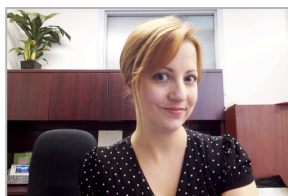# Reading Strategies: At Risk and High Performing Immersion Learners

by Renée Bourgoin

Dr. Renée Bourgoin is a faculty associate at the Second Language Research Institute of Canada at the University of New Brunswick (Faculty of Education). Her research and publications focus on at risk readers in immersion programs, second language reading and writing development, and inclusion in second language contexts. Along with her responsibilities teaching French Second Language methodology and literacy courses, Renée is a member of the Institute's research team on best teaching practices.

Language immersion classrooms are increasingly attracting a more diverse student population. This diversity includes students of various cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic abilities (Genesee & Fortune, 2014). Consequently, immersion educators are called to reflect on ways to best support the wide range of students in their classes. Researchers are also committed to better addressing the needs of all students, particularly those at risk for reading difficulties.

Why focus on reading?

Skilled reading of increasingly complex text is a key contributor to academic success. While extant research shows that at risk students are at no greater disadvantage when enrolled in immersion, both with respect to their first language development and overall academic achievement (for review see Genesee & Fortune, 2014), many young students exit the program because of academic difficulty related to language arts.

This brief reports on a study that examined what "typically developing students" and "students at risk for reading difficulties" do differently when reading in their second language (L2). The study was carried out in Gr. 3 Canadian French immersion classrooms in a context where the immersion program began in Grade 3 (Bourgoin & Dicks, 2013). These students had initially learned to read in their first language (English) and were now enrolled in their first year of a total French immersion program. Post-task interviews and think aloud protocols were conducted with students on four different occasions throughout their first year in immersion (Grade 3) to explore how students learned to read in their L2 (French). Findings can inform immersion educators' practice when providing effective support to individual readers in the classroom.

What types of reading strategies did at risk and high performing readers use?

At risk readers used a smaller range of reading strategies than their higher performing peers. When at risk readers tried to remediate reading challenges, they used the same few strategies, mostly cognitive strategies targeting difficulties at the word level. Much of their text processing time was expended on bottom-up cognitive strategies such as decoding (i.e., breaking down the words into its parts) and getting the idea quickly using pictures. Text comprehension was compromised due to the cognitive processing demands of lower-level reading skills. In comparison, high performing readers used a greater variety of cognitive strategies including deductive reasoning and transferring knowledge across languages, which at risk readers never used. They also drew upon more types of strategies, including both cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

How did at risk and high performing readers deploy reading strategies?

Not only did at risk readers display limited knowledge of reading strategies, but they did not seem to understand when and how to make strategic use of them. This was evident in the following excerpt:

Researcher	Why did you choose to chunk up the word here?
Owain	Because it's the quickest way.
Researcher	How do you know which strategy to use when?
Owain	I don't. I just pick one.

At risk immersion readers did not seem to understand the relationship among various strategies and tended to use them separately from one another. High performing immersion readers, in contrast, were not only able to name and describe a wider range of strategies, but used them in combination with one another to successfully accomplish the reading task. Below are two examples of how this group of readers orchestrated use of multiple strategies in strategic ways.

Researcher	How do you know you are reading correctly?
Anissa	I sound it out or use my strategies like the sounds I know '*oi*' '*gn*'. Or, I use the words I know or I go to the end of the sentence and then I try to fit in a word that would make sense.
Researcher	How do you know you are reading correctly?
Samantha	If it doesn't make sense to me, I try to make it make sense. I use the words I know and replace them with the words I don't know. I could replace '*allons-y*' with '*allons*' and '*moteur*' with the word 'motor'.

High performing readers drew upon their strategies in an integrated way when facing reading challenges. This group of readers used reading strategies with intent and demonstrated an awareness that the effectiveness of strategies is dependent on particular reading situations (Anderson, 1991; Grabe, 2009; Koda & Zehler, 2008).

What role did metacognition play for at risk and high performing immersion readers?

A detailed analysis of the types of strategies used by these Gr. 3 French immersion students showed that high performing immersion readers used metacognitive strategies three times more than at risk readers. They planned for the reading task, knew why they were reading, and were able to reflect upon, monitor, and evaluate their reading. Conversely, poor readers lacked or made inadequate use of metacognitive strategies. They had a harder time adapting their strategies to the reading task because their use of strategies was not as flexible as that of strong, strategic readers. (See excerpts below.)

CARLA | Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

At risk L2 readers		High performing L2 readers	
Researcher	When you got to this word, how did you know you read it right?	Researcher	Why did you go back and reread it?
Owain	I don't.	Jessa	Because I didn't know quite what it was. I wanted to make sure I would know the word better.
Researcher	Do you have any strategies to figure out if you said it right or not?		
Owain	No, not really.		
Researcher	So do you sometimes think, I wonder if I got that right or wrong?	Researcher	So you weren't sure about this word?
Allan	Yeah I think about it mostly every time I don't know a word.	Marcelle	Because if I say it really fast like *par-toit*, then I'm like, that doesn't sound right because I went too fast. Maybe I should do it slower. So I'd be like *par-t-out*.
Researcher	What do you do when you're thinking about it?		
Allan	Nothing.		

How was cross-linguistic transfer used by at risk and high performing readers?

Early literacy skills, decoding strategies, word recognition, and comprehension strategies have been found to transfer across languages (Durgunoglu, 2002; Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006; Geva & Clifton, 1994). In the present study, at risk immersion readers did not seem to make cross-linguistic connections as quickly as high performing readers. As one student explained: "My teacher hasn't taught me the French reading strategies yet." When asked whether they could rely on their L1 reading strategies to read French texts, many L2 at risk readers were baffled by the question. In contrast, high performing readers drew instinctually from previously acquired L1 linguistic resources when learning to read in their L2.

Implications for classroom practice

The role of immersion teachers in modeling and explicitly teaching the effective and strategic use of reading strategies cannot be overlooked. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on showing at risk students how to use a greater number of reading strategies and how to deploy a greater range of consolidated strategies when facing difficulties. This can be done through shared reading, a reading practice in which the teacher models explicitly the strategies of proficient readers. Further, since at risk readers do not have access to a high number and range of metacognitive strategies, explicit instruction on how to regulate and self-monitor the reading process needs to be an integral part of focused early interventions and guided reading sessions.

Because at risk immersion readers focus extensively on strategies at the word level, comprehension is compromised. Efficient vocabulary development of high frequency L2 words is crucial in order for these words to be read with automaticity. Effective pedagogical approaches to vocabulary development include: a strong emphasis on L2 oral language development, multiple exposures to new words in a variety of meaningful contexts, use of word walls, semantic maps, and multi-modal word learning strategies.

When students do not have sufficient reading strategies or lack automatized decoding and word recognition skills, they often times do not enjoy reading. When reading tasks become laborious, it can lead to students being less motivated to read. Vocabulary development slows down and weak readers fall further and further behind their peers. Read aloud activities are a powerful way to help remedy this phenomenon. They help rekindle the joy of reading by re-exposing students to reading. Reading aloud to students allows them to hear fluent and expressive reading, facilitates comprehension, and exposes them to different genres.

Finally, we know that certain literacy concepts and strategies can operate across languages, but at risk readers may need additional explicit instruction in this area. Teachers can focus on integrating transfer as a learning/reading strategy since it was not evident to at risk immersion readers that such transfer can take place and be helpful to them. There needs to be an increased awareness on the part of students of the benefits of language transfer. Reviewing with students what they already know about reading in their L1 can help at risk readers make connections between languages. We cannot assume that students will intuitively view their L1 as a linguistic resource or know how to effectively draw from it to support L2 reading.

References

Anderson, N. J. (1991). Individual differences in strategy use in second language reading and testing. *Modern Language Journal, 75,* 460-472.

Bourgoin, R., & Dicks, J. (2013). Reading without borders: At risk students transitioning from L1 to L2 in French immersion. In K. Arnett, K. & C. Mady (Eds.). *Minority populations in Canadian second language education* (pp. 118-134). Toronto, ON: Multilingual Matters.

Durgunoglu, A. (2002). Cross-linguistic transfer in literacy development and implications for language learning. *Annals of Dyslexia, 52,* 189-204.

Genesee, F., & Fortune, T. W. (2014). Bilingual education and at-risk students. *Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Education, 2*(2), 196-209.

Genesse, F., Geva, E., Dressler, C. & Kamil, M. (2006). Synthesis: Cross-linguistic relationships. In August, D. & Shanahan, T. (Eds.), *Developing literacy in second-language learners* (pp. 153-174). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Geva, E., & Clifton, S. (1994). The development of first and second language reading skills in early French immersion. *The Canadian Modern language Review, 50* (4), 646-667.

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Koda, K., & Zehler, A. M., (Eds). (2008). *Learning to read across languages.* New York: Routledge.