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# English Reading Problems in French Immersion:

## A report on six children

### Abstract

*This report is concerned with the types of reading difficulties encountered by children in early French immersion. Six elementary school children were studied during three months of remediation in English reading strategies. The objective of this program was two-fold: (1) to help them become readers, and (2) to investigate the types of English reading difficulties encountered by children in early French immersion. The remediation program focussed on a holistic approach to reading and as such emphasized techniques for choosing recreational reading books, reading more effectively, and writing more fluently. Results indicated that children in French immersion experience the same range of problems in developing English literacy skills as children not enrolled in the program.*

### Résumé

*Ce rapport est consacré aux différentes difficultés de lecture auxquelles sont confrontés les enfants inscrits à des cours d'immersion en français. Six élèves du primaire ont été suivis pendant trois mois alors qu'ils participaient à un cours de rattrapage de lecture de l'anglais. L'objectif de ce programme était double: (1) Aider les enfants à apprendre à lire, et (2) étudier les problèmes de lecture de l'anglais auxquels font face les enfants inscrits à des cours d'immersion en français. Le programme de rattrapage reposait sur un approche globale de la lecture et s'appuyait sur des techniques favorisant le choix de livres de lecture récréatifs, l'apprentissage efficace de la lecture et l'acquisition d'une plus grande aisance d'écriture. Les résultats obtenus indiquent que les élèves de cours d'immersion en français font face aux mêmes problèmes de lecture de l'anglais que les enfants qui ne participent pas à un programme de ce genre.*

*Any reading test has an implicit theory of comprehension of language and learning.*

*Farr and Carey (1986),  
Reading, What Can be Measured?*

This article discusses and analyzes an English-reading tutoring program for six students in an early French immersion school. These students, who for their first four years of school had been taught entirely in French, had begun in grade 4 a program of half-day English, half-day French instruction. The objective for tutoring these students was two-fold; first, to help them become readers and second, to investigate the types of reading difficulties encountered by children in early French immersion. The tutorial program was based on an approach to assessment and instruction of reading difficulties that teaches students to take control of their learning through the collaborative efforts of teacher and pupil. This view was developed from recent advances in the understanding of the reading process (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Samuels & Kamil, 1984; Smith, 1982), and reading assessment (Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Lipson & Wixson, 1986).

The results of this long-term work with six students in intermediate grades strongly suggest that English reading problems in French immersion programs are no different from those found in regular English classrooms. The reading problems of the French immersion students were similar to the reading difficulties of children in English schools.

### **Organization of the Tutoring Program**

The six students were referred for tutoring because of poor progress in English language arts. Other than this inauspicious beginning they had little in common. Since classroom dynamics rarely allow time for one-to-one tutoring, and since it appeared important to learn what would work for these youngsters in peer groupings, they met with the tutor in groups of three. If this program and recommendations were to be put into practice in the classroom, then sensitivity to normal classroom constraints was necessary.

Peter, Bruce, and David were the grade 4 group, meeting with the tutor as a group of three, twice a week for 45 minutes each time, for a total of 15 meetings in three months. The grade 5 students, Heather, Cathy, and Stan, also met as a group twice a week for 45 minutes each time, for a total of 20 times over three and a half months.

A holistic assessment program was used for all students (Glazer, Searfoss, & Gentile, 1988). The six students were initially examined in the areas of: (1) Listening comprehension, (2) Story recall – with and without prompts, (3) Written story recall, (4) Personal reading habits, and (5) Silent and oral reading comprehension of short texts. The students were asked to

respond to short but authentic texts at different grade levels. During the initial assessment stage they heard stories, told stories, read stories, and wrote stories; and they discussed their personal reading habits at home and at school. From this array of responses to the different tasks it was possible to assemble a portfolio of strengths and weaknesses for each child. Telephone conversations with each family rounded off the observations and assessments. These conversations were conducted not only to get parental input on individual students, but also to encourage parents to read to their children regularly and to request the parents to insist on their children engaging in fifteen minutes of daily recreational reading.

### **Grade Four Students**

#### ***Individual assessment***

Peter's attention wandered from here to there as he half listened and half played. He was a slow, hesitant, word-by-word reader who paid little attention to the meaning of the passage. His story recall was skimpy, and he needed prompting to continue. In addition, his understanding of story sequence as crucial to story comprehension was weak and undeveloped. He had no interest in personal reading and did not know how to choose a book by himself. Phone conversations with his mother confirmed Peter's determination to avoid reading and writing in both English and French. He didn't read at home but spent all his free time playing outside or watching television.

David was very shy and quiet, unsure of his own abilities and very hesitant to risk answers or contributions to the group discussions. By far the shiest and least confident of the three grade 4 boys, David was the strongest reader. Although his story recall was accurate, there was some difficulty with story sequence which could be attributed to lack of practice in the oral retelling of stories. Phone conversations with his mother revealed that personal family difficulties were weighing heavily on David and could be contributing to school problems. This may well have been the case as his lack of participation in class was not a result of weak reading skills. During meetings he was painfully insecure and unable to risk answers to questions in group work, yet he did read at home in both languages and was rather excited about Roald Dahl's books.

Bruce was an athletic, well co-ordinated fellow, serious and intense, and wary about the tutor's role and what was going to be asked of him. He had the most serious reading and writing problems of the three boys. His listening comprehension and follow-up oral story recall were at appropriate grade level. He was able to retell the story in correct sequence and include details and information indicating literal and higher order understanding. Yet his oral reading of a graded story indicated that he was a very slow, awkward word-by-word reader with little understanding that reading has to make

sense. For example, he substituted "bitter" for "better" in his oral reading and made no attempt at self-correction. He had no interest in reading at home in either language, a fact confirmed by his mother. His passage writing indicated spelling and sentence structure weaknesses. Conversations with his mother revealed facts about Bruce's frustrating early school experiences with the reading and writing program. In addition, it soon became obvious that he was a clever avoider of reading and writing acts. This information may well indicate that Bruce's problems stem from developmentally delayed visual-perceptual development – a condition which often results in a slow reading start followed by embarrassment and subsequent avoidance and lack of practice in literacy acts. But whatever the cause of his reading problem, it was necessary to find methods of convincing him that reading could be pleasurable and was worth the effort of personal engagement.

### *Tutoring program*

All three grade 4 boys needed assistance in establishing and maintaining a personal reading program. This was perhaps the most crucial part as well as the most difficult part of the tutoring program. If the children were going to maintain reading progress, they had to see themselves as readers and consequently had to engage in recreational reading. Finding interesting books at their reading levels was hard work but perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of the program. Even David, although a reader, needed direction after he had exhausted all the Roald Dahl stories. The tutor chose their prime time for this activity – the first ten to fifteen minutes of the 45 minute session were spent talking about recreational books. "Book talks" were given, and they discussed the books they had read and were reading; they then browsed through the available books and made a choice.

The three boys needed to work on becoming fluent readers and not word-by-word decoders. To accomplish this, numerous "Reader's Theatres" were performed (Sloyer, 1982). First the students read the play to themselves (after it was impressed upon them that no one should ever read aloud without first reading the passage silently). Then there was a discussion about who would take the various roles; those parts would be read once again silently, and then the play would begin. The students would read through the play paying particular attention to their particular character, trying to give impression and meaning to their *persona*. Then the students would rotate roles and read the play aloud a second time. Sometimes, if the play were of special interest, the reading might continue until everyone had a chance to be each character. In this manner the students gained reading fluency through repeated readings (Samuels, 1979) and grasped the notion that reading has to make sense and be meaningful. If it doesn't make sense, then the reader has to re-read and self-correct. And as self-correction is an

indication of a comprehending reader (Beebe, 1980), Reader's Theatre teaches an important skill. Reading plays became an enjoyable and useful way to learn reading skills.

For the last 15 minutes of each session, the tutor chose between extra practice in attaining fluency (*Paired Reading*, Greene, 1970), or attending to comprehension strategies (*ReQuest*, Helfeldt & Lalik, 1979), or writing out ideas and arguments (*Process Writing*, Graves, 1983). Reading ability improves as students strengthen the connections between themselves as readers and as writers (Belanger, 1987). Putting thoughts down in writing helps reading comprehension and attentive reading helps the writing process. After oral discussion and semantic webbing (Johnson & Pearson, 1984) on a topic, the students would work on a first draft. These preliminary drafts were typed after some editing by the tutor. At the next session the students would read the typed version and discuss the changes that had been made. This, more or less, was the pattern of the tutoring program: a third of the time on book choosing, a third on improving reading fluency, and a third on writing or comprehension strategies.

### Grade Five Students

#### *Individual assessment*

The assessment program for the grade 5 students was identical to the one for those in grade 4. As explained earlier, holistic evaluation does not focus on deficits or seek to decompose functions. Instead, it probes the students' sense of pattern-seeing and problem-solving in expressive as well as receptive language acts. The results of the evaluations were that these three students did not need as much work on fluency as did those in the fourth grade, but they needed extensive help with comprehension of content area material.

Cathy read orally at her grade level. She admitted she liked to read aloud and did it as much as she could. Her oral reading skills indicated a good deal of practice as well as pleasure with performance. However, Cathy did not enjoy reading silently – either narrative fiction or information material in either French or English. As far as she was concerned, reading was a school subject and as such should not be continued beyond the afternoon bell. (This information was confirmed during a telephone conversation with her father.) She avoided silent reading as much as possible and was quite adept at appearing to attend to a reading task when in fact she was doing something else, such as mindlessly turning pages, doodling, or simply dwelling on her own thoughts. As a result of this lack of practice with reading, her vocabulary and comprehension of silently-read stories were below grade level. Her written passages, although skimpy, indicated spelling proficiency. She possessed a highly developed visual memory of words, an ability which accounted for her oral decoding skills.

Yet her oral reading proclivities did not transfer to the silent reading process, as these processes, although dependent on one another, are acquired differently. (Understanding a silently read passage requires a different set of strategies from reading aloud.) Cathy had difficulty with story prediction, inferential reasoning, and vocabulary in context, all of which are connected to comprehension but not to oral recitation.

Heather, small for her age, was somewhat nervous and fidgety, very chatty, and very quick to volunteer answers or opinions. At times she would be tremendously enthusiastic, answering questions before the tutor had finished asking them, while at other times she would be grumpy and lethargic, whining and complaining about everything.

Heather, like Cathy, read aloud at grade level with fluency and good expression. She claimed that she had read all the books in the *Anne of Green Gables* series the previous summer but during the time of this research she was simply too busy to engage in home reading. A phone conversation with her mother further attested to Heather's sporadic recreational reading habit. Her reading comprehension was low, but near her grade level. However, as is the case in so many French immersion classrooms, the class reading level was well above national norms, so Heather's scores in informal testing were rather low only within the context of her classmates. This then appeared to be the problem. She had personally assessed herself as being a weak student and, consequently, had reacted by playing the clown, the silly one, the chatty one. In group sessions, it was difficult to complete a question before Heather was jumping up and down, demanding attention, calling out any answer, and arguing vehemently in defense of it. Her avoidance techniques would exhaust her, though they entertained the other two students. After a few weeks of these "shenanigans" she tried a completely different approach, claiming to be simply too tired to work, stating flatly that she could read the material provided but couldn't possibly answer a single question, as that was work and she was too exhausted to work. However, when it was suggested she return to her classroom because she wasn't participating in the tutoring program, she would perk up slightly and do the minimal amount of work that would permit her to stay in the group.

Stan went through a major attitudinal change during the course of the meetings. Initially, he was flippant and careless and would work only under close supervision. He was evaluated as a competent oral decoder but a disinterested (some might say immature) learner. He did the absolute minimum of anything he was asked to do and then completed it in haste and without thought. His oral recall of a story that was read aloud by the tutor lacked supporting details, and it was only with prompting that he completed the retelling. His silent reading comprehension was barely at grade level.

Yet, he liked writing and was able to write an ending to an incomplete story read to him. He described his home reading as negligible, reading only in English and just a *Hardy Boys* book, every now and then. Phone conversations with his mother confirmed his self-description. His mother admitted that Stan was quite active and "hard to pin down," so she had not been encouraging recreational reading for quite a few years. But as a result of the phone call she realized Stan needed support and said she would do her part to encourage him to start reading. Shortly afterwards, Stan declared that reading wasn't so bad after all and he started behaving like an independent reader and writer.

### *Tutoring program*

The grade 5 students needed as much help in finding good books to read as did the grade 4 students. They knew how to use the library, but they didn't know how to find a good book to read. Popular authors (e.g., Eric Wilson, S.E. Hinton, Frank Bonham, etc.) were discussed, and the first 15 minutes, or longer if necessary, were spent on book talks, book browsing, and book choosing. Much has been written about the importance of finding the right book for the right child at the right time (Spiegel, 1981), but the selection process is not as easy as it might seem; assisting the non-reader to choose books requires a wide knowledge of good books and unlimited patience.

The skill of reading fluency was not of concern with these students as they were all competent, rapid decoders; however, they all needed help with reading comprehension. They had no techniques or strategies to focus on main ideas or make connections between what they already knew and what they were learning. Since they were reading content material as well as narrative fiction in their class, informational printed matter was selected as a way to teach study skills and comprehension strategies.

The third part of the tutoring program was taken up with writing. A range of writing activities was offered to the students – everything from thinking up their own questions, to describing a class trip, to explaining how to do something. As with the grade 4 students, the emphasis was on process, and the schedule of pre-writing, writing, post-writing was followed.

The pattern that evolved for the grade 5 tutoring program consisted of spending a third of the time on book choosing, a third on techniques for reading in the content areas, and a third on writing in different modes.

### **Results**

There were two obvious success stories, three students on their way up, and one who steadfastly refused to work on her reading.

Stan (grade 5) and Bruce (grade 4) were the two stars of the tutoring program. According to informal assessment of their reading and writing, as well as personal accounts from teachers and parents, they had overcome their "fear of reading" and had come to see themselves as competent readers, reading anything from magazines lying around the house to books they chose from the library! David had somehow dealt with his family situation to his own satisfaction, and became more interested in his school work. He even requested a letter be written to his father saying he had to own more Roald Dahl books. Peter appeared to have grasped the notion that reading improvement is somehow connected to home reading and had begun working his way through the *Mr.* books, (*Mr. Tickle*, *Prof. Peabody*, etc.). Heather calmed down somewhat and her teacher reported increased on-task behaviour and greater pride in her work. By the end of May she was reading *The Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Observations of Cathy led to the conclusion that she was having personal struggles about the relationship between home activities and school demands. She would comply with the tasks given in the sessions, but she was adamant about not reading at home. She stated flatly she wasn't going to read at home, and true to her word, she didn't. Under these conditions, she hardly improved at all. Fifteen minutes every day of personal reading would have been enough to influence vocabulary and comprehension strategies but without that minimal involvement, Cathy's reading could not improve significantly.

### Discussion

Six children, six stories. Each child was having reading problems; however, each child was a learner and none was learning disabled. Each child, for different reasons, had had problems in acquiring reading strategies. Their lack of growth in reading was a result of a complex interplay of factors: physical and emotional maturity, family support, and educational programs.

The reading problems exhibited by these six students are the same sort that one meets in regular English schools. It is vaguely possible that their participation in French immersion aggravated their difficulties, but certainly not because of anything detrimental in the study of a second language. It is more likely that these children's involvement in a program that is so unfamiliar to many parents, resulted in a situation for families for which they had no precedents, and thus they lacked understanding of how to help their children. Many parents have the mistaken notion that they should not be engaged in reading in English to their French immersion children, because it might cause confusion and subsequently give confusing messages about learning to read in French. Yet, children can only benefit from being read to (Teale, 1984). Not all reading problems will be eradicated by children having daily encounters with books, but many will be lessened and some



will probably never occur. And when reading problems do become apparent, then a full picture of the child's reactions to all literacy acts must be examined before a reasonable plan of action can be decided upon.

The tutoring program described here is based on the theoretical understanding that reading is a socio-psycholinguistic process. This research followed an interactive approach to diagnosis, assessment, and remediation of reading deficits. The tutoring program was concerned with interaction with the text and the context of the reading situation.

Another point of view toward reading remediation is presented in Wiss's (1987) report of a child in French immersion with English reading problems. Wiss administered the Boder method (1982) as part of her assessment and concluded that the child was learning disabled. The Boder method tests discrete skills such as knowledge of words in isolation followed by instructions to spell these words. The reading level is determined exclusively by testing sight vocabulary. In Wiss's case study the remediation suggested is "the analysis, sequencing and synthesis of syllables and sounds" (Wiss, 1987, p. 310). Wiss goes on to suggest that the case study child, Jenny, "could be asked to listen to words, recognize a particular prefix, and write out that prefix" (Wiss, 1987, p. 310). The problem with this approach is that the standardized test is based on a unidimensional picture of what in reality is a multidimensional and complex process.

It is possible that in the haste to explain everything that happens to children learning to read in French immersion programs, there is a danger of misinterpreting English reading problems when they occur. Using the Boder method to test reading is an example of a quick but highly questionable solution. Caution must be taken not to confuse problems in learning to read in English or French with a learning disability; often, in fact, a struggling student will genuinely prosper in an enriched reading program at the appropriate instructional level.

Analysis of the work done with the six children described and discussed in this article provides convincing evidence that children in French immersion experience the same range of problems in developing English literacy skills as children not enrolled in the program. Achieving literacy through engagement in rich and varied reading and writing activities should be our concern for all children, whether they are in French immersion or English programs.

The research for this article was completed while Dr. Halpern was an assistant professor at the University of Windsor (Ontario).

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*Colonial Interior of Madame John's Legacy, Louisiana State Museum*