

## **SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE**

### **Formal Literacy Instruction and the Development of Oral Language in Manitoba French Immersion Early Years Classrooms**

**Kathryn Reuter**

#### **Abstract**

*French Immersion instruction has often focused on the development of oral language as the primary method of early literacy learning. Manitoba Education endorses this focus with its curricular emphasis on oral language acquisition before formal reading and writing instruction. This article examines the role of early years French immersion teachers in supporting both early years students' social-emotional development and early language development through supportive literacy practices. The author presents research that supports language acquisition alongside pedagogical methods that support kindergarten and grade 1 literacy development in a French Immersion environment.*

Oral language is foundational to language learning. Oral language development emerges throughout a child's first years of life. The first cries and coos of babies are their primary way of communicating with their world. As babies develop into toddlers, their ability to communicate with more complex language structures enhances their interactions with the world and helps them to build meaning and connections to their environment. Literacy researcher Marie Clay (2004) wrote extensively on oral language development and its impact on children's literacy skills. As children enter school, their oral language forms the basis of their literacy learning (Clay, 2004, p.1). They learn how to communicate not only through spoken words but also through written work, as they reciprocally learn how to receive messages from text around them.

The French Immersion program in Manitoba (Manitoba Education, 2017) is built for students to develop French as an additional language through an immersive experience. French language develops as students are taught in French across subjects. Manitoba Education understands the importance of oral language underpinning the literacy process (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015), as any formal literacy instruction is delayed until the beginning of grade 2. Accordingly, kindergarten and grade 1 focus primarily on developing students' French oral language to support the forthcoming literacy instruction in later years.

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning's (2015) curriculum support document for kindergarten teachers endorses a holistic play-based approach to early childhood development as the best practice for teachers. This document outlines in detail the need for experiential and inquiry learning through play during kindergarten.

#### **Problem**

Manitoba Education has tasked French Immersion teachers with developing the whole child through a holistic play-based approach while simultaneously developing French oral language competencies in their students. However, in my kindergarten classrooms, I have observed many students who have not developed a sufficient amount of French vocabulary or language structures to communicate in French during their experiential learning, which leads to non-immersive French experiences during play. While children may be developing in many other ways, their time in play has limited value for their French language learning. Teachers must find other teaching opportunities to develop students in their oral language and literacy knowledge.

Manitoba Education's (2017) French Immersion document outlines the literacy activities that should be occurring in the early years classroom. Activities such as reading wordless picture books, read alouds, echo reading, and choral reading are all recommended as good

teaching practices. The document prioritizes the development of oral language: “During a student’s first two years in French Immersion, priority must be given to the development of French oral language” (Manitoba Education, p. 4).

French Immersion Early Years teachers are then tasked with a problem – how to create immersive French oral language opportunities while simultaneously basing their instruction on holistic play-based learning experiences. Two questions then emerge: What oral language activities will best support second language learning in the early years classroom? Are play-based learning opportunities sufficient to develop the oral competency that is required to support French literacy development? This paper contends that increasing formal literacy opportunities in the early years classroom will enhance oral language development. While acknowledging the merits and benefits of a holistic play-based and inquiry approach, I argue that while that approach may be a best practice in a monolingual classroom, it is not ideal for developing oral language competencies for second language learners.

## **Literature Review**

### **Learning Through Play**

It is a common understanding that children learn best through play. According to Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning (2015), best practices for kindergarten teachers are to use play as the main method for presenting learning: “Research by various child development experts has concluded that through play, children show; better verbalization, richer vocabulary, higher language comprehension, higher language level, better problem-solving strategies, more curiosity, higher intellectual competence” (p. 35).

Play is understood to be a vehicle in which teachers can present new vocabulary, oral structures, and phonemic awareness through games. Students are engaged in play as the teacher scaffolds the instruction to the developmentally appropriate level (Strauss et al., 2020). Research by Strauss’ group has revealed the unique benefits of play-based learning in the development of sight word recognition and vocabulary development. One of the largest benefits is the child’s engagement throughout the process. Strauss et al. (2020) also stressed the importance of teacher record keeping, scaffolding during learning, and modelling oral and written language as being key factors in the success of play-based learning (p. 7).

Teachers must be aware of developmentally appropriate practices that encompass literacy learning in kindergarten for second language learners. The practices for developing oral language include creating play-based learning environments that include linguistic curricular goals as well as modelling specific language structures when playing, providing opportunities for the child’s repeated practice (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 41).

Play-based learning facilitates a potentially high number of rich conversations with children. Research by Browne et al. (2017) revealed a positive relationship between children’s language development and the richness of their caregivers’ language. When adults are engaged with children in interactive and responsive conversations in conversations led by a children’s interests, the children are exposed to a higher variety of complex language structures.

Enhancing the classroom with a language rich environment supports the development of oral language. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth’s (2007) handbook outlines the expectations of a French Immersion environment. Linguistically rich décor that includes French vocabulary alongside pictures and objects covering the walls supports written language during play. Offering students easy access to assorted French books, videos, music, and games promotes the playful learning of the second language. The teacher’s role is always to be speaking French while using gestures, mime, intonation, pictures, and objects to convey meaning to students.

## Instructional Practices

The variety of instructional practices that can be implemented within an early years classroom can be difficult to navigate. Most teachers' instructional practice moves between less formal student-led experiences and more teacher-directed formal practices. When focusing on the development of a second language, research suggests that formal teacher-directed practices provide a higher ratio of time for the child speaking the second language (Ewert & Straw, 2001). Practices that are less formal do not support new vocabulary and scaffold the conversation that is necessary for the children to build meaning and use the second language. The Manitoba K to 12 français curriculum for French Immersion outlines the expectations for reading instruction in French (Manitoba Education, 2017). In accordance with these learning expectations, students engage in informal reading instruction in kindergarten and grade 1, and in formal reading instruction beginning in grade 2.

Not all research supports sequence as the main teaching practice for developing a second language. According to Ewert and Straw (2001), formal literacy practices that include scaffolded and direct teaching support greater oral language development in students. While Ewert and Straw noted the complexity of language instruction, their research found that teacher expertise and knowledge in language acquisition is paramount to successful language acquisition. They also noted that oral language should not be developed solely through conversation but in tandem with formal literacy instruction such as writing and reading. "By using French to develop literacy, the children learned not only how to read and write, but also they developed their oracy. ... Oral language and written language supported one another" (Ewert and Straw, p. 195).

Browne et al. (2017) outlined the importance of experiential learning that encourages children to take ownership of the words they use to develop deeper meaning, skill use, and understanding of vocabulary, but they also qualified that type of instructional practice:

Recent evidence indicates that not all children are able to learn from implicit teaching: ... through exposure, particularly very young children and those with limited vocabularies. Experimental studies in the United States and Chile have shown that explicit instruction in word meanings, where a word is identified and information about meaning or usage provided, is more effective in teaching words than exposure to the words in books alone. (p. 9)

When learning a second language, there is an evident link between the importance of direct explicit instruction and the development of oral language. Because most children enter French Immersion schools with no exposure to the second language, they require explicit teaching of vocabulary to expand their very limited range of language.

## Language Acquisition

Additional languages are acquired through the development of vocabulary, phonics, and oral competency (Reese et al., 2010). "Second language learning largely depends on vocabulary, as the building blocks from which learners start their second language (L2) acquisition. Hence, its significance lies inherently deep within the first states of the acquisition of any language" (Restrepo & Falcon, 2015, p. 158). The study by Restrepo and Falcon also revealed that engaging in formal literacy activities such as reading is more beneficial for low and intermediate learners, because it fosters a greater increase in vocabulary and lexical items. Additionally, engaging in listening activities was found to be a greater benefit to more advanced learners for retaining vocabulary.

The research by Restrepo and Falcon is further supported by Kovelman et al. (2015), whose research results demonstrated that children who acquire their language beyond the ages of birth to age two benefit the most from phonics instruction for both advanced and foundational

reading abilities (p. 9). While the policy of Manitoba Education (2017) is to begin formal literacy opportunities once students have a level of oral competency in the language of instruction, opposing research by Reading (2009) found that language acquisition is best supported by beginning formal literacy instruction at the earliest levels of schooling.

Droop and Verhoeven (2003) expanded on the importance of oral language development: “The results of the present study show oral proficiency in the target language to be of critical importance for the development of both first- and second-language reading” (p. 101). They also recommended interacting with language and vocabulary in as many ways as possible. Student interaction with vocabulary, through oral language and formal reading and writing activities, increases the acquisition and retention of meaning, which in turn increases a student’s ability to use the language acquired in multiple and flexible ways.

### **Description of Suggested Approach**

Formal literacy practices best support oral language development (Reading, 2009). Practices such as reading, writing, and modelled oral language encourage teachers to responsively teach students new vocabulary and language structures.

Language acquisition is best achieved when literacy instruction has a balanced and equal emphasis on formal reading, formal writing, and oral language experiences (Ewart & Straw, 2001). The government of Alberta recognizes the importance of formal instruction on the development of oral language in French Immersion programming. Learn Alberta (2022) has recently undergone a review of their early years French Immersion curriculum and increased their classroom expectations for formal literacy instruction. The draft curriculum that has been proposed now includes a more balanced and formal approach to literacy acquisition in the early years, clearly outlining essential elements of language acquisition with reading and writing skills starting in kindergarten such as explicit vocabulary and phonics instruction. Early years classrooms that include this type of balanced approach to literacy can include playful opportunities for students to practise the language and vocabulary that has been taught through practices such as guided reading, guided writing, and teacher-directed shared experiences.

Many of the suggested activities in Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth’s (2007) French Immersion handbook can be integrated in this approach if the teachers maintain a balanced schedule in their day. A balanced classroom integrates research-supported language acquisition practices and may begin with whole-group formal writing, followed by small-group reading instruction as the other children spend time in writing activities based on their whole-group teaching. Teachers then provide playful learning experiences as outlined by Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning (2015), such as songs, poems, bingos, and games. These playful activities connect to the formal literacy instruction that is the current focus for the class. Students are supported in their expressive oral language as the teacher provides students with explicit teaching. The learning focus flows through the activities that are prepared by the teacher with the understanding of how all three practices support one another in language acquisition.

In order for teachers to be comfortable with this approach, they must have a level of competency in using formal literacy instruction practices such as guided reading, and modelled and shared writing. This type of learning is widely accessible through many different commercial programs and professional development. Establishing a balanced structure of formal literacy and playful learning opportunities can be difficult at first. However, finding the optimal balance will help children to use language in purposeful yet engaging ways.

The effects of this approach can be assessed as the students develop, by using various oral French assessments, reading level benchmarks, and writing continuums. Many school divisions have created or adopted assessment tools that can provide data to inform educators of the development of their students’ oral language proficiency. Undergoing this process, schools would begin to see whether students are demonstrating a higher degree of ease and confidence in their French use in formal and informal settings.

## **In Defense of a Balanced Approach**

The position of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (2007) is that oral language is best developed through playful learning in kindergarten. While Manitoba Education (2017) supports many research-based instructional approaches, they do not promote the use of formal French literacy instruction for French immersion students in kindergarten and grade 1. Instead, Manitoba Education promotes developing oral language competencies before expecting students to take on the work on formal reading and writing in grade 2. Not all research supports this position as being the most effective way to acquire competency in oral language:

Research suggests written literacy and oral literacy can be developed simultaneously, backstrapping each other to build a more meaningful and efficient scaffold for language acquisition. Oracy need not be taught to the exclusion of print-based literacy and in fact, instruction in print-based competency can enhance oral competency.

(Ewart & Straw, 2001, p. 196)

Teachers who spend the majority of learning time engaged in playful learning have students who do not develop their second language at the same rate as teachers who scaffold the learning with more formal practices (Restrepo & Falcon, 2015). When students are engaged in play-based learning, they are developing many important skills and competencies. However, students are not engaged in speaking a second language during play without having a skillful teacher beside them to support their language development. In a typical early year French immersion kindergarten classroom, it is not always possible to have a fluent adult beside each child or each group of learners. The students require more than occasional language support in their play settings.

Oral language develops when students are introduced to new vocabulary and language structures (Ewart & Straw, 2001). This language can be introduced in many playful yet formal and directed opportunities, such as guided reading, guided writing, big books, songs, and modelled and scaffolded conversations. These activities are not ones that can be directed by the students with limited oral language; they must be planned, initiated, directed, supported, and maintained by the teacher. The most efficient use of a teacher's time would then be supporting the highest ratio of students in their second language in either whole-group or small-group teacher-directed activities. If students were introduced to formal reading in kindergarten, they would interact more frequently with a broader variety of useful language structures. Students would be able to reinforce those language structures in writing opportunities, and in turn increase their confidence in using those language structures orally.

## **Conclusion**

Manitoba Education (2017) promotes the development of oral language before formal literacy instruction. The research outlined in this paper supports using early formal literacy instruction to introduce and reinforce oral language development. Students who are not given a chance to read and write formally from the beginning of their school experience are limited in the vocabulary and language structures they encounter, in comparison to students who experience these formal types of learning opportunities from the onset of schooling.

While the merits of play-based learning are not in dispute, the question must be asked whether play-based learning is sufficient to develop oral language within a French immersion program. The research reviewed in this paper has outlined additional tools and instructional approaches that best support oral language development. Relying solely on play-based learning in the early years of a student's schooling may limit the progress that the student will be able to make within their second language. Play-based learning by itself can limit the important scaffolding and teacher-directed learning opportunities that research has demonstrated are

important for the acquisition of a second language. In reviewing the literature, formal literacy opportunities should not be limited to the beginning of grade 2 for French immersion students. Formal literacy opportunities, such as reading and writing instruction, expose children to a higher quantity of vocabulary and language structures, which supports the development of oral language. Integrating formal literacy practices into play-based situations requires a high level of skill that requires continuous professional learning. Teachers who understand the development of literacy are best equipped to undertake this challenge of teaching for a second language within a French immersion program.

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## About the Author

*Kathryn Reuter is a vice-principal and early years literacy support teacher in a French Immersion K-8 school with the Seine River School Division. Kathryn completed both her M.Ed. in educational administration and M.Ed. in inclusive education at Brandon University. She has been an educator for 15 years and has worked in a variety of roles, including early years classroom teacher, Reading Recovery teacher, and French immersion literacy consultant.*