

Inclusionary Practices in French Immersion: A Need to Link Research to Practice

Renée Bourgoin

University of New Brunswick
bourgoin@unb.ca

Abstract

French immersion programs were introduced in Canada over forty years ago. Since then, questions have been raised regarding the suitability of French immersion for students with academic and learning difficulties. Research examining the suitability of French immersion for a wide range of learners is highlighted in this article, in order to make links between research and the inclusionary practices that are currently being promoted in French immersion programs. An analysis of the extent to which different Canadian jurisdictions address key concepts related to inclusion in French immersion, including accessibility and retention, is then presented. Current gaps in the ways in which inclusionary practices in French immersion are supported are described in the final sections of this article, with the hope of advancing the promotion of early French immersion as a fully inclusionary program option.

Introduction

French immersion programs are an integral part of Canada's educational landscape. Supported by over forty years of research, French immersion has become a viable and popular option for the 350,000 students currently enrolled in the program (Canadian Parents for French, 2010-2011). Regarded as an effective pedagogical approach to language learning, French immersion focuses on learning content such as social studies, math, and literacy through the medium of a second language. Due to increasing popularity, French immersion classrooms are welcoming a wide range of learners including students with learning difficulties.

"Today's French immersion classrooms are as diverse as those delivering other programs" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1). These classes include students whose first language is not English, students who are gifted, First Nations students, students of different socioeconomic status, and students with a wide range of difficulties, including students with learning disabilities, low levels of academic intelligences, and behavioral challenges. Despite considerable research to the contrary, questions remain over the suitability of immersion for at-risk students; that is, students with specific learning disabilities or students who may be at risk for academic or learning difficulties due to other learner-related factors (Genesee, 2007a).

Research supports the inclusion of a wide range of learners in French immersion programs. Studies examining the suitability of the program for learners with learning difficulties, for example, have consistently shown that being enrolled in French immersion poses no detrimental risk to students' learning (Bruck, 1978/79; Cummins, 1983; Genesee, 1992; 2007a; Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). The question this article is seeking to unpack is: How is this literature and research, explored in greater detail the first sections of this article, informing practice?

Students who face challenges in school often abstain from entering French immersion (Genesee, 1992). Educators, researchers, and other stakeholders are questioning the practical and ethical implications of these decisions. As Genesee and Jared (2008) explain:

Discouraging such students [at-risk learners] from immersion in the absence of empirical support for such a policy is questionable on ethical grounds, because it denies subgroups of learners access to employment-related skills that are important in a bilingual country. On the other hand, including such students calls for providing appropriate differentiated instruction and support services, which are often not provided at the moment. (p. 141)

Denying students access to French immersion, a publically funded program, is cause for concern. However, so is the apparent lack of appropriate support services for this program.

There are also concerns regarding French immersion's high attrition rates (Arnett & Fortune, 2004). Unfortunately, many students exit the early French immersion program due to academic difficulty (Bournot-Trites, 2008; Keep, 1993). When students who experience learning difficulties refrain from enrolling in, or transfer out of French immersion, inequalities between immersion and English classes are oftentimes created. These inequalities can lead to the French immersion program being categorized as elitist. It also prompts "a call to be made for the elimination or curtailing of immersion by those who have chosen the non-immersion option because they feel that the best students are being pulled into immersion leaving a weakened, inferior 'regular' program" (Genesee, 1992, p. 200).

Throughout this review, I will be examining to what extent do different provincial governments address issues relating to the accessibility of French immersion programs for students with learning or academic difficulties? What is being promoted in terms of inclusionary practices in French immersion to address attrition concerns? How closely related is the research examining the issues of suitability of French immersion for a wide range of learners to policy and practice?

Official documents from many Canadian Ministries of Education discuss issues relating to inclusion and immersion including accessibility to and retention in French immersion. Alberta Education (2007), for example, states:

Following the spirit of inclusion within our education system, removing a student from a stimulating program on the basis of his or her learning difficulties, corresponds with a lack of respect towards a person's educational rights. Current research shows that learning difficulties are not linked to a student's environment, but are rather the result of a difficulty processing information brought forth through general language usage, thus not caused by the second language. As such, removing students from the immersion program certainly will not help eliminate a child's difficulties and could even cause other difficulties such as adjusting to new surroundings. (p. 2)

This type of statement makes it clear that denying students' access to French immersion programs based on their learning difficulties infringes on their educational rights. Have other Canadian jurisdictions taken such a strong stance on the question of suitability of French analyzed immersion for students with academic or learning difficulties? To answer this question, immersion curricula and program guides from various Canadian jurisdictions were analyzed to determine the extent to which inclusionary practices and policies are being discussed. This analysis allowed for an interpretation of how different provincial governments perceive issues relating to inclusion and immersion and how they relay this information to teachers and other school personnel.

Finally, what barriers remain in term so of facilitating accessibility to and retention in French immersion? This article concludes by highlighting current gaps in the way in which inclusionary practices in French immersion are supported. These gaps include the need for additional professional development opportunities and resources targeting inclusionary practices in immersion coupled with the need of additional tools, tailored to the second language context, for the identification of learners who would benefit from early interventions. These gaps in services need to be acknowledged and addressed, if our education systems are to advance the promotion of French immersion as a fully inclusionary program.

A Review of Academic Literature

The Suitability of Immersion for All Students

Ever since French immersion programs were introduced, those in school settings and in the world of academia have struggled with questions regarding the suitability of the program for students at risk for learning difficulties, including those with specific learning disabilities. Issues stem from the belief that learning a second language overburdens struggling learners and can lead to further difficulties. As Arnett (2003) explains:

The majority of students who receive support for learning disabilities do so for alphabetic language-related challenges, either in oral language, reading, or writing. Thus, given the fact that most students with LD do experience problems with the reception, processing, and/or expression of language, it is not surprising that many people believe that the introduction of a second language would create even more problems for students with LD. (p. 177)

Studies examining this question have consistently found that students at risk for learning difficulties (i.e. low academic ability and/or limited first language skills) experienced no greater disadvantage in French immersion in terms of their English language development and overall academic achievement. Studies have also found that these students would face the same academic challenges if they were enrolled in the English program (Cummins, 1984; Genesee, 1992, 2007a). A few studies conducted in the late 1970s suggests that students who were developmentally immature would perhaps fare better in late immersion or English-only programs (Trites, 1976; Trites & Price, 1978). However, the validity of these studies has been called into question, and these findings have generally been refuted (Cummins, 1984; Genesee, 2007a).

With regard to specific language impairments/disabilities, a limited number of studies have been conducted comparing immersion and non-immersion students. According to Bruck (1987), “it was taking the disabled children in both programs longer to attain basic literacy and academic skills than their non-disabled peers, as would be expected given their disability” (p. 65). In terms of their linguistic, cognitive, and academic development, immersion students with language impairments/disabilities were progressing at a similar rate than their English peers with similar disabilities/impairments. It can thus be concluded that students with specific language disabilities have the ability to learn two languages (Paradis, Crago, Genesee, & Rice, 2003).

Dropping Out of Immersion in the Elementary Grades

Since high drop out rates are being linked to program inequalities, and given the ethical implication of this, several studies have examined the reasons for which elementary immersion students decide to leave the program. It has been found that both academic and non-academic variables factor into the decision. On the one hand, Bruck’s (1985) study found that the reasons for transferring out of the program were associated with poor attitudes, motivation, and nonacademic behaviors. Students who transferred to English did not enjoy school, were not interested in learning French, or had behavioral issues. According to Bruck (1985), these students were no more disadvantaged academically than other struggling students who decided to stay in immersion. She concluded that although students who transferred out of the program struggled academically, “these were not sufficient conditions for transfer, as the control children who remained in the immersion program had similar profiles. Affective, attitudinal, and motivational characteristics appeared to be the primary predictors of program departure” (p. 59).

In contrast, in some studies, academic difficulties could not be ignored as reasons for exiting out of the program. In one study, all 34 students who transferred into the English program performed below grade level expectations. Ninety-four percent of the students had been referred for assessment due to academic problems, and eighty-five percent of those students were found to have weak cognitive processing relating to working memory, language, and visual perception. Also noteworthy is that this study found that twice as many students who exited the program were boys (Arnett & Fortune, 2004).

If the research examining why students leave the program seems inconsistent, so does the research on students’ progress once they enter English-only classrooms. Bruck (1978/79) and Cummins (1984) found that students’ level of success varied once having exited the program. A percentage of students experienced frustration and unhappiness and for some, academic difficulties worsened due to lowered self-esteem. Students who indicated higher levels of success in the new English classroom environment, Bruck (1978/79) noted that they were now receiving extra support, which was often not the case in French immersion. Yet, other studies yielded contradicting findings. When asked if students in French immersion should transfer out of the program when experiencing difficulty, Trites & Price (1978) unequivocally answered yes. Their data indicated that students who left the program had a more

positive attitude and their academic progress in English held steady (Trites & Price, 1984). According to Genesee (2007a), much of the research on the issue of transferring programs is based on people's own interpretation, and as such, may not be considered evidence-based in determining the suitability of French immersion for students at-risk for learning difficulties.

Effects of Learning a Second Language

It is a commonly held belief that learning a second language should only take place once students have a firm grasp on their first language literacy skills for fear of putting at risk their 'normal' ability to read and write. As Genesee (2007b) notes, second language programs, such as immersion, "have raised a number of educational and research questions because they contradict the commonsense notion that initial reading and writing skills should be taught in a language that students already know" (p. 1). However, studies have consistently shown that, although immersion students may initially lag behind their unilingual peers in the development of English language skills, they rapidly catch-up once English instruction is reintroduced in the upper elementary grades (Genesee, 1987, 2007a; Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Wiss, 1987). When analyzing provincial English literacy data, elementary immersion students were either at par or outperforming their English counterparts, as long as they were exposed to some English literacy instruction beforehand (Genesee, 2007b; Turnbull, Lapkin, & Hart, 2001).

Cummins' (1984) linguistic interdependence model of language acquisition, otherwise known as the common underlying proficiency model, sheds light on the processes associated with language transferability. This hypothesis stipulates that although a child's first and second languages may be distinctly different on the surface, they are both supported by shared concepts, skills, and linguistic knowledge. A language does not develop in isolation from another in the brain, but rather both languages nurture each other. As such, the concepts and skills learned in a first language context can be transferred to second language learning. In fact, more than 150 studies on second language acquisition reveal that bilingual children's thinking skills are often more adaptable and flexible due to practice processing information in not one, but two languages (see Cummins, 2001 for a review of this literature). Other immersion studies have also reported cognitive benefits to learning a second language. Along with social and economic advantages, immersion students demonstrate greater non-verbal problem-solving abilities, heightened creative thinking skills, more flexible thinking, and possibly greater metacognitive awareness (Bialystok, 2001; Fortune & Tedick, 2003).

A strong understanding of the research is needed by those working in and for French immersion programs for a solid decision to occur. To what extent is this literature finding its way into many curricula and program guides, in order to provide educators, administrators, and parents the information needed to support inclusion in immersion programs?

What Inclusionary Practices Are Currently Being Promoted In French Immersion?

In order to describe the inclusionary practices being promoted within elementary French immersion classrooms, curricula and program guides from various Canadian jurisdictions were retrieved from provincial department websites¹. These guides, along with other government-produced documents used to support French immersion programs, were examined and themes relating to inclusionary teaching strategies and practices were extracted.

Acknowledging Diversity

This review revealed that most provincial governments acknowledge individual differences and describe the diversity that exists in French immersion classrooms (Alberta Education, 2009; British Columbia's Ministry of Education, 1997; Manitoba Education, 2007; Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Education, 2005; Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). "Today's French Immersion classrooms are as diverse as those delivering other programs" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1). Apart from general discussions of diverse learning needs, the concept of inclusion/special education is addressed in most immersion curricula and program guides, although to varying degrees and through various means. The Ontario (2001), New Brunswick (1996), British Columbia (1997) and Nova Scotia (2006) documents, for example, have sections entitled *French Immersion for Exceptional Students*, *Students with Special Needs*, *Students Presenting Special Needs* and *Statements Relating to Students with Special Needs*.

These sections include suggested teaching strategies, relevant research, and /or ways to accommodate students or to modify the program for students with exceptionalities in immersion.

Instructional Practices

Acknowledging that students enter French immersion with different needs, interests, and abilities is a first step in facilitating the implementation of appropriate instructional approaches and teaching strategies required to address such diversity. As Saskatchewan Learning (2005) states, “it is the role of every teacher to accommodate these differences through adaptations to curriculum content, instructional strategies, and the learning environment if all are to benefit” (p. 68). Scaffolding, explicit instruction, modeling, and creating a positive learning environment are promoted in most provincial documents and program guides as good practices for the immersion context (Alberta Education, 1998; British Columbia’s Ministry of Education, 1997), as is the importance of considering multiple intelligences (New Brunswick’s Department of Education, 1996).

Saskatchewan’s Department of Education (2005) and Alberta Education (2007) push the issue of learner needs further by describing at length the importance of differentiation in French immersion in addressing individual differences. According to the Saskatchewan’s Department of Education (2005), “adapting approaches, strategies and technologies accessible to students are necessary in order to address individual needs, all while respecting the general objectives of the program” (p. 5). Alberta Education’s *Inclusion in immersion – A guide for pedagogical differentiation to meet diverse learning needs* not only describes the significance of the differentiated approach in immersion, but also guides immersion teachers through the implementation process by providing specific examples as to what differentiation looks like at different grade levels. The document includes an explanation of favorable conditions needed for students with diverse needs to succeed within immersion classrooms, and asks teachers to self-reflect about their own inclusionary teaching practices.

The Inclusive Environment

Although the extent varies as to how provinces address specific questions relating to inclusion in immersion, it is evident that efforts are being made to advocate for students with exceptionalities in the immersion program. Promoting inclusion in immersion is essential because it “provides students with the best learning opportunities that will meet their needs by removing barriers to their participation” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1). When documents make strong statements such as “the immersion program promotes inclusion” (British Columbia’s Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3), “the same programming alternatives expected in English classrooms are possible in the French Immersion classrooms” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 68), and “French immersion is a program open to all students” (Alberta Education, 2008, Can French Immersion... section, Paragraphs 1 and 4), it supports the position that French immersion is a program suitable and open to the widest range of learners.

There are also legal implications for the need to promote inclusion within immersion programs. As Manitoba Education’s *Handbook for School Leaders* (2007) states:

Students who are born with or who acquire physical disabilities are easily accommodated in the French immersion program. Parents need to be encouraged to consider this option, as it is a way to expand their child’s social and cultural horizons and to give the child an added advantage later on in a greater variety of social and cultural settings and in the job market. (p. 9-2)

Denying some students the added advantages of learning a second language, based on their disabilities, brings forth major ethical and legal questions. The document further stipulates that, “students with special needs have the same entitlement to be in the French Immersion Program as in any other program in any public or funded independent school in Manitoba” (Manitoba Education, 2007, p. 9–1). While advocating for students with exceptionalities in immersion, it is also important to advocate for appropriate support services for these students (Ontario’s Ministry of Education, 2001). For example, Saskatchewan Learning (2005) provides administrators and teachers with a list of support services needed to accommodate and support various learner needs in French immersion.

The Link to Academic Research

It is fair to say that the various Canadian Ministries of Education have considered and integrated the research pertaining to the suitability of immersion for students at risk for learning or academic difficulties when defining

their position on inclusion and accessibility to French immersion for all interested students. However, the way, and the extent, in which they do so vary. For example, some jurisdictions focus on specific inclusionary practices and strategies to be used in French immersion, while others describe processes for the implementation of Individualized Education Plans within the immersion context. Unfortunately, only a few guides provide information as to how Individual Education Plans can be adapted, modified, or individualized to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities in immersion (Manitoba Education, 2007; Nova Scotia's Department of Education, 2006).

Most provincial guides reference the literature related to the suitability of French immersion for all students, the benefits of learning a second language, and/or the issues relating to transferring out of the program (Alberta Education, 2007, 2009; Manitoba Education, 2002, 2007; Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). A typical example is Alberta Education's website *The Special Needs-French Immersion Student* (2008): "Several studies have indicated that learning disabilities are present no matter the language of instruction. Immersion has been found to be suitable for students having academic difficulty and for the learning disabled (Cummins, 1984; Bruck, 1985; Wiss, 1989; Edwards, 1989; Keep, 1993; Ali Khan, 1993)." None, however, address the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in immersion as well as Manitoba Education's *French Immersion in Manitoba: A Handbook for School Leaders* (2007). This document not only provides readers with information on educational programming, such as access, early identification, procedures to consider, academic assessments, Individual Education Plans, and student support teams all within the context of immersion programs, but it also includes important segments of the published research article *French Immersion and At-Risk students: A Review of Research Evidence* by Fred Genesee.

What are the Gaps in Services and What Should be Considered?

Most French immersion curriculum and program guides attend to issues surrounding inclusion in immersion in one way or another. However, some researchers, educators, and stakeholders feel that more should be done to ensure the best quality programming for all students who choose to enroll in immersion. A review of professional educator journals revealed important gaps in services, were we to actually provide fully inclusive French immersion programming. These gaps include: teacher professional development and the identification of French immersion students who may be at risk for learning difficulties.

Gap: Teacher Professional Development and Resources to Support Inclusion

In 1992, the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers asked 2000 of its members, French immersion educators, to participate in a survey of their professional needs. When asked to identify the areas in which they felt professional development was needed, immersion educators overwhelmingly placed instruction and pedagogy high on the priority list along with the creation of materials and resources. More specifically, three-fifths of respondents identified themselves as having a 'great need,' while another third identified as having 'some need' in teaching French language arts (Day, 1995). According to Fortune and Tedick (2003), "understanding how to make language immersion classroom more inclusive for a broader spectrum of learners is one of many topics of interest to immersion educators" (p. 1). With increased diversity in immersion classrooms, educators are calling for support in the form of educational assistants, more reading material to target students' reading levels, and more resource help (Rousseau, 1999.). Similar findings were reported in which "school board respondents indicated that they felt more students with special needs could be retained [in French immersion] if appropriate resources and programs were put in place" (Genesee & Jared, 2008, p. 143).

Solution

Worthwhile professional development needs to bridge the gap between teachers' needs and the practical application of current research. Recommended teaching strategies for students with learning difficulties parallel those for teaching second language learners (alternative explanations, gestures/pictures/voice to emphasize language, repetition of key concepts, pre-teaching vocabulary, frequent questioning, and alternate forms of expression). Professional development sessions need to provide teachers with the tools to meet their needs along with those of their students (Arnett & Fortune, 2004). Moreover, professional development needs to focus on how specific instructional adaptations used to support struggling learners can also benefit other students (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Regarding the lack of specialized services and resources in immersion programs, Demers (2001), a long time school administrator who worked in French immersion settings, suggested the implementation of a school-based team process focusing on students' needs. According to Demers, many beginning teachers have very little experience or training in the identification of exceptional learners and in the strategies needed to address specific learner needs. As such, he argued that, "systemic and consistent school-based collaborations are necessary to help both the learners and the classroom teachers in providing interventions and developing a repertoire of accommodations" (p. 2). Although such school-based teams are well established in many schools, too few school-based teams work within a framework of second-language acquisition. School-based discussions are needed to learn more about specialized services and resources that can help second-language learners, in order to practice the identification of second-language exceptional learners, and in order to work on developing and practicing strategies appropriate for the second-language context.

Lastly, school administrators have a significant role to play in supporting inclusionary practices within French immersion contexts. According to Met (1987), support from the administration is the most important factor for the success of an immersion program. More specifically, school administrators are often called upon to provide valuable program options to parents. They are also asked to provide information pertaining to second-language education to the school community, and they play an important role in promoting the program and its teachers (Rehorick, 1995).

Gap: Proper Identification, Assessments, and Interventions

The early identification of L2 students who may be at risk is crucial to providing remedial help as quickly as possible (Bournot-Trites, 2008). Although "abundant evidence links early identification of reading problems to constructive interventions and improved student achievement" (Wise & Chen, 2009, p. 1), difficulties arise in attempting to properly identify students within a second language context. What is more, the process of identifying students who may be at risk is often delayed until students acquire sufficient L2 literacy skills.

The belief that immersion students should not be assessed until they have developed enough second language proficiency can lead, in some cases, to over-diagnosis or in other cases, to under-diagnosis. As Geva (2006) explained:

On the one hand, one would want to avoid interpreting poor language and literacy skills development among L2 learners as indicative of RD [reading disability], a process that may lead to *over-diagnosis*. On the other hand, avoiding assessments of L2 learners who are actually at-risk of having RD, because of lack of training and sensitivity or because of a strong belief that what thwarts children's adequate development of language and literacy skills reflects poor language proficiency, may result in *under-diagnosis* of L2 learners. (p. 2) (Original emphasis)

This ambiguity often delays the implementation of appropriate intervention strategies even though research has shown that reading ability and reading comprehension skills are major contributors to students' success in school. When students experience reading difficulties, this can lead to frustration, feelings of failure, and loss of self-esteem, and for immersion students, it often results in many exiting the program (Bournot-Trites, 2008; Bruck, 1985; Keep, 1993).

Solution

When assessing immersion students who may be experiencing difficulty, it is important to remember that developing second language learners often exhibit characteristics that parallel those of students with language/learning disabilities, which again makes the early identification of immersion students more complicated (Fortune & Menke, 2010; Kohnert, 2008). These characteristics include: difficulty with expression, low vocabulary and comprehension, difficulty following directions and recalling the sequence of syllables, not being able to read at grade level, confusing sound/symbol associations, and reversing letters and words.

Regarding the types of assessments needed to identify immersion students at risk for learning difficulties and whether these students should be assessed in their home language or their language of instruction, studies have found that the factors underpinning second language reading acquisition are the same as those of first language reading. Good second language readers, for example, typically read well in their first language (Bourgoin & Dicks,

213; Bournot-Trites & Denizot, 2005; Dressler & Kamil, 2006; Geva & Clifton, 1994). Similarly, students who struggle with reading likely do so in both languages. It has therefore been recommended, whenever possible, “to collect information about children’s competence in both languages” (Genesee, Paradis, & Cargo, 2004, p. 211). It would also be important to take into account recent studies that found that immersion students who need additional support in learning to read in French can be identified using early literacy indicators, administered in French or English (Bourgoin, 2014; Erdos, Genesee, Savage, & Haigh, 2013; Jared, Cormier, Levy, & Wade-Woolley, 2010). This growing body of research also suggests the administration of both English and French predictor measures.

For educators concerned with the proper recourse for working with immersion students with reading difficulties, Genesee (2007b) suggested that although the research is somewhat limited, “effective interventions for second language learners with reading difficulties will incorporate many of the best practices of interventions for first language readers with difficulty” (p. 4). For example, research conducted in first language settings found improvements in students’ phonological awareness skills and decoding with the use of direct, explicit instruction in phonological awareness. Similar results, although preliminary, are being reported from immersion settings (Bournot-Trites, 2008; Wise & Chen, 2009).

Conclusion

French immersion classrooms have increasingly become more diverse. Inclusionary practices and policies from Canadian Ministries of Education are playing an increasingly vital role in ensuring continued access to and retention in French immersion programs. Although more research is needed in terms of the suitability of French immersion for specific learning challenges, research has consistently shown that the program poses no detrimental risk to normally developing students or to students who may be at risk for academic or learning difficulties. Accusations of elitism, documented cases of a lack of support services, and concerns over attrition rates have plagued French immersion programs. Thus, there is a need to continue linking research to policy and practice. This article calls for renewed emphasis on the professional development of all stakeholders in the area of inclusion and immersion, a need for a more collaborative approach in supporting at-risk immersion learners, and a need for proper diagnostic tools for the early identification of students, along with effective second language intervention strategies.

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Notes

ⁱ Some Canadian territories share curricula with other provinces such as British Columbia and Alberta.