

Cross-Language Transfer When Learning to Spell in a Second Language

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Introduction

Knowledge of French spelling is hypothesized to transfer into English spelling (and vice versa). For example, with the English word “shop”, children may use the French grapheme “ch” for the sound represented in English by the “sh” grapheme, indicating a “transfer” of French into English (i.e., “chop” vs. “shop”). Likewise, with the French word “chuchoter”, children may use the English grapheme “sh” for the sound represented in French by the “ch” grapheme, indicating a “transfer” of English into French (i.e., “shushoter” versus “chuchoter”).

Our research explores whether cross-language transfer of spelling is related to children’s literacy knowledge (e.g., reading, vocabulary, orthography, etc).

Method

English speaking Kindergarten children enrolled in Early French Immersion (n=120) were tested on their spelling and literacy skills in English (their first language) and French (the language of instruction).

Children were asked to spell a list of nine English words (e.g., treasure) and nine French words (e.g., trajet) in which sounds that are common to French and English (e.g., phonetic transcription “ʒ”) are represented by different graphemes (e.g., “s” versus “j”).

Word (English)	Phonetic Transcription	English Grapheme	French Word	French Grapheme
Sugar	ʃ	s	Chuchoter	ch
Microwave	w	w	Jouet	ou
Me	i	e	Midi	i
Shop	ʃ	sh	Chocolat	ch
We	w	w	Oui	ou
Musician	ʃ	s	Mouchoir	ch
Treasure	ʒ	s	Trajet	ch
Easy	i	e	Ici	i
Finish	ʃ	sh	Gouache	ch

Results

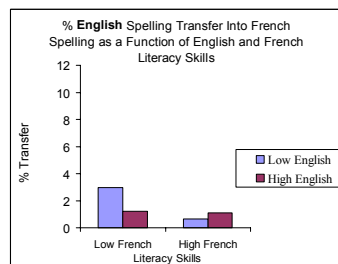


Figure 1.

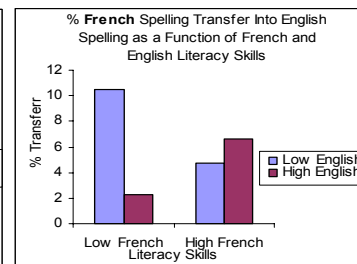


Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 1, children with low scores in both French and English reading showed the greatest frequency of intrusions of English graphemes into French words (e.g., writing trajet as traset). Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, children with low reading scores in both languages show the greatest frequency of intrusions of French into English (e.g., writing shop as chop). Children with low French but high English reading scores made few intrusions of French graphemes into English, whereas children with relatively high French reading scores made more. Thus, there was support for cross-language transfer of skills, with greater transfer (in both directions) occurring for children with poorer reading in either language, but more evidence for transfer from French (the language of instruction) to English, even for children with good English language skills.

Conclusions

- In support of cross language transfer (a) low French literacy skills predicted English transfer into French spelling and (b) low English literacy skills predicted French transfer into English spelling.
- There were relatively few intrusions from English into French; most frequent for children with lower reading skills in both languages
- Intrusions of French into English were most common for children with lower reading skills in both languages, again, but also for children with higher French skills; seems consistent with the idea that they are learning about French in school.