

THE TREMPLIN DEC FOR ALLOPHONES AS A MEASURE OF INCLUSION AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION



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Given that schools are amongst the most effective means for integrating immigrants, colleges face a substantial challenge in making education accessible to these groups, especially in areas with higher levels of immigration. The issues involved relate directly to the college system's prime mission as a provider of higher education, a community, an engine for economic development, and a source of guidance.¹

Collège Montmorency developed a model that could benefit other institutions interested in implementing integration and inclusion measures for immigrant populations. This model also serves as an indicator of the educational and administrative constraints that can hinder the development of measures adapted to allophones interested in earning a college diploma, most often needed to enter the job market. Accepting immigrants in higher education entails a twofold challenge: helping students adapt to the host society and also adapting our learning situations and programs to a population with different needs than those of our student body.

In recent years, measures for integrating allophones into the college system have been somewhat overshadowed by the increasing number of students with disabilities who have special needs that we have endeavored to meet with some urgency. Yet a reflection on accessibility and on the academic success of allophones had already been launched, namely by the coordinators of *Centres d'aide en français* (CAF). One such example is the *Intercaf* event,² which brought together more than 80 CEGEP and university teachers on May 28-29, 2009 at Collège Ahuntsic under the theme *Entre immigrations et Premières Nations: des mesures d'aide aux élèves non francophones*.

At Collège Montmorency, difficulties integrating allophone populations have resurfaced in the French department, which is struggling with enormous challenges in integrating and assisting an ever-growing number of students for whom French isn't their mother tongue. In fact, CEGEP courses are their first contact with French in an educational setting. We need to recognize, first and foremost, that allophone integration is a linguistic issue. The major barrier to academic success is language, which is the main instrument used across all higher education programs. Although cultural and socio-economic dimensions can also contribute to major pitfalls for academic integration, insufficient proficiency with the language of instruction directly impacts both academic success and retention persistence, even for Francophone populations, irrespective of the academic subject studied.

When the French department at Collège Montmorency consulted the Academic Dean, a debate on measures to assist and help non-Francophones with the French language was sparked. This debate was expanded to a few other CEGEPs with similar concerns.³ As the process of reflection began to take shape, the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche, de la Science et de la Technologie (MESRST) issued its instructions for introducing the new *Tremplin DEC* educational option (code 081.06), which would replace orientation and integration sessions and, as the French title "springboard program" implies, would offer students a way to "integrate into or complement a program leading to the college diploma." This option, which was given new goals that reflected immigrant integration (MESRST, 2013a), motivated Collège Montmorency to develop and put in place a *Tremplin DEC* specially designed for allophones, which was to be first offered in the fall of 2014. Developing this option, which reflects our institution's values of openness and accessibility, has been an important priority for the administration. As a result, it has allocated the resources needed to carry the project out.

PEdagogical Challenges

It would be wrong to assume that the allophone students attending CEGEPs form a coherent and uniform whole. Indeed, CEGEPs with large numbers of immigrants in their student body can attest to the complexity involved in dealing with these groups. Early on, we were faced with the fact that no single measure, no matter how effective it was, could meet all of the integration needs of non-Francophone populations. Our first challenge, consequently, was to determine the target population for the *Tremplin DEC* for allophones. Given our organizational structure and in order to fill a significant regional need, we decided to gear the *Tremplin DEC* to recent immigrants to Quebec who had completed the Francization courses of the Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles (MICC), which are, in fact, also offered at Collège Montmorency.

¹ Fédération des cégeps. "Qu'est-ce qu'un cégep?", 2014 [www.fedecegeps.qc.ca/cegeps/qu-est-ce-qu-un-cegep/].

² The *Intercaf* is a yearly meeting for coordinators of French-language assistance centres in the college system and in a few universities.

³ On this subject, see: Stéphanie Carle. "Organisation de cours de mise à niveau en français pour les élèves allophones: pistes de réflexion." *Correspondance*, vol. 19, n° 1, 2013 [http://correspo.ccdmd.qc.ca/Corr19-1/8.html].



Our intent has been to develop an educational option that fosters continuity for immigrant students who are on a path to pursuing higher education. Francization courses aim to make students “able to communicate in French in situations of everyday life.”⁴ However, nothing could be further removed from everyday situations than higher education, where students must contend with a higher level of abstraction, specialized vocabulary, and situations where communication require advanced language skills. Although the French department’s teaching staff initially sought to facilitate allophone adaptation to general education courses, a strong need was felt to broaden the purpose of the *Tremplin DEC* by making it an academic stepping stone between Francization and higher education in French.

This connection between programs with different aims and criteria required us to examine the MICC’s *Échelle québécoise des niveaux de compétence en français des personnes immigrantes* (2011), on which Francization courses are based. This 12-level scale drastically altered our perception of the language proficiency level that we could set for admission into college, as well as our perception of the level that we could aim for in the program and in college education overall. Indeed, students interested in joining a professional body need to score at least 8 on the MICC scale of French knowledge by the end of their CEGEP careers, which is much lower than we had expected. As a result, we decided to accept students with a level of 6 in reading, writing, and oral interaction, with the aim of bringing them to level 7 by the end of the *Tremplin DEC* (see [Table 1](#) for a description of these levels). Pursuing regular CEGEP education, including French proficiency courses as well as general and specific education programs, means that allophone students will have to continue developing their French-language skills (as is also the case for Francophones) in order to reach level 8 with the help of additional assistance.

A new challenge arose while we were working according to this scale: the training of French teachers. The French department is trained to offer courses in French Language and Literature (601). No one at Collège Montmorency has been trained to teach French as a second language (FL2), except from the standpoint of literature and linguistics. In fact, none of the instructors in Francophone CEGEPs are assigned to teach French as a second language (602). Yet the greatest educational challenge for the *Tremplin DEC* is directly related to teaching FL2. Consequently, we had to make certain assumptions and accept a measure of uncertainty in developing a coherent and relevant option. We also had to create a professional development program in FL2 for teachers interested in teaching courses in the *Tremplin DEC* for allophones. This

program will be available during the years that the *Tremplin DEC* is being implemented.

Another challenge—this one from a standpoint of educational development—has been the scarcity of tools responding to the needs of students in the *Tremplin DEC* for allophones. Since our goal is to fill the need for the “academic-communication” component of the Francization process, we will need to come up with learning situations and scenarios adapted to the levels of students to allow them to develop their language skills and to achieve sufficient proficiency to be able to undertake and complete higher education. As Carle (2013) put it:

Going much further than grammar, language skills [according to the model of Lebrun and Boyer, 1987, cited in Moffet and Demalsy, 1994] can be broken down into three components: linguistic skill, textual skill and discursive skill. In other words, being proficient in a language means being able to apply the rules of the linguistic code, to organize ideas clearly and coherently, and to follow communicational norms consistent with the situation and the particularities of the type of discourse at hand” (Carle, 2013).

Accordingly, in a language-immersion context, the *Tremplin DEC* allows students to reach a skill level that would enable them to distinguish between the instructions and vocabulary specific to higher education—for example, the difference between the French equivalents for the words “explain,” “demonstrate,” “analyze,” “argue,” and “debate”—and to be able to approach extremely varied contexts of reading and writing, from scientific texts to poetry. The learning situations therein will also be an opportunity to address grammar and syntax. This is a vast agenda and a huge mission for the teaching staff in charge of creating an option that is completely different from our system’s existing offerings.

All of these observations led us to develop an educational option that would meet ministry objectives, as well as our own chosen objectives with regard to language proficiency. The option takes the form of an intensive 285-hour academic term, 180 hours of which are specifically devoted to practicing French, the language of instruction, for non-Franco-phone students. It consists of four courses:

⁴ Ministère de l’Immigration et des Communautés culturelles. “Apprendre le français au Québec. Approche pédagogique.” Gouvernement du Québec [www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/langue-francaise/apprendre-quebec/temps-complet/approche.html].



TABLE 1

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF LEVELS 6, 7 AND 8 IN THE MICC'S ÉCHELLE QUÉBÉCOISE DES NIVEAUX DE COMPÉTENCE EN FRANÇAIS DES PERSONNES IMMIGRANTES DU MICC (2011)

Progression of general descriptions	Level 6 (level for admission to the <i>Tremplin DEC</i>)	Level 7 (level targeted on completion of the <i>Tremplin DEC</i>)	Level 8 (level targeted on completion of college education)
ORAL INTERACTION: In a predictable or partly predictable situation...	On concrete topics related to ordinary needs in everyday life: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the contents of conversations or basic discourse • Participates or makes informal presentations 	On concrete topics related to ordinary needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the contents of conversations or other forms of speech in standard French at a normal pace • Communicates autonomously 	On concrete topics or certain general-interest subjects related to ordinary needs or needs of specific groups of people: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the contents of conversations or other discourse in standard French at a normal pace and without help • Communicates autonomously
WRITTEN COMPREHENSION	Grasps the gist of texts at least one page in length that are composed of familiar contents and contexts but which include a few complex sentences and a few unusual words.	Grasps the gist of general texts that are presented and organized in such a way as to facilitate reading or comprehension, despite the presence of complex sentences, unusual words, or a few implied ideas.	Fully understands general texts several pages in length that are presented and organized in such a way as to facilitate reading or comprehension, despite the presence of complex sentences, unusual words, implied ideas, and a few ambiguities or abstractions.
WRITTEN PRODUCTION	Can compose a short, generally structured text that is organized into paragraphs composed of simple or complex sentences, albeit with many errors.	Can compose a basic formal text in order to convey occasionally complex messages to various recipients, albeit with a few errors or mistakes.	Can compose a formal text that complies with the basic requirements of various settings (school or work), albeit with a few grammatical or spelling problems.

Français pour les allophones 1 (601-015-50)

90 hours devoted to learning grammar based on short literary texts, as well as to learning language appropriate for higher education.

Français pour les allophones 2 (601-016-50)

90 hours primarily focused on applying grammatical concepts in oral-communication situations and in varied disciplinary contexts.

Pratiques culturelles québécoises (601-Y13-MO)

60 hours devoted to integrating into Quebec culture and developing work methods that are well suited to college education.

La société québécoise (387-Y13-MO)

45 hours devoted to integrating into Quebec society and, more specifically, to learning about Quebec's major public institutions and school system.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

A number of administrative challenges were encountered. Developing the *Tremplin DEC* for allophones was a challenge for several departments that needed to adapt, to cooperate, to

rally around a common goal, and to adopt a problem-solving approach in order to make the program a reality. Since the *Tremplin* is not a standard college program but is intended for a non-traditional student population at our institution, and because our practices and systems are not adapted to this type of situation, a great deal of creativity was needed to develop this semester of language-immersion instruction. The administrative management of the *Tremplin* was perhaps one of the aspects that we had underestimated the most.

Since the issue of student admissions and classification came up early on in the planning stage, the *Service de l'encadrement scolaire* (guidance department) in charge of admissions was involved from the outset. While the teaching team worked on educational matters, the guidance team tackled admissions-related issues. These issues soon sparked a debate about accessibility and the need to develop an option that would address the specific needs of allophones. The issue of classification was the first to arise: How to test the candidate's language proficiency? It seemed important to clearly define "allophones"—for both educational and administrative purposes—and to decide on how we would identify them amongst the large number of applications for admission. The ministry



funding allocated for recognized French-as-a-second-language programs allowed us to grant limited access to the *Tremplin DEC* for allophone students who had completed secondary school outside of Quebec (MESRST, 2013b) and who met the general conditions for admission at the college level.

We then considered various placement tests we could use. The idea of writing a new one was fairly quickly dismissed due to a lack of resources. The tests considered were the *Test de français international* (TFI),⁵ tests used in other CEGEPs, and a test currently being developed by the *Centre collégial de développement de matériel didactique* (CCDMD). After having decided to accept students who had completed Francization courses, we chose to use the MICC transcript obtained on completion of these courses, which gives a clear indication of levels achieved in reading, writing, and oral interaction. Our choice is temporary, as we hope to use a French-as-a-second-language placement test that the CCDMD will be providing to the college system in the near future. For the first year of implementation, we deemed that the MICC transcript would be adequate, even if it limited *Tremplin DEC* access to students who had completed Francization at a college, at certain universities, or at a few community organizations. Because school boards have not yet adopted the MICC program and their course evaluations differ, students who have taken their Francization courses in secondary schools are not eligible for the time being.

All of these reflections led us to develop an educational option that would meet ministry objectives, as well as our own chosen objectives with regard to language proficiency.

Given that the targeted student population has not studied in Quebec, the degree of complexity of admission files also represented a challenge: a substantial number of immigrants already have higher-education diplomas whose recognition remains problematic. This situation often brings strong students to our institutions. Timeframes for obtaining a comparative assessment of education outside Quebec are generally extensive when relying on the MICC. Since we are required to request this assessment, for admission purposes, we have turned to the *Service régional d'admission du Montréal métropolitain* (SRAM), which offers the same assessment services in a shorter delay.

Another dimension that raised challenges for our institution's administration was promotion of the program. With the *Tremplin DEC*, we might succeed in establishing an outstanding option, yet if our targeted population did not know about it, we would be unable to get the students needed to form a

group. We were familiar with the potential for recruitment following a few meetings with the Francization coordinators at our college, but the *Service des communications et des affaires institutionnelles* had neither the tools, nor the network to reach out to this population. Working hand in hand with the *Service de la formation continue et des services aux entreprises*, we chose a direct promotional approach aimed at immigrants who had completed or would be completing three Francization courses within the last year and a half. A section of the college website⁶ was also developed, along with a telephone hotline and an email address, to guide potential students through the SRAM admissions process. We had to adapt our tools to a student population for whom language itself was the main barrier to admission. These tools were designed to be clear, simple, and concise, in spite of the constraints associated with presenting the nuances of admission requirements.

We may have also underestimated the complexity of this dimension in our timeline for developing the *Tremplin DEC*. That explains why we had to abandon the idea of introducing the option during the first round of the SRAM; it was launched in the second round, so that we would have the time to establish an admissions and promotional framework. Our current outlook suggests that we will be taking in a group of 30 students in the fall, but we must also contend with some uncertainty, as the *Tremplin DEC* is intended for a student population that we are only beginning to get to know as we continue our efforts to put a program into place.

What remains is to develop support measures to help these students once they have completed the Francization semester and are taking various regular courses with Francophone groups, including the *Renforcement en français, langue d'enseignement* development course. Together with the *Service d'aide à l'apprentissage* and the CAF, the teaching staff is currently considering a variety of approaches in order to support allophone students once they join the ranks of our regular student population, including individual assistance, study groups, and a specialized CAF.

CONCLUSION

Each of the steps involved in developing the *Tremplin DEC* for allophones, from design to implementation, represented a genuine challenge for an institution such as our Collège.

⁵ For more information about the test, visit [<http://www.etscanada.ca/fr/tfi/>].

⁶ The website can be accessed at [<http://beta.cmontmorency.qc.ca/programmes/tremplin-dec-pour-allophones>].



Unlike standard education programs with their familiar and well-controlled processes, this option required collaboration that brings together different and complementary kinds of expertise that must be channeled toward a common objective. From an organizational point of view, each and every step required planning adjustments in order to solve the problems that emerged up along the way.

In concrete terms, the *Tremplin DEC* has revealed certain challenges related to inclusion and access, which would appear to indicate that the rigid structure of a large organization such as Montmorency can be an obstacle in itself. When we are faced with populations with particular needs our institution's capacity to adapt becomes a critical issue. Our willingness to propose solutions, whether pedagogical or administrative in nature, is what allowed the project to move forward. It is clear that a single inclusion measure cannot meet all needs. We need to focus our efforts in order to effectively reach a portion of the targeted population, in our case, immigrant populations who have completed Francization courses.

Over time, we have gained greater knowledge and insight into the integration-related obstacles that we initially underestimated. CEGEPs interested in developing a *Tremplin DEC* for allophones will need to weigh their administration's and teaching staff's openness and degree of motivation, because inclusion is also a challenge in terms of organizational adaptation to a population with particular needs.

To avoid establishing a system that deals with allophones on a case-by-case basis—which would represent a form of exclusion—it is important to put in place measures that will promote integration by modelling the rules already prevailing in our institutions. ●

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