Promising practices in writing instruction for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the French Immersion Program
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Introduction

In New Brunswick, French Immersion (FI) programs often make newspaper headlines where they are called into question regarding inclusion and equity (Poitras, February 27th, 2019). Yet, the claim that FI is not suitable for students with exceptionalities is not supported by research evidence (Bourgoin, 2014; Genesee & Fortune, 2014). Wise (2011) suggested that the allegation of elitism against FI and the inaction from stakeholders such as political and educational leaders to work towards more inclusionary practices in FI could be viewed as a conspiracy of silence. Indeed, since its inception over 40 years ago, FI's suitability for exceptional students has been questioned and the research evidence has constantly shown no disadvantage for these students (Bourgoin, 2014). It is time to move ahead and to pursue inclusionary practices for students with exceptionalities in FI. The purpose of this article is therefore to share promising writing instruction practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in an FI context. ASD is a neurological-based developmental disability that affects the normal functioning of the brain (Leblanc, Richardson, & Burns, 2009).

Description of the study

Over the course of one school year, the writing progress of students and the teaching practices in a Grade 7 FI class were documented as part of this ethnographic study. The purpose of the study was to describe the progress made in writing by students in FI and the writing instructional practices used by both the FI Language Arts (FILA) and the English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. Eight case studies were used to examine more closely the progress made by particular students. Four writers with exceptionalities, including one with ASD, were included in these case studies. The other four students were typically developing writers. The eight students were interviewed and wrote two texts while thinking aloud, once at the beginning of the school year and for a second time at the end of the school year. Throughout the year, classroom observations were conducted as well as formal and informal interviews with the FI and English Language Arts teachers, and informal interviews with the students.

Molly, a student with ASD

Molly[1], a student with ASD, took an active part in the regular FI classroom activities. She was highly motivated to learn in general, and also to continue developing her writing skills in her second language. Molly loved animals and she knew numerous facts about them. She enjoyed reading informal books about animals and she could speak in depth about several species. When Molly could choose her writing topic, she wrote about animals.

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[1] Pseudonym

Molly had anxiety, and she would draw in order to manage her anxiety. In terms of writing, she was very creative and would come up with several interesting topics. She experienced difficulties with the following aspects of writing: starting and finishing a text; dealing with subjects other than animals; relating to the characters and describing their emotions, ideas and feelings; planning and revising text; and using language conventions, especially spelling.

Classroom instruction

Ms. Amélie and Ms. Michelle[2], the FILA and ELA teachers, shared common practices regarding language arts (classroom observations). Even before thinking about specific pedagogies, they considered it important to develop a climate conducive to learning for all their students. Both teachers adopted a balanced literacy approach where writing was not taught in isolation from other language skills such as speaking and reading (interviews with Ms. Amélie and Ms. Michelle). In regards to the FILA curriculum, teachers followed a process approach to writing (planning, translation of ideas, revising) and included the six elements of good writing (ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions) in their instruction and assessment. Ms. Amélie and Ms. Michelle both used the following evidence-based writing practices in their writing instruction:

1. Analysis of model texts: Students, with the help of teachers, analyze model texts to identify the text structure and the elements of good writing (Cavanagh, 2006; Hyland, 2007)
2. Modeled writing: Teachers share aloud their writing processes (Saddler & Graham, 2007)
3. Shared writing: Students write cooperatively and receive support from peers during writing (Trehearne, 2006)
4. Independent writing: Students write individually following the writing process (Trehearne, 2006)

Ms. Amélie and Ms. Michelle explicitly taught writing, but focused their instruction primarily on the traits of writing, not the processes of writing. They provided scaffolding for their students. In their classrooms, students were expected to plan, edit and proofread. Teachers provided and modelled flowcharts for planning, usually the same template for all students. For review and correction, Amélie and Michelle recorded on the board the items that students needed to revise in their writing. Students also conferenced with their peers and with their teacher.

Molly's writing progress

During the school year, Molly made progress both in terms of writing traits and the writing process. At the end of the year, she was able to choose a writing subject, delineate it, and develop it while still managing to stay on task. Also, while writing her text, she reread her already written text and took into account its coherence and cohesion. In addition, Molly

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[2] pseudonyms

implemented the editing process at the end of the year, whereas she had avoided it at the beginning of the school year. Her corrections consisted mainly of checking the spelling of words in the dictionary.

Promising writing practices for students with ASD

Generally speaking, collaboration between English and French language arts teachers appears to be crucial in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the benefits of this collaboration can be seen in a number of ways. I will therefore begin this section on promising practices by discussing the benefits of this collaboration before moving on to more specific practices.

The attitude of Molly's teachers towards students with exceptionalities in immersion cannot be overlooked as a contributing factor to Molly's progress. Ms. Amélie strongly believed in inclusion in the FI program and considered it a fundamental right of Molly to have access to bilingualism. For her part, Ms. Michelle supported her colleague and saw the opportunity to learn the language arts in both languages as a way to strengthen literacy and not as an impediment to developing literacy in Molly's first language. This positive attitude towards access to the FI program for all was reflected by the school administration and the student support team. The importance of this favorable attitude cannot be understated; it translated into concrete actions to facilitate and support access for students with ASD like Molly in FI.

In addition, the two language arts teachers shared similar pedagogical approaches. This congruence led to predictability with respect to the teaching of writing. Predictability is certainly beneficial for students with ASD; it seems to have helped reduce anxiety and, consequently, facilitated learning.

The linguistic transfer from one language to another, whether from English to French or from French to English, is not to be underestimated. To reap the full benefits, teachers of FILA and ELA must help students with ASD to become aware of the common elements and processes between the two languages and, at the same time, draw their attention to the differences. Both teachers in this study facilitated these linguistic transfers and, in this way, contributed to Molly's writing progress.

The following practice illustrates the interconnectness of teacher collaboration and the more specific practices related to writing instruction. Molly had difficulty delineating her writing topic and Ms. Michelle, the English language arts teacher, spent a lot of time on this aspect of writing during the writing conferences, a period of time that allowed for individualized instruction. Writing conferences are a very effective writing instruction practice for all, including students with ASD. Molly, encouraged by her teachers to make linguistic transfers between the two languages, was very good at using the strategies she learned in English to delineate her writing topic to her French writing. She indeed credited Ms. Michelle for her progress with that aspect of writing.

This leads to another important writing promising practice for students with ASD — the need for opportunities to revisit the same concept multiple times. Mrs. Michelle worked with Molly on the delineation of her writing topic during several writing conferences over a number of months. It is important to respect the student's pace of learning and to give her the time she needed to learn.

Generally, the evidence-based writing practices identified in the research – that is, analysis of model texts, modeled writing, shared writing and independent writing – supported Molly's progress and helped her develop more confidence in her abilities to write. However, it is important to mention that these practices seemed to be much more powerful when sequenced in order to gradually transfer the responsibility for the learning of writing to the student. Indeed, Ms. Amélie was constantly scaffolding her writing instruction in order to support writing in a second language and that scaffolding was key to Molly's success. Ms. Amélie always started with an analysis of model texts which allowed her students to compare and analyze texts of the genre under study with her support and then enter the information in a graphic organizer posted in the classroom.

The next writing practice used was modeled writing. Using a graphic organizer, Mrs. Amélie would share aloud her thought process while writing a text of a specific genre. After using practices where a teacher's instruction is central, Ms. Amélie gave more autonomy to the students with shared writing. The students practiced and negotiated the writing processes and particular writing traits in small groups. Meanwhile, Ms. Amélie circulated and observed the students to check for understanding. In cases where a student like Molly needed more explicit instruction, Ms. Amélie would individualize her instruction to meet the student's needs. Finally, the students would write independently and, therefore, have more autonomy. However, it would be incorrect to assume that students no longer need scaffolding at this point in the teaching sequence. In other practices, students and teachers have developed several resources to support independent writing, such as a graphic organizer representing the writing traits, a thematic word wall, and a checklist. In addition, the teacher facilitates the implementation of writing processes and conducts writing conferences with students. Students also support each other through peer writing conferences.

The predictability of the teaching sequence and the repetition of the gradual release of responsibility model for each new text genre are indispensable for a student with ASD. Another advantage of this teaching sequence is that it provides opportunities to individualize instruction. Molly, as is often the case with students with ASD, required explicit individualized instruction in planning and revising her written texts (Brown & Klein, 2011).

With regards to the planning process, breaking it down into its components supports students with ASD to gain a better control of the process. The planning process is composed of goal setting (the intentions for writing this text), generating ideas, and organizing ideas. It is easy for students with ASD to get lost in the planning process when it is not broken down into its components. However, the quality of the final text depends very much on the quality of the planning. Thus, a promising practice for these students is to individualize explicit instruction

and break it down into its three components while providing the students with graphic organizers to guide them.

Intentional teacher support of the review process is also a promising practice. Students with ASD tend to focus a great deal of mental energy and time on trying to correct spelling mistakes by searching for words in the dictionary. Spelling errors are surface elements of a written text. To support students with ASD in addressing elements that require higher-order thinking skills such as cohesion and consistency of text, the teacher needs to reduce the cognitive load related to spelling in the following ways: developing a thematic word wall with students; creating language support posters in the classroom with students; inviting students to create personal dictionaries; and devoting time to spelling instruction including pattern information, spelling variations based on word origins, and meaning (morphological or morphemic) information. During the teacher-student writing conferences, the teacher should scaffold the thinking process of students with ASD by asking pointed questions leading the student to think more deeply about the quality of their written text.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to reiterate the importance of taking a strengths-based approach for students with ASD participating in FI programs. By continuing to question the relevance of FI programs for these students, we are perpetuating the myth of program elitism. All students, including those with ASD, have the right to quality bilingual education. Denying them the support they need to succeed and suggesting that they attend a unilingual program to receive support is detrimental to students with ASD.

As demonstrated in this article, there are several promising practices that can ensure the success of ASD students in FI programs. The promising practices suggested here were in the area of writing, but they also exist for other learning contexts. Student success is everyone's business whether it is in the English Prime or FI programs. Collaboration among subject teachers, the educational support services team, school administration, parents, community members, the school district, and the Department of Education is crucial.

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