

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SUITABILITY OF IMMERSION FOR ALL STUDENTS

In this document, we provide brief answers to frequently asked questions about the suitability of immersion for all students. The focus of our comments is students in immersion programs, primarily in Canada, who have diverse backgrounds and learner characteristics. This includes students from socio-economically disadvantaged families, students from minority cultural groups who speak English (e.g., children from the Mohawk community), students with below average intellectual ability or first language abilities, and students who speak neither immersion language (English and French in French immersion programs). These students have been the focus of some research attention because there is often concern that they might struggle in school and, therefore, they are often discouraged from participating in immersion programs. At issue is providing access to immersion programs to all students equitably. The comments we provide below draw on research that has included these kinds of learners.

1

**Can children who might be at risk of underperforming in school become bilingual if they attend an immersion program?**

**Yes, at-risk learners can become bilingual.**

Research has shown that students who might struggle in school for reasons associated with socio-economic status, language background, marginalization linked to cultural background, and intellectual and first language abilities can learn two languages to advanced levels of proficiency in immersion. To accomplish this, it is important that they be given the same appropriate supports in school that would be offered similar students in monolingual programs along with supplemental accommodations that take into account that they are learning two languages, one of which may be in the early stage of development.

2

**Will learning an additional language in immersion aggravate the language difficulties of learners with below average first language abilities?**

**Will it slow down language learning? Will it confuse the child?**

**No, learning an additional language will not aggravate the difficulties of such learners.**

To answer this question, researchers have compared the achievement of immersion students with poorly developed first language abilities to those of students with similarly low levels of first language

ability in monolingual programs. They have found that the students in immersion do not have greater academic difficulties than students in the monolingual programs. They exhibited the same levels of first language ability and academic achievement and, at the same time, acquired much higher levels of proficiency in the second language.

3

**At what age should children who might be underperforming in school be introduced to an additional language in immersion?**

**We do not have research that addresses this specific question.**

However, we know that, generally speaking, students in immersion programs acquire more proficiency in a second language the earlier they are immersed in the language. Some studies have found that students in some late immersion programs achieve the same levels or almost the same levels of proficiency in the second language as students in early immersion. This finding is not common, however. We do not know if starting immersion in an early grade is an advantage for at-risk students in comparison to beginning immersion in a later grade.

4

**Should a child with dyslexia avoid learning to read and write in two languages?**

**We do not have research that answers this specific question.**

However, research shows that learning to read in one language supports learning to read in the other language. Moreover, students who come to school with some ability to read in the home language learn to read the second language relatively easily and, vice versa, students who learn to read in a second language acquire skills that help them to learn to read in their home language, if they cannot already read in that language. We also know that knowing two languages enhances students' metalinguistic awareness and that metalinguistic awareness facilitates learning to read and write. Taken together, these findings suggest that dyslexia should not prevent children from learning to read and write in both languages.

5

**Is one form of immersion more suitable for at-risk learners than another?**

**We do not know if one form of immersion is better for at-risk learners.**

There are no studies that have compared different kinds of immersion programs for at-risk students.

6

**How do we know if a child has a language or reading impairment/problem or if he/she has not yet mastered the language of instruction?**

If a child has difficulty learning a second language or learning to read in a second language but shows no similar problem in the first language, it is not a true impairment. It is likely that the student's difficulties are due to incomplete acquisition of the second language or some other issue. If a child has an underlying language or reading impairment, then it will be evident in both languages.

7

**Should classroom instruction in immersion be the same for at-risk learners and students who do not appear to be at risk?**

**Yes and no.**

Students who might be at risk should be provided the same basic instruction as their not-at-risk peers. At the same time, they need additional individualized instruction from their classroom teacher that is tailored to their specific strengths and needs. For example, providing additional focused support on the core skills that underlie oral and written language development is important for students with language or reading-related difficulties. This is important to ensure that they acquire automaticity in the skills that are the building blocks for more advanced language skills (e.g., letter-sound correspondence, awareness of parts of words like prefixes and suffixes in the case of reading). The intensity and duration of individualized support from the teacher should reflect the level of the individual student's needs. Research has also shown that teachers should monitor the progress of at-risk students and adjust the level and kind of support to reflect their progress. Students who do not show satisfactory progress over time despite individualized support from their teacher should be referred to a specialist for additional one-on-one support.

8

**Should additional support be the same for at-risk students in immersion and at-risk students in monolingual programs?**

**Yes and no.**

As noted in our reply to question 6, additional support for at-risk students in immersion programs should be tailored to their individual strengths and needs and the severity of their needs; this is also true for at-risk students in monolingual programs. At-risk students need more intense and extended support the greater their difficulty. At the same time, at-risk students in immersion require support that reflects the fact that they are learning two languages and they are learning in two languages,

and one of the two languages is still in the early stages of development. For example, if the student has trouble with reading or language in general, provide support that focuses initially on those aspects of reading and language that are the same or similar in the two languages. When aspects of the languages that differ are taught, the teacher should be careful to show the learner how they are different. Moreover, classroom instruction should develop students' vocabulary and grammar in the second language at all times.

## 9

### **In what language should support be provided for at-risk students in immersion? It depends.**

If the student is in an early total immersion program, then support should be given in the second language because that will result in maximum immediate benefit for the student. If the student is in the bilingual phase of immersion, then support can be provided in both languages. Some research suggests that bilingual intervention may be preferable.

It is always important, no matter which language is used for support, to focus on those areas where the student has the greatest need and to help the child apply their new skills and knowledge in the language that is most important in school at that time. Sometimes, this will be only the second language and sometimes it will be both languages.

## 10

### **How can parents or caregivers help a child who is struggling in an immersion program?**

Parents and caregivers should consult the school or the school's specialist to seek advice on areas that they can support at home and how they can support their child at home. Generally speaking, it is important that parents and caregivers with a child who is struggling in immersion provide rich experiences in the home language so that they stimulate the child's language development (e.g., read to the child and engage the child in conversations, ask them to explain what they like about a story and why or to provide alternative endings). This is important because we know that students with strong first language skills develop strong second language skills.

**What about children with a developmental disability?  
Can they become bilingual?**

**Yes, children with a developmental disability  
can become bilingual.**

In this regard, researchers have examined the language development of children with a developmental language disorder, Down syndrome, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. These disabilities can affect children's ability to acquire language. The children in these studies were being raised bilingually and did not necessarily attend bilingual school programs. Thus, this research did not examine their performance in bilingual programs.

This research found that bilingual children with these developmental disorders acquired the same language competence as children with the same disabilities who were being raised monolingually. In other words, their disabilities did not prevent the children from becoming bilingual. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that a supportive learning environment with continuous, high quality language exposure and lots of opportunities to use the language are the best ways to promote high levels of proficiency in two languages.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. (2011). Dual language development and disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning (2nd Edition). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Kay-Raining Bird, E., Genesee, F., & Verhoeven, L. (2016). Bilingualism in children with developmental disorders. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 63, 1-14.

Bilingualism Matters research and information centre:

<http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

François Grosjean's Life as a Bilingual blog:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/life-bilingual>

Prepared by:

Fred Genesee, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, McGill University

Caroline Erdos, PhD, S-LP(C), Advancing Learning in Differentiation and Inclusion (ALDI)  
Coordinator, English school boards of Quebec

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