Support For Struggling Readers:
A case study in one early, full immersion school

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By

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Since LILA began in the fall of 2004, Kaari has served as a classroom teacher, basic skills teacher, special education liaison, mentor teacher, literacy specialist and member of the school board. Prior to this, Ms. Rodriguez had worked as a classroom and resource teacher in a bilingual elementary program in California and as a literacy home visitor with the Minnesota Literacy Council. She was drawn into teaching while tutoring adults as they uncovered the power of reading. Ms. Rodriguez has recently earned her M.A. in Second Languages and Cultures Education from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota.

Abstract

In early total language immersion programs, students receive initial literacy instruction in their second language (L2). While immersion research indicates that this does not increase the risk of reading difficulties, even for students considered at-risk, immersion programs must plan for the instruction of all students, including those who struggle with reading. This case study examines the characteristics of three struggling readers in one early, full Spanish immersion program as well as the teachers’ interpretations of and responses to their needs. Studies in immersion programs indicate that the needs of struggling readers in immersion are similar to struggling readers in other first and second language settings and the discussion reviews some effective intervention practices that can inform immersion educators’ response to struggling learners.
Description of struggling learners. In compiling descriptions through interviews, observations and written records, a unique profile emerged for each of the three focal student. While each student was unique, common characteristics emerged as well. These common characteristics were: 1) low achievement and a low rate of growth relative to peers; 2) less time spent independently engaged and focused on literacy-related tasks relative to peers; and 3) inconsistent performance and integration of discrete skills related to literacy.
Discussion

Research-based Best Practice in this Case

Study findings of research-based best practice. Many elements of successful reading intervention identified in the research were evident in the current case study of reading support for these three struggling readers in one immersion program. Some aspects were lacking in assessment, instruction and the coordination of the intervention process. In the following section I will describe a few ways in which the support program described in this case study reflected research-based best practice. I follow with some ideas on ways that research can be used to further improve reading support programs to better meet the needs of struggling students in immersion.

The support program for struggling first grade readers described in this case study demonstrated many characteristics of best practice as described in the literature. Pikulski (1994) found that in each successful program, “is clearly oriented toward ensuring that students conceptualize reading as a meaning construction process, but each also emphasizes teaching word identification strategies” (p.36). The reading support program in this case study appeared to include this as well as other characteristics identified by Pikulski such as small group sizes, word level strategies, a home-school connection and ongoing teacher training.

The data collected for the case study also demonstrated some elements of successful strategies instruction as described by Almasi (2003) and Chamot and O'Maley (1996). Teachers recognized the importance of a safe learning environment, provided explicit strategy instruction, and encouraged students to discuss how and why they used specific strategies. The positive, supportive atmosphere that facilitated
strategy instruction also seemed to correspond well to two additional characteristics of successful intervention programs described by Pikulski: “Teachers believe in their early intervention programs - and in their students’ ability to learn to read; and pupils build confidence and come to see themselves as readers and authors.” All of these elements appeared to be facilitated and enhanced by the educational programs implemented at the school including the Responsive Classroom approach and the IB program.

Suggestions for further incorporation of research-based best practice in this case. When comparing the support program described in this case to the relevant research regarding effective intervention and prevention of reading difficulties, there are other areas that were less evident. All studies referred to both strong classroom instruction as well as effective intervention. Although mainstream classroom instruction was not the focus of this study, “for maximum impact, early intervention programs should try to ensure that students are receiving excellent, coordinated instruction both in their classrooms and in the special intervention program” (Pikulski, 1994, p. 38). In this case, the reading specialist felt she had little time to talk and plan with classroom teachers, making coordination of instruction and scheduling difficult.

Other elements that could be better incorporated are more explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness. Research strongly supports the role that phonological awareness plays in reading development and also demonstrates that explicit instruction can have a great positive impact in L1 and L2 settings. Considering the strong evidence for systematic instruction in this area, both classroom and support teachers should be providing such instruction. Phoneme segmentation, blending and other sound manipulation games could be incorporated into each lesson. In one
English language intervention program (Sonday, 2007), the teacher tosses a ball to each student in the small group and calls out a word. The student repeats the word and is asked to isolate the beginning, middle or end of the word. The group can play a quick rhyming game or practice deleting phonemes from a word as well.

Some elements of other successful programs that were not consistently implemented in this case were word study and writing activities. Pikulski (1994) gives the example of “Making Words” from the Winston-Salem Project, in which students use letter tiles to form various words. He found that in effective intervention programs, writing is used to teach and extend word identification skills. Writing also plays a key role in the English language intervention program designed by Sonday (2007). While writing activities fit into the end of each lesson in the guided reading model being used, the reading specialist reported often running out of time to incorporate more writing activities.

There are other ways writing can be combined with word study activities where students practice breaking apart and recombining words and parts of words. Word boxes, which are designed to help children notice phonological and orthographic features of words, are one proven strategy to help students with both phonemic and phonological awareness (Joseph, 1999). Word boxes are rectangles separated into individual boxes that represent each sound in the word. First, students slide counters (beans or colored circles) into each box as each sound in a word is said. Later they slide magnet letters into each space and eventually use this process to help them hear and write all the sounds in a word in the correct order. A sample word box for the word
sheep, which consists of three phonemes (sounds), can be found below. Source: http://bogglesworldesl.com/elkonin_boxes.htm

In a study of first-grade small group intervention Joseph found that incorporating more explicit instruction in phonological and orthographic processing of words including word boxes and writing activities had a significant impact on the reading and spelling skills of first grade students identified with learning disabilities.

The research reviewed here indicates that early, frequent and detailed assessment is a key factor in identifying the specific needs of students and designing instruction to meet those needs. While a system was in place for identification of students struggling to acquire basic reading skills, the information gathered did not provide details such as phonological awareness and reading fluency. Lesaux and Seigel (2003) in writing from the field of ESL and Genesee (2008) and Genesee and Jared (2008) from the perspective of immersion, recommend assessing foundational skills such as phonemic awareness as early as kindergarten. They recommend using these data to provide targeted and intensive instruction throughout kindergarten, first grade and if needed, into second grade.
Genesee (2008) suggests that selective use of L1 for assessment and identification of students at risk of reading difficulty, even in the early years of full immersion, may be appropriate. In an ongoing, longitudinal study of reading in immersion, Genesee (2008) reports that initial results support the usefulness of L1 assessments in predicting reading difficulty in immersion. He notes that risk for decoding and comprehension development entail different difficulties on early assessment tasks. He suggests that careful interpretation of early L1 assessment data can improve early identification and focused intervention in immersion programs.

In using L1 assessments conducted in the fall and spring of Kindergarten Genesee’s (2008) initial results indicate that in the area of decoding, “phonological awareness (blending) and knowledge of the alphabetic principal are the best unique L1 predictors of L2 reading outcomes in immersion” (2008, slide 29). In the process of identifying struggling readers in immersion, Genesee and Jared (2008) also report that, “skills assessed in students’ first language, particularly phonological awareness, can predict subsequent word-identification abilities in their second language” (p.144).

In the area of comprehension, Genesee (2008) reported that language skills such as listening comprehension and vocabulary (measured in L1) in addition to decoding skills were important in predicting reading comprehension in L2 in first grade. Some knowledge of the L2 on entering Kindergarten also showed positive impact on first grade reading in L2.

Finally, these research-based suggestions could be incorporated through the implementation of a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach to remedial intervention and identification of students with learning disabilities (LD). According to the National
Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2005), a key element of an RTI approach is, “the provision of early intervention when students first experience academic difficulties, with the goal of improving achievement for all students, including those who may have LD” (p.1). While there are many models of RTI, the general approach establishes a “collaborative, problem solving mechanism to design and implement effective interventions within general education for students who are experiencing difficulties” (p.3).

A school-based intervention team did exist at the site of this case study. In regard to the three focal students in this study however, it seems that earlier and more frequent access to this team could have helped teachers better discover and respond to individual needs. It is not sufficient to simply note a student struggles and respond to the most easily observed characteristics such as off-task behavior. When initial efforts to provide additional support are not sufficient, we must ask ourselves, what else could be causing this behavior? What else could be causing this student to struggle? What other approaches might we try? This is not to say that classroom teachers are expected to identify and diagnose underlying language or learning disabilities. Yet the early intervention process ought to be designed and supported by a team made up of classroom teachers, specialists and other knowledgeable staff.

In describing the collaborative process common to RTI models the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities lists the following steps in the systematic problem solving process: “(1) identifying and analyzing the problem, including the collection of baseline data; (2) generating possible strategies or interventions; (3) implementing an intervention plan; (4) monitoring student progress to determine success; and (5)
reviewing and revising plans as needed” (p.3). Fortunately, the program described in this case has since begun the process of creating an RTI model. The school leadership, with the help of an on-site special education director, special education teachers, and other specialists are working together with the entire school staff in this area.

Implications for Early Intervention in Immersion

Immersion students, like any other group of students, will include children who struggle to learn to read. While being in immersion does not increase the risk for reading or other difficulties, the best ways to identify and support these students within an immersion context needs further research. The process of conducting this case study and reading the relevant literature has led me to the following insights on the question of how to best support struggling first grade readers in immersion.

First of all, we must begin with what is known about successful reading instruction and intervention from the realm of L1 reading research. The characteristics of successful intervention described by Pukulski (1994, n.d.) provide a strong framework for developing intervention programs in immersion programs such as the one described in this study. His descriptions of successful programs indicate a need to integrate the discrete skills that make up reading within the context of meaningful text, the importance of writing, the role of explicit strategy instruction, and guidance on the organization for providing early intervention. Ongoing research related to the implementation of an RTI approach also provides a framework for early intervention for all settings, including immersion.
Secondly, there are many kinds of learning needs within the group of students who perform poorly on measures of reading. Within this group will be students who will later identified with specific learning disabilities as well as those who are slower learners or who struggle for a range of reasons. Early identification and intervention can be more effective if schools use more nuanced assessments to understand how and why students are struggling. Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge upon entering Kindergarten are strong predictors of reading in L2 and L1 (Genesee 2007, 2008). I agree with Genesee’s suggestion that, even in the first two years of immersion, strategic use of L1 for early assessment and identification of students at-risk of reading difficulty could facilitate the intervention process by helping schools identify and respond to specific learning needs earlier.

Thirdly, I recommend stronger implementation of the strategy instruction models developed by Chamot and O’Malley (1996) and Chamot et al. (n.d.) for second language settings and others designed specifically for reading such as the one developed by Almasi. Chamot and O’Malley’s (1996) CALLA model provides guidance on integrating language learning and learning strategies into content lessons. When looking at the specific needs of the struggling readers I observed, these frameworks, including a safe atmosphere and metacognitive development, allow teachers to incorporate the many elements of early literacy instruction and provide students with the tools to be in charge of their own learning.

A fourth area needing further attention is the connection between language and reading development. While much more research is needed on the link between, L1 language difficulties, L2 development and reading, this could explain why a portion of
the struggling readers I work with also appear to lag behind their peers in their Spanish language development. Genesee and Jared (2008) point out that reading and language difficulty can and often are distinct areas of concern. Yet, “a significant proportion of at-risk children are at-risk for both language and reading difficulty” (p.10). In his current research Genesee (2008) is using L1 measures to identify students with these difficulties upon entry into an immersion program and preliminary results show that difficulties in L1 predict difficulties L2. In combining best practice research to create an effective intervention program in immersion, it seems that intervention in L2 development goes hand in hand with reading intervention. While this already happens to a certain extent, it is something this school’s program could try to do more explicitly in the future.

Finally, these approaches must all be applied with the unique needs of immersion students in mind. An example is the way in which the reading specialist in this case provided home activities for additional practice that were accessible to parents who did not speak the language of instruction. Careful book selection and introductions were an important part of the guided reading model used in this case and the intervention models observed by Pikulski (1994, n.d.). Special care should be taken with the leveling, selection and introduction of new books since difficulty will depend not only on the students’ reading level, but their vocabulary and L2 development as well.

Currently available research can provide guidance to immersion educators as they work to meet the needs of all students. Many questions still remain to be answered about the most effective ways to design and implement early intervention programs in immersion. In what language should support be provided at different points
in the immersion program, for different students? How can we help parents make tough choices about whether or not immersion is appropriate for their child? What is the best group size for early reading intervention in immersion? What should be considered when forming groups of students? What specific assessment tools are the most useful in identifying and monitoring the progress of students likely to have difficulty in reading in immersion? How will those tools vary depending upon the languages involved? How can we better understand the transfer of reading skills such as phonological awareness between alphabetic languages such as English and Spanish and how can we use this information to improve instruction?

Conclusion

As the money available to public schools becomes scarce, schools must make tough decisions about how much, and what type of additional support to provide for struggling readers such as those observed in this study. The process of examining the support provided to struggling readers in one immersion setting has given me greater insight into my initial research questions regarding the best use of limited support resources.

The support program observed in this case study had many strengths as well as room for further growth and improvement. Responding to the needs of struggling learners involves careful observation and interpretation that can be supported by a collaborative team of teachers and specialists. Research in the areas of reading, early intervention, language acquisition, strategy instruction, and immersion education should continue to inform immersion educators as we strive to make the benefits of immersion education accessible to as many students as possible.