

A LOOK AT DEEP-ROOTED FEARS REGARDING FRENCH IMMERSION

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Introduction

I began studying teaching of French as a second language two years ago at UQAM. Last Fall, I returned home to the Laurentians to work as a student teacher within an immersion class. During this wonderful experience, I heard about some parents' deep fears about French immersion. As legitimised as their reluctance was, I decided to write this article hoping to put the record straight on French immersion according to what I have been taught in university.

1. What is French immersion?

Immersion is a pedagogical program through which 50 percent of a classroom's curriculum is taught in another language to efficiently foster bilingualism.

For example, kids enrolled in French immersion don't only have French classes, but may have social studies or science classes in French. This method was enacted in the 1960s due to pressure from middle-class Anglophone parents from St-Lambert, on the south shore of Montreal, who were unsatisfied with the poor results obtained from core French teaching to their kids. From that small town, immersion has made its way far beyond Quebec's borders and on to schools worldwide.

2. Will French immersion disrupt my child's learning of other school curriculum?

Many studies have been conducted to determine whether children enrolled in an immersion program had lower scores than students in regular programs. Two of these studies, one conducted from 1965 to 1970 in St-Lambert, and the other one conducted in Liège, Belgium from 1997 to 2003 have concluded that scores from students in immersion are nearly equivalent, and in many cases, higher.

The interesting aspect of these research papers is that they come to nearly the same conclusions while being conducted nearly three decades apart, and on two different continents.

Canadian linguist Jim Cummins also elaborated an interesting hypothesis about languages' interdependence, according to which knowledge acquired in different languages can be transferred onto one another under certain conditions. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that French immersion will not alter your child's learning of other school curriculum even if classes are given in another language.

3. Will French immersion have negative impacts on my child's native language development?

According to many studies, and in particular to a research paper written by McGill professor Fred H. Genesee, students who were put in immersion at an early age experienced a certain linguistic delay compared to their counterparts. However, as soon as formal teaching of the native language occurred a few years later, this delay disappeared entirely, catching up to students from regular programs' reading proficiency (Genesee, 2012). Needless to say this is not surprising, as everything outside of the classroom happens in the child's first language (friends, family, community, etc.).

Therefore, French immersion will have only a temporary negative impact on your child's native language development.

4. Won't French immersion worsen my child's case if he is an academically weaker student?

According another time to professor Genesee in 2007, a student having a hard time with some aspects of his native language will experience the very same problems in the second language, proving that the immersion factor won't make things worse. In 1991, Genesee stated in another article that immersion can boost weaker students' self-esteem. Therefore, as concluded by this research, even though immersion students may not initially be making top marks, the long-term benefit is that they will be augmenting their studies by mastering a second language. As a result of all this, it can be assumed that immersion is suitable for every kind of student.

Conclusion

Finally, I hope that all the evidence above provides everything parents need to trustfully enroll their children in French immersion programs available in their school board.

French is the 6th most spoken language worldwide with around 220 million of speakers. Essential to life in Quebec, it can also open many doors professionally, and improve knowledge of your own language.

As 19th Century philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said: ‘Those who know nothing about foreign languages know nothing of their own’, an ideal surely understood by the over 300,000 students in immersion across Canada.

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