
2. FRENCH IMMERSION APPROACH

In a French Immersion Program, all or a major portion of the courses, with the exception of English LA-Immersion, are offered in French, by teachers who are proficient in French, to students who have little or no knowledge of the French language upon their entry into the program. The immersion approach allows for an active and practical acquisition of the French language through subject matter acquisition.

A French Immersion Program also offers a special educational environment where students “live” in French, French being the language of administration and communication in the program.

2.1 GOALS OF THE FRENCH IMMERSION APPROACH

The French Immersion Program aims to develop, in addition to the mastery of the English language, linguistic competence in the French language. Students are thus able to communicate in both languages on a personal and professional level (Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers, 1994). In addition, the immersion approach fosters an understanding of the French peoples and their cultural diversity.

In Manitoba, the French Immersion Program has been recognised as an official program by the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth since 1995. Beyond its linguistic and cultural dimensions, the program aims to develop “the academic skills, the personal, social, and career skills, and the life management skills that future citizens will need to develop their individual potential and contribute to the economic, social, and cultural life in Manitoba” (*Renewing Education: A Foundation for Excellence*, 1995: 6).

In immersion, students acquire the French language and, at the same time, the learning outcomes which comprise essential learning as outlined in the Department's 1995 document *Renewing Education: A Foundation for Excellence*.

2.2 FOUNDATIONS OF THE FRENCH IMMERSION APPROACH

The immersion approach integrates language instruction and subject- area content instruction. In fact, in immersion, the French language is both the *medium of instruction* and *subject of instruction*.

2.2.1 French as the medium of instruction

In immersion, the language is a vehicle for acquiring knowledge from different subject areas. Language-teaching and content-teaching are integrated, and the French language is thus perceived as an informational vehicle — a medium by which thought, feelings, and actions are expressed or displayed. Furthermore, through this work, students develop a linguistic competence that enables them to use the French language as a tool for cognitive development, a construction of knowledge through observation, exploration, problem-solving and integration of newly acquired knowledge about the world and languages.

Moreover, the definition of immersion gives language development an important place in all school subjects taught in French. The curriculum is designed to provide a learning experience for the study of language itself. As a result, it is imperative that language-teaching objectives be set in all school subjects taught so that particular attention is given to the means of integrating language-teaching with subject-specific content-teaching. This emphasis on language development within the teaching practices themselves induces teachers to use the educational strategies most appropriate to language development, and plan instructional activities by systematically combining the factors referring specifically to subject matter and those referring to language.

2.2.2 French as the subject of instruction

Language is also a subject of instruction. Each subject area has its own vocabulary and particular way of using the language. The linguistic characteristics specific to different subject areas are identified by teachers and integrated into the teaching of the subject-area content.

As important as using the language in all subjects may be, it is but one necessary condition for language-learning and must be accompanied by activities providing the learner with strategies, knowledge and techniques.

Two types of language-teaching objectives are to be considered:

- *content-obligatory language objectives* (Snow, Met et Genesee, 1989): these specify the language skills required for students to understand a given area of content, talk about it, make it his/her own, and master it. These obligatory content-specific language skills are both structural (vocabulary, grammar, and textual) and functional (for informative, persuasive, expressive, and aesthetic purposes)
- *content-compatible language objectives* (Snow, Met et Genesee, 1989): these specify other language skills taught and acquired within the context of a given area of content, but not required for successful content mastery, since the learning context generates new vocabulary, and new grammatical and language structures. These objectives also use communicative strategies.

In immersion, the integration of the language-teaching (the content-compatible language skills and the content-obligatory skills) with the content-teaching provides increased opportunities for students to maximise language development (Snow, Met et Genesee, 1989).

2.3 IMPORTANT PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Two main thrusts have evolved from the immersion approach, each one of a different nature and applicable at different levels.

2.3.1 Context and school environment

Students learn the language mainly through practice in three means of communication: oral, written, and viewing. In short, students learn the language by interacting with their environment. It is, therefore, in a rich linguistic environment, where communication is meaningful and centred on a variety of authentic tasks, that students will make use of the language and meet their educational, personal, and social needs.

The environment that is created for the acquisition of the French language is in itself a very significant factor and the immersion school and the immersion centre (see section 3.3) offer a special educational environment where students live in French. Since most of the immersion students in Manitoba have little or no contact with the French language outside of the school environment, situations requiring communication in French are of utmost importance and should be maximised in the school setting. Students enrolled in such a learning environment will have the opportunity to hear French and speak it with a number of people (staff members, school administration, etc.) in a variety of natural and authentic situations.

Graduates are responsible for maintaining and further developing their bilingualism once their academic education is complete. The linguistic competence is not a permanent acquisition and will vary, depending on how frequently the individual uses the French language, the richness of his/her language experiences, and the attitudes he/she has towards bilingualism.

2.3.2 Language and culture

Immersion students, by being exposed to the facets of the francophone cultural life, become more aware of their own cultural identity. The cultural dimension of their experiences in the family environment and social network, and of the English LA-Immersion course, acquires a heightened sense of cultural awareness.

In the French Immersion Program, the learning outcomes of the immersion curriculum frameworks are congruent with those of the English Program. Some of the teaching strategies of the French Immersion Program may differ from those of the English Program, but students still acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes similar to those of their counterparts, while simultaneously developing a command of the French language and an awareness of the francophone cultural life.

It is very difficult to separate language from its cultural component. Students in the immersion program are introduced to francophone cultural life, as found here in Manitoba and elsewhere, and to the cultural practices found in the French-speaking world. The acquisition of a second, a third, or a fourth language is considered as a linguistic, personal, and social advantage. It is therefore important to go beyond strictly practical aspects of the learning of these languages by ensuring that the acquisition of another language, is viewed as a way of broadening one's cultural perspectives, as a form of personal enrichment, and as a means of better understanding oneself and others.