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ANSWERS
FOR PARENTS
ABOUT FRENCH
IMMERSION 

DO CHILDREN NEED ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC ABILITY TO SUCCEED IN IMMERSION?

Learners with lower academic ability do as well in immersion as they might in English programs, and they gain the additional benefit of learning another language. Researchers have found that diverse learners (those with lower academic ability or particular learning needs) in immersion perform at the same level as diverse learners in the English program on English language and academic achievement tests and actually outperform them on second-language tests (Genesee, 2009).



WHAT ARE THE EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS OF COMPLETING A FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM?

Bilinguals have access to a wider range of national and international jobs. Although demand for workers fluent in both official languages varies widely by region and industry, highlighting French and English language skills provide jobseekers with a greater competitive advantage particularly in areas such as admin/finance, human resources/recruiting, training/education, technical support/customer service and marketing. A 2010 study by economics professors at Guelph University found that bilinguals earned on average between 3.8% (males) and 6.6% (females) more than their unilingual counterparts. Thousands of industries and organizations operate in more than one language, such as travel, hospitality, import-export, as well as the public service sector. All of these areas require and value linguistic and intercultural skills afforded by having learned another language. Those who have fluency on both languages have access to more opportunities, face less competition for roles, and earn higher wages.

WHY SHOULD I CHOOSE FRENCH IMMERSION FOR MY CHILD?

Parents want to make the best educational choices for their children, and many would like them to have the advantages of bilingualism. The ability to use more than one language and understand other cultures is not the only benefit of an immersion education. Research shows that students gain additional cognitive, academic and employment benefits.

HOW DOES IMMERSION DIFFER FROM OTHER SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS?

Immersion programs use the target language for instruction and as a means of communication – learning language through content. The time and intensity of learning in this context means that learners acquire language much more effectively than when French is learned as one subject among many others. An immersive approach allows students to learn a second language in a similar manner to the way that they have learned their first.



HOW PROFICIENT WILL MY CHILD BE?

Learners in immersion programs generally attain a level of proficiency that exceeds that of a core program, thanks to the time and intensity involved. Recent testing in some Canadian school boards have shown that French immersion students in Grade 12 generally succeed at a B2 level on the international DELF assessment, which means they can interact effectively with native French speakers as well as understand and produce complex oral and written texts (e.g., Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2014). The intensive exposure to the target language allows students to quickly reach the level of proficiency required to learn all of their subjects in the new language. High school immersion graduates should be able to work in or pursue post-secondary studies in French.



WILL A FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON MY CHILD'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SKILLS?

Learners can add a second language at no cost to their first language competence because languages are interdependent: skills developed in the second language are used in the first language and vice versa. English language arts are introduced in the middle elementary years, and family and community also reinforce first language skills (Lazaruk, 2007). 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" (Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002). 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 (Turnbull, Hart, & Lapkin, 2000).



CAN MY CHILD REALLY LEARN MATH AND SCIENCE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE?

Reviews of research studies found that immersion students met or exceeded English program students' performance in mathematics and science, and province-wide assessments in three Canadian provinces* found that, at Grades 6, 8, and 10, respectively, immersion students did as well as or achieved at a significantly higher level than those in the regular program (Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000; Dube & MacFarlane, 1999; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2000; Turnbull, Hart, & Lapkin, 2000).

*Although other provinces and territories conduct province-wide assessments, they do not separate the results of immersion and English program students.



WILL FRENCH IMMERSION GRADUATES HAVE TROUBLE IN UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T TAKE HIGH SCHOOL SUBJECTS IN ENGLISH?

A survey of Canadian university students (Canadian Parents for French, 2005) found that the majority of immersion graduates surveyed reported no difficulty in adjusting to university courses offered in English. In fact, immersion graduates have more options than other students because in Canada they may choose to take some or all post-secondary courses in their second language. The majority of survey respondents reported no difficulty in making the transition from high school to university courses in French.



WHAT ARE THE COGNITIVE BENEFITS OF BEING BILINGUAL?

Bilinguals are better able to analyze their knowledge of language. They learn that there are at least two ways of saying the same thing and understand the relationship between words and their meaning. They are able to focus more on meaning and focus on relevant features when there is distractive information (heightened metalinguistic awareness). Bilinguals demonstrate more cognitive flexibility and perform better on tasks requiring mental manipulation. They are original in verbal expression, demonstrate non-verbal intelligence and can answer open-ended questions more freely than monolinguals (Lazaruk, 2007). As well, they demonstrate increased sensitivity to others and a heightened awareness, receptivity and appreciation of language. There is some evidence to suggest that bilinguals are better able to understand the needs of others and to respond appropriately. Through exposure to cultural differences, they may become more respectful of differences between people and their cultures and may be able to communicate with a large variety of people (Lazaruk, 2007).

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD IF I DON'T KNOW THE LANGUAGE?

Immersion teachers know that most parents don't understand the target language. You can help make your child's language-learning experience positive and lasting by being supportive and enthusiastic. Research shows that students whose parents have positive attitudes towards the target language do better in immersion programs. Remember that most skills learned in the first language are transferred to the second (or third). Read to your children in English, encourage English writing, and introduce English-language word games like crossword puzzles, word searches, Scrabble and Password. Provide opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom: borrow or buy books and videos, watch second-language TV with your child, and expose your child to second-language events and activities like plays, interest courses, and sport activities.



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