

It's tough to learn French in an English school

Montreal Gazette · 10 Apr 2017 · A1 · ALLISON HANES

If you want to know how bilingual Quebec anglophone students are these days, it's worth asking the kids.



I had the chance to do just that last week at the annual French for the Future conference for Montreal-area English high school students, which was held at École F.A.C.E. And what they told me is there's a wide disparity between those who feel at home in their second language and those who are struggling.

"I think my French is pretty mediocre," a brutally honest 16-year-old said. In appreciation of her frank self-assessment, I won't tell you her name to avoid singling her out. But needless to say, she wasn't alone.

The exercise offers a reality check for the English school system about the challenges it faces in trying to stem the flow of eligible students to French schools and take advantage of its unique position to offer bilingual programs. Despite laudable efforts by English-language school boards to strengthen French education, the story students themselves tell suggest this endeavour remains a work in progress.

Almost universally, the kids said they learn most of their French outside a school setting.

"I started working at McDonald's in August and I feel like ever since then, speaking French has gotten much better," said Vanessa De Rosa, 16, a student at Howard S. Billings in Château-guay.

Her friend, Victoria King, 17, said she's bolstered her language skills through extracurricular activities, like playing soccer with francophone teammates.

"I apply what I learn in French there," King said. "The French girls on my team are really French. I feel included, but sometimes I don't get everything they're saying."

For Lindsay Place High School students Courtney Shapiro and Emma Wolf, both 14, it's exposure to French media: watching *Les Parent*, listening to MarieMai and tuning into hockey games on RDS.

Macdonald High School student Dylan Ritchuk, 16, said he speaks French with his relatives, many of whom are francophone.

"I'm forced to (speak French) at some family events," he said. "Some of my cousins only speak French."

On the other hand, students may be selling their French skills short. At the conference, several got on stage and performed in French as part of a *The Voicestyle* singing competition. A few even wrote their own songs in French, including Shapiro and Wolf.

The judges were three graduates of English schools who have themselves performed on TVA's Quebec version of the show, *La Voix*.

Angelike Falbo, 18, made it to the final elimination round singing in French. A graduate of Laurier Macdonald High School, she came from a home with a francophone mother and an Italian father who speaks English.

"French was my first language, but over the years in school speaking English, I lost some of my French," Falbo said.

But now she is proud of her ability to bridge the cultural divide.

"After doing *La Voix*, I started speaking more and more French," Falbo said.

"I think it's important to have balance."

Not a single student I asked said that they speak French with their peers anywhere other than in French class — which is at best a missed opportunity to reinforce their skills and at worst a deterrent to language acquisition. Students who speak French at home, like 14-year-old Gabriel Lagadic, of Lakeside Academy, have a major advantage.

"I have some friends who don't speak French so well, so they asked me to kind of help them," he said.

Kim Gremko, a Grade 9 and 11 French teacher at Lindsay Place High School who was attending the conference, said it's tough to get anglophone students to speak French to each other because it doesn't seem authentic. Gremko tries to offer her students real-life opportunities to learn French, for instance, visiting with francophone seniors and handing out sandwiches to the homeless.

"If I take them outside it makes them realize they know more than they think they know," she said.

"They're more willing to use it when it's an authentic situation, when it's part of interacting with the real world or real people doing real things."

The difficulty of getting young anglophones to speak French beyond the classroom remains the Achilles heel of English schools.

There is an angst particular to anglo parents in Quebec, about whether we are doing enough to raise our kids, not only fluent in French, but versed in francophone culture, so they will have every opportunity here. If we fail, the risk is our children will one day move away and leave us behind.

Some 12 per cent of us have hedged our bets and sent our kids to French school; the majority of anglophones — those who remain attached to English institutions, fear sacrificing their children's mastery of their mother tongue in an increasingly English world, feel their kids might struggle in French school, or simply believe in the idea of a bilingual education — cross our fingers and hope the English school system can offer the best of both worlds.

Schools can't do it alone, of course. Parents have a responsibility, too. But given the amount of time kids spend at school, given that it is often the centre of their social lives, more needs to be done to bring about a cultural change at English schools so that speaking French is more highly valued.

We have to keep working toward striking the right balance. English schools have come a long way, but it does no one any favours to look at their progress through rose-coloured glasses.