

Optimal Entry Point for French Immersion

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Article abstract

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OPTIMAL ENTRY POINT FOR FRENCH IMMERSION

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Abstract

This discussion will be divided into three sections. In the first, I wish to present for your consideration certain general principles of bilingual education which need to be taken into account in making decisions about entry into immersion programs. Secondly, we will examine the three major forms of immersion education, early, middle and late, to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each, and lastly, I will share with you my perceptions as to which point might be considered an optimal one for entry into French immersion.

Résumé

Ce texte se divise en trois sections. Tout d'abord, l'auteure présente les principes généraux de l'éducation bilingue à prendre en considération au moment de prendre des décisions au sujet de l'âge d'entrée aux programmes immersions. Ensuite, les trois grandes formes d'éducation bilingue, précoce, moyenne et tardive, seront examinées afin de déterminer les avantages et les inconvénients de chacune. En dernier lieu, l'auteure présente son point de vue sur ce qui peut être considéré comme le point d'entrée optimale en immersion française.

1. Principles of Bilingual Education

Bilingual education is a very complex term which refers to various forms of education in two languages, some of which have been much more successful than others. First of all, a distinction needs to be made between additive bilingual education, which uses and promotes literacy in two languages, and subtractive bilingual education, which generally promotes literacy in one language, usually that of the majority, for minority children. The term bilingual education has been used to apply to

both situations, and thus can have both positive and negative connotations. Bilingual education for the minority language child, associated primarily with immigrants in certain countries, for many years was considered detrimental to the social and emotional development of the child, as well as with illiteracy and lack of academic progress, as for example was the case for Hispanics in the southern United States. This situation created very negative attitudes towards bilingual education that have been difficult to dispel. More recently, with the development of an understanding of the difficulties facing the minority language child and the construction of more positive forms of bilingual education promoting literacy and academic success (additive bilingualism) for these children, perceptions are beginning to change. By contrast, bilingual education for the majority child has normally been a positive experience. Bilingual education of itself is not a negative experience; it is the way in which the experience is structured that is important.

In this discussion about French immersion, we are talking about a form of bilingual education (education to develop competence in both English and French) for the majority child (a child who has English as a mother tongue). If we are to ensure that this experience is a positive learning one for the child, there are certain principles which we need to consider.

First of all, we need to understand that learning a second language never begins at zero. We sometimes seem to forget this principle. As the child at the beginning of a second language learning experience knows little about the second language, we assume that the starting point for learning is zero. This is not the case. There is always a mother tongue present. Development of an adequate oral competence in the mother tongue is necessary in order to add on a second language successfully (creating additive bilingualism). While there are some exceptions such as children who live in bilingual households, usually oral competence in one language should be developed before starting to develop competence in a second language. Most children by age five in a majority milieu who have experienced a normal pattern of oral language development have developed an adequate oral competence to undertake a French immersion program.

Secondly, we need to understand the principle that, at the beginning stages of literacy development, just as with oral development, it is much more effective to concentrate on developing skills in one language first. Whether children learn to read in their first or their second language is not the important issue. The issue is that learning to read will be a much more successful experience if it is pursued in one language at a time. It may seem contrary to common sense, but research has shown that strong French literacy skills at the beginning of the immersion experience will result in strong English and French skills later on.

Thirdly, we need to understand that there is a relationship between first and second language development. The theory of the interdependence of languages, often referred to as the iceberg theory (Cummins, 1970, 1981), proposes that languages, although seemingly very different on the surface (phonology, intonation, aspects of vocabulary), are actually not different in the underlying intellectual processes involved in both learning and using a language. The uses to which we put language are the same, no matter what the language. Language is used to analyze, synthesize, generalize, make inferences, construct hypotheses, solve problems; examples of the intellectual use of language are many. The development of these cognitive processes is the same, no matter what the language.

This theory has several implications for immersion education. In particular, skills that are developed in the one language can be used in the other language, once a certain level of competence has been achieved in the language. This is why second language learning never begins at zero; many skills associated with creating discourse, for example, developed in the first language are used in the second language. In addition, skills that are developed in the second language can be transferred, as we say, and are used in the first language. For example, children who learn to read in their second language can transfer certain skills to reading in English, thus advancing considerably learning to read in the first language. Both cognitive skills and processes developed in one language can be transferred and used in the other language. However, the transfer of skills between languages does not take place until a reasonably high level of competence is attained in both languages.

Having examined these considerations, we may conclude by proposing that, if we are going to put a majority language child in an immersion

program, we should ensure that oral mother tongue competence is well developed and be prepared to provide a strong second language experience at the beginning of the program. In an immersion program, if we 'water down' the second language experience at the beginning, fearful that we will otherwise limit first language development, we risk limiting both first and second language development, as well as the learning of other academic subjects. Once the decision has been made to place a child in a bilingual education experience, we have to be sufficiently courageous to accept a large dose of the second language in the beginning stages to develop second language competence.

2. Comparison of Types of French Immersion Programs

All programs have some advantages and some disadvantages. Different aspects of a program may suit a particular child, given certain psychological characteristics, level of maturity, and academic development. More importantly, not all learning outcomes can be met equally by all programs. Therefore, we will examine the significant advantages and disadvantages of each of the programs in sequence.

2.1. Early French Immersion

The premise of immersion programs is that the students will develop their competence in a second language at the same time as achieving the content outcomes of a particular grade level. The major advantage of the early immersion program is the congruence between curriculum and desired learning outcomes. The primary grades concentrate on the development of literacy skills. Therefore, experiencing the primary grades through the medium of French gives a rich literacy development in the French language which will later be transferred to English. Another advantage of this program is the availability of learning resources. Approximately eighty percent of French immersion programs are early immersion programs; therefore, there is a relatively interesting market for publishers to produce adequate resources and ministries of Education have produced very detailed course outlines in many provinces which assist the teachers to achieve learning outcomes.

The major disadvantage of this program is the difficulty of identifying the nature of learning difficulties, should a child experience problems. It is

difficult to separate problems of learning a second language from those of learning literacy skills when the two processes are intertwined. Identifying the needs of the child is complex and few instruments are available for these purposes. Related to this problem, is the difficulty of obtaining appropriate remedial assistance when the needs have been identified. Personnel who can give remedial assistance in French are not readily available in most communities, and school districts do not always feel that the provision of these services is part of their responsibility. A further disadvantage at this level is related to the suitability of resources. When resources used are those that are produced for the French-first-language market, which is usually the case, these resources, while generally close to the social and emotional level of the students, are not geared to the linguistic competence of the students and require considerable adjustment on the part of the teacher.

Children at this age are generally well motivated and are interested in learning. Thus, as long as they have adequate support from the home, most children will experience success in this program. Oral production will be close to native-like in pronunciation and intonation; however, because of the nature of the learning experience both oral and written production will tend to be fluent, but not always entirely accurate.

2.2. Middle French Immersion

The major advantage of this program is that parents feel more secure because they feel that mother tongue literacy has been established for their child. They are now prepared to add on a second language. Another advantage of the program at this level is that students are still able to develop native-language phonology.

The disadvantages of the program at this level are related to the lack of congruence between the learning objectives of the program and the curriculum. Students are following a curriculum that has considerable subject matter content which must be learned in their second language, which is a weak language system. This is one of the major characteristics of subtractive bilingual education. Adaptations are made for this difficulty, either by spending several months at the beginning of the program developing second language skills or reducing the curriculum content. The question that must be addressed is 'How much content

matter lag is acceptable in order to learn a second language?' The answer to the question is difficult, as it is certainly not the premise of an immersion program that children in the program will learn less than their peers in other programs. However, a lag with respect to some learning outcomes is inevitable, due either to lack of time to spend on content learning, lack of sufficient second language skills to understand fully the content, or a combination of the two.

A further serious problem with this program is the lack of learning resources. There are only a very few (less than fifty) middle immersion classes still in existence in Canada. There is little market for publishers, and few curriculum documents prepared by any ministry of Education, which, if they existed, might be shared. Using resources prepared for French-first-language students creates enormous problems, as the documents at grade level are much above the linguistic competence of the students. Using resources prepared for younger children creates problems of interpretation and motivation. Teachers of middle immersion, also, have an incredibly demanding workload in finding, or preparing, adequate resources.

Consequently, this type of immersion program has a very restricted clientele. Only those students who have succeeded well in school to this point, and who are well supported at home, can really benefit from the program. They will tend to develop native-like pronunciation and intonation, and their oral production will also demonstrate fluency but will not be entirely accurate, again due to the nature of the learning experience.

2.3. *Late French Immersion*

The major advantage of this program is that the students are generally efficient language learners who can learn the morphology and syntax of the second language quickly. They also tend to be self-chosen, and are therefore motivated learners.

The major disadvantage of this program is again the lack of congruence between the learning outcomes of an immersion program and the curriculum. The second language skills of the students must be developed at the same time as learning the content of the curriculum. At the beginning of the program, time is spent learning the second language

and content is learned in a weaker language. However, after the first four or five months of the program, content learning becomes less difficult as language competence has increased rapidly. Resources, however, continue to be a problem. Resources for French-first-language students are linguistically too advanced, and teachers have to make many adaptations. A further problem at this age is the difficulty many students have in developing native-like pronunciation and intonation.

This program is suitable for children who have experienced success in school and who are motivated learners. Again, due to the nature of the learning situation, their second language skills may be stronger in written than in oral competence; they will also tend to demonstrate considerable fluency, but there will still be some errors in their production. At this level, it is difficult for teachers to maintain a balance between second language learning and content learning; oral skills and overall language accuracy may sometimes be neglected in favour of content learning. The same dilemma confronts teachers of early immersion students in the latter years of the program.

3. An optimal entry point

From my considerable experience with immersion programs, I would suggest that early French immersion appears to me to be the most practical entry point for the widest variety of learners to experience academic success, and develop both oral and written competence in French. Primarily, this decision is based on the congruence between the learning outcomes of immersion and the primary curriculum. The premise of immersion programs is that the child will develop competence in the second language while achieving the learning outcomes of the grade. This premise works at the primary level where the emphasis is on developing literacy skills, not on academic content learning. In early immersion, time is spent on developing literacy skills in French. These literacy skills will later be transferred to English. Once content learning is begun in earnest, students have already developed sufficient oral and written competence in French to be able to learn subject matter more easily than is generally the case in other forms of immersion education.

Early French immersion is also the program which is open to the widest variety of students. Because of the congruence of the curriculum

and learning outcomes, that is the development of literacy skills, children of a wide variety of academic abilities can profit from the program. Both middle and late immersion require much more ability on the part of the students to learn both language and content at the same time. While there are indications that enrolments in late immersion programs are increasing rapidly, it remains to be seen to what extent it will be possible to make this learning experience a successful one for students from a wide variety of backgrounds.

For the vast majority of children, early immersion has been an additive learning experience. However, as with any educational program, not all students will be equally successful, and it is difficult to predict which students might have some difficulties. If a child's oral language development follows the normal pattern, the child will most likely succeed in an immersion setting. The number of children who experience problems is very small. Children who have major learning challenges, behavioural problems or who do not have strong support from the home, can be at risk in an immersion program, but can succeed if adequate support is available. Immersion programs must always remain open to all who wish to enter, but also an optional form of second language education.

When discussing an optimal entry point for French immersion, it needs to be said that this decision includes parents, too. Parents must be happy with the entry point which they have chosen. If they have doubts about the entry of their child into French immersion, they should think carefully about their decision. Most children need to feel that they are encouraged and supported by their parents in order to succeed, and soon sense any hesitations on the part of their parents. Lack of confidence in the ability of the child to survive in an immersion program on the part of parents can be the source of lack of success of the child in an immersion program.

To conclude, it is not really possible to determine an optimal entry point for French immersion programs which will apply to all children and their parents. The optimal entry point is really when both parent and child are ready to try the immersion experience.

Postscript

It is important to remember that French immersion education in Canada is a major success story. Thousands of children have participated in the programs since its inception in St. Lambert, Québec, in 1965. The graduates of these programs have changed the face of Canada, increasing considerably the number of anglophone children who are able to participate fully in the social and intellectual life of the country. It is also a Canadian educational innovation that has been adopted in many other countries throughout the world.

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