

Intensive French at Ottawa Christian School Report to Parents and Board (2010-11)

Intensive French (IF) was offered to the Grade six class at Ottawa Christian School (OCS) for the second year in 2010-11. This report will provide a brief summary of the research results for this year's class, some reflections on progress made and further reflections on future possibilities for IF at OCS.

Results for 2010-2011

In order to monitor the implementation and progress of IF at OCS, the IF Committee decided to track development of linguistic outcomes (oral and written), motivation and attitudes towards learning French, and parental satisfaction with the quality of this learning experience for their children. Results are presented below.

Oral production

Students were interviewed at the end of the intensive period to determine their ability to carry on a conversation in French related to their own lives and the topics studied. The interviews were then rated according to the proficiency descriptors of the New Brunswick Middle School Scale of Oral Proficiency Interview. Table 1 shows the results of the OCS oral production ratings compared to IF students from nine school jurisdictions in Atlantic Canada and IF students in the Surrey, B.C. implementation study. As can be seen in Table 1, OCS students overall are exceeding the target of Level 14.

Table 1: Final oral production scores of OCS IF students compared to other Canadian IF students

OCS (2010)	OCS (2011)	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	BC (2009)
14.5	14.3	13.6	14.3	14.1	13.8	14.1	14.5

The following proficiency descriptors will help interpret the above scores:

Novice high (13): Able to satisfy immediate needs using longer, memorized phrases; some hesitations; understanding is limited; shows beginning signs of initiative in choice of words and sentences.

Basic low (14): Able to show a certain spontaneity when speaking about familiar topics; uses simple but complete sentences; asks and answers simple questions.

Basic mid (15): Able to show some spontaneity when speaking about a variety of topics; can initiate and sustain simple dialogue.

There is an important difference in quality of performance described for levels 13 and 14. A critical shift takes place between these levels. Students who attain the Basic low (14) level are capable of communicating spontaneously; in other words, they are able to engage in a conversation related to topics they have studied. Compared to Level 13, Level 14 students are no longer restricted to memorized phrases but can create sentences to express what they want to say. This is described by some students as a newfound ability to 'think in French.' Indeed, it is the objective of IF to provide enough exposure to and practice in French so that students are able to cross the threshold of language learning that allows them to communicate spontaneously and creatively. It is important to note that the 14.3 average for OCS suggests that many students placed at levels beyond 14. Some students actually attained Level 16 without any previous French Immersion experience at another school. This is impressive!

Written production

Written production skills were tested at the end of the intensive period in February. Students were given a topic appropriate to their age level and the themes studied during the intensive period and asked to write a short story. In contrast to last year, the written products this year were evaluated using a new grid, recently adopted by the Ministry of Education in New Brunswick, where IF is now the default core French program in Grade 5. The criteria include:

- Ideas (development of ideas and appropriate details);
- Organization (logical development of ideas and use of appropriate connectors);
- Sentence (appropriate structure in French and evidence of some complex structures);
- Word choice (correct use of words and some variety in adjectives and adverbs); and,
- Conventions (punctuation, capitalization, spelling, subject-verb agreement, tense, pronouns, gender).

Since we have no baseline data for the new evaluation criteria, nor comparison data from other jurisdictions against which to compare and interpret the OCS results, we have decided not to report these results this year.

Motivation and attitudes toward studying French

In order to track any change in motivation and attitudes as a result of the IF experience, students completed a questionnaire in September and again in February. Using a five-point scale, students responded to the 40 items with either: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. The average scores for each of the eight subscales of the questionnaire are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean scores by subscale on attitudinal and motivation questionnaire for IF classes (2010 and 2011)

Subscale ↓	IF class 2010			Combined classes (2010 & 2011)		
	Sept.	Feb.	Difference	Sept.	Feb.	Difference
1. Attitudes toward French people	3.27	3.22	-0.05	3.24	3.27	0.03
2. Interest in world languages	3.59	3.78	0.19	3.65	3.84	0.18
3. Attitudes to learning French (pos)	3.20	3.46	0.26	3.13	3.42	0.30
4. Attitude to learning French (neg)*	3.73	3.83	0.10	3.69	3.81	0.12
5. Integrative orientation	4.00	4.00	0.00	4.05	4.14	0.09
6. Instrumental orientation	3.49	3.41	-0.09	3.51	3.49	-0.01
7. French class anxiety (reversed)*	3.12	3.44	0.32	3.02	3.30	0.27
8. Parental encouragement	3.69	3.64	-0.05	3.73	3.73	0.00
Total Instrument	3.38	3.47	0.09	3.37	3.49	0.12

*A desired score for these subscales was a decrease from September to February; however, in order to report these scores in the same manner as the other subscales (i.e., an increase is desirable) these scores were reverse coded.

As can be seen in the first column, most subscales for the 2011 class vary slightly from the September score. Three of the subscales (interest in languages, attitude to learning French, anxiety) changed significantly over the six-month period. These are all positive, desired changes: overall student attitude to language learning improved, overall attitude to learning French improved and anxiety about learning (speaking) French decreased. This was equally true for the 2010 class.

A closer look at these data, however, reveals some important information. First of all, the scores are already quite high in September; this leaves less room for positive change. However, in spite

of the fact that, on average, OCS students already agree positively with most of the items, there is still growth on most of the subscales from September to February. Secondly, the scores for subscale 5 (integrative orientation) is the highest for both groups in September. Before one can appreciate the significance of this result, however, it is important to understand the difference between an integrative and an instrumental orientation to motivation. Instrumental motivation refers to an interest in learning another language for personal gain, such as a better job or higher salary. This concept is reflected in questionnaire items such as:

Studying the French language can be important for me because other people will respect me more if I know another language.

Studying the French language can be important for me because I think it will be useful in getting a good job.

Integrative motivation, on the other hand, refers to interest in learning another language to know the other language group (or out groups, in general) and a willingness to identify with the speakers of a language group. This concept is reflected in questionnaire items such as:

Studying the French language can be important for me because it will make me feel more comfortable with people who speak French.

Studying French can be important for me because then I can talk to other kids who speak French.

Based on these scores, we can claim that IF students at OCS, as a group, appear to demonstrate a strong sense of openness to ‘the other;’ that is, a cultural sensitivity to learn about others and value them. This suggests that learning French for them is oriented to the ‘other’ rather than to the ‘self.’ The score reflecting this disposition in September was the highest of all the subscales, leaving very little room for improvement. For the 2011 group this score remained stable in February; however, when combined with the scores of the 2010 group we see a small increase. This outcome is noteworthy and reflects a spirit congruent with the educational goals and core values of OCS. For this we can give humble thanks!

Parental appraisal of student experience of the IF program

In the interest of evaluating this year’s experience and improving IF for subsequent years, parents were invited to assess the program and the quality of their child’s experience. As can be seen in Table 3, 18 out of 20 of the 2011 parent group who responded considered the experience to be positive or very positive for their child. This compares well with the parental response of the previous year.

Table 3: Level of parental satisfaction with IF for both classes

Level of satisfaction	2010	2011
Very positive	06	06
Positive	02	12
Neutral	01	02
Negative	01	00
Percentage of parents reporting	100%	77%

Written comments from parents were noted and will be considered as we plan the IF experience for next year’s class.

Reflections on progress made and the future of FSL instruction at OCS

It is clear that IF has been a successful experience for most of the participating students in both classes. This is evident both in the linguistic and attitudinal outcomes, for which we can be very thankful.

IF continues in Grades six, seven and eight as Français approfondi (FA), the post IF program. Students go back to 200 minutes per week but the teaching strategies remain the same. In planning the schedule for next year, we will continue to schedule intense blocks of time (e.g., 3 periods of 65 minutes per week) so that some of the intensity can be retained, and we will try to add extra minutes wherever possible. The acquired skills need to be practiced if students are going to retain their increased fluency and advance further. Based on research of FA, students should be able to bring their level of oral production up another level by the end of Grade eight.

As for next year, we hope to make some changes to further enhance the program. We are committed to purchasing more resource materials and increasing the amount of time given to the intensive period, if possible. We must emphasize that the amount of time at OCS allocated to the intensive period (55%) is minimal compared to what is offered in other jurisdictions, making our results even more impressive. In the future, time and resources permitting, we would like to complement IF with one subject (or more) taught in French. Redeemer Christian High School is already moving to such a model to enrich their own French program and to prepare for the eventual arrival of OCS students who have experienced IF.

Parents who have questions about the program, the research instruments and/or the research results are welcome to contact the school for more information.

On behalf of the committee,

Larry Vandergrift, Ph.D.
Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute
University of Ottawa
Chair, IF Implementation Committee