

MULTIMODAL INSTRUCTION IN PRE-KINDERGARTEN:

An introduction to an inclusive early language program

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2013-2014 school year, a charter school in Central Florida (which will be given the pseudonym “The Unity School”) known for its practice of full inclusion launched an unconventional project. The Unity School, which serves children from preschool through grade five, began offering foreign language to all pre-kindergarten students. The Unity School’s practice of offering its French program is uncommon for a couple of reasons. First, few foreign language programs exist for young children in the U.S., with only about 25% of U.S. schools offering any type of foreign language program at the elementary level, according to Pufahl and Rhodes (2011). This trend of offering foreign language only at the secondary level continues despite research conducted decades ago by Lambert and Tucker (1972) showing the benefits of early language learning on first language literacy skills. More recently, studies conducted by Bialystok (2001) have shown that foreign language learning is beneficial to a student’s overall cognitive skills; specifically in problem solving.

Furthermore, students of all ages who

have special needs often do not have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits that learning a foreign language can provide. Students with special needs may be discouraged from pursuing foreign language study for various reasons, including the belief that learning a second language is a privilege reserved for typically developing students only. The authors of this article, a university professor and a graduate assistant, played a major role in the development and implementation of The Unity School’s French program. The purpose of this article is to describe a pre-kindergarten foreign language program designed to make learning French accessible to all children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the field of foreign language education for students with special needs has often focused on the challenges that arise for students and their teachers. The challenges with foreign language study noted in the literature regarding students with special needs include weaknesses in language processing skills, especially in phonology according to Leons, Herbert, and Gobbo (2009). This weakness results in a struggle with the decoding of written texts and the pronunciation of words. Tanock and Martinussen (2001) also asserted

that students who have difficulties with verbal working memory, typically those who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (AD/HD), find it hard to simultaneously work on remembering vocabulary, using syntactical rules and applying the right grammar while listening to teacher or watching a video in another language.

The aforementioned studies of special needs students have been conducted in high school or university foreign language classes where literacy skills are a large part of the curriculum. In this setting, special needs students have shown evidence of struggle with literacy-based components of language learning resulting in the practice of exemption for special needs students at all levels of foreign language study. Many well-meaning teachers, administrators, and parents feel that foreign language learning can be too challenging for special needs students and that exemption is in the student’s best interest. However, the mission of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) is to ensure free public education to all students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. A restriction of special needs students from foreign language classes does not align with the mission of IDEA

(2004). Furthermore, studies have shown that special needs students can participate successfully in foreign language classes when inclusive teaching methods and multimodal approaches are used (Regalla and Peker 631; Sparks 18).

SETTING AND PREPARATION OF THE FRENCH PROGRAM

SCHOOL SETTING

The Unity School is a charter school serving children from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 which practices full inclusion of children with special needs. The Unity School is unique in that it maintains a balance of approximately 50% special needs students and 50% typically developing students. Because The Unity School has a long-standing partnership with a local university, the principal of the school welcomed the opportunity to begin a foreign language program for all students by inviting university professors to the school. In the Fall of 2013, a meeting took place between the school principal and two university professors, one of whom is an author of this article. We decided that French instruction would begin at the pre-kindergarten level in all three classrooms.

We met with all three pre-kindergarten classroom teachers to explain the benefits of early language learning and the structure of the proposed French program. Each pre-kindergarten class was scheduled to receive one thirty-minute French lesson two days per week taught by a French teacher from the university. In addition to the two French classes per week taught by the French teachers, the French materials were left with the pre-kindergarten classroom teachers to be used throughout the week in order to expose students to French on a daily basis. We also provided parent permission forms in accordance with the university's Institutional Review Board. The letter explained the French classes and all related research projects. Parents had the option of removing their child from French classes and from any university research studies, but none of the parents chose to do so.

TEACHERS

During the semester prior to the start of the French classes, one of the university professors, who is also a certified French teacher with prior elementary language teaching experience, designed the curriculum, ordered materials, and recruited French teachers. The teachers for the program included the university professor and two university French majors who are not in the field of education. Because the French

majors lacked a teaching background, we provided a two-hour professional development session for the French majors prior to the start of the program. The professional development session focused on lesson planning, implementing engaging activities such as Total Physical Response (TPR), and classroom management. The professor wrote the weekly lesson plans and arranged the schedule so that the French majors were able to observe the professor teaching the French lesson to her assigned pre-kindergarten class just before teaching their own classes. We observed the French majors teaching their lessons and provided them with feedback on their teaching throughout the semester.

MATERIALS AND PROGRAM DESIGN

Due to the fact that the school site follows a full inclusion model, we made an effort to create a foreign language program where all students could participate fully and experience success by incorporating a multimodal approach to language teaching. Multimodal teaching techniques can include technological resources such as the use of visuals, graphics, animation, and video, according to Moreno & Mayer (2007). Special needs students often require more time to process linguistic input and need repetition to incorporate new knowledge into both short and long-term memory. Due to the need for repetition, Skinner and Smith (2011) recommend multimodal teaching techniques when creating language lessons for students with learning disabilities because of the multiple types of exposure to language that multimodal techniques provide.

In order to provide multimodal instruction appropriate for young learners of all ability levels, we chose the *Little Pim* video series (2015). *Little Pim* was created to teach foreign language to young children from birth through age 6. The video series features a cartoon panda who presents vocabulary and short phrases in French by making use of visuals and other scenarios in order to provide a context for language learning without the use of translation. Each week's lessons focused on a theme connected to one episode of the *Little Pim* video program. The French instruction in the pre-kindergarten classes included the videos from the *Little Pim* series, videos and songs found from other online sources, teacher-directed instruction, and teacher-created activities that are age appropriate for pre-kindergarten students.

THE FRENCH LESSONS

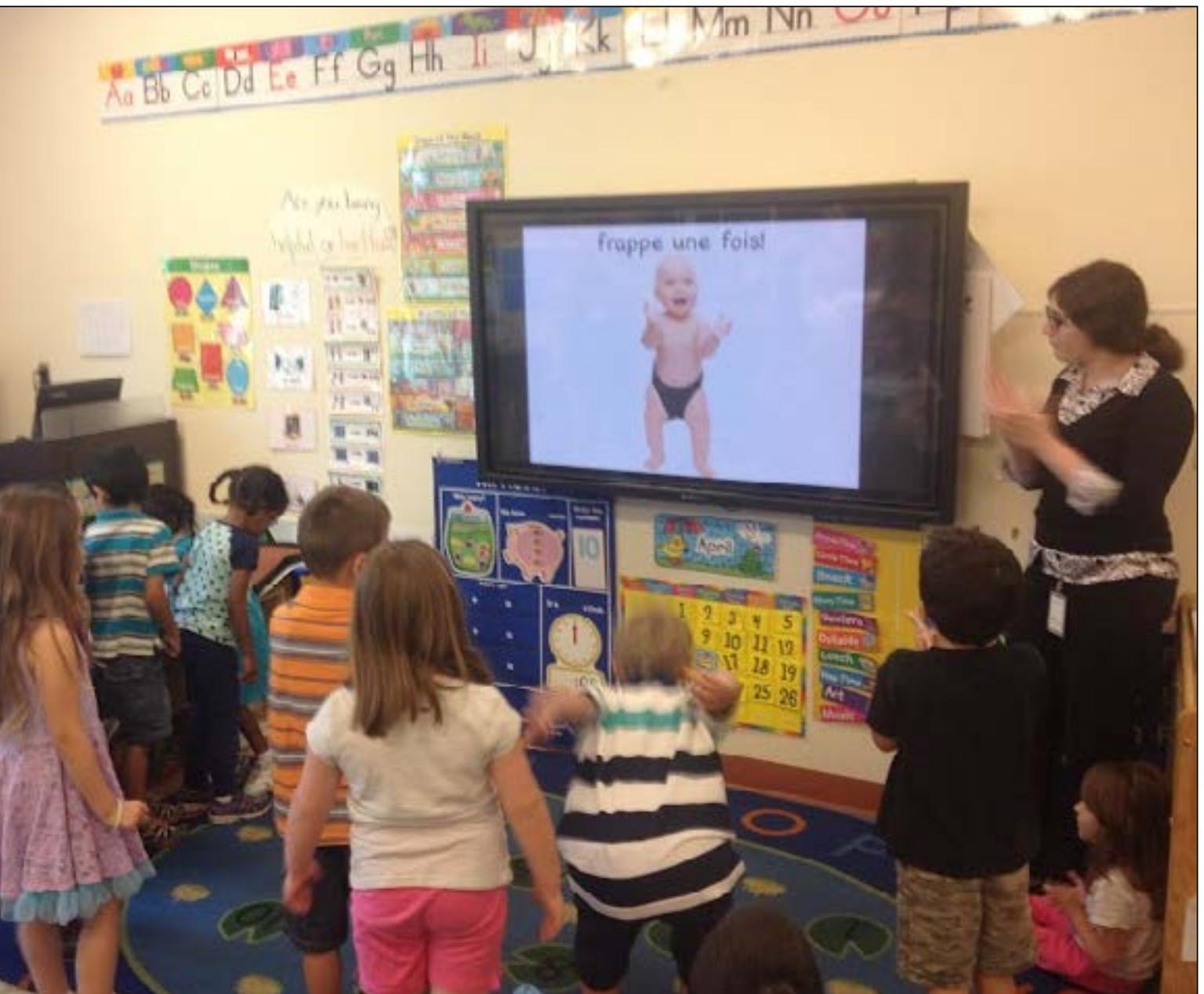
After a semester of preparation, the French classes began in January 2014. A typical French class session started with a warm-up activity, such as an exchange of greetings between the teacher and students. Next, the French teacher reviewed previous learning by asking students to identify words pictured on flashcards or realia brought in by the teacher. After reviewing key vocabulary and phrases, the French teacher played the *Little Pim* video episode corresponding to the theme and vocabulary. During the video episode, the teacher encouraged children to repeat the vocabulary and respond to prompts provided in the video. Following the video, the teacher led the children in songs, teacher-designed games, or a TPR activity that reinforced the vocabulary and the phrases presented in the video. Each lesson ended with a short review activity designed by the teacher to summarize learning.

To illustrate an example of typical activities conducted by the French teachers, we will share short transcripts of lesson activities. The theme of the following transcripts is the food and table setting vocabulary from the *Little Pim* DVD entitled *Eating and Drinking*. Transcripts will show examples of a typical vocabulary review, interaction during a viewing of a *Little Pim* episode, a TPR activity, and a song.

VOCABULARY REVIEW

First is an example of a teacher-led vocabulary review that would normally last for approximately five minutes. In the following example, the teacher used realia





such as plastic food and silverware that she brought to the classroom. The teacher removed each item from her bag, called on individual students to identify the vocabulary in French, and then she asked the class to repeat the word chorally.

T: "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" [What is this?]

S: Une banane [a banana]

T: "Très bien, Emily. Répétez classe, une banane." [Very good, Emily. Repeat class, banana]

SS: "une banane" [banana]

VIDEO EPISODE

The next transcript comes from the end of an episode of *Little Pim*. Pim has presented several vocabulary words and phrases on the topic of food and drink. At the end of the episode, a visual is shown and students are prompted by Pim to identify

the vocabulary with a question and a pause, giving students an opportunity to provide the French word.

V: "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" [What is this?]

SS: Une pomme [an apple]

Total Physical Response (TPR)

During the instruction of food and table setting vocabulary, the French teacher announced that the students were to prepare a picnic for Little Pim. She set a small blanket on the floor in front of a stuffed Pim panda toy seated in front of the classroom and distributed realia such as plastic silverware, paper plates, cups and plastic foods to all of the students. As each item was announced by the teacher, students who were holding those items brought them to the picnic blanket at the front of the class. For example, when the teacher asked, "Qui

a la pomme?" [Who has the apple?], and "Qui a la fourchette?" [Who has the fork?], the student with the plastic apple and plastic fork came to the front of the room and placed those items on the picnic blanket.

SONGS

One of the songs played during the *Eating and Drinking* unit was about lunchtime. The song includes food and drink vocabulary learned in the unit, but also includes words for some non-food items. The singer asks children if they want to eat a series of items for lunch. Some of the items suggested were typical lunch foods, while others are undesirable. Students were asked to respond to this song by agreeing or disagreeing in French as to whether or not they would eat the suggested items:

Song lyrics: "Qu'est-ce que vous voulez

pour déjeuner? Un gâteau au poisson et l'arraignée?" [What do you want for lunch? A cake made of fish and spiders?]

SS: *Non!* [No!]

Song lyrics: *D'accord, du lait, des pâtes, et des fruits?* [Ok, milk, pasta, and fruit?]

SS: *Oui!* [Yes!]

During the French lessons, the French teacher-led instruction with the support of the pre-kindergarten classroom teachers. Classroom teachers supported the French lessons in various ways. First, they were present during the French lessons, helped to keep students on task, and assisted with behavior management. This was especially important for the French teachers who did not have any background in education or classroom management. The classroom teachers also modeled examples of engagement in the lessons by repeating French vocabulary words with the class and participating in the French teacher-directed activities. In addition to participation in the French lessons, classroom teachers played the video episodes and prompted their students to use their French vocabulary during the week when French was not in session.

ASSESSING STUDENT OUTCOMES AND THE FRENCH PROGRAM

The authors of this article collected data on student learning in the form of video recordings of French classes. Out of the 32 French classes that were observed and video recorded, 11 videos were selected for data analysis. The authors and another university professor reviewed each video separately and recorded evidence of learning using a student list coded for special needs status. The reviewers counted the number of instances when students displayed evidence of demonstrating their understanding of French or the ability to communicate in French by correctly responding to teacher prompts (see Regalla and Peker 2015 for full details of the study). We found video evidence showing that all students were able to understand simple French based upon their nonverbal responses, as in the example of the picnic TPR activity. Also, evidence showed that all students were able to engage in verbal communication with their teacher in French exchanges, such as the vocabulary review activity. In some cases, students with special needs required additional prompting from their French teacher or the pre-kindergarten classroom teachers in order to use their French language skills. These additional prompts and longer wait time were used by the French teachers most frequently as

instructional modifications for special needs students. However, video evidence also showed examples of special needs students participating in French lessons along with their typically developing peers without any additional prompting or wait time. Overall, the video evidence demonstrated that students of all ability levels can participate in foreign language classes and enjoy a positive language learning experience.

At the end of the school year in May 2014, the pre-kindergarten classroom teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire to assess the French program. All three classroom teachers reported that the French classes had a positive impact on their students, the students looked forward to their French classes, and they requested that the French program continue. Also, the classroom teachers reported positive feedback from parents of participating students who were impressed that their children were using their French vocabulary at home. One teacher stated that several parents of participants asked for a French vocabulary list so that they could review with their children at home.

Conclusion

Although a small French program such as the one conducted at The Unity School cannot make an argument for changing the practice of exemption of special needs students from foreign language classes, this study makes a contribution to our knowledge in this area. This French program provides an example of a school's commitment to full inclusion and shows that all children can participate in foreign language learning regardless of ability level. Due to the success of the French program in the pilot year, The Unity School has continued with the pre-kindergarten French program for a third consecutive year with hopes to expand the program into other grades and continue to provide access to foreign language learning for all students.

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