Teachers collaborating to meet students’ linguistic needs: A bilingual reading (aloud) initiative

Laura Collins, Concordia University

in collaboration with
Roy Lyster & Susan Ballinger
McGill University
Background

Part of a larger research project:

Context

- In-service teachers
- Primary schools in Montreal area
- French immersion classes
  - French homeroom teacher
  - English language arts teacher
- Changed demographic
  - equivalent numbers of French-dominant and English-dominant children in the same class
  - potentially rich L2 learning context, but…
Challenges

- Teacher training focused on mother tongue pedagogy
  - for BOTH French immersion and English language arts
- Model of French immersion emphasizes separation of children’s two languages
- Cross-curricular collaboration ‘mandated’ by MELS
  - in-service teachers have little (if any) training, experience with collaboration
  - time
Reading aloud... bilingually

- Common activity observed: Reading aloud
- Bilingual twist: expand familiar unilingual activity
- Format
  - French and English teachers of each class read aloud from same story books over 5 months
  - alternate reading of one (or more) chapter(s) in the French and English classes
- 3 pairs of teachers
  - Grade 1/2 split; Grade 2; Grade 3
- Goal: foster cross-curricular, cross-linguistic collaboration
The Books

- Magic Tree House series
  - Mary Pope Osborne
  - English, French, and Spanish
- Theme
  - books and how writing changes over time
- Main characters
  - two children
- Common plot
  - travel back in time to save books from destruction
Vacation Under the Volcano

Panique à Pompéi

- Ancient Rome: books were papyrus scrolls, written in Latin with reed pens and octopus ink.
- Children travel back to A.D. 79 to retrieve the legend of Hercules.
Day of the Dragon King
Le terrible empereur de Chine

- Ancient China: books made of bamboo strips displaying Chinese calligraphy.
- Children sent to retrieve Chinese legend of the silk weaver and the cowherd.
Viking Ships at Sunrise
L’attaque des Vikings

- Ireland during the Middle Ages: books handwritten in Latin, decorated by monks using sheepskin and goose quill pens
- Children sent to Ireland to retrieve ancient Irish sea serpent tale
Impact of initiative: Students

- Enthusiastic, active participants
- Cross-curricular/cross-linguistic connections
- Reported on at this conference:
  - Ballinger, Lyster, & Collins: *Bilingual reading and beyond: Students linking the ‘two solitudes’ in French immersion*
Impact of initiative: Teachers

- Enthusiastic response
  - reading aloud
  - debriefing/stimulated recall (twice)
    - Rare opportunity to observe their own classes and their students in another class/language
Teachers’ enthusiasm

Grade 1 French teacher:
- J’ai trouvé que le vocabulaire était assez, peut-être, difficile. Mais j’ai changé d’avis quand j’ai vu les enfants embarquer là-dedans et puis s’intéresser...

Grade 2 English teacher:
- We were really concerned that there weren’t enough pictures and, you know, how are they going to follow the story and on top of it, we’re going from English to French. But they really did not have a problem with it. They really didn’t.
Teachers’ enthusiasm (cont)

- Grade 3 English teacher:
  - [Those students] who don’t have a big vocabulary in English, I think it helped them come into the story when I was reading the English version because they had a little idea of what was happening.
Teachers’ collaboration

- Opportunities for collaboration among teachers who had never collaborated

  *Grade 3 French teacher:*
  “*On se sentait pas tout seul dans le projet*”

  *Grade 3 English teacher:*
  “*We’re teachers in the same building and we never have a chance to talk to one another. Yes, it took you guys to bring us together to discuss and, you know, re-energize us or just like spark our imagination.*”
Teachers’ collaboration (cont)

Grade 2 teaching pair

English teacher: Moi, je trouve ça ‘fun’.
Researcher: De se consulter?
Both teachers: Oui!
Researcher: Et comment est-ce que vous avez organisé ça?
French teacher: On a travaillé en équipe.
Researcher: Est-ce que vous avez travaillé en équipe avant ça?
English teacher: Non...
Impact on Teachers’ Collaboration

- Successful at initiating collaboration
  - talking to each other
  - sharing ideas, material, perspectives on students
- Less successful at fostering collaboration on linguistic or content objectives
  - often focused on similar vocabulary features, but coincidentally
  - shared material but didn’t work on it together
  - elaborated content but separately
Teachers’ advice to other teachers

Grade 2 teaching pair

- English teacher: *Find time together. Find time to get together.*
- French teacher: *Actually sit down and that’s one thing we didn’t do.*
Explanations

- Why didn’t the teachers collaborate more on language-related objectives?
  - Training
    - focus on L1 not L2
    - focus on content, not language
  - Experience
    - collaboration rare across languages
  - TIME
    - although mandated by the Ministry of Education, not part of teaching day
Time

- Grade 3 French teacher: *On fait les projets puis on apporte nos choses dans nos sacs mais on travaille seule le soir à la maison parce qu’il n’y a pas de temps, et souvent quand il y a des journées pédagogiques, bien, on a la formation à la commission scolaire*

- Grade 3 English teacher: *I see [my colleague] at 4 pm and she’s still at her desk working, I’m not going to disturb her...*
Summary

- Familiar easy-to-implement activity successful at initiating cross-linguistic collaboration
- More intervention and guidance needed for expanding collaboration
Follow up

- Potential areas for future intervention
  - focus on key lexical items, word families
  - thematic projects linked across languages
  - writing projects linked across languages
  - peer-peer comprehension tasks during reading

- Format of intervention
  - Work with school board to implement larger scale in-service teacher training for cross-curricular; cross-linguistic collaboration
Closing Panel Issues

- Thoughts on in-service training components
- Applications to other contexts
Key aspects of in-service initiative

- Resulted from a year of observations
- Compatible with existing teaching practices
- Involvement of teachers
  - choice of books
  - reading aloud procedure
    - # of chapters
    - pre-/post-reading questions
- Debriefing (after 1st book; at end)
- Release time
  - plan for readings
  - debriefings
Applications in other contexts

- Mix of language dominance not uncommon in immersion/bilingual/dual language teaching contexts
  - Within Canada
    - French language schools in English majority contexts
      - e.g. Nanaimo
    - English language schools in French majority contexts
      - e.g. Quebec City
  - Elsewhere
    - Spanish/Catalan
    - Spanish/Basque
    - Welsh/English
    - Spanish/English in USA