

Bilingualism: Should I Enroll my Child in an Immersion Program?

Adapted from Elizabeth Rosenzweig, MS, CCC-SLP LSLC Cert. AVT

In today's world, being bilingual has advantages. Some families speak more than one language in the home. In other cases, children attend bilingual immersion programs. What factors need to be taken into account when considering oral bilingualism for children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing?

To clarify upfront, we are talking specifically about **oral bilingualism**: learning two or more languages through listening and speaking. The research and conclusions discussed here **do not** apply to children whose parents have chosen a Bilingual-Bicultural or Total Communication approach using sign language and spoken/written English.

Teachers used to tell parents to stick with just one language, usually English. The idea was not to confuse children. This advice was thought to be especially important for children at risk for language delays, such as children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. New research shows us, however, that this idea is incorrect. We now know that children, including children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, can learn more than one language.

Some families only speak English at home, but want their child to have the advantage of being able to speak another language as well. This situation is different than a family who speaks two languages at home and can expose their child to both languages from day one. For children from English-speaking homes, second language exposure begins at school.

Key Factors to Successfully Learning More than One Language

➤ **Lots of exposure to fluent language models.**

To help children learn a language, they need to hear that language being spoken often by native or fluent speakers. We now encourage parents who are stronger in their native language to speak the native language to their children. When parents speak to children in their “heart language,” they are able to communicate more clearly and give the child a rich language model.

➤ **Average intelligence and no cognitive/learning delays.**

Children with additional challenges are capable of becoming bilingual. The extent to which a child can learn more than one language depends on *the extent to which they can learn the first language*. If the child is delayed in learning Language #1, she will likely also show delays in Language #2. These delays aren’t necessarily caused by learning two languages. They are more likely due to the fact she has difficulty with languages overall.

➤ **Good access to the speech signal.**

If the child’s hearing devices are not appropriately programmed, or if she is not wearing her hearing devices consistently, she will not have access to all of the sounds of speech. Learning one oral language will be difficult, let alone two or more. Remember that we only speak as well as we hear, so access to all of the sounds of speech is crucial for children to become bilingual.

➤ **Early exposure and early intervention.**

The sooner, the better! Babies are born with brains ready to learn language, so getting children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing enrolled in early intervention, access to hearing devices, and early exposure to both languages is important for a good outcome.

What to Expect for a Child Learning Two Languages

Children learning multiple languages often go through a *silent phase*, when they are taking in both languages, but may not be communicating much in one or both of them. This silent phase is followed by a period of *language mixing*, where the child seems to confuse both languages or use them together. Finally, the child learns how to *code switch*, or how to tell the difference between the two languages and how to decide when and where to use them. These steps are all part of the natural process of becoming bilingual and should not be mistaken for a language delay or disorder.

However, there are some children who do actually have a language delay or disorder and this tends to show up in both languages. If a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing is struggling to learn her first language, introducing a second language may not be the best strategy. Also, immersion may not be the best strategy for a child whose hearing loss was identified late and has a lot of catching up to do.

Is a Bilingual Immersion Program Right for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing?

Like most things, the answer is: it depends on the child! In general, earlier is better. Starting to learn a second language in preschool is much easier than to start learning in high school. Both can be done, but our brains are more ready and able to learn new languages at a younger age.

Questions to help you and the school team assess your child's readiness include:

- Does my child have a solid foundation in her first language? Are her language skills on par with her hearing peers in English before we introduce a second language?
- How is the school day divided between languages? Would my child do better if certain, more difficult, subjects were taught in her first language?

- Will my child have access to the same supports that she would have in an English-only program? For example: access to an educational audiologist and/or an FM/DM system, or support from a teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Will the teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing be fluent in the second language?
- Will the bilingual immersion staff work collaboratively with professionals to learn the best ways to teach a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing?
- Is the child able to follow along in the classroom and access the curriculum through listening?
- How is the curriculum structured to help parents who may not speak the second language? Is tutoring or homework help available for students? If you do not speak the second language, you may not be able to help your child with homework.
- Are there opportunities for the child to practice the second language outside of school, like social gatherings or after-school or weekend activities?

Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing are very capable of learning to listen and talk in more than one language. Good access to sound combined with rich language input is the key to success.

Following are some personal perspectives on bilingualism from parents and professionals.

Our Journey with French Immersion

Adapted from Kathi Osinchuk

My son Stu has unilateral hearing loss, low working memory capacity, and ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder).

Stu started with French immersion in kindergarten. In grade one, he started to have difficulty. In his words:

“It was hard to hear and pronounce what teacher was saying. I had to pay a lot of attention to just keep up. It was very tiring having to listen so much. It was hard. It was frustrating not being able to understand.”

As a parent, I would say the 'active' listening demands of French Immersion were significant and exhausting for my son. This was the case despite consistent and diligent use of an FM system.

Some secondary difficulties that we noticed were that Stu started to feel like he was stupid when others were able to understand and speak the language and he could not. His self-esteem went in the pot. Towards the end of grade one, we stopped even trying to have 'output' or be producing anything - our goal for Stu was just getting through the day. Stu became explosive and volatile at home and at school, and he hated going to school.

When we enrolled Stu in French immersion, we thought we would 'see how it goes' and keep a close eye on it - which we did. We thought because Stu was 'smart', this might make up for the hearing loss (it didn't; he just got creative about how he could cope with his difficulties).

In hindsight, we should have moved him to an English program in mid-grade one, when he started having behavioural difficulties due to his frustration level. That extra six months was horrible. If I had to do it again, we would have moved him right away.

Now Stu is in a small class of 16 students. The listening environment is so much better. He is excelling academically and socially and is being taught many strategies and skills for dealing with the difficulties associated with ADHD. My son is happier, and so am I.

It Takes a Village to Teach a Child

Adapted from Jennifer MacGowan

My daughter, Brooklyn, is 12 years old and has been in French Immersion since kindergarten. She was diagnosed with bilateral, moderate sensorineural hearing loss in the high frequencies in grade one and wears hearing aids in both ears. We had a huge decision to make – whether to keep her in immersion or place her in an English-only school. Fortunately, from the beginning, we had excellent resources to help us make this decision, from the school principal and teachers, to the hearing strategist (also known as a teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing) and child psychologist.

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. In this case, it takes a village to teach a child with hearing loss that she can do anything she sets her mind to, including learn a second language. Once we confirmed the diagnosis, we rallied every resource we could find to determine the best learning environment for our child. We knew that learning a second language in addition to having hearing loss had the potential to pose a significant challenge. On the other hand, we believed that if we had the right resources in place and a child who was motivated to learn a second language, then we had a formula for success. I'm pleased to say we haven't looked back.

Brooklyn has been in both an elementary and junior high school for French immersion and she has been the only hearing loss student in both schools. The educators in these schools have been extremely accommodating and they treat her like any other student. In fact, I couldn't imagine moving her away from French immersion given the significant amount of support that we receive.

Where is Nouvelle France?

A Perspective from an Educational Audiologist

By Sandra Vandenhoff, Au.D., R. Aud

When I was in grade seven, I switched to a French immersion program at a junior high school. I remember being very excited about the idea when I first heard about it - not necessarily because I wanted to learn French, but because it was at a junior high school, and I would take the bus to school instead of walk!

At the time, I had a severe hearing loss and wore two hearing aids. My school was not in the public system, and despite living in a large city, I did not have access to a teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing or an educational audiologist. I did not know about FM systems.

I remember being mystified about Nouvelle France in history class. I could not find it on the map (even old maps). I did poorly on my history test because I did not make the connection between Nouvelle France and Canada until later in life. It made me wonder about other gaps - because I certainly struggled in grade nine and beyond when I switched back to an English school (again, without an FM system).

In my work as an educational audiologist now, I see technology as being a critical part of success in school, especially in an immersion program. If your child does not wear her hearing aids or cochlear implant processors consistently, I would not recommend an immersion program.

In many languages the soft, high pitch sounds are the ones that give information about verb tense and grammar. Hearing aids and cochlear implants provide a "circle of sound" of about six feet around the student. When the teacher is more than six feet away, the microphones of the hearing aids and cochlear implant processors cannot pick up the really faint sounds of speech that are so important. FM and DM (Digital Modulation) technology overcome this obstacle by placing the microphone six inches or less from the teacher's mouth.

Research shows some strong positive effects of bilingualism on the brain. However, research also shows the increased demands on the brain that come from processing in two different languages *may come at the expense of the ability to hear in noise*. In other words, noise in the classroom may have a greater impact on bilingual children.

Personal FM/DM systems will help to overcome the effects of distance and noise in the classroom. I recommend that assistive technology becomes an integral part of classroom learning for children in immersion programs. In addition to the teacher transmitter, passing around microphones should also be considered so the student who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing can have access to language models from their peers.

What is Best for Learning?

An Education Consultant's Perspective

Adapted from Dr. Donna Crawford

I have no parental experience with a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, but quite a bit of exposure as an educator in French Immersion programs. In total, I worked 19 years in schools with French Immersion programs - as a resource teacher, assistant principal and principal.

When I started looking at files of students who were struggling for no apparent reason, there was often a history of ear infections in preschool and kindergarten. That is not to say everyone with that history did poorly, but many who were struggling did. In those cases, I advised parents to get both vision and hearing checked, among other things.

Classes in immersion programs are very auditory-based, although there are lots of gesture and visual information to supplement the French language and vocabulary instruction. Teachers may be auditory learners themselves, so they may have to work hard to remember to attend to the other learning modalities. More visual materials are available in French than for Spanish or Mandarin, but not as much as in English. The subtle differences in tonalities in French vowels as

well as the intonation of the language make it an interesting linguistic challenge for most learners. Students learn the language primarily by listening to the teacher and then repeating what has been said. Even slight changes in the pronunciation of a word in French can result in two different vocabulary words being produced.

My own son, who had significant written language and vision issues, did really well in French Immersion. His peers did not even realize he had an issue until grade three, because he always sounded good. He learned the oral and receptive aspects of language easily, and no one really noticed that he could not read or write much in grade one and two - except me. I was busy doing vision therapy with him every day and teaching him to type. French immersion for him was an advantage - so I am not saying that children with disabilities in general cannot do it.

Some students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing do not sound like a native speaker of English, but usually they can be understood. Add a second language with different accents, sounds and grammar, and I think you are asking a lot of a young child. For kindergarten or grade one, unless the parents see this as part of their culture and history, it is really way more difficult and I would never suggest an immersion program unless there are clear indicators for a specific child that he or she will be able to thrive.

In many school systems, there is a later entry point for French Immersion, often at grade five or seven. If a parent is considering late French Immersion for a child who is otherwise meeting grade level expectations, it should be fine with support. Late immersion students already work harder than average. This is because they are learning new content at a faster rate than in kindergarten or grade one through a new language. Higher levels of fatigue may result - in addition to listening fatigue, which is common in students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

By the end of grade nine, you can hardly tell the difference between students who start in kindergarten (early entry) and grade five or seven (late entry). This may be at least partially explained by the fact that the late entry students are

not a typical group of learners when they begin to learn the language. They are self-selected, at least partially based on academic progress to date, and love the language. The early entry group may have slightly better vocabulary; the late entry students may have better grammar.

Most students do start bilingual immersion in kindergarten and grade one. A much smaller group are willing to give up their friends and go into grade five or seven immersion. This is one of the best reasons to start early. There is certainly evidence that points to greater brain flexibility in the early years, and general advantages in brain growth through learning a second language. However, later entry works just as well. In the end, to be really fluent, you have to live the culture of any language. Experienced second language teachers will tell you that to learn a language, regardless of age, takes perseverance, a tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to take academic risks. Parents should ask themselves if these are characteristics of any child they are considering for an immersion program.

Another thing to consider is the transportation issue. Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing will generally have more listening fatigue at the end of the day. If enrollment in a French immersion program means a long bus ride, I would not add that, especially for a young child. Many parents report their kindergarten child, who had not taken afternoon naps in many years, began to sleep in the afternoons.

I would consider the nature of the hearing loss, what the first language is for the parents, how much English language the child has, and how hard it was to achieve English oral language skills. In theory anyone can do immersion, if the teacher, student and family are dedicated enough. In practice, I would not do that to my child with a significant hearing loss, unless there was some really good reason.

Myths and Realities of French Immersion

By the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers and Calgary Board of Education: <http://205.193.86.57/collaborateurs-contributors/articles/mythes-myths-eng.html>

The article is not specific to children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing – however, it does mention hearing loss, and is based on research. This article contradicts information provided in the articles above. In an effort to provide a balanced overview, these points are highlighted below:

MYTH Students should get help in French, if possible.

FACT Most special needs are not related to the language as such. As soon as the child learns strategies to respond to his or her special needs, these strategies can be transferred to the immersion program, including French. While getting help in French would be better, English resources can be used if necessary.

MYTH Parents who register their children in immersion have to know French so that they can do more to help their children.

FACT Parents must understand that French immersion was created for students who have no knowledge of the French language.

MYTH Late immersion students benefit from the same advantages as early immersion students.

FACT Erin Gibson, a student and graduate of the early immersion program, describes the difference between the two programs in this way: "When all the high school immersion students went to a French play, everyone understood the story and got the message, but the early immersion students enjoyed more of the jokes." (*Yes, You Can Help!*, 1997).

This reality is more than a question of fluid proficiency. Early immersion students can learn a third or fourth language more easily than other students. The research shows that early and late immersion students have several advantages when they learn a second language, but early immersion students enjoy a greater number of advantages (Archibald et al. 2006).

Conclusion

Some of the information provided above is based on research, and some on personal experience. In the end, the Alberta Hands & Voices mantra is especially relevant: **Whatever choice is best for your child makes that the right choice.**

Careful consideration is important; so is going with your gut feeling.