

French Immersion (adapted from a report prepared for the Ministry of Education / Manitoba)

What is French Immersion?

French Immersion is a second language program designed for children whose first language is not French and who have little or no knowledge of French prior to entering the program.

The goal of French Immersion is to give students the opportunity to achieve, by secondary school graduation, a level of bilingualism sufficient to function well in a French-speaking community, accept a job using French as the working language, or take university or college education in French. French Immersion is a highly successful approach to second language learning – an effective way for children to achieve linguistic competence in French and English, while achieving all of the educational and social outcomes of the English program.

Success in the program depends on many variables, including an aptitude for learning languages and the amount / intensity of time spent studying in French. Students whose French Immersion experience includes extracurricular activities will do best in French Immersion. These include listening to the radio and watching television, personal reading and writing, French camps and exchanges. Parental involvement and encouragement are tremendously important to the academic success of all children. French Immersion students are no exception.

Graduates from French Immersion receive essentially the same education as their peers in English language schools, with the added benefit of having a second language.

Brain Research on Learning French in Early Childhood

Why learn French starting in Kindergarten or Grade 1? Why not leave learning a second language until later in the child's school years, when English has been thoroughly learned?

In recent years, considerable emphasis has been placed on brain research as it relates to learning in young children. Brain research has shown that there is a definite "window of opportunity" for learning languages. It is open at its widest at age seven and under. At this age and stage of brain or neural development children are most receptive to learning a new language. Research has also shown that children under age seven have a better chance of having accurate pronunciation than children who learn the language after the age of ten.

Language Development

Children proceed from understanding no French to mimicking and repeating the teacher's words to using English sentences with French words thrown in. At this stage, French is interspersed with some English. By mid-grade 1, children are able to use French sentences. In effect, they are learning language by using language.

During the language learning process, the teacher plans learning situations to add more complex vocabulary. As the child's vocabulary increases, the teacher is also modeling proper usage. For instance, if the child says something incorrectly, the teacher will generally repeat it, using an appropriate expression or perhaps suggesting a different way of saying it. If the child's pronunciation is incorrect, the teacher will repeat with the correct pronunciation. Students are encouraged to use French as much as they can. They are given positive encouragement to try out their new language. When they take risks and make mistakes, the teacher uses repetition and modeling to teach appropriate usage.

There is very little translation in French Immersion. The teacher does not say "This is a cat in French, it is un chat." Rather, the teacher will read a story, showing pictures and talking about the animal in the pictures as "un chat" and the children naturally associate the animal with the word. They may not be able to tell you "In French you call a cat, un chat", but if you show them a picture, they will probably say that their teacher calls it "un chat." They have acquired two labels for that animal, one in each language, one for home and one for school. Language learning proceeds naturally in an upward spiral.

Having acquired many comprehension skills in listening and reading, the children will develop speaking and writing competencies. These production skills take longer to develop. It should be noted however, that the language of instruction is at a level to promote comprehension and to foster new knowledge of French. When students use the French language to study Math and Science, they are developing their competence in French as well as developing the many dimensions of numeracy and scientific literacy.

By the middle years, students are producing French explanations, stories, poems and plays and expanding their knowledge of grammar and syntax. In middle and senior years, they read more and a greater variety of French texts, study drama and poetry, view films and videos, as well as listen to music, all of which expand their experience with the language and French culture. In senior years, students sharpen their ability to analyze and critique various texts. They write purposeful pieces, which reflect this heightened comprehension.

Just as the development of English in all its correct forms and breadth of vocabulary takes many years, the development of language skills in French takes more than just a few years in elementary school. Students who continue in the program until the end of high school will have had the opportunity to develop the best language skills possible.

Brief History

French Immersion is the most studied, discussed and documented language acquisition program in our history. It is an educational phenomenon that several other countries have adopted. More than one thousand studies have been done on French Immersion since its inception in the 1960's. According to the Canadian Education Association: "No educational program has been so intensively researched and evaluated in Canada as has French Immersion." The effects of the program on the acquisition of French-language as well as English-language skills and the academic achievement of French Immersion students have been well documented. Research shows that the program works.

Children in French Immersion classes reflect the linguistic and cultural mosaic of Canada. Children in French Immersion come from families whose heritage language may be Chinese, Japanese, German, and Ukrainian, one of the First Nations languages as well as English. Canadians recognize the excellence of the program for language learning, as well as the English language arts component, which makes it possible for their children to have skills in both official languages

From Kindergarten to Grade 12

Kindergarten: The first steps in the language adventure. One important purpose of Kindergarten is to initiate the children to the sounds of the French language. The teacher speaks French so that the children begin to recognize sounds and words and start using them.

Children start paying close attention to the way the teachers speak and they search for clues to the meaning. French Immersion Kindergarten teachers use many strategies to convey meaning to their use of French: body language, gestures, expressive tone, visual supports, and repetition. The communicative approach is conducive to second language acquisition and learning. The children may not understand every word the teachers use, but they understand what is meant and what they are supposed to do.

Immersion Kindergarten has structured times, in that there are certain words and phrases that the children hear accompanied by certain actions. For example, the teachers start the day by greeting the class with “Bonjour”, smiling and nodding as if in greeting. Soon one of the children will respond: “Bonjour” making the connection between the word and the occasion. The teachers react by clapping their hands and saying “oui, oui, bonjour!”

The child’s classmates see the positive reaction exhibited by the teachers and will mimic “Bonjour”, too. After a day or two, every child knows that you say “Bonjour” when you meet someone. Repetition, encouragement and positive reinforcement are useful teaching strategies in the second language class.

School day routines allow children to associate words with specific times and daily events. For instance, “gouter” means you eat your snack; “gymnase” means you go play in the gym; “au revoir, mes amis” means you go home. In the safe and caring environment of the Kindergarten class, children anticipate or predict meaning and verify their hypotheses continuously throughout the day.

An integrated approach to teach the second language is used. Teachers choose themes from children’s interests, other subject matters, the community or the natural environment. They teach songs, games and poems. Sooner or later, depending on individual differences, children will begin to use the words that the teacher has introduced. Some hesitantly whisper a word or two; some take bigger risks and imitate phrases; others wait until they have enough confidence to say a whole sentence before they venture to use French. The teacher encourages them, modeling the correct pronunciation or combination of words.

French Immersion Kindergarten is described as “total” or “100%” French, because after a brief transition period, the teacher speaks only French, unless there is an emergency or a need for emotional support. For some time, the children speak to the teacher and to each other in English. To a parent visiting the classroom, it may sound a little odd, hearing one person speaking French and the students, obviously understanding some of what the teacher says, responding in English. They are experiencing the language and learning to distinguish its sounds and the meanings they represent. This is known as comprehensible input. As the children progress in acquiring the language, they also use it more to communicate.

Specific outcomes are identified for the different subjects in the Kindergarten curriculum. In Mathematics, children will have many opportunities to use their reasoning skills. They will solve problems, communicate mathematical ideas and learn to value mathematics.

In the sciences, children will study the world we live in. Through concrete explorations, they will develop research skills and attitudes of curiosity and respect for the world which surrounds them.

Literacy skills are introduced and developed to help prepare the children for formal reading instruction. During storytelling, they will be encouraged to use the positive strategies of prediction, confirmation and integration of new information.

Throughout their first year in French immersion, the children are learning what every other child learns in Kindergarten: sharing, waiting their turn, cutting and pasting... to name but a few.

Primary:

The emphasis on the development of oral language in French continues throughout the early years with the addition of new outcomes related to all aspects of language learning. In Maple Ridge / Pitt Meadows, children learn to read in French in Grade 1 and in English in Grade 3. This is the general practice in French Immersion across the country.

As their knowledge of the second language expands, children progress from simple utterances like “Merci” and “Bonjour” to a greater level of proficiency and fluency in French. In Grade 1, they will start using French to communicate their needs, ask questions and to describe their world. By Grade 2, with a greater vocabulary base and new expressions, they start to use more complex structures. They independently read stories and write in French as well.

Every grade level has learning outcomes that guide the students’ progress. Assessment by the teacher will show their level of achievement in the new language, as well as their achievement in the different subject matters including English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Music and Physical Education. In all subjects, except English Language Arts, French is the language of instruction.

By the time the children complete Primary, speaking, reading and writing both French and English are natural parts of their school life. They have acquired a variety of grammatical forms. They can read, interpret and answer questions about audio, visual or written material in French or in English. They are on their way to being bilingual.

Intermediate:

Students between Grade 4 and 7 are called intermediate learners. Children are able to write in French, to articulate oral and written explanations to questions, to solve written Math problems and they have a fairly wide vocabulary in the areas studied in class.

From grade 4 onwards, students continue to:

- expand their knowledge of specific subject areas
- expand their vocabulary
- develop their grammar and writing skills
- increase their confidence in their language skills
- increase their appreciation of French culture
- be exposed to an increasing number of language models
- be involved in many different learning and language situations
- be provided opportunities for their increased independence
- have their creativity challenged

At the same time, the students continue to learn English. They have the same outcomes as the students in the English program.

In the intermediate years, children also continue to use the French language as a vehicle to study subjects like Science, Social Studies, Music, Physical Education and Mathematics. Expectations increase. Students consult French reference tools like dictionaries, encyclopedias and search engines. They read and interpret stories and novels. They write their own stories, which demonstrate a prescribed level of grammatical expertise.

For student and parents who have missed the early entry to Immersion, this might be a time to consider the Late Immersion option. They might be looking for an alternative program, a new challenge and a new language choice. Late Entry French Immersion would provide the students all of these while allowing them to pursue the same academic outcomes as the English program.

Secondary:

To graduate with a provincial French Immersion diploma, students must successfully complete the course: Communication professionnelle et technique 12.

The Secondary Immersion program will serve to:

- increase the students competence in French by offering a variety of courses in language-rich areas
- deepen their appreciation of the French language and cultures
- promote academic achievement and expand their knowledge in many different subject areas
- develop their skill in the use of technology
- encourage the development of their intellectual maturity while providing the opportunity to pursue independent studies in French
- sustain their social development

- give students the opportunity to develop their full potential as members of the community

The number and the type of courses offered usually depend on the number of students selecting them. While it may be difficult for a school to offer some courses in French because of limited enrolment, special adaptations and arrangements can sometimes be made at the school level to help the students obtain the credits they need.

Students who graduate from French Immersion will leave with good language skills in both language and a solid academic foundation. They can proceed to study in French at the post-secondary level, live in a French community, work in a French language environment or attend post-secondary studies in English.

The Struggling Learner

Children learn in different ways and at different rates and teachers support them as individuals, regardless of program or language of instruction. It is understood that not all students will reach the same level of achievement at the same rate and the same time, but rather that all students will be challenged to reach their maximum potential. Students who have learning disabilities or special academic needs can succeed in French Immersion programs just as well as they can in the English program, all things being equal.

In many cases, when thinking about a possible transfer, parents assume that children with learning difficulties will get better grades and have fewer programs in the English program. In most cases, the transfer results in no change in the children's behaviour or in their academic success.

Most learning difficulties are not language-specific. Likewise, behavioural or social challenges have nothing to do with the language of instruction. Learning disorders do not go away because the language is English instead of French. They are not caused by French Immersion, any more than they are caused by the English program and they most likely cannot be solved by simply changing the language of instruction. Once the children have acquired learning strategies to overcome their difficulties, they use these strategies in an English or French language situation. It is usually preferable to provide assistance in the language of instruction.

Parents and Homework

Parents are usually concerned about whether they will be able to play an active role in their children's homework. They worry that their lack of French-language skills may make them unable to understand or help.

The parents' role in homework can be summed up in three words: opportunity, motivation and encouragement. Every child needs a homework friendly place to do assignments, free from distraction and interruption, with adequate light and space. Children need basic tools: pencils, erasers, dictionary, thesaurus, verb manual, and

whatever other necessities the teacher has placed on the “Tool Kit” list for that grade level. Children also need time to complete their assigned task. Parents can help by negotiating with their child a specific homework period, so that there is quiet, stress-free time to do the work. That’s the opportunity part.

Parents can participate in homework in other ways. English reading and writing are part of the child’s homework that English-speaking parents can help with. Looking up words in a French dictionary, finding definitions and writing simple sentences are good opportunities for teamwork while doing homework in French. Parents can help with Math problems even if they do not understand French. The children can explain the task to the parent. The concepts are the same in English and French, whether it’s subtraction and addition or division and multiplication, scientific formulas, algebraic equations or chemical reactions, etc. An added bonus is that a lot of learning happens as children explain and teach to parents.

Get Involved in Learning:

Not all learning takes place in the classroom. Many of life’s lessons can be found in everyday activities involving parents and children. Cutting pizza can be an opportunity to talk about fractions, as well as sharing and cooperation. Shoveling snow can be an illustration of levers at work. Making cookies is an experiment with expanding gases, and so on. Very young children need to experiment with numbers. Suggested number games can include counting cars, seats on the bus, blocks on the floor, stairs up to their bedrooms, and candies in their treat bags.

An important part of learning to read is being read to and reading to others. Children benefit from discussing what they read. Feedback and encouragement from an adult when they are reading can be very powerful as a motivation tool for further reading. Children are consumers of knowledge and information. They love having the opportunity to ask “how come?” this gives a parent the chance to teach and to learn with the child as they find out together how something works or what a new word means.

Some Immersion families have made a definite plan to incorporate French videos, music, books, magazines and games into their home entertainment to support language acquisition and to demonstrate and value French cultures and language. The fun of watching a French movie together and sharing a laugh are all good family learning experiences.

Schools recognize that parents and guardians want to be involved in their child’s homework. More articles on this issue are available on the Canadian Parents for French websites <http://www.cpfmb.com> and <http://www.cpf.ca>