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FAQ

How popular is French Immersion in Canada and BC?

Latest enrolment figures show that in all of Canada, there are around 320,000 students enrolled in the French Immersion program. In BC, estimates for 2004/2005 indicate enrolment in French Immersion stands at 33,407.* BC has the fastest growing program with record numbers enrolling over the past four years. With 13 new programs initiated in BC in the past three years alone, and enrolment estimated to reach 40,000 by 2010, there is no sign of a slow-down in this increasingly popular program of choice. This growth is occurring while overall enrolment is decreasing due to declining birth rates.

BC has 43 communities with Early French Immersion, 29 with Late French Immersion and 23 with both.* School districts with multiple French Immersion programs spread over a geographic area include such towns as Nanaimo and Ladysmith, Sooke and Colwood, Prince George and Mackenzie, 100 Mile House and Williams Lake, Burns Lake and Vanderhoof.

Is French Immersion for all students?

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.

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 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.

Is my child going to lose out in English or in other 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.

When is English introduced to French Immersion students?

Proportion of French to English Instruction in EFI

In Early French Immersion programs, Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 should be taught totally in French. Beginning in Grade 4 and continuing to Grade 12, English Language Arts shall be provided for all French Immersion students. Other courses may be offered in English: the following chart shows the recommended time allocations:

Grade	% of French Instruction	% of English Instruction
K-(2 or 3)	100	0
(3 or) 4-7	80	20
8-10	50 - 75	25 - 50
11-12	no less than 25	no more than 75

Source: Ministry of Education

Proportion of French to English Instruction in LFI

In Late French Immersion programs, the entry year, usually Grade 6, is taught totally in French except at the beginning to establish routines. English is used only if necessary in exceptional situations after this. By Grade 7, English is reintroduced. Students in Grade 8 will join up with the Early French Immersion students where EFI exists.

Grade	% of French Instruction	% of English Instruction
6	100	0
7 - 8	70 - 80	20 - 30
9 - 10	50	50
11-12	no less than 25	no more than 75

Source: Ministry of Education

How can I help at home? I don't speak French!

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 "dictee" (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 "dictees" 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.

Canadian Parents for French is a national non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and creating opportunities for young Canadians to learn and use French as a second language. The BC branch of CPF, in partnership with Educacentre, helps organize basic French classes for parents in many communities around the province so parents can help their children with homework.

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.

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.

Should I register my child in Early French Immersion or Late French 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 extremely positive. Because students in LFI are motivated learners, they are able to cope with the initial anxiety of not knowing what is being taught. They quickly get caught up and are well prepared to join their EFI peers by Grade 8.

* Statistics from November 2004

Useful sources:

www.cpf.bc.ca

www.cpf.ca

www.bced.gov.bc.ca > search French Immersion policy