Capacity Building Series

French Immersion in Ontario

Two languages ... A shared approach

The goal of French Immersion is to develop students' proficiency in French while building mastery of English – that is, not to replace a first language with an additional one but to develop proficient communication skills in both. Researchers suggest that French Immersion programs enjoy success in meeting this goal because the cognitive and linguistic component skills required for learning to read, write, speak, view and represent in a student's first language support literacy development in a second. The transfer of skills works both ways. Students' developing abilities in French also support their continuing growth in English.

Dr. Jim Cummins (OISE) has helped to create an influential body of empirical research supporting the notion of knowledge transfer (Cummins, 1998). Studies of dual language programs in Canada and elsewhere suggest that students' literacy skills in a first language provide the schemata for literacy learning (e.g, phonological and phonemic awareness, thinking/processing skills, comprehension strategies) which will transfer from a first language to a second and, vice versa, from a second language to a first. Cummins' "interdependence hypothesis" not only explains why students who are literate in their first language are likely to be advantaged in the acquistion of a second, but it also holds implications for those responsible for planning and instruction in Ontario schools.

This monograph has been developed to support the work of dual language teaching teams as they explore effective literacy instruction and implement practices to improve not only French Immersion instruction but literacy instruction overall.

Why shared literacy instruction?

The same approaches to effective literacy instruction apply — regardless of students' first language or the language of instruction.

These include:

- a strong oral language component
- scaffolding on prior knowledge and experiences
- a focus on higher-order thinking
- critical literacy practices

    Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
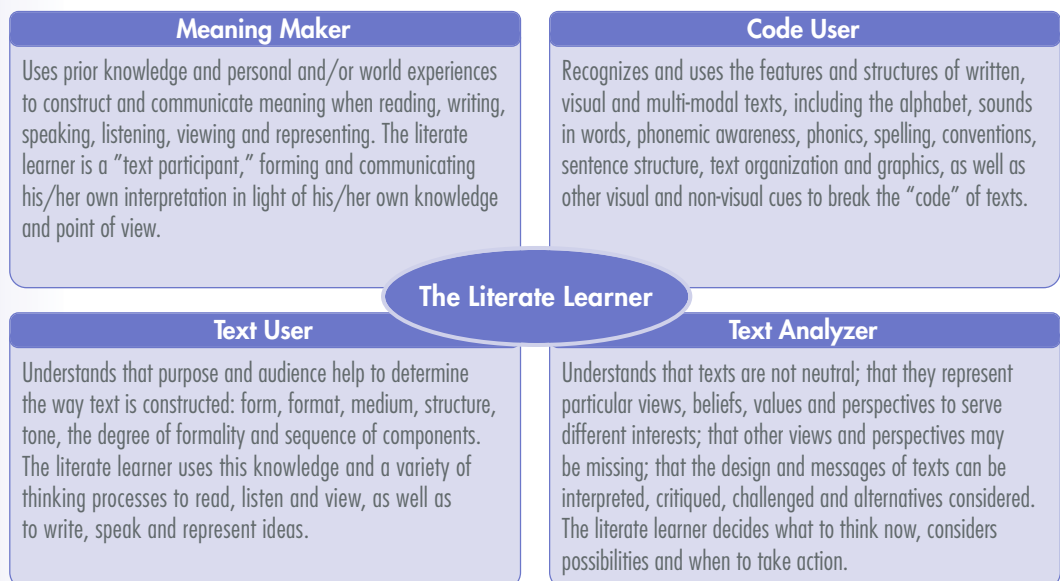
reach every student

Ontario

Working Together to Deepen Collective Understanding

In French Immersion schools, where English and French Immersion teachers have a shared responsibility for literacy instruction, collaboration is essential. As a growing number of district school boards support this collaborative model, French Immersion educators across Ontario are engaging in teacher inquiry to enhance their understanding of effective literacy instruction and are working in learning teams to share their experience with English program colleagues.

By working together, English and French Immersion teachers are able to design integrated classroom experiences where the communication skills taught in one language are supported and reinforced in the other. By co-planning to address the big ideas in curriculum (e.g., environmental stewardship), they are ensuring that students have opportunities to develop and apply the skills required for robust, higher-order thinking in authentic and engaging contexts in both languages.

Through authentic classroom inquiry, English and French Immersion teaching teams are working together to gain a deeper understanding of how the "four roles model" supports students' literacy learning. Many have broadened their instructional repertoire of strategies for engaging students in authentic communication. Teacher inquiry into how Freebody and Luke's resource model can foster students' higher-order thinking has proven, as Ellin Oliver Keene suggests, that "the degree to which children understand deeply is very dependent on the language we use to define, describe and encourage higher levels of understanding" (Keene, 2008, p. 15). Teaching teams are exploring how "even subtle changes in language" and questioning practices are "promoting huge leaps in their [own] thinking" and leading students to deeper, richer levels of understanding and communication. Through inquiry, they are finding that purposefully planned classroom discussion that intentionally focuses on the learners' roles as code users (décodeurs/encodeurs), meaning makers (créateurs de sens), text users (utilisateurs de texte) and text analyzers (analystes de texte) does lead students more deeply into texts and encourages them to see themselves as having more involvement in, and indeed control over, the interpretation of the texts' messages.

"Literacy in the 21st century involves not a single skill, but a complex interaction of skills and resources that the literate learner draws upon to make meaning from texts of many types." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004)

Evolving View: Four Roles of the Literate Learner

Meaning Maker

Uses prior knowledge and personal and/or world experiences to construct and communicate meaning when reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and representing. The literate learner is a "text participant," forming and communicating his/her own interpretation in light of his/her own knowledge and point of view.

Code User

Recognizes and uses the features and structures of written, visual and multi-modal texts, including the alphabet, sounds in words, phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, conventions, sentence structure, text organization and graphics, as well as other visual and non-visual cues to break the "code" of texts.

The Literate Learner

Text User

Understands that purpose and audience help to determine the way text is constructed: form, format, medium, structure, tone, the degree of formality and sequence of components. The literate learner uses this knowledge and a variety of thinking processes to read, listen and view, as well as to write, speak and represent ideas.

Text Analyzer

Understands that texts are not neutral; that they represent particular views, beliefs, values and perspectives to serve different interests; that other views and perspectives may be missing; that the design and messages of texts can be interpreted, critiqued, challenged and alternatives considered. The literate learner decides what to think now, considers possibilities and when to take action.

Based on Freebody and Luke's "Four Resources Model" (1990). Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education (2004, p. 9) on the basis of the work of the Collaborative Inquiry in Literacy (2008–09 and 2009–10).
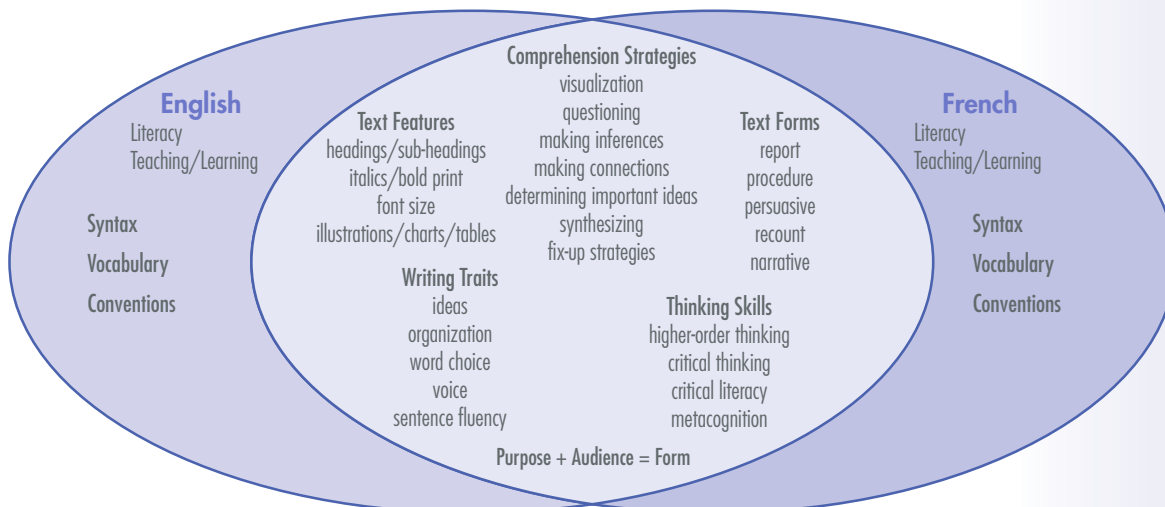
As students engage in relevant, authentic and purposeful higher-order thinking tasks, effective communication, regardless of the language of instruction, becomes the goal in addition to language-acquisition.

Planning with Purpose, Precision and Intentionality

Recognizing the underlying set of literacy skills that are common to both English and French language teaching and learning is a critical starting point for school-based planning in French Immersion. When dual-language teaching teams meet to engage in co-planning and curriculum mapping, they are able to focus on these common components. Close communication allows teaching partners to plan how they can reinforce and consolidate literacy concepts taught in one another's classes. When robust thinking is fostered, modelled and explicitly taught in both English and French through carefully mapped instruction, students learn that thinking processes such as inferring, synthesizing, evaluating and summarizing span all languages. By co-designing programs which allow their students, in both English and French, to develop as active, critical, responsible and creative communicators, teachers provide a firm foundation from which their students "... learn to live with respect and intellectual vigour in a multicultural world," building the "higher-order thinking and critical-literacy skills they need for responsible citizenship and lifelong learning in the 21st century" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 6).

The sample planning template, reproduced below, was developed by a junior-division French Immersion PLC; the template identifies some of the shared literacy components of the English and French Language Arts program. Curriculum-mapping, in this school, reflects the thoughtful co-planning and shared responsibility of all of the junior division teachers and is not intended to imply a division of tasks. All teachers assume responsibility for instruction of these components. What strengthens the delivery of the program is the collaborative support each teacher receives in the "open-to-learning" professional conversations they have in designing their instruction.

Checklist for a Communicative Approach ...

- emphasize performance within language rather than knowledge about language
- provide students with authentic language experiences
- create an environment that emphasizes comprehension (both receptive and expressive abilities)
- encourage and celebrate risk taking
- acknowledge that culture and language are interconnected and interdependent

One Sample Planning Template

English
Literacy
Teaching/Learning

Syntax

Vocabulary

Conventions

Text Features
headings/sub-headings
italics/bold print
font size
illustrations/charts/tables

Writing Traits
ideas
organization
word choice
voice
sentence fluency

Comprehension Strategies
visualization
questioning
making inferences
making connections
determining important ideas
synthesizing
fix-up strategies

Text Forms
report
procedure
persuasive
recount
narrative

Thinking Skills
higher-order thinking
critical thinking
critical literacy
metacognition

Purpose + Audience = Form

French
Literacy
Teaching/Learning

Syntax

Vocabulary

Conventions

The concepts included in the template are not exhaustive. Subsequent PLC sessions included other aspects of the broader repertoire of knowledge and skills required for effective literacy teaching and learning.

Principals of French Immersion schools in which this collaborative teaching model has been adopted agree that pre-planning by teaching partners has significantly alleviated the pressures of accommodating a dual-language literacy program in the instructional day. English and French language arts programs are not seen as separate entities; rather, teachers in both programs see their instruction as part of a larger, connected literacy block.

A Collaborative Approach to Support Student Learning

Principals in French Immersion schools are beginning to set time aside for French/English teaching partners to meet by division and engage in authentic classroom-based teacher inquiry. These divisional teams include teachers, literacy leaders and central support staff, both inside and outside of their program. Together, they question current practices, examine new approaches and consider how to assess their students' (and their own) questioning, discussion and thinking strategies.

Some questions to guide those supporting collaborative professional learning in French Immersion schools are suggested below:

What would be the impact on student learning of ...

- supporting collaborative planning by teachers of both language programs to cluster and target expectations across strands, clarify learning goals and success criteria and plan for integrated literacy learning?
- collaboratively planning for the intentional teaching of metacognitive strategies linked to feedback, learning goals and success criteria in order to help students gain independence as literate learners in both languages?
- providing English/French teacher teams with opportunities to build the instructional capacity required to co-teach in a literacy-rich dual-language program, by connecting the content areas to ground language and literacy learning in meaningful, authentic contexts?
- selecting a variety of connected texts in both languages with multiple perspectives and cultural awareness to support students in developing universal literacy skills, such as critical analysis?
- providing the necessary framework for French Immersion teacher teams to map their instruction in a way that avoids unnecessary duplication of instruction and allows students opportunities to reinforce, consolidate and transfer learned skills across languages?

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