
FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING OF FRENCH IMMERSION STUDENTS

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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 reach university age, the question of the effects of immersion education on high-level first language writing skills is frequently posed.
