



Self-Questioning and Planning of Projects Integrating Oral Literacy at Primary Level

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Abstract

As part of a research project on oral literacy integrated with project-based learning, we accompanied ten primary school teachers in planning projects for their students. Our research objectives were to encourage teachers to question themselves when planning projects, and to use different tools to develop oral literacy within these projects. Before and after a twelve-week coaching period, we conducted interviews to paint a picture of the changes perceived by teachers regarding oral literacy, project-based learning, their ability to self-question when planning projects and to observe the evolution of oral literacy in their students. In this article, we present the problem, the theoretical framework, the support system, and some research results based on the analysis of our interviews.

Keywords: *Self-questioning strategy, Project-based learning, oral literacy, planning*

1. Introduction

In Quebec, many elementary school teachers work with a varied clientele, the majority of whom are allophone students for whom French is not their mother tongue. In the classroom, these students often choose not to use spoken French for academic or everyday tasks. In Quebec, the number of students whose first language is not French is on the rise. In 2012, 22.2% of students in the public school system came from an immigrant background. This percentage rose to 34.7% in the private sector [1]. These students are more likely to use English to express themselves at school. In private educational institutions, students who don't master French find themselves in regular classes with few resources to encourage the practice of oral French. Yet, oral French is the best way to communicate in the classroom and beyond. It is also a means of self-expression and identity affirmation. When language is not mastered, it creates a feeling of insecurity that hinders its use in the classroom [2]. Teachers working in these schools often lack the resources to help their students communicate.

2. Problem

The deliberate choice not to speak French at school is a major and recurring challenge for Académie Sainte-Anne, a private school located in Montreal. Indeed, despite efforts made since its opening, the situation never seems to be resolved, despite an initial research collaboration conducted with this school in 2019-2020. Although this collaboration helped to better equip teachers to develop oral French as an object with their students, they found that they were limited in their ability to encourage the use of oral French in everyday tasks outside the classroom. According to these teachers, students seem to perceive French exclusively as a school subject and not as a tool for developing their potential in meaningful tasks related to school or outside school. Yet, the development of oral French as a medium, which is what we're talking about here, is important because it serves other school disciplines, such as reading [3] and writing [4,5]. What's more, it supports the development of literacy in students [6,7,8], which seems central today in a society where we seek to develop engaged and responsible citizens [9]. Thus, in this second year of research, teachers mentioned to us their interest in evolving their planning approach towards learning situations that would enable students to practice speaking in real tasks that go beyond the walls of the classroom. Yet, as Emond [10] points out, teachers have few resources and know few strategies for developing complex, authentic tasks while considering their students' level of oral literacy. In this respect, Kagan and Tippins [11] have shown that if young teachers don't have an explicit framework for planning, they create situations with little detail and miss out on important content. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, would like the planning of their learning situations not to be based exclusively on their own experience, but rather to be inspired by research and constantly questioned. These teachers' concerns are in line with the scientific literature, which points out that planning this type of situation requires a great deal of guidance and networking [12]. Thus, while continuing to take oral expression into account as an object



in planning, the aim of this school institution was to design interdisciplinary learning and assessment situations in which oral expression is necessary for carrying out useful tasks such as solving problems linked to everyday activities, or convincing classmates of the importance of respecting the rules of road safety when cycling, and so on. It therefore seems important to us to support teachers in developing oral language as a medium for their students, by planning authentic and complex situations that would, de facto, develop literacy in oral French. The question guiding our research was the following: How does supporting primary school teachers in questioning themselves when planning learning situations change their perceptions of oral literacy integrated into the project?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Lesson Planning

The lack of time mentioned by the teachers in our research and in many other studies [13] means that they must learn to plan effectively. To this end, the model developed by Wiggins and McTighe [14] suggests taking pedagogical alignment and backward planning into account. This approach is little known to teachers and would enable them to plan more effectively [15]. In fact, according to Wanlin [16], teachers who plan do so to simplify their procedures and increase their efficiency in terms of time. As many researchers have shown [17,18,16], planning learning situations is a cognitive process that involves deliberate, intentional, interpretative, and metacognitive thinking. It is also a problem-solving approach since, to be adapted to the teaching context, it must consider the constraints of the environments and the knowledge of the domain. Yet, as research evidence is constantly evolving in education, updated and adapted planning is essential to meet the new challenges of the classroom [19] and of oral literacy, which is a relatively recent and poorly documented concept [20]. Butler [19] argues that getting teachers to plan, select and invent effective tasks and strategies requires not only meeting their needs, but also evolving their knowledge, beliefs, and conceptions, particularly to adapt to new reforms [17]. Planning therefore requires high-level thinking and continuous questioning.

3.2 Planning Through Self-questioning Practice

Self-questioning is a metacognitive strategy in which every learner is made aware of his or her own questioning and its deliberate, reflective use during a task [21]. Thus, when planning, teachers must constantly question themselves, whether orally or in writing. The evolution of self-questioning can be verbalized and observed through the four variables of metacognitive knowledge: the interests and values of the individual, the goals pursued, the demands of the task and the teaching strategies known by the individual [22]. In this project, teachers used self-questioning to plan interdisciplinary learning and assessment situations inspired by project-based pedagogy. During the implementation of the planned projects, teachers had multiple opportunities to question their practice and observe the evolution of oral literacy in their students, since rigorous, thoughtful planning enhances the quality of time spent in the classroom [23].

3.3 Planning Oral Literacy Activities

Oral literacy is defined as the ability to communicate effectively orally with different media to achieve one's goals and by exploiting one's potential to carry out authentic everyday activities [6,7]. Planning that takes this into account would make it possible to predict and observe its evolution in students according to two levels [24]: 1) the basic level where oral serves as a support in tasks related to reading and writing; 2) the intermediate level where oral is called upon to seek, process and analyze information. This is also the level at which students express their thoughts in large-group discussions, cooperate in teamwork, orally communicate the product of a project, or exercise their critical judgment. This second level refers, in a way, to the cross-curricular competencies of the Quebec school curriculum [9] or to 21st century strategies [25]. The literature in this field identifies five discourse conduits to be considered in developing oral literacy: argumentative, descriptive, explanatory, justificatory, narrative or prescriptive [26]. Justificatory discourse has been chosen for this research, given its coherence with project-based learning. Moreover, it is essential to work on oral literacy according to the principles of the integrated approach, where the teacher is better able to validate its importance and appropriateness [27,28]. For Soucy [28, page 76], the integrated approach is defined as follows:



[...] the integrated approach to French is a didactic approach that advocates the explicit articulation of more than one language skill (reading, writing, listening or speaking) within a single teaching-learning situation, through the intersection of one or more structuring activities aimed at teaching knowledge of different components of french and one or more communicative activities during which students are led to mobilize their knowledge (adapted from Soucy, 2022).

In the present research, we focus on oral literacy as a component of "listening and speaking" language skills in a project considered as a complex interdisciplinary learning situation that includes several interrelated activities.

3.4 Planning a Project

Project-based learning is a teaching-learning method inspired by the socioconstructivist movement, which places the student at the heart of the construction of knowledge [29]. Engaged in the project, students choose a topic that sparks their curiosity, plan tasks, search for information, develop a final product, present it to an audience, assess themselves and their peers [30]. Each project not only enables learners to acquire and apply disciplinary knowledge, but also to develop cross-curricular skills that will be useful in both in-school and out-of-school contexts, preparing them for life in society [31]. Planning learning situations inspired by project-based learning requires a clear understanding of the steps involved and implies constant questioning about the stages of project implementation, the learning objects to be selected, the real place given to the student, the monitoring of objectives to be achieved, and so on. According to Lam & al. [32], teachers who are well supported in the development of their planning skills are more autonomous and motivated. What's more, they are more persistent in implementing projects for their students. But if the project is to incorporate oral literacy as well, planning becomes an additional challenge.

The aim of this research is to address the following objective: To sketch a portrait of teachers' perceptions of project-based learning planning integrating oral literacy following coaching.

4. Methodology

The aim of this qualitative exploratory research is to learn about teachers' perceptions of projects that integrate oral literacy following coaching between March and May 2022. It studied participants in their natural environment, the school [33], and is exploratory in nature, exploring new links or little-known phenomena that have been little discussed together [33].

4.1 Sample

In this research, we used non-probability convenience sampling. Ten participants teachers, from preschool to grade 6, were interested and available to participate in the project. Each teacher benefited from several meetings per project, depending on the needs expressed. They carried out between one and two projects during this support period. Table 1 gives details of the meetings held with the participants and the projects planned.

Table 1. Participants met for project planning.

Cycle and level	Number of participants	Number of projects per level	Number of support meetings
Preschool	1	2	5
Primary cycle 1 Grade 1	1	1	8
Primary cycle 1 Grade 2	2	1	4
Primary cycle 2 Grade 3	2	1	7
Primary cycle 2 Grade 4	1	1	7
Primary cycle 3 Grade 5	2	2	4
Primary cycle 3 Grade 6	1	2	3



4.2 Tools and Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the specific research question, e.g., to paint a picture of teachers' perceptions of planning projects integrating oral literacy, we conducted an interview before and after the coaching period. These semi-structured interviews [34] included ten questions. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. Content analysis was carried out using Nvivo, identifying recurring themes linked to the questions asked. We then identified themes that did not emerge from the initial categories.

4.3 The Research Process

Before and after the implementation of the support system, three conferences were offered to the participating teachers. Table 2 shows the interventions favored by the project.

Table 2. Details of support system.

January 2022	February 2022	March to May 2022	June 2022
Initial interviews	3 presentations : Lesson planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral literacy • Project-Based Learning 	12 weeks of support for teachers	Final interviews

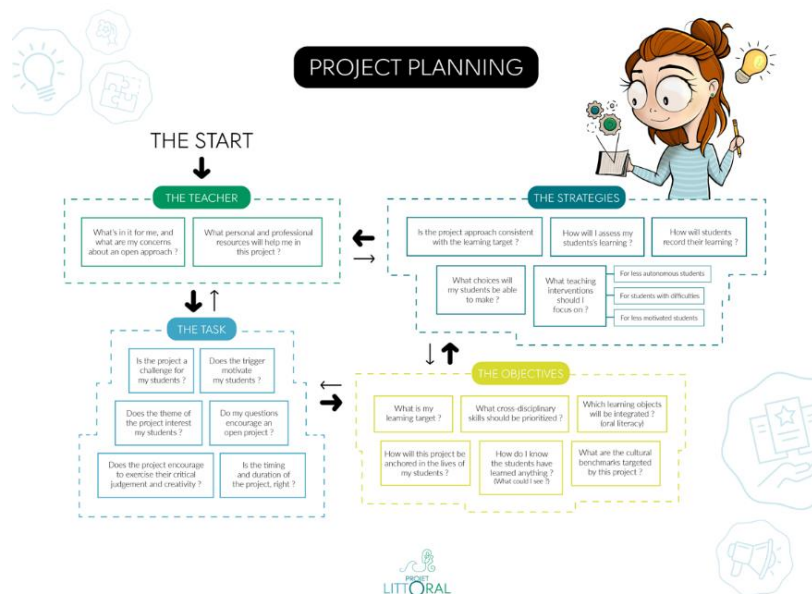
During our support for teachers, we developed tools for project planning. These tools were developed in advance of our meetings but were fine-tuned during the coaching process to consider the needs and interests of the teachers. Table 3 gives an overview of the tools designed for teachers.

Table 3. List of tools designed to support teachers.

Tools	Users
Preschool and elementary school planning chart	Teachers
Roadmap	Students
Diary, resource cards, mind maps	Teachers and students
Posters for project stages	Teachers and students
Self-questioning approach	Teachers
Project planning guide	Teachers

As an example, Fig. 1 shows a self-questioning approach to planning a project that integrates oral literacy.

Fig. 1. Self-questioning approach to planning a project that integrates oral literacy.





5. Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results concerning teachers' perceptions of oral literacy, oral literacy integrated into the project, self-questioning during planning, and the evolution of oral literacy in their students. For each of these variables, we provide extracts illustrating teachers' perceptions before and after the teacher support.

5.1 Changing Perceptions of Oral Literacy

First, we wanted to find out what teachers' perceptions of oral literacy were. Since they had to plan and observe their interventions, they needed to understand their scope. We were aware that this concept was not easy to understand, and we expected that it would not be clear to the teachers at the start of the coaching. So, before the teacher support two participants told us the following:

For me, in fact, oral literacy would be literature, sharing things with students, telling things too, analyzing, that's it. [02 A-Ens2Ho].

Basically, we can think of the model teacher who will explain, who will give examples of how we're supposed to formulate our sentences orally, and take the time to explain to children, like let's admit it, the famous "don't" and "not". You can say "I don't like that" orally, but not in writing. [03 A-Ens6Fe]

After the teacher support, the concept seemed better understood by most of our teachers. Here's an example for the same two teachers:

Oral literacy, in fact, is the procedures that enable students to express themselves, but also to be critical, to share information, to develop other avenues, in the sense of other learning paths, we'll say. [02 A-Ens2Ho]

Oral literacy, that is, certain ways of communicating, let's admit it, how we communicate in a debate, in a discussion, when we recite poetry, a slam. So, different conventions, procedures that we should know. Like when you give an oral presentation in front of others, it won't be the same as when I'm talking to my godson. [03 A-Ens6Fe]

Like Lafontaine [7, page 40], we believe it's essential for the teacher to be able to define the concept of literacy: "If the teacher adopts the definition proposed above of literacy oral component, he or she will work on it in connection with real-life situations." However, to our knowledge, very little research has documented teachers' knowledge and understanding of oral literacy, and even less when it is integrated into projects.

5.2 Changing Perceptions of Project Integrated Oral Literacy

When we asked teachers what they thought about the relevance of integrating oral literacy into projects, we noticed a little hesitation before the coaching. This hesitancy is much less apparent afterwards. Here's what the same two teachers had to say before and after the teacher support.

Before teacher support:

Ah OK. I think it's important, in any project, I think you should always have this part included. [07 A-Ens5 Fe]

[...] to the interdisciplinary project and I think that if there's a way of integrating oral expression in the way we want to do it, I think that the project once again is the best way, because pupils talk every day, pupils are constantly talking. But, if once again, suddenly, I place it in a project, but there, it makes, it makes sense. Then, the student suddenly wants to learn, because it's going to help him become a better generalist, for example. [08 A-Ens5 Ho]

After teacher support:

I think any project incorporates, at its core, literacy. I mean, I don't think you can do a project without touching on oral literacy. It's almost impossible, because if you don't, you can't



communicate to plan your project. We also do very collaborative projects. We've never done an individual project, and at the same time, when you make a project, your final product, there's obviously an intention to disseminate it in some way. Once again, you're going to use oral literacy. [07 A-Ens5 Fe]

Now, I think it's extremely important to teach it [ORAL], then the project well, that makes it totally relevant because I mean, eventually, there's an oral at the end, eventually you're going to talk about your project, eventually like you're going to want to talk to others about it. You're going to be proud of your project. Well, we might as well use French words throughout the project [...] So, I think the project really becomes the most effective way of, quotation marks, teaching oral skills. [08 A-Ens5 Ho]

Although they did not formally assess their students' oral literacy, the teachers in our research appropriated effective tools to modify their existing practice by integrating literacy into projects, as Lafontaine & al. [20] also demonstrated. According to Allen [35], the measurement and evaluation of oral literacy practices are considered difficult for teachers. We note, moreover, that teachers' responses before coaching were rather evasive, whereas they were more precise after coaching, and that the terms used to report their perceptions were more explicit ("I think" versus "it's almost impossible to"..., "it's certain"/"I think" versus "it's extremely important").

5.3 Changing Perceptions of Questioning Skills during Planning

The core of our research was to support teachers in planning projects using a questioning guide (see Fig.1). To do this, we first questioned the teachers using the guide. Then, gradually, we shared this questioning with them. Our aim was to get them to use the questions independently. The questions asked by the teachers before the coaching identified the issues of time, efficiency, clarity, and adaptability of the projects to the students. The questions asked after the tutoring session relate to elements of the questioning guide provided in the research device.

Before teacher support:

There's one obvious question, of course, and that's the question of time. Because teachers are short of time, so yes, that's the first question, "How long will it last? Yes, that's it. Then, the second question I ask myself is effectiveness: "Is it effective or not for the student?" So in terms of the feasibility of the SAÉ, to see if it's effective, if it actually brings something to the student. That's it. Those would be the 2 questions I ask myself sometimes, because I want my students to be as effective as possible. [02 A-PRÉ Ens2 Ho]

Oh my God! How do you tie it all together? How do you make it clear to the child? I'm a first-grade teacher, so I work with 6–7-year-olds. It would have to be clear, adapted to them, adapted to all the styles of learners I have in the classroom. That would be it. [04 A-PRÉ Ens1 Fe]

After the teacher support:

It was a very concrete project, where we worked directly on a classroom project, and it made us go deeper, asking questions we might not necessarily have asked ourselves before. How do we integrate cross-disciplinary skills? Do we have a primer? Do we have prior knowledge? Sometimes, we'll jump ahead a bit and explain the project to you, and then we'll start the research. [...] there's the oral aspect, which is very, very, very important, which we add to our projects, but the whole planning part too, I think, we know how to do. In any case, I'll speak for myself, I've, I think, improved in that, in any case, I've, I've dwelt on elements that I didn't dwell on before. [08 B-POST Ens5 Ho]

Well, we worked a lot throughout the project, even, both me and the students, questioning each other, pronouncing their choices, explaining why they'd chosen this or that over another. I asked a lot of questions. [04 B-POST Ens1 Fe]

In her research, Butler [19] argues that getting teachers to plan, select and invent effective tasks and strategies requires not only meeting their needs, but also evolving their knowledge, beliefs, and conceptions, particularly to adapt to new reforms [17]. Planning therefore requires high-level thinking



and continuous questioning, which one participant mentions in terms of deep learning. The evolution of this self-questioning process can be verbalized and observed through the four variables of metacognitive knowledge: the individual's interests and values, the goals pursued, the demands of the task and the teaching strategies known by the individual [22]. The second teacher mentioned that she asked students many more questions. She seems to have modified her usual teaching strategies by giving her students more space. Could this new posture of student autonomy facilitate greater observation practices in the classroom?

5.4 Perceptions of Students' Oral Literacy Development

By giving students more autonomy, teachers can gain time to observe and support their students, as shown by several studies on the subject [36]. We therefore wanted to know whether teachers had had the opportunity to observe the evolution of oral literacy (justification) in their students before and after coaching.

Before teacher support:

But, once again, unlike in other subjects or other skills, I wouldn't be able to break down the aspects of speaking as much to say that this student is strong in this aspect of speaking, but less strong in that aspect of speaking. Unlike, for example, in French, where I know that such and such a student is very good at giving lots of great ideas, very creative, but makes lots of spelling mistakes or has difficulty putting in relationship markers, but his ideas are very good. So, when it comes to speaking, I wouldn't be able to dissect as much as that, because once again, speaking comes a bit out of the blue at the end of the project, all the students come in to give a one-and-a-half-minute talk, we do it in two periods and that's it. [08 A-PRÉ Ens5 Ho]

I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe we don't. Because we don't really take the time, really see what they can do. That's honest. It's something that often comes last because we think it's just an oral mark. [09 A-PRÉ Ens3 Fe]

After teacher support:

Then, the students, they're going to know a little more where they're going with this because I can't speak for all my students, but this may be the first time that, I may have the impression that this is the first time that we've put so much emphasis on an aspect to be taught, there, oral, practicing oral, practicing oral justification. [08 B-POST Ens5 Ho]

I think they still must learn. Although, we've worked a lot on justification and when I did the last assessment, I'd say that three quarters of my class had understood how to state their choice and how, in any case, we'd worked a lot: "I think that...", "I think so, because...", "for example...". Yes, for the most part, they had understood how to formulate it. [04 B-POST Ens1 Fe]

We gathered very little information about teachers' opportunities to observe oral literacy, apart from a few generalities. This is partly due to the limited time and tools available to them. In fact, during this research, teachers spent a great deal of time learning about project-based pedagogy. Very little attention was paid to oral literacy. What's more, to date, there is no grid enabling teachers to observe the development of oral literacy. As Granger [27] points out, it would have been desirable to anticipate students' communication difficulties or potential, and to create tools for noting them in advance.

6. Conclusion

At the end of the research, we can see that teachers' perceptions of oral literacy, the oral literacy integrated into the project, their self-questioning during planning and the evolution of oral literacy in their students evolved positively over the course of the coaching. However, our results also highlighted several obstacles. Before the coaching, teachers had a rather closed conception of project-based pedagogy, which did not allow students to make choices. It was necessary to bring this knowledge up to speed before tackling the oral component of literacy. As some of our teachers mentioned, it would have been important to start this kind of support at the beginning of the year, to give them time to plan long-term projects. Also, written plans are not common among teachers, whether experienced or novice. They are, however, necessary to facilitate reflection on subsequent practices [23] and to



establish long-term ownership [37]. However, many teachers are put off by them, and don't see the point. This is what we observed during our coaching. Our research also revealed several advantages, including a definite awareness of the need for a more open-ended project-based pedagogy, and the integration of literacy at different stages of the project, not just at the end. The concrete tools offered to teachers were appreciated by them. We also hope that the documents we developed with them as the research progressed will reassure them and encourage them to pursue projects integrating literacy into their classrooms independently.

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