

CORE FRENCH IN CANADA

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Frequently Asked Questions

FAQs

What is core French?

In core French, the second language is taught in periods that vary in length from school to school. Provinces may recommend a basic core French structure, and school boards may also contribute to the shape of the program.

The aims of core French include:

- basic communication skills
- language knowledge
- an appreciation of French culture in Canada and beyond.

Core French typically begins in grade four or five. In New Brunswick and Quebec, it is introduced in grade one, and in kindergarten in the Northwest Territories. Other school boards may also choose to offer core French earlier than their provincial or territorial Ministries of Education recommended start.

The amount of French instruction in elementary schools often depends on teacher availability and qualifications. Most provinces and territories aim to provide about 600 hours of French instruction by the end of elementary or middle school. Core French is often an optional subject in high schools, and students may need at least some high school French to graduate.

Exciting innovations with more intensive forms of core French have produced positive results. You can learn more by referring to the studies by Lapkin, Hart & Harley (1998), and Netten & Germain (1999a, 1999b), in the reference list. Your school board or school may be interested!

As of the year 2000, 2 million elementary students and approximately 1 million secondary students are taking core French. This compares to about 317,000 students in French immersion. In fact, ninety percent of students learning French are in core programs.

Introduction

Canadian Parents for French supports all French second language (FSL) programs in Canadian schools, so that all students may have the opportunity to develop skills in both of Canada's official languages.

This report answers some of the questions parents ask most frequently about core French. Our answers are based on research conducted over the past 35 years. Selected CPF resources and references are listed, along with an order form, at the end of the report.

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FAQS

Frequently asked questions

1

How does core French differ from immersion?

There are two principal differences between core and immersion French programs: the kind of exposure to French, and the amount of it.

In immersion, instruction is mostly in French. Subject areas, like math, music, and science, are taught in French. The second language is the medium and not the object of instruction. Core French curriculum, on the other hand, con-

centrates on speaking, listening, reading, and writing in French. It teaches these language skills through themes designed to spark student interest. Immersion and core French teachers often use similar teaching techniques. The other difference between the programs is the duration and intensity of exposure to French. By the end of grade eight, the average early immersion student has had over 4000 hours of instruction in French. Late immersion

students accumulate between 1200 and 2000 hours in French. A typical immersion student also gains between 1000 and 1500 hours in French high school courses. In comparison, a student who studies core French from grade four to grade twelve is exposed to a maximum of about 1100 hours of French instruction.

2

Has core French changed since I went to school?

A five-year research project recently examined how to make core French more effective by adapting and improving on immersion research and classroom practice. The final report advocated an approach that includes much more than grammar instruction.

Since the study's publication in 1990, education authorities have allocated a great deal of time and money to implement the report's recommendations. Consequently, core French now aims to expose students to more spoken French; core French curricula now

require students to use their linguistic and cultural knowledge to communicate in real-life situations. Newly-created teaching materials support the new core curriculum, and most schools are now using these materials at all grade levels.

3

What should happen in a core French classroom?

Core French should be much more than grammar drills and translation exercises.

Learning activities should balance listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the beginning, the curriculum emphasizes listening and speaking. Later, the emphasis on reading and writing increases.

Students should actively participate in tasks and projects. Curriculum should be based on fields of experience or 'themes' that consider the learners' life experiences, intellectual development,

and interests. Research has shown that using theme-based tasks is effective for teaching a second language (Skehan & Foster, 1997; Turnbull, 1999a; Turnbull, 1999b).

Activities in core French should prepare students for real-life communication. This makes grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation relevant to real communicative needs. To this end, core French curriculum should integrate learning about Francophone culture, with an emphasis on French-speaking Canada, especially in the beginning.

Teachers should encourage students to think about ethnic diversity and stereotypes. Programs should also include student reflection on their learning, self- and peer-evaluation, and strategies to enrich learning and communication.

French should be the language of communication in the classroom, with teachers speaking and writing French as often as possible. Students should be encouraged to do the same, but difficulties may need to be accommodated in English.

4

What will my child be able to "do" in French?

You might ask yourself this when deciding on an FSL program, or you may wonder if your child is meeting the program's objectives.

Many studies show that most core French students meet the objectives set for them. Speaking skills have sometimes been reported below expectations. Research also shows core French students generally have positive attitudes toward the French language, French-speaking people, and learning French (see e.g., Calman & Daniel, 1998).

Current research does not describe what students are able to do in French, because program objectives were not designed to describe student performance when this research was done. Now most provinces and territories in Canada have articulated these expectations for core French. The example below,

from British Columbia (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1995, 1997), provides an indication of some of the expectations included at grades 6, 9 and 12. Contact your child's teacher, principal, or the school board to learn about what outcomes you can expect.

British Columbia: Selected core French outcomes

By the end of grade 6, students will be able to

- exchange personal information in brief messages
- make simple requests
- participate in classroom routines

By the end of grade 9, students will be able to

- share opinions and preferences orally and in writing

- understand the gist of texts they read, listen to, and view
- participate in a variety of real-life situations
- view, listen to, and read creative works and respond to them in a personal way

By the end of grade 12, students will be able to

- use a wide range of useful vocabulary
- seek out and create opportunities to practice French in and outside the class room
- identify cultural content in everyday texts
- show cultural sensitivity in everyday situations through appropriate behaviour and language

5

Why core French – why not another language?

Ideally, students would learn a variety of the languages alive in Canada's diverse communities. Sadly, language education is not valued as highly in Canada as it is in Europe, for example, where students commonly study three or four languages.

For many reasons, it makes most sense for French to be the second language taught in most Canadian schools:

- French is one of our official languages, spoken by over 6.7 million Canadians and more than 300 million people world-wide.
- Teacher-training programs are established for teachers of French, but for few other languages.

- There is an infrastructure for French: teacher organizations, parent support, and advocacy groups, for instance.
- Resources are readily available for core French programs.
- Federal funding enhances the program's potential.
- Many jobs in Canada require French-speaking skills.

(See the CPF publication,
The Value of French
for more information)

6

How can I help my core French child?

Consider these research findings: Students whose parents have positive attitudes to French tend to do better in core French (Stern, Swain, McLean, Friedman, Harley & Lapkin, 1976; Pack, 1979; Ullmann, Geva & McKay, 1985). They also develop a more positive attitude toward French and francophones (MacFarlane & Wesche, 1995).

This means you can play an active role in your child's success with core French. Even if you don't speak French – or aren't confident in your rusty skills – you can help. Try some of these ideas:

- Establish rapport with the core French teacher. Make an effort to talk with him or her at parent-teacher interviews.
- Ask your child what he or she enjoys about core French. Focus on the positive!
- Buy, rent, or borrow French books, magazines, videos, and software that interest your child. A book on dinosaurs or a teen magazine may help make French feel 'real' and fun! Check out the CPF web site for links to excellent online resources.
- Watch French TV with your child. Remind yourself and your child that it's not crucial to understand every word.
- Tune the radio to a local French station, and let it play in the background at breakfast or in the evening.
- Take a French course to refresh your old skills or to start from scratch – if your child can do it, you can too!
- Encourage participation in French extracurricular activities: school clubs, public speaking, summer camps.
- Talk to adolescents about the careers opened up by knowing French.
- Around grade 7 or 8, or when core French becomes optional, encourage your child to keep a positive attitude toward French class.
- Read to your child in English to help him or her develop a love of language.

7

What else should I know about core French?

Teacher shortage is a growing issue across Canada, and some school boards face a particular challenge in finding qualified FSL teachers. Parents can help by supporting the many excellent teachers currently in core French, and by advocating for more training and more teachers with the specialized skills needed in a core French classroom.

Reports have been made of disturbingly negative attitudes toward French held by some students, parents, administrators, and other officials who are not supportive of core French. Supportive parents can mount publicity campaigns, both in the school and beyond, about the benefits of studying French. They can also advocate placing core French in the centre of the curriculum along with such subjects as math and science.

Contact your local CPF Chapter or Branch to find out what's happening in your community.



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Membership in CPF is open to individuals and families who support French second-language learning. Join CPF today and add your voice to the thousands of Canadians who are already members of CPF.

Selected CPF resources

The following CPF publications may also be of interest to you:

PAMPHLETS

French Immersion In Canada: Frequently Asked Questions (1996)
Informative, easy-to-read pamphlet designed for parents making choices about FSL education. (Free.)

SPECIAL REPORTS

The State of French Second Language Education in Canada (2000)
Research-based report outlining the quality of support for FSL programs across the country. First in an annual series and covers both core French and immersion programs. (\$5/ea for members and \$25/ea for non-members.)

Immersion and the New Core French: A Dynamic Partnership (1993)
Explores the impact that French immersion programs have had on the delivery of core French programs and how core and immersion can work together. (Free)

Using Research to Champion FSL (2000)
A pamphlet outlining the most effective ways to use research in creating and promoting French as a second-language programs. (Free)

VIDEOS

Proud of Two Languages (1995)
Showcases graduates of a variety of French immersion programs who talk about their experiences. (\$6/ea for members; \$10 for non-members)

Please use the order form to request further information about these and other CPF resources.

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