



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Effective literacy strategies for immigrant students

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Canada, like many developed countries faced with shrinking birth rates, has come to rely on immigration as a way of building and maintaining a skilled workforce. For a majority of today's immigrants, English or French is a second language and, when their children start school, their education proceeds in one of these second languages.

While many immigrant students thrive in Canada's schools and go on to post-secondary education and successful careers, others struggle with their second-language skills—and falter in school as a result. Effective English as a Second Language (ESL) and French as a Second Language (FSL) literacy instruction can help to ensure that immigrant children succeed in school and are well-positioned to join a skilled workforce when they complete their educations.

Immigrants in Canada

According to the 2006 Census, one in five Canadians was born elsewhere and came to Canada as an immigrant.¹ Statistics Canada also reported that most immigrants do not speak either of Canada's official languages as their mother tongue: 70% of all immigrants—and 80% of those who arrived between 2001 and 2006—reported a language other than English or French as their mother tongue in 2006.²

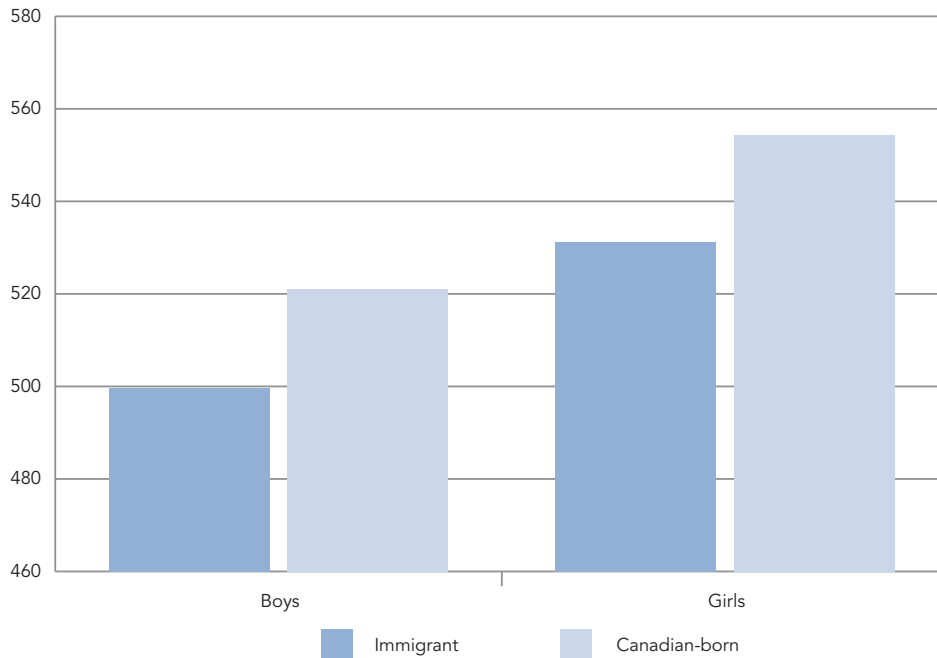
The Immigrant Experience in Canada's Schools

About 7% of children in Canada under the age of 16 were born elsewhere and came to Canada as immigrants—where most learned English or French as a second language. An even larger number of Canadian children are born to immigrant parents and grow up in homes where neither English nor French is spoken. Together, these two groups of immigrant ESL/FSL children make up a significant proportion of students in Canadian classrooms. This is especially true in areas that attract large numbers of immigrants. For example, over 40% of Toronto District School Board students have a mother tongue other than English.³ In Montreal, 34% of students speak a language other than English or French at home⁴ and in the Vancouver school district, 61% of students speak a language other than English at home.⁵

Research has shown that many of these immigrant ESL/FSL children are well-prepared to meet the demands of the Canada's schools and go on to follow successful educational pathways. For example, young immigrants are more likely to attend university than their Canadian-born counterparts,⁶ while immigrants for whom English is a second language show especially high rates of university attendance.⁷ Visible minority immigrants are less likely to drop out of high school, more likely to take pre-university math courses in high school, and more likely to earn higher grades in math, than Canadian-born students.⁸

Despite these successes, many immigrant students are faced with literacy challenges. According to data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a wide-scale survey of 15-year-old students in more than 40 countries, immigrant students in Canada scored significantly lower than their Canadian-born counterparts on literacy assessments (see *Figure 1*).⁹

Figure 1:
PISA Reading Scores of Immigrant and Canadian-born 15-year-olds



Source: Statistics Canada and OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment (2000).

For some immigrant groups, literacy is just one of a host of difficulties that contribute to poor academic results. A recent study commissioned by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and Citizenship and Immigration Canada examined the educational pathways and academic performance of students who do not speak English or French at home and who live in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver—Canada’s main immigrant destinations.

This report, titled *Educational Pathways and Academic Performance of Youth of Immigrant Origin: Comparing Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver*, reveals large differences among different groups of immigrants. For example, Chinese-speaking immigrant youth tend to do as well (and, often better) than Canadian-born youth in terms of high-school graduation rates, overall grades and participation in pre-university courses. Meanwhile, Spanish-, Creole- or Vietnamese-speaking immigrant students were shown to perform well below their Canadian-born counterparts on all three of these measures.

Lessons in Learning: Teaching Literacy Skills to ESL/FSL Students

Strong literacy skills are a key ingredient of academic success, and therefore addressing weaknesses in this area is a critical step towards fostering positive academic outcomes among immigrant ESL/FSL students. CCL's Lessons in Learning from October 2008 ("*Understanding the academic trajectories of ESL students*") determined that when it came to effective teaching strategies for ESL students, a flexible, varied approach was more successful than a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

In addition, CCL has recently reviewed the literature devoted to instructional strategies designed to teach literacy skills to immigrant ESL/FSL students.¹⁰ This review highlighted three important lessons for teaching English literacy skills to ESL/FSL students.

Lesson 1

Collaborative reading, systematic phonics instruction, multimedia-assisted reading and diary writing are proven tools for teaching English literacy to ESL immigrant students.

Collaborative Reading

ESL/FSL students can improve their literacy skills by working cooperatively to develop a shared understanding of written material.^{11, 12} Reading fluency and reading comprehension often improve when a proficient reader and a less-proficient reader take turns reading aloud to one another.¹³

A popular (and effective) form of such collaborative learning is called Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC). Used for comprehensive reading and writing instruction in Grades 2 through Grade 8, CIRC includes story related activities, direct instruction in reading comprehension and other reading activities.^{14, 15, 16} Developed in the United States, a bilingual version of this program has shown positive results with Spanish-speaking students.

Although several types of CIRC are currently in use, a common method involves forming "learning teams" made up of students (usually four) who are at varying levels of reading proficiency. These students work on different cooperative activities, including creative writing, peer reading, identification of major elements in a story, summarizing of stories and story retelling, and activities geared toward practice of basic reading skills (e.g., spelling, decoding, and vocabulary).

Systematic Phonics and Guided Reading

In systematic phonics instructions, learners are taught how to read and write using the correspondences between letters and the sounds they represent. The goal of phonics instruction is to help beginner readers understand how letters are linked to sounds to form letter-sound correspondences. Guided reading is a strategy to help students develop their reading skills in which the teacher provides support for small groups of readers as they learn to use various reading strategies (e.g., letter and sound relationships, context clues, word structure).

Multimedia-Assisted Reading

A number of effective multimedia-assisted reading interventions have been reported in the literature. Some of those used with ESL immigrant students include:

- incidental word learning through the use of close-captioned television;
- audio taped or read-along instructional materials;
- computer programs for reading and writing (e.g., the Fast ForWord program; word processing).

For example, it is believed that reading skills for beginning learners can be improved by watching television programs with close-captioning. This allows students to hear the words, see the words as captions and experience the context of the words by watching the images on the television.

Writing Strategies

Different strategies have been used with immigrant ESL/EFL students to help improve their writing, including keeping diaries in which they reflect on their own understanding of language and linguistic structures¹⁷ as well as structured writing exercises and free writing (i.e., where students are instructed to write continuously for a period of time without worrying about content or form).¹⁸ Interventions that focus on free writing typically emphasize the process of writing rather than the product. Free writing allows students to receive feedback from teachers and their colleagues without being graded. Conversely, in the structured writing learning environment, topics to write about are usually assigned to students and writing is graded, based on syntactic and lexical correctness.¹⁹

Lesson 2

The literacy strategies described above have been shown to reap benefits for ESL/EFL students in all grades from kindergarten to Grade 12, but were especially beneficial for students from a low socio-economic status (SES). This is important, considering that low-SES students have traditionally been found to:

- harbour more negative attitudes towards learning than other students;
- rate themselves as less confident readers;
- derive less enjoyment from reading than their high-SES peers.

Further, students from a low SES have also reported that they have less access to books in their homes, limited access to educational resources such as computers and magazines, and (perhaps most importantly) receive less encouragement from their parents to read.²⁰

Lesson 3

ESL literacy instruction carried out in classrooms has been shown to be more successful than instruction carried out in laboratories or “pull-out rooms” (separate rooms where students can work individually or in small groups with a resource teacher).

Conclusion

Educators have a strong interest in developing successful strategies for teaching literacy to immigrant students. While more high-quality studies are needed to increase our understanding of how different students respond to different instructional strategies, the evidence reviewed by the Canadian Council on Learning indicates that co-operative reading, systematic phonics instruction, multimedia-assisted reading techniques and structured writing have the potential to enhance the teaching of English literacy to ESL immigrant students.

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