

FRENCH IMMERSION

Early vs. Late - Which is the Best Fit for Your Family?

by Taslim Jaffer

Standing in the playground of my elementary school in Victoria, I focused on the task at hand. While my classmates challenged themselves on the monkey bars and climbing the slide backwards, I had my own skills to master. The sounds of the other children calling to each other faded as my concentration grew.

Moving my tongue tip to the ridge behind my front teeth, I pronounced the sound /t/.

“T. T. Tongue.”

Satisfied, after several rounds, with my work on the /t/ sound, I transitioned my tongue from the ridge to between my teeth and blew air through the tiny openings in my mouth.

“Th. Th. Thumb.”

Tongue and thumb were the bane of my existence as a 6 year old in the early second-language learning stage. Not only did they sound the same to my non-native ear, I was constantly mixing up the initial sounds of each word, generating nonsensical terms that now hold a little nostalgia for me.

I do believe that, perched on the perimeter of the playground in my self-imposed speech lesson, a seed for loving languages was planted that continues to be a source of joy for me today.

Growing up with pentalingual parents also set the stage for me to be a lifelong language learner; my world has never been solely coded in English and I developed the notion that a language is a golden ticket to another dimension.

I saw how easily my parents could navigate various social situations, and enjoy many more experiences than I with my two languages. When I started learning French toward the end of elementary school on the Mainland, I latched on to the new experience with excitement – armed with Canadian singer-songwriter Charlotte Diamond’s cassette tapes. I’m sure I wasn’t the only Canadian kid to know Je Suis Une Pizza by heart!



I assumed that when I became a mom, I would raise bilingual kids who would then go on to learn French in school, and possibly other languages throughout their lives. But my first language, Kutchi, is no longer my primary language, and speaking it to my kids in their formative years was slow and unnatural.

Over the last year, I have taken a broader view of language learning. I may not be able to ensure that my kids are fluent in the language of their ancestors, but I can open their hearts to the idea that they are capable of learning languages that are available to them.

In a relaxed way, I will spout a Kutchi expression or a KiSwahili word, a French question or a Spanish greeting. Now, even if they don’t know what I’m saying, they can tell me which language it is just based on the sounds. And I’m happy to have them attempt anything in

any language! In my home, you may hear me ask my 5 year old a yes/no question in Kutchi and then hear her respond, “Oui!” in French, and we just go with it!

It is possible to learn languages at any age, but I believe two factors make it easier to pick them up: 1. When we have the opportunity to play with different sounds in our mouths at a young age, and 2. When we’re in an immersive environment. My desire to lay the foundation for lifelong language learners had me examining the options within the French immersion system in the Surrey School District, where we live.

For those of us who wish for our kids to pursue bilingualism in English and French, there are two options here in BC: an Early Immersion program (from K-12) and a Late Immersion program (from Grade 6-12).

Here's how to differentiate between Early and Late French Immersion, to help decide which may be the best fit for your family:

Early French Immersion

The better-known tract is Early Immersion where students enter the program in Kindergarten. Schooling begins completely immersed in French, with teachers using hand gestures and visual support paired with verbal output. Students learn the language as most children do their mother tongues, while immersed in play and song, and familiar routines. All subjects are taught in French for the first few years, and then in Grade 4 an English Language Arts class is introduced. Because they learn so young, their accent is typically close to a native speaker in most cases.

A common hesitation for some parents considering Early Immersion is the question of whether or not their child will pick up the French language, and further, will they be behind in English literacy and math.

Surrey teacher, Colette Chalifour, who has taught Kindergarten through Grade 6 and is currently teaching Grade 3, says, "Parents have to trust the teachers in the Early Immersion program to be honest with them. In Early Immersion we do have children who have designated difficulties in learning and they remain in the program. We have others that, the parents have decided to remove them from the French Immersion program. Each child and each situation requires its own conversation."

Late French Immersion

The students who enter Late Immersion in Grade 6 have been a part of the conversation that gets them in the classroom. This results in a class full of students who know why they are there: to learn a new language.

Many have convinced their parents to sign them up, and some have been strongly encouraged to give it a try by their parents. But what they have in common is that they likely changed schools to be there. It's a tricky age to change schools, and this may be a deterrent for students and parents, but it's also a valuable life lesson in resilience and change.


Surrey teacher, Simon Nadeau, who is a native French speaker from Quebec and who has taught both tracts says, for a teacher, the fact that the students are part of the decision to be there makes a huge difference. "The kids here in Grade 6, they all want to be here. It makes for a very nice group of kids. The dynamic in Late Immersion is fantastic because they all decide to be here, they all want to learn."

"If you ask the teachers at Earl Marriott [a French Immersion high school in Surrey], of course they will tell you yes, we can tell these kids are from Late Immersion and these kids are not. But apparently, in the writing, the Late Immersion kids are stronger because we cover it so much. We do work a lot on writing, we talk about the grammar and we work hard during Grade 6. And they do in Grade 7, and by the end of Grade 7 they are almost at the same point [as an Early Immersion student]," Simon affirms.

For both tracts, high school looks the same. In Grade 8, 50% of the coursework is done in French and this number decreases until Grade 12 when 25% of the coursework is done in French. Upon graduation, French Immersion students receive a *diplôme de fin d'études secondaire en Colombie-Britannique*, as well as a British Columbia Certificate of Graduation.

My oldest daughter has just completed her first semester as a Late Immersion student, and we are considering the same route for our other two children. This will give them a fair crack at fluency in another language; both Early and Late Immersion programs offer that for BC students. ♥





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