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BILINGUAL IDENTITY IN FRENCH IMMERSION

BY MONICA TANG



Hi! I'm Monica and I have been a French Immersion teacher for 20 years in Coquitlam and a parent of a French Immersion student. I currently work at SFU as a Teacher Educator and give professional development to French Immersion teachers on how our students can grow to see themselves as legitimate French speakers (regardless of the mistakes they may make). This series of articles was written to help parents like you understand how to support the development of a positive language identity, as early as kindergarten!

If you have questions or would like to make suggestions of questions that you would like me to address, feel free to write to me at monica_tang@sfu.ca.

Q: WE SPEAK MANDARIN, FARSI, PUNJABI AT HOME. HOW WILL THIS AFFECT MY CHILD LEARNING FRENCH?

A: We used to believe that learning too many languages at the same time was detrimental to their progress, but we now understand that while there may be moments where the languages are confused, children are ultimately able to learn several languages at once very effectively. In fact, the greatest “jump” is between a child’s dominant language (L1) and their second language (L2). Once kids have more than 2 languages, they are conceptually more able to “imagine” how a 3rd language might have separate rules and words, thus making it easier to learn more languages.

Another point to make around linguistic identity is that some parents feel that the language spoken at home is something precious that you share as a

family and that may be lost if you don’t work to preserve it. This is so true and home languages should be preserved! However, the French that your kid is acquiring at school will not jeopardize that special language and cultural bond with your home language, even if their mastery of the home language will never be as strong as if they learned it in your home country. This does not mean that they cannot have a positive connection with the home language and culture, as long as their experiences with that language are also positive ones (ie. Fun and encouraging, rather than punitive or forced). Their French linguistic identity will simply be integrated into a PLURAL linguistic identity, one which incorporates several languages. How you respond (ie. With curiosity and openness) to their French linguistic identity will have an impact on how actively they pursue it.

Q: WE DON'T SPEAK FRENCH AT HOME. DO WE NEED TO LEARN FRENCH IN ORDER TO HELP OUR KID DO WELL AT SCHOOL?

A: Sometimes, as parents, we feel that our job is to ensure our kids have the correct answers in their homework. However, a more important role is to help them develop coping strategies when they don’t feel confident, or don’t know how to plan their time (as they get older and may have quizzes to study for), or simply but very importantly, sit with them when they are disappointed or struggling through social situations and validate their struggle. Or even better, share with them the struggles that you may also have in your own day. For this, we do not need to know the answers. It almost helps to NOT have the answers, so that you can ask questions together and formulate a plan to find some answers, or even reverse positions by asking your kid to teach you

something! They so rarely get to teach us parents new tricks! And they love it!

That said, learning French alongside your child is a great way to form a bond, as long as you are not doing it so that you can correct them or so that you can know more than them! Learning alongside your child can help us understand what they are going through. Learning a language requires that we take risks and stretches our brain. Adults can sometimes forget what that feels like. CPF (Canadian Parents for French) offers programs to support parents' French.

Q: I DO SPEAK (SOME) FRENCH. SHOULD I CORRECT MY KID WHEN THEY MAKE MISTAKES?

A: Great question! My personal opinion on this is that I would prefer to take on the role of cheerleader than error-corrector. The accuracy and precision of their French will improve the longer they stick with it. However, if they feel that they are often corrected, rather than celebrated, they may prefer NOT to use their French and may want to quit when they get the opportunity to do so. As hard as it is to let an error go, (unless they actually ask you point blank) the long game might be a more rewarding one (both for their linguistic identity and your relationship with your child)!

Q: MY KID REFUSES TO SPEAK FRENCH TO US AND TO SHOW US WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED. WE THEREFORE HAVE NO IDEA WHETHER THEY'RE LEARNING ANYTHING!

A: It can be frustrating, and it may feel like their unwillingness to speak French in front of you is an indication that they are incapable of speaking French at all. However, here's another way of seeing it. If you were taking beginner ballroom dancing classes, would you jump at the opportunity to show it off to anyone that asks you to perform on command? Few people would! Their competence



and confidence are growing and freely demonstrating their skills will come when they are comfortable. Insisting too much might have the adverse effect of making them not enjoy it or feel anxious about having to prove themselves (especially if their parents know some French). I find that when I ask my child to speak French to me, he refuses. However, when I sing one of the French songs he's learned in class, he willingly joins in. It's all a matter of perception!

Q: IF WE CAN'T READ FRENCH, IS IT A BAD IDEA TO READ IN ENGLISH WITH THEM AT HOME? WILL IT CONFUSE THEM AS THEY LEARN TO READ IN FRENCH?

A: (This may be more useful in grades 1-2 than in kindergarten...) Individual teachers may differ on this, but the act of reading in English and the act of reading in French have more in common than they do differences. At a young age (preschool), kids are learning that reading means holding a book (or newspaper, or iPad) a certain way, looking at letters on the page from left to right, turning the pages when you're at the end of the page, etc. The differences are around what letters (and letter combinations) make what sounds (Grade K/1). Even there, there are actually a lot of commonalities between English and French. If your kid is reading to you in English and mispronounce some sounds, you may ask them if that's

the sound in French that they learned. I have noticed that my own kid prefers to read in English but sometimes does so with the French sounds he's learned. But given a French book, he is more reluctant to read it. This is because the English books have more familiar words that he can understand. So, although there are some mispronounced words, he's practicing the enjoyment of understanding a story. We can fix the mispronounced words as we go... That said, if the Grade 1-2 teacher feels strongly otherwise, I would follow their lead.

Another perspective on this is that reading in ANY language is beneficial because the bigger picture goal is to foster a love of reading.

Q: MY KID SEEMS TO HAVE A NEGATIVE ATTITUDE ABOUT FRENCH. SHOULD WE TAKE THEM OUT OF THE PROGRAM?

A: This is a rather complicated question that should definitely become a conversation with the teacher(s). Here's my view on this, following 20 years of experience as a teacher seeing kids leaving the program at the first sign of trouble. Learning a language is a long-term goal and it works best when the whole family visibly values bilingualism or plurilingualism as a concept. We can certainly benefit hugely from learning new languages without necessarily mastering them or being

“naturally gifted” in learning languages. I have also seen so many students really enjoy themselves in a second language, even when they aren’t the best student. There are also so many benefits in experiencing the struggle of learning something. Learning a language will increase their tolerance level of not understanding everything, which is useful in many areas. It will also put them in a position of regularly having to take risks when they try to say something they are not confident with. Culturally, learning a language also makes them more open to consider that there is more than one way to see the world, more than one way to express themselves about the world.

Also, although there is the academic side of things, families can also do a lot to promote curiosity and a sense of belonging to a French-speaking environment by participating in activities organized by CPF (Canadian Parents for French), for example, or by seeking out French cultural activities designed for families (ex.: Festival d’été de Vancouver – a summer musical festival with kids’ programming or Festival du Bois – a Maillardville festival held in March to celebrate the Francophone history and culture in the Tri-Cities or even the BCFFC – a French family camp held in 3 locations around BC where kids have a camping experience with French-



Even in the case of students with some learning difficulties, pulling a student out of Immersion may not necessarily help them do better in school, as they may face the same difficulty in English. It is a decision that must be weighed against the loss of their friend groups, and the challenge of adapting to a new environment.

That said, staying in French Immersion just for the sake of it, when there may be tears and ongoing frustration is not better for the child. Ultimately, it is a family’s decision as we know our child best.

speaking counsellors while parents enjoy socializing with other Immersion parents and doing fun bilingual activities. Sign up is in February. I HIGHLY recommend this camp! My family LOVES it!). By participating with them in these fun activities, the message they hear is that there is enjoyment in being immersed in a new language, regardless of whether you master it or not. They don’t need to be perfect at it to enjoy it. My partner who only speaks English was originally nervous about going to French camp (BCFFC), but he can now see the benefits of investing in this sense of community and no longer feels intimidated by having French-speakers around him.

Q: AT WHAT POINT WILL MY CHILD BE BILINGUAL (FRENCH/ENGLISH)?

A: This is another question I get a lot, even by some teachers. However, I find this question does more harm than it helps. By asking the question, we are defining bilingualism as a difficult (and arbitrary) standard to reach in their language competence and as such, it is often viewed through a deficit perspective, which means that we only notice how their French (their L2 or L+) is inferior to their English or dominant language (L1), usually English. And given that BC is a minority setting for French, it makes sense that their English will always be stronger than their French. In fact, researchers do not all agree on what it means to be bilingual. I like to use the definition of Grosjean (1982) which states that **being bilingual is a matter of functioning in a bilingual environment**, which all of our kids do, for the most part, even in kindergarten.

In my PhD research and work with French Immersion teachers, I have learned that being bilingual is also more than how much of the language one masters. To me, a big part of being bilingual is the attitudes and dispositions they have developed around learning a language. To me, being bilingual includes things like: being curious, taking risks and jumping into a situation without knowing if they’ll have all the necessary words, being ok receiving feedback, being willing to improve, tolerating the discomfort of not understanding everything, enjoying the process of deciphering a puzzle, finding joy in interacting with people who speak a different language. These dispositions will help a child want to stay in this learning environment, and ultimately, improve in French.

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BILINGUAL (L+) IDENTITY
OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS



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