

## **The Post-Secondary Continuity Gap in French Immersion Education in British Columbia: Evidence from University Programming and Student Behaviour**

### **Executive Summary**

French Immersion education in British Columbia successfully provides students with strong French-language skills through immersive K–12 instruction. However, growing evidence suggests that these gains are not being sustained at the post-secondary level due to limited opportunities to continue studying in French within non-language disciplines.

While some progress has been made, such as French-English dual-language delivery in Political Science at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and targeted applied French courses such as FREN 230 at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), these initiatives remain limited in scope and accessibility.

Recent classroom evidence from UFV indicates that French Immersion graduates are actively seeking opportunities to maintain their language skills, primarily to prevent language attrition rather than for academic credit alone. This points to a structural gap between secondary immersion education and post-secondary academic and professional language use.

Without a systematic expansion of French-language academic pathways across disciplines, British Columbia risks weakening the long-term outcomes of its significant investment in French Immersion education.

### **Background**

French Immersion education in British Columbia, along with Francophone schooling administered through the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, has played a central role in expanding access to French-language education outside Quebec. These programs were designed to promote functional bilingualism by delivering subject-based instruction in French from early schooling through to secondary graduation.

In practice, students are exposed to a wide range of academic subjects taught entirely or partially in French, including mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language arts. This sustained exposure enables many graduates to develop strong receptive and productive language skills, often reaching a level where they can communicate effectively in academic French contexts.

Despite these achievements, French Immersion remains primarily structured as a pre-university pathway. Once students enter post-secondary institutions, the linguistic environment changes significantly, with English remaining the dominant language of instruction across most disciplines and French largely confined to language departments or isolated elective courses.

This transition marks a critical turning point in language development. Students who arrive at university with strong French proficiency often do so without structured opportunities to continue

using the language in their chosen field of study. As a result, long-term academic and professional French development becomes difficult to sustain.

### **Emerging Institutional Responses**

Although a structural gap exists, some universities in British Columbia have begun developing partial solutions.

Simon Fraser University (SFU) offers a bilingual pathway in Political Science where students may complete the program in either English or French. This demonstrates that French-language instruction can be integrated into mainstream academic departments beyond language studies. However, this model remains limited in scope and has not been widely extended to other disciplines such as health sciences, engineering, or social work.

At the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), the Modern Languages Department offers FREN 230, an applied French course designed for students outside French majors. In Fall 2025, the course enrolled 12 students from diverse disciplines including kinesiology, education, and aviation, with none being French majors.

Informal classroom feedback revealed that nine out of twelve students enrolled primarily to maintain their French after French Immersion and avoid losing proficiency. Many were already showing early signs of language attrition. The remaining three students enrolled for career reasons, particularly in education where French proficiency is professionally relevant.

These examples highlight both strong latent demand and early evidence of language decline in the absence of continued use. However, such initiatives remain fragmented and dependent on individual departments rather than forming part of a coordinated institutional framework.

### **The Core Problem**

The transition from secondary French Immersion to post-secondary education exposes a structural weakness in Canada's bilingual education continuum. While students graduate with strong functional French proficiency, universities do not consistently provide environments where that proficiency can be maintained or developed within their chosen disciplines.

As students move into English-dominant academic settings, they experience gradual language attrition characterized by declining fluency, reduced vocabulary retention, and decreased confidence in spontaneous French communication. This process is gradual but cumulative, leading many graduates to lose significant functional ability over time.

A key limitation is the confinement of French instruction to language departments. Most professional programs, including nursing, kinesiology, business, health sciences, aviation, and social work, are delivered almost entirely in English. This disconnect separates language learning from professional identity formation.

Even when French courses are available, credit restrictions and program structures limit students' ability to maintain language study alongside their core degree requirements. As a result, French is often treated as an optional extracurricular activity rather than an integrated professional competency.

This creates a broader mismatch between immersion outcomes and labour market needs, particularly in sectors requiring bilingual professionals such as healthcare, education, and public services.

### **Policy Implications**

This structural discontinuity has significant consequences for education policy and workforce development. First, it reduces the long-term return on public investment in French Immersion education by failing to sustain bilingual outcomes beyond secondary school.

Second, it weakens the pipeline of bilingual professionals in sectors where demand continues to grow across Canada, particularly outside Quebec where French-language service provision is more limited.

Third, it creates unequal access to French-language academic continuity depending on institutional offerings rather than student background or ability.

Finally, it undermines broader national bilingualism objectives by limiting the consistent development of French proficiency across the post-secondary system and labour market.

### **Policy Options**

A range of policy responses could address this gap. These include expanding French-language instruction within non-language disciplines, developing structured bilingual degree pathways, and creating continuity programs specifically for French Immersion graduates.

Institutional models such as SFU's bilingual Political Science program and UFV's FREN 230 demonstrate that applied French instruction can be successfully integrated into university structures. However, these models remain isolated and require scaling.

Additional measures could include improving credit flexibility for language continuity courses and aligning French-language programming more closely with labour market demand in key professional sectors.

### **Recommendations**

A coordinated provincial framework for French-language continuity in post-secondary education is needed to formally recognize French Immersion graduates as a distinct learner group requiring sustained linguistic pathways beyond secondary school.

Post-secondary institutions should be supported in expanding bilingual programming in professional disciplines such as nursing, health sciences, education, and public administration, where bilingual competencies are increasingly necessary.

Successful institutional models should be scaled across faculties and institutions, and structured transition pathways should be developed to connect French Immersion graduates with post-secondary opportunities that maintain and develop their language skills.

Finally, French-language retention should be explicitly integrated into education policy planning to ensure coherence across the full educational pathway, from primary school through to professional training and workforce entry.

## **Conclusion**

The continuity gap in French-language education in British Columbia reflects a structural weakness within an otherwise successful French Immersion system. While strong foundations are built at the K–12 level, the absence of sustained post-secondary pathways limits long-term bilingual outcomes.

Emerging institutional initiatives demonstrate that solutions are possible, but they remain fragmented and insufficient at scale. Addressing this gap requires a more integrated approach that extends French-language education beyond secondary school and into post-secondary and professional contexts.

Such an approach would strengthen both individual language retention and Canada’s broader bilingual workforce capacity.

## **Author**

### **Williams Atanga**

Director of Operations, Verbal Link Institute  
French Instructor, University of the Fraser Valley  
M.A. Global French and Francophone Studies

*Williams Atanga is a French instructor at the University of the Fraser Valley and Director of Verbal Link Institute. His work focuses on French immersion education, bilingualism, language policy, immigration, and the development of French-language capacity in minority-language contexts in Canada.*