

# The language development of preschool children in a linguistic minority context

Ashley Benoît, Amber Flannigan, Chantal Mayer-Crittenden



Laurentian University, Canada



## INTRODUCTION

- The vitality of francophone communities in Canadian minority settings is a matter of significant concern, as shown through the ongoing decline in the use of French as an official language, which has decreased from 3.6% in 2016 to 3.3% in 2021, continuing a downward spiral observed within the past 2 decades (Statistics Canada, 2022)
- A significant number of francophone children routinely navigate dual cultural environments, which greatly influences the development of their linguistic abilities and identity formation.

## OBJECTIVES

- To assess the implementation of the classification of children in Sudbury's francophone early childhood centers into 4 linguistic profiles, with or without language difficulties.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the developed protocol to support children who are acquiring the French language, considering their linguistic profile and potential language challenges.

## METHOD

The study involved 52 children aged 18 to 47 months. A language exposure mapping questionnaire was used to estimate language exposure in all languages spoken, and the Language Use Inventory (LUI) (O'Neill, 2002), to assess communication skills. The children were assessed twice using these measures to determine the validity of these profiles.

### LUI Language Use Inventory

### EXPOSURE MAPPING

COMMUNITY LANGUAGE VS. TARGET LANGUAGE  
BOTTE-BOOT.COM



The 4 (5) language profiles (Mayer-Crittenden et Bertrand, 2022)

- Profile A** – Child with minimal exposure to French (< 40% of child's waking hours in French)
- Profile B** – Child with sufficient exposure to French (40–50% of child's waking hours are in French)
- Profile C** – Child with adequate exposure to French (50–70% of a child's waking hours are in French)
- Profile D** – Child consistently exposed to French (> 70% of child's waking hours are in French)
- Language difficulties** - Added to profiles A-D when the child has language difficulties in all spoken languages.

### Intervention

- 11 day care sites were divided into 2 groups:
  - 5 sites = experimental group (n=24)
  - 6 sites = control group (n=28)
- The research team visited the 5 sites in the experimental group in December, January, February, and March.
- The targeted language stimulation strategies (LSS) were modeled, the educational staff had the opportunity to ask questions, and the researchers provided recommendations based on their observations.
- Staff attended a 3-hour training session.
- Children in the experimental group received French language stimulation strategies and support from speech and language pathologists, while the daily routine of the control group remained unchanged.



Left: PI demonstrating LSS with 3;11 year old.



Above: Staff practicing LSS during book reading.



Left: Staff practicing LSS during a craft activity.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- All the children who participated in this study were classified in one of the linguistic language profiles with or without language difficulties potentially related to a language disorder.
- 13 children were suspected of having **language difficulties**
- Children in profiles A and B required more one-on-one with the staff
- The researchers' observations following the visits to the 5 experimental sites:
  - Mastered language stimulation strategies\*** (80 % of the time)
    - Getting down at the child's level
    - Following the child's lead and interests
    - Naming and labeling items
  - LSS to target\*\***
    - Self-verbalization
    - Parallel verbalization
    - Creating communication opportunities
    - Prolong/extend and enrich the child's words & sentences



QR code: LSS website

- Next steps:**
  - Compare data at both intake times
  - Interview staff
  - Parent questionnaire

## CONCLUSION

- Communication is one of the most important (yet underexplored) social determinants of health in underserved language communities.
- This action-research was focused on the development of oral communication skills in French during the preschool years.
- This protocol (profiles and language stimulation strategies) can be utilized by other childcare centers in linguistic minority contexts in Canada and elsewhere.

## REFERENCES

- Bergelson, E., Soderstrom, M., Schwarz, I. C., Rowland, C. F., Ramirez-Esparza, N., R. Hamrick, L., ... & Cristia, A. (2023). Everyday language input and production in 1,001 children from six continents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 120*(52), e2300671120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2300671120>
- Gilbert, A., LeTouzé, S., Thériault, J. Y. et Landry, R. (2004). Le personnel enseignant face aux défis de l'enseignement en milieu minoritaire francophone [Rapport de recherche]. Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur la citoyenneté et sur les minorités, Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques et Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants.
- CSAP, n.d. Stratégies de stimulation du langage. Conseil scolaire acadien provincial. <https://sites.google.com/sepne.ca/lastimulationdulangage/accueil>
- Mayer-Crittenden, C. & Bertrand, D. (2022). 2e rapport du projet francisation au Carrefour francophone de Sudbury. 36 p.
- O'Neill, D. K. (2002). Language Use Inventory for Young Children: An assessment of pragmatic language. Statistique Canada. (2022). *Profil du recensement, recensement de la population du Grand Sudbury de 2021*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/>



QR code: Action-research web page

"This action-research allowed me to become more aware of the strategies that I already use and it has taught me new LSS strategies that I have now incorporated into my daily routine. For example, I no longer use the 'sandwich' method when talking to the kids (Give the instruction in French, then in English, then in French again). I use more visual cues, routine, and repetition." (Early childhood educator from experimental group)



Santé Health Canada



This initiative was made possible thanks to the financial contribution of Health Canada and the Ministry of Francophone Affairs. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of these entities.