



COMMENTARY

FRENCH IMMERSION: WHEN AND WHY?

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French immersion is often used as a general term in opposition to core French where French is taught as a subject for up to one hour per day. The term French immersion, however, is an inclusive one that can be used to refer alternatively to a number of different variants of immersion. These variants all contain foundational characteristics of immersion programs, but vary according to the degree to which those features are included, and whether other optional features are involved. The main variants of immersion programs are described below:

Program Descriptor	Percentage of Instruction in French
Early total immersion	90-100% usually beginning in K or G1
Early partial immersion	50% usually beginning in K or G1
Middle total immersion (also known as delayed immersion)	90% usually beginning in G4
Middle partial immersion	50% usually beginning in G4
Late total immersion	80% usually beginning in G6 or G7
Late partial immersion	50% usually beginning in G6 or G7

Early total immersion (EFI) is by far the most common variant in Canadian schools. For example, in New Brunswick in 2006, 1,646 students (32.7%) were enrolled in early immersion compared with 1,020 in late immersion (17%). In all other provinces except Nova Scotia, more than 50% of French immersion students started in an early immersion program (Statistics Canada, 2000). In some provinces, early immersion accounts for a much higher percentage; for example, more than 80% in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. In fact EFI is the only immersion option currently offered in all other Canadian provinces and in two territories, Yukon and Northwest Territories (CPF, 2006). After early total immersion, middle or delayed total immersion (usually Grade 4 entry) and late total immersion programs (usually Grade 6 or Grade 7 entry) are the most popular options. Several studies looking at the impact of time on second-language learning have indicated that partial immersion programs are less common and tend to produce the lower levels of competency in the second language. For example, in one large-scale urban study of immersion variants, Lapkin, Hart and Swain (1992) found that 50/50 delayed programs obtained less consistent levels of language performance than early total immersion programs and that there are factors that make early immersion a preferred and more successful option. Met (1993) concurs and cites intensity and increased exposure as reasons

for the superior results of the early immersion option. She goes on to say that although partial programs may be easier to staff and may be a better option for parents who insist on early exposure to the first language, they do not produce better first- or second-language results in the long run. Met also suggests that the best start is in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or Grade 1, but states that some success has also been reported with total immersion options beginning in Grades 4 or 7. Although Genesee (1998) has reported success with some select groups of late immersion cohorts, he believes the early start to be the preferred option for learners in bilingual settings.

Given the options available, parents and decision-makers often seek sound information regarding which option is best. Fortunately, because French immersion has been carefully researched and evaluated in Canada over a period of 40 years, there are decisive answers to fundamental questions related to eventual language proficiency in English and French, effects of immersion on subject matter learning, and the effectiveness of immersion for all students; however more research is required in this area (Genesee, 2007).

Second-language experts agree that four interrelated variables affect eventual attainment in a second language in school settings: age of entry into the program, the degree of intensity of language instruction in the program, the total cumulative time spent in the target language over the course of the program, and the pedagogical approach to language teaching of the program. The first three variables can be controlled fairly easily;



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the fourth variable, pedagogical approach, is much more challenging. However, certain pedagogical features can be identified as being particular to one program variant or another.

A basic finding regarding immersion variants is that students who start earlier (early French immersion) will reach a higher level of oral competency in French than students who start in delayed entry programs (middle French immersion) or late entry programs (late French immersion). Similarly, delayed-entry students tend to outperform late-entry students. Testing consistently shows this to be the case for oral fluency and spontaneous language use (e.g., McVey, Bonyun, Dicks, and Dionne, 1990; Dicks, 1995; Turnbull, Lapkin, Hart and Swain, 1998). With regard to literacy skills, reading and writing, and more analytical language tests, delayed-entry and late-entry students tend to do as well as early immersion students (Genesse, 1998; Turnbull, Lapkin, Hart and Swain, 1998; Dicks, 1995). One explanation is that these later-starting learners have more highly developed analytical skills than five or six year olds and are able to analyze and reflect on language in an explicit way, thus enabling them to make more rapid gains in these areas. Since oral fluency and spontaneity are closely linked to natural language development, this competency appears to be strengthened by an early start to second-language learning.

Later starting programs have been popular among unilingual anglophone parents for two main reasons:

- (1) Some parents feel that having students learn to read and write in their first language is more “normal” and will cause less problems than learning to read and write in the second language;
- (2) Typically, non-immersion programs have more resources including literacy specialists to work with students who are having difficulty in reading and writing.

These variants are popular in three different contexts. First, immigrant families in larger primarily English-speaking urban centres often like to have the option for their children to learn English first in school, and then learn French once they are competent in English. Many of these parents view delayed immersion as a good option. Second, school districts in rural areas where there is not a large enough demand for early immersion in a small elementary school often offer late French immersion in a middle school into which these elementary schools feed. This is an effective way of offering an immersion experience for students in that particular social setting. Finally, older children moving to a new province or territory, or emigrating to Canada, would not be able to participate in an early entry program.

These delayed entry programs clearly have appeal and advantages in particular social settings. One important factor to consider, however, is that the longer the entry to immersion is de-

layed, the more the group becomes select. Late French immersion, for example, is a cognitively demanding program due to the complex subject matter that has to be learned in French from the outset. Not surprisingly, this program is more attractive to students who are academically inclined, or who are highly motivated to master the second language despite the academic challenge presented. In addition, while complex subject matter learning does not affect delayed-entry (middle immersion) programs as strongly as it does late French immersion programs, its enrolment is still influenced by students' language and literacy performance in English in the early grades. Students with identified learning difficulties are less likely to participate in these programs.

Given the option of just one program, the early immersion option presents the most advantages. It is the least likely to be affected by academic ability and therefore the most inclusive of all variants. It will produce the best results for oral fluency and spontaneity as well as very good literacy results in both languages. It is also the most “pedagogically friendly” version because of the naturalistic approach to language learning based on literacy and oracy – the ability to express oneself fluently in speech and to understand a spoken language. These teaching methods correspond to the developmental levels of these young learners, as do the materials and resources.

Given the possibility of a second or a third choice, there are advantages to delayed and late immersion. Delayed options like middle immersion offer the opportunity for eventual French attainment that is closer to EFI with regard to oral ability. Late immersion presents a much clearer alternative to an early start due to the fact that it starts immediately after a natural break in the organizational system of most schools (i.e., at the beginning of middle school). However, the delayed (middle) entry does have the advantage of being less academically demanding in the early stages than late entry programs.

A final point relates to the socio-political reality that surrounds the immersion program (Genesee, 2007, 1998, 1996, 1987). If one is in a context where the two languages are in close contact and there is a bilingual reality (e.g., Montreal, Ottawa, or New Brunswick), EFI would provide children with linguistic and cultural contact with the French community from a very early age, as well as the opportunity to develop the advanced oral proficiency required for employment and other interaction with the community later on. If one is in a context where French is less of an issue for day-to-day life (e.g., Vancouver or Corner Brook), a delayed entry or a late entry program may be a reasonable alternative. Parents in these areas may not be as concerned about the regular contact at an early age, and eventual attainment of French at a high level may be reserved for a more motivated group who see this as an academic and professional choice.

Depending on the socio-political context and the specific concerns of parents, no one program offers the perfect solution. However, in bilingual areas where the two official languages are in contact, an early start is the best option, both with respect to short-term cultural interaction and long-term linguistic attainment. In other contexts, availability of resources and the nature of proficiency goals may influence educational decision-makers to offer a delayed or late entry option either in addition to or as an alternative to an early start. Procedures should be implemented and proper support provided in order to attract and retain students from a broad range of backgrounds and abilities so that all can benefit from whatever immersion program option they choose.

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