

Diversity in French Immersion Classrooms: A Quick Inclusion Guide for Teachers

Introduction

Today's French immersion classrooms are as diverse as other classrooms. This means that some students may require some accommodations to participate fully in a French Immersion program. This can be an opportunity for administrators and teachers to find innovative ways of meeting the needs in their classrooms so that all students may benefit from learning French. Experts such as Fred Genesee (Duval, 2008) believe that there is no reason to exclude any students from French Immersion programs. For many students, even those who may appear to struggle with learning, the benefits outweigh the challenges and help build better language strategies in ways that might not be possible in an English-only program.



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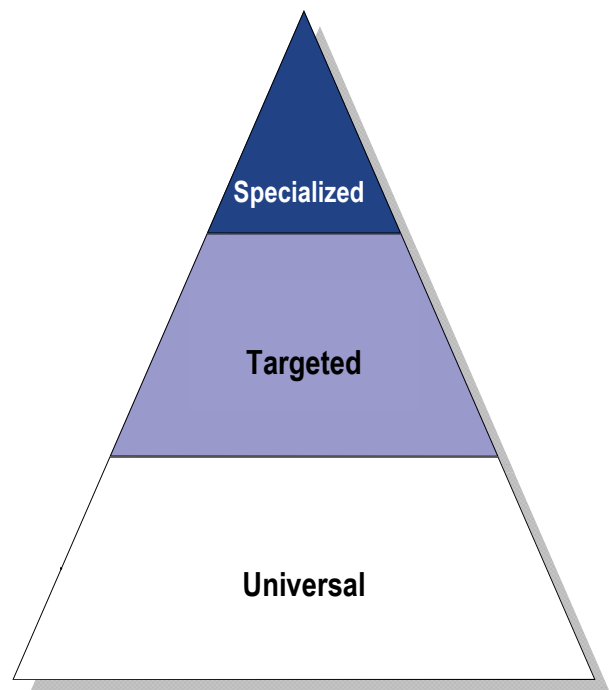
This brochure presents a series of questions and answers to help teachers in meeting the needs of students who may need extra support in the French Immersion program.

What is Inclusion?

In Alberta, inclusive education means that all schools and all school staff take responsibility for all students. It also means that all students will have equitable opportunity to be included in the typical learning environment or program of choice. Inclusive schools recognize and celebrate diversity, value students and staff and see differences as valuable resources to support learning.

An inclusive education system provides different levels of support to meet different students' needs in a variety of contexts. *Universal supports* are those which benefit all students and would typically be used by the entire class. *Targeted supports* benefit students with specific learning needs and/or preferences and might involve such things as explicit instruction in small groups or extended opportunities for guided practice and specific feedback. *Specialized supports* will meet the needs of the small number of students who have specialized needs related to sensory, physical and/or cognitive disabilities.

Providing targeted or specialized supports to students in French Immersion programs allows them to continue learning French in order to benefit from the advantages French Immersion can offer.



What are the advantages of keeping a student who is struggling in French Immersion?

French Immersion programs can be a good choice for some students who are struggling or who have special education needs. By learning both of Canada's official languages, students gain more than the ability to speak both official languages. For example, students may benefit from a wider range of learning strategies for overcoming learning difficulties and may gain renewed confidence for learning. Recent research has shown that language skills learned in one language may transfer to the other language, thus advancing language skills in both the first and second languages (Woolfolk, 2006). Furthermore, students at risk for reading or language development delays might benefit from attending a French Immersion program where more instruction time is spent on basic sounds and letters. In fact, more repetition and increased opportunities to transfer skills can make students in the French Immersion stronger readers overall.

The benefits of attending a French Immersion program in Canada are well documented. These benefits apply to all students, including those with diverse learning needs. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) states that Canadians who speak both official languages have higher employment rates and generally earn more than those who speak only English or French. Additionally, bilingualism in French and English enhances one's ability to fully participate in Canadian society (CCL, 2007). Other benefits identified include greater cognitive flexibility, creativity and concept formation (Woolfolk, 2006). French is also an asset for employment, travel and leisure pursuits around the world.

What do I do if I notice that a student is struggling in my French Immersion classroom?

When you are concerned that a student is struggling, a number of steps should be considered:

- 1) First, you should collect information to help identify the specific difficulties that the student is experiencing. Meaningful samples of student work, sample assessments and more formal assessments such as COLI (see resource list for more information) may be useful in determining the student's strengths and needs. This information should include everyday classroom tasks that are challenges and strategies you have attempted to

address these issues. It is also important to consider the learning environment and to observe whether there are particular times when the student experiences greater difficulties, such as transition times.

- 2) Once you have identified the student's specific difficulties, the next step is to try out new strategies to help the student progress. Examples of strategies may include presenting the materials differently, moving the student to a different area of the classroom or personalizing assignments to address the student's needs. You should use the information collected to determine which type of support should be provided. During this phase, you should continue to collect data on the student's progress and, at the end of several weeks, should be able to determine whether the new strategies put in place have helped the student progress, or if it is time for more specialized assessments. Teacher resources such as *La différenciation en Immersion* can help you differentiate instruction for all your students.
- 3) If it is decided that the student requires specialized assessments, it is a good idea to hold a meeting that includes special education personnel from the school or school jurisdiction and the student's parents, prior to assessment taking place. This is an opportunity to gather more data that will benefit the assessment and to create an understanding of the purpose of the assessment. This meeting may include the student if appropriate. Refer to documents such as *The Learning Team/L'équipe d'apprentissage* and *Individualized Program Planning/Plan d'intervention personnalisé* for ideas on how to engage parents in the process. Parents will need to provide informed consent prior to these specialized assessments being given.
- 4) If the student requires an intellectual assessment (i.e. IQ test), it should be performed in the student's first language to ensure that the assessment is as valid as possible. Achievement or academic functioning assessments should be provided in French, but these can often be done at the school level by personnel qualified to administer Level B assessments.
- 5) The last step in the assessment process is to look again at the student's strengths and needs in order to develop a plan that outlines strategies and supports for the student, based on her or his strengths. For more information on planning for students, see Alberta Education's *Individualized Program Planning* (2006).

Which types of diverse learning needs can be supported in a French Immersion program?

A student's ability to succeed in a French Immersion program depends upon many factors, including motivation, support and environmental factors. If appropriate supports are in place, students with a variety of special education needs can succeed in French Immersion.

Students with language or reading difficulties and/or a learning disability can often thrive in French Immersion. As these difficulties are pervasive (i.e. they will exist regardless of language of instruction and in all languages learned by the student), the student may not struggle more in French Immersion than he or she would in an English-only program. Skills and strategies learned to overcome learning or reading difficulties are transferable from one language to another, meaning that interventions can benefit both the student's languages.

Students with cognitive disabilities can also benefit from learning a second language in an immersion setting if they are provided the appropriate supports. These students will learn more slowly and may require targeted or specialized supports, but they will also enjoy benefits from learning a second language.

Students with behaviour difficulties or AD/HD often require behavioural interventions, but their ability to learn language is not usually impaired. Behaviour issues may be addressed using strategies similar to those used in other programs. *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools* is an excellent resource to help schools provide universal, targeted and/or specialized supports for improving students' behaviour.

Students who are gifted may benefit from the opportunities that French Immersion education presents. However, these students may require targeted supports in order to best meet their needs.

French Immersion may *not* be appropriate for students with a significant language delay or disorder in their first language or with significant hearing impairments, unless these can be rectified. Sometimes this can be done by adjusting the educational environment; e.g., by installing an amplification system or other equipment.

Who decides that a student should be moved to an English-only program?

Together with the teacher, the school principal and the student's parents or guardians and other school jurisdiction staff, should discuss what is best for the student. Psychologists and other specialists are an excellent resource for identifying student needs and strengths. Placement decisions are ultimately the responsibility of the parents and school administration.

Who is responsible for meeting students' needs in a French Immersion program?

According to the Standards for Special Education, all students in a jurisdiction have the right to have their needs met. It is the teacher's responsibility to meet student needs with the help of jurisdictional staff where required. School jurisdictions have a variety of consultants and specialists available to support the classroom teacher. It is up to the school jurisdiction to make decisions as to how the needs of all students will be met.

What types of strategies can be used to meet a diverse range of needs in the French Immersion classroom?

Students in the French Immersion classroom require the same range of strategies that they would need in an English-only program. Once the student's particular needs have been determined, appropriate strategies should be used. Generally, all students can benefit from differentiated instruction that meets the varying levels of ability that exist in any classroom.

What does differentiated instruction look like in a French Immersion classroom?

French immersion classrooms are just like any other classroom where students' abilities vary. Teachers skilled in differentiated instruction techniques are better able to meet all the needs in their classroom by varying assignments, assessments and time allotments for completing tasks. For more detailed information for on how you can differentiate instruction in a French Immersion program, refer to *L'Inclusion en immersion*, a practical guide to implementing differentiated instruction practices in the French Immersion classroom. Alberta Education's recent publication, *Making a Difference/Faire la différence*, provides many tools for effectively differentiating

instruction. Many other excellent resources on differentiated instruction are available in English and French, such as Carol Ann Tomlinson's (2001) publication on differentiating instruction.

What if we decide that the student really should be moved to an English-only program?

If, after careful consideration of all relevant factors, parents, school administration and the student (if appropriate) conclude that the student should be moved to an English-only program, it is important to ensure a smooth transition. Alberta Education's resource entitled *Building on Success/Miser sur la réussite* is an excellent general reference to help manage transitions so that they may happen more smoothly. Generally, it is good practice to gather all the relevant documents and assessments and to outline the student's difficulties so that he or she may obtain the necessary supports within the English-only program.

Conclusion

Research shows that a wide variety of students can be successful in a French Immersion program. It is therefore important for teachers to be welcoming and open to student diversity in French Immersion. Teachers need to be willing to intervene and provide students with the supports they need to succeed in their French Immersion program.



Recommended Resources available online at <http://education.alberta.ca> or from the Learning Resources Centre, <http://www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca>:

COLI

Focusing on Success/Viser le succès

Individualized Program Planning/Plan d'intervention personnalisé

L'inclusion en Immersion

Making a Difference/Faire la différence (available in 2010)

Resources to Support Students with Diverse Learning Needs/Ressources pour appuyer les élèves ayant divers besoins spéciaux

Student-Centred Collaboration :

- *A Guide for Administrators*
- *A Guide for Teachers*
- *A Guide for Parents*

(Available Fall 2010)

Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools/ Renforcer le comportement positif dans les écoles albertaines

Unlocking Potential/Révéler le potentiel

References

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- Duval, S. (2008). French immersion: Do English skills "translate?" *Clar(!)ty*. Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, London, ON, 16-19.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Second edition. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
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