

French Second-Language Programs and Student Performance

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French Second Language (FSL) programs comprise a major part of the curriculum in school boards across the country. With the wide range of FSL programs available, Canadian Parents for French provides research findings to help members advise school boards about their communities' needs for FSL options in schools. This article and the accompanying chart will clarify the advantages and differences in program design as well as student performance among Canadian FSL programs.



French Second-Language Programs Offered in Canada

Early French Immersion (EFI)

EFI students are almost completely immersed, learning all subjects in French during their first few years of school. English is usually introduced between Grades 2 and 4. From Grades 4 to 8, French instruction is reduced to 60 to 80 per cent. In high school this percentage drops again, with two to four subjects taught in French, in addition to a French course. By Grades 11 and 12, students generally take only one or two courses in French.

Middle French Immersion (MFI)

MFI programs typically begin in Grade 4 or 5. Like early immersion programs, students are immersed in the French language at the beginning of the program and, over time, the amount of material taught in French is reduced. There are relatively few middle immersion programs offered in Canada with most participating school districts offering only early and late immersion options.

Late French Immersion (LFI)

LFI programs commonly begin in Grade 6 or 7. Instruction is almost exclusively in French at the beginning and, as in early and middle immersion programs, the proportion of French-language instruction is gradually reduced.

Early Partial Immersion (EPI)

EPI programs, also known as 50-50 or bilingual programs, begin in Kindergarten or Grade 1, with classroom time evenly divided between French and English instruction for the duration of the program.

Core French (also known as basic French or FSL) is taught as one subject within a school curriculum. Instruction in French language skills and culture is usually introduced between Kindergarten and Grade 4, with students spending between 20 and 40 minutes per day learning French language arts.¹

Extended/Expanded French programs provide core French students with additional exposure to French, by using it as the language of instruction for one or two subjects in addition to a French course. This option becomes available to students between Grades 4 to 8 and may continue throughout secondary school. Currently, extended French programs are offered only in a few provinces.

Intensive French programs are generally available in Grades 4, 5 or 6 to enhance the core French program. For one half of the school year, students take part in an intensive period of French instruction using immersion teaching methods. During this period, students spend approximately 70 per cent of the school day in French, learning skills that support the curriculum. The regular curriculum is "compacted" and students complete it in English in the second half of the school year.

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English Language Skills

Parents and educators may be concerned that studying in French will prevent students from developing good English language skills. Forty years of research, however, have shown that students can add a second language without compromising their first language proficiency. This is known as additive bilingualism because languages are interdependent and skills developed in the second language are available for learning and use in the first language and vice versa. English-language arts are introduced in school by the middle elementary years, while family and community also reinforce first language skills. Research has shown that “the effect of learning a second language on first-language skills has been positive in all studies done... [and] the loss of instructional time in English has never been shown to have negative effects on the achievement of the first language.” In fact, immersion students match and often surpass English program students’ performance by Grade 4 or 5 after first-language arts are introduced in the middle elementary years.²

French Language Proficiency

Immersion programs have generally produced better French proficiency results than traditional foreign language teaching methods. In Core/Basic French programs, the French language is the subject of instruction, while immersion programs use French both as the language of instruction and as a means of communication. This authentic communication allows students to learn a second language in a similar manner to the way that they have learned their first.

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By the end of elementary school, immersion students have native-like levels in listening, comprehension and reading in French, although they are still less proficient in speaking and writing. High school immersion graduates should be able to work in or pursue post-secondary studies in their second language. In fact, many attained an intermediate or higher level of second-language proficiency on Public Service Commission of Canada tests.³

Instructional Time and Intensity

Generally, EFI students achieve higher French proficiency than MFI students who, in turn, are more proficient than LFI students. It is important to note, however, that the FSL programs associated with the highest levels of proficiency offer extensive instructional time in French and, most importantly, provide intensive instruction in French at the beginning of the program. Research has shown that intense instruction in French is more effective than programs offering

the same or more instructional hours over the course of the program.

Intensive exposure to French at the outset of a program allows students to quickly reach the proficiency they need to study other subjects such as science or math in French.⁴ Late French Immersion, for example, is associated with greater French proficiency than partial immersion programs, though LFI may provide more hours of instruction over the course of the program. This is because 50/50 programs do not provide an initial period of intensity.

Equitable Access

While all French Immersion programs succeed in producing proficient graduates, not all immersion programs meet the needs of a wide range of student abilities. Middle Immersion enrollment reflects students’ performance in English in the early grades, and students with learning difficulties are less likely to enroll. Late French Immersion programs are demanding due to the complex subject matter to be learned in French. Not surprisingly, Late Immersion attracts students who are academically skilled or highly motivated to master the second language despite the academic challenges presented. The later the immersion entry point, the more students are excluded from the program. Early French Immersion is the least likely to be affected by academic ability.⁵

CPF strongly believes that Early Immersion presents the most advantages because it is associated with the highest French proficiency results and is the most inclusive program. ■

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3. Lazaruk, W. (2007) *Linguistic, Academic and Cognitive Benefits of French Immersion*, Canadian Modern Language Review 63(5), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON <http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/k02740110543/?p=fa115bfd80444ec4a5be9937589c3ff5&pi=28>

4. Netten, J., Germain, C. (2004) *Theoretical and Research Foundations of Intensive French*, Canadian Modern Language Review 60(3), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON <http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/t576871543w1/?p=fa115bfd80444ec4a5be9937589c3ff5&pi=43>

5. Netten, J. (2007) *Optimal Entry Point for French Immersion*, Revue de l’Université de Moncton, Numéro hors série, 2007, p. 5-22. <http://on.cpf.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/Optimal-Entry-Point-for-FI-Joan-Netten-University-of-Moncton-Revue-20071.pdf>