

## **French Immersion (adapted from a report prepared for the Ministry of Education / Manitoba)**

### **What is French Immersion?**

French Immersion is a second language program designed for children whose first language is not French and who have little or no knowledge of French prior to entering the program.

The goal of French Immersion is to give students the opportunity to achieve, by secondary school graduation, a level of bilingualism sufficient to function well in a French-speaking community, accept a job using French as the working language, or take university or college education in French. French Immersion is a highly successful approach to second language learning – an effective way for children to achieve linguistic competence in French and English, while achieving all of the educational and social outcomes of the English program.

Success in the program depends on many variables, including an aptitude for learning languages and the amount / intensity of time spent studying in French. Students whose French Immersion experience includes extracurricular activities will do best in French Immersion. These include listening to the radio and watching television, personal reading and writing, French camps and exchanges. Parental involvement and encouragement are tremendously important to the academic success of all children. French Immersion students are no exception.

Graduates from French Immersion receive essentially the same education as their peers in English language schools, with the added benefit of having a second language.

### **Brain Research on Learning French in Early Childhood**

Why learn French starting in Kindergarten or Grade 1? Why not leave learning a second language until later in the child's school years, when English has been thoroughly learned?

In recent years, considerable emphasis has been placed on brain research as it relates to learning in young children. Brain research has shown that there is a definite "window of opportunity" for learning languages. It is open at its widest at age seven and under. At this age and stage of brain or neural development children are most receptive to learning a new language. Research has also shown that children under age seven have a better chance of having accurate pronunciation than children who learn the language after the age of ten.

### **Language Development**

Children proceed from understanding no French to mimicking and repeating the teacher's words to using English sentences with French words thrown in. At this stage, French is interspersed with some English. By mid-grade 1, children are able to use French sentences. In effect, they are learning language by using language.

During the language learning process, the teacher plans learning situations to add more complex vocabulary. As the child's vocabulary increases, the teacher is also modeling proper usage. For instance, if the child says something incorrectly, the teacher will generally repeat it, using an appropriate expression or perhaps suggesting a different way of saying it. If the child's pronunciation is incorrect, the teacher will repeat with the correct pronunciation. Students are encouraged to use French as much as they can. They are given positive encouragement to try out their new language. When they take risks and make mistakes, the teacher uses repetition and modeling to teach appropriate usage.

There is very little translation in French Immersion. The teacher does not say "This is a cat in French, it is un chat." Rather, the teacher will read a story, showing pictures and talking about the animal in the pictures as "un chat" and the children naturally associate the animal with the word. They may not be able to tell you "In French you call a cat, un

Children in French Immersion classes reflect the linguistic and cultural mosaic of Canada. Children in French Immersion come from families whose heritage language may be Chinese, Japanese, German, and Ukrainian, one of the First Nations languages as well as English. Canadians recognize the excellence of the program for language learning, as well as the English language arts component, which makes it possible for their children to have skills in both official languages

### **From Kindergarten to Grade 12**

Kindergarten: The first steps in the language adventure. One important purpose of Kindergarten is to initiate the children to the sounds of the French language. The teacher speaks French so that the children begin to recognize sounds and words and start using them.

Children start paying close attention to the way the teachers speak and they search for clues to the meaning. French Immersion Kindergarten teachers use many strategies to convey meaning to their use of French: body language, gestures, expressive tone, visual supports, and repetition. The communicative approach is conducive to second language acquisition and learning. The children may not understand every word the teachers use, but they understand what is meant and what they are supposed to do.

Immersion Kindergarten has structured times, in that there are certain words and phrases that the children hear accompanied by certain actions. For example, the teachers start the day by greeting the class with “Bonjour”, smiling and nodding as if in greeting. Soon one of the children will respond: “Bonjour” making the connection between the word and the occasion. The teachers react by clapping their hands and saying “oui, oui, bonjour!”

The child’s classmates see the positive reaction exhibited by the teachers and will mimic “Bonjour”, too. After a day or two, every child knows that you say “Bonjour” when you meet someone. Repetition, encouragement and positive reinforcement are useful teaching strategies in the second language class.

School day routines allow children to associate words with specific times and daily events. For instance, “gouter” means you eat your snack; “gymnase” means you go play in the gym; “au revoir, mes amis” means you go home. In the safe and caring environment of the Kindergarten class, children anticipate or predict meaning and verify their hypotheses continuously throughout the day.

An integrated approach to teach the second language is used. Teachers choose themes from children’s interests, other subject matters, the community or the natural environment. They teach songs, games and poems. Sooner or later, depending on individual differences, children will begin to use the words that the teacher has introduced. Some hesitantly whisper a word or two; some take bigger risks and imitate phrases; others wait until they have enough confidence to say a whole sentence before they venture to use French. The teacher encourages them, modeling the correct pronunciation or combination of words.



**Intermediate:**

Students between Grade 4 and 7 are called inte



whatever other necessities the teacher has placed on the “Tool Kit” list for that grade level. Children also need time to complete their assigned task. Parents can help by negotiating with their child a specific homework period, so that there is quiet, stress-free time to do the work. That’s the opportunity part.

Parents can participate in homework in other ways. English reading and writing are part of the child’s homework that English-speaking parents can help with. Looking up words in a French dictionary, finding definitions and writing simple sentences are good opportunities for teamwork while doing homework in French. Parents can help with Math problems even if they do not understand French. The children can explain the task to the parent. The concepts are the same in English and French, whether it’s subtraction and addition or division and multiplication, scientific formulas, algebraic equations or chemical reactions, etc. An added bonus is that a lot of learning happens as children explain and teach to parents.

#### Get Involved in Learning:

Not all learning takes place in the classroom. Many of life’s lessons can be found in everyday activities involving parents and children. Cutting pizza can be an opportunity to talk about fractions, as well as sharing and cooperation. Shoveling snow can be an illustration of levers at work. Making cookies is an experiment with expanding gases, and so on. Very young children need to experiment with numbers. Suggested number