Understanding Language and Learning Disabilities in Immersion Education:

Immersion Educators' Top Questions & Research-based, Practitioner-informed Responses

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Introduction to the Project

For more than a decade the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota has sponsored a variety of summer institutes that cater to the needs of language teaching professionals. These institutes serve as one of several outreach venues for the dissemination of CARLA's various projects including the Immersion Research and Professional Development Project. During the summers of 2003 and 2004, the annual "Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education" institute focused specifically on one of the field's more complex and persistent challenges—language and learning disorders in the immersion context.

Over the course of these two summers, more than seventy professionals with experience in language immersion education gathered to engage issues relevant to educating the struggling immersion learner. Together, they examined research, exchanged ideas, and listened to specialists, including researchers, special education teachers, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists.

The goals of the institutes were:

1. To establish a professional forum for immersion educators and specialists who are interested in this topic to exchange ideas and practices.

2. To examine the research literature on struggling second language learners and discuss implications for teaching and learning in immersion settings.

3. To consider a range of pre-referral procedures and assessment practices that can provide feedback on students' language development and learning.

4. To explore a variety of instructional adaptations known to be effective with under-performing language immersion learners and discuss how to integrate these strategies both at the classroom and program level.

5. To collaboratively create a list of recommended instructional adaptations that address particular language and learning disorders and create a more inclusive learning environment.

Immersion Projects Coordinator, Tara Fortune, facilitated the weeklong event and presentations were given by various educational specialists from Minnesota's immersion schools, as well as by Kathryn Kohnert, Associate Professor in the Department of Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences, who presented during two days. All but one, a Taiwanese participant, came from immersion programs

located in 16 states representing all continental regions of the U.S. and Alaska. They embodied three distinct immersion education contexts: the one-way foreign language immersion context (71% of participants), the two-way bilingual immersion context (24%), and the indigenous (heritage) immersion context (5%). The immersion language(s) targeted by participants' programs included Spanish, French, German, Japanese (one-way programs), Spanish-English, Cantonese-English (two-way programs), and Yup'ik (an indigenous program).

Collectively, participants brought a wealth of experience in the immersion setting and a wide variety of professional perspectives. On the first day of the institute, participants were invited to complete a survey that requested information about their role and years of immersion experience, as well as the range and frequency of language and learning issues they had encountered in their professions. Of the fifty-four participants who responded, the majority of respondents had three or more years working as classroom teachers in an immersion setting (see Figure 1).
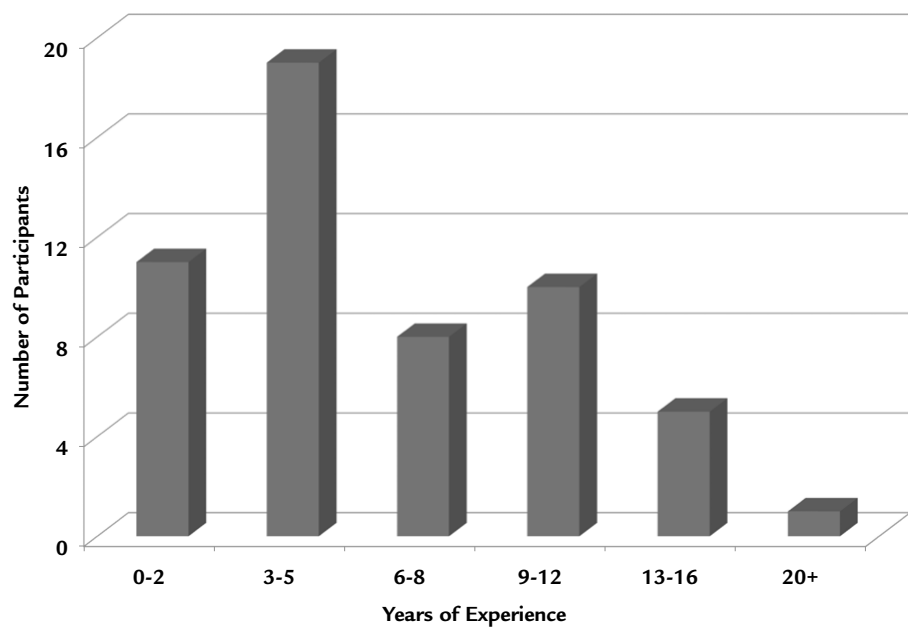
Summer institute participants attend to Dr. Kohnert's presentation on Language Disorders and Second Language Learning.

Figure 1: *Institute Participants' Years of Experience in the Immersion Setting*

In addition, many respondents were educational specialists and program support personnel (see Table 1 below).

N	Participant Role in the Immersion Setting
35	Immersion Classroom Teacher
3	Immersion Program Coordinator (program-level)
3	Special Education Teacher
2	School Psychologist
2	Speech Language Pathologist
1	Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences Graduate Student
1	Social Worker
1	Gifted/Talented Specialist
1	Reading Specialist
1	Immersion Program Coordinator (district-level)
1	Immersion Administrator
1	Paraprofessional
1	Ph.D. Student
1	Linguistics University Professor

Table 1: Number of Survey Respondents by Participant Role

The "Survey of Exceptionalities and the Immersion Classroom" included a list of exceptionality categories recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A brief definition was provided for each category. For example, the label "visual impairment and blindness" was followed by this descriptive text "visual impairment includes any type of sight problem which, even with correction, adversely affects educational performance." Participants were asked to indicate how often they had encountered the particular exceptionality in their immersion practice using a five-point scale that ranged from "never" to "always."

Results from this informal survey indicated that the most frequently encountered disorders fell under the broad category of "specific learning disability" (SLD), with the exception of two: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and speech or language impairment. The seven most frequently encountered issues of exceptionality are listed below beginning with the issue cited most often:

1. Reading Comprehension (SLD)
2. Basic Reading Skills (SLD)
3. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
4. Listening Comprehension (SLD)
5. Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)
6. Oral Expression (SLD)
7. Math Reasoning and Calculation (SLD)

The forthcoming practitioner-oriented document began to take shape during these summers. It is framed by ten questions that were individually identified and mutually agreed upon by institute participants in the summer of 2003 (see below). Beginning with these questions the next summer, 2004 summer institute participants broke into groups of four or five and selected one of the already identified questions to examine in greater depth during the course of the institute. As various presenters shared information and research, participants were invited to apply what they were learning from one another to their group's question. They were also encouraged to avail themselves of the rich array of research articles in the institute's Struggling Learners Lending Library. Based on institute presentations, discussions, and readings, each group put together a list of relevant research findings. On the final day of the weeklong institute, the groups brainstormed implications and offered recommendations for immersion classroom and program practices.

The Ten Questions

Question #1:

For whom might immersion not be appropriate? For whom might immersion be appropriate? Who is likely to struggle and stay in the immersion program? Who is likely to struggle and leave the immersion program?

Question #2:

How do you differentiate between typical delays experienced by children who are learning through a second language and a language and/or learning disability?

Question #3:

In an immersion program, how much of a reading lag still falls into the normal range when learners are acquiring initial literacy? What initial literacy challenges should constitute a cause for concern?

Question #4:

What kind of assessments can be given to language immersion students
- who are not progressing in the target language and may not be developing cognitively at an appropriate rate?
- who are not yet reading and writing?

What languages should be used to assess an immersion learner?

Questions #5 & #6:

As we work to support immersion teachers with struggling learners, what research-based adaptations are known to be effective with these students? Which strategies are most likely to be implemented by the teachers?

Question #7:

Should interventions be provided in immersion students' L1, L2, or in both L1 and L2? If a particular language(s) is recommended, which language(s) should one use, when and why?

Question #8:

In your program, are there any services available for struggling students in the early primary grades (K-2)? If so, what are they and how do students qualify for these services? If not, does this impact the program's pre-referral process in any way?

Question #9:

When it comes to communicating with immersion parents…

♦ How and when does the teacher raise the issue of transferring a child out?

♦ How and when does the teacher encourage parents to keep their child in the immersion program?

What tools can immersion educators give or recommend to parents to help their struggling and/or learning disabled (LD)/ language and learning disabled (LLD) immersion student at home?

Question #10:

Is it appropriate to pre-assess potential students' readiness to enter an immersion program? If so, how might this be carried out and by whom?

With roots in this initial collaborative work, Tara Fortune and Mandy Menke have put together a comprehensive publication that will be introduced during the 2009 "Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education Summer Institute: Language and Learning Disorders and the Struggling Immersion Learner," scheduled to take place July 13-17, 2009.[1] Consistent with other professional contributions to this field, this publication targets a variety of dual language contexts, including one-way (foreign language) immersion, two-way (bilingual) immersion, and indigenous (heritage) immersion.

The ten original questions were reduced to nine chapters because questions #5 and #6 were combined into one. These nine chapters have been organized into two sections: Part One: Program Suitability and Learner Disability (Questions #1-4) and Part Two: Best Practice at the Classroom and Program-Level (Questions #5-10). Part One addresses educators' uncertainties about the appropriateness of immersion schooling for various learner profiles and learning needs, initial literacy challenges, and the subtleties involved in differentiating delay from disability, including the development of assessment practices to determine eligibility for special education services. Part Two focuses on classroom-based and program level responses to language and learning struggles. It discusses ways that teachers, reading specialists and special education teachers can modify and

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1 For more information about this project and future publications, visit CARLA's Immersion Projects website at www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/

adapt instruction, presents a variety of support programs and services developed by immersion educators, provides guidance for the "In which language?" conundrum, and addresses the important role of home-school communication.

To provide a more meaningful reading experience we invited a number of veteran educators who work in immersion programs to share a personal case story that relates to the question at hand. Their lived experiences offer a forum for reflecting on the issues at a deeper level.

Each chapter begins with a question. Questions #1-9 are followed by an immersion educator's narrated experience with the particular challenge introduced by the question. Next, we provide background information for the topic at hand as needed, and present a brief discussion of relevant research and literature from the field of language and culture education. Depending on the topic's complexity we have further divided these discussions into sub-topics we found to be helpful in exploring the question. After the presentation of research, we set forth a list of research and practitioner-informed recommendations to guide program and classroom practice (see sample research-to-practice connection taken from Question #1 below). Finally, we suggest a number of online and print resources that can serve to provide information and support best practice. References and a master list that includes resources related to each of the nine questions are currently accessible online via the CARLA website at http://carla.umn.edu/conferences/past/immersion2008/workshops.html

Excerpts from Part One: Chapter One

Question #1:

For whom might immersion not be appropriate? For whom might immersion be appropriate? Who is likely to struggle and stay in the immersion program? Who is likely to struggle and leave the immersion program?

Case Narrative:
Key Elementary, Arlington (VA) Public Schools

While a few struggling learners have left Key school to find a better program match, the vast majority of students who struggle end up staying. To help make this possible the school makes many kinds of support programs available within the school. The school works very hard to meet the needs of all children and except for a few extreme cases it has managed to do so and do it well. A critical component to Key's success is the administration and staff's firm belief that all barriers are bumps in the road that can be overcome.

Relevant Research and Literature

☑ Milian and Pearson (2005) conducted a case study of two visually impaired students who participated in a two-way bilingual immersion program. Based on data gathered during semi-structured interviews of the students, their parents, and twelve teachers (two of whom specialized in teaching students with visual impairment), researchers found that the dual language setting was possible for these students given strong collaboration among home and school support systems, use of written materials (i.e., materials in English and Spanish Braille), and unyielding commitment to the goal of bilingualism and biliteracy. They also noted that parents and staff perceived an additional benefit for the two students due to the school environment's promotion of acceptance of diverse characteristics among all students.

Practitioner and Researcher Recommendations

☑ **Secure specialist staffing and appropriate materials to address language and learning difficulties within the program itself**. Transfer into a non-immersion program may be the only solution available to learners who struggle when there is a lack of intervention resources and remediation services available in the immersion program. By ensuring access to language and learning support services and materials within the program, educators enable learners to stay and continue learning through the immersion language.

Conclusion

Since this project was initially conceptualized, interest in the intersection between the fields of special education, language and learning disorders and immersion students learning through a second language has risen sharply. New legislation has changed the way schools are expected to respond to students who are underperforming academically, and many programs are searching for ways to adapt their practices. Although research continues to add to this small but growing knowledge base, we hope this resource will provide language immersion educators and families with research-based information, practitioner-informed guidelines and useful resources for their day-to-day practice.

Acknowledgements