

# LESSONS IN LEARNING

French-Immersion  
education in Canada

May 17, 2007

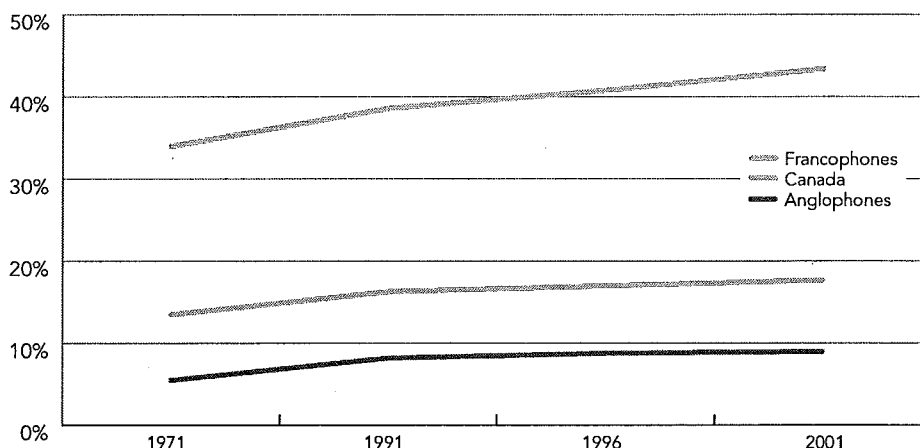
In 1969, Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism released its landmark final report which, among many other things, recommended making French an official language alongside English. Parliament passed the Official Languages Act not long after, yet nearly 40 years later fewer than 20% of Canadians can speak both of our official languages.

Evidence shows that French-immersion schooling is an important and effective means of second-language training across the country—and this issue of Lessons in Learning examines current approaches to immersion and identifies ways to strengthen French-immersion programs.

### Rates of French–English bilingualism in Canada

Rates of French–English bilingualism have steadily increased since the early 1970s and nearly half of all Canadian Francophones speak English. However, progress has been slower among Anglophones and fewer than 10% speak French (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
French–English bilingualism rates among Anglophones and Francophones



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 1971, 1991, 1996, 2001

### The importance of being bilingual

In Canada, French–English bilingualism carries a number of benefits:

- **Economic benefits:** Canadians who speak both official languages earn more, on average, than those who speak only English or only French.<sup>1</sup>
- **Cognitive benefits:** A number of studies have documented the cognitive advantages that speaking a second language confers. For example, many bilingual people have enhanced problem-solving skills because of their ability to attend to relevant information and disregard misleading information.<sup>2,3</sup>
- **Cultural benefits:** French–English bilingualism enhances Canadians' ability to participate fully in Canadian society.

Canadians recognize the individual and society-wide benefits of bilingualism. In a recent *Centre de recherche sur l'opinion publique* (CROP) poll, a strong majority of Canadians (81%) indicated that they support bilingualism in Canada and that they want Canada to remain a bilingual country. A majority of Canadians (57%) also indicated that rates of French–English bilingualism outside of Quebec are not high enough, and 62% of Quebecers indicated that these rates are not high enough in Quebec.<sup>4</sup> According to an Environics poll conducted in 2004, 86% of all Canadians indicate it is important for their children to learn a second language.<sup>5</sup> Among young Canadians (aged 12–30), 66% believe that all high-school graduates should have a working knowledge of both English and French, according to an Ipsos-Reid poll conducted for the Department of Canadian Heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Given the strong support for bilingualism in Canada, the question remains: why is it that so few Canadians—particularly Anglophones—have learned both official languages? CROP's polling data indicate that 76% of Canadians blame a lack of interest and half of Canadians blame a lack of opportunities to learn. Lack of interest is a tricky obstacle to overcome, but learning opportunities are relatively easier to create. Since the late 1970s, French-immersion education has been an important component of efforts to create such opportunities and to promote bilingualism in Canada.

## French-immersion education in Canada

When French is not a language used in the home, formal instruction in school is often the most convenient option for children to learn it. French immersion is one of several French as a second language (FSL) program options available in elementary and secondary schools across Canada (see text box). Canada saw the opening of its first French-immersion class in 1965, in St-Lambert, Quebec. Since then, French immersion has become available in all provinces and two territories.<sup>7</sup> Most programs were developed following parental dissatisfaction with the traditional core French programs and the desire to encourage bilingualism among their children.

### Some FSL program options in Canada

- **Core (or basic) French:** French is the object of instruction. It is taught as a subject for about 20 to 40 minutes each day. This is by far the most common FSL program in the country.
- **Extended French:** Type of core French program in which additional exposure to French is provided. For example, French will be the language of instruction for an additional subject such as social studies.
- **Intensive French:** Relatively new core French program where half of the school year is dedicated to intensive French instruction (up to 75% of the day spent on learning French), and the other half is spent on the regular (compacted) curriculum.
- **French immersion:** French is the language of instruction for a large portion of the subjects taught in class, as opposed to being the object of instruction.

There are several types of immersion programs that differ along two dimensions: (Table 1) age of first French instruction and (Table 2) intensity of French instruction.

Early immersion begins right at the start of schooling in kindergarten or grade 1, while delayed immersion does not begin until the middle years of elementary school, and late immersion after that. An important difference between early and delayed or late-immersion programs is that training in second-language literacy precedes training in first-language literacy in early immersion.

In total French immersion, all classes are taught in French, usually for the first three years of the program. English-language arts classes are introduced in the fourth grade, followed by a gradual increase in English instruction for other subjects. In partial French-immersion programs, a varying proportion of classes (usually 50%) are taught in French. This proportion typically remains stable throughout the program.

**Table 1:**  
Age of first French instruction

Immersion Type	Age of first French instruction
Early	5-6 years
Delayed or middle	9-10 years
Late	11-14 years

**Table 2:**  
Intensity of French instruction

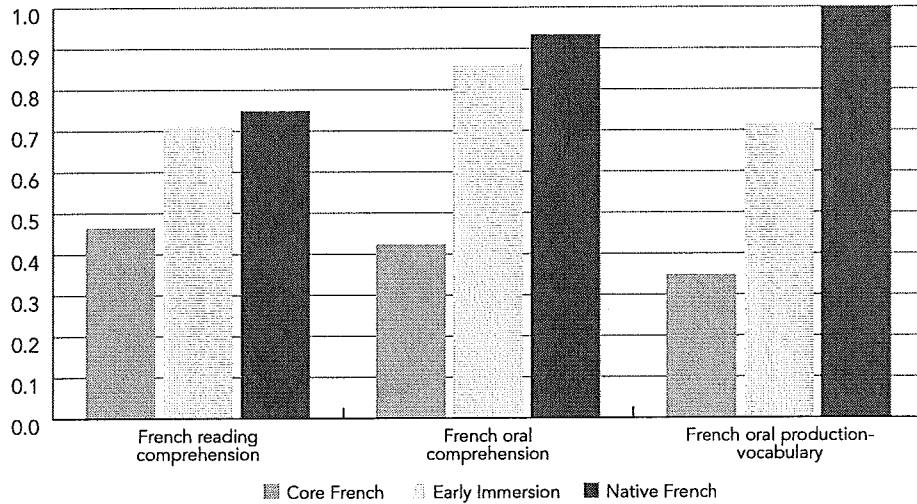
Immersion Type	First 3 years	Subsequent years
Total	100%	Decrease from 80% to 40%
Partial	50%	50%

## Does French immersion work?

### French skills

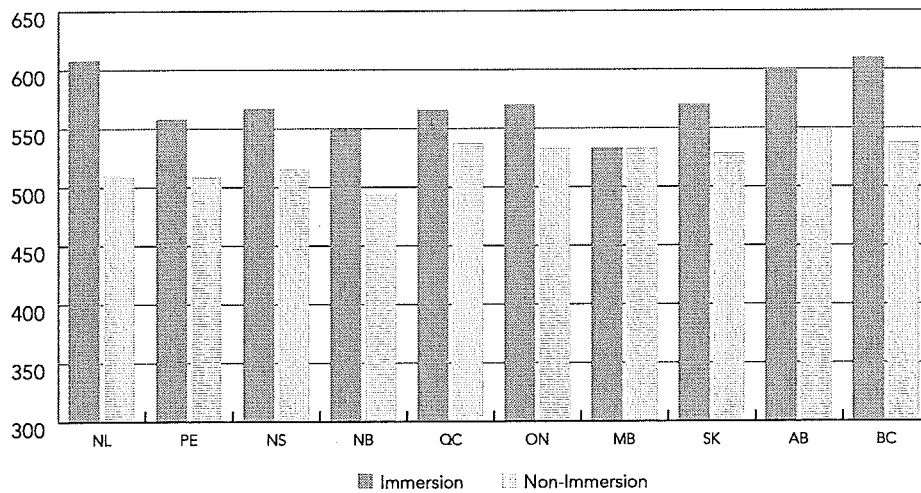
Research conducted in Canada during the past 40 years has shown that French-immersion students outperform English students in regular core French programs in all types of French-language tests.<sup>8,9</sup> Immersion students, especially those in early immersion, have been found to perform as well as native French students on tests of reading and listening comprehension.<sup>10,11</sup> However, French-immersion students do not typically show native-like proficiency in speaking and writing skills (see Figure 2), although their linguistic deficiencies are generally not a serious obstacle to their effective use of French for academic or interpersonal purposes.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2:**  
Scores on French-language tests for early-French immersion, core French, and native French fifth graders



Source: Adapted from Genesee, 1978

**Figure 3:**  
Reading achievement scores at age 15 by province



Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada (PISA), 2000

The level of French proficiency attained by immersion students depends on the age of first instruction and on the extent of French instruction. Total-immersion students tend to outperform partial-immersion students on all types of tests.<sup>13,14</sup> Early-immersion students show higher degrees of proficiency in reading, listening comprehension, oral production, grammar and writing than late-immersion students.<sup>15</sup>

Early-immersion students also tend to outperform delayed (or middle) immersion students on some French tests, though the differences in performance are sometimes small.<sup>16</sup>

### English-language skills

Since immersion programs focus on curricular instruction in French, a natural concern, especially with early total-French immersion, is that students' native language development may suffer. Typically, students in total early immersion receive no instruction in English until the third or fourth grade when English-language arts are introduced for the first time.

During the first years of their immersion programs, early total-immersion students tend to score lower than students in English school on English-language testing of literacy skills (such as reading comprehension, spelling and written vocabulary). However, most studies indicate that they show improvement in these skills after the first year of English-language arts instruction (introduced in grade 3 or 4).<sup>17,18,19</sup>

In a recent Ontario study, early-immersion students in grade 3 and grade 6 were found to perform as well as their English-school counterparts on English reading and writing skills.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a recent report based on data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggests that 15-year-old French-immersion students perform better on reading-assessment tests than non-immersion English students\*, even when tested in English.<sup>21</sup>

### Academic skills

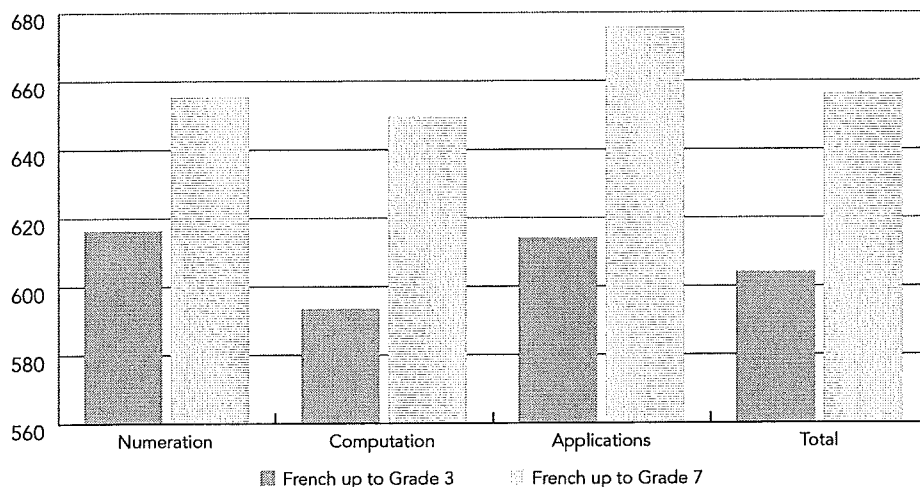
In French-immersion programs, the same academic content is taught as in the regular English program. Since the language of instruction in French-immersion programs is the students' second language, it is important to determine whether these students perform as well as students in non-immersion programs who are being taught in their first language. Generally, research indicates that French-immersion students perform as well, and in some cases better than English students on tests of science and mathematics.<sup>22</sup>

A recent study compared the mathematics achievement of students enrolled in different kinds of French-immersion programs in Vancouver. In the regular immersion program, mathematics classes were taught in French up to grade 3, after which they were taught in English. In the new immersion program, mathematics classes continued to be taught in French in grades 4 through 7. Results indicate that students who continued learning mathematics in French performed better on mathematics tests (administered in English) than those who were taught in English after grade 3 (see Figure 4).<sup>23</sup>

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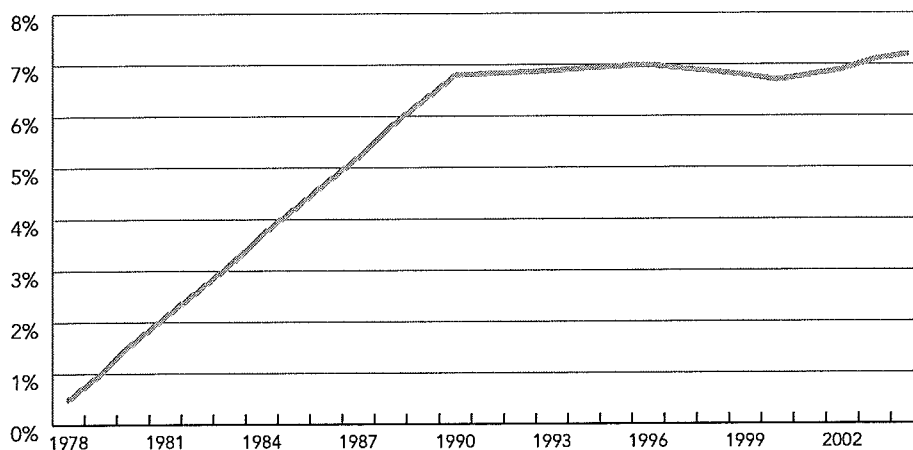
\* It is important to note that factors other than French-immersion education likely play a role in these differences. These factors include self-selection, parental-educational attainment, and greater availability of immersion programs in more affluent and urban communities where literacy tends to be higher.

**Figure 4:**  
French-immersion students' scores on mathematics tests  
by immersion type



Source: Adapted from Bournot-Trites and Reeder, 2001

**Figure 5:**  
French-immersion participation rates among eligible students



Source: Statistics Canada, Action Plan for Official Languages, CPF Provincial Enrolment Tables

## French-immersion participation rates

Overall, French immersion appears to be an effective approach to fostering French–English bilingualism among young Anglophone Canadians. Students graduate from immersion programs with strong French-language skills and show above-average achievement in English literacy and in math and science. In addition, further evidence suggests that immersion experience fosters a desire to continue developing French-language skills: while only 30% of students in core or extended French programs choose to take French at university, 51% of immersion students do so.<sup>24</sup>

French immersion is clearly a successful program, but current participation rates indicate that immersion education is not sufficiently widespread to increase substantially rates of French–English bilingualism among Canadians. After its initial introduction, French immersion saw rapid growth during the 1980s and then stagnated during the 1990s. For the past six or seven years, French immersion has seen a period of renewed growth (see Figure 5), but nationwide there are still fewer than 10% of eligible students enrolled in French-immersion programs. Enrolment rates in provinces like Quebec and New Brunswick (where, respectively, 37% and 26% of eligible students are enrolled in French immersion) suggest that there is considerable room for expansion in other provinces.

## Lessons in learning: Improving French immersion in Canada

Although French-immersion programs are currently seeing renewed growth, a number of issues must be addressed before substantial expansion is likely to occur.

### Adequate supply of qualified French-immersion teachers

There is a shortage of qualified French-immersion teachers in most provinces.<sup>25</sup> In areas where demand for French-immersion services is growing, this shortage means that many districts are unable to provide spaces for all children who wish to enrol in French-immersion programs. For example, in British Columbia some school districts have implemented lottery systems because parents were lining up overnight to get their children enrolled in immersion programs. The teacher shortage is particularly acute at the secondary level, where teachers are required to have content area expertise in addition to their French-language skills.

Long-term solutions to this issue will require expanded opportunities for post-secondary learning in French, as well as opportunities and incentives for teachers to develop their French-language skills during their teacher preparation. In the short term, innovative approaches will be required. For example, video conferencing is being introduced in Alberta so that teachers with specialized knowledge can deliver classes to other schools through remote connections.



### High attrition rates

Attrition rates in French-immersion programs are particularly high after grade 8. The lack of qualified teachers who are able to offer senior-level courses (as discussed above) is a contributing factor, as is the lack of appropriate learning materials. University-bound students may choose to abandon their language studies at this point and concentrate on other academic subjects, knowing that many post-secondary programs do not have second-language requirements and believing that higher grades can be achieved in an English program. Attrition rates tend to be lower in self-contained French-immersion schools, suggesting that entirely French environments work better for students than do dual-track schools where English is also spoken.<sup>26</sup>

Attrition rates are particularly high among students with learning disabilities. Extra support for these students is required, as special-education services are less often available within French-immersion programs. As well, vocational training and cooperative education are increasingly rare in French-immersion programs, but alternative programming of this variety could attract a broader spectrum of students to immersion education.

### Low participation rates among immigrant students

New immigrants make up over 6% of Canada's population<sup>27</sup> and in urban areas like Vancouver and Toronto, immigrants make up over 25% of the school-age population.<sup>28</sup> These children are currently less likely than non-immigrant children to participate in French-immersion education. On the surface, it may seem likely that learning English as a second language presents enough of a challenge to immigrant students whose first language is not English. However, the available evidence indicates that immigrant ESL students enrolled in French immersion perform as well as their Anglophone counterparts, and ESL students who come to French immersion having already developed literacy in their home language often perform even better than Anglophone students.<sup>29,30</sup>

### Learning-disabled students in French Immersion

There are conflicting opinions regarding the suitability of French-immersion education for children with learning disabilities. Some researchers have concluded that learning difficulties are language specific and that children experiencing difficulties in French immersion are likely to learn more effectively in a regular English program.<sup>33,34</sup> Other researchers have concluded that children with learning disabilities will experience those difficulties in any language. They argue that switching these children out of French immersion carries a number of negative consequences (e.g., loss of self-esteem, lost opportunity to learn French) while the intended benefits (i.e., improved learning outcomes) generally fail to materialize.<sup>35,36,37,38,39</sup> Overall the research suggests that some students with disabilities can succeed in French-immersion programs. Given adequate support and suitable special-education services, these students can develop competence in French, maintain their English language skills, and master academic skills as well.<sup>40,41,42</sup>

The French-immersion classroom can provide advantages that are often not available to immigrant students in English classrooms. All students in French-immersion classrooms are learning a second language and the frequent use of visual aids, gestures and rephrasing designed to help students learn French can also help ESL students make sense of their classroom experiences.<sup>31</sup> For many immigrant students, multilingualism is a normal part of life: students who carry this perspective have much to contribute to French-immersion classrooms.<sup>32</sup> French-English bilingualism is as important to new Canadians as it is to native-born Canadians; therefore, new Canadians need sufficient opportunities and support to participate in French-immersion programs.

#### Action Plan for Official Languages

The Government of Canada has implemented an Action Plan for Official Languages and developed bilateral agreements with each of the provinces and territories to promote Canada's linguistic duality. Through these efforts some, but not all of the French-immersion issues discussed above are being addressed. French immersion can make a significant contribution toward the Government's stated goal of doubling, between 2002 and 2012, the number of high-school graduates with a working knowledge of both English and French.<sup>43</sup> However, this will require a significant expansion of the French-immersion programs currently offered across the country.

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