

Impact of Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Bilingualism on French Language Development in Early French Immersion

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Abstract

The current thesis tracked the French language development of a group of children progressing through Grades 1-3 of Toronto's Early French Immersion program. In addition to language and cognitive tasks, information on children's language and social background was collected. Results showed effects of SES and bilingualism on aspects of children's developing French language proficiency.

Background

- Seminal evaluations of French Immersion have confirmed the program's effectiveness for developing French proficiency without impacting English language and academic abilities.¹⁻³
- In recent years, the student population enrolled in French Immersion has diversified.⁴
- Studies have found that in general, high SES individuals tend to outperform low SES individuals on language tasks⁵⁻⁷, and differences also emerge between monolinguals and bilinguals.⁸⁻¹⁰

Objective

We sought to investigate the effects of socioeconomic status (middle vs. high) and bilingualism (monolingual vs. bilingual) on French language development in Early French Immersion, to understand whether these factors lead to differences in French language development.

Method

Participants: In 2018, 234 Grade 1 French Immersion students participated from 18 schools across Toronto, Ontario, Canada. 194 of whom were tested again in Grade 2, and 105 in Grade 3. The number reduced over time due to switching schools or programs, non-renewal of participation, and COVID-19 school closures.

Student Background:

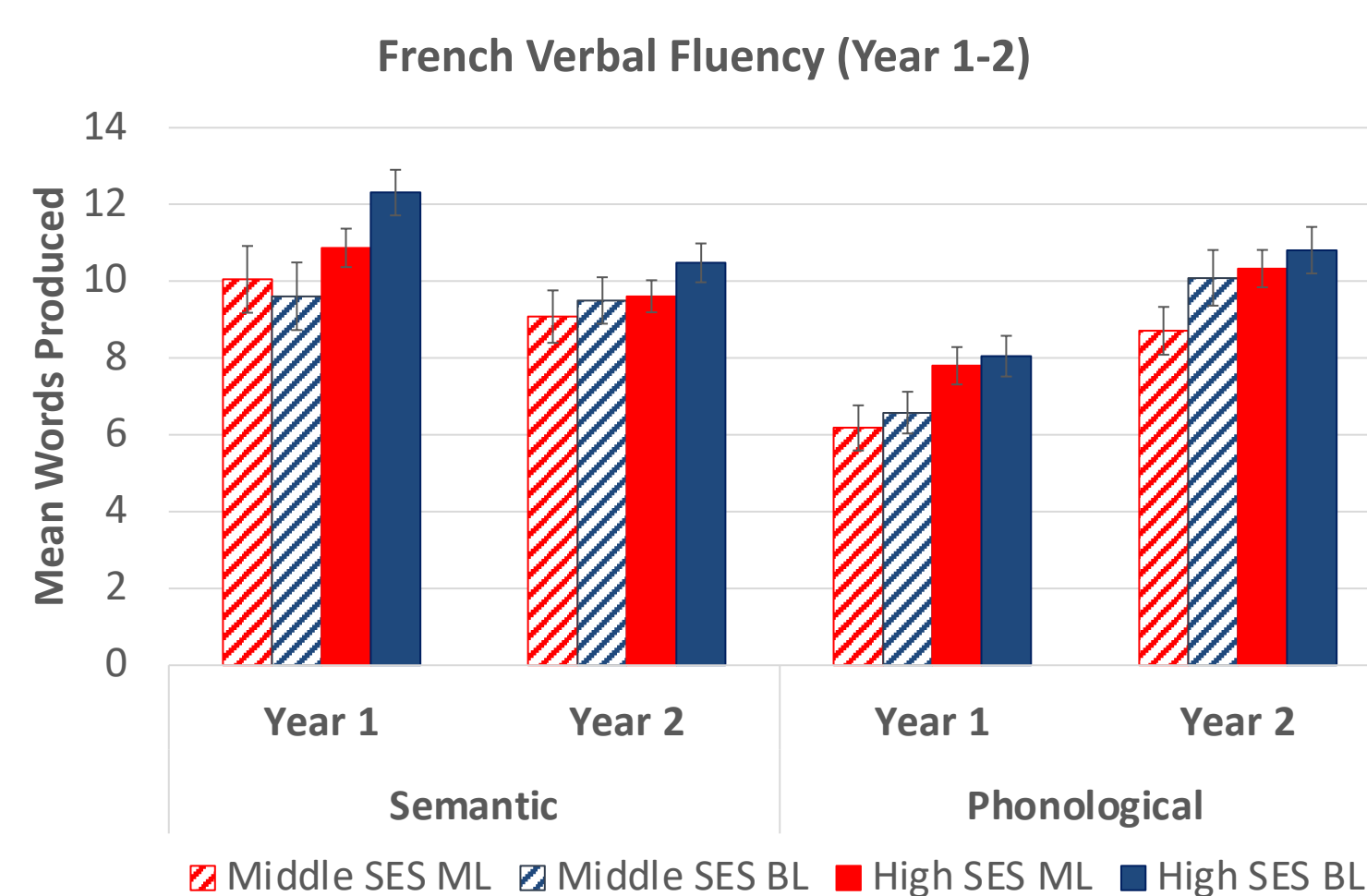
- Measured using the Language and Social Background Questionnaire¹¹
- SES:** defined as middle or high based on combined parental education
- Bilingualism:** defined as monolingual or bilingual based on child's language experience

Measures of Interest:

- Nonverbal intelligence test (Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices¹²):** Student selects one of six patterns to complete a series of patterns
- English vocabulary test (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test¹³):** Student identifies image that corresponds with an audible English word
- French Verbal Fluency:** Student lists words that fall into a category (semantic; e.g., animals), or start with a certain letter (phonological)
- French Sentence-to-Picture-Matching:** Student identifies image that corresponds with an audible French sentence describing people/items (descriptive) or relationships between actions/objects (relational)
- French vocabulary test (Échelle de vocabulaire en images Peabody¹⁴):** Student identifies image that corresponds with an audible French word

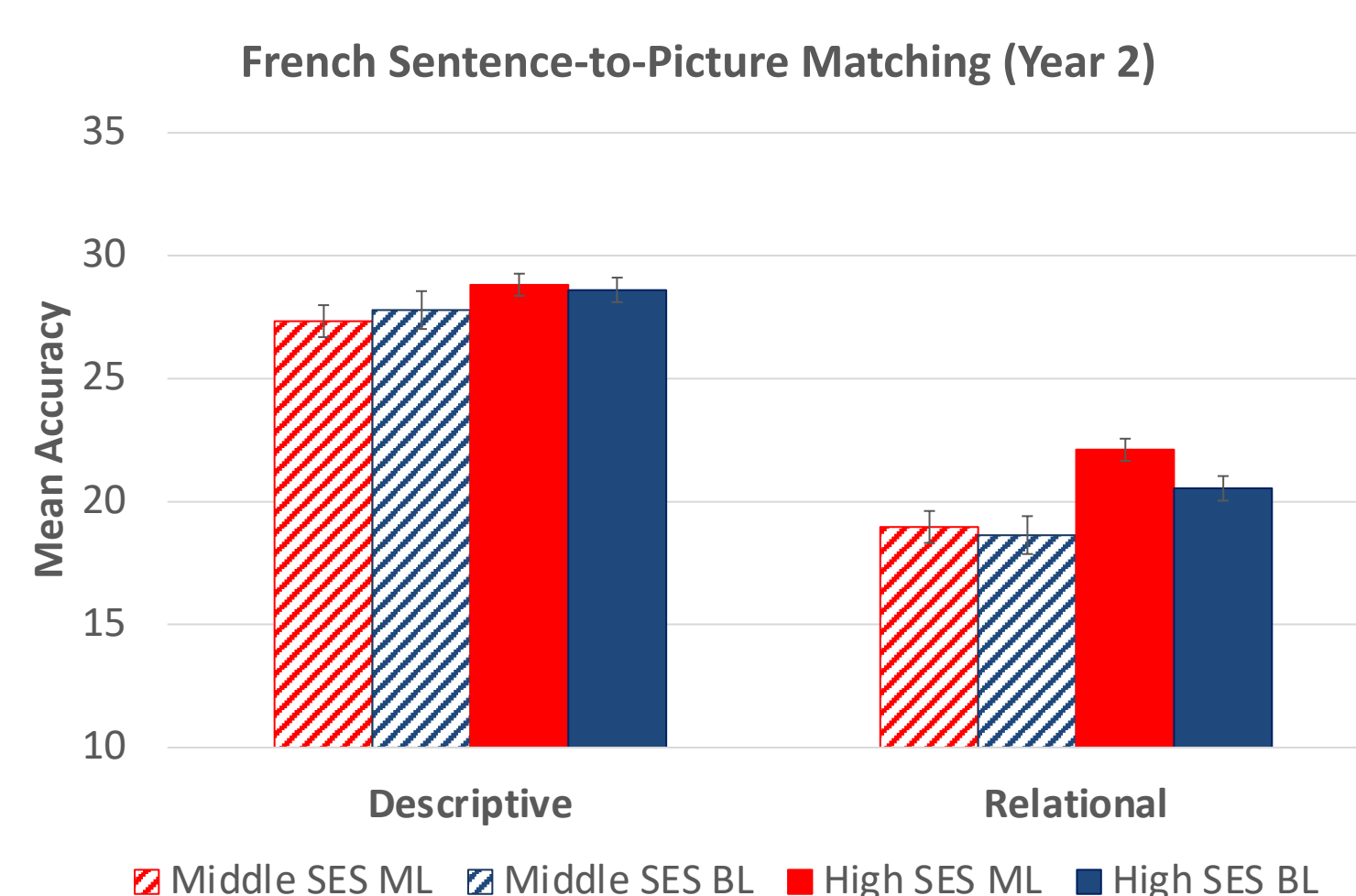
Results

We found no differences in **nonverbal intelligence tests** by SES or Bilingualism. However, **English vocabulary tests** were better among students with high SES compared to middle SES ($p=.001$), and among monolingual students compared to bilingual students ($p<.001$).



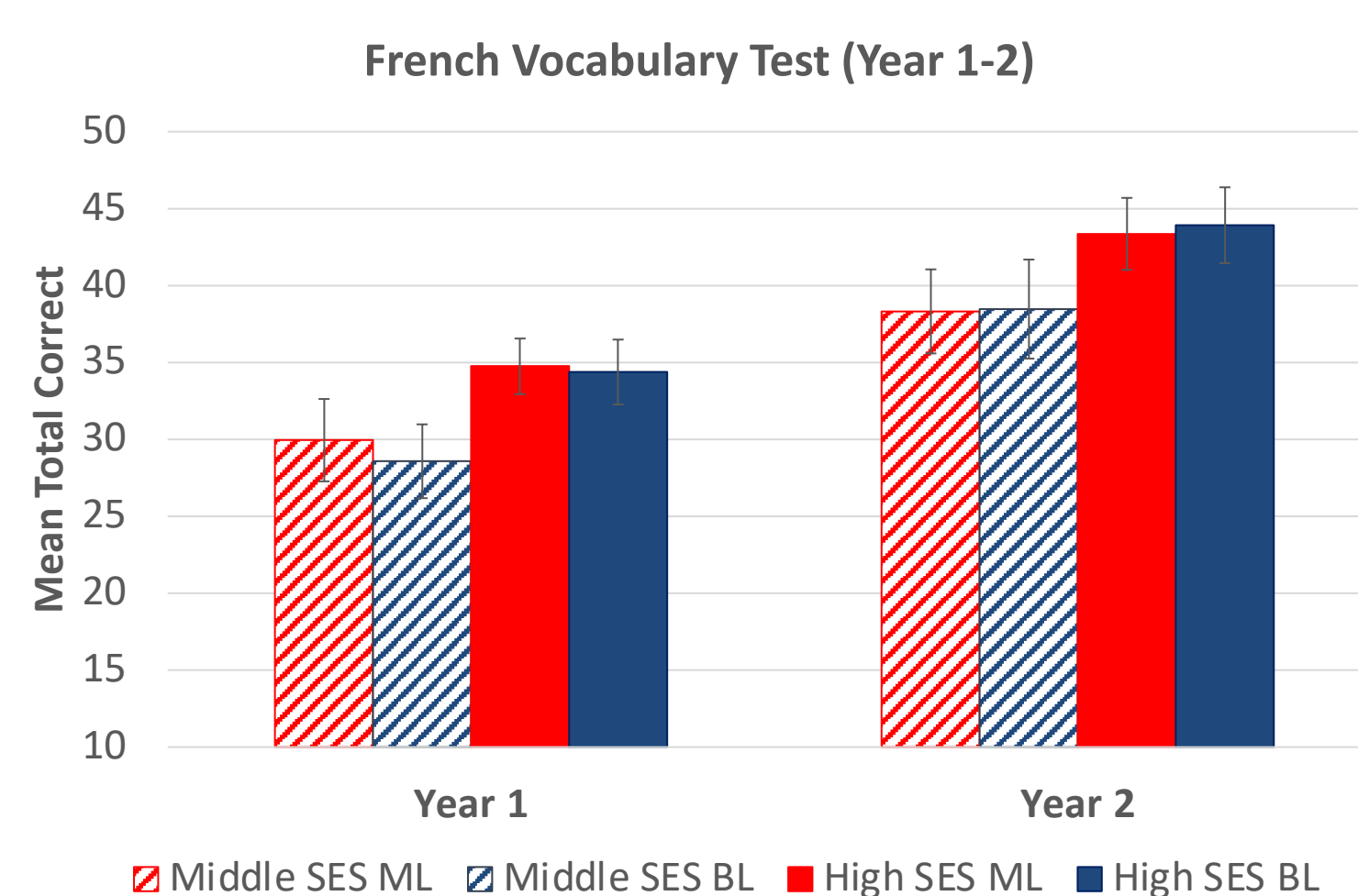
High SES students produced more words compared to middle SES students across both types of tests (semantic/phonological). This was consistent in Year 1 and Year 2 of the study ($p=.007$).

There were no differences between monolingual and bilingual students ($p=.017$).



High SES students outperformed Middle SES students in the French sentence-to-picture matching task for both descriptive and relational types of sentences ($p<.001$).

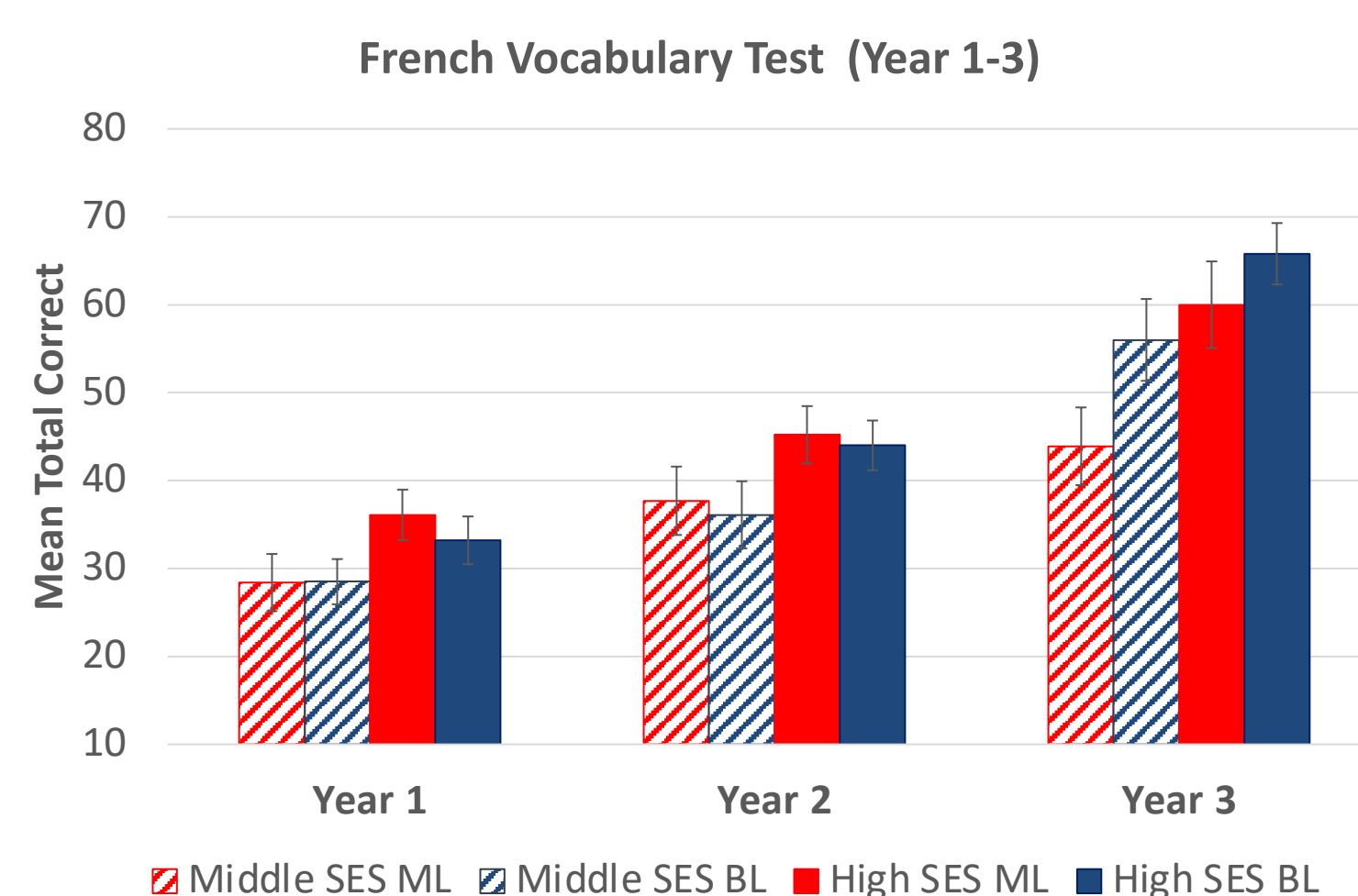
There were no differences between monolingual and bilingual students ($p=.417$).



Overall, French vocabulary test scores increased from Year 1 to Year 2 ($p<.001$).

High SES students had larger French vocabularies than middle SES students ($p=.018$).

There were no differences between monolingual and bilingual students ($p=.958$).



French vocabulary test scores significantly increased over the three years ($p<.001$).

High SES students outperformed middle SES students ($p=.003$), and there was greater improvement for bilingual students in Year 3 ($p=.01$).

Note: Data presented for students who had test results for Year 3.

Conclusion

- Differences in French language proficiency exist between middle and high SES students, with greater performance among the high SES group.
- Monolingual and bilingual students performed similarly over the first two years, with greater improvements in French vocabulary among bilinguals in Year 3.
- The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of Early French Immersion for French language acquisition, while also taking into account the diverse backgrounds of students currently enrolled in the program.