

# Lower lexical recall in bilingual kids no cause for alarm

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If your French Immersion student is scratching their tête over not being able to think of the English word for sifflet or the French word for keyboard, a University of Alberta researcher has a sage piece of advice. Relax, it's completely normal.

Elena Nicoladis, an experimental psychologist, recently published a study of unilingual and bilingual children's ability to recall words in *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. Nicoladis' research with students between the ages of seven and 10 showed that bilingual children's lexical recall was slightly lower than their unilingual counterparts.

However, Nicoladis notes that this is not an alarm bell to pull children from French Immersion programs and put them into an English-only classroom. She says that the results of the study show only a small part of the children's overall [language skills](#).

"The results are not a deficit of bilingualism," said Nicoladis. "We know from other studies that the same challenges can be found in bilingual adults. But you don't see bilinguals stuttering more or having a difficult time expressing themselves."

In the study, a group of unilingual and bilingual students were initially asked to name a series of objects that, while familiar to them, were not everyday words, such as a weather vane. The bilingual students scored slightly below their English-language peers.

However, the bilingual students were equally able to recognize an object's name in both languages at a later period during the testing. The bilinguals also showed a stronger capacity to describe the object or even literally translate the name of the object.

"The bilingual children displayed what were clearly some influences from a literal translation or some other translation," said Nicoladis. "For example, a couple of students called a pine cone a pineapple, which, in French is pomme de pin, so, literally, pine apple in English."

The children also demonstrated some distinct behaviours during the study. Some students would occasionally answer in French during the English interview portion or in English during the French interview. Nicoladis notes that these types of responses did not occur with researchers working with adults. Nicoladis believes that it is likely a developmental issue related to filtering language context and accessing two separate lexical files, akin to picking up the wrong dictionary.

Nicoladis notes that there are some positives to the study. If the adult research is any indication, the bilingual children will improve their recall ability as they grow older. Nicoladis also sees the thinking process that the bilinguals displayed in responding to the questions as a benefit to the students' linguistic duality.

"The kids are already showing incredibly clever ways at coming up with words or expressions that convey what they're trying to say," she said. "One argument about an advantage of bilingualism is that it could lead to creativity, and we're already seeing the signs of that now in that age range here in the study."

Source: University of Alberta ([news](#) : [web](#))

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