

Cognitive Benefits of FSL Education

THE BENEFITS OF CHOOSING FRENCH-SECOND-LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILDREN

The ability to understand and speak French is only one benefit of French-second-language education. Research shows that students who are educated in a second language—particularly those in immersion programs—reap additional benefits from the experience. Their English language skills are strengthened and they show increased mental flexibility and creative thinking. In addition, they are able to benefit from increased communication and cultural and economic opportunities.

As parents, we want to make the best educational choices for our children and we are lucky enough to live in a country that is known around the world as the leading expert in French immersion and core French programs. This summary is intended to help answer questions about French-second-language education by providing information from the wealth of research studies that have been conducted since French immersion programs were introduced in the early 1970s. **References and suggestions for further reading can be found at www.cpf.ca.**

WHAT IS FRENCH-SECOND-LANGUAGE EDUCATION?

French as a second language (FSL) is learned in the classroom through a variety of program options. The popular options include early, middle, and late French immersion, extended French, intensive French, partial immersion and core/basic French.

HOW BILINGUAL WILL MY CHILD BE?

How bilingual your child will become depends on the type of French-second-language program, and particularly on its intensity. The intensity, or percentage of time spent in French at the beginning of a program, is more important to French-language development than the total accumulated hours of instruction over a student's career. Intensive exposure to French is important because it allows students quickly to reach the level of French-language ability that is required to study other subjects in French. This is called the *Threshold Level Theory*. In all types of FSL programs, students are stronger at listening and reading in their second language than speaking and writing. Early immersion programs have generally produced better French-language results than other programs. Levels of language proficiency attained in early immersion are higher than those attained in the core French program. Proficiency levels are also higher than those for the partial, middle, and late immersion programs. Generally speaking, early immersion students perform better on tests of French listening comprehension, reading comprehension, general French achievement, and overall French proficiency. Parents can expect their early immersion child to approach native-like levels in French listening comprehension and reading skills by the end of elementary school. They are, however, still distinguishable from native French speakers in speaking and writing skills. Many students in French immersion attained an intermediate or higher level of language proficiency in French, based on Public Service Commission of Canada tests.

HOW WILL FSL EDUCATION AFFECT MY CHILD'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SKILLS?

No negative effects on English-language skills

English skill levels are not compromised by French immersion instruction, and researchers report that "the effect of learning a second language on first language skills has been virtually positive in all studies." Students can add French to their repertoire at no cost to their English-language competence. This is known as *additive bilingualism* and it is possible for two reasons:

- (1) English is reinforced and promoted in the family and community; and
- (2) Language skills are interdependent and can be transferred from one language to another. In other words, language skills developed in French are available for learning and using in English and, similarly, language skills learned through English are available for learning and using in French.

Enhanced English-language skills in French immersion programs

Bilingual students 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. Furthermore, they are able to focus more on meaning and take into account only relevant features when there is excess or distractive information. Researchers call this *heightened metalinguistic awareness*.

Immersion (early, middle and late) produces students who demonstrate high proficiency levels in English, although early immersion students who receive their first few years of instruction entirely in French may experience a temporary lag in English reading, spelling, and punctuation skills. Once formal English-language instruction is introduced around Grade 3 or 4, early immersion students quickly catch up with their English-program peers and, in many cases, achieve higher results in reading, writing, and speaking skills.

WHAT ARE THE ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE?**Adopting new perspectives**

The *Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism* suggests that bilingual individuals understand each language directly. Much like the idea of “thinking in French,” they organize their mental representations according to the meaning of each language and have the ability to adopt two perspectives. This theory suggests that there is one common conceptual system in the brain that manages language learning. When learning a second language, this system permits bilingual students to understand each language and its subsystem separately, allowing them to recognize existing concepts and form new ones in their thought process.

Mental flexibility

Studies show that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals on tasks that require mental manipulation and reorganization of visual patterns. Bilinguals are original in verbal expression, demonstrate non-verbal intelligence, and are able to provide a variety of answers to a question. Also, they more freely answer open-ended questions than their monolingual peers. This flexibility is also a function of *heightened metalinguistic awareness*.

Increased sensitivity to others; heightened awareness, receptivity, and language appreciation

Students with two well-developed languages have an increased sensitivity to communication. They are better able to take the role of others who are experiencing difficulties, to perceive their needs, and to respond appropriately to these needs. They are able to monitor the appropriateness of language use and correct their errors faster than monolinguals. In addition to communicative sensitivity, bilinguals develop cultural sensitivities as well. Through curriculum content and exposure to cultural differences, the second language opens the mind to respecting differences between people and their culture and allows them to communicate with a large variety of people.

Employment

Employment is another significant advantage to learning a second language. Bilinguals have access to a wider range of national and international jobs. Thousands of Canadian businesses operate in both French and English. The airlines, import-export companies, and other international businesses require employees with French language skills. About 40% of all positions in the Public Service of Canada about 67,000 jobs—are bilingual. In addition, the Federal Student Work Experience Program recruits students for federal departments and agencies to fill approximately 7,000 temporary student jobs each year.

CONCLUSION

As parents, we want to prepare our children to take their place in today’s national and international communities. Parents can help by creating a language-friendly environment in which youth can pursue French-second-language education and reap the cognitive, cultural, and economic opportunities that bilingualism brings. Enrol your child in Canada’s world renowned FSL programs and contact Canadian Parents for French for support as they learn French. References and suggestions for further reading can be found at www.cpf.ca.