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FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING OF FRENCH IMMERSION STUDENTS

Marie-Josée Vignola and Marjorie Bingham Wesche, University of Ottawa

Our presentation provided a review of the research literature on L1 and L2 writing of French immersion students, and reported the results of a pilot project with such students in first-year university studies. Over the past two decades, various forms of "immersion" have become a prominent approach to teaching second languages, particularly French, in Canadian schools. In immersion programs, children whose home background is English (L1) are taught some or all of the regular school curriculum through the medium of French (L2). Popular starting points for these programs are kindergarten, the middle elementary grades and grades 6/7. Many students continue their high school studies in bilingual programs. Research has consistently shown that students completing immersion programs as a group catch up to, or sometimes surpass, English program students in English language arts and subject matter courses, and that they achieve high, if not native-like, levels of functional French skills.

Most research to evaluate the impact of immersion education on students' writing skills has focused on French (L2) writing skills, including the influence of L1 on L2 writing. Some research has also been done on L1 writing skills in early immersion students. Several studies have demonstrated that students after 3 to 4 years in early French immersion not only catch up in L1 skills but may surpass English language control groups in certain areas (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, sensitivity to grammatical structures) despite the fact that the immersion students have had more limited training in their L1 than students enrolled in the regular English program.

To our knowledge, all research to date on immersion students' writing skills has compared immersion students with English instruction or French L1 control groups in order to evaluate their L1 and L2 language skills. We have found no previous research which compares the L1 and L2 writing skills of the same subjects. As ever-increasing numbers of former immersion students enter university age, the question of the effects of immersion education on high-level first language writing skills is frequently posed.

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HOLISTIC AND PERFORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ESL WRITING

Ulla Connor, Purdue University
Elaine Fischer-Kohn, San Francisco State University

This session focused on two types of assessment of ESL writing: (1) large-scale holistic scoring for pre- and posttesting for program assessment purposes and (2) "performative assessment" for assessing specific writing skills as a diagnostic tool for classroom instruction. First, we described a new tool for assessing specific writing skills: performative assessment, developed by Faigley et al. at the University of Texas at Austin. We explained what a performative assessment instrument is (a set of rubrics, or evaluation guidelines, describing specific levels of proficiency for several general skills required by the writing task); how it differs from other criterion-based assessment tools such as primary-trait scoring; and how it is developed. We discussed the practical applications of performative assessment, both in diagnostic testing and as a tool for classroom instruction.

Next, we explained how holistic scoring, used effectively in native-speaker composition testing, is currently being adopted by schools and testing companies for non-native speaker (ESL/EFL) composition testing. Holistic scoring enables evaluators to identify high- and low-level writing efficiently and reliably. However, holistic scoring fails to differentiate between different qualities of middle-range ESL writing.

Our research was conducted on immigrant university freshmen in a year-long ESL program.
However, it seems that secondary school English grades (based in part on the evolving provincial exam and in part on the teacher's assessment of work throughout the year), are more valid measures of writing ability than current one-shot placement tests.

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