

Merging rather than exiting

Supporting teachers to foster the inclusion and success of students with learning difficulties in second language classes

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In einer Zeit, in der man in einigen Schweizer Kantonen ernsthaft erwägt, Kinder mit Lernschwierigkeiten in den Fremdsprachen von diesem Unterricht zu befreien, ist es einigermaßen beruhigend zu erfahren, dass Lehrer in bilingualen kanadischen Klassen ähnliche Vorschläge machen. Callie Mady geht zunächst auf die Auswirkungen solcher Vorschläge auf die betroffenen Schüler ein, die sich dadurch entweder als dümmer als andere empfinden oder die Bedeutung der Fremdsprache für ihr berufliches Weiterkommen als weniger wichtig einschätzen. Obwohl es in der Forschung durchaus ersichtlich ist, dass Schüler mit Lernschwierigkeiten sehr wohl von bilinguaem Unterricht profitieren können, setzen sich die kanadischen Fremdsprachenlehrer erst langsam mit diesen Erkenntnissen auseinander. Mady zählt eine Reihe von Massnahmen auf, dank derer Lehrer sich bewusster den Problemen gemischter Gruppen stellen können, damit schliesslich alle – je nach ihren Möglichkeiten - in den Genuss bilingualen Spracherwerbs gelangen können.

“I am going to take Luke out of French class, so he can finish his math.”

“We recommend Sophie not continue with French.”

“I suggest Jessie leave the immersion program and transfer to the mainstream English program.”

“I would like Pat to be exempt from studying an additional language.”

The sentiments expressed in these quotes are not uncommon when discussing students with learning difficulties studying an additional language in Canada. They may come from our colleagues, our administrators, students’ parents and at times from us as teachers of additional languages.

Although the students mentioned above may not hear the statements directly, when they are removed from the additional language classroom, they may come to believe:

“I am not smart enough to learn French.”

“I can’t learn another language.”

“French is not as important as other subjects.”

In light of research that shows that students with learning difficulties can successfully learn an additional language, I wonder why the above decisions/recommendations are often the first reaction when considering a student with learning

difficulties in an additional language class. As a teacher educator, I turn to educators to find the answers with a view to understanding the issue in order to then better offer solutions.

Canadian Context

French as a second language (FSL) learning

In Canada, education is not a national responsibility, but under the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories. As such, the degree of language learning is variable with only 8 of the 12 “English” dominant regions requiring the study of an additional language. In 6 of those 8 regions, French is the obligatory language of study as the second official language of the country. Throughout Canada, whether an obligatory area of study or not, French is offered through a variety of delivery models. Most of our students study core French – a class that focuses on the study of French for approximately forty minutes a day. It is a minority of students who learn French in the more successful, intensive programs of intensive¹ or extended² French, or the model known for its effectiveness French immersion. This hierarchy of programming options core, intensive, extended and immersion³ correspond to the time allotted to the program with an accompanying documented increase in success.

Inclusion in French second language learning

In the last two decades in particular, Canadian educators have been called to meet the needs of all students in the mainstream classroom by means of differentiating their instruction to support a wide range of learners. As mainstream educators endeavored to provide more accessible instruction for all, FSL classes seemed to lag behind. The French immersion program often remains elite as students with learning difficulties, among others, are at times being refused access

or are withdrawn from the program. Similarly, students with learning difficulties are at times exempt from the provincial language learning credits in the core program. Calls for French immersion, in particular, to become inclusive came from parents, academics and government alike. In 2008, in the bilingual province of New Brunswick, for example, research that found French immersion to often exclude students with learning difficulties led the provincial government to make systematic changes in response. Parents in the province of Ontario also highlighted segregation in the French Immersion program and filed a claim of discrimination. It is perhaps in part due to such push back that governments have begun to encourage FSL educators to become more inclusive in their administration and pedagogy.

FSL educators

Why would second language educators make or support the recommendations cited at the beginning of the article? Research provides insight into the continued practice of segregation. First, research reveals that FSL educators in Canada are often unaware of the potential for students with learning difficulties to meet with success in second language learning. Research with second language teachers shows them to be uncertain about including students with learning difficulties and unknowledgeable about the research that would support their potential to meet with success. Mollica, Philips, & Smith's (2006) survey of over 800 FSL teachers in the one province of Ontario, for example, showed that the majority of respondents did not consult research. Similarly in my study (Mady, 2012), through interviews and questionnaires with FSL educators, the majority of participants revealed that they rarely/never consult research or attend research focused presentations. Yet, after having read research articles provided by this project, the teacher participants showed changes in opinion more congruent with the articles post-reading as revealed through the questionnaire. The teachers' recommendations at the beginning of this article, then, may be grounded in good intentions, without considering the potential for success, nor the possible negative impact of an exclusionary message on the student. Second, in the last two

decades, Canadian research has revealed that FSL educators do not feel well-prepared to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties regardless of program of delivery (Lapkin Macfarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006). More precisely, in Lapkin et al's national survey of 1305 core and immersion FSL educators, the teachers revealed student diversity to be their greatest concern. Addressing these two areas of lack of research exposure and adequate preparation, then, could provide means by which to advance inclusive practices in additional language learning contexts.

Potential Solutions

Research Awareness

The responsibility for having teachers become more aware of research is a shared responsibility. First, collaboration between teachers and researchers may lead to researchers investigating issues of current concern and teachers learning to research themselves in the process. Second, researchers in applied linguistics need to write in publications accessed by teachers. Although our work culture calls for academic publications, the opportunity for application comes from cross-work culture communications. Third, the probability of teachers accessing research could also be enhanced with administrative support to provide access and attention to and time for educators to engage with research. Fourth, teachers could include research in their toolkit as a resource to consult in the face of unknowns.

Teacher Preparation

In Canada, as described above with the elementary and secondary levels, teacher education programs vary from province to province without any national expectations for curriculum. It is possible, then, for a teacher candidate to receive qualifications to teach without having specialized in second language or special education preparation. Therefore, although it falls to teacher education programs to begin the preparation of teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students; it is incumbent upon teachers to continue their professional growth throughout their careers. This philosophical shift toward inclusive education highlights an urgent need for practical preparation of additional language educators to better meet the needs of students with learning difficulties in both teacher preparation programs and ongoing development.

Preparation has begun

Although Canadian French as a second language educators have expressed discomfort in their abilities to address the needs of students with learning difficulties, they may be better prepared than they think as some of their preparation to teach second languages will serve them



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well to address the needs of students with learning difficulties. Additional language educators, for example, will often:

- Modify their language according to students' needs
- Repeat and/or rephrase to enhance comprehension
- Support target language comprehension with the use of visuals
- Consider the level of language in texts presented to students
- Judiciously use the students' first language (s) as support
- Highlight sound-symbol connections
- Present language in a variety of modes
- Teach language learning strategies
- Pre-teach vocabulary
- Focus on oral language development, particularly in the early stages of language development
- Provide models for written and oral production
- Highlight patterns (e.g. cognates, language structures)

Inclusion of a direct focus on meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties within teacher education programs may better prepare additional language educators to:

- Adjust the pacing of their instruction (e.g. giving short instructions one at a time)
- Modify assessments (e.g. timing and length of assignment)
- Establish an physical environment to enhance learning (e.g. preferential seating, few distractions)
- Become aware of supportive technology choices (e.g. Dragon speaking)
- Advocate for support for their students
- Modify text (e.g. highlighting known words)

Such preparation and ongoing professional development may provide additional language educators with not only the knowledge that it is possible for students with learning difficulties to meet with success in additional language learning but also with the means to bolster that success. As this shift to inclusive education continues to move towards additional language classes and is met with well-prepared and

informed educators, perhaps the above questions/recommendations will change to:

“Luke is excelling in French, can you help him with math at another time?”

“How can I support Sophie to remain in French?”

“What support can the school and I provide to allow Jessie to experience the program that is most likely to enhance his additional language skills?”

“Pat should continue the study of an additional language as it is an area in which he excels.”

Endnotes

¹ A FSL delivery format that offers learners a concentrated exposure to French involving an increase in the allocated hours and literacy-based pedagogical strategies. Students typically have from half a day to a full day of French over one semester usually in Grade 5 or Grade 6.

² Extended French programs offer students who have completed three years of Core French (Grades 4 - 6) an opportunity to enter into a more intensive French program beginning in grade 7. Students entered in the Extended French program spend approximately a minimum of 25% of their day in classes where the French language is the medium of instruction.

³ French immersion in Canada begins in elementary school where French is the language of instruction for at least 50% of the instruction.

References

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