Comparing Learning to Read in English and French

Report for Parents and Teachers: June 2015

During the 2013-2014 school year, researchers from the Child Language and Literacy Research Lab at Carleton University conducted research with children from schools in Ottawa and Gatineau. We wish to share our findings with you.

What was the goal of the research? To assess the development of children's reading abilities in English and French, because the two languages differ in how difficult words are to read. Specifically, the English language is less **consistent** between how words are spelled and how they are pronounced (see example). Does this difference in consistency affect the speed of learning to read?

Example: English words, like *mint* and *pint,* are spelled similarly but pronounced differently; however, French words, such as *ment* and *vent,* are spelled and pronounced similarly.

English Non-word Reading

French Non-word Reading

Who participated? A total of 171 children in grades 1 and 2 did. Children received parent or guardian consent and agreed to participate. They were in English-only (56 children), French-only (71), or French Immersion schools (44). Children in French Immersion (FI) were introduced to reading in English only in grade 2.

How did we proceed? Children completed three reading tasks three times in the school year: in fall, winter, and spring. Children in English and French schools were assessed in their language of instruction. FI children were assessed in either English or French.

Task 1: Non-word Reading

In this task, children were asked to read in one minute as many items as they could from a list of 36 **non-words** that increased in difficulty. Non-words look and sound like real words, but they have no meaning. Examples of non-words include *feno* in English and *vina* in French. The average percentages of non-words read by children in English (top) and French (bottom) are presented next for fall, winter, and spring.
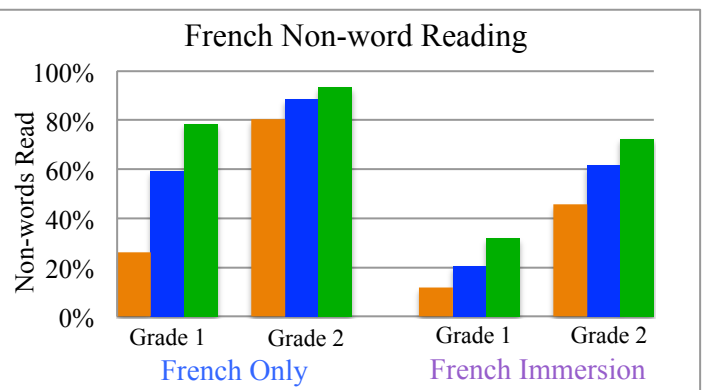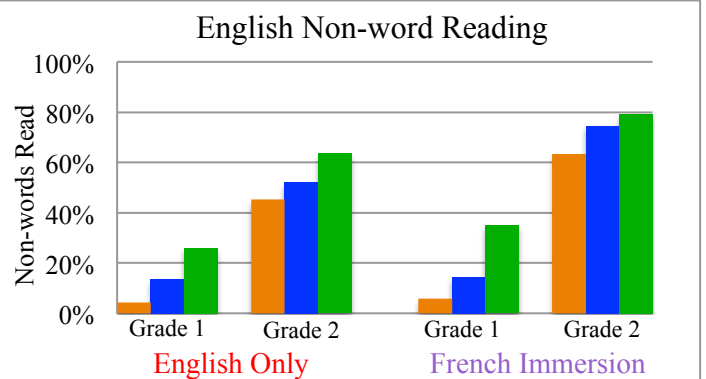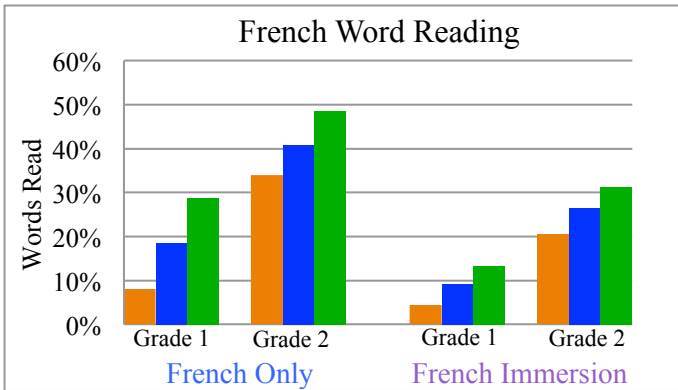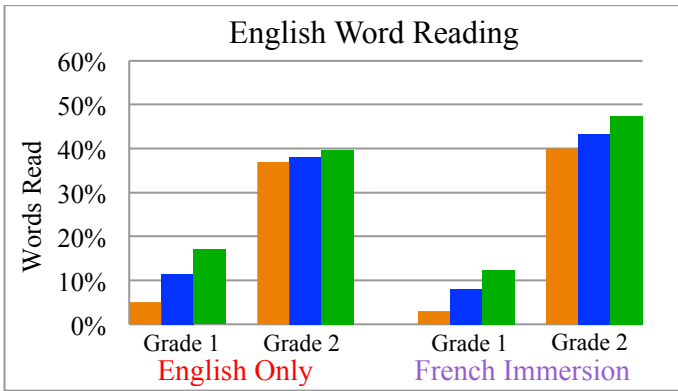
Examination of these figures shows the following:

• All groups made progress during the school year.

• Children in English schools made slower progress than children in French schools. This supports the expectation that the consistency of the language would affect the speed of learning to read.

• FI children reading in English made rapid progress once English instruction began in Grade 2.

• FI children reading in French made slower progress than children in French schools. This was expected because FI children were learning to speak and read French at the same time.

Task 2: Word Reading

In this task, children were asked to read in one minute as many items as they could from a list of **real words** that increased in difficulty. There were 158 two- to four-letter words for children assessed in English, and 105 two- to ten-letter words for children assessed in French. The average percentages of words read by children are presented next.

English Word Reading

French Word Reading

Examination of these figures shows the following:

- All groups made progress during the school year. However, children in English schools made slower progress in Grade 2.

- Overall, these figures show the same general conclusions as those for non-word reading. This also supports the expectation that the consistency of the language would affect the speed of learning to read.

Task 3: The Stroop Task

The Stroop task assessed **automatic reading**, which is the ability to recognize a word without needing to read it letter by letter. Children were asked to name four colours as fast as they could in two tests: one for groups of symbols (test 1), and one for mismatched colour words (test 2).

| Test 1: | *** | ***** | **** | ****** |
| Test 2: | RED | GREEN | BLUE | YELLOW |

Example: The correct answers in both tests are *green*, *red*, *yellow*, and *blue*.

To name the ink colour of RED, for example, an automatic reader must stop the reading of the printed word (RED) in order to name the colour ("green"). This is expected to result in a longer time to complete test 2. The time difference between these two tests was used to calculate Stroop scores.

Previous research has demonstrated that children's Stroop scores increase to a maximum peak while automatic reading is being acquired. Scores then slowly decline and stabilize as children develop greater mental control to inhibit automatic reading. This indicates more advanced reading abilities.

The Stroop scores obtained by children are reported in the figure below. Due to small sample size, results are not presented for FI children.
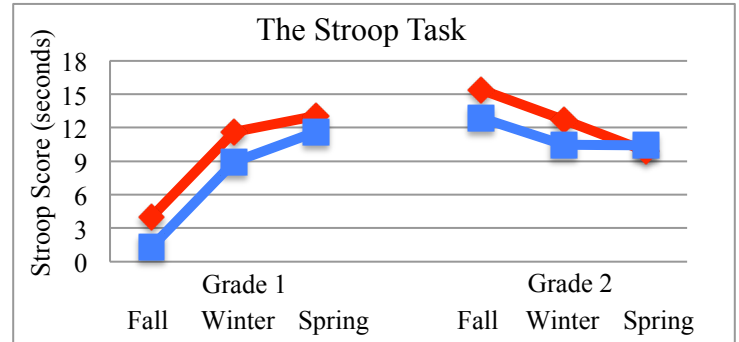
Examination of this figure shows the following:

- In grade 1, contrary to expectations, the Stroop scores obtained by children in English and French schools increased at a similar rate.

- In grade 2, scores declined at a similar rate from fall to winter. However, in support of expectations, from winter to spring the scores of children in English schools continued to decline while French children's scores began to stabilize (indicating more advanced reading abilities).

In conclusion, our findings support similar research conducted in Europe: The more a language is inconsistent, the harder it is for children to learn to read. Studying the impact of language consistency on reading acquisition is important for understanding how best to help children learn to read.

We thank the children, school principals, teachers, and parents (guardians) for their participation.