

Symposium: *We all have our parts to play: The roles of students, peer-mentors and administration in creating pathways to higher education and student success for minority-language students*

Paper 2 : « Somebody like me » : Student perspectives on facilitating the transition to and success in higher education

This research project, conducted at the University of Ottawa in 2011-2012, followed the institutional trajectories of more than 300 incoming Francophone students from linguistic minority regions in Ontario and across Canada. The project documented the impact of a peer-to-peer mentoring program implemented to diminish or overcome challenges experienced by such a linguistically and culturally diverse group as they integrate a bilingual university located in a region that is more Franco-dominant than their home regions.

The University of Ottawa, North America's largest bilingual institution, recruits 55% of Ontario's francophone secondary school graduates who pursue higher education studies. These students join other Francophones from Quebec, Eastern and Western Canada as well as international students from the various countries of *La Francophonie*, on campus. Although they are all Francophones, the multitude of linguistic registers and cultural references creates a very heterogeneous cohort. Francophone students represent a little more than 20% of the University's student body.

A growing number of American and European research addresses issues of access and student experience in terms of racial/ethnic minorities (Eimers & Pike, 1997; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Lesure-Lester & King, 2005; Watson, Terrell, Wright et al., 2002), however most research, including Canadian research, ignores or minimizes the linguistic issues of access and transition to further and higher education, particularly for ethnic, racial or linguistic minorities (Lamoureux, 2011). Studies regarding student experience of Francophone students at Ontario university demonstrate the devastating impact of linguistic insecurity on student success and persistence (Desabrais, 2008; Lamoureux, 2007) and how they are subjected to symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) and are stigmatized (Goffman, 1975) by both Francophone majority students and staff and Anglophones (students and staff), neither group recognizing the minority context Francophones as legitimate speakers of French (Lamoureux, 2010; Lamoureux & Cohen, 2011).

A mixed methods approach, influenced by Bourdieu's work regarding the mechanisms of reproduction of social hierarchies was favoured for this study. The quantitative component identified the number, characteristics, language profiles and needs of the Francophone freshman cohort. Electronic surveys were carried-out at two key moments of the year: before entering university and after the first semester. The qualitative component consisted of focus groups and participant observation at events such as summer meetings with students and their parents, during social activities organised by the peer-to-peer mentoring program, and after each of the two semesters. Thematic discourse analysis was also conducted on artefacts from dedicated Facebook pages for the program and email exchanges between participating students and their mentors.

Findings demonstrate that linguistic and lexical insecurity is more prevalent than had been indicated in previous studies. Furthermore, students from extreme-minority regions favour different language registers and linguistic repertoires than Francophones from bilingual or Franco-dominant areas. Despite having excellent academic credentials or exceeding admission requirements, students struggle in university programs that are designed according to dominant monolingual literacies and ideologies.

In this paper, we will first present the characteristics of the participating students. We will then report on the three types of challenges reported by the participating students: I) social integration challenges, II) academic challenges and III) linguistic challenges. Finally, we will highlight the findings regarding the students' perceptions of the impact of the peer-to-peer regional mentoring program as well as their suggestions for possible improvement. The 2011-2012 Freshman at the University of Ottawa from extreme-minority regions believe that social networking and access to an insider perspective of university life as provided by the peer-to-peer mentoring program is essential for their successful transition to and experience of a large research-intensive postsecondary institution. Our intention in this presentation is to ensure that the students' voices are the primary focus.

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