



# Strategies for Helping Underperforming Immersion Learners Succeed

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## Introduction

One of the more complex and persistent challenges confronting educators in language immersion programs is the issue of the under-performing learner. In immersion programs students receive a minimum of 50% of their subject matter instruction in a second language. Through this experience they are expected to acquire the subject matter knowledge and concurrently build proficiency in the second language. Research evidence lends clear support that for many students language immersion programs are a successful means to both of these end goals (Genesee, 1987; Turnbull, Lapkin, & Hart, 2001).

While research strongly indicates that immersion programs can achieve their stated goals of academic achievement and high levels of proficiency and literacy in English and the immersion language, there is also evidence that many students enrolled in these programs struggle and eventually leave the program. After a review of the literature on studies investigating the topic of transfer, Stern (1991) approximates transfer rates from French immersion to non-immersion programs for Canadian K-6 students at between 40-50%.

Several studies have examined the reasons behind student transfer. Survey data collected in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Canada's French immersion programs found that poor academic achievement and frustration were frequently cited by parents and teachers as the main reasons for an immersion student leaving the program and attending a non-immersion program instead (Bruck, 1979; Kamin, 1980; Morrison, Pawley, & Bonyun, 1979). In an effort to examine the critical factors that might predict transfer before it occurred, Bruck (1985) analyzed data gathered from immersion teachers, immersion students who were struggling academically, and their parents before reaching a decision about transfer. She found that *non-academic* variables, specifically—learner-identified discomfort speaking French in front of the class and teacher-identified classroom behavior issues, proved to be more predictive of opting out of immersion than *academic* variables related to a child's reading skill or ability to provide a high level of detail in the oral production task.

Hayden (1988) sought to shed further light on the reasons for students leaving immersion and designed a study to investigate perspectives from parents, teachers, and the students themselves. Her participant pool consisted of 28 elementary-level students, 18 boys and 10 girls, and their parents and teachers. Consistent across all participant groups was the identification of difficulties with

language arts, in the primary grades reading and decoding in French and in the upper elementary grades reading and writing in French and English. Teachers described the language arts challenge as trouble with grammar, vocabulary assignments and writing tasks. In grades 1 and 2 teacher-identified struggles focused largely on decoding text. In the words of one of the first graders, “I got reading wrong” (p. 232).

More recently, Keep (1993) carried out a dissertation study on the issue of attrition in the French immersion programs of Canada. She collected data on 37 immersion students who successfully completed ten years in immersion programs and compared them with 34 students who transferred out of immersion by grade 6, and 54 Grade 1-6 students still participating in the program. Within the transfer student group, she found that twice as many were male as female. All were functioning between one to two or more years below grade level, the vast majority (94%) were referred and assessed because of academic difficulties, and 85% demonstrated cognitive processing weaknesses particularly in the areas of memory, language, and visual perception. Students who transferred out of the program differed significantly from successful immersion students who displayed significantly higher IQ scores in both verbal and nonverbal domains, and overall performed at or above grade-level in school. If referred for assessment, the successful students were referred for concerns related to a need for enrichment, or social-motivational, emotional-behavioral and visual perceptual issues.

In summary, research findings are inconsistent with regards to whether students eventually leave the immersion program for primarily academic or non-academic concerns. However, the majority of studies suggest that under-achievement and academic difficulty with reading and language arts in particular are necessary, if insufficient, factors in student transfer. Thus, the question becomes how can immersion programs improve support for students who are struggling academically and create a classroom environment that meets the needs of a wide range of learners?



*Katy Arnett addresses a participant's question at the 2003 CARLA Summer Institute, "Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education"*

In August 2003, during one of the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition's week-long immersion institutes, a group of 36 educators gathered to examine research on language and learning disorders in dual language educational settings and discuss implications for teaching and learning. Most of the participants were experienced immersion teachers. All were interested in learning about instructional adaptations known to be effective with learners who may be language or learning disabled and are learning content through a language they are still acquiring. The goal was to consider ways to create as inclusive an immersion learning environment as possible.

One of the invited presenters, Katy Arnett, focused on strategies that teachers could feasibly incorporate into their planning and pedagogies to make the learning experience more accessible to those students who were not performing to the best of their abilities. Here she shares some of the techniques that she focused on at the institute in an effort to help us further our understanding of effective teaching for under-performing learners. This BRIDGE Insert will now therefore shift from the theoretical to the practical, as Katy describes practices that can make the language immersion experience more rewarding for every student.

## *Inclusive Instruction in the Language Immersion Classroom*

In *any* classroom, teachers face a student population that represents a spectrum of interests, motivations, ability, potential, and success. The immersion setting is no different, but because of the pivotal role of the L2 in the learning process, teachers must ensure that the techniques that comprise their pedagogies must simultaneously facilitate the perception, comprehension, and expression of the L2 and of the content under study.

The strategies presented on the next pages are those that I have found in my own teaching to be useful when addressing diverse learner needs in a language learning setting where the foreign language is used as a medium for instruction. To facilitate a better understanding of when these strategies would be of most use, I've organized this discussion according to the three stages of learning—perception (input), processing (deciphering/organizing), and expression (output). Each of the four language skills or modalities—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—is activated in two different learning stages. For example, listening skills are necessary to facilitate perception (stage 1) as well as the processing of information (stage 2). Thus, the strategies you choose to help a particular learner or group of learners better negotiate one of the skill areas must address both stages of the learning process that are engaged during the skill's use in order to fully surmount any challenges.

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## 1. Strategies to Facilitate Perception (Listening, Reading)

### *Provide additional time*

This is probably the easiest of all of the strategies. If a student has a lower proficiency in the target language, it will take him/her longer to figure out what is happening. Wait nine seconds before restating/rephrasing a question. If you immediately call on the first student who puts his/her hand up, you are not assessing how well the student understands, but instead, how fast it takes a student to perceive, process, and express an answer. When working with texts, give students with lower proficiency a few more minutes to completely get through the material. If you ask a student who did not have enough time to finish reading a question about the end of the passage, what exactly does that prove?

### **Regularly use visual or graphic representations of concepts**

This strategy works particularly well for vocabulary acquisition. Books geared to young learners are typically full of pictures. The pictures not only help capture the children's attention, but they help to focus their decoding attention. Learners can begin to figure out the messages being conveyed in text by looking at what is happening in the picture. In addition, using the images helps learners later to organize their knowledge because they have established a connection between a word/concept and its visual representation. However, any time you use such representations, you must make explicit the association you are conveying between the concept and representation (e.g., if you use a picture showing Rodin's *The Thinker* to represent the verb "to think," not necessarily the noun "the thinker," you must articulate this to the students.)

### **Present the same information using different modalities**

Not every student learns best by listening or reading; some may need to touch or move something in order to fully grasp the significance of the concept. When you are presenting information to students, never rely on only one modality or skill to convey your message. If you do so, you are automatically putting those students who do not learn best in that modality at a disadvantage.

## 2. Strategies to Facilitate Processing (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing)

☑ **Teach and regularly use mnemonic devices (e.g., *My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas* is used to help remember the order of the planets in the solar system.)**

Mnemonic devices organize information for learners; they can immediately begin focusing on how they are going to use this information to express their understanding of the concept. Mnemonic devices can be created using any group of related words or concepts—and it makes a great party game if you are having trouble doing it alone!

☑ **Chunk the task/concept into smaller steps/ideas (e.g., listing all of the steps a student should follow when doing long division)**

By breaking down tasks or concepts into smaller steps, students do not become too overwhelmed by all of the material; it is much easier to order a body of knowledge that is limited in scope. However, while chunking does help focus student attention on the here and now, it also builds anticipation for the resolution, because students become invested in how each stage will be contributing to the end product.

☑ **Use graphic organizers regularly throughout a unit**

Graphic organizers allow students to immediately see the relationship between groups of ideas, the significance of certain concepts, and, as the name implies, orders the information the students need. For example, since I introduced the *Phraseburger* (a 4-foot-plus foam hamburger I made in which all of the parts of speech are represented by a component of the burger) and showed my students how a whole olive (a preposition) cannot balance the bottom of the hamburger (the end of the sentence), my students no longer write sentences that end with prepositions. Telling them this until I was blue in the face probably would not have had the same result.

### 3. Strategies to Facilitate Expression (Speaking, Writing)

#### Ask students more questions that assess their knowledge at a global level

Granted, knowledge of discrete points of information is necessary in life (i.e., in what year did Columbus discover the New World?), but discrete-point questions can really discourage student participation in class. If there is more than one right answer (or no one right answer), students are more willing to take a risk and participate in class, particularly if you are asking them to respond orally.

#### Accept multiple forms of expressing information (through art, music, movement, speaking, writing)

If a student has a tendency to flip words and letters when writing, a written response could give you the impression that the student has absolutely no grasp of the concept. Why not ask the student to tape-record his/her response instead if you don't have access to a computer with spell-check? Also, if you vary how a student needs to use a productive skill (e.g., writing answers on a small white board as opposed to paper), you can really diminish student anxiety and increase motivation and production.

#### Provide students with starter expressions

Sometimes, half of the battle of formulating an acceptable response is knowing how to begin the answer. If you are concerned about learners becoming too dependent on the expressions, you may want to provide them with an outline of which question structures require which answer structures (e.g., in French, *Est-ce que* questions require a yes/no response.)

## Conclusion

By no means do I consider any of the strategies presented here to be rocket science. In fact, many of them are often identified as indicators of good teaching. If you are unsure of how or where to integrate these strategies into your teaching, identify the technique that is most compatible with your existing pedagogy. Make an effort to use this strategy at least once a day in your lessons. Once you feel that you are doing this strategy automatically and feel satisfied with the results it is producing,



*After her presentation, Katy Arnett consults with a table of immersion teachers.*

try another technique. It does not have to be one of the strategies suggested here; it could be a technique that you have generated yourself based on your students' needs. In addition, do not be afraid to ask the students for feedback. Even very young learners can articulate how they feel about something you are doing in your classroom, and older ones might be able to tell you what would work better for them instead of what of you are doing.

Over the years, I have come to view teaching classrooms full of diverse learners as akin to preparing an all-you-can-eat buffet. If you want a room full of happy customers, you need to give them a lot of different dishes from which to choose. If the learners can pick what appeals most to them (in terms of their personal approach to learning), they are more likely to walk away with the knowledge that was the entrée on the menu.

## Some Useful Websites for Working LD Students: Instructional Teaching Tips for Students with Learning Disabilities

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### The Learning Tool Box [www.ldonline.org/teaching/tool\\_box.html](http://www.ldonline.org/teaching/tool_box.html)

#### *What is the Learning Tool Box?*

The Learning Toolbox is an instructional resource website for secondary students with LD and ADHD, teachers, and parents. The major objective of the project is to field test the website which is designed to help secondary students with LD and ADHD become more effective learners using research-based strategies. It is designed for independent use by students; use by special education teachers following a systematic, direct teaching approach, and use by parents who want to help their children learn.

The Learning Toolbox is not an informational website; rather, it is an instructional website. The criteria of navigability, accessibility, and usability are being used as the basis for the field testing. The Learning Toolbox is unique in two respects: 1) it uses research-based special educational instructional approaches as the basis for the content of the website, and 2) its development took into consideration the unique characteristics of students with LD and ADHD.

The Learning Toolbox uses a combined strategy instruction and direct instruction approach, which has been found to be the most effective model for improved treatment outcomes for students with LD. We are examining the issue of whether research-supported methodology that has proven effective in traditional face-to-face instructional settings can be effective using the electronic medium of the internet. In addition, we are exploring the challenges presented by students with cognitive disabilities so that they can benefit from electronic instruction.

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### The Instant Access Treasure Chest The Foreign Language Teacher's Guide to Learning Disabilities [www.fln.vcu.edu/ld/conf.html](http://www.fln.vcu.edu/ld/conf.html)

The handouts listed below were provided to attendees of sessions by Sonja Moore (Virginia Commonwealth University) and Frank Moore (Longwood College) at the Foreign Language Association of Virginia (FLAVA) Conference at the Hyatt Richmond, VA, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Conference at the Anaheim Hilton, CA, and the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) Conference in Mobile, AL.

- What are the disabilities that affect learning?
- What is dyslexia?
- What is dysgraphia?
- What is dyscalculia?
- What are language deficits?
- What are visual deficits?
- What are auditory deficits?
- Characteristics of students with phonological processing deficits
- What is ADHD?
- What is ADD?
- Students with disabilities and the law
- General classroom strategies for all students
- Strategies for visual learners
- Strategies for auditory learners
- How to deal with listening activities?
- Reading strategies
- Writing strategies