Bilingualism and Biliteracy: A Superpower Within Reach of All Learners

Caroline Erdos, PhD, S-LP(C)

November 13th, 2025

Outline

- What are some of the most common language learning myths?
- Immersion programs 60 years later – what do we know about student outcomes?
- What does research evidence tell us about bilingualism and multilingualism in the context of diverse learning needs?
- How can school teams optimally support all learners in French Immersion?
- How can we ensure timely identification and response to needs?
- Potential action items for French Immersion school administrators

Popular language learning myths

- Children are like sponges
- Learning an additional language is difficult
- Bilingualism is a zero sum game
- Code mixing is a sign of confusion
  - Mirror environment
  - Linguistic resource
  - Grammatical
- A child should master one language before learning another
- Learning to read in two languages is more difficult than learning to read in one

See also https://www.ecsd.net/language-mythbusters

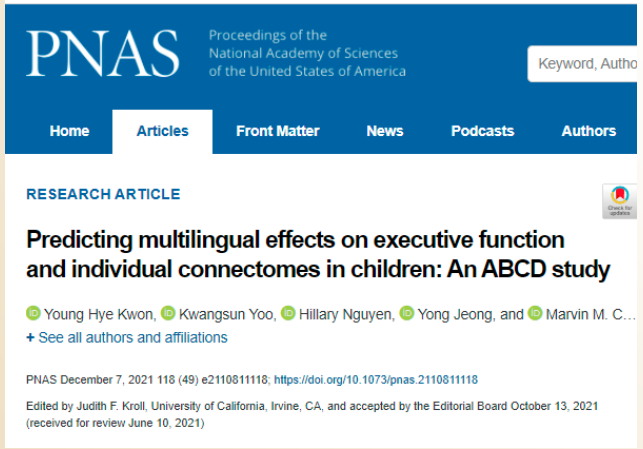
(Dr. Nancy Wise)

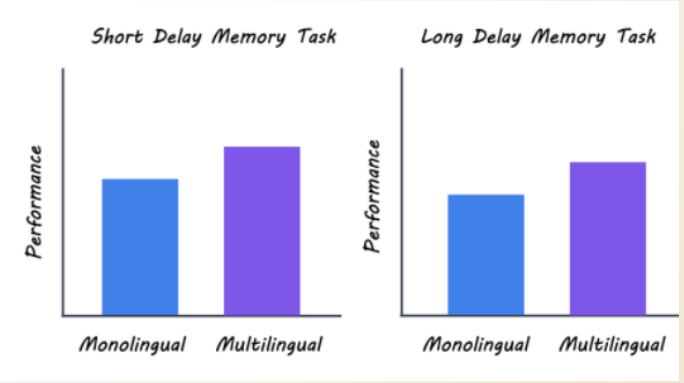
What all stakeholders should know about bilingualism and multilingualism

1. More than 2/3 of the world speak at least 2 languages
   - Europe (67%)
   - Canada (40%)
   - India (25%)
   - United States (20%)
2. Bilingual advantages include
   a) higher employment rate and higher income
   b) increased possibilities for education, socialization and travel
   c) a greater openness to differences
   d) increased opportunities for community support (social & health services)

What all stakeholders should know about bilingualism and multilingualism

2. Bilingual advantages include
   a) higher employment rate and higher income
   b) increased possibilities for socialization and travel
   c) a greater openness to differences
   d) Increased opportunities for community support
   e) superior cognitive outcomes
      i. working memory advantage





https://www.brainpost.co/weekly-brainpost/2021/12/14/multilingual-language-experience-affects-cognitive-function-and-modulates-functional-brain-connectivity

What all stakeholders should know

2. Bilingual advantages include
   e) superior cognitive outcomes
      i. working memory advantage
      ii. selective attention advantage
      iii. metalinguistic awareness advantage
      iv. delayed manifestation of dementia symptoms
3. THE most effective way to learn an additional language well enough to function in that language – Immersion programs
   - i.e., teaching subjects in another language
4. Students in Immersion programs perform **as well or better** academically than their peers in English-only programs
   - when assessed in English or in French
   - across subjects
   - English reading and writing usually on track after 1 to 2 years of formal English reading and writing instruction

Immersion versus non-Immersion education

- Low socioeconomic index
- Minority language background
- Minority language context

Equal or superior academic outcomes

Byers-Heinlein et al., 2019; Brini et al., 2020; Chen & Padilla, 2019; Heritage Canada, 2016; Kwon et al., 2021; Monnier et al., 2021; OECD, 2020; Paulavicius et al., 2020; Yurtsever et al., 2023; See reviews/meta-analyses in Anderson et al, 2020; Cheatham et al., 2012; Dicks & Genesee, 2016; Drysdale et al., 2015; Marinova-Todd & Mirenda, 2016; Paradis & Govindarajan, 2018; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2021; Ní Chlochasaigh, Karen, Gerry Shiel, & Pádraig Ó Duibhir, 2021

What about children with diverse learning needs?

Children raised in monolingual versus bilingual homes

Comparing profiles, severity and language abilities of monolingual versus bilingual children with

- language disorder
- Down syndrome
- autism*

BILINGUAL ≥ MONOLINGUAL

* Superior outcomes in some cases

Gilhuber et al., 2023; Paradis et al., 2003; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016; Drysdale et al., 2015; Lund et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019

Children raised in monolingual versus bilingual homes

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Bilingual Families: a Systematic Review

Review Paper | Published: 29 July 2014
Volume 2, pages 26–38, (2015) Cite this article

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Heather Drysdale, Larah van der Meer & Debora Kagohara

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Abstract

Because social communication impairment is a defining feature of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), making the right decision regarding language use for bilingual families of children with ASD is pertinent. The present review evaluated eight studies identified as addressing bilingual language development in 182 children with ASD and issues/perceptions of bilingualism in 62 parents of children with ASD. Studies were summarized in terms of participants, languages spoken and communication level, assessment/intervention, instruments, main findings, and evidence of bilingual language development. Findings suggested bilingualism does not have a negative impact on language development for children with ASD, but the majority of parents reported that practitioners predominantly advised against providing a bilingual environment. Evidence-based recommendations regarding the adoption of bilingualism for families of children with ASD are discussed.

Drysdale et al., 2015

Autism

National Autistic Society

Impact Factor: 5.6 / 5-Year Impact Factor: 7.2

Open access | Review article | First published online January 11, 2023

Language and communication skills in multilingual children on the autism spectrum: A systematic review

Christina Sophia Gilhuber, Tracy Jane Raulston, and Kasie Galley View all authors and affiliations

Volume 27, Issue 6 | https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221147780

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Abstract

More than half the global population is estimated to be multilingual, yet research on autistic children who grow up in multilingual environments remains scant. We conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies on multilingualism in autistic children and its impact on children's language and communication skills. Following Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines, our search identified 22 group comparison studies published from 2011 to 2022. The current review addressed two main questions: (a) Which language and communication skills of multilingual autistic children were assessed and how; and (b) how the skills of multilingual autistic children compared with their peers. Semantic-related skills were most frequently reported, while phonology and pragmatics were the most underreported dimensions of language. Most reviewed studies used a combination of direct and indirect language assessments. Available research provides no indication that being exposed to more than one language has adverse effects on the communication skills of autistic children. Although multilingual autistic children often have common autism characteristics, such as pragmatic difficulties affecting their communication skills, preliminary findings also indicate that they may share some advantages of multilingualism with their multilingual nonautistic peers. Studies often excluded participants with co-occurring diagnoses, which may have impacted the generalizability of the findings.

Gilhuber et al., 2023

Effects of Bilingualism on Executive Function of Children on the Autism Spectrum

Review

Effects of Bilingualism on Executive Function of Children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Scoping Review

Hoi Kwan Yuen [1], Haoyan Ge [2], Caicai Zhang [3], Yuen Ting Wong [1], Eva Y. W. Chan [1], William W. N. Tsang [1] and Catherine M. Capio [1,*]

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[2] School of Education and Languages, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong SAR, China; hge@hkmu.edu.hk
[3] Department of Language Science and Technology, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China; caicai.zhang@polyu.edu.hk
* Correspondence: ccapio@hkmu.edu.hk

Highlights

What are the main findings?

- Compared with their monolingual peers, bilingual children with ASD show advantages in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control on performance-based tasks.
- The evidence is limited to ASD, with no studies found on other neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD or dyslexia, highlighting a research gap.
- Inconsistencies exist between performance-based and parent-reported executive function measures, with bilingual participants performing better in laboratory tasks.

What is the implication of the main finding?

- Bilingualism may be beneficial for specific executive function skills in children with ASD, suggesting potential complementary value to traditional interventions.
- Further research is needed to explore the relationship of bilingualism with executive function across diverse neurodevelopmental disorders to inform clinical and educational practices.

check for updates

Received: 2 August 2025

Yuen et al., 2025

Diverse needs in the context of Immersion versus non-Immersion education

Students with **language disorder**, **learning disability**, **developmental delay**, **emotional problems** in dual language (Immersion) programs

- Same English-L1 outcomes
- Same or superior academic outcomes (history, science, math)
- Superior L2 outcomes

Students with **reading difficulty** learning to read in 2 languages

- Superior phonological awareness
- Superior decoding
- Faster rate of reading comprehension growth

See reviews in Cheatham et al., 2012; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2021; Vender & Melloni, 2021

Diverse needs in the context of Immersion versus non-Immersion education

Home / Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Language Education, Volume 9, Number 2

Access and outcomes of children with special education needs in Early French Immersion

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Authors: Kay-Raining Bird, Elizabeth; Genesee, Fred; Sutton, Ann; Chen, Xi; Oracheski, Joan; Pagan, Stephanie; Squires, Bonita; Burchell, Diana; Sorenson Duncan, Tamara
Source: Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Language Education, Volume 9, Number 2, 12 July 2021, pp. 193-222(30)
Publisher: John Benjamins Publishing Company
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/jicb.20012.kay

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References
Citations
Supplementary Data

Abstract | References | Citations | Supplementary Data

Abstract

This study investigated access to and outcomes of Early French Immersion (EFI) for students with special education needs (SEN) attending a large school board in Canada. Data analysis was carried out on: provincially mandated achievement test scores for all Grade 3 students with SEN participating over a three-year period (n=705) who attended either EFI or English programs; standardized French and English language and reading scores for a small subset of students (n=20); and interviews with parents of Grade 4 students in EFI (n=9). Results revealed lower participation but higher English academic and language performance for students with SEN in the EFI program as well as development of French language and reading skills. Interviewed parents often believed children with SEN 'could not handle' EFI and that withdrawal should be an option in response to learning difficulties. Implications for inclusive practices in EFI are discussed.

Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021

Students with diverse needs from minority home language contexts in Immersion

Academic achievement of minority home language students with special education needs in English language of instruction and French immersion programs

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Author(s): Ann Sutton[1], Fred Genesee[2], Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird[3], Xi Chen[4], Tamara Sorenson Duncan[5], Stephanie Pagan[6], Joan Oracheski[6]
View Affiliations

Source: Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Language Education
Available online: 19 October 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/jicb.23015.sut
Received: 18 May 2023 **Accepted:** 14 Sept 2023 **Version of Record published :** 19 Oct 2023

Abstract

This study explored the academic achievement of students who speak a minority language (ML) at home (i.e., a language other than the official languages of Canada, English and French) and who have special education needs (SEN), in two educational programs that differed in language of instruction: English language of instruction (ELoI), and Early French Immersion (EFI). The proportion of students (n = 131) meeting the provincial standard in reading, writing, and mathematics and the effect of gender, place of birth, socio-economic status, English proficiency level, and program were analyzed. Writing was the strongest domain, followed by reading and mathematics. ML-SEN students were equally likely to meet the provincial standard whether in ELoI or EFI, and there were few significant predictors of achievement. Participating in EFI did not increase students' risk of academic difficulty. Additional supports may be beneficial to ML-SEN students in ELoI and EFI programs.

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Sutton et al., 2021

Taken together, students with or without diverse learning needs can benefit from Immersion

Despite less exposure to each language than students in non-immersion programs, students in early or late Immersion programs

- acquire comparable levels of conversational and reading and writing proficiency in **English**. Adding more English does not change anything.
- perform **as well or better** in terms of **academic achievement** (math, science, history) **in English and French**
- attain proficiency in **French that is significantly superior** to that obtained through regular FSL (core)
  - This is especially interesting for students with diverse learning needs for whom the **social and health support benefits may be even more critical.**

Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013, 2021

Students with diverse learning needs – the bottom line

Research evidence does not support the practice of excluding them from strong* dual language programs. It is therefore essential to

- include them
- have realistic expectations
- foster high levels of language ability using best pedagogical practices
- ensure the same timely identification and response to needs as students in non-immersion programs

*Beyond core French

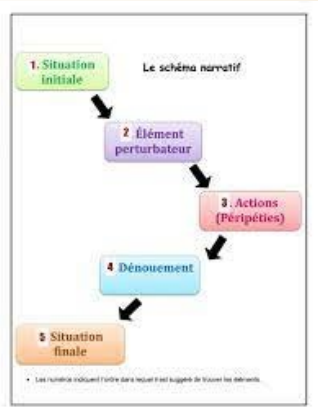
Why might students in Immersion do as well or better academically than their non-Immersion peers?

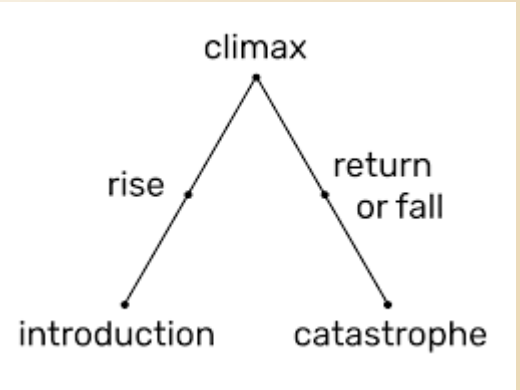
- Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 1991)
- Greater intensity of 2nd language instruction = more time spent on literacy
  - Second chance to learn to read and write
- Boost to self-esteem and self-confidence because teachers expect all students to still be acquiring the language
- Interactive and multimodal teaching strategies critical for diverse learners are at the core of second language instruction

Netten & Germain in SPEAQ, 2021

Why do some students struggle?

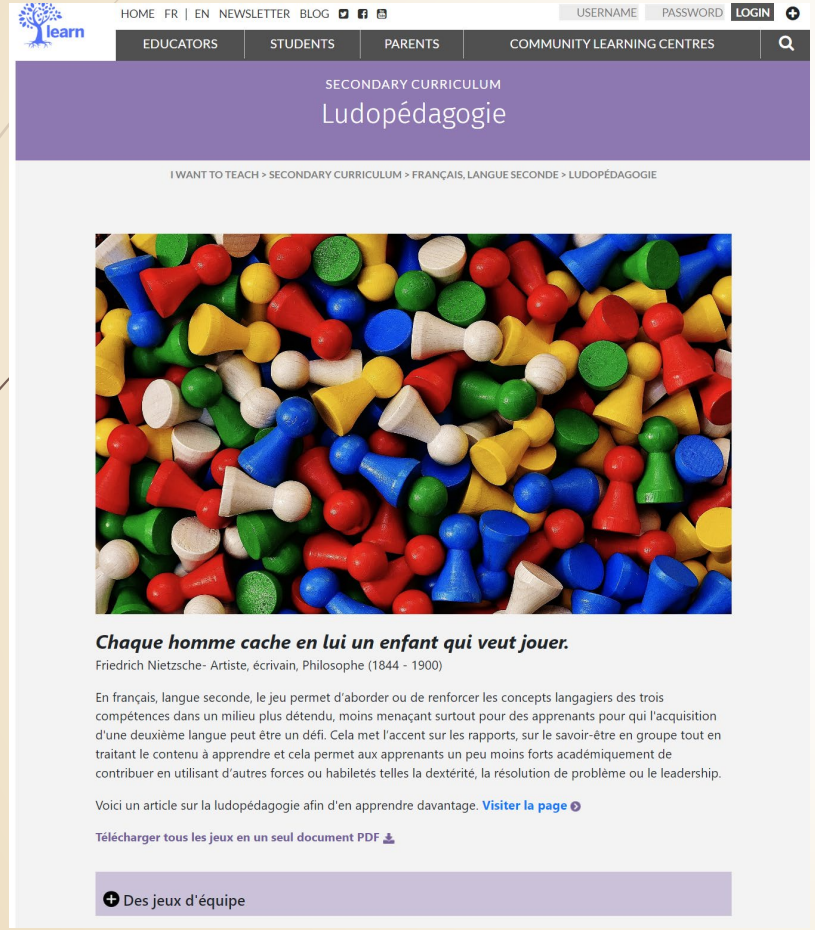
- Pedagogical practices
  - Siloed languages
  - Decontextualized teacher-centred instruction
  - Content not cognitively challenging
  - Low expectations
  - Unrealistically high expectations
    - Curriculum not adhered to
    - First language instead of second-language materials
  - Little teacher collaboration resulting in minimal overlap in
    - learning routines
    - themes
    - classroom management
    - visual supports
- Supports provided in only 1 language
    - Resource support
    - Technological aids





Pedagogical Practices Worth Highlighting

Pedagogical practices – ludopédagogie

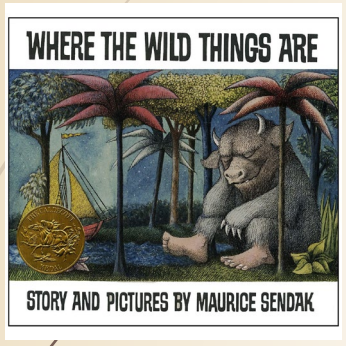


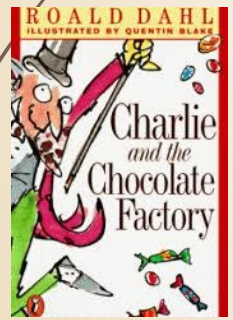
Sample video

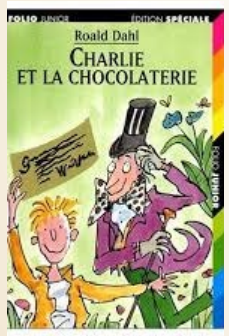
Sample resource

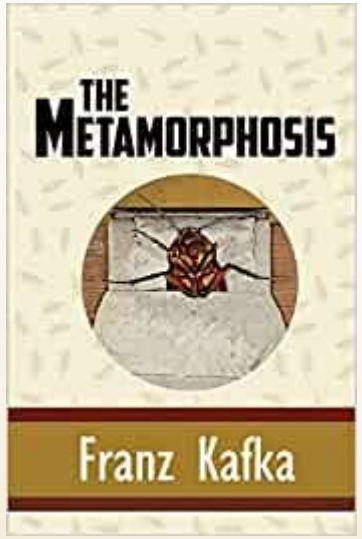
Pedagogical practices – bilingual books

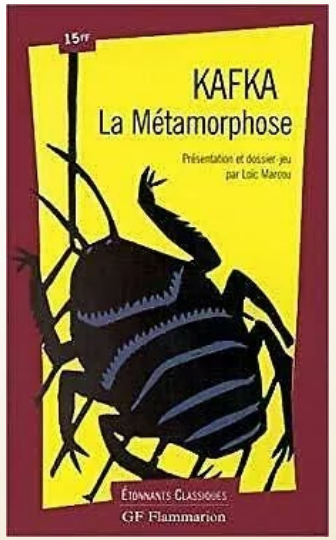
same **book**





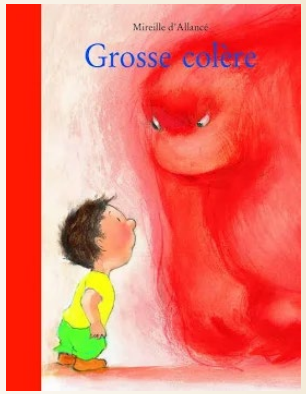


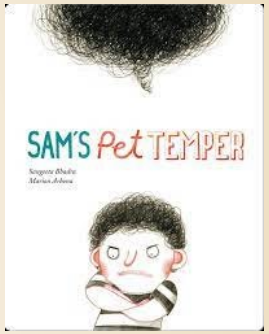


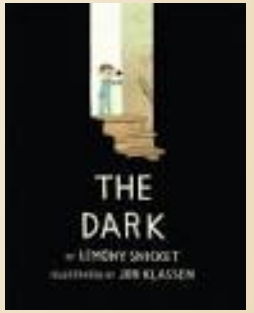


https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/education/pfeq/ressources-pedagogiques/Transfert-apprentissages-langue-seconde.pdf (end of document)

or same **theme**

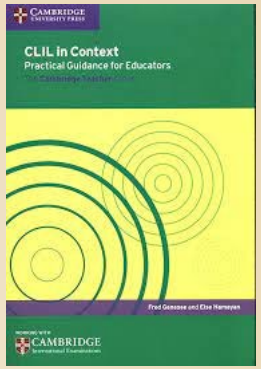






Lyster, Collins, & Ballinger, 2009

Pedagogical practices – Content and Language Integrated Learning



APPENDIX 4:A UNIT-PLANNING TOOL

Topic: **Big ideas:** **Time frame:**	
Content objectives:	**Content-compatible language objectives:** **Content-obligatory language objectives:**
Cross-linguistic objectives:	
Cross-cultural objectives:	
General learning-skills objectives:	
Background knowledge needed: **Assessment:**	

PREVIEW PHASE: **Teaching activities:** **Assessment:**	**Grouping arrangements:**
FOCUSED-LEARNING PHASE: **Teaching activities:** **Assessment:**	**Grouping arrangements:**
EXTENSION PHASE: **Teaching activities:** **Assessment:**	**Grouping arrangements:**
Materials:	
Assessment at the end of lesson:	

Genesee & Hamayan, 2016

Provide consistent language exposure

- ALL adults in the classroom use the language of the class
- Avoid systematically translating unless it's an emergency, but make sure students know you understand them
- Use strategies specific to Immersion instruction
  - Comprehension

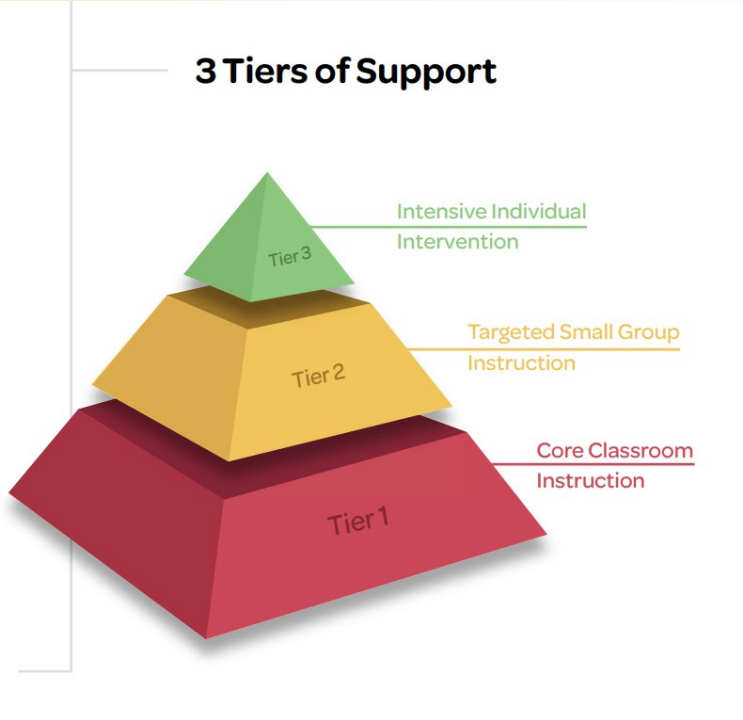
    https://dliteachingrubrics.umn.edu/self-assessment-rubric/individual-strands/self-assessment-rubric-strand-4
  - Expression

    https://dliteachingrubrics.umn.edu/self-assessment-rubric/individual-strands/self-assessment-rubric-strand-5

Tedick & Lyster, 2020

Timely Identification and Response to Student Needs

Response to Intervention (RtI)& Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) – Tier 1



Classroom teachers
- *All students (100%)*

Tier 1 - Early Screening and Progress Monitoring

- **Screen vision of all** (simulation) (25%)
- **Screen hearing of all** (simulation) (8-15%)
- **Screen oral language abilities of all** (7%)
- **Screen literacy abilities of all** (7-18%)
- **Sensitive and specific tools (>.80)**
- **Administered by the student's teacher**
- **Progress monitoring at 2-3X/year**

Typical literacy milestones

With abundant exposure and practice in the classroom setting, students in Immersion and non-Immersion programs should be able to master these within the same timeframe. Generally,

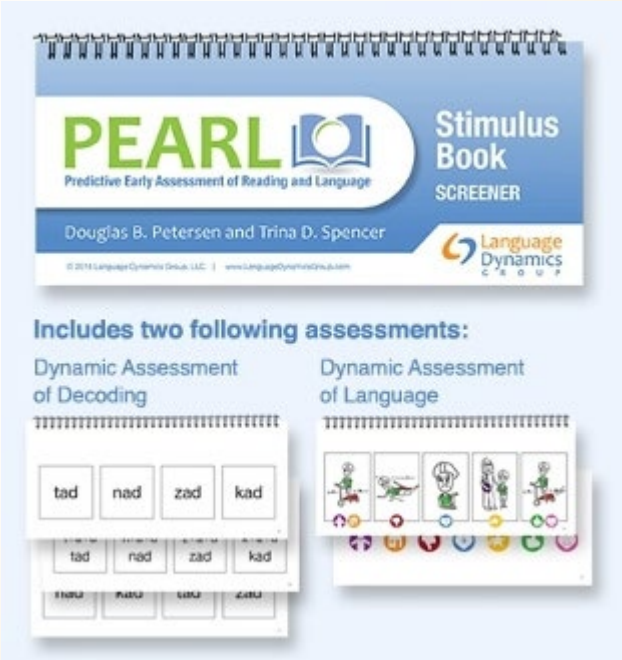
- by the end of **K4**: **blending and segmenting syllables**
- by the end of **K5**: **blending and segmenting phonemes** and know **most letter sounds** in the language(s) of instruction
- by the end of **grade 1**: **decode** (read) and **encode** (write) words that follow **phonics rules taught** in grade 1, in the language(s) of instruction
- Beyond **grade 1: reading speed and accuracy**, in the language(s) of instruction

Geva in August & Shanahan, 2006

Tier 1 - A Few Tools

Screening

- PEARL (Eng)*
  - K5
- DIBELS (Eng)
  - K-grade 8
- Acadience Reading Français (Fr)
  - K- grade 2



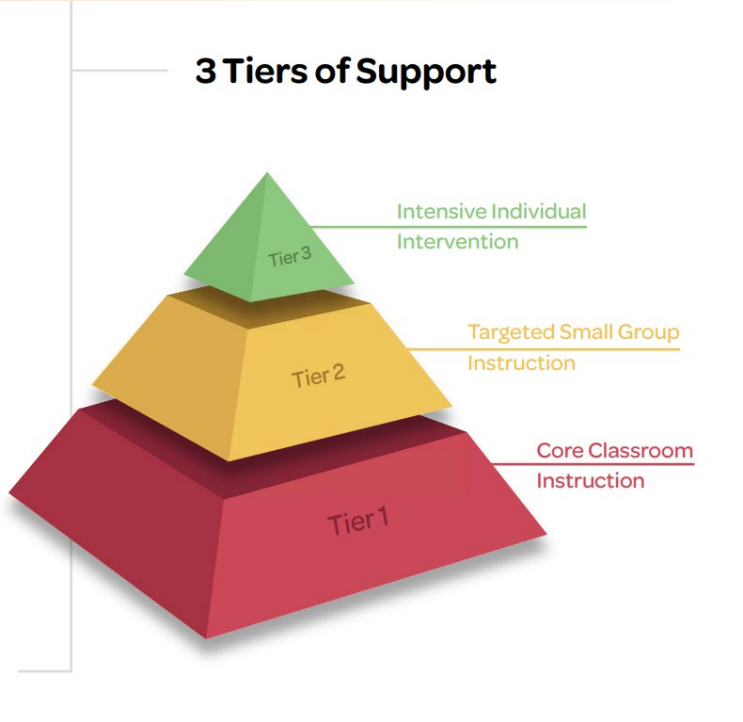
(informal French adaptation available)

*dynamic assessment: test-teach-retest

Language(s) of Screening

- Oral language – **dominant language**
- Phonological awareness – **L1 or L2**
- Written language – **language(s) of instruction**

Response to Intervention (RtI)& Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) – Tier 2



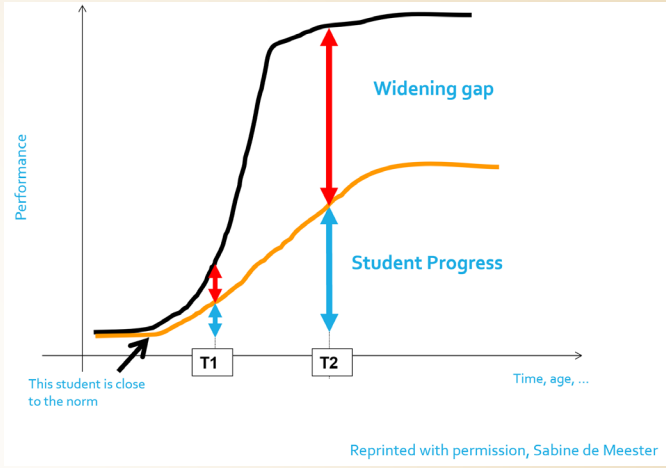
Resource teachers
- *Some students* (20%)

+

Classroom teachers
- *All students* (100%)

Principles of Intervention

- Target precise area of difficulty
  - Phonemic awareness
  - Letter-sound knowledge
  - Vocabulary
  - Story structure
- Highlight similarities and differences between languages
- Intensive and sustained over time
- Supported by research evidence (e.g., structured and explicit literacy instruction)
- Progress/response to intervention should be monitored



Crosslinguistic Teacher Collaboration in Action

- Activating background knowledge : L'activation des connaissances antérieures pour favoriser le transfert des apprentissages langagiers
- Language transfer and oral language : Le transfert des apprentissages langagiers au service de la compétence à communiquer oralement
- Language transfer and written language : Le transfert des apprentissages langagiers pour la compétence à produire des textes variés à l'écrit
- Bilingual book reading : Le transfert des apprentissages langagiers au service des compétences à lire et à interagir
- Explicit instruction : Un enseignement explicite pour favoriser le transfert des apprentissages langagiers
- Modelling : Modélisation dans les classes de ELA-FLS pour favoriser le transfert des apprentissages langagiers

Students with complex needs require the same evidence-based reading instruction

Stanford Report

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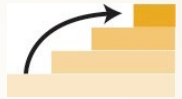
Education

Learners with disabilities benefit from more complex reading instruction, Stanford researchers say

Stanford education scholars Chris Lemons and Lakshmi Balasubramanian share strategies for helping students with intellectual and developmental disabilities learn to read.



Systematic

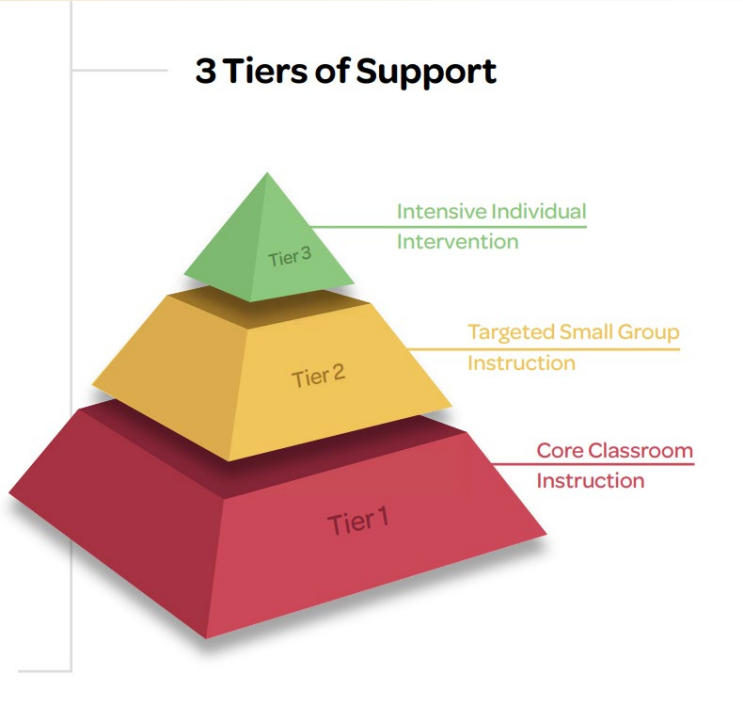
Scope and sequence

Explicit

Scaffolded

Differentiated

Response to Intervention (RtI)& Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) – Tier 3



Speech-language Pathologists
- *Few students* (5%)

Resource teachers
- *Some students* (20%)

Classroom teachers
- *All students* (100%)

Tier 3 - A Few Tools

Academic Testing

- WIAT (Fr & Eng)
- ECLAIR (Fr)

Language/ Literacy Testing

- TILLS (Eng)
- DYMOND (Eng)
- CELF-5(Fr & Eng)
- PPVT (Fr & Eng)
- EVT (Fr & Eng)

Cognitive Testing

- WISC (Fr & Eng)

Language delay versus language disorder

Language delay due to incomplete acquisition of the additional language

- Has not yet accumulated 2 (conversational language) to 7 (academic language) years of exposure to the new language
- Difficulty understanding and speaking the new language only
- No issues noted or reported in the first language

At risk for language disorder

- Presence of risk factors
- Difficulty understanding and/or speaking both the first language and the additional language
- The language difficulties have always been present according to caregivers

Reading disorder across languages

Annals of Dyslexia
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A 3-year longitudinal investigation of the overlap and stability of English and French word reading difficulties in French immersion children

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Abstract
Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of struggling reader identification in monolingual children Compton et al. (*Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*, 327–340, 2010). However, very few studies have explored identification of struggling readers in bilinguals. The aim of this study was to investigate (1) the overlap of word reading difficulties in English and French, (2) the difference in overlap when word reading fluency skills are included in struggling reader classification, and (3) the stability of English and French word reading profiles. A total of 169 French immersion children were followed from grades 1 to 3. Standardized measures of English and French word reading accuracy and fluency were administered every year to classify status as a bilingual typical reader, bilingual struggling reader, English struggling reader, or French struggling reader. Chi-square analyses were conducted to assess the overlap between English and French word reading difficulties and stability of word reading profiles from grades 1 to 3. Results indicated that struggling reader classification using both word reading accuracy and fluency as opposed to accuracy alone captured bilingual reading difficulties (difficulties in both languages) more accurately. Across all grades, there was a significant relationship between being a struggling reader in English and being a struggling reader in French, with the percentage of overlap ranging from 56 to 82%. Moreover, being a bilingual struggling reader in grade 1 was significantly related to being a bilingual struggling reader in grades 2 and 3. These findings suggest that English-French bilingual children with reading impairments have significant and persistent deficits in both languages.

Skakory et al., 2022

Assessment considerations for learners of an additional language

Language

- consider all languages of the student
- avoid comparing to a monolingual standard
- adopt assessment strategies appropriate for learners of an additional language, e.g., dynamic assessment
- assess vocabulary across languages

Reading & Writing

- assess only if the student has received literacy instruction in that language
- students in early French Immersion will perform like their English-only program counterparts in reading after 1 to 2 years of reading instruction

Do not delay assessment but do insist on tracking response to targeted intervention

Hunt, Nang, Meldrum, & Armstrong, 2022; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2021

Language(s) of intervention

- Oral language – **bilingual intervention** leads to superior gains
- Written language – **language(s) of instruction**
  - However, there is evidence of transfer of phonological awareness, phonics, and perhaps even decoding from first to second language when providing intervention in the first language

Ebert, Kohnert, Pham, Disher, & Payesteh, 2014; Côté, Savage, & Petscher, 2021; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2021

Diagnostic Gold Standard

Language or literacy issues are present despite

- Intact vision and hearing
- sufficiently rich stimulation and exposure
- targeted, sustained, evidence-based interventions

Potential Action Items for School Administrators

Action item #1
Ensure realistic expectations

Neurotypical learners of an additional language (L2)

- require 2-4 years for conversational language proficiency in the L2,
- require 5-7 years for L2 academic language proficiency,
- require 30% total exposure for productive language use,
- may use code switching, a normal phenomenon for bilingual individuals, and
- possess a smaller vocabulary in each language but similar sized conceptual vocabulary.

Collier and Thomas, 1995; Paradis et al., 2021

Action item #2
Recognize potential sources of difficulty

Classroom walkthroughs may reveal French-English inconsistency

- Themes
- Classroom routines
- Behaviour management approaches and strategies
- Instructional approaches and tools
- Adaptations or accommodations

Action item #3
Address potential sources of difficulty

a) Provide built-in common planning time for teachers to collaborate and align
   - Themes
   - Classroom routines
   - Behaviour management approaches and strategies
   - Pedagogical practices
   - Adaptations

Action item #3 cont'd
Address potential sources of difficulty

B. Plan professional development time to ensure that all teachers know which academic and testing adaptations or accommodations are permitted
C. Ensure that adaptations or accommodations are used systematically where required
   - e.g., text-to-speech software for ALL reading & writing tasks in L1 AND L2 in the case of a student with a dyslexia profile

Action item #4
Ensure timely identification of needs

a) Identification of needs should be timely and accurate

Which action item is most pressing at your school?

1. Aligning expectations
2. Addressing sources of difficulty - pegagogical practices
3. Addressing sources of difficulty - adaptations
4. Timely identification and response to student needs

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