

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT FRENCH IMMERSION

French immersion programs were first implemented in St. Lambert on the South Shore of the Island of Montreal in 1965. Since its inception, variations of the St. Lambert early total French immersion program have been implemented by communities across Canada and around the world where they are often referred to as “the Canadian model”. The St. Lambert program was widely studied for many years by researchers at McGill University. Immersion programs in other cities in Canada and, indeed, around the world, have also been carefully studied by researchers. While most research conducted on immersion programs in Canada has focused on programs where French is the language of instruction, immersion in other languages has also been studied, including Ukrainian, Hebrew, Mohawk, Spanish, Japanese, and others. Researchers define immersion as at least 50% instruction in the second language for at least one year. The evidence we cite below pertains to programs with this level of intensity. Researchers consider programs with less than 50% exposure to the second language enriched second language instruction. In this document, we have provided brief answers to frequently asked questions about immersion. Our replies are based primarily, but not exclusively, on research conducted on French immersion in Quebec.

1

Will the students’ English language skills suffer in French immersion programs?

No, students’ English language skills will not suffer in French immersion programs.

Research shows that students in French immersion programs achieve the same levels of competence in English as students in English-only programs. This has been found for reading, writing, speaking and listening. Sometimes students in total immersion programs perform more poorly in English during the primary grades when all instruction is in French than students in the English program. However, these differences usually disappear within one year of getting English language instruction.

Immersion students usually catch up to their peers in the English program quickly because:

- The skills acquired when learning to read and write French transfer to English.
- They may have some experience reading and writing in English at home
- Children have to learn to read and write only once and then they can figure out how to read and write in another language, with some support from their teachers.

It is useful for immersion teachers to assess their students’ level of literacy or preliteracy skills in English when they start immersion so that they can individualize instruction. Students who have already acquired the basic skills of reading and writing in English do not need to relearn those skills again in French.

Is French harder to learn than English?

No, French is not harder to learn than English.

In fact, there are reasons to believe that English is harder to learn, especially when it comes to reading and writing. There are many irregularities in English spelling and grammar that make reading English especially difficult. But for young learners, there is little difference between learning oral English or oral French; each language has relatively easy and relatively difficult aspects.

It is useful for teachers to understand how English and French are the same and how they are different in both their oral and written forms. When teachers understand these similarities and differences, they can start instruction with the similarities and then focus on the differences. For example, when it comes to teaching the sounds of the letters, there are some letters in English and French with virtually the same sounds and there are some that are quite different. Certain grammatical rules are the same (e.g., general word order – subject, verb, object) but some are different (placement of direct and indirect object pronouns – I like them vs Je les aime). When teachers know these similarities and differences, they can plan instruction accordingly, and they can teach the students to identify similarities and differences. This kind of metalinguistic knowledge is useful when it comes to reading and writing.

What is the optimal percentage of French exposure in each grade in French immersion?

Earlier and more is better.

In general, for students who speak English outside school and live in predominantly English-speaking neighborhoods, the earlier they start to learn French and the more time devoted to learning in French the better the outcomes in French. To be considered a true immersion program, a school must offer at least 50% of instruction for a least one year in French. Increased use of French in school does not usually reduce students' competence in English because they are surrounded by English outside school. Research in Montreal has shown consistently that even students in early total French immersion programs achieve the same levels of competence in English by the end of elementary school as students who have been in all-English programs. Of course, students' level of French will depend on the quality of instruction. More time in the curriculum for French does not guarantee higher levels of proficiency if instruction does not take advantage of the additional time students have in French.

Teachers can ensure high levels of French by:

- aligning the French language arts curriculum with the students' language needs in their other school subjects, like science and mathematics, and with their need to use French outside school,

- including language learning objectives in every unit/lesson plan in all subjects, including non-language subjects like science and mathematics,
- monitoring students' use of French at all times to identify gaps in students' competence,
- using in-class activities that give students lots of opportunities to practice new language skills, and
- carefully monitoring your own use of language to make sure that you are modeling new language skills.

4

Which subjects should be offered in French or English in French immersion? Should those subjects continue to be taught in the same language throughout elementary and high school?

There is no research to indicate if it is better to teach some subjects in French.

It is probably a good idea to expose immersion students to instruction in French in all major school subjects so that they become comfortable using French in diverse domains. This is particularly important in Quebec where students will be called on to use French in diverse situations.

It is also advisable to teach a subject in French for more than one year in succession so that students can solidify their knowledge of French in that academic domain.

Immersion teachers should systematically seek to expand students' practical language skills no matter what subjects they teach in French. To do this, unit and lesson plans for teaching academic subjects should always include practical language objectives as well as academic language objectives. In addition, immersion teachers should plan activities that reinforce new language skills and give students lots of opportunities to practice new language skills. Do not leave language learning to chance... incorporate language learning into subject learning.

5

Are early or late immersion programs best with respect to French language proficiency and academic outcomes?

Early total immersion usually results in higher levels of proficiency in French.

In early immersion programs, French is used to teach academic subjects starting in kindergarten. In late immersion, French is used to teach academic subjects starting in Grade 7 and can include Grade 8 in some cases. Students who enroll in late immersion have usually had French-as-a-second-language classes since Kindergarten so they have some knowledge of French when they begin immersion in Grade 7.

Overall, students perform equally well in early and late immersion programs with respect to English language development and academic achievement and even in French language outcomes in some cases. However, early immersion appears to be better for below-average students, especially with respect to speaking and understanding French. On balance, early total immersion is likely to result in higher levels of proficiency in French and has the added advantage that it allows young learners to take advantage of opportunities to use and learn French outside school.

6

What is preferable: 1 day French, 1 day English or ½ day French, ½ day English?

There is no research that has looked at this.

However, when it comes to learning an additional language, opportunities to practice that avoid long interruptions are best. Students can forget what they have learned if they do not use French every day. Therefore, daily exposure (½ day French; ½ day English) is preferable.

7

Should students learn to speak French at a functional level before we teach them to read and write in French in French immersion programs?

No, students do not have to have functional competence in oral French before they learn to read and write in French.

Students can begin to acquire foundational as well as functional skills in reading and writing at the same time as they are learning to speak and comprehend the language. However, until they have developed adequate listening and speaking skills in French, they will require support to understand what they read and to express ideas in written French.

Here are some examples of teaching oral language and foundational decoding skills simultaneously to beginning learners:

- teach students the sounds of the letters in French as you teach them the names of familiar and unfamiliar objects, actions, and qualities (big, small)
- provide pictures of objects with the same initial letter and teach students the sounds of the letters by stressing the initial sound of those object names
- include word boards with written forms of vocabulary that you refer to when you use new words with students; ask students to identify the written form of new words as you and they use them

Here are ways of engaging beginning level immersion students with written language:

- Reading stories aloud from big books is very motivating for students and teaches them how written language is organized... spaces between words, periods at the end of sentences, capital letters for first words versus lower case letters most of the time, etc.

- With carefully chosen questions about the story, you can teach students how to analyze story content or to develop strategies for figuring out what the story is about even though they are still learning the language.
- Questions about stories in big books engage students with written narrative. Questions that give students choices are particularly useful for beginning readers since they can simply repeat part of the language modelled in the question; for example, “*What was the boy’s favourite animal? A whale or a turtle?*”. Who, what and when questions are also a good and easy way to engage students in story book reading.

8

Should written language be taught at the same time in English and in French in French immersion?

Reading and writing can be taught in French and English simultaneously or sequentially with equal effectiveness.

The decision to teach literacy in both languages simultaneously will depend on the model of immersion you select. If you select an early total immersion program, then instruction in reading and writing would be done in French only for the first 2 or 3 grades. If you select a partial immersion program, then you could teach literacy in both languages. There is no evidence on this issue based on research in French immersion. However, there is some evidence in other communities that simultaneous reading instruction in two languages probably does not jeopardize literacy development but may actually be beneficial in comparison to sequential literacy instruction in two languages. If teaching literacy in two languages simultaneously, teachers should avoid features of the two languages that are difficult or confusing; for example, presenting identical letters that sound different (French *e*/English *e*) or letters that look similar (*b/d* or *p/q*) but have different sounds. No matter which approach you take, all students can benefit when teachers explicitly highlight connections between the languages.

9

Should the teacher repeat instructions in English for the first few weeks or months in an early total French immersion program?

No, it is not advisable for French immersion teachers to repeat themselves in English.

When immersion teachers repeat themselves in English, they reduce students’ motivation to learn French because they know that they will hear the English version if they wait. It is preferable to use alternative strategies to ensure that students understand what is being said in French; for example:

- demonstrate what you want students to do

- use repetition and visuals to illustrate what you are trying to say
- break instructions into smaller comprehensible pieces
- identify students who are following instructions properly to students who appear to be confused.

The more teachers use French, the more students have opportunities to learn French.

10

What about translanguaging? Is this a useful strategy in French immersion? Sometimes, but it must be used strategically.

Translanguaging (using both languages during the same lesson) should be used in very limited ways and only when you have an important and specific pedagogical objective. For example, to teach:

- similarities and differences in English and French grammar (for example, that there are 2 words of negation in French but only 1 in English)
- similarities and differences in spelling patterns (for example, a cognate activity highlighting word ending differences—*delicious/délicieux*),
- important terms in English that they have learned in French (for example, terms related to story structure: *dénouement/climax, évènement déclencheur/precipitating event*).

11

If our school has a high underprivileged area index, is French immersion appropriate?

Yes, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds can do well in immersion.

Research has shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can do just as well as similarly disadvantaged students in English-only programs. More specifically, research has shown that their English language skills and their academic achievement are just as good as those of similar students in English-only programs. At the same time, they develop advanced levels of functional proficiency in French. Acquiring functional proficiency in French is very beneficial for these students because it can increase their qualifications for many jobs in Quebec, Canada and more widely.

Is French immersion suitable for struggling students?

Yes, immersion is suitable for most struggling students.

Research has found that students who might struggle in school for a number of reasons do just as well in immersion programs as similar students in English programs. In Montreal, this has been shown for students from socio-economically disadvantaged families, students with lower than average academic ability, and students with language impairment (or developmental language disability). These students perform as well as their non-immersion peers with similar learner characteristics in academic domains and in English, both oral and written. At the same time, they acquire much higher levels of functional proficiency in French than struggling students in the regular French-as-a-second language program. Research conducted in the U.S. has found similar results with students with a range of developmental issues.

What if support services (ex.: resource, SLP) are not available in French at my school? Is French immersion still appropriate?

It depends.

Struggling students require extended, targeted support to help them succeed academically. It is advisable to provide that support in the language that is most useful for the child's communication in school; otherwise, any improvements in performance will not benefit them academically. If specialized support services are not available in French, then some of this support can be provided through individualized instruction by classroom teachers. This, of course, requires that the immersion teacher can identify individual students' needs and can deliver instruction that would meet those needs. The specific kinds of additional supports that struggling students need depend on the specific kinds of difficulties that challenge them (e.g., reading, language, socio-emotional) and the extent of their difficulty. If a student's needs cannot be met by the immersion teacher or a learning specialist in the school, then parents may need to consider seeking outside help in French if they want their child to remain in French immersion; or they may need to consider switching the child to the English program if support is not available in school.

If most of the students in a school speak French as a first language, is French immersion appropriate for them?

Yes, French immersion can be appropriate for French-L1 students.

To ensure that French-L1 students in immersion programs for English-speaking students achieve the same high levels of competence in French as students in French schools, immersion teachers should provide enrichment activities in French. To maximize French-L1 students' competence in English, immersion teachers should use the same thoughtful strategies they would use when teaching French to English-L1 students.

If a student struggles in a subject that is offered in French, should he/she switch to English in that subject?

No, because immersion students who struggle with a school subject in French are likely to struggle with that subject even if it is taught in English.

Switching to English is not likely to help a struggling student. Since the student will still have to learn new subject-specific academic language (e.g., specific vocabulary) in English, a switch may, in fact, cause the child to fall further behind. Some students will need more support than others to learn the language they need to master specific subjects. It is important for immersion teachers to individualize instruction according to individual students' strengths and needs so that they enhance the learning of all their students.

Are parents right to switch their child to regular English-only programs in order to boost his/her academic standing before high school or CEGEP entry?

There is no evidence on this question.

Since we know that immersion students whose academic instruction has been in French in the elementary grades score just as well as students in English-only programs, there is no reason to believe that they need a boost to catch up to their peers in the English program. In fact, switching students to a program with regular French Second Language instruction could stunt their growth in French and, thus, reduce the advantages they have had from immersion in the elementary grades.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books:

Genesee, F. & Hamayan, E. (2016). CLIL in context. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lyster, R. (2016). Vers une approche intégrée en immersion. Montréal : Les Éditions CEC.

Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. (2011). Dual language development and disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning (2nd Edition). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Tedick, D. J., & Lyster, R. (2020). Scaffolding language development in immersion and dual language classrooms. New York: Routledge.

Websites:

<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/second-language/according-experts/learning-read-second-language-research-implications-and>

The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development is a project from the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) supported by Université Laval and Université de Montréal. Its international experts gather, synthesize and comment, in their respective domain of expertise, the most up-to-date scientific knowledge available on the development of young children, from conception to age five. The Encyclopedia is intended for service providers, service planners, policy makers and parents.

<https://transformingfsl.ca/en/resources/including-all-students-in-fsl/>

An Ontario Ministry of Education and the Department of Canadian Heritage collaboration. A toolkit developed to support school boards, educators and other stakeholders in their efforts to include students with special education needs in FSL programs. It includes a webcast about including students with special education needs in FSL programs and examples of research-based strategies, filmed in a variety of FSL classrooms.

Organizations:

<https://cpf.ca/>

Canadian Parents for French (CPF) is a national network of volunteers that values French as an integral part of Canada. Teachers and school administrators make up an important part of CPF. It is dedicated to the promotion and creation of French-second-language learning opportunities for young Canadians. CPF publishes a magazine, reports and position statements.

<https://www.acpi.ca/>

Association canadienne des professeurs d'immersion/Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers (ACPI/CAIT). ACPI/CAIT is a professional non-profit association that aims to promote and improve immersion programs in Canada and provides professional development opportunities for immersion teachers. ACPI/CAIT offers a newsletter and annually sponsors both a summer institute and a conference.

<https://www.caslt.org/en/general-information/the-association/about-caslt>

The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) is a non-profit organization that fosters and advances professional excellence in the teaching of languages in Canada. CASLT supports its members by promoting the advancement of language learning and teaching throughout Canada, by creating opportunities for professional development, by initiating and disseminating research and by facilitating the exchange of information and ideas among language educators. CASLT supports the use of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of language learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner.

<http://carla.umn.edu/index.html>

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) is one of the U.S. Department of Education's resource centers. Its role is to improve the nation's capacity to teach and learn foreign languages effectively. CARLA offers annual summer institutes specifically targeted at the needs of immersion educators. You will also find useful tools on their website, including this immersion teacher's teaching strategies checklist:

<http://carla.umn.edu/immersion/checklist.pdf>

Prepared by:

Fred Genesee, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, McGill University
Caroline Erdos, PhD, S-LP(C), Advancing Learning in Differentiation and Inclusion (ALDI)
Coordinator, English school boards of Quebec

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