

A La Française: Helping Students with Learning Disabilities Improve their French Language Skills

In the winter and autumn '08 semesters The Learning Centre of Vanier College initiated a French peer-tutoring program for students with learning disabilities (LD). Previous experience had shown that these students often failed their French courses. Because French courses demand reading, writing, listening/comprehension and speaking skills, students with LD usually face a greater challenge than the average student. This is a problem that arises earlier on in the education system, follows the students to cegep, and is not easily overcome. It can cause high levels of frustration and discouragement, lead to failing grades and have a negative impact on self-esteem.

To set up the program we turned to our internal partner, Vanier's French Department. Three teachers in the department were consulted in designing the project. In addition they recommended three French tutors from the winter '08 "Relation d'Aide" course. Once the project was underway, teachers were invited to the workshop given by the *Équipe Volante* team of SAIDE. The two workshop components, "Les élèves avec TA au collégial" and "Comment intervenir auprès des élèves ayant des TA", made teachers more aware of the challenges facing students with LD in mastering French and explored ways to help them.

In the first semester of the project, 15 students with learning disabilities were enrolled in French courses. Five of these students signed up for tutoring. In Autumn '08, eleven students with LD were enrolled in French courses, and three

students were tutored. With the help of their tutors, all but one student, who withdrew from the college, passed their French courses. Equally important as passing their courses was the positive feedback the students gave about the project: they appreciated the friendly nature as well as the expertise of their tutors.

A very important change was introduced to the project in Autumn '08. The two tutors hired to replace the tutors from the French "Relation d'aide" course were themselves students with LD. They had graduated from a French secondary school and had strong oral and written French skills. The new tutors brought with them not only first-hand knowledge of LD, but also useful learning strategies, and a lot of patience. As living proof that French could be mastered, they served as excellent role models and a source of motivation.

During the project, the project coordinators met with the tutors and sat in on several tutoring sessions to provide feedback to the tutors. At the end of the semester, evaluation forms were collected from tutors and tutees. The evaluations from both tutees and tutors were positive: both groups benefited from working together. One tutee commented, "The positive aspect of the tutoring was that my tutor helped me a lot with my speech (Oral). ... He was quite friendly himself, and he helped with pronouncing the words...." A comment from a tutor with LD aptly summarizes the benefits of having tutors with LD: "[P]eople who have LD actually know how it feels to have LD and know how we like to be talked to and what encourages us and what does not." This quote highlights a crucial factor in the success of the project.

Certainly there is room for improvement. One aspect of the project that was not implemented was the expansion of activities beyond course work. Perhaps too optimistically, we had envisioned an out-of-class cultural component, such as French films or restaurant outings. However, the students were not willing to devote time to these activities and instead wanted to concentrate only on their course work. Another difficulty not easily overcome was students finding enough time to devote to the tutoring sessions. Whether it was due to poor time management skills or very busy lives, or both, students were often not able to commit to the tutoring. One partial solution was to introduce a degree of flexibility, so that in addition to individual sessions, group drop-in sessions were set up during universal break. Students could then attend these sessions on an ad hoc basis as needed.

In other respects the goals of the project were successfully met: the merits of peer tutoring are well known. Students with LD were able to see an improvement in their grades and became more confident in their use of the French language. Having students with LD as tutors added multiple benefits to the peer-tutoring model by acknowledging and capitalizing on the strengths of students with LD. It provided them with another avenue to contribute to and be valued in their school community. Whenever possible, having students with LD serve as tutors is most desirable.

