



# Prologue

FOR FRENCH IMMERSION AND EXTENDED FRENCH EDUCATORS

A PUBLICATION FOR PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

## Acquisition of Oral Language as a Foundation for Literacy

The focus of this publication is on preparing a language-rich, accepting classroom environment in entry-level grades that supports students' acquisition of the French language, as well as their confidence in using French across the curriculum. Throughout, there are opportunities for teachers to reflect individually or in professional learning communities on practices that create positive classroom environments to support the acquisition of French language and literacy development.

In this publication, you will read about: strategies for encouraging students to take risks and develop confidence in speaking French; the importance of teacher modelling of French for students; the provision of a variety of literacy experiences; and the developmental process of students' French language learning.

*Prologue* is a professional learning publication for educators working in entry level French Immersion and Extended French programs. It includes an element of research, questions for reflection, translations of key educational terms and teacher voice, which are intended to inspire professional conversations. *Prologue* is available electronically in English and French on Curriculum Services Canada's website (<http://curriculum.org/content/home>).



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## The Goals of French Immersion and Extended French Programs

French Immersion and Extended French were established in the 1970s in Ontario to provide a unique opportunity for students in English-language school boards to acquire a high level of proficiency in the French language. The success of the programs is demonstrated not only by the increase in demand, but also by the benefits that they provide for students such as enhanced reasoning and problem solving skills.

**REFLECTION** What background knowledge and skills do my students have to help them learn French?

The principal aim of French Immersion and Extended French programs, as outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum French as a Second Language: Extended French, Grades 4-8, French Immersion, Grades 1-8 (2001)*, is to “provide students with the skills they need to communicate in a second language, and thereby to enhance their ability to perform effectively and meet with success in a rapidly changing global economy. The programs also aim to provide students with an understanding of the cultures of French-speaking societies by integrating cultural study into daily language instruction.”

In order to provide students with a strong foundation in the language they are acquiring, initially they are often taught entirely in French. Delivery models include French instruction either for the whole school day or designated blocks of the timetable. Through this type of programming, students learn the subject matter (e.g., science, social sciences), and French at the same time.

Entry points into French Immersion and Extended French programs vary: an early entry at Kindergarten or Grade 1; a middle entry at Grade 4 or 5; and a late entry at Grade 6 or 7. The variety of entry points gives school boards the flexibility to respond to local needs. Depending on the entry point, there are differences in student profiles and the prior knowledge each student brings in terms of literacy development that a teacher must take into consideration.

“When I began teaching junior Extended French, one of my colleagues taught immersion. When I saw that she conducted the class in French at all times, I had to rethink how I expected the class to run. It meant that I needed to use different strategies as the students develop oral skills much faster. I am so glad I had such a strong mentor in the early days.”

Grade 5 teacher

## All in French

Regardless of the entry point, French Immersion and Extended French students are offered the same curriculum as students in English programs, except that some subject curricula, excluding Language Arts, are taught all in French. Teachers implement the expectations identified in the Ministry of Education curriculum policy document for each subject, along with *The Ontario Curriculum French as a Second Language: Extended French, Grades 4-8, French Immersion, Grades 1-8 (2001)*, which was created specifically for French language development.

As students develop literacy skills in French, there is a transfer of skills between English and French which is mutually beneficial to both languages. They use French to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired in subjects such as mathematics, social studies, science and technology, and the arts. Students also self-assess and develop skills of **learner autonomy** and **metacognition** in order to reflect on and articulate their learning — *all in French*.

Teachers provide explicit instruction in second language and literacy strategies, and use best practices in assessment and evaluation. They develop **rich performance tasks**, co-construct **learning goals** and **success criteria** with students, provide **descriptive feedback**, and guide students to ‘make their thinking visible’ — *all in French*.

“In my Grade 4 Middle Immersion class, my students are engaged in co-constructing the success criteria for oral interaction. This helps them understand what they have to learn and also helps them to talk about it in French. Since I have started involving my students in self-assessment practices, I find that they are more engaged in trying to speak French in the class.”

Grade 4 teacher

## In the Beginning...

The entry years of the programs, regardless of the age and background of students, form the foundation of French language acquisition that teachers can build upon to create the most effective and positive experience possible for students. Teachers become the primary model of French language for students, notably in the entry year of the programs. They are key in the social dialogue of the classroom – they have an important role to play at all times.

... most striking are the metacognitive benefits. Where the first language is well supported, children acquiring a second (or third) language in immersion develop a “linguistic detective capacity” (Lambert & Tucker, 1972, p. 43); their bilingualism equips them to learn additional languages more readily and enhances their cognitive functioning.

- learner autonomy  
*l'autonomie de l'apprenant*
- metacognition  
*la métacognition*
- rich performance tasks  
*les tâches d'évaluation significatives*
- learning goals  
*les objectifs d'apprentissage*
- success criteria  
*les critères d'évaluation*
- descriptive feedback  
*la rétroaction*

**REFLECTION** In what ways do I model French for my students?

## A Positive Classroom Environment

Early language acquisition is a subconscious process: students are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. (Krashen, 1981)

French Immersion and Extended French programs are designed for students who do not speak French at home, therefore the main opportunity that they have to develop French language skills occurs in the classroom setting. Teachers are aware of the first language competencies students have developed prior to all entry level classes. It is through modelling the French language that teachers lead students to realize that French is a language of everyday situations and not simply a series of words and expressions learned to complete classroom activities. Because the goal of developing oral language skills is effective communication, teachers create a classroom environment where students participate in everyday communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language rather than placing an emphasis on recall of vocabulary and language structures. It is important, therefore, that teachers create a language-rich classroom experience from the first day. That means that French Immersion and Extended French classrooms are environments in which risk-taking is valued and promoted. Students are encouraged to listen and talk, share ideas, and become problem solvers even though they have not yet attained linguistic accuracy. Teachers make an effort to ensure that their students see that making errors is part of the process.

**REFLECTION** How does my classroom environment encourage students to take risks and make attempts to use French, even if the language is not correct?

According to James Britton, professor of education, University of London, “literacy floats on a sea of talk,” so the conditions that encourage students to develop oral communication skills (listening, oral interaction, and production) also assist them in developing or transferring reading and writing skills. It is important for students to use oral language to develop reasoning and observation, prediction, sequencing, and other skills connected with reading and writing.

Teachers present relevant linguistic elements as they help students develop French language skills across curriculum areas. For example, examining topics in science and solving problems in mathematics create opportunities for students to acquire subject-specific vocabulary and language structures associated with those subjects, and applicable to a broad range of situations, in a natural and authentic manner. Giving instructions and following directions in the French class or in the physical education class, for instance, provides opportunities for students to understand and use the imperative tense without a formal lesson.

Oral communication, reading and writing are not separate skills but rather they interconnect to create a web of language development. Students must have access to French through print as well as oral communication. Environmental print in French Immersion and Extended French classrooms contributes to the acquisition of language. This includes French word walls, sentence walls, samples of student work, co-constructed charts and shared writing, which serve as references for all students and as support for visual learners.

**REFLECTION** What does environmental print look like in my classroom?

## French is the Language of Instruction

The most effective strategy that can be used to ensure a language-rich second language classroom environment is the use of the target language by the teacher at all times. In order to achieve this goal, teachers need to use a variety of second language strategies to advance students' comprehension and to eliminate or minimize their use of translation to and from English.

Strategies used by the teacher to support comprehension in French include the use of:

- visual cues (e.g., use pictures, drawings, objects)
- non-verbal cues (e.g., use gestures, facial expressions)
- cognates (e.g. choose words that sound similar in French and English such as “télévision, television”)
- repetition (e.g., change intonation, speed, emphasis)
- rephrasing (e.g., choose different language, grammar structure)

**REFLECTION** How do I know that the strategies I use are effective in helping my students understand?

When students are exposed to a variety of strategies (see page 6) they become better language students, and they tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. They assess the learning situation, determine which strategy to use, and then monitor their performance on an ongoing basis. This leads to **self-regulation** of learning, which is a characteristic of successful students.

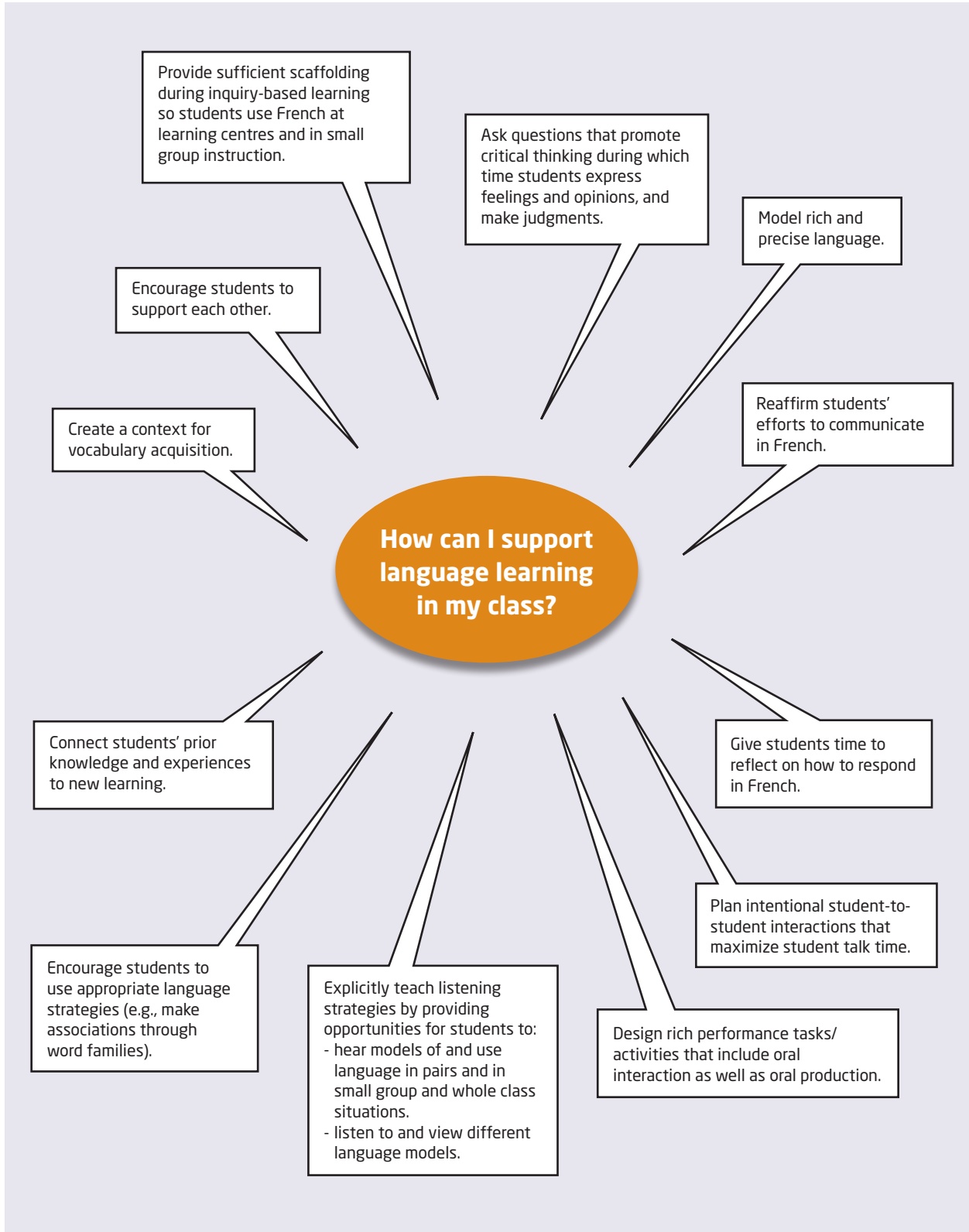
**REFLECTION** How do I foster the development of skills that will lead my students to learner autonomy?

→ self-regulation  
*l'autorégulation*

“The students in my Senior Kindergarten French Immersion class do not think that I speak English. Although they know I can understand them, they do not believe that I can respond. I have tried this approach for the past couple of years and I am convinced that the language of the students has improved noticeably. I make sure that the students understand using all sorts of methods. Sometimes I act out an instruction 4 or 5 times in different ways until they understand. But they finally get it.”

Kindergarten teacher

Teachers use a variety of strategies to support French language learning. The suggestions in the diagram below serve as starting points for reflection and discussion.



Teachers provide students with the opportunity to listen to and practise the sounds, rhythms, words, and structures of French. This can be accomplished through explicit teaching of phonological awareness and exposure to a wide variety of poems, comptines, and songs.

“It is the pleasure of playing with sound that makes it fun to sing songs and say rhymes. The teaching objectives are to help children listen on purpose for sounds in language and to pronounce new sounds and words. They practise focusing their attention on similarities and differences in combinations of sounds, which sharpens their phonological awareness. They are also exposed to difficult new words that challenge and exercise their speaking abilities.” (Roskos, Tabors and Lenhart, 2004)

**REFLECTION** How do I engage my students in playing with language?

Experimenting with sound and language patterns is a natural part of language development at any age level, and in this way, students make approximations and gradually modify and refine their understanding of oral grammar.

Shared reading and read-alouds are important strategies that support students at all entry levels. It is the conversation in which teachers and students engage that supports vocabulary development and comprehension. The choice of texts appropriate to the students’ levels and topic studied also contributes to the acquisition of language. Classrooms contain a variety of texts in different formats, styles and genres. As teachers read fiction and non-fiction texts in an engaging and natural way, students hear a variety of levels of language which helps them acquire new vocabulary and language structures. Explicit instruction clarifies students’ understanding.

**REFLECTION** What resources will best support my students’ learning?

“In my Grade 7 Extended French class, there is a wide range of language proficiency for the students who are coming from 3 years of Core French in different schools. Over the years I have found that choosing stories that connect with History and Geography and reading them aloud has been a very effective strategy. The students hear good language and they often go back to the texts when they are searching for particular vocabulary.”

Grade 7 teacher

## Partners in Success

It is important for teachers to use French at all times in the classroom to model and create a French environment so that students develop the ability to communicate in French. Students listen and respond to the language in a variety of settings and become increasingly confident in experimenting with the spontaneous use of French.

Regardless of their age or grade level, second language students progress through stages of language acquisition which may differ according to the background they bring to the process. There is an initial stage during

“Purposeful talk is one of the major means through which children construct and refine their understandings of language. Talk should underpin all language activities.” (First Steps, 1997)

**REFLECTION** How do I support my students as they progress through a continuum of learning to speak French?

which students absorb the language modelled by the teacher, which builds their skills in comprehension and expression. Teachers modify their oral language and adapt written texts to make meaning accessible. Initially, students respond partially in English and partially in French to questions and instructions given in French. They repeat models of language presented by the teacher and gradually attempt to incorporate more and more French words and phrases in their speech. They often communicate in French with the teacher and continue to speak in English with their peers. When students feel at ease with the language, they experiment and speak spontaneously, make generalizations about language rules and begin to self-correct.

**REFLECTION** How do I nurture the acquisition of oral language as a foundation for literacy skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)?

Students progress at various rates. Teachers create an environment that encourages language development while recognizing that students' French language competencies and confidence to speak only in French develop at individual rates. Continuous encouragement, modeling, and support help students at all levels make gains in language acquisition.

“...children learn to do amazing things in oral language; all they need are opportunities to produce language in situations that are meaningful to them, to be understood, to be part of conversations, and to have a model of language to learn from.”  
Marie Clay, 1998

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