

*The opinions of parents about what their children experience in foreign language classes are rarely looked at by school administrators. Schools will give surveys to know if they are doing a good job, but rarely do they care what parents think.*

*I got this letter from a parent in British Columbia. It is very poignant:*

Hi Ben,

I just want to express appreciation for what you are contributing. I'm not entirely clear on all the details, but if it involves something other than the tyranny of rote repetition of meaningless dictée lists every week at home, then I thank you.

I am the mother of four kids; three of them are in the French Immersion program here in British Columbia. The youngest, 7 years old, is an eager and bright achiever and conformist. She comes home raring to read her assigned levelled readers (even if she can't understand them at all, and doesn't get engaged with the stories, she is determined to "read" them) and transcribe again and again the words the teacher has assigned for dictée. She has a single-minded goal of getting gold stars, preferably more than anyone else has.

The oldest, 12 years old, has been in FI since kindergarten, and now in grade 7, both his French and English written skills are below average. He has no interest in French beyond its presence in his life as a requirement at school. He refuses to speak even a word of French outside the classroom, and is paralyzed with social fear if a francophone engages him in French, but he is quite articulate in English and enjoys being clever with words.

The 9-year-old has been in FI since kindergarten and just started grade 4 with a native speaker teacher from Quebec. Immediately it was clear that the pace of the instructor's speech was leaving my daughter in the dust. On her first dictée of the year, she scored a 4/20. On her second, 5/25. She is becoming successively more discouraged about school, herself, and is definitely wanting to just put her head down on the desk and give up.

Meanwhile, two of our friends from France say that her spoken French is quite good; she is eager to use her language skills for something she values highly: connection. I took her to Quebec when she was 7 and she was happy to speak French to any stranger on the street, and was understood. Unfortunately, what is happening at school is a type of analysis of her language skills that puts all the emphasis on the slightest spelling or grammar mistakes, which, instead of inspiring her to communicate more, is shutting her down completely and stressing her out.

To combat this stress, the school counselor and teacher recommend MORE studying at home, so she can enjoy a sense of "confidence" and "success" in the classroom. This is a

child who comes home after her full day of school and wants nothing more than to delve into self-directed projects like building houses out of cardboard boxes and making people out of flowers and paperclips. She is a brilliantly creative kid, and school is a long day of being cut off from her essential self, her innate gifts, and the relationship-building that feeds her soul. To be told that we must devote an hour of precious family and relaxation time to drilling dictée lists is an incredible insult to my sensibilities, and this comes across to my kid. I do not believe that rote drilling of teacher-constructed sentences is a good way to achieve literacy, and I'm certainly not willing to put any effort into perpetuating that nightmare on my turf.

I'm trying to build the case to remove her from this program. What I could use is some empirical research that offers other views on language acquisition, but in plain English for my ex-husband, who has definitely drunk the FI Kool-Aid and is now so narrowly focused on insisting that our child "succeed" through her "hard work and perseverance" that I fear for his relationship with the girl. In the end, who cares if she can "perform" the arbitrary tasks assigned to her? At what cost this performance?

I'm looking at something called the School for Ideal Education here in Victoria, BC. The school focuses on relationships, community, compassion, and creativity while instructing the BC curriculum. They have French, but it is in the context of a French class, where "fun" activities like cooking and crafts are done while speaking French. Core curriculum is taught in English. My guess is that my daughter would come alive in such an environment. They even teach meditation there, and nonviolent communication, disciplines that foster self-connection and connection with others.

What is the point of learning a "foreign" language, anyway? To get gold stars? To get a 25/25 on your dictée test? To have another "blade" on your Swiss Army Knife? Or is it a way to expand your range of connection in the world? And if it is a way to expand connection, is it so important that my 9-year-old know the difference between a verb and an adjective, or is it more important that she be encouraged to write her stories, speak her heart, and form relationships, in whatever language?

Any help you can lend in directing me toward resources that will substantiate my claims that her current learning situation is NOT serving her would really be a gift.

Again, thanks for what you are doing. I can only imagine the relief you have brought to thousands of people.

Warmly,

Mollie in Victoria, BC

*A member of our PLC here on this site, Chris Stoltz, who by chance happens to teach in Vancouver, British Columbia, provided this strong response to this parent's concerns:*

I would tell her three things based in research for ALL learning, not just languages:

a) people with intrinsic interest in learning something do better in it, and retain more, than those who have extrinsic (reward-based) interest, or those who are forced to take things. If you want someone to hate a subject, force them to take it.

b) in ANY subject, people who do not understand what they are being told/exposed to, and/or what they have to do, do poorly and don't enjoy the subject. A bad math teacher is as bad as a French immersion teacher who won't slow down/simplify for the kids.

c) in ANY situation – not just school – people who are confused, stressed or frightened do not learn. It's that simple. Stress responses, cortisol, etc...when this stuff kicks in, the higher mental functions shut down. Your kid is going to not only hate her stressful/confusing French class, she is also going to have to “recover” from it every time she has to do stupid homework, or leave the FI room miserable because she didn't understand it.

French Immersion in Canada is a great idea, and works well generally. However, it doesn't work for all kids – I got booted from an FI school in grade 3, despite basically knowing French – and it frequently has a fairly elitist component to it. Many parents view it, frankly, as a way to put their kid in with “good” (read: wealthier, non-immigrant, academic) kids.

French Immersion (FI) kids are generally, but not exclusively, wealthier and whiter (and, more recently, more Asian) than their non-FI peers. There is also (among some teachers) a strong elitist component: a kid must be “smart” and “hard-working” enough to “qualify” for FI, which “not everyone” can do.

One problem that can come up with FI is that people put kids with “issues” into FI because they think the good behaviour habits of those egg-head immersion kids will rub off. This does happen, but can also backfire hugely.

Teachers in BC have a code of ethics, one part of which states that “the teacher is willing to review performance with parents.” Mollie needs to go and see the teacher, explain the problem, and ask how they are going to address this, ideally by slowing things down. Ideally, she would talk to her daughter's peers, and see if they too are having this problem. If it's just the kid, possibly FI is not the place for her. If it's the whole class, there are issues. If no results are forthcoming, i.e. if the teacher doesn't slow down, etc. then the Principal needs to be contacted.

As Dr. Stephen Krashen says, for people to learn a language, “All you have to do is give people messages they understand that they'll pay attention to. And they'll pay attention to them if they're interesting.”