Literacy Development in Early FI
Summary of Research

English Reading Outcomes

Students in early total immersion programs scored below grade level on tests of English word knowledge & reading comprehension during grades when no English instruction was provided.

Immersion students achieved parity with English comparison students in these same skills within one or two years of having English language instruction.
Genesee, 1978, Lambert & Tucker, 1972, Rubin, Turner & Kantor, 1991

This suggests that skills acquired in French can be, and are, transferred to English & possibly vice versa. Competence in English reading reflects experiences outside of school.

Early immersion students continue to perform as well as comparison students in all English reading skills assessed when evaluations are carried out in higher grades.
Genesee (2004)

Findings confirmed in more recent studies based on Ontario-wide testing of grade 3 and 6 students.
Turnbull, Lapkin & Hart (2001)

French Reading Outcomes
Immersion students often score at the same level as native French-speaking students on tests of standardized reading comprehension & in the average range on standardized tests normed on native French-speaking students.
Genesee, 1978

Immersion students have areas of difficulty: fewer were independent readers & had good passage-retelling scores in comparison with regular program students reading in English. Immersion students could get the gist, but could not answer questions concerning details of the text. Main reason for this difficulty is lack of vocabulary.

At-Risk Learners

Reasons: low level of general academic ability, poor first-language abilities, disadvantaged socioeconomic background, minority language status.

Discouraging students from such backgrounds from the most effective educational means for attaining functional bilingualism is questionable on ethical grounds.

But including such students calls for providing differentiated instruction & support services, which are often not provided at the moment.

Poor Academic Ability
There are no statistically significant differences between below-average students in Immersion and those in the English program. Below-average students were not at greater risk for low reading achievement in English.

In French reading, below-average students in Immersion scored significantly higher than below-average students in the English program. Immersion students benefit from the program in the form of enhanced French reading ability, despite their academic challenges.

Reading achievement scores for students who switched out of immersion were not significantly worse than those of students who remained in immersion. However, these students had significantly more negative attitudes toward school (and immersion) & exhibited more behavioural problems. Behavioural problems are linked to the students' academic abilities, and not difficulty with reading. Students who had switched improved in English reading (word recognition & comprehension) to the same extent as students who remained in immersion. Negative attitudes & poor school behaviours continued after they had transferred, suggesting that the ability to cope with poor academic performance may be a more serious problem.
Bruck, 1985

Poor First Language Abilitiies
K students classified by teachers as "impaired" or "normal" (judgments, oral interview & diagnostic tests) – "impaired" immersion students reading almost at grade level by grade 2 and reading as well as English program students by grade 3.

Disadvantaged Socioeconomic Background

Participation in early immersion programs does not put such students at greater risk for poor reading outcomes.
Bruck, 1975

Minority Language Status
Concerns have been expressed that minority language students may experience incomplete development of all languages if schooled in early FI. Early FI has not been as popular in Toronto among heritage language children, based on belief that they should learn English first. Middle immersion programs are more popular. Students who developed literacy skills in their heritage language scored higher on French reading comprehension tests than either Anglophone or immersion students or heritage language students who had acquired only oral language proficiency. No additional advantage for students whose first language is another Romance language.
Lapkin, Rowan & Hart, 1990

Predicting Individual Differences in Reading Outcomes
Principals & teachers often cite academic difficulties as the primary reason students dropped out of immersion. More students with special needs could be retained if appropriate resources & programs were put in place.

Need more research on early detection of students with language-related difficulties in immersion & on effective remedial activities in needed.
Lapkin, Swain & Shapson, 1990

Bowey (2005) identified Kindergarten predictors of subsequent reading ability (primarily word identification) in monolingual English-speaking children: letter-name knowledge & phonological processing abilities. Understanding the alphabetic principle & developing efficient phonological recoding skills are the main competencies beginning readers must acquire for reading to become a self-teaching process.

WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test), Raven's Matrices (tests of nonverbal IQ), English receptive vocabulary, English expressive language, speeded picture naming, word segmentation into syllables, CIRCUS tests (assess auditory discrimination, knowledge of numbers & letters, comprehension & recall of stories, quantitative concepts & problem solving.

Verbal IQ and expressive language scores are good discriminators because they provide evidence that English language skills tests before children start immersion may be good predictors of later reading achievement in French. Skills assessed in English can predict Immersion students' word identification scores in French. Phonological awareness skills transfer across languages.
Comeau, Cormier, Grandmaison & Lacroix, 1999

Phonological awareness: syllable, onset-rime & phoneme –

Future word-identification ability in French can be predicted from tests given in English

Grade 1 immersion students who were considered at risk according to their performance on a set of English tests were also identified as at risk on the basis of performance on a similar battery of French langage tests.

Morphological awareness facilitates reading across languages. Skills that facilitate learning to read in a second language, and skills assessed in students' first language (esp. phonological awareness) can predict word identification ability in the second language.