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FRENCH IMMERSION: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES



French immersion is a proven program to second language learning developed in Canada. It is one of the four official programs offered in Manitoba schools. The others are: the English Program, the Français Program, and the Senior Years Technology Education Program.

The Manitoba Context

French immersion first began in Canada in 1965 as a well-researched experiment in St. Lambert, Quebec. The success of the program and the supporting research quickly spread across Canada and the first French immersion school in Manitoba opened its doors at École Sacré Cœur in 1973. By 2004-2005, 300,628 children or 7.18% of total school enrolments in public schools were registered in French immersion programs in Canada (Canadian Parents for French, 2006). In Manitoba, the percentage for the same year was 9.3% or 17,429 students, with the French Immersion Program being offered in 97 schools across the province. The French Immersion Program has always received strong support in Manitoba.

The French Immersion Program has been officially recognized by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth since 1995. The document *Curriculum Policy for the French Immersion Program* sets out the legal, didactic and administrative foundations upon which the planning and implementation of the French Immersion Program in Manitoba are based.

The Bureau de l'éducation française is the division of the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth whose mandate is to develop, evaluate and administer policies and programs relating to French-language education in Manitoba. French immersion schools in Manitoba benefit from the services offered by the Bureau de l'éducation française Division (BEF).

Graduates of the French Immersion Program may choose to continue their postsecondary education in French. In this case, the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface offers postsecondary education to students who are interested in pursuing their education in French in Manitoba. Furthermore, the vibrant French community in Manitoba provides a wealth of opportunities for French immersion students to



use their French in authentic situations and to experience French culture at their own doorstep. French immersion programming in Manitoba flourishes in a rich and supportive context.

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Program Goals

The goal of the French Immersion Program is to develop linguistic competency in the French language as well as mastery of the English language. Linguistic competency in French is defined as the ability to communicate for both personal and professional needs. In addition to encompassing learning outcomes related to competency in French, curricula for the French Immersion Program reflects the learning outcomes of curricula designed for the English Program.

The French Immersion Program aims to foster an awareness and an appreciation of the French peoples and their cultural diversity. Furthermore, it is hoped that graduates of a French immersion program will be better able to appreciate other languages, cultures and communities throughout Canada and around the world.

Beyond its cultural and linguistic dimensions, the French Immersion Program seeks to develop the skills necessary for future citizens to develop their individual potential and contribute to the economic, social, and cultural life in Manitoba as stated by Manitoba Education and Training, *Renewing Education: New Directions. A Foundation for Excellence* (1995).

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Characteristics of the French Immersion Program in Manitoba

- The French Immersion Program is designed for students whose first language is not French and have little or no knowledge of French prior to entering the program.
- The French Immersion Program is a second language program in which French is the language of instruction for a significant part of the school day and several or all subjects, with the exception of English Language Arts, are taught in French. French is also used for meaningful communication within the school.
- The French Immersion Program has three entry points:
 1. early immersion begins in Kindergarten or Grade 1;
 2. middle immersion begins in Grade 4;
 3. late immersion begins in Grade 7.

The program, regardless of entry point, is intended to continue through Grade 12.

- All students follow curriculum documents developed by the Bureau de l'éducation française Division and are expected to achieve established standards.
- The students begin the program with little or no knowledge of French, and instructional strategies and materials are designed with this in mind.

- The program begins with intensive instruction in French by teachers fluent in the language.
- Instruction of subject material is not repeated in English.
- In order to best achieve the program goals, students are encouraged to remain in the program through the end of Grade 12.
- Parents play a strong role in promoting the French Immersion Program and supporting their child in achieving their child's goals.

The Web site http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/fr_imm_pr.html links you to detailed information regarding the French Immersion Program.

Theoretical Underpinnings of French Immersion Programs in Canada



The social and political context of second language learning as well as the impact of first language competency and second language competency are important variables in discussing the success of French immersion programs in Canada. Explanations of the Theory of Additive-Subtractive Bilingualism (Lambert, 1975), the Threshold Hypothesis (Cummins, 1978), and the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1978) are given in the context of French immersion programs in Canada.

Theory of Additive and Subtractive Bilingualism

The theory of additive and subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1964) traces its roots both to the reported failure of bilingual programs in the USA between 1920 and 1960, and to the reported success of French immersion programs in Canada in the sixties and the early seventies.

American results showed that bilingual children in the USA tended to perform less successfully in school, score lower on the verbal parts of IQ tests, and exhibit more emotional problems than their unilingual counterparts (see Darcy, 1953; Peal and Lambert, 1962 for reviews of these studies). This body of research supported the general perception that bilingual education was detrimental to a child's development. Conversely, the Canadian studies (Cummins, 1978; Genesee, 1987; Lambert and Tucker, 1972) reported that the French immersion students in Canada tended to perform at equal or superior levels than their unilingual counterparts. These studies suggested that bilingualism can enhance some aspects of academic or cognitive growth. These areas included superior performance of bilingual children in some aspects of English Language Arts (ELA) skills, enhanced ability of bilingual children to analyze linguistic meaning, and a positive association between both cognitive flexibility and creative thinking abilities for bilingual children.

Faced with this blatant contradiction in research results, some kind of explanation was in order. The conditions under which the earlier American studies were conducted were very different from the conditions under which the Canadian immersion studies were conducted. In the American studies, the participants were immigrant or minority-language-speaking students. They were placed in English schools where they were “submerged” in the English language. They received no instruction in their native language at school and were discouraged from speaking it both at home and in the classroom. Gradually, the children lost their cultural identity, and their native language was replaced with English.

As a result, although the children were gaining competency in the second language, they did so at a loss of their first language. This is an example of a subtractive bilingual situation; the child is in the process of **subtracting** his or her first language (L1), and replacing it with his or her second language (L2). This phenomenon affects not only language competency in both languages, L1 and L2, it often results in the loss of the learner’s cultural identity.

This is in direct contrast to studies of students in French immersion programs where majority English-language children were placed in a minority French-language setting. The two languages and the two cultures were valued both at home and at school, and their dominant language, English, was not threatened by the introduction of the second language, French.

As a result, the learner was in a situation from which he or she could benefit both cognitively and affectively. Lambert described this setting as one of “additive” bilingualism. Because the children spoke the language of the majority, English, they were in a position to benefit from an immersion in French and were in no danger of replacing L1 with L2. In fact, L2 was added to L1 and the students in the French immersion programs showed varying degrees of competence in L2 at no loss to L1.

To summarize then, an additive bilingual situation is one in which a second language is added to the repertoire of language ability at no loss to the first language and to the cultural identity of the learner. Conversely, a subtractive bilingual situation is one in which a second language becomes the more dominant of the two languages and eventually replaces the first language, and the learner’s cultural identity is jeopardized.

Threshold Hypothesis

In order to better understand how students can actually enhance cognitive and affective development in a bilingual situation, the threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 1978) deserves consideration. The threshold hypothesis posits that there may be a certain level of linguistic competency which a bilingual child must attain in order to benefit cognitively from the two languages. In other words, for a child to benefit from a second language, he or she must first have a minimum level of competency or “threshold” in both languages. Conversely, if a child does not have

a minimum competency in either language, the effects of a bilingual program may be negative.

The child in French immersion is an excellent example of the application of the positive repercussions of the threshold hypothesis. All things being equal, the French immersion child has already, before entering school, competency in his or her first language. This competency continues to develop as the child matures in his or her first language milieu. With the introduction and continued use of the second language at school, varying degrees of competency in French are attained. The degree to which French is mastered determines the effect bilingualism will have on the child. The greater the competency in L1 and L2, the greater are the benefits of the two languages on the cognitive development of the child. Obviously, if there is very little competency in L2, the effects of the second language are minimal. Efforts should be made to ensure maximum competency in L2 if children are to reap the benefits of bilingualism.

Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis

Whereas Cummins' threshold hypothesis posits that a certain competency in both L1 and L2 is necessary before the benefits of L2 can be reaped, Cummins' developmental interdependence hypothesis explains how the benefits of bilingualism are derived. He proposes that there is an interaction between the learner's mastery of the first language and the second language. The knowledge the learner has of his or her first language is transferred to and interacts with the knowledge he or she is acquiring in the second language.

For example, a learner who is read to as a child before entering school will understand the concept that meaning is embedded in the print and in the illustrations of the story. Upon entering a French immersion Kindergarten, the teacher will read to the child in French. Although the child may not understand all the vocabulary in the story, he or she approaches the learning situation with the knowledge that the purpose of reading is constructing meaning from text. This is an essential concept to master in the learning-to-read process. The child in this case makes a transfer from his understanding of literacy in L1 to his understanding of literacy L2 which results in L1 enhancing competency in L2.

Conversely, a student who learns, for example, how to critically read a Web site using his or her second language, will transfer this ability to his or her first language. In this case, the transfer is from L2 to L1 and L2 enhances competency in L1.

In summary, Cummins' developmental interdependence hypothesis posits that competency in L1 has a positive effect on acquisition of L2 and competency in L2 has a positive effect on acquisition in L1. The two languages interact and this phenomenon accounts for the fact that L1 development is not disadvantaged with instruction time dedicated to L2.



How French Immersion Works

The Role of the French Language

French immersion integrates language instruction and content area instruction. Students **learn** the French language, they **learn about** the French language and they **learn through** the French language.

- **Learning the language** enables students to read, speak, write and listen in French.
- Students **learn about the language** when they study French as a content unto itself.
- Students **learn through language** when they use French to solve problems, understand concepts and create knowledge.

These three notions are developed simultaneously and interactively. One cannot “learn the language” without dealing with some kind of content-area discipline. For example, when children are ‘learning-to-read’, they are also ‘reading-to-learn’; we cannot teach them story grammar without teaching them a story. One must not assume the children learn to read and then, subsequently, they read to learn. The two notions are inseparable. The same holds true of learning “about” language. We learn about language as we use it in authentic significant contexts. Teaching grammar or vocabulary in isolation of connected meaningful text is ineffective. The three notions are integrated and complement one another. As the complexity of the interplay among these three notions develops, so does the linguistic competency of the learner.

In French immersion, students are given the opportunity to use the French language in meaningful and authentic situations for a variety of purposes. In such instances, they will not only learn to use French to construct meaning, but also, they will learn about French as a content unto itself.

The notion of learning through language precludes that all content-area teachers are teachers of language. Learning through language involves being able to think and solve problems as an expert in a particular discipline would do. For example, it involves thinking like a historian and having the knowledge and vocabulary base a historian needs to solve problems. As the student learns the language of the discipline, he or she is using language to learn about the discipline. It is through language that students come to construct meaning in various content areas. Consequently, content area teachers must be teachers of language.

How Children Learn Their First Language

Children acquire their first language with ease and rapidity by being immersed in a language rich environment. The child’s cries, changes in intonation, initial sounds and then single words are all part of the process of learning to talk. Gradually,

single words become short phrases and then evolve into sentences. The motivation for children to learn language is a desire to socialise and to express their needs and interests. They engage in conversations with caregivers who support their attempts to communicate and encourage them to continue in their experimentation with language. Risk and approximations are natural occurrences in the process of language learning. As children get older, their language experiences become more diverse, and they learn to communicate in a variety of situations using a range of registers. By the time they enter Kindergarten, they are in control of the syntax of their language, that is, its grammatical structure. They are skillful users of pragmatics, that is the appropriate use of language in various contexts, and they are equipped with the semantics, or vocabulary, necessary to communicate.

In a socio-constructivist perspective, children learn language by actively interacting with their social, cultural and historical environment to make sense of the reality that surrounds them. The role of a more knowledgeable language user, say a parent, sibling, or peer, is essential to their language development. The knowledgeable language user works in the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) by helping the learner accomplish tasks which he or she would otherwise be unable to accomplish alone. The more knowledgeable language user provides a scaffold upon which the learner builds his or her knowledge about language. There is a constant negotiation of meaning between the participants. The role of interaction with the environment is key to a socio-constructivist perspective of language development.

Children learn language naturally and globally. Although they have specific properties unto themselves, reading, writing, viewing, representing, speaking and listening do not develop in a hierarchical order. For example, children do not learn to listen before they speak, they do not learn to read before they learn to write. The cries of a child and the changes in his or her intonation are the first signs of speaking and his or her alertness when a familiar voice is heard are the first signs of listening. The child learns from a very young age to read signs in his or her environment and as soon as the child is able, he or she will hold a pen and draw a message. These competencies are interrelated and complement one another, building upon each other in complex ways that enable the child to develop his or her language. As the child gains more experience, he or she becomes more proficient in exploiting these competencies. The kinds of experiences the child is able to draw on are essential to language development.

How Children Learn a Second Language

The majority of children who attend school in the French Immersion Program are Anglophone children who are learning French as a second language. As a result, most of the Canadian research on learning in French immersion is based on second language contexts with English being the first language and French being the second language. However, the number of children who speak a language other than English at home is increasing in Canada. These children may have English as a second

language. Consequently, when they enroll in French immersion, French becomes not a second language, but a third language (L3) or “additional language”. Research is starting to be published showing that learning a third language follows similar processes to learning a second language and benefits from similar learning conditions. Furthermore, research is showing that the advantages of learning a third language are analogous to those of learning a second language (Genesee & Cloud, 1998).

Young children learn their second language the same way they learned their first language; they interact with their environment to satisfy their communication needs. At first their utterances are simple words or short phrases and gradually they compose sentences. As with first language learners, second language learners take risks, make approximations, and negotiate meaning and this, in a secure environment. They learn language globally; the strands of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrated and are not processed in a sequential fashion. Their language competency becomes more sophisticated as they participate in a variety of language experiences.

Although the process of learning a second language mirrors that of the first language, there are some differences which make second language learning distinct. The greatest challenge facing second language learners is that their motivation, or need to communicate, is less urgent in L2. This is because they always have recourse to their first language when the need to communicate arises. This has huge implications for second language pedagogy. Learning situations must be presented which compel the learner to communicate in the second language. Authentic situations based on the needs and interests of the learner are most effective to motivate the learner to use his or her second language.

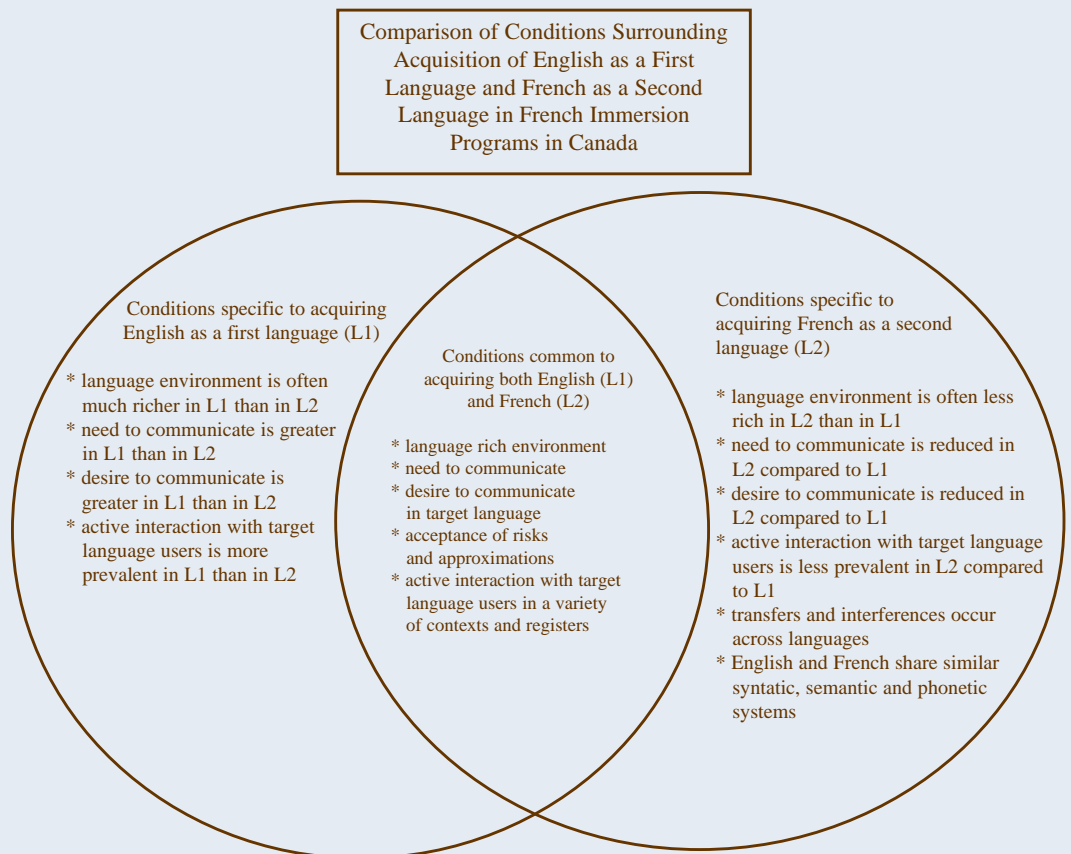
Another challenge facing second language learners are the interferences that the first language can have on the additional language. The learner tends to impose his or her knowledge of L1 on his or her knowledge of L2, which can result in errors or interferences from the first language. These interferences may be syntactic, phonetic or semantic. Immersion teachers realize these errors are a natural part of second language learning. They know how to identify them, which ones to correct, when to correct them, and how to correct them.

Although the knowledge of a first language can cause interferences in the acquisition of the second language, there are many transfers which take place. For example, higher order thinking skills are easily transferred from one language to another. In the case of French and English, the syntax of the two are closely related: the basic grammatical structure subject, verb and complement is common to both languages. The two languages share most of the same phonemes and there are many instances where the vocabulary of one language can be transferred to the other. For Anglophone students in the French Immersion Program, the negative effects caused by interferences are negligible compared to the positive effects created by the transfer of learning from one language to the other. Furthermore, the advantage of the phenomenon of interferences is that it permits the learner to reflect on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, and in doing so, enhances mastery

of both languages. Second language teachers capitalise on transfers and interferences between L1 and L2 to help learners develop competency in both languages.

Second language learners do not benefit from the same rich linguistic environment offered to first language learners, nor do they benefit from the same amount of time in that rich environment. Both of these factors impact on the learners' opportunities to acquire his or her second language. Furthermore, the classroom environment restricts the learners' experiences to academic situations and the chance to use French in a social context is greatly reduced. Immersion pedagogy takes these circumstances into consideration and strives to provide a multitude of experiences and opportunities for learners to develop a variety of language registers.

In conclusion, children learn language by interacting with a rich language environment, be it their first language or their second language, to satisfy their communication needs and to make sense of the world that surrounds them. This is the basic notion behind socio-constructivist theory of language development. However, what is unique to French immersion is that children learning French as a second or third language come to the task with a certain language competency previously acquired. This presents not only advantages, but also, it presents certain challenges. French immersion pedagogy in the Canadian context, anchored in socio-constructivist theory, respects the particularities of the two official languages and draws on it to achieve its mandate of creating bilingual or multilingual global citizens.



Source: Ewart. (2006) unpublished.



Immersion Pedagogy

In many respects, immersion pedagogy is very similar to pedagogy of first language learners. Teachers in French immersion implement a pedagogy which is based on the **interests and needs of the learners**.

Allowing the learners to follow their interests is an important catalyst for motivation. Respecting their cognitive and affective needs ensures that they learn in a secure atmosphere that encourages risk-taking. Pedagogy is differentiated to respect not only the needs and interests of the learners, but also their learning styles and intelligences. Teachers and learners negotiate curriculum to ensure that curriculum outcomes are being met and students have a voice in meeting those outcomes.

French immersion teachers offer **a linguistically rich learning environment**. This is essential to second language pedagogy. A linguistically rich environment means that French immersion teachers are very conscious of the role of language across the curriculum. They understand the notions of learning the language, learning about the language and learning through the language. Language is integrated in all the disciplines, and it is the tool the learners use to construct knowledge and understand the world around them.

Because exposure to second language is restricted to the child's school experience, it becomes even more critical for second language learners to have the opportunity to experience a **variety of authentic learning situations** that might not otherwise be available to them. Furthermore, authentic learning situations permit the learners to make links between a school setting and real-life circumstances. This, in turn, increases motivation which poses a major challenge for second language learners.

As children learn their second language, they make approximations, errors, predictions and guesses. Immersion pedagogy recognises the role of approximations in language acquisition and accords **priority to the message over the form**. This is not to say that the form or "correctness" is ignored, but rather that first and foremost, what the child has to say has precedence over how he or she says it. A child learns language through use. If the learner is preoccupied with errors, he or she will not take risks. Risk-taking is vital to learning.

Learning, and particularly language learning, in a socio-constructivist framework, calls for the **active participation of the learners** in the construction of their literacies. Students and teachers negotiate the curriculum through inquiry. Questions, wonderings, and problem resolution are the central component for both learning and teaching. The teacher acts as the facilitator, scaffolding the learner through new territory and yet, at the same time, making space for the learner to interact in the learning experience. The learner must appropriate the new knowledge before it can be considered "learned."

And finally, immersion teachers are aware of the phenomenon of **transfers and interferences** between the first and second languages. They capitalise on the knowledge the learners bring to the table in their first language to teach the second language. Many transfers can occur from one language to the other. French immersion teachers are aware of the transfers and yet, do not assume they have taken place. They teach the transfers and interferences so the learners may benefit fully from the interaction between French and English.

School Culture Conducive to French Immersion



The success of a French immersion program is directly related to the culture of the school. There are certain conditions that apply to schools and learning in general and other conditions that apply specifically to the French Immersion Program. First and foremost, schools are based on the universal principles that all children can learn, and all children have a right to an education. There is a general acceptance of a constructivist view of learning, a commitment to building collaborative work environments for adults and children in schools, a commitment to inquiry as a central component of learning for teachers and children and a commitment to university/school collaboration in educating teachers and in improving student learning (Levine, 1996). These basic tenets are critical to effective schools.

There are other tenets that relate specifically to French immersion schools. French immersion schools are bound by mission statements that clearly explain the mandate of immersion programming, and this mandate is supported both at the provincial and the divisional levels. The administrators of the French Immersion Program are convinced of the success of immersion programming, and they hire staff who share their commitment. The teachers working in French immersion settings are competent: they have mastered the French language, have mastered the content areas they teach, and they use effective second language teaching strategies.

If we expect students to learn the French language, they must be immersed in that language. A rich linguistic environment is vital to language acquisition. French must be encouraged in all aspects of school life. It is also essential that students have opportunities to use their French outside the school walls. In Manitoba, we are particularly fortunate as we have a vibrant French community which offers many opportunities for students to contribute to the French culture. Participating in cultural exchanges is particularly powerful in motivating students to learn a second language.

Effective schools work collaboratively with parents. This poses a certain challenge for French immersion schools. On the one hand, it is imperative to guarantee a French environment in the school and on the other hand, it is essential that parents participate in the school life. Schools must be creative in finding a balance which respects both the linguistic component of French immersion and the role parents play in building a community school.



Research Findings

Literally hundreds of quantitative and qualitative studies have been carried out over more than 40 years of French immersion in Canada. These studies consistently illustrate the following results:

- Students achieve a high level of functional fluency in French by the end of Grade 12.
- After an initial lag lasting until a year or two after English Language Arts is introduced, early French immersion students perform as well as or better in English Language Arts than their English-program counterparts.
- No detrimental effects on students' English language skills have been found in studies of late immersion. In fact, some research tends to suggest that first language skills are enhanced by second language study.
- Immersion students do as well as their English-program counterparts in subject areas.
- There is a positive association between second language learning and cognitive and academic development.
- Immersion students experience no loss of cultural identity.
- Immersion students develop a positive attitude and understanding for other cultures.
- The more time learners spend immersed in their second language, French, the more competent they become in French.
- Brain research suggests that the ideal time to learn a second language is before puberty.
- Learning a third language is aided by mastery of the first language and transfers of learning can take place among the languages.



A Historical Overview of French Immersion in Canada

French immersion has been called a “phenomenon” and “the great Canadian experiment that worked.” It is a modern-day educational innovation that has become a Canadian success story and has gained Canadian researchers, educators and parent groups respect worldwide.

1960s – French immersion began in Canada in response to parental interest spurred by political, social and economic changes happening in Quebec and throughout Canada. In Quebec, as a result of the Quiet Revolution, French was fast becoming the principal language of work and communication throughout the province, leaving anglophone Quebecers concerned for their futures. In the rest of Canada, socio-economic horizons were broadening – opening new career opportunities and changing attitudes.

The best-known French immersion experiment began in Quebec in 1965. After a two-year struggle to convince their reluctant school board, a group of 12 parents calling themselves the St. Lambert Bilingual School Study Group received permission to start a French immersion Kindergarten program. Their biggest challenge had been to make school board officials understand that children could learn French through immersion without harm to their competence in English. To do so, they had sought the advice and help of linguistics specialists, psychologists and other experts, among them Dr. Wallace Lambert of the Psychology Department, McGill University and the well-known Montreal neurosurgeon, Dr. Wilder Penfield. The involvement and professional advice of these two scholars helped to shape the future of second language education in Canada.

Having won their opportunity, this foresighted group of St. Lambert parents then insisted that their fledgling program be carefully studied. By 1969, McGill University was releasing encouraging research results on the St. Lambert experiment.

In the same year, the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism led to the passage of the first *Official Languages Act*. Anglophone parents throughout the country became increasingly concerned for their children's future. They knew from personal experience that the traditional approach to second language instruction in school systems was inadequate to prepare young people for careers and lifestyles that would require competence in a second language. They began to call for improved opportunities in publicly funded school systems for their children to learn Canada's other official language. Word of the St. Lambert results quickly spread, and soon parent committees across the country were demanding French immersion for their children.

1970s – Federal-provincial agreements are established to transfer money to the provinces and territories for first and second language education in the minority official language (English in Quebec and French elsewhere). The Official Languages in Education Program (OLEP) began in 1970.

By 1977, some 45,000 Canadian students were enrolled in French immersion programs and a national support group called Canadian Parents for French was formed. The *Association canadienne des professeurs d'immersion/Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers (ACPI/CAIT)* was also founded in this year.

1980s-1990s – French immersion enrolments increased by more than 650 percent during the 80s and 90s. By the 1998-1999 school year, more than 320,000 students were enrolled in French immersion programs being offered in large cities and small towns from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland/Labrador to the Territories.

2007 – Canada has become a world leader in second language teaching. Today, Canadian-style immersion programs can be found in countries around the world including Australia, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Spain, and the United States.



The Evolution of French-Language Education in Manitoba

The historical overview of French immersion in Manitoba closely follows the evolution of Francophones' rights to schooling in French.

- In 1818, the future Bishop Provencher arrives in Manitoba and establishes the first French-language school in Manitoba. The Collège de Saint-Boniface originates from this school for boys.
- Between 1820 and 1870, a denominational school system controlled by the various religious groups is established. It consists of the Catholic system, which is essentially French, and the Protestant English system.
- In 1870, at the time of Manitoba's entry into the Canadian Confederation, the *Manitoba Act* establishes a denominational system that gives Catholics and Protestants management and control in the area of education. French is the language of instruction in almost all Catholic schools.
- In 1890, the denominational system is abolished and replaced by a system of public schools managed by a department of education. French is abolished as an official language by the provincial government of the day. These two laws threaten the teaching of French in Manitoba schools.
- Following the federal election in 1896, the provincial government of Manitoba and the federal government reach an agreement known as the Laurier-Greenway Compromise. The compromise allows for bilingual instruction where ten or more students speak French or a language other than English. A number of French, German, Ruthenian and other bilingual schools are established over the next twenty years. In 1915, one-sixth of Manitoba students attend bilingual schools.
- In 1916, the *Thornton Act* puts an end to bilingual schools and the Department of Education issues directives making English the only language of instruction in Manitoba's schools. French and German may be taught as foreign languages in Grades 10 - 12.
- Despite this legal prohibition, Franco-Manitobans continue to teach various subjects in French in their schools over the next fifty years. The Association d'éducation des canadiens français du Manitoba, established by Franco-Manitobans following the passing of the *Thornton Act*, coordinates these efforts.
- In 1947, the Department allows the teaching of French as of Grade 7.
- In 1955, French may be taught legally as of Grade 4.
- In 1963, the Department allows the teaching of French as of Grade 1.
- In 1967, Manitoba's government passes a bill allowing French instruction for up to 50% of the day. The bill specifies the subjects that may be taught in French.
- In 1970, the Manitoba government passes Bill 113, which amends section 258 of the Manitoba *Public Schools Act*. The new legislation acknowledges English and French as the official languages of instruction in Manitoba schools.

- From a practical standpoint, this law provides that:
 - French-language instruction is allowed for up to 100 % of the day from Kindergarten to Grade 3;
 - French-language instruction is allowed for up to 75 % of the day from Grades 4 - 12;
 - English must be taught as of Grade 4.
- In 1974, the government establishes the Bureau de l'éducation française Division (BEF), which is responsible on behalf of the Department of Education for all French-language programming in Manitoba.
- That same year, the Institut pédagogique du Collège de Saint-Boniface is established for the purpose of training teachers to provide French-language instruction in Manitoba schools.
- In the late sixties and early seventies, the French Immersion Program is established in the Winnipeg, Saint-Boniface and Brandon school divisions.
- As of the early seventies, the federal government supports the province by providing grants to help develop and maintain schools that provide instruction in the language of the official minority.
- In 1976, the BEF hires a curriculum consultant responsible for French immersion programming and development in Manitoba. The following year, a second curriculum consultant is hired in this sector.
- In 1995, the Department recognizes the French Immersion Program as one of the four official programs in Manitoba.
- The French Immersion Program is an unexpected success in Manitoba. The first data for 1974 indicate that 652 students are enrolled in the program. The program reaches its peak in 1991 with a total of 19,751 students enrolled.
- Enrolment subsequently declines slightly. As of September 30, 2006, enrolment is 17,871. The program is offered at 97 schools, in 21 school divisions. (See Chapter 7.)



Frequently Asked Questions

While the success of French immersion has been well documented by research and has existed for 40 years, parents still have many questions about the value and the validity of the program. The document developed by Dr. André Obadia, Professor at Simon Fraser University (Faculty of Education) in British Columbia and published by Canadian Parents for French addresses many of these concerns. The content of the following document published in 1996 is still relevant today.

**An excerpt from French immersion in Canada -
Frequently asked questions
Canadian Parents for French, 1996**

Introduction:

Canada's French immersion programs have attracted positive attention from many countries around the globe. For the last decade some countries, particularly in Europe and the United States, have been offering immersion programs often patterned on the Canadian model.

This report provides answers to some of the questions most frequently asked by parents of French immersion students (actual and prospective). This report, we hope, will also give parents a quick overview of a Canadian educational success story. The answers are based on the results of three decades of research about one of the most thoroughly studied educational programs in Canada.

It is rewarding to see that our education system has succeeded, for the first time in the history of second-language teaching in Canada, in giving English-speaking and other students for whom French is a third or fourth language the ability to communicate naturally in French using a wide range of vocabulary.

This high level of French proficiency is developed at no cost to students' English proficiency or to achievement in other academic subjects such as science or mathematics.

1

Is French immersion for all children?

French immersion has sometimes been criticized as an elitist program, because, among other reasons, children enrolled in this program tended to come from families with high incomes and the educational level of parents tended to be above average. This criticism may have been valid when the French immersion program began. However, with hundreds of thousands of students in the program, if this was ever true it is not the case today.

Studies have shown that there is no reason why immersion programs should not be suitable for any child. Of course, children with above average academic abilities generally have an advantage in most forms of learning, particularly, in the case of immersion programs, in the development of reading and writing skills. High academic ability, however, is not related to performance in French speaking skills.

By the same token, children with learning difficulties will experience some problems in trying to cope with the French immersion curriculum — the same problems they would encounter in the English-stream program. Learning assistance should be provided to them, whether they are in immersion or in the regular English program. These children (except in rare instances) should not be denied the satisfaction and pride that come from becoming bilingual.

2

How good will my child's French be?

The level of French will vary from one child to another in the same way as performance in mathematics, for example, will vary from child to child. Some students speak French making many mistakes while others might be taken for mother-tongue French speakers.

The language skills of French immersion students are consistently superior to those of core French students (who study French for 20 to 50 minutes per day). In general, immersion students' French oral and reading comprehension skills (receptive skills) will be almost on a par with those of native French speakers. Speaking and writing in the second language (productive skills) may not be as advanced as their comprehension (receptive) skills.

We must remind ourselves that French for these children is, after all, their second language and that English is the predominant language in their environment.

To dwell too much and too critically on the quality of the French spoken by immersion students is often a red herring because it ignores the fact that immersion students not only communicate effectively in French but also learn the skills of communication: selecting the right words with the right nuances, adapting communicative strategies to get the message across, cracking the right joke without making a cultural or linguistic gaffe, and establishing a positive environment by creating a friendly atmosphere with the native speaker.

It will take years of immersion schooling before your child will reach such a level of achievement and comfort in a second language.

As an example, imagine yourself being able to understand Chinese spoken by a native speaker at a normal speed and that you are able to communicate, in a normal way, albeit while making some mistakes, with that person. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

French immersion teachers and parents should constantly seek out opportunities for the children to use their French with mother-tongue French speakers. The new technologies (Internet, videoconferencing, multimedia materials, etc.) will help students to establish links with Francophone communities around the world. These opportunities for interaction should help students to improve their sociolinguistic skills.

3

Is my child going to lose out in English or in subjects taught in French?

Research has shown that throughout Canada French immersion students perform at least as well in many aspects of English-language achievement as those who are enrolled in regular programs. Understandably, in the first two or three years (primary grades) of French immersion your child may show some lag in certain areas of English-language skills such as spelling, capitalization, etc. These lags

are, however, temporary and usually disappear when English language arts are introduced.

It is not uncommon to see immersion students reading English fluently even though no formal classroom English instruction has yet been introduced. This is due to the phenomenon of transfer of reading skills from French to English. Having the same

alphabet makes this process of transfer much easier. Various studies have shown that immersion students perform as well as English-stream students in all school subjects such as math, science, etc.

4

How can I help at home?

You can start by establishing a good rapport with your child's immersion teacher in a spirit of collaboration and support. Through regular communication with the teacher you should become familiar with the curriculum and be able to help your child as effectively as possible.

At home, your child should be free to read for pleasure in French or in English and be encouraged to talk about his/her experiences at school. Showing interest in what your child is doing at school and providing encouragement and support is of the utmost importance. For example, you can help by sitting

by your child and encouraging him/her to complete his/her work or study his/her lessons. This will help your child in the short and long run. It is particularly easy to work with your child in math, social studies, science or art because they can be done in English at home. Eventually, and as soon as possible, your child will become an independent learner.

Other examples: when there is a "dictée" (spelling exercise) to practice, and if your pronunciation is reasonably good, you may ask the child to say the words to you first and then repeat the words so your child can spell them.

It is often an amusing exercise when your child tries to teach you how to pronounce French words. You can transcribe words phonetically to remember how to pronounce them. You may also wish to ask the immersion teacher to record one or more "dictées" to practice at home or your child can make the recording and you can play back the tape. Your child can work using the teacher's voice.

For more information about how you can help, please see the list of selected CPF resources at the end of this report.

5

Should a child ever be transferred out of French immersion?

Except in unusual circumstances, transferring a child out of immersion is generally not advisable. Performing below grade level or grade average, for example, is not a valid reason for transferring your child. In all likelihood the child would not be performing much better if he or she were in an English-stream program.

Transferring a child out of French immersion should be a decision that is made first of all by parents, usually in consultation with the

immersion teacher and the school staff. Especially at the elementary level, guidance may be provided by a school-based team generally made up of the French immersion teacher, the English teacher, the counselor and the learning assistance teacher.

Please remember that in the English stream, where there is no alternative, the child with learning difficulties must stay in his/her program. The existence of this option of transferring

the child out of immersion sometimes encourages a parent to transfer the child too hastily. Apart from some extreme cases, children with learning difficulties should not be denied the right and privilege of becoming bilingual and also should be able to draw satisfaction and pride from understanding and speaking two world languages.

6

Is there learning assistance in French immersion?

The level of learning assistance, whether in English-stream or French immersion programs, varies from school district/board to school district/board and sometimes from school to school.

Depending on the available resources, children who are in need of learning assistance in French immersion should normally receive the same level of help as that available in the English stream.

Teachers should work in cooperation with the learning assistance teacher to provide help based as much as possible on a child's particular learning style. Parents are encouraged to participate in the process if it will help the child.

7

Should I register my child in Early immersion or Late immersion?

It is estimated that about 80% of all French immersion students are enrolled in early immersion programs. The popularity of this program can be explained by many factors.

1. Studies have shown that it is easier and more "natural" for a child to learn another language at a very early age. In Finland, for example, a Swedish immersion program is offered to children at the age of three.
2. Early French immersion teachers are very conscious of the fact that at first children do not

understand the language. The teachers provide clear explanations using various communications strategies and by making experiential activities meaningful.

3. Research has shown the positive results of language immersion programs in Canada and other countries.

While it is "natural" for children to learn French in very early immersion programs (kindergarten), it requires motivation to work much harder when immersion starts in later

grades (grade 6 or 7). Students in these grades will want their opinion to count in the decision to enter the French immersion program and the decision will be dependant on their attitude to, ability in and perception of French.

Results of Late immersion programs (with some differences in favour of Early immersion) have been positive.

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