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Majority Learners Acquiring a Minority Language in a Bilingual Community

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Abstract: Children who learn a language in a linguistic minority context often have limited opportunities to use it outside the home and school. This is the case for English speaking children who learn French in Northern Ontario, Canada, where the majority language is English. However, these children learn their native language without great difficulty. At the outset, different linguistic contexts in which both majority and minority language learners dwell will be examined for a comparison. Very little research has demonstrated how bilingual English-French children learn French as a second language (L2) in an English dominant context. It is important to specify that these children are not learning French in an immersion program but rather through a French school system. Parents chose to enroll their children in French schools in order to provide them with the opportunity to become bilingual, even though they themselves often only speak English. An ethnolinguistic practical model has been proposed for empirical validation to better account for the individual and societal influences on second language acquisition in a bilingual community.

Keywords: Majority Language, Minority Language, Bilingualism

Introduction

Most countries have a diverse linguistic reality which makes it challenging for researchers to determine the exact distribution of populations in relation to the language or languages that are being studied. Canada is no different. According to Laflamme and Reguigui (2003), French-speaking Canadians who find themselves in a minority situation are strongly influenced by language contact. Seeing as French is a minority language in Ontario, a Canadian province, children are constantly exposed to English, the majority language, through media such as television, radio and music (Laflamme and Bernier 1998). English has a significant influence on the French language and mainly among children (Thomas 1994). Moreover, the proportion of Francophones¹ in Ontario is constantly increasing since 1971, having gone from 29.9% in 1971 to 41.8% in 2006 (Statistics Canada 2007). According to Marmen and Corbeil (2004), English is often the most commonly used language between linguistically mixed couples in Canada, which allows for the instruction of predominantly Anglophone children within French schools. Under section 23 from The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and The Education Act in Ontario (1990), children are given the right to attend schools in the official minority language: French, in French language schools. These children are identified as "rights holders". The aim of this article is to define different types of linguistic communities where second language acquisition is concerned. For this purpose, different bilingual contexts will be described and an ethnolinguistic practical model will be proposed for empirical validation to better account for the individual and societal implications on second language acquisition.

In Northern parts of Ontario, there are many majority language children who are learning a minority language in a minority context. The children whose dominant language is English are learning French, the minority language, in French schools, and this, in a predominantly English community. This linguistic minority context makes the acquisition of a second language (L2) (minority language) quite challenging since there are very few opportunities to communicate in this language outside of the classroom. In addition, we also propose that it is difficult for French

¹ In this context, Francophones are defined as individuals whose first language is French but who often speak English at home.

monolingual children to master the French language, their first language (L1), in this environment because of the ubiquitous and often involuntary exposure to the English language. Even if the school's language of instruction is French, in certain communities, children seem to converse in English in the hallways and in the schoolyard. At home and elsewhere, they watch television in English, visit English websites and mostly read in English (Internet, magazines) (Laflamme and Bernier 1998). Consequently, the moments of exposure to French are confined to the classroom and are intermittent at home. In fact, it is difficult to find French monolinguals (Laflamme and Bernier 1998; Laflamme et al. 2008; Laflamme and Reguigui 2003) who reside in certain regions of Northern Ontario and who have been exposed to a limited amount (less than 5 hours) of English per week (Mayer-Crittenden 2013). Since Franco-Ontarians originate from a linguistic minority community, we must take into consideration the effect of language contact (Melanson 1996) on learning and maintaining the French language.

A minority context is often characterized by the presence of immigrants who speak the language of the country from which they originate (e.g. Mandarin) and reside in a metropolitan center like Toronto, Canada where the majority language is English (Cummins 2000), or even, by the presence of Anglophones residing in Quebec, a predominantly French speaking province, who are learning French as a second language (Genesee, Tucker, and Lambert 1975; Genesee, Tucker, and Lambert 1977; Genesee 1978-79; Genesee 1983; Genesee 1987). In the United States, several studies have been conducted on the Hispanic population learning English in immersion schools or in monolingual schools (August, Carlo, Dressler and Snow 2005; Hakuta et al. 2000). Gathercole and Thomas (2009) use the term *immigrant community* when they are referring to this kind of linguistic context. These same authors conducted a study in Wales where, according to the 2011 census (Office of National Statistics 2011), 81.2% of the general population speaks English and 18.8% speak Welsh. Among the people who speak Welsh, 94.3% are bilingual (English-Welsh) and very few people only speak Welsh (5.6%). In this context, the community's bilingualism remains relatively stable in contrast with a bilingual immigrant community that is always in a dynamic state, due to the steady arrival of new immigrants. In the case of a linguistic majority context or a bilingual immigrant community, we could even say that children are assimilated into the L2. This is logical because the individuals' L1 is often not valued by the community, which offers few opportunities for the child to practice the first language, unless they live in ghettos (e.g., a Chinese neighborhood). Parents often choose to speak English at home in order to allow their children to master the majority language (Lambert 1974a). Among immigrants, we often see a subtractive bilingualism (Lambert 1974). In Quebec, Canada, especially in Montreal, the context is more commonly an additive bilingualism when it comes to the French and English languages, or a stable bilingual community, since both coexisting languages are the official languages of the country and they are both valued.

However, very little research has focused on majority language children who learn a minority language in a minority context, where instruction is only offered in the minority language. Research by Gathercole and Thomas (2009) are among the few, to our knowledge, who have studied this population. More precisely, their study was conducted on children learning English and Welsh in Wales. Their results show that the development of the Welsh language is strongly linked to the level of input available, either during childhood or adulthood. However, the acquisition of the English language seems to be linked to a certain level of input received early in the children's language development. Differences between the groups of children, based on the level of input received, disappear around middle school age (around 9 years old). It seems that for this group, English language skills vary depending on the language of instruction, however, no measurable differences were found once they reached adulthood. It should be noted that according to the Education Reform Act of 1988, Welsh children must learn Welsh at school, either as a first language or as a second language.

In Northern Ontario, we find the same situation where children speaking the majority language learn a minority language in a minority context. Children whose dominant language is

English learn French, the minority language, in French schools and in a predominantly English community. However, the difference is that learning the minority language is not mandatory in Canada before the sixth year of schooling or the fourth grade. In Wales, children are required to learn Welsh as early as the first year of school. As mentioned above, this linguistic context makes it at times difficult to acquire the minority L2 language due to limited opportunities during which the child can practice this L2. Similarly, another study on the Welsh population showed that the dominance of the English language among Welsh children is less evident with regards to the language spoken between peers (Gathercole 2007). This study maintains that residing in a stable bilingual community ensures that Welsh, the minority language, is less vulnerable than the minority language in a bilingual immigrant community. In addition, English speaking children who are learning English in Wales seem to do it effortlessly and without formal instruction. This phenomenon has been observed in similar bilingual communities where one language has a certain dominance over the other (Allen 2006; Gathercole and Thomas 2009; Meisel 2006; Schlyter and Håkansson 1994; Treffers-Daller Özsoy and van Hout 2007).

Altogether, it appears that learning an L2 differs considerably depending on whether the context is a minority or a majority setting. Several psychosocial and political factors come into play and cause interference. This is even truer when the L2 is a minority language.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality Of A Language

When addressing the issue of a minority language, it is essential to take into consideration its ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977; Hamers and Blanc 1983). Giles et al. (1977) define this as “that which makes a group behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (p.308).

This vitality is characterized by three factors: status, demography and institutional support. According to these authors, the four factors linked to status (economic status, social status, sociohistorical status and language status) actively contribute to the groups’ degree of vitality and to the use it makes of this language (Giles 1977).

Status

In order to illustrate this, we need to determine the state of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the French language in minority communities of Northern Ontario. We can argue that the economic power seems important: most of the Francophones involved in their community are business men and women who occupy important positions in the region with a lot of power and prestige. In regards to the ethnolinguistic cohesion, it is firmly established that Francophones have a tendency to stay together as a group, although the dominant group may have a negative perception of the dominated group. The sociohistorical status has no major upheavals (history does not reveal any major oppressions among Francophones in most parts of Northern Ontario), although it is important to note the incident where, without wanting to offend the ethnic groups in the City of Greater Sudbury, one of the larger cities of the North, the municipality refused in 2003 to raise the Franco-Ontarian flag beside the city’s flag as well as the provincial and national flags while it declared its promotion of multiculturalism and its support for the principle of official languages. Today, the Franco-Ontarian flag is flown with all the nations’ flags on the Bridge of Nations in the City of Greater Sudbury. Evidently there still exists some somber events in the provinces’ history that remain engraved in the memories of Franco-Ontarians. In particular, there is Regulation 17, a regulation adopted in 1912 by the Conservative government, prohibiting the use of French as the language of instruction in bilingual schools. This regulation was revoked in 1927 (Office of Francophone Affairs 2011). We can also note that Ontario does not have a bilingual status, which may offend many people. However, these events are part of the political and social underpinnings of the province as a whole, and not only a particular

experience of the City of Greater Sudbury. These events founded the sociohistorical background of Franco-Ontarians and helped shape their identity. Coming back to the status of a language, it is also important to assess whether the French language inside and outside of the community is valued. This last factor may vary according to different perspectives and groups. Children and adolescents may not value the French language while the adult francophone population may see it as being central to the survival of the francophone culture. At the outset, it seems that majority language children (and often the French speakers) do not always perceive the French language as an added value. However, English is seen and experienced as the *lingua franca* of the world, of the Internet, of fashion and of celebrities, among others (Romaine 2006). Sometimes, young Francophones focus more on the English language since they see it as a more useful language. It is therefore likely that the value, as it is perceived, has less weight among the youth than it has among adults.

Demography

The demographic weight and the distribution of its members also determine the ethnolinguistic vitality of the group. It appears that a certain demographic threshold of native speakers is essential for language survival. Keeping in mind that the City of Greater Sudbury consists of approximately 30% Francophones (Statistics Canada 2006b), Giles et al. (1997) do not specify an acceptable minimum percentage, but we believe that 30%, nearly one third of the population, represents a significant demographic base.

These authors also argue that emigration or immigration shape the context. However, this factor is negligible in Northern Ontario because it is not yet a destination of choice for immigrants, which is not the case in metropolitan centers like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, Canada, where we find a greater cultural and linguistic diversity due to immigration (Statistics Canada 2006b). However, the distribution of the population has a great influence in Northern Ontario. Within the City of Greater Sudbury, for example, the distribution of French-speakers is visible: we find a greater concentration of Francophones in certain communities or districts (Regional Business Centre 2006). Finally, Giles et al. (1977) discuss the importance of institutional support.

Institutional Support

In most of Northern Ontario's minority contexts, we believe that the Francophone population benefits from good institutional support in relation to the French education system, with its French school boards, which has several elementary and secondary schools as well as its French colleges and bilingual university. However, most of the students who attend these schools are dominant in English. Does the presence of this English dominant population shape the institutional support? Do the elementary and secondary schools award high school degrees to students who have consistently high levels of French linguistic competency? Despite the fact that the Francophone community seems to have good institutional support, reality can be very different from what we might see at the surface.

We can also add to the school system, media, churches, clubs and cultural centers, among others. In the City of Greater Sudbury as well as in other parts of Northern Ontario, this network is in place in order to maintain the language within the community (Haché 2003). However, do the children who learn French use this language at school and elsewhere, or do they use English instead? Do they only watch television in English? What about the extracurricular activities in which they engage? Is the French-Canadian culture being transmitted to these children?

The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality has been the subject of several reviews (Hamers and Blanc 1983). Hamers and Blanc (1983) considerably disagree with Giles et al. (1977) because their typology has no predictive value. In fact, even though one language has all the necessary factors that are believed to be critical to its survival, it's the speakers of that language who must

put them into practice. Since young learners are easily influenced by the majority, a minority language with a good linguistic vitality (like French in Northern Ontario) is at the mercy of its speakers. Despite these criticisms, the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality can be useful when trying to determine why a language is abandoned or, in the case of Northern Ontario, why the language can be hard to learn or master. Conklin and Lourie (1983) speak of language maintenance and establish a list of factors they refer to as mobilizers: political, social and demographic, cultural and linguistic factors. These elements correspond to the three factors mentioned by Giles et al. (1977) in their conceptualization of ethnolinguistic vitality. As is the case for the thesis of these same authors, it is difficult to measure the relative importance of Conklin and Lourie's (1983) findings.

Although the ethnolinguistic vitality of the adult Francophone community in the French minority communities may seem satisfactory, that of children and adolescents does not appear to be so. This confirms, to some extent, the process of language transfer. We assume that this state of affairs would not present itself in a majority context where English-speaking children are learning French, as is the case in immersion programs in Quebec, Canada.

We must specify the elements that are inherently related to the acquisition of a language, such as those related to the typical development of language. According to Kohnert (2009), linguistic skills are developed in terms of means, opportunities and motives. The individual must have, first and foremost, unimpaired cognitive, sensory, social, emotional, and neurobiological systems. Any deficiencies within these systems may cause difficulties in the acquisition and use of language. In addition, opportunities that offer a rich linguistic environment as well as positive opportunities allowing for the acquisition and use of a particular language for rewarding communicative interactions must be present. Finally, the motivation that may come from various sources is of ultimate importance: be it internal or external resources, environmental needs, opportunities and preferences associated with various social contexts. All these factors play an essential role in the acquisition and maintenance of language among children.

As we mentioned, the institutional support is of the utmost importance. However, this does not account for the increasing number of Anglophone children enrolled in French-language schools as opposed to traditional French immersion programs. These programs offer very distinct types of language instruction.

Immersion Programs versus Monolingual Programs

There are two types of schools in Canada that educate children in French: French immersion schools and French schools. Immersion schools began in 1965 and were created in Canada by Lambert and Tucker in 1972. These schools are designed for English speakers who want to learn French and differ significantly from French schools. A variety of studies have been conducted in order to analyze the effectiveness of these programs on L2 learning as well as on the maintenance of L1 (Christian and Genesee 2001; Genesee 1987; Johnson and Swain 1997; Quinn 2001; Swain and Lapkin 1982). These studies show that children who attend immersion programs and who speak the dominant language of the community reach a much more advanced level of functional competence in their L2 than children who receive conventional instruction in L2 (For a review of the literature, see Genesee 2006). The studies also show that the linguistic competency of these children in their L1 is similar to the linguistic competency of monolingual children who are enrolled in a monolingual program. Sometimes, children enrolled in immersion programs fall behind in literacy when these skills are only integrated into the curriculum in the third or fourth grade. However, this delay fades away once the teaching of literacy skills in L1 is established due to the underlying linguistic competencies common to both languages and to the positive linguistic transfer (For a review of the literature, see Genesee 2006).

The French programs can clearly be distinguished from immersion programs. While the French schools were established by and for the minority in order to prevent the assimilation of

French-speakers, immersion programs are designed for the majority in order to offer students the opportunity to access a functional level of bilingualism (Gajo 1999). The French schools teach in French, while immersion schools teach the French language.

It goes without saying that the linguistic context, the expectations, the pedagogy, the social context, the classroom dynamics, the teachers and the students vary considerably between these two programs. In immersion programs, choosing French as the language of communication allows them to learn the language, while in the French schools, this linguistic choice meets the need to learn and maintain the French language and culture (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training [OMET] 1994).

To conclude, there are more and more students who learn a second language within the French education systems (non-immersion). These students are often at the heart of communities where one of the two official languages is in a minority context (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2009). In Canada, there are two types of linguistic minority communities: the ones from Quebec and those from elsewhere in the country, particularly in Ontario. In the public sector of Quebec, this refers to English speakers who are learning French in immersion programs within a predominantly French-speaking community. In Ontario and in other provinces, it is English speakers from predominantly English-speaking communities who are learning French. The children are either learning French in immersion programs (English School Boards) or in French schools (French School Boards). The French schools welcome children whose first language (L1) is English and second language (L2) is French. The purpose of this paper was to propose a practical model that could be considered as an additional framework to that of Giles, Bourhis and Taylor's (1977) Ethnolinguistic vitality theory when studying the acquisition of an L2 in a linguistic minority context.

Practical Model for the Study of Second Language Acquisition in a Minority Setting

More and more rights-holders coming from exogamous homes are enrolled in French schools. These schools welcome students with English as their first language in order to increase their enrolment with the intention of avoiding the possibility of managing empty schools: a phenomenon that could occur if French schools limited themselves to students who only spoke French at home (Landry, Allard, and Deveau 2010).

In fact, according to the national survey in francophone minority schools (Landry, Allard, and Deveau 2010), increasing the number of students from exogamous couples could not only lead to real demographic consequences, but also amplify the English atmosphere of the school and risk transforming a French school into an immersion school. According to Cazabon (1984), maintaining one's first language as a French-speaking individual is becoming more and more difficult in minority communities due to an environment that does not guaranty not only its use, but also its status.

When studying second language acquisition in a minority context, it is essential that we not only look at the ethnolinguistic vitality of the community in the L2, but also the child's means, opportunities and motives to learn the L2. However, the latter three are intrinsically related to the elements that constitute a community's ethnolinguistic vitality.

We are proposing a new practical framework that could enable researchers to study the way that majority language learners acquire a second language in a linguistic minority setting. This model also fits with Uri Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model for human development by adopting a holistic approach to the study of language acquisition, starting with the child and diverging out to the community and policy makers. The bioecological system encompasses human development at all levels such as the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem of the individual (see Bronfenbrenner 2005 for a thorough

explanation of each level). But first, we must look at the child who is at the centre of all these systems.

The practical model proposed in this paper highlights the importance of assembling the elements of language development and language vitality explained thus far: the means, the opportunities, the motives, the institutional support, the demographical support and the status. The model presented in figure 1 represents various links that are essential for the successful acquisition and maintenance of a minority L2. The links are left open because each one can be influenced by many other factors and are not static. At the top right, we find the neurological means available to the child. Children who have neurological impairments can learn a first and a second language. However, they will likely not acquire language in the same way as a child who has no known neurological impairment (For a review, see Johnson et al. 1999). A child who has neurological deficits will expectedly require more support to acquire the first language and even more so if acquiring a second language (Kohnert 2009). The second crucial element of language acquisition that is included in the model is related to its use. A child must have many opportunities to hear and use a language in order to become proficient. However, we posit that the opportunities would be directly related to the elements of the ethnolinguistic vitality and that, in a linear fashion. In other words, in order to find opportunities that are significant and substantial enough to support second language learning, a child would need to live in a community that supports the minority L2. This would only be possible if all three of the main factors: the status, the institutional support and the members, associated with the ethnolinguistic vitality had a strong presence within the community. This can be seen in Figure 2. Finally, the last element of the proposed model is the motive. If a child has the means and the opportunities to use a language, the motive should follow. However, it appears as though this is often one of the missing links in certain linguistic minority communities. Figure 1 shows how these six elements can be united in order to look at second language learning as a process that incorporates the individual and the society in which one resides.

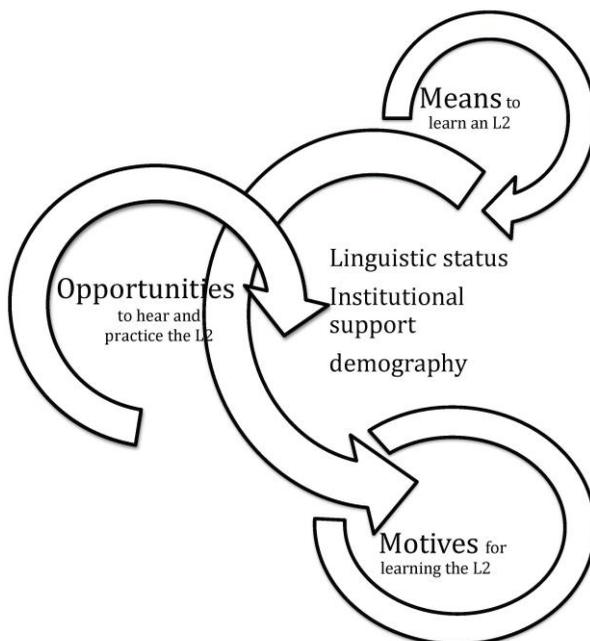


Figure 1: Ethnolinguistic practical model of second language acquisition in a minority context

The following hypothetical figure demonstrates how the opportunities to use a language could be positively correlated with the linguistic status, the linguistic demography and the institutional support of a community. It should be noted that the ethnolinguistic vitality factors could be placed in any order as one is not hierarchically more important than another.

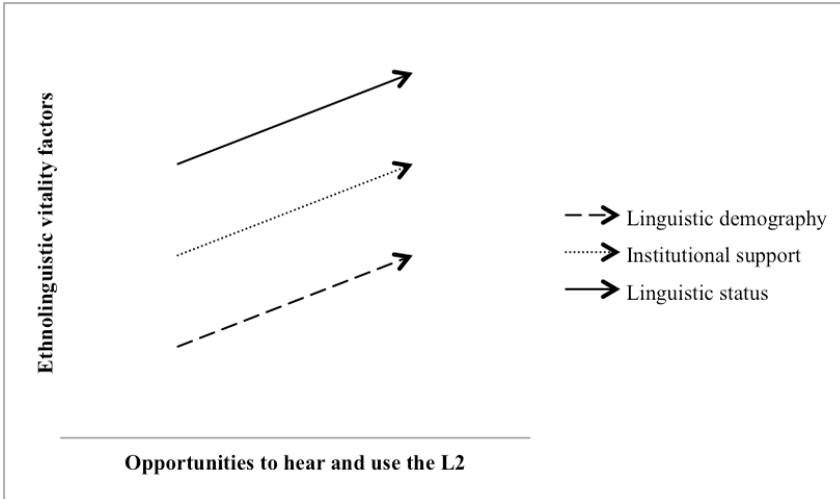


Figure 2: Plausible relationship between the ethnolinguistic vitality factors and the opportunities to hear and use an L2

Furthermore, we could postulate that the motivation could also be positively correlated with the opportunities in such a way that the more a child has genuine opportunities to hear and practice a language, the more he or she will be motivated to use it in the long run. This plausible relationship between the opportunities and the motivation to learn an L2 is presented in Figure 3.

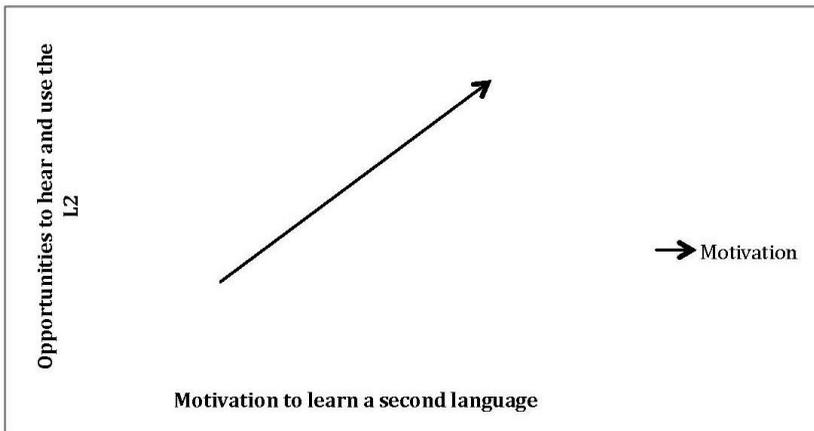


Figure 3: Plausible relationship between the opportunities and the motivation to learn an L2

These figures clearly show how the three basic components of language acquisition: the means, the opportunities and the motives could be intrinsically related to the elements of a community's ethnolinguistic vitality. When we compared the bilingual communities of Wales and those of certain parts of Canada, we found that the minority language speakers of Wales, the Welsh, appeared to reside in a community that had a much more viable linguistic culture, mainly due to the fact that all Anglophone children in that community must learn the Welsh language, either in an immersion or in a Welsh school as early as the first year of school. This in turn would have a positive influence on the linguistic demography, the institutional support and the linguistic status. Similarly, this would increase the opportunities for speaking the L2 and inherently increase one's motivation to use the minority language. Because the means cannot be controlled for, we can only assume that the two countries have the same prevalence of cognitive disorders or other neurological impairments. Having said this, the only differences between these communities relate back to the ethnolinguistic vitality of the minority languages, which, as the Figures 1, 2 and 3 show, could be directly related to the two remaining essential elements of language acquisition: opportunities and motives for using the minority language. In Canada, because most French-speakers become bilingual speakers, they often feel as though they belong to both French and English cultural-linguistic groups (Ehala 2009). This in turn could make it more difficult for children to find motivation in learning the French language, seeing as they already belong to the English culture and also because most Anglophone children in Canada are not obligated to learn French in school before the sixth year of schooling. Overall, this model could help us better understand how each link plays an important role when it comes to this population: as soon as one of the links is missing or weakened, the L2 acquisition and maintenance could also become compromised.

Conclusion

This paper set out to define different types of linguistic communities where second language acquisition is concerned. At the outset, different bilingual contexts were described. On the one hand, there is the much researched immigrant community and on the other hand, there is the more obscure bilingual community. The latter has received very little attention in the literature and was the focus of this paper. In order to understand how children acquire an L2, we turned to Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor's model of ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977), together with Kohnert's basic elements for language acquisition: the means, the opportunities and the motives (Kohnert 2009). Collectively, these elements have been combined to form a practical model that may help researchers better understand the fundamental elements to learning a minority L2 in a linguistic minority context. The proposed model which takes into account the individual and societal influences on second language acquisition can help researchers understand how children learning an L2 in a minority setting are faced with many challenges. It is important to note that the proposed model is not to be interpreted as a revised version of Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor's model (1977), but a separate model that could be used to study the way in which a language is acquired and mastered in a linguistic minority context. Nonetheless, for the French language to continue to prosper in Canada, a country that politically has two official languages, it is important not to discourage its acquisition by rights-holders children of English speaking families. Rather, it would be of high importance to research new and innovative ways to help these children gain an L2 by reaching out to more distal bioecological levels such as the families, the schools, the communities, the institutional support systems, the cultural organizations and the political parties involved, among others. This, in turn, could improve the language's ethnolinguistic vitality, which could potentially have a significant impact on a child's motivation to learn and master a minority language. However, in order to substantiate the empirical validity of the proposed model, it would need to be tested as part of a longitudinal study. Such work is currently underway.

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