



Frequently Asked Questions about French Immersion

French immersion—what is it?

French immersion is a very effective approach to learning French as a second language. Students acquire French language skills by learning curriculum that is taught in French. French immersion allows students to become functionally fluent in French while achieving all the required learning outcomes of the curriculum offered in Nova Scotia public schools. Developing competency in French means being able to use the language to acquire, extend, and refine knowledge; and to use language and knowledge in meaningful ways.

Early French Immersion Program

Early French immersion begins in primary and continues to grade 12. At the elementary level, all instruction should be in French with the exception of English Language Arts (beginning in grade 3) and those courses taught by specialists who cannot speak French. The recommended subjects taught in French for grades 7, 8, and 9 are French language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and personal development and relationships. This constitutes approximately 70 percent of instruction in French. A variety of courses are offered along with the required French language arts courses in French immersion programs at the senior high level.

Late French Immersion Program

Late French immersion begins in grade 7 and continues to grade 12. The recommended subjects taught in French for grades 7, 8, and 9 are French language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and personal development and relationships. This constitutes approximately 70 percent of instruction in French. A variety of courses are offered along with the required French language arts courses in French immersion programs at the senior high level.

The French Immersion Certificate

To obtain the *French Immersion Certificate*, students in senior high school French immersion must

- successfully complete the French language arts course in grades 10, 11, and 12
- successfully complete, each year, a minimum of two courses where the language of instruction is French (excluding Core French)
- successfully complete during their high school career, a total of nine courses for which the language of instruction is French (This represents 50 percent of the minimum number of credits required for graduation.)

As a parent or guardian, do I need to know French?

French immersion is a French second language program designed for students whose first language is not French. It is not necessary for parents or guardians to know or speak French. The best way to help your child is to be positive and supportive:

- Continue to read with your child every day.
- Invite your child to read with you.
- Watch French television with your child.
- Take advantage of French cultural events.
- Provide French references such as visual and French/English dictionaries.
- If your child is willing to do so, encourage him or her to speak French at home *but do not make it a chore*.
- Ask your child to explain his or her work *but do not ask them to translate*.

What will happen to my child's English language skills?

Parents or guardians of students in French immersion programs have asked and continue to ask about the development of their children's English language skills.

According to the Canadian Education Association (1992), French immersion is the educational program that has been most researched and evaluated in Canada. French immersion programs began in St. Lambert, Québec, more than 35 years ago. Research over the years has found no negative impact on students' English language skills. In fact, most studies have shown that the learning of a second language enhances the development of first-language skills.

Researchers explain these findings by suggesting that students learning a second language have a greater awareness of language in general and are able to identify similarities and differences in both languages. They develop skills that they can transfer from one language to another. Many language concepts and skills learned and developed in French are the same as those used in English. For example, once a student has learned how to write a paragraph in French, he or she can easily transfer this knowledge to English. Students in immersion actually receive a "double helping" of language arts.

Many studies and standardized provincial evaluations have examined specific English literacy skills such as reading and writing. The results have shown that English language skills of students in immersion are not hindered in any way. In fact, research has shown that English language skills and competencies are usually enhanced.

In Nova Scotia, results obtained from provincial grade 6 English language arts assessments and from national English reading and writing assessments for 13- and 16-year-old students, reflect these findings. The results indicate that English language skills of Nova Scotia students enrolled in French immersion programs are not diminished, but, on the contrary, are usually enhanced.

Will immersion students know science?

Since the inception of the program, parents have questioned whether their children should take science courses in French. They wonder whether students in immersion will be able to keep up with their peers taking science courses in English and whether students will be able to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired in courses taken in French to English learning experiences.

Language and thought develop simultaneously as students engage in authentic learning experiences that allow them to continually construct meaning. The aim of science education is to help students acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to be scientifically literate. Learning experiences in science are designed to permit students to explore, discover, and comprehend their environment—hence to construct meaning. They must use language to describe, predict, explain, argue, infer, and conclude. Scientific vocabulary is very similar in French and in English. The curriculum of courses offered in French immersion programs parallels that offered in English programs.

Numerous studies have shown that immersion students are indeed able to keep up with students taught in English. Standardized tests have compared the achievement of immersion students in science with that of students in English programs. Results have consistently shown that immersion students achieve as well as their English-instructed peers.

Results obtained from the 1999 Student Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) Science Assessment, a national assessment for 13- and 16-year-olds, have shown that French immersion students in Nova Scotia achieve as well as students who are instructed in English. In fact, the Nova Scotia results indicated that students in French immersion achieved above the national average. This assessment also indicated that students can indeed transfer knowledge and skills learned in French to English contexts. Results from grade 12 provincial assessments in biology/biologie and chemistry/chimie also indicated that students in French immersion obtain results that are comparable to those of students who are taught in English.

How will immersion students perform in mathematics?

Many studies have also looked into the mathematics achievement of French immersion students. Results obtained from a number of standardized tests and provincial assessments indicated that immersion students do as well as their English-program counterparts. Results also showed that students transfer their knowledge from one language to another.

A national mathematics assessment was administered in 2001 to 16-year-old French immersion students in Nova Scotia. Results should be available in the spring of 2002.

Are there other benefits to learning a second language?

Immersion students not only learn a second language, they learn how to learn. Immersion students become good listeners. They learn to use not only words but gestures, body movements, intonation, expression, and context to understand what is going on in the classroom. They also acquire strategies that help them access written information and texts, and become effective communicators. Immersion students learn to control two language systems and thus sharpen their language awareness. Authentic and meaningful learning experiences allow them to develop the cognitive skills necessary to comprehend, interpret, analyse, and evaluate the world around them.

What about transferring from French immersion to the English program?

French immersion does not cause learning difficulties. *Any decision to change the placement of a student must be in the best interest of the student.* Switching from an immersion program to the English program can have a negative impact on the student's self-esteem. It is important to realize that a student leaving French immersion will not automatically overcome his or her learning difficulty.

The decision to remove a student from the immersion program should be a program planning team decision involving the student, the immersion teacher, the learning specialist(s), the principal, and the parent(s)/guardian(s). The decision to transfer a student from an immersion program must not be made lightly or hastily.

There is general agreement that students should stay in French immersion if they are achieving, and if adequate support services are available. French immersion offers many benefits to students with learning difficulties. Research has shown that the ability to speak French may significantly enhance a student's self-esteem. The pedagogical approaches used, such as contextualizing, respecting and linking prior knowledge, and valuing different ways of knowing and doing, are well suited to the needs of students with learning difficulties.

As in the English program, curriculum in immersion programs can be adapted to meet the varying needs of all students. Teaching practices must include a variety of strategies that correspond to the learning styles of all students. Depending on the nature of the concern, adaptations may need to be made to the program.

There are times, however, when a transfer *should be considered*:

- if leaving the program would give the student access to critical services
- if the child is not achieving and the program planning team is convinced that this situation will not exist in the English program

For further information about transferring from French immersion to the English program, parents should contact their child's school regarding the policies and guidelines of the school board. Parents can also consult the *Special Education Policy Manual, 1996*.