

L2RIC NOTES

French Immersion and At-Risk Students: A Review of Research Evidence – An Article Summary

In a recent article¹, Fred Genesee comprehensively reviewed the research currently available on the topic of French Immersion (FI) and students with special educational needs. Dr. Genesee, whose primary research interests include bilingual first language acquisition in both “normal” and impaired populations², has been a professor at McGill University since 1978. The focus of the article was on providing a review of research results regarding the suitability of FI for students with special educational needs, and on interventions and strategies that may meet the needs of these students. Genesee outlined some recommendations based on this review of research and suggested a need for further research in the area.

Research involving FI students with low levels of academic performance has suggested that these students experience the same academic struggles whether enrolled in FI or the English program. Below average FI students score as well as below average non-FI students enrolled in English programs. Similarly to below average students enrolled in an English program, below average FI students under-perform average and above average students enrolled in the same program. Furthermore, even those FI students with low levels of academic performance experience the benefit of increased proficiency in French, when compared to those in the English program. This was shown to be true on tests related to literacy (reading and writing) for both the Early FI (EFI) and Late FI (LFI) programs. However, when it comes to comparing the EFI and LFI programs, the

EFI program produces the most egalitarian results, particularly in French speaking and listening skills. This means that below-average students in EFI scored as well as average and above-average EFI students on speaking and listening tests. The same cannot be said for LFI, where below-average students score less than average and above-average students on the same types of tests.

A limited amount of research exists regarding the effects of transfer to the English program for FI students with academic difficulties. Some of this research has suggested that transfer students show improvement in both academic performance and self-esteem. A limitation of such studies is that there were no comparisons made to a control group who remained in FI and who could have been provided with additional support, and results were based on participants’ impressions. Other research in this area has found that it is the ability to cope with difficulties, rather than the difficulties themselves, that influences FI students’ and parents’ decisions to switch programs. Furthermore, these studies found that those who switch from FI to an English program continue to experience academic difficulties. Trites and Price³ (in Genesee, 2007) have suggested that some students may have a developmental delay in a specific part of the brain and therefore a predisposed difficulty when it comes to learning in an immersion environment. This research has been criticized however, based on the results of a follow-up study, and on methodological and logical grounds.

Genesee’s review found only one set of studies based on the research of FI students with Language Impairments (LIs). The research has shown that students with an LI are not more disadvantaged in FI than

they would be in the English program. Similar to the case of FI students with low levels of academic ability, FI students with LIs experience the benefit of increased proficiency in French when compared to students with comparable disabilities enrolled in the English program. Other research has investigated simultaneous bilingual children with specific language impairment (SLI) and found that these children did not show a unique pattern of impairment, nor were they suffering from greater impairment, when compared to monolingual children with SLI.

While there is no available research on FI students with reading impairment, there is some research on FI students with poor reading skills, or who were identified as at-risk for reading difficulty. Results from these studies have shown that FI students who read well in English also read well in French; similarly, those who read poorly in English also read poorly in French. When comparing students from the FI program to those from the English program, there were no differences on measures of accuracy, however English-program students demonstrated faster and more fluent reading (this was true for both strong and poor readers). Regarding assessment of students, other studies have found that identical English-language tests can be used to identify risk in English or French.

Research results on the effectiveness of intervention strategies for FI students with low levels of academic ability or LIs have shown that students, parents, and teachers have high levels of satisfaction with such programs. Whether such intervention programs actually have an effect on academic performance is unclear, as current studies have not focused on the use of pre- and post-tests and control group comparisons. Another study researched a phonological training program for kindergarten FI students using pre- and post-testing, and found that the training had a

positive effect on students' phonological awareness.

Based on the available research in the area of FI and at-risk students, Genesee recommended that undertaking additional, updated research be a priority. While it may be possible that immersion is not suitable for some students, this remains unclear. Furthermore, there is not enough evidence currently available allowing for identification of these students beforehand. It is suggested that transfer from FI is a multifaceted decision, which should take into account several factors such as regional, familial, and emotional factors, and not simply academic performance.

¹ Fred Genesee, "French Immersion and At-Risk Students: A Review of Research Evidence," *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 63, no.5 (2007): 655-687.

² <http://www.psych.mcgill.ca/faculty/genesee.html>

³ For primary source article see Trites & Price, "Specific Learning Disability in Primary French Immersion," *Interchange* 9, no.4 (1978b): 73-85.