

# Auditory Problems in French Immersion: Can it Work?

*This article was contributed by Joanne Boissonneault, MA, French immersion and special education specialist and consultant. For more about learning difficulties and French immersion, look under "For parents" at [www.cpfalta.ab.ca](http://www.cpfalta.ab.ca).*

Should children with auditory discrimination or auditory processing problems remain in French immersion? Should students with a weakness in listening skills be transferred to the regular English program?

Because in early immersion French is first learned through listening and speaking, over the years there has been a great deal of concern about the suitability of the program for children with auditory difficulties. However, as is the case for other types of learning difficulties, experience has shown that, with proper assistance, many students can function at their ability level while gaining all the benefits and opportunities that come with bilingualism. After all, didn't they learn their first language the same way?

These problems—and the solutions—are not language-specific. In its pamphlet *The Special Needs French Immersion Student!* Alberta Education explains, "Hearing problems may make it difficult for a child to learn in French immersion but it is not impossible. French immersion hearing impaired students need the same services as other hearing impaired students. Assistance for these students is available thanks to wireless technology where the teacher wears a microphone. The teacher's voice is amplified in a headset that the student wears or through speakers in the room. A French immersion hearing impaired student may also need the support services of a speech therapist. If these services are not available in French, they should be offered in English."

"Auditory discrimination" refers to the ability to tell the difference between similar sounds (such as discriminating between *p-p-b* and *p-b-p*) or similar-sounding words (such as *soup* and *soap*). A young child with an auditory difficulty would think that *main* and *vain* are the same word—he would not hear the difference between them.

"Auditory processing" is the way one receives and information through hearing and then is able to use that information. For example, a child who hears a phone number and cannot repeat it or write it down has been unable to process what he has heard. If you ask your child to bring you a loaf of bread and she brings you crackers instead, she has "processed" something in the correct food group but was unable to come up with the appropriate response.

Students with auditory problems sometimes go unnoticed, whether in immersion or in the English program. Some succeed without extra help, while others struggle. For example, students who are easily fatigued, frequently yawning or losing concentration are sometimes incorrectly labeled as having attention deficit disorder (ADD) when in fact visual and/or auditory problems are causing them to lose interest.

Often auditory discrimination or processing problems are not identified until Grade 3 or even later. The children function well in the immersion classroom on a non-academic, day-to-day basis. They participate fully in summer French camps. Clearly, they are learning the French language!

In fact, learning in an immersion classroom where the only language spoken is French, the students have to concentrate and pay attention more than they would if they were learning via their mother tongue. Immersion thus helps to establish good habits from the beginning and throughout the program. In addition, the emphasis on oral work, listening and repetition helps students with articulation and pronunciation. In essence, therefore, the immersion method must actually be assisting those children who have auditory problems.

## Hearing and dyslexia

Since 1990, research has shown that dyslexia is linked to the auditory processing system.<sup>2</sup> Because children with dyslexia experience reading and spelling problems, it has been considered a visual disorder. New findings, however, indicate that the auditory processing system may be the primary cause of or a major contributor to this impairment.

Other experts, from institutions such as Foothills Academy, note that many individuals have trouble with reading and spelling. Whether in English or in French, it has been found that some students have problems making use of the sounds and cannot determine the identity and order of the sounds within a word.

According to Sylvia Hannah, the former Director of the Edmonton Literacy Centre, "Classroom and clinical experience in the United States and Canada shows that once auditory conceptual function is developed and perfected, students of all ages make satisfactory literacy gains."<sup>3</sup>

Whether in English or in French, we educators must consider that our students may have auditory functioning problems or other learning weaknesses, and that these are treatable. At the same time, we must realize that our students have to develop their phonemic awareness and decoding skills for better reading. If they can't decode a nonsense word like *rilamerp*, then they can't read.

## What can parents do?

The main symptom of an auditory/hearing problem is that your child does not listen attentively or properly.

Here are some questions you or your child's teacher can ask yourselves when considering that your child may have an auditory problem:

- Observe your child's reactions or movements—including head movements—when you are asking her questions.
- Have your child's teacher observe and record his reactions to questions. Is he listening attentively? Is he watching lip or mouth movements when someone is talking to him?

Does he seem to hear less well when he cannot see the speaker?

- Does she seem to ignore you when you call her name even though you know she can hear?
- Take your child into a quiet room. Stand behind him and drop a piece of paper, first to his left side, then to his right. Each time ask him if he heard the paper drop. Which side?
- Does she react to sounds you don't hear—or react to them before you hear them? Or does she not react immediately to commands? Does she look surprised when suddenly spoken to?
- Is he sensitive to sound, or does he seem uncomfortable or distracted in a group or a busy room? Does he cover his ears frequently to block out sound—for no apparent reason, when there is too much noise such as loud music, or when there are plays/musical presentations in the gym? Does he often complain that “it’s too loud” or even that “it hurts”?
- Does she have excessively strong reactions—or virtually none at all—to loud or unusual noises?
- When listening, does he hold his head slightly turned to one side? Does he hold his hand cupped behind his ears?
- Does she seem sensitive to or uncomfortable in a particular environment or setting?
- Does he have trouble with phonics and learning to read?
- Does she skip sentences, words, end of sentences, or have trouble with sounding out words? Does she have difficulty discriminating among certain sounds or words?
- Does he often ask others to repeat what they have said?
- Does she have an unusually high or low tone of voice or voice volume? Does she talk too loudly or too softly?
- Does he not speak as well as other same-age children, or have poor language ability?
- Does she have trouble concentrating when she listens to people? Does she daydream during lessons?
- Does he easily forget what he has heard?
- Does your child seem to be very noisy and disobedient?
- Does she dislike activities where she has to sit still and listen to stories, etc.?

It is very important to have your child’s ears tested by an ear/nose/throat specialist regularly, perhaps every six months or at least once a year, especially if your son or daughter has had a significant history of ear infections. In addition, if your child’s mouth is open most of the time and he or she breathes through the mouth, that could be a sign of an ear, nose or throat problem which should be checked out.

If you have noticed any listening problems with your son or daughter, the following are some activities you can do for remediation.

↳ The most important is to refer your child to a speech therapist, audiologist or health worker.

- ↳ Arrange for him to sit at the front of the class so he can hear better or read lips better.
- ↳ Speak slightly louder and more slowly.
- ↳ Try not to say anything with your back to the child.
- ↳ Ask her to repeat important information, to see if she has received it and understands it.
- ↳ Coach her to watch your lips when you are talking so that she listens more attentively.
- ↳ Encourage him not to be afraid to ask questions when he has not heard the information accurately, whether it is from the teacher or others.
- ↳ Have her follow directions in game-like situations, gradually increasing the number of instructions. For example: “Get the chalk and put it beside your desk.” “Take the paper, put it under the garbage can, and go to the door.” This could be applied to a treasure hunt game where instructions are given verbally rather than in writing.
- ↳ Play riddles or rhyming games with him.
- ↳ Read a story to your child, pausing from time to time to leave out a word and have her supply the missing word.
- ↳ Read to him or have him listen to a recorded story or text, then ask detailed questions about the content. Encourage him to read or retell the story or parts of it—and be an enthusiastic and supportive listener.
- ↳ Have her identify beginning, middle, or end sounds (What is the third sound in *mystery*?), supply missing sounds (*the soup comes in a ca\_\_*), or change or omit sounds in words (e.g., *panto ran*; what does *scale* sound like without the *sc*?)
- ↳ Music lessons assist tremendously with listening skills!

It important to remember that students who are easily fatigued, yawning frequently or losing concentration are often incorrectly labelled as have attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD). The truth is, they may be experiencing auditory or visual problems—or both. They can easily lose interest in the classroom if their needs are not being met.

Education can be complicated but we must *believe* in our children in French immersion, trust in their abilities and strengths, and work with their weaknesses. The problems and the solutions encountered are not language-specific. The skills learned are easily transferred from one language to the other—especially between languages as similar as English and French.

<sup>1</sup> To see an online version of this pamphlet go to [www.education.gov.ab.ca/french/adtscol/frlmm](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/french/adtscol/frlmm)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, research on dyslexia done by Dr. Glenn Rosen at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston and Drs. Albert Galaburda and Matthew Menard at Harvard Medical School

<sup>3</sup> “All Students Should Read This,” Sylvia Hannah, *Alberta Teachers’ Association Magazine*, November/December 1992