

Reinterpreting Experiential Learning for FSL in Canada: Bridging Community and Classroom

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Abstract

This article presents a reinterpreted approach to experiential learning (EL) for French as a Second Language (FSL) in Canada, where asymmetrical bilingualism, minority Francophone settings, and widespread multilingualism profoundly shape learner experience. Rather than viewing these sociolinguistic realities as obstacles, the article argues that they can be leveraged for creating meaningful, contextually grounded experiential learning experiences.

The presented approach consists of two complementary components: community-based EL and classroom-based EL, the Discussion Group and Peer Review Summary (DGPRS). Both components are grounded in Kolb's experiential learning cycle and framed through task-based and genre-based pedagogies. Community-based EL systematically integrates authentic interactions with Francophone communities—whether local, institutional, or digital—directly into the FSL curriculum, thereby expanding learners' exposure to linguistic diversity and enhancing social value of French. The DGPRS, as a form of classroom-based EL, creates structured opportunities for authentic communication, peer observation, collaborative reflection, and the development of a classroom-based language community, that validates learners as legitimate users of French. Together, these two complementary components foster experiential learning that enhances sociolinguistic competence and learners' ability to navigate linguistic diversity. This EL approach bridges classroom learning and real-world experience.

Keywords

experiential learning, DGPRS, community-based learning, task-based instruction, genre-based curriculum, FSL in Canada, minority settings

Résumé

Cet article présente une approche réinterprétée de l'apprentissage expérientiel (AE) pour le français langue seconde (FLS) au Canada, où le bilinguisme asymétrique, les contextes francophones minoritaires et le multilinguisme généralisé façonnent profondément l'expérience des apprenants. Plutôt que de considérer ces réalités sociolinguistiques comme des obstacles, l'article soutient qu'elles peuvent être mobilisées pour créer des expériences d'apprentissage expérientiel pertinentes et ancrées dans le contexte.

L'approche présentée se compose de deux volets complémentaires : l'AE communautaire et l'AE en classe, à travers le dispositif *Groupe de discussion et suivi des pairs (GDSP)*. Ces deux volets s'appuient sur le cycle

d'apprentissage expérientiel de Kolb et s'inscrivent dans les approches par tâches et par genres. L'AE communautaire intègre de manière systématique des interactions authentiques avec les communautés francophones — qu'elles soient locales, institutionnelles ou numériques — directement dans le curriculum de FLS, élargissant ainsi l'exposition des apprenants à la diversité linguistique et renforçant la valeur sociale du français. Le GDSP, en tant que forme d'AE en classe, crée des occasions structurées de communication authentique, d'observation par les pairs, de réflexion collaborative et de développement d'une communauté linguistique en classe, qui reconnaît les apprenants comme des utilisateurs légitimes du français. Ensemble, ces deux volets complémentaires favorisent un apprentissage expérientiel qui développe la compétence sociolinguistique et la capacité des apprenants à naviguer dans la diversité linguistique. Cette approche établit un lien entre l'apprentissage en classe et les expériences du monde réel.

Mots-clés

apprentissage expérientiel, GDSP, apprentissage communautaire, approche par tâches, curriculum fondé sur les genres, FLS au Canada, contextes minoritaires

Introduction

Experiential learning (EL) is an educational approach in which learning occurs through direct, meaningful experience followed by conscious reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis (Association for Experiential Education, 2019; Kohonen et al., 2001; Kolb, 2015; Nunan & Richards, 2015; Roberts, 2005, 2012). Grounded in Kolb's foundational EL theory (1984), the approach draws on Dewey's educational pedagogy (Dewey, 1916), Piaget's cognitive psychology (Piaget, 1976), as well as Maslow's and Rogers' humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968; Roger, 1980). These theories share core pedagogical principles: they de-emphasize automatic memorization, reject decontextualized learning, promote learner-centeredness, and emphasize real-world engagement, interaction, and reflective thinking as central to knowledge construction and human development.

EL has gained prominence in second and foreign language education, with its effectiveness supported by extensive research (Chen, 2021; Choi & Nunan, 2018; Nunan, 2015, 2018; Kong, 2021). In the Canadian context, however—particularly in French as a Second Language (FSL) program—the implementation of EL encounters important challenges. For instance, while many Canadian colleges and universities offer opportunities such as international exchanges, language partnerships, community-engaged learning, and internships (Colleges & Institutes Canada, 2018; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016; Knutson, 2003), these initiatives are often selective and entail substantial financial costs for institutions and students. Moreover, although these programs allow students to engage authentically with language and culture, they are sometimes perceived as insufficiently academic in focus (Nunan, 2015; Kolb et al., 2001). Reflection—an essential component of EL—is also frequently neglected due to time constraints, thereby diminishing the potential benefits of EL in second-language contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Miller & Maellaro, 2016).

Beyond these challenges and limitations, the sociolinguistic context in which EL occurs can further complicate its implementation in second or foreign language learning (Ellis, 2018; Nunan, 2015). In Canada, asymmetrical bilingualism, minority Francophone environments, and widespread multilingualism in major Canadian cities and provinces may restrict authentic opportunities for experiential engagement outside the classroom (Barysevich, 2023).

In response to these challenges, post-secondary institutions in French-speaking minority settings in Canada have begun to develop alternative ways of integrating experiential components within the institution and the FSL classroom itself, thereby embedding EL into more formal learning environments (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016; Knutson, 2003). Classroom-based EL has expanded significantly and now encompasses a wide range of activities, including reflective journals, conferences or event organizations,

performances, competitions, games, case studies, and simulations (Cavanagh, 2011; Wurdinger, 2005). Despite these efforts, research suggests that in-class EL for second-language learning may still lack authentic interaction, especially authentic output, and may be constrained by inherent power imbalances between instructors and students (Ellis, 2015; Nunan, 2015).

The obstacles outlined above may discourage FSL instructors from incorporating external experiential components into their courses and may reduce students' willingness to engage in EL activities. The main purpose of this article is, therefore, to present an approach designed to address these challenges within Canadian post-secondary FSL contexts. Our approach illustrates how EL spaces can be created simultaneously and continuously both outside and inside of the classroom and highlights the importance of leveraging the sociolinguistic context in which second-language learning occurs. Rather than viewing asymmetrical bilingualism and minority Francophone settings as obstacles, we argue that they can serve as catalysts for reinterpreting and enriching EL in FSL education.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we outline key questions related to the sociolinguistic context. Next, we introduce EL approach to FSL. The final section demonstrates how this approach allows us to revisit and respond to the questions raised.

Sociolinguistics Context and EL

The sociolinguistic context plays a decisive role in shaping the implementation of EL in FSL education. Although language dynamics vary considerably across the Canadian region, several recurring features continue to influence learners' experiences. In this section, we examine three interrelated sociolinguistic factors that are central to developing an EL approach for FSL in Canada: the widespread presence of multilingualism in major urban centres across provinces, the asymmetrical nature of bilingualism, and the minority status of Francophone communities outside Quebec.

Canadian urban centres and many provinces are characterized by high levels of multilingualism and plurilingualism. According to the 2021 Census, approximately 25% of households in Ontario and 18% of households across Canada reported speaking two or more languages at home, and more than 5% in Ontario expressed speaking three or more (Statistics Canada, 2022a). In metropolitan areas like Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, and Calgary, over a quarter of the population speaks a language other than English or French, most often at home (Statistics Canada, 2022b). While 18% of Canadians announced the ability to conduct a conversation in both official languages, this proportion dropped to 9.5% outside of Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Consequently, bilingualism in Canada is asymmetrical: French occupies a subordinate position within the national bilingual framework. Outside Quebec, Francophones live within minority settings, where French is often one language among many and rarely holds dominance over English.

A closer analysis of Canada's sociolinguistic landscape (Environics Analytics, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) raises critical questions that directly inform the design of an experiential approach to FSL teaching and learning:

- How can immersive environments be created, and how can the social value of French be enhanced within an asymmetrical bilingual context where French is positioned as a minority language among many?
- How can FSL learners be meaningfully connected with minority Francophone communities in ways that foster sociolinguistic competence?

These questions form the backdrop of our approach to EL for FSL. The Canadian sociolinguistic landscape - with its increasing multilingualism and plurilingualism, its entrenched asymmetrical bilingualism, and the minority

position in Francophone communities – necessitates an approach that is context-aware, socially grounded, and responsive to learner lived realities. Our approach is developed precisely with these dynamics at its core.

Two-Fold Approach to EL for FSL

Experiential learning (EL) we propose unfolds across two interconnected settings: community-based experiences (outside of the classroom) and classroom-based experiential activities (inside the classroom). These dimensions are not discrete; rather, they operate as mutually reinforcing components of a unified pedagogical approach. Together, they create conditions necessary for meaningful, situated, and sustainable FSL learning.

Community-Based EL

EL theory emphasizes the importance of interaction with socio-cultural environments as a prerequisite for effective knowledge construction. Research demonstrates that participation in activities beyond the classroom – such as internships, exchange programs, and extracurricular activities – is essential for developing higher levels of second or foreign language proficiency (Choi & Nunan, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). Additionally, studies show that long-term, frequent exposure to native speakers increases learners' awareness and use of non-standard linguistic forms, reflecting greater sociolinguistic competence (Mougeon et al., 2010; MacFarlane & Wesche, 1995; Wong & Nunan, 2011). These findings collectively indicate that community-based activities and contact with French speakers play a crucial role in the development of sociolinguistic competence among FSL learners.

In minority-language contexts – typical of most FSL learning environments in Canada – the systematic implementation of community-based experiential activities becomes even more crucial, as exposure to the target language is often limited to formal classroom settings. Community-based learning has been shown to enhance both strategic and sociolinguistic competence (Baker, 2019; Zapata-García, 2011). It is primarily through outside classroom activities that FSL learners encounter diverse varieties of spoken French, sociolinguistic variability, and more informal registers (Mougeon et al., 2010).

We therefore argue that community-based experiential learning should be systematically integrated into the mandated curriculum, particularly in minority settings. Systematic implementation requires that FSL learners engage regularly and purposefully with French-speaking communities outside the classroom. It is crucial to ensure that this engagement is accessible to students at all levels of proficiency, from beginners to advanced learners. It should not be limited to those with advanced linguistic skills

In our approach, all students are required to complete several out-of-class experiential activities. These may take multiple forms. FSL learners are encouraged to explore French-language opportunities within their institution, such as pairing with Francophone or Francophile peers, participation in research projects with FSL instructors, involvement in student clubs, attendance at cultural or academic events and use of language labs or other dedicated to French language learning spaces. French learners at the FSL program are encouraged to engage with the local French-speaking community beyond the institution by attending cultural events, joining organizations such as the Alliance française, participating in guided tours, attending theatrical and musical performances, joining meetups, or collaborating with local Francophone groups on a range of community projects (Barysevich, 2023). These interactions foster connections with local Francophones and create synergy between English and French-minority speaking communities.

In addition, learners are encouraged to immerse themselves in French through digital environments, such as watching films or series on platforms like TV5Monde, Tou.tv, Radio-Québec or TFO, listening to (or creating) Francophone podcasts or music, or engaging with French-speaking influencers and content creators (Barysevich, 2023). Virtual exchange programs also offer valuable opportunities to FSL learners for authentic interaction (Lenkaitis & Loranc, 2019).

These diverse experiences help FSL learners recognize that, even within minority-language contexts, French remains widely accessible. Regular exposure and meaningful engagement are both achievable and essential for fostering sociolinguistic competence and strengthening FSL learners' connection to Francophone communities.

Classroom-Based EL

In French minority settings, where opportunities to engage in EL in French outside the classroom are often limited, integrating experiential dimensions within the classroom becomes particularly advantageous. However, as noted earlier, a key challenge of classroom-based EL lies in ensuring the authenticity of interactions – specifically, providing learners with genuine input and opportunities for authentic output in the target language. As Nunan (2004) argues, effective pedagogy must be intentionally designed to create these conditions. In response to this challenge, Lebel and Viswanathan (2016) propose a pedagogical activity called the *Discussion Group and Peer-Reviewed Summary* (DGPRS), which directly addresses the limitations of classroom-based EL for FSL. The DGPRS draws on the principles of task-based learning (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015) and genre-based approach (Dolz & Schneuwly, 1998), while also aligning with core tenets of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984).

Discussion Group and Peer-Reviewed Summary

The DGPRS (Lebel & Viswanathan, 2016; Barysevich et al., 2016; Lebel et al., 2018; Viswanathan et al., 2018) is implemented as a weekly core activity in university-level FSL courses across all proficiency levels (A1-C1)¹. It integrates oral and written comprehension with oral and written production into a single structured task.

For this activity, the class is divided into small groups of four to eight, which are then split into two subgroups: a *speaker group* and an *observer group*. In class, the *speaker group* has the task of engaging in a collaborative interaction aimed at constructing knowledge around a theme, question, or a topic. Their task may involve describing, informing, explaining, analyzing, arguing, or debating. Prior to the in-class discussion, speakers complete oral or written preparatory tasks—such as carrying out a real-life task in the community, reading a newspaper article, viewing a video source, or conducting online or community-based research.

In class, the *observer group*, in turn, has the task of listening, observing and taking notes on the discussion produced by the *speaker group*. Their goal is to produce a collective written summary that accurately reflects the discussion they observed. Observers play an active participatory role: they must monitor the interaction closely and ask clarifying questions to complete their written task effectively. The roles of speakers and observers alternate over the course of the term, enabling learners to experience both sides of the activity and to benefit from reciprocal learning.

The experiential dimension of DGPRS

What makes DGPRS an experiential activity? We argue that DGPRS constitutes a form of experiential learning because it follows the four phases of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Through its division into speaker and observer subgroups, the activity creates two simultaneous experiential settings. Each engaging learner in distinct but complementary phases of the EL process.

For the *speaker group*, the preparatory work for the discussion constitutes the *concrete experience* phase. Students engage with authentic materials—such as videos, blog posts, or articles describing real-life community events—thereby encountering discursive, textual, and linguistic features in context. This preparatory stage also integrates *reflection* and *abstract conceptualization*: learners are encouraged to analyze their experience, to identify salient discursive, textual, linguistic and communicative features, and to connect these insights with course concepts. During the in-class discussion, students apply what they have learned in a new communicative

context. This interaction corresponds to the *active experimentation* phase, where learners test, adapt, and disseminate their knowledge through spontaneous collaborative dialogue.

For the *observer group*, listening to peers engage in the discussion constitutes the *concrete experience* phase. The *observer group* participates in an authentic encounter with FSL speakers who are collaboratively constructing meaning based on their personal experiences and forming their own language community. After discussion, observers engage in collective reflection, analyzing the discursive, textual, and linguistic features that emerged from the interaction. This stage aligns with Kolb's *reflection and abstract conceptualization phase*. Subsequently, during the production task, observers apply their insights in a new genre - for example, a discussion report, cultural column, or tourist brochure—thus completing the *active experimentation* phase of Kolb's model.

The DGPRS is innovative within EL framework because it treats peer observation itself as an active form of experience. In minority French settings, the *speaker group* provides authentic, meaningful French-language input for the *observer group*, thereby enabling learners to live a concrete experience in the target language even within the classroom.

The activity also deepens experiential learning by emphasizing collective reflection and collaboration—dimensions often overshadowed by individual reflection in EL models. For the *speaker group*, experience is followed by collaborative meaning-making. For the *observer group*, collective analysis shapes subsequent written production. These collaborative processes strengthen the experiential, socially grounded nature of the DGPRS activity.

As noted in the introduction, one persistent challenge in classroom-based EL is designing tasks that support authenticity. The DGPRS addresses this challenge by enabling learners to engage in authentic interactions in the target language. Empirical work by Lebel et al. (2017) and Viswanathan et al. (2018), for example, demonstrates that the DGPRS fosters negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, inference, and monitoring—features associated with interactional authenticity (Bachman, 1990; Ellis, 2009).

The DGPRS requires learners to collaborate to complete real-life-based communicative tasks. Its structured design therefore promotes not only the development of a learning community, but also the emergence of a language community within the classroom. Collaboration within and between subgroups encourages learners to recognize their responsibility toward others, to mobilize diverse strategies, to negotiate meaning, and to manipulate the target language for authentic purposes.

Through their authentic interactions, FSL learners collectively explore how to take responsibility for their group's learning process, how to mobilize a range of strategies, how to negotiate meaning, and how to use and manipulate the target language in real-world contexts. In doing so, they take part in the co-construction of linguistic norms and form a legitimate language community built around a community of practice of the target language in a minority setting.

Complementarity of Community-Based and Classroom-Based EL

Our approach to EL in French-speaking minority settings rests on the connection between community-based and classroom-based practices. Community-based learning should not be treated as an isolated or incidental activity; rather it should directly inform and enrich the learning that occurs in the classroom. Experiences gained in the community can serve as the foundation for in-class discussion groups, enabling learners to reflect critically on their firsthand encounters and integrate them meaningfully into academic tasks.

A key point of complementarity between the two components – community-based and classroom-based practices – is their shared pedagogical grounding in task-based and genre-based instruction. Task-based instruction is widely recognized as a “[m]eans of creating experience-based opportunities for language learning”

(Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 36) and is particularly well suited for FSL contexts in minority settings (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Landry, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Van den Branden, 2006; Van den Branden et al., 2009). Community-based EL activities constitute tasks in the Prabhu (1987) sense: they require learners to use the target language to achieve concrete communicative goals rather than to manipulate language as an end in itself.

The DGPRS similarly qualifies as a task-based activity in the Ellis (2009) framework. According to this definition, a task-based activity for the classroom must include some kind of gap that will generate a need for communication. In the DGPRS, this gap originates mostly from the interdependence between the tasks assigned to both the *speaker group* and the *observer group*, and the information gap to fill puts students into action (Lebel & Viswanathan, 2016).

Both components of our approach – community-based EL and the DGPRS – are also anchored in a genre-based approach (Dolz & Gagnon, 2008; Dolz & Schneuwly, 1998). From this perspective, *genres* are socially situated communicative practices shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. Learning involves the appropriation of genre in both receptive and productive modalities through the internalization of its discursive, textual, and linguistic features.

The DGPRS draws extensively on Bronckart's theory of socio-discursive interactionism (Bronckart, 1996, 2005, 2008), which conceptualizes genres as socio-historically constructed forms of verbal action rooted in specific spheres of human activity, including academic settings. Within the DGPRS, language competence is developed through engagement with the discursive, textual, and linguistic characteristics of a targeted genre (Barysevich et al., 2016; Lebel et al., 2017; Viswanathan et al., 2018).

In our approach to EL for FSL, the interdependence between community-based and classroom-based learning is strengthened by the direct transfer of genres studied in class to real-world tasks. For example, when the DGPRS focuses on the genre *récit d'immigration*, the corresponding community-based activity may involve interviewing a Francophone immigrant. When the DGPRS centers on the genre *portrait d'un lieu*, the community-based task may involve exploring a Francophone site or neighbourhood. This alignment allows learners to engage with the same oral and written genres across both classroom and community contexts, thereby deepening their mastery through varied, authentic, and meaningful applications.

Discussion

This article has proposed an approach to EL for FSL that is specifically designed to address the challenges posed by asymmetrical bilingualism and minority Francophone settings. In this section, we review the two guiding questions introduced earlier:

- How can immersive environments be created, and how can the social value of French be enhanced within an asymmetrical bilingual context where French functions as a minority language among many?
- How can FSL learners be meaningfully connected with minority Francophone communities in ways that foster sociolinguistic competence?

Immersive Environments and the Social Value of French

In minority language contexts, immersive environments are limited or inaccessible for most FSL learners. Our approach responds to this challenge by systematically integrating community-based experiential activities into the curriculum and by incorporating the DGPRS as a structured classroom-based experiential activity.

In our approach to EL for FSL, the community-based component is not peripheral; it is a mandatory and integral element that ensures sustained contact with French beyond the classroom. Both components align with the four

stages of Kolb's experiential cycle and are framed within task-based and genre-based pedagogies, thereby ensuring engagement with real-world communicative situations and authentic oral or written texts.

Through participation in local French-language cultural events, guided community tasks, exploration of Francophone digital spaces, and DGPRS sessions, learners develop communicative competence in contexts that simulate immersion—even within a predominantly English-speaking environment.

This approach also enhances the social value of French by presenting it as a living, dynamic resource for communication, identity, and social participation rather than merely a school subject. Learners encounter French in diverse cultural, interpersonal, institutional, and digital contexts, which reinforces its legitimacy and relevance in everyday life. The DGPRS contributes to this process by structuring interactions around an information gap that requires learners to use French—despite English being their shared dominant language (Viswanathan et al., 2018). In doing so, the classroom becomes a micro-community in which French has real communicative value.

Connection of FSL Learners to Francophone Minority Communities and Developing Sociolinguistic Competence

A central objective of our approach is to connect learners meaningfully with minority Francophone communities. These connections are fostered through structured activities encouraging students to explore local institutions, attend cultural events, and interact with Francophones and Francophiles in their immediate surroundings. Digital participation further expands opportunities for engagement and makes visible the linguistic diversity of the Canadian and international Francophonie. Such encounters deepen learners' understanding of local sociolinguistic dynamics and foster solidarity with linguistic minorities, generating deeper empathy and awareness of the challenges they face.

Our approach to EL strengthens sociolinguistic competence, understood as the ability to use language appropriately across social contexts. This is supported through a dual focus on genre and reflexivity. Engaging with specific genres equips learners to identify social norms, discursive practices, and contextual variations shaping language use. Reflective tasks—such as journals, blogs, or roundtable discussions—prompt learners to critically examine their perceptions, interactions, and evolving identities in French. These processes foster metacognitive awareness and prepare learners to navigate linguistic variation, power relations, and identity issues that characterize minority language contexts.

Integrating both community-based and classroom-based EL heightens learners' awareness of their sociolinguistic environment and positions them as active participants in a bilingual and diverse Francophonie. Community-based EL bridges the “two solitudes” by fostering intercultural dialogue and reshaping learners' attitudes toward linguistic and cultural identities. Exposure to the diverse varieties of French spoken in Canada and interaction with diverse speakers enrich learners' awareness of informal and non-standard forms, including vernacular and regional varieties (Mougeon et al., 2010). Classroom-based EL, particularly through the DGPRS, further challenges the notion of the *ideal native speaker* by affirming learners as legitimate users of French whose identities are shaped by multiple linguistic and cultural influences (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 5). Through this process, learners become more confident and empowered participants in Canada's plural Francophonie.

Final Remarks

Sociolinguistic and cultural diversity are valuable resources for fostering EL in second and foreign language education. Our approach—combining community-based and classroom-based EL and grounded in task-based and genre-based pedagogies—draws on the rich array of resources available in minority-language communities. The DGPRS illustrates how experiential learning can be effectively implemented within the classroom by incorporating collective interaction and reflection, thereby enhancing the authenticity of communication in FSL learning environments. Task-based and genre-based learning, coupled with the availability of local, authentic,

and community-relevant resources, maximizes and supports EL in French-speaking minority settings. Together, these elements maximize opportunities for experiential and meaningful engagement with French in minority settings.

We contend that this approach is both pedagogically rigorous and socially responsive. It equips learners with the linguistic, cognitive, and intercultural tools necessary to live in French and to participate actively in the evolving Canadian Francophonie. Through their community-based experiences, learners become aware of the challenges faced by linguistic minorities and are encouraged to critically examine dominant language ideologies, including the power of English, prevailing definitions of bilingualism, and evolving conceptions of la Francophonie in Canada. In doing so, they come to recognize the legitimacy of diverse linguistic identities beyond native-speaker norms. Engagement in authentic experiences, reflective tasks, and meaningful interactions inside and outside the classroom situates FSL learners within the broader reality of social bilingualism and supports their autonomy and ongoing personal development.

Although this approach was initially developed and implemented in the French-speaking minority context of Ontario (Barysevich et al., 2016; Lebel et al., 2017; Lebel et al., 2018; Viswanathan et al., 2018), we argue that it is transferable to other settings where linguistic and cultural diversity and mobility are defining features.

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Notes

¹ The DGPRS was implemented in a series of French as a Second Language Courses (A1-C1) at the University of York (Glendon College) and the University of Guelph.

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