

Landscapes of Language Learning: Québec's Francisation Program through the Eyes of Recent Newcomers





Author

Thomas Brown

Date published

April 2024

Copyright © 2024. Y4Y Québec.

Material from this publication may be reproduced for training, teaching or other noncommercial purposes as long as Y4Y Québec is fully acknowledged. This publication may also be distributed and/or accessible from your website provided that Y4Y Québec is fully acknowledged as the source. No part of this publication may be reproduced for any commercial purpose without the prior express permission of the copyright holders.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
FRANCISATION PROGRAM DETAILS	4
FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCES	4
EXPERIENCE ONE	5
EXPERIENCE TWO	5
EXPERIENCE THREE	5
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	6
WORKS CITED	8

INTRODUCTION

I made the decision to move to Montréal in February of this year. As a British born immigrant and non-French speaker, I understood that learning French was necessary in order to fully integrate and work in Québec. I was therefore excited to learn about the Francisation program, which offered free enrollment in full-time French classes. However, the process of attempting to find a place in the program took me roughly 7 months. During this time, I received three offers, two of which I was subsequently declined for after not responding within a 36-hour window. Alongside this, minimal and sometimes conflicting advice from support services stifled my application progress, and eventually led me to find French language training elsewhere. Taking time to complete full-time classes - even with the maximum financial support available - was, at this point, no longer a financial possibility.

My story is of course one of many. Yet while thousands are successfully enrolled into the program each cycle, my experience made me question how effective the program is overall. As everyone has an interest in the success of the Francisation program, I believe it is worth listening to the experience of its participants in order to explore this question and provide recommendations to improve it. Specifically, what can the experiences of immigrants who have entered into the Francisation program tell us about its strengths and weaknesses? By interviewing three such newcomers, this brief will provide qualitative research findings regarding the experience of applying to and participating in the program. These, in turn, can better inform potential applicants and highlight areas of future research for policy makers.

FRANCISATION PROGRAM DETAILS

The Francisation program aims to support the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration's goal of promoting the full participation, in French, of immigrants and ethnocultural minorities in the province's collective life by offering French learning services to adults, over the age of 16, in either classrooms, the workplace, or online. These adults refer to those already domiciled in the province; folks who plan to settle in Québec, or those who already work within businesses who would like to improve their speech (*Learn French*, n.d.).

In addition to free part-time and full-time classes, offered both online and in person, the program has financial support available, including a \$205 weekly allowance, childcare support, and funding for travel to and from classes. As of June 1st 2023, the program can now be applied to through a single online portal, Arrima, a one-stop-shop for residents and immigrants alike seeking French language training in Québec (*Arrima - Online Immigration and French Learning Services*, 2023). This development took place following an increase in the demand for the program. In 2021-2022, 37,000 Québec residents were enrolled, rising by around 25% to 46,000 in the following year; from 2018 to 2022, government funding for the program doubled (Shingler, 2022).

FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCES

To explore this research question, three newcomers to Québec were interviewed about their expe-

rience in the Francisation program. The first is a female English newcomer to Montréal with no French background; the second is a Brazilian-born male, moving to Montréal in 2022 with no knowledge of French, but speaking English, Spanish, and Portuguese; the third is a female, English-speaking Nigerian newcomer now living in Québec City.

EXPERIENCE ONE

While moving to Montréal from the United Kingdom, the interviewee first heard about the program through a friend who was also in the process of enrolling. Although she only spoke English when moving here, she was able to find work in a French-speaking kitchen space. Little language learning occurred, however, until she made it into her Francisation classes. Her application took approximately two months to be accepted. Once in the classes, her experience was largely positive and she was able to learn French basics quite quickly. However, she felt the learning plateaued and the large time commitment (involving full-time classes) began to stifle her progress, both in terms of learning the language and finding work, which were her ultimate goals. She also noted that while the main financial support (a sum of \$205 a week for full-time participation, at the time of the interview) was helpful, she understood it would not be given if two or more classes were missed per week. This meant that there was a barrier to finding consistent work to supplement the rest of a participant's monthly financial needs. In her case, this resulted in her having to accept precarious employment. These included very short-term work contracts, or consistently working a full-time job alongside full time classes, leaving little time for anything other than work and sleep.

EXPERIENCE TWO

Moving to Montréal from Brazil, the interviewee was told about the Francisation program by an immigration advisor. It was described as being the go-to French learning resource offered by the Québec Government. With a background in Spanish, Portuguese and English, he still felt concerned about learning French, having heard it is a challenging language. It took two months to find a part-time class placement, having first applied for full-time courses. Once accepted, receiving the financial support provided became very important, as work was very challenging to find upon arrival. In the classes themselves, the experience he had was initially positive, but was described as varying depending on the school and instructor. The interviewee noted that the challenges of French language learning while supporting himself in a French first environment were substantial, but were also observed to be more intense for those with a non-English speaking background. For instance, some of his classmates had not received language training, nor formal education of any kind. In the latter case, instructors would need to adjust the content of the course to accommodate the wide range of learning backgrounds of the group, which altered the experience for all participants and slowed the rate of learning.

EXPERIENCE THREE

Before moving to Québec City from Nigeria, the interviewee discovered the program through online

research. While she initially struggled to find a direct contact from within the program, she found the application relatively straightforward and was accepted after a five week delay. Upon starting the classes, the fact they were being taught in French was a surprise and caused worry for some participants. However, the interviewee felt this was beneficial for her language learning in the long run. The courses focused largely on speaking and listening, and distinguished between French and Québécois dialectical differences. Having completed multiple rounds of classes, the interviewee feels that she is now able to hold a conversation in French, but will sometimes struggle with listening comprehension. Overall, her two points of concern were in regards to the timing of the classes, and the organisers' communication styles. In terms of timing, while the program offers morning, afternoon, evening, or full-time classes, these are not available in all locations. This means having to slot classes into a potentially strained work/life schedule. In terms of communication, her own experience, as well as that of other participants, was marked with inconsistent and unclear responses from the Francisation program's organisers. She felt that email requests would often be ignored, and that instructions were often unclear.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Francisation program enacts the Québec Government's mandate of supporting and integrating newcomers into Quebec society. Adoption of the French language is central to its mandate. As such, the following recommendations should be considered to ensure newcomers are best positioned to use the program and learn French upon arrival in Québec.

As a participant...

Enrol immediately upon arrival in Québec: While the Québec Government website reports that classes may begin within 50 working days of your application, this is only a guarantee for the first offer (*How to Register for full-time French courses for immigrants*, 2023). This means that an offer can be made within the first two and a half months, but if this offer is not acceptable for any reason, you will potentially need to wait that same length of time again for your next offer.

Accept offers quickly: Apply early and be ready to respond within the same day the offer is made, as the offers are released to a large number of applicants. In this instance, a late response (for example, not checking your email over the weekend) can lead to a missed acceptance.

Seek assistance from language training institutions, not just the Francisation program: Talking to a guidance counsellor or similar person from a registered training institution – which you can find through the Arrima map – should be done in addition to your Francisation application (*Training Sites Offering Part-Time French Courses for Immigrants*, n.d.). These counsellors often speak directly with Francisation advisors, and can offer help in understanding deadlines, application requirements, and finding a place in the program.

The Francisation program itself is one option of many: Respondents noted that Francisation should be seen as one approach to French language learning, and not the only approach. Whether or not the program is a good fit for a given language learner depends on that person's own background with

formal education, French, and classroom learning in general. In some cases, the pace of the course can become too fast or too slow. As such, taking part in language learning with self-driven resources or programs may be easier to fit around certain peoples' work and life schedules. Specifically, respondents suggested that newcomers who have prior language learning experience, experience in a formal educational setting (like college or university), or those who have already worked alongside French-speaking Québécois, should consider learning French by other means. In all cases, respondents noted that consistent verbal practice with Québécois was the single most important tool for language learning.

As a program...

Program placement expansion: The Francisation program will need to be expanded to meet the increasing annual demand, and to reflect the lived experiences of those involved. With a months-long application period, the lag time for a newcomer arriving in the province to become competent in French may extend well over a year; this could, for instance, make meeting Québec's 6-month French language learning timeline very challenging (Shingler, 2022).

Language accessibility: Given that Francisation is a program that serves non-French speakers directly, language accessibility supports need to be very robust. Ideally, support staff running the program should be provided resources to help them assist those with questions in other non-French languages. In multiple instances, interviewees reported having issues understanding the advice given to them by support services, which made understanding the expectations of the course challenging.

Language audit: Given that it is a French language learning program, written resources need to be accessible for completely non-French speaking applicants. Multiple reports of French-only documents and communications came from the interviewees. In some cases, these documents or web pages could also not be translated by Google's auto-translate software. This dramatically increased the time needed to understand these documents, as each line needs to be translated with a third party software, and also exposes applicants to potential misunderstandings due to language translation errors. A language audit of all web pages and documents on the Francisation site and portal could help resolve this, guaranteeing that there are no bodies of text which cannot be translated from French.

Greater social and exit supports: The provincial government should consider expanding the program to offer a broader range of financial and social support, as well as greater class time flexibility. Interviewees reported having difficulty both fitting the sometimes rigid class schedules into their own, and in applying French in their day-to-day lives. As such, we believe the program could:

- Benefit from expanding the number of classes and available times outside of the 9-5 PM/ 5-9 PM dynamic.
- Provide a wider range of social integration resources, such as opportunities for newcomers to connect with Québécois and begin real world language learning. Research shows that French language learners may see the process of meeting language requirements as either a barrier to community participation, or as a force for motivation and empowerment (Beaulieu et al., 2022). Whether they see it as a positive or negative force can be shaped by whether or not they feel as if they are gaining greater access to their local French-speaking community as a result of their learning.



5165 Sherbrooke Street West,
Suite 107
Montréal, QC H4A 1T6



info@y4yquebec.org



514-612-2895



www.y4yquebec.org