French-speaking students’ academic experiences at a private provider of higher education offering foundation programmes

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Abstract
The academic experiences of French-speaking immigrant students involve a negotiation of the French language with the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Utilising Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), case study, observation, document analysis and a narrative inquiry, this research set out to explore the academic experiences of French-speaking students at a private provider of higher education offering foundation programmes as a route to mainstream degree programmes. It was found that socio-cultural factors played vital roles in the survival of French-speaking students at the academic institution. South African students spoke Sotho and Zulu both within and outside of the lecture rooms, a scenario which undermined the capacity of French-speaking students to adapt academically and socio-culturally to the academic institution. Unfriendliness on the part of South African students and introversion (an inherent character trait) along with the incongruous posture of the French-speaking students in terms of their incessant use of the French language challenged their academic survival.

Keywords: communities of practice, legitimate peripheral participation, sense of belonging, socio-cultural experience

INTRODUCTION
Entry requirements to South African public universities remain stringent and uncompromising. It is assumed that students who demonstrate compliance with the set curriculum at secondary school exit level via the matriculation examination are capable of surviving the academic rigours of tertiary education. Consequently, they are admitted directly to mainstream degree programmes without first having to negotiate the foundation programme route (Fraser and Killen 2003, 254). Fraser and Killen (2003) provide insight into the academic standard required for access to higher education after secondary education. However, the intellectual puzzle pertains to whether the students will succeed at tertiary level. This discussion is of
immense importance because the transitions that students must make in moving from secondary school to tertiary institution are enormous tasks that deserve consideration (Goos, Gannaway and Hughes 2011, 105). This issue becomes an intellectual puzzle when foreign non-English speakers are considered for admission to higher education institutions (HEIs).

South Africa has, in recent years, seen an influx of immigrant students from French-speaking countries enrolling with private providers of higher education. Access to HEIs seems to be different for students from Francophone (French-speaking) countries when compared to the experiences of students from other countries. Many of them arrive in South Africa with the notion of studying in English but, in the case of most South African public universities, they are often denied access to degree programmes. Their major hope of traversing higher education seems to be through taking the foundation programme or pre-degree programme route until they are certified to be academically fit to move into the mainstream degree programmes. Disparities between South African curricula and those in their home countries seem to predispose them to such circumstances. The language barrier also seems to be a limitation. In pursuance of this study, we sought answers to the following questions:

• What are the academic experiences of French-speaking students at a private provider of higher education?
• What are the opportunities and challenges confronting such students at the identified private provider of higher education?
• How effective is the foundation programme at addressing the gaps in the knowledge of French-speaking students?

The argument is made as follows: Firstly, we outline succinct contextual information on immigrant students in higher education to pinpoint the identified scholarly puzzle. Secondly, we explore the literature to decipher the findings available from the key arguments on foundation programmes. Thirdly, we conduct a brief analysis of the theoretical framework in an attempt to comprehend the study. Fourthly, the emergent findings are offered, explored and expounded in pursuance of our objective of unravelling the journey of French-speaking students to higher education. Furthermore, we explore the challenges involved, and how they are supported, in the midst of a socio-culturally diverse academic environment. Fifthly, we provide a comparative discussion of findings in the literature in order to identify the points of convergence and divergence in the data obtained from the study.

**BACKGROUND CONTEXT**

The context of the study was confined to a private provider of higher education in the Gauteng province of South Africa. At the study site, there were many black immigrant students in the midst of a socio-culturally diverse milieu. The student population
comprised indigenous South Africans, immigrant students from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Gabon and the Republic of Benin, to mention but a few.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

The educational experiences of immigrant students are a reflection of their academic achievements and experiences negotiated at school. According to Qin, Way and Rana (2008), immigrant students are likely to succeed at school in the foreign societies in which they find themselves. Pearce and Lin (2007, 20), whose research focus was on Chinese-American tertiary student success, indicate that both social and cultural factors play an important role in academic achievement and attainment. Pearce and Lin (2007) also recognise parental educational accomplishment; parental educational anticipation; parental participation; and method of parenting as key components of cultural capital. It is also noted that cultural capital plays an important role in student achievement (Pearce and Lin 2007, 33). The high educational achievement of Chinese-Americans is entrenched in their home-cultivated culture rather than through assimilation into the dominant culture (Pearce and Lin 2007, 33). Chow (2006) refers to sociocultural factors which subject immigrant students to sending and receiving signals that describe their acquiescence or non-acquiescence with the dictates of challenges that they negotiate in the foreign culture.

Gonzalez (2002, 193), in a study of campus culture and the experiences of Chicano students in a predominantly white university, argues that culture in an academic institution is created communally by those attending that institution. This assertion about culture probably arises from observation of the enormous variety of cultural tenets displayed by indigenous and immigrant students – and their co-existence within the same educational institution, with language being the dominant tool of expression (Chow 2006; Yeh et al 2008). Consequently, it could imply that when immigrant students have the abovementioned characteristics at their disposal, they are bound to experience life satisfaction and a sense of belonging to the academic institution, as suggested by Chow (2007). Life satisfaction and sense of belonging are therefore indices of academic identity (Chow 2007). These issues present a pedestal from which to explore the sense of belonging and satisfaction with life on campus among French-speaking students enrolled with the private provider of higher education identified for the current study.

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AT TERTIARY LEVEL VIA THE FOUNDATION PHASE

Winter and Dismore (2010, 266) argue that presenting bridging modules from one faculty to the other could facilitate academic support for all students. By contrast, the foundation phase initiative was instituted to bridge the gap between secondary-level curricula and the expectations of HEIs. Bridging programmes appear to be
more important to French-speaking students for linguistic and socio-cultural reasons (language, acculturation and identity). The French-speaking students referred to in the study came from French-speaking backgrounds to an English-speaking background. This challenge was compounded by the use of South Africa’s 11 official languages over and above the world of other African languages brought to the academic institution by its non-English speaking foreign students. Winter and Dismore argue that bridging programmes offer the possibility to address deficiencies in knowledge as well as concerns of ‘workload and assessment’ (2010, 266). Going by Chow’s (2006) description of educational and socio-cultural experiences, a survey of the literature was conducted to explore the dynamics of immigrants in another culture. These dynamics involve using educational and socio-cultural experiences as a lens to locate the situation at hand. The current study is presented with an undertone of socio-cultural experiences because, as found by Adebanji (2010), academic experiences hinge on a number of socio-cultural factors – notably, educational experiences are coloured by a number of socio-cultural experiences that confront immigrant students in their adopted societies.

**SOCIOCULTURAL EXPERIENCES**

Socio-cultural experiences have an impact on the academic performance of immigrant students (Chow 2006; Yeh et al 2008). According to Larson and Marsh (2005, 339), the term ‘socio-cultural’ is the consciousness of experiences negotiated by students with respect to their past. It is the notion that each student is the aftermath of a societal, ethnic, assertive and chronological interplay of forces prevalent at a particular time in a particular place. In view of this definition, an exploration of the past and present events negotiated by French-speaking students was undertaken. In doing this, Chow’s (2006) consideration of socio-cultural experience was intertwined with Larson and Marsh’s (2005) definition to evolve an argument in terms of the linguistic and acculturative perspectives of their existence in matters of identity negotiation. Effective communication among people of diverse cultures entails negotiation of meaning, and this is achieved through the use of a language of communication (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordon and Street 2001). Deficiencies in academic knowledge may arise from linguistic incompetence among non-English speakers. A look at the detrimental features of linguistic incompetence may be vital as it could lead to an inability among French-speaking students to engage in self-regulated learning and to the consequence of academic dropout (Tinto 1975, 1993). Engagement of students with the academic environment seems to be hinged on their interest, sense of belonging, motivation, the extent of communication and commitment to attending lectures (Woolley and Bowen 2007).

Severiens, Dam and Blom (2006, 29) contend that the knack of foreign students in terms of their ability to ask questions in class is indicative of their boldness in engaging in an academic institution. Engagement with the academic institution, which may be in terms of both the intended and hidden curricula, may be taken as an
avenue to restructure diminished levels of academic success, elevated levels of student weariness, isolation and high dropout (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2004). Saville-Troike (2003, 6), who focused on extending communicative concepts in the second language curriculum, presents an important argument. The argument points to the notion that any effort to learn the tenets of different cultures – as well as the customs, principles and attitudes of the new community – but without intermingling with the members of that new culture would make the learning of language become merely an academic routine. Such learning would therefore not produce the desired outcome of cultural negotiation. Interaction and integration in an academic institution are key facilitators of academic performance and diminished dropout (Tinto 1975, 1993). It has been reported that the issue of accents among non-English speaking students tends to make them conspicuous. This is a situation which causes segregation and alienation because accents tend to stratify the scope of interaction among students of dissimilar cultures (Aikhionbare 2007; Lave 1997).

The starting point of belonging to an academic institution is entrenched in the willingness of non-English speakers to go out of their way to associate with students of dissimilar cultures (Dika and Singh 2002). An extension of this capacity to relate with others may ensue when they develop a rapport with their lecturers in a dimension that facilitates freedom to ask questions in class (Severiens, Dam and Blom 2006). Good student-lecturer relationships have been found to enhance the extent of belonging of students to an academic institution (Whannell et al 2010). Non-English speakers have been found to feel persistently unsustained (Gibson, Gandara and Koyama 2004; Noguera and Wing 2006). However, when non-English speakers arrive in their host societies and quickly brazen up, they may be doing so because they are aware that attaining a higher education will be vital to their upward mobility (Cole and Omari 2003; Delgado-Gaitan 1994). The extent of the sense of belonging that non-English speakers have with regard to a particular academic domain is a predictor of their level of acculturation (Yeh et al 2008). Thus, an exploration of the acculturation of non-English speakers is vital because it assists in predicting their identity and their acceptance of their newly adopted domains.

Acculturation unveils the manner in which immigrant students settle for negotiating the challenges and opportunities at their disposal (Berry 1995; LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993; Mouw and Xie 1999; Yeh and Inose 2003). Acculturation is a depiction of how people negotiate their belonging within a specific socio-cultural context. Acculturation of foreign students occurs when they are connected to one or more cultures than the others in the society of sojourn. This interplay of cultural forces is made manifest when individuals express their identities to show off their extent of connections to ethnic inclinations (Berry 1995; LaFromboise et al 1993). The route to acculturation involves comprehending and embracing the prevalent cultures and traditions of the embraced society. The acceptance of an academic environment by students is regarded as a predictor of their incorporation into the academic institution. The acceptance of students in terms of the culture of the academic environment is therefore conceptualised as academic acculturation.
Acculturation is more than simply the route to learning new customs and tenets, and the embracing of prominent model groups of mainstream society. It includes the capacity of immigrants to outgrow their home-grown culture and to assimilate a novel culture. Consequently, exchange of ideas is fundamental to the course of acculturation. Verbal communication is the primary avenue of successful transaction of such ideas, while communication in general is a vital device for interaction and for recovering information on a daily basis (Yeh et al 2008, 784). The extent of a student’s acculturation is usually a pointer to the degree of that student’s incorporation into the academic campus.

The mediation of identity is intricately linked to acculturation (Adebanji 2010; Yeh et al 2008). When identity is negotiated among immigrants, hybrid identities are formed in order to show the acceptance and negotiation of their home-grown cultures with the cultural tenets of conventional society (Vandeyar 2008). McCaslin’s (2009, 138) perspective of identity is the habit of questioning who an individual actually is, that is, a perpetual scenario that evolves in the background of self-, societal- and ethnic confrontations. Identity is partially premised on what people engage in; their reasons for engaging in those events; as well as a mixture of personal and group ascription of meaning to what is being practiced, including ascription of meaning to upcoming events. Consciousness of ethnic origin, racial background or diversity appears to be more established among immigrant or suppressed groups than among people originally living in a community (Norton 2000; Reay, David and Ball 2005). Peirce (2000, 5) postulates that identity involves the way an individual comprehends his or her association with others; how that association is built over time; as well as how the opportunities for the future are construed. Drawing on Peirce (2000, 5), an exploration of how French-speaking students perceive opportunities in the new society becomes plausible. Van Rooy (2006, 443) is of the opinion that verbal communication is vital in the negotiation of identity. Tollefson (1991, 23) believes that students who wish to absorb another culture – and who associate with members of the target language neighbourhood – are usually more successful than students who are anxious about maintaining their uniqueness.

The aforementioned dynamics of experiences negotiated within the academic institution in terms of linguistic mediation, acculturation to the mainstream and campus environments, sense of belonging and identity fabrication, unswervingly impact the socio-cultural capabilities of immigrant students. They all operate either to uphold or contravene the quintessence of their existence as students in an unusual cultural and academic milieu.

THEORETICAL ANCHORAGE: LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

In the study, we used the theoretical foundations of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) (Lave and Wenger 1991) to unravel the academic experiences of French-speaking students enrolled at a private provider of higher education. This was achieved by using the sociocultural lens in consonance with the LPP model.
LPP is a symbol of being permitted to interact with more knowledgeable others in an Academic Community of Practice (ACoP). Otten (2009) proposes that the environment of a tertiary education institution be conceptualised as an ACoP, where new entrants to the community are seen as beginners. The people who have been actively involved in learning and sharing knowledge within the community are viewed as custodians of the learning curriculum, in other words, as experts. Experts are perceived as participants who have taken the centripetal advancement into the core of learning activities within the community (Lave and Wenger 1991). It is customary for actors or participants within the community to shift their positions and perceptions. Shifting positions are significant characteristics of participants’ learning trajectories, mediation of identities and perceptions of association within the community (Lave and Wenger 1991, 36).

LPP is more about being involved in communal and academic endeavours with which participants in the community engage (Serpell 2007, 26). According to Merriam, Courtenay and Baumgartner (2003, 172), LPP describes how beginners in a community grow into complete community members. It is the progression of changing participation and how the members in the community are identified (Serpell 2007, 26). In this context, French-speaking students entering the pre-degree programme at the private provider of tertiary education examined in the study are conceptualised as novices since they are new to the existing learning curriculum at the academic institution. The idea of French-speaking students being referred to as novices may not be in terms of academic engagement only, but also in terms of other experiences that are negotiated at the campus (eg, having to learn the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), and the need to acculturate and identify with the academic institution).

The explored milieu in the study involved monitoring the trajectory of French-speaking students’ academic and sociocultural experiences in higher education from the pre-degree to the main degree programmes. This may have predicted the phenomena involving identity shifts if they participated fully in higher education. If they did participate fully, then a shift in their identity was likely to have occurred via the course of engagement with well-informed participants. Examples include South African students and lecturers at the academic institution. The French-speaking students – starting from a point at the periphery of the community (pre-degree programme) – are conceptualised to change their positions and perceptions in order to be able to negotiate their learning trajectories with experts in the community (eg, lecturers and tutors). By so doing, they build their individuality and path of association with more knowledgeable others (Lave and Wenger 1991, 36). The prominent actors of concern in this ACoP were the stakeholders coming into direct contact with the French-speaking students. The extent of participation and engagement among the French-speaking students with stakeholders was seen to depend on how conscientiously they were able to individually recognise, characterise and construct a picture of previous events that they had negotiated in their lives with what they confronted at the academic institution.
Participation among the French-speaking students in an ACoP may comprise all categories of associations. These may involve conflict and harmony, intimacy and politics, competition and cooperation (Wenger 1998, 56). Therefore, as the French-speaking students approach the ACoP, it is conceptualised that they do so with the understanding that they are in possession of something to share, gain or lose. The scenario is graphically illustrated in Figure 1.

At point A, French-speaking students are conceptualised as approaching the private provider of higher education with their social and cultural capital. They move on to negotiating their ethnic and social capital with the culture of the academic institution via the learning of the LoLT. (The culture of the academic institution is taken to comprise the academic and hidden curricula.) As the French-speaking students move centripetally to deeper participation at point B, it is conceptualised that they have traded their ethnic culture a little more than was the case when they approached the periphery of the academic institution as novices (from point A to B). With experience and time, they are conceptualised as having attained full participation (see point C). The LPP concept seems to be appropriate for analysing the academic and socio-cultural experiences of immigrant students in the tertiary institution. This could be because the moment the tenacity of students is geared towards the development of their sense of belonging to the academic institution via interaction with stakeholders, ‘they are more likely to apply themselves to academic effort and participate actively in instruction’ (Cummins 1996, 2). The emergent learning that ensues is the energy that produces further scholastic effort (Cummins 1996).
RESEARCH APPROACH

The meta-theoretical paradigm employed in the research study was the interpretive paradigm within the constructivist terrain. The methodological model engaged a qualitative case study strategy and a narrative enquiry. The data collection was a blend of semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis and field notes. The content analysis approach was used to analyse the study, using the adapted model of Elo and Kyngas (2008). A private provider of tertiary education located within the Johannesburg area in South Africa served as the research study site. French-speaking students were selected in the following order: two students at pre-degree level (Felicia and Bradley); one student at first-year degree level (Belinda); one student at second-year degree level (Ornella); and two students at third-year degree level (Candy and Amanda). The representatives of the private provider of higher education included the manager of foundation and academic support programmes (Ms Hendrick), the Dean of the Information Technology faculty (Ms Du Toit) and the French-speaking student advisor (Ms Rosette). Participant observation was done for a period of one-and-half years. The interviews were conducted in 2012; spanned between 30 and 60 minutes; and were video recorded and transcribed verbatim to enable analysis of the obtained data.

FINDINGS: INTERACTION WITH CULTURAL TENETS AT THE PRIVATE PROVIDER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The French-speaking students studied had faced linguistic challenges at the pre-degree level. These challenges diminished, however, as they interacted with more knowledgeable others in the ACoP. The gateway to novel cultures is through comprehension of the mainstream language (Chow 2006; Wang and Phillion 2007; Yeh et al 2008). The LoLT was the means of both academic and social transaction at the school because several African languages were spoken by members of the different cultures represented on campus. English, therefore, was the unifying language among the students. The academic survival of French-speaking students depended on their proficiency in the LoLT and on a number of visible and invisible forces at work in the ACoP. Their academic experience was also enhanced through parental participation as evidenced by Bradley in this statement:

My parents decided that I should come to a developed country to pursue my studies. Before I came here, I went to Ghana, and spent about two months to learn English.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN RESPECT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The findings were analysed by contemplating the research questions of the study. This gave the precise answers to the questions posed.

What are the academic experiences of French-speaking students at
the private provider of higher education?

The experience of Ornella (female), a second-year French-speaking student from Gabon, is used to initiate discussion on the academic experiences of French-speaking students. She expressed her concerns regarding the linguistic orientation of South African students. She was of the opinion that, when South African students spoke their mother tongues, her capability to interact and integrate into the academic system was marginalised. This practice, found to operate among South African students, seemed to delay the transition of French-speaking students from French to English. This was taken as a cogent reason for diminished academic performance among French-speaking students, especially at the entry level. Ornella expressed her concerns (sighing):

South African students only speak Zulu and Sotho, their mother tongue in class. So it is not fair to speak another language that I don’t understand. It is not fair because I would prefer them to speak in English so that I can hear and learn from what they are saying.

Similarly, the Dean of the IT Faculty, Ms Du Toit, reiterated the implication of linguistic incompetence among French-speaking students. She commented (sighing):

They sometimes fail Business English and do it two or three times before they can pass. Sometimes they lose their cum laude or magna cum laude because of the English that they fail or repeat.

Therefore, an academic experience of French-speaking students was delayed transition from French to English as a result of the incessant use of Zulu and Sotho languages within the academic campus. Zulu and Sotho are prominent South African indigenous languages and the experience of their being spoken proved to be a challenge to the French-speaking students in the study. In addition, South African students were experienced as being unfriendly. In Ornella’s words:

After my bachelor’s and honours degrees I will go back to Gabon. I like South Africa, not South Africans. I like the country and the people, but there are some black people who are not friendly.

A demonstration of an inherent character trait was exhibited by Felicia. She preferred to go secretly to her lecturers to clarify academic issues instead of asking questions during lecture periods. This was a demonstration of introversion, a situation which seemed to marginalise her academic potential and the boldness she would have needed to interact with classmates:

Whenever I don’t understand a concept, I prefer asking the lecturer after the class,
or my friend[s] if they understand, because I am shy. I don’t like to talk where there are many people. I am afraid because other students will laugh when I am speaking English.

On the other hand, Bradley was an extrovert. He broke barriers to make friends with students who could speak English:

I did have problems with English but now I am trying to do my best. I engage with South Africans and other friends to speak English. If you’re not from an English-speaking country and you always keep quiet it would not help. You have to read English books.

The academic experiences of French-speaking students were dictated by character traits of introversion and extroversion and these seemed to impact on their academic survival. The challenges posed by accents were revealed by Bradley who had recently begun the pre-degree programme. He mentioned the unfamiliar accent of a white South African lecturer. He could not initially adjust to how the white lecturer spoke. However, within a month he had adjusted to how she pronounced words. Bradley expressed his concerns as follows:

I have a white lecturer, teaching student skills. At the beginning I couldn’t hear what she was saying, because she has a way of pronouncing words. It took me about one month to understand her accent. I always looked at the way she was pronouncing the words by looking at her mouth, but today I don’t have that problem anymore.

It is posited that problems with accents were a prominent academic experience of French-speaking students because it seemed to compromise their learning potential. Amanda pointed to an important issue which seemed to delay her transition from French to English, that is, indulgence among her fellow French-speaking students in the incessant use of the French language:

One bad habit that I picked up is to express myself in French. Before, when I was with French-speaking students, I spoke in English. Now, I speak French more often, except when there are other students who do not understand French.

It is argued that linguistic inconsistency was an academic experience common to a number of French-speaking students at the private provider of higher education because French-speaking students indulged in the frequent use of the French language. This inconsistency was noticed everywhere on campus as French-speaking students sat with their peers and spoke relentlessly in French.

How effective is the foundation programme at addressing the gaps in knowledge of French-speaking students at the private provider of higher education?
The French-speaking student advisor made an outstanding statement which pointed to the support received by French-speaking students at the private provider of higher education. She attributed the eventual stability of French-speaking students at the academic institution to the support they received from the student advisory unit (SAU). The SAU was initiated to source and cater for foreign students attending the tertiary institution. Ms Rosette argued:

Each student here has got a student advisor attached to him/her, which means that we act like liaison between the parent, students, lecturers and the academic institution. We advise them to have English-speaking friends, so that they can learn very fast.

French-speaking student advisors liaised with the parents of French-speaking students and performed parental roles. French-speaking students visited the French-speaking student advisors regularly and, given this opportunity to discuss their challenges, were made to feel at home. Ms Rosette spoke enthusiastically on the issue:

As a result of the fact that this institution is private, we do a kind of follow up on our students, which is totally different from what is available at public institutions.

The French-speaking student advisors played an indirect role which helped to focus the French-speaking students on learning. This interaction was effectively an academic experience because it gave the students a sense of commitment to their studies as they were monitored by the French-speaking student advisors.

Ms du Toit pointed to the success of the pre-degree programme. She affirmed that the programme was laudable and commented with exhilaration:

I have a few examples of foreign students that are doing very well. If you look at the wall, there are pictures of a few students from pre-degree. We entered them into a Microsoft competition and they won a prize at the competition. They all started as pre-degree students and English is not their first language. This year, our top graduate was a pre-degree student and he achieved magna cum laude.

French-speaking students enjoyed the small class-sizes at the provider of higher education. This was an advantage to them because they had direct contact with lecturers in terms of tutoring, mentoring and consultation. Ms Rosette spoke on the advantages of small class-sizes:

The students are not many in class, so the lecturers have a one-on-one contact with the students. French-speaking students’ academic needs are addressed during consultation with tutors and lecturers.
What are the opportunities and challenges confronting French-speaking students at the private provider of higher education?

According to the manager of the pre-degree programme, Ms Hendrick, the main opportunity enjoyed by the French-speaking students was in terms of small class-sizes. This meant that they were given personalised attention by their lecturers and tutors. In Ms Hendrick’s ecstatic words:

We do try and keep classes smaller, particularly in lectures and tutorials, to create a sense of students not being lost in a crowd. It is much easier for a lecturer to get to know a student in a group of 60 than in a group of 600 and so we’ve tried to tap into that in terms of connectedness.

French-speaking student advisors were engaged in a long-standing struggle targeted at the retention of those French-speaking students who had trouble meeting their commitments in terms of high school fees, as well as with the exclusion of fee defaulters from tuition. Exclusion from tuition was seen to be undermining the academic potential of the French-speaking students because their access to tuition was denied whenever they could not keep up with monthly payment of fees. Ms Rosette, however, reiterated the issue of exclusion from classes:

Students do not gain access to the school when they owe fees. Not having access to the school affects their academic work. The school authority has to find another way of recovering fees instead of excluding fee defaulters from tuition.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

We refer to the finding of Qin et al (2008) that Chinese-American immigrant students attained academic achievement against all odds, ranging from harassment and discrimination to acts of bullying against them in the American society. The Chinese-American students’ achievement was entrenched in their ethnic culture and in the goals that they set for the future. After going through education in the American system, they had a premonition that they would achieve upper class mobility. The survival of French-speaking students at the private provider of higher education depended on their capability to learn the LoLT. For the French-speaking students, learning the LoLT was the gateway into the academic culture of the private provider of higher education. At the pre-degree level, the French-speaking students gained access to the academic institution’s cultural tenets via the requirement to learn the LoLT. They achieved this by negotiating some agreement between their home-grown academic culture and the culture of the academic institution they found themselves in. Even though they had gone through a phase of superficial linguistic metamorphosis in learning the LoLT at designated schools which taught them the use of English, at the private provider of higher education they had to register for a bridging English module aimed at further addressing their linguistic concerns.

This practice, engendered by the private tertiary institution, is what Winter and
Dismore (2010, 266) refer to as presenting bridging modules from one faculty of an academic institution to the other. (The English bridging module was organised by the language department.) Winter and Dismore (2010) argue that this strategy could facilitate academic support for all students, and it did so at the private academic institution where the study was conducted. This claim was evidenced by the French-speaking students’ advancement from pre-degree to third-year degree level, and by improvements in their linguistic proficiency over a turnaround time of about four years. The current study agrees with the notion of Winter and Dismore (2010) that bridging modules could facilitate remedial actions directed against dropout in an academic institution. The French-speaking students came into the academic institution as Legitimate Peripheral Participants via the access granted to them by the academic institution at the foundation (pre-degree) phase. As they moved into the depth of academic and social culture at the private provider of higher education in a centripetal direction (Lave and Wenger 1991), they began to associate and interact with more knowledgeable others, thus learning the culture at the academic institution.

Learning seemed to have taken place as a result of an encounter between linguistic cultures (French and English). The two languages were in a state of constant juxtaposition and negotiation as the transition to the LoLT evolved. The longer French-speaking students stayed, interacted and learned, the more advanced they became in learning the cultural tenets of the academic institution. Through this process, academic and non-academic learning evolved. Despite this learning taking place, inconsistency in the use of English delayed their transition from French to English which, as the LoLT, was their gate pass to the academic institution. The students indulged in speaking French with their peers whenever they were together, instead of speaking English. The incessant use of Sotho and Zulu languages by indigenous South African students also seemed to marginalise their transition from French to English. This was because South African students did not constantly communicate with them in English. This attitude seemed to push French-speaking students away from South African students.

The study has revealed that the argument of Fraser and Killen (2003) – that students have to comply with conventional entry requirements before being admitted to mainstream degree programmes – was limiting in terms of not taking linguistically challenged students from other African countries into consideration. The pre-degree programme was thus found laudable in its addressing of the linguistic challenges of French-speaking students, because it gave them an additional period to adjust to the LoLT. This initiative seemed to anticipate the inclination of a number of students who were rejected by public universities by giving them another chance to display their academic competence. Thus, the study agrees with the finding of Goos et al (2011, 105) that the transitions that students must make in moving from secondary school to a tertiary institution are enormous tasks that deserve consideration. The consideration as far as French-speaking students was concerned involved focusing on their linguistic adjustment mechanism – something which had threatened their academic survival.
The study further agrees with Pearce and Lin (2007) that social and cultural capitals affect the academic performance of immigrant students. The socio-cultural capital brought by the French-speaking students into the academic institution was the French language. They learnt English in addition to their existing French language. Learning the LoLT became their point of linguistic adjustment. Learning the LoLT was vital for their compliance with academic tenets within the school. The study also agrees with Yeh et al (2008, 784) that acculturation not only entails imbibi salient information in the adopted society, but involves the ability of immigrants to outgrow their home-grown culture in order to embrace another culture. French-speaking students approached the periphery of the academic institution with their full linguistic capital (French) but, in addition, had to take on the learning of English which was vital for attaining academic acculturation. Academic acculturation was vital for focusing and excelling academically. The French-speaking students had academic identity because they had academic acculturation. Acculturation and identity are intricately connected as observed in the literature (Adebanji 2010; Vandeyar 2010; Yeh et al 2008). The study supports the research of Van Rooy (2006, 443) that verbal communication is vital in the negotiation of identity. Language is a tool that enhances the fortitude of people to express their identity. In the case of the current study, French-speaking students were glued to the academic institution – a symbol of academic identity – by virtue of their tenacity in learning the LoLT to ultimately earn degrees. It is posited from the evidence at hand that language, academic acculturation and academic identity are vital considerations for the success of immigrant students at a tertiary institution.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Important findings in respect of the research questions are as follows:

1. Indigenous South African students spoke Sotho and Zulu within and outside the classrooms. This was implicated in delaying the transition of French-speaking students from French to English.

2. South African students at the private provider of higher education were unfriendly because of traces of xenophobia which seemed to have unnoticeably and sparingly infiltrated into the academic institution.

3. The inherent character traits of French-speaking students hindered a number of them from interacting and breaking the frontiers of introversion to relate with more knowledgeable others at the academic institution.

4. Some of the French-speaking students were initially uncomfortable with the issue of accents.

5. French-speaking students indulged in associating with fellow French-speaking
students instead of with other students who could have communicated with them in English.

6. French-speaking students had strong support from the SAU which assisted them in coping and in settling down to learn.

7. The pre-degree programme achieved the aim for which it was inaugurated.

8. French-speaking students were accommodated in small classes which gave them the opportunity to engage with lecturers and tutors.

The quest to comply with the trends of globalisation predisposed the French-speaking students in the study to be bilingually educated. A number of them were of the opinion that bilingualism could enhance their opportunity in the global market in terms of workplace relevance. South Africa appears to be the choice for a number of immigrants who seem to see the frontiers of this country as a gateway to the Western world. This observation disagrees with the finding in the literature that the borders of South Africa offer a comparative advantage for settlement. As suggested by Vandeyar (2011), South Africa presents itself as a terrain of opportunity for settlement. The study reiterates that the settlement of immigrant students at tertiary level, in the context of a private provider of higher education, is a transient and circumstantial scenario. However, a number of questions still need to be answered: Why would immigrant students continue to see South Africa as a transitional terrain? Does South Africa offer sufficient acceptance of immigrants after 18 years of freedom from apartheid? These are questions that have implications for the future of the South African educational system.

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