolescent boys be applied to languages that are less popular?

### **Reasons for male disinterest in second and foreign languages**

A variety of reasons have been proposed when attempting to explain the general lack of male interest in studying second and foreign languages. The following section provides an overview of the main reasons reported by second and foreign language researchers. Accompanying each reason, the authors suggest related research questions that have yet to be addressed.

#### ***Pedagogy***

Several studies (Court, 2001; Jones and Jones, 2001; Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Kissau, 2006) have drawn on theories of communicative language teaching, and effective teaching in general, to understand male participation in second and foreign language programs. For example, Jones and Jones (2001) reported that the repetitive nature of the curriculum in many foreign language classes was particularly disliked by boys. The programs that boys talked about most critically were traditional, teacher-fronted classrooms where the students had little opportunity to use the target language and thus failed to develop any real oral proficiency.

Problems related to control in the classroom have also been raised in recent research investigating the lack of male interest in L2 studies (Jones and Jones, 2001; Kissau, 2006; Pavy, 2006; Kissau and Quach, 2008). Rotter (1966) developed a motivational theory around the concept of locus of control. From his studies, Rotter concluded that people who believe they have internal control over events in life accept greater responsibility for their actions and are more motivated to complete activities than those who feel they have very little internal control. Research by Pavy (2006) and Kissau (2006) has demonstrated that male students feel very little personal control in the language classroom. In many subjects when students do not understand something, they feel as though there are things they can do to improve their comprehension such as doing extra reading or asking their parents for help. When learning a language, however, the boys in many studies did not feel they had this option. They reported that second and foreign language classrooms were places of mimicry and repetition and that they had little control over not only classroom activities, but also their

own success (Jones and Jones, 2001; Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Kissau, 2006; Pavy, 2006).

Many of the comments made by the boys in the above-mentioned studies would seem to suggest that a grammar-translation or audiolingual approach is being used in their language classrooms. However, as previously reported by Kissau and Quach (2008), communicative language teaching (CLT) has been the dominant approach to teaching second and foreign languages for the past two decades. With its emphasis on real-world, authentic tasks, interaction in the target language and student-centred instruction, CLT would seem to incorporate many of the lacking pedagogical elements reported by these boys. It could be argued, however, that in spite of being the prescribed approach to teaching second and foreign languages, many language teachers may not actually be implementing CLT (Smith, 1991; Lapkin, Harley and Taylor, 1993; Lewis, 1995; Turnbull, 1999). The failure to consistently implement CLT in second and foreign language classrooms may be one more factor influencing males to drop second and foreign languages from their studies.

In addition to teaching methods and student control and choice in this teaching, it has also been argued that gender-specific topics discussed in second and foreign language classrooms further alienate male students. Callaghan (1998) found that of the 16 topics discussed in the French language syllabus of a British school district, the large majority was rooted in domesticity. Topics such as house and home, family and daily routine, food and drink and shopping, which are commonly found in foreign language readers, were reported by Callaghan to favour girls and to generate little male enthusiasm.

Comments by boys in numerous studies (Jones and Jones, 2001; Carr, 2002; Kissau, 2006; Pavy, 2006) pertaining to their dislike of worksheets, repetition, unrealistic tasks, limited use of the target language, topics of study and teacher-centred instruction should not be ignored. Moreover, future research that draws on Rotter's (1966) theory of control, from a gender perspective, would be helpful to understand why boys perceive that they have little control in FSL classes. The following questions should therefore guide future research:

1. To what extent is the Communicative Approach to teaching languages being used in FSL classrooms?
2. How would male motivation change in FSL classrooms that were less teacher-centred and offered more student-control?
3. Which pedagogical and inclusive strategies are effective for reaching males in FSL classes and why?
4. Which pedagogical and inclusive strategies are used by teachers who manage to retain high numbers of males in their FSL classes?

5. To what extent do topics commonly discussed in second and foreign language classrooms contribute to the general lack of male interest in language learning?

### *Socioeconomic factors*

In addition to raising issues related to pedagogy, Carr and Pauwels (2006) also believed that motivation to learn another language is impacted by socioeconomic status. Historically, learning a second or foreign language was restricted to the privileged. Indeed, learning another language was thought to contribute to being “cultured”. According to Ausubel’s (1968) Meaningful Learning Theory, in order to be effective, learning must be meaningful and related to prior experience. In regard to both of these necessary conditions, it could be argued that students from lower socioeconomic echelons would be at a disadvantage in comparison with more privileged peers. Due to financial constraints, less advantaged students might never have previously traveled overseas nor might they envision international travel in the future. One can see how in such circumstances L2 learning may be less meaningful and less related to prior experience. Working-class boys have traditionally not seen language learning as relevant to their lives. This appears to still be the case. It was the working-class boys in the study by Carr and Pauwels (2006) who performed poorly in foreign languages and who were outnumbered by females in their foreign language classrooms. The more affluent boys in the study expected to travel overseas, making language learning more relevant. The public school boys, on the other hand, did not anticipate traveling overseas to use the foreign language.

However, even in wealthier schools the travel-related and cultural benefits of language learning are outweighed by career relevance. Court (2001) reported that the need to get good grades and to take courses that are related to one’s career aspirations was of supreme importance for the boys in her study. Similarly, Carr and Pauwels (2006) reported that although many of the more privileged boys in their study could relate to the cultural benefits of foreign language learning, they did not see the practical, career-related benefits of learning a foreign language. Several boys thought language learning leads to less well paid careers like teaching and therefore is less popular amongst boys.

The findings of the above-mentioned studies, while interesting, are anecdotal in nature. Further, it was not the intended goal of any of these studies to investigate the influence of socioeconomics on second or foreign language learning. There is clearly a need for further research in this area. Key issues to consider include:

1. How do attitudes and motivation toward the study of French in Canada differ amongst socioeconomic groups?

2. How would the prospect of traveling abroad or to Quebec increase male motivation to learn French in Canada?
3. How do public and private schools differ with respect to the promotion of French studies in Canada?
4. What are student beliefs and perceptions about the career-related benefits of learning French in Canada?

### *Masculinities*

Subjects in school have traditionally been linked to gender. The above-mentioned boys in the study by Carr and Pauwels (2006) reported that the study of foreign languages leads to less lucrative careers like teaching and is thus not suitable for boys. Furthering this notion, according to Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), the foreign language classroom, in particular, runs counter to what is traditionally viewed as male-appropriate behaviour. Personal expression, exercises in personal identification with characters and exploration and performance of interpersonal relationships are all integral parts of foreign language classrooms. Research has reported that hegemonic views of masculinity do not align well with such activities (Hofkins, 1995; Epstein, 1998; Coates, 2003; Frank, Kehler, Lovell and Davison, 2003; Burgess, Park and Robinson, 2004).

For boys who hold an oppositional view of gender where masculinity is associated with anything not thought to be feminine, underachieving in the second or foreign language classroom may be a way of asserting one's masculinity (Flood, 1997; Martino, 1999; Cameron, 2004). In Kissau's (2006) study, boys reported to be less capable in French and in need of luck to succeed, not because they actually believed this to be true, but because they thought as boys they were not supposed to be good at learning languages. According to Court (2001), underachievement in foreign languages may be an effective way for boys to assert their masculine identity until they have the option to drop foreign languages from their schedule.

Acceptable forms of masculinity may serve as an even greater deterrent for boys studying French, a language often perceived as feminine. Dörnyei and Clément (2001), Carr and Pauwels (2006), Kissau (2006) and Rosenthal (1999) all reported French to be stigmatized as effeminate. While all languages were thought to be more appropriate for girls, Carr and Pauwels (2006, p. 129) suggested that French had "the monopoly on femininity". In Kissau's (2006) study, investigating gender differences in motivation to learn French among approximately 500 Grade 9 students studying French in Canada, the impact of the perception of French as effeminate was pervasive. The perception that the study of French was more appropriate for girls was found to be an underlying reason behind significant gender differences in 15 of 18 motivational variables investigated. In the study it was reported that even boys that liked French and

were good at it were deciding to abandon their pursuit of learning the language due to its “sissy” stigma. If second or foreign language study, in particular the study of French, is viewed by society as effeminate, it is understandable and not surprising that boys resist and drop out of French at a time when they feel the need to strictly adhere to the norms of masculinity or face ostracism from their peers.

The complex relationship between gender identity and language learning offers many possibilities for future research that is framed theoretically within the realm of gender studies and language learning. The fact that societal views of male-appropriate behaviour may be limiting boys’ choices in life definitely necessitates further research in the area. Some questions to consider are:

1. To what extent is French considered effeminate by some students, parents and teachers?
2. To what extent is the appearance of working diligently at school work perceived as feminine? Why are boys who pursue academic excellence in French viewed as less than masculine compared to boys who do poorly in French?
3. In what ways do male and female teachers and administrators contribute to and/or reinforce the perception that French is effeminate and a more appropriate field of study for girls than for boys?
4. What can be done to change the perception that French is more appropriate for females? What can parents, teachers and students do to broaden the concept of masculinity to include subjects like French?

### *Influence of peers*

Fearing they would be viewed as effeminate by their peers, many boys in the study by Kissau (2006) chose not to study French beyond the compulsory years. Research on single-sex second and foreign language classes suggests that one cause of male disinterest and underachievement is this pressure many boys feel to differentiate themselves from females. In co-ed classes, boys tend to adopt a masculine persona where they must distinguish themselves from girls. As a result, they steer away from courses that are traditionally viewed as feminine and largely populated by females, such as second and foreign languages. In single-sex classes, researchers like Chambers (2005) and Barton (1998) suggest that boys feel less need to differentiate themselves from their female peers, and therefore feel less pressure to pursue strictly the “masculine” subjects like math and science.

The results from several international studies seem to support this notion (Stables, 1990; Cheng, Payne and Witherspoon, 1995; Henry, 2003; Carr and Pauwels, 2006). Cheng *et al.* (1995), for example, reported that only 8% of

boys from co-ed schools in the UK chose advanced-level foreign language courses in 1995 compared to 23% from single-sex schools. Carr and Pauwels (2006) reported that boys in Grades 11 and 12 who were studying French at an all-boys school in Australia were truly enjoying their French class and were succeeding in learning the language.

However, not all research findings point to the benefits of single-sex classes. According to Barton (1998), teaching older all-male groups can be a challenging and, at times, unpleasant experience. As peer-pressure increases, adolescent and teenage boys often become more resistant and difficult to motivate in the second or foreign language classroom. Chambers (2005) reported that 85% of the British boys in a study investigating single-sex French classes agreed that the behavior in their classes had worsened in the single-sex environment.

As schools continue to try to improve student performance and narrow the gender gap in reading and writing, new and innovative ideas, including the use of single-sex classes, may become more popular. The impact of such initiatives must not be overlooked with respect to second and foreign language classrooms. We believe that future research in this area needs to move beyond the description of phenomena to a theoretical framing of gender identity and maleness in language learning contexts.

The following four questions provide some guidance for interesting areas of further research:

1. In what ways are males' decisions to continue to study French or other second and foreign languages at secondary school (especially past the mandatory years) affected by the existence of single-sex classes?
2. How do the dynamics of single-sex and co-ed second or foreign language settings differ?
3. To what extent do teaching strategies differ in single-sex environments from co-ed classrooms? In what ways are teachers able to better meet the needs of their students in single-sex classes?
4. Are single-sex second or foreign language classes offered in co-ed schools as effective in motivating males as language classes offered in entirely single-sex schools?

### ***Encouragement***

Another reason cited for the lack of male interest in learning a second or foreign language relates to the amount of encouragement males receive to pursue language studies. Numerous studies examining student participation in school subjects have demonstrated the importance of parental, teacher and peer encouragement (McGannon and Medeiros, 1995; Frank *et al.*, 2003; Bartram, 2006; Portelli, 2006). Drawing on theories of motivation and adolescent development, these studies have shown that students who are encouraged to study a

language by parents, teachers and peers are more likely to do so than students who do not receive such encouragement.

In light of this importance, it is troubling that studies have suggested that male students receive less encouragement than their female peers to study French. In the study by Netten *et al.* (1999), it was mentioned by the researchers that the male participants were not aware of being encouraged to study French, whereas the female participants admitted to having received encouragement to study the language. Kissau (2007) provided further evidence that males were not only encouraged less than females to study French, but in some cases actually discouraged from pursuing the language. The Canadian boys in the participating Grade 9 FSL classes were perceived by students and teachers to receive less encouragement from parents, teachers and peers to study French than their female peers.

Netten *et al.* (1999) did not theorize or offer explanations for the lack of parental and school support for boys' participation in FSL programs. Kissau (2007) suggested that the reported gender differences in encouragement related to societal perceptions of masculinity. Influenced by traditional views of male-appropriate behaviour, parents, teachers and peers encourage males to pursue stereotypically female courses like French less than they do females.

An additional reason for gender differences in encouragement to study French, as reported by Kissau (2007), pertained to the depreciated status of FSL instruction in Canada (see Kissau 2005). The students in his study were unaware of the influence of budget cuts to French programs and the optional nature of French in the curriculum on the amount of encouragement they received to study the language. Their teachers, however, were unanimous and adamant that all students, not just males, would be more encouraged to study French if the government and school boards placed greater value on learning the language. A similar message was delivered in a large-scale Canadian study by the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (2002) that involved 2989 Grade 11 students who were no longer enrolled in core French programs. In the study, both male and female participants frequently reported that French suffers from low status compared to other school subjects. As further evidence of this depreciated status of FSL instruction in Canada, the results of telephone surveys conducted by Canadian Parents for French (2005) clearly demonstrated the low status of learning French in Canada. The 105 university students involved in the study who had previously been enrolled in core French or extended French programs in elementary or secondary school strongly believed that the study of French in Canada was not given the same respect as other subjects (Canadian Parents for French, 2005).

In Kissau's study (2007), guidance counselors in all 11 of the participating high schools were specifically singled out by the teachers in the study for giving little value to the study of French and for discouraging males from studying

French beyond Grade 9. Similar claims related to the lack of encouragement to study French from guidance counselors were raised in the previously mentioned study by Netten *et al.* (1999). In this Canadian study both boys and girls reported that they received no encouragement from guidance counselors to study French.

As recently reported by Kissau (2007), very little research has been conducted to investigate male and female encouragement in the second or foreign language classroom. The following questions should, therefore, receive attention in the future:

1. How does the amount of encouragement students receive to study languages by parents, teachers and peers vary according to the language of study? For example, are boys encouraged less to study French in Canada than they are to study other languages like German or Spanish?
2. How do current language policies and school board practices bias against male interest and enrolment in FSL programs?
3. What role do guidance counselors play in the encouragement of boys to study French in high school?
4. How do current curricula and graduation requirements discourage males from studying French?

### ***Influence of male teachers***

According to the Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the learning of gender roles as influenced by environmental factors, there are two possible ways in which male teachers may benefit boys (Gold and Reis, 1978). First of all, assuming there are significant differences between male and female teaching styles and expectations, the presence of male teachers may mediate male student behaviour more effectively. There is some evidence to suggest that female teachers rate girls higher than boys in speech development and find girls easier to understand than boys. The second purpose that could be served by male teachers is that they may provide positive male role models to young male students (Gold and Reis, 1978). It could be argued, from a Social Learning Theory point of view, that French would be perceived as more appropriate for males and that males would, as a result, receive more encouragement to study the language, if there were more male French teachers. In the three years prior to participating in Kissau's (2006) study, approximately 80% of the 490 student-participants had been taught French exclusively by female teachers. While this number alone is startling, it is actually better than the national average in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003). In Ontario, for example, where only 20% of all elementary teachers are male (Partridge, 1999), a recent survey conducted by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2006) reported

that of the 2341 teachers who self-identified as core French teachers, only 247 were male (10.7%). Similar percentages were found amongst French immersion teachers and teachers with a core French specialty. Similar statistics also emerged from an informal survey of faculties of education across Canada. Of 230 students enrolled in a preparatory course for future French teachers in 2005/2006, only 26 were male (11%).

Males from other English-speaking countries also appear to be steering away from a career in teaching foreign languages. A study completed in California schools, for example, found that only 28% of foreign language teachers were male (Sung, Padilla and Silva, 2006). In the United Kingdom, Callaghan (1998) reported that of 973 students who graduated from university with a degree in French, 244 were men and 729 women. Of the 131 students who later went into teacher training, only approximately 20% were male.

The discrepancy between male and female second and foreign language teachers does not come without consequence. Numerous studies have reported that teachers are the most important factor in influencing student motivation to learn a second or foreign language (Dörnyei, 1998; Chambers, 2001; Office for Standards in Education, 2002). Callaghan (1998) reported that boys felt more comfortable to communicate in classes taught by males, and in a study by Denham (1993), the majority of male high school participants described their best, most interesting teacher as a male. Depriving male language students the opportunity of being taught by a male teacher may represent an additional hurdle in the attempt to increase male participation in second and foreign language classrooms.

Despite these concerns, a thorough review of literature revealed no study that specifically looked at the relationship between the sex of the teacher and student achievement or motivation in a second language environment. This clearly illustrates the need for further research in the area. Future research might be framed theoretically from a feminist point of view to understand the feminization of the teaching profession in general (e.g., Acker, 1994) and the impact of this feminization on FSL teaching and the FSL workforce. Other salient questions pertaining to the influence of male teachers in the FSL classroom might include:

1. How does the gender of the teacher affect student motivation and achievement in the FSL classroom?
2. What causes males to steer away from a career in teaching second and foreign languages?
3. What percentage of male teachers with FSL qualifications in Canada are not currently teaching French? What can be done to lure these teachers back into the FSL classroom?
4. What can be done to recruit more male FSL teachers?

***Biological differences in second language aptitude***

When questioning the reasons for male underachievement in second and foreign language classrooms, a common response is that males are simply less able language learners. Studies dating back more than 50 years have cited biological reasons to explain the underachievement of males in the language classroom. McCarthy (1954), for example, reported evidence of female superiority in pronunciation, mean length of sentence, vocabulary and verbosity.

Many teachers also subscribe to biological differences when explaining male underachievement in foreign and second language studies. Carr (2002) reported that while teachers may often attempt to be politically correct and say that differences in the language classroom are due to socialization, they seem to have deeply entrenched ideas that boys learn differently than girls. The teachers in the study by Carr (2002) frequently stated that boys and girls have different needs. Boys were reported to need more physical activity and to be more autonomous (Carr, 2002).

Carr and Pauwels (2006), on the other hand, have pointed out that the biological argument does little to explain how millions of boys and girls around the world learn two or more different languages with ease. Brain-based differences in males and females also fail to explain males who are excelling in second and foreign language classrooms, such as those reported by Sunderland (2000) and Kissau (2006). Numerous other studies have also argued that biological evidence of brain differences is inconclusive and that it is the different socialization processes and different out-of-school experiences that are the causes of gender differences in linguistic achievement (Halpern, 1992; Sacks, 1993; Gipps and Murphy, 1994; Yates, 1997; Paechter, 1998; Sunderland, 1998).

The biological argument that males are less able language learners does little to support the movement to improve male participation in second and foreign language classrooms. It could in fact be hypothesized that lower expectations for boys learning languages may negatively influence the way males are treated in language classrooms. For example, if second and foreign language teachers feel boys are less able language learners, it is possible that they would devote more attention to females in the classroom and thus deprive males of language learning opportunities. Furthermore, according to Bandura's (1986, 1997) Theory of Self-efficacy, people appraise their self-efficacy from observation and evaluation by others, especially parents and teachers. It could therefore be postulated that second and foreign language teachers who believe their male students are less able language learners may be negatively impacting upon these students' perceived competence.

In light of the pervasive nature of the biological argument, as reported by Carr and Pauwels (2006), research needs to be completed to investigate

the impact of such beliefs on male motivation and achievement in the FSL classroom. The following four questions are worthy of future investigation:

1. How pervasive is the commonly held belief of female language learning superiority? How does this belief affect male performance, motivation and perceived self-efficacy in the FSL classroom?
2. In what ways do male students believe that they are less capable language learners as compared to females? In what ways do males' beliefs affect their motivation and achievement in the FSL classroom?
3. In what ways do FSL teachers treat boys differently in the classroom? To what extent do FSL teachers attempt to create male-friendly classrooms?
4. In what ways does the belief amongst many second and foreign language teachers that males are less able language learners result in boys receiving less teacher attention in the classroom?

### **Concluding note**

The studies documented in this report demonstrating the general lack of male interest in learning second and foreign languages represent the first step in improving male participation and achievement in the FSL classroom. Having taken this first step, it is now time to move beyond investigating the existence of gender differences and to begin exploring the many reasons behind such differences. Numerous factors influence a student's interest in learning another language. As a result, it does not suffice to simply state that males are less interested than females in second and foreign language learning. We must investigate the various causes and influences of this lack of interest.

An important component of this second step in research is the acknowledgement that the lack of male interest in language learning cannot be simply attributed to biological differences. Change will only come about when schools, teachers, parents and boys themselves recognize that boys are responsible for their own success and failure. Blaming gender differences in second and foreign language education on biological sex differences and references to what boys need and can and cannot do is too simple an explanation for the complex process that is language learning. A more comprehensive approach is required when investigating a complex construct like language learning which is too often viewed as a strictly cognitive process.

The research questions proposed in this article are therefore intentionally broad and varied in order to adequately address the many facets of language learning. While the questions to be answered are multiple, each of significance and worthy of issue-specific investigation, the inter-related nature of the many influences discussed in this article would also lend to research that encompasses several factors influencing male interest in language learning. For

example, a large-scale study investigating the impact of single-sex instruction on male motivation to learn second and foreign languages may not only answer research questions presented in the article related to peer influence, but may also provide useful information to answer questions pertaining to the influence of male teachers and societal perceptions of masculinity. Such a study could also help to shed light on effective pedagogical strategies when working with boys.

Given the vast scope of the research questions proposed in this article and the need to address the lack of male interest in language learning in a timely manner, in addition to encouraging research studies, such as the one mentioned above that addresses multiple issues, it may also prove useful to prioritize research questions that may be most impactful. While the authors strongly believe that each question proposed in this research agenda is significant and worthy of inquiry, what is a priority on one educational context may not be so important in another context. The influence of societal perceptions on second language learning is particularly problematic in the Canadian context of adolescent boys learning French, a language reported by Carr and Pauwels (2006, p. 129) to have “the monopoly on femininity”. Exemplary of the broad and powerful influence of societal perceptions of male-appropriate behavior on male motivation to learn French in Canada, it was reported by Kissau (2006) that male students in his study who were not only doing well in French class, but also had positive attitudes toward the language, their French classroom and the French culture were nevertheless planning to drop French from their schedules for fear of how they would be perceived by others. The pervasive nature of such societal perceptions of masculinity on male motivation to learn second and foreign languages necessitates attention on a variety of fronts coming from a variety of theoretical, socio-political and pedagogical perspectives.

It is hoped that the preceding article has not only allowed for a greater understanding of the existing research related to the lack of male interest in language learning but will also provide the impetus and the direction for further research, ultimately leading to an even greater understanding of why adolescent males in Canada and elsewhere appear less interested in learning second and foreign languages.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term FSL refers to all programs designed to teach French to non-Francophone students in Canada (Canadian Parents for French, 2002).
- <sup>2</sup> French is not considered a foreign language in Canada. It is one of Canada’s two official languages and thus, is considered a second language.
- <sup>3</sup> Core French is a program in which French is taught as a subject for one period each day or several periods each week; also called basic French in Manitoba and FSL in Alberta (Canadian Parents for French, 2002).

- <sup>4</sup> French immersion is an FSL program in which French is the language of instruction for a significant part of the school day (Canadian Parents for French, 2002).
- <sup>5</sup> Intensive French is a core French program that provides students with a significant increase in instruction in French over a given period, during which the regular curriculum is condensed (Canadian Parents for French, 2002).

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