



Don't Let French Be a Pain for Your Child

Author: Bradley Zhao Translated by: Bo Yang Zhao

The Pain of Learning French!

It's a slice of Europe in North America: Montreal attracts immigrants from all over the world. Many foreigners come here seeking a better life, looking to realize their dreams. However, they often find life here less wonderful than they'd hoped. And although French is a charming language, it is also a difficult one to pick up, especially for adults and for kids whose mother tongue is an oriental language. For new immigrants wanting to start a new life, the language barrier can become an imposing obstacle and a source of concern. Many newcomers who are skilled and hardworking find it challenging to adapt to the environment and wonder why they cannot replicate the success they've enjoyed at home.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Similarly, our career aspirations are hindered by our greatest weaknesses. For first-generation immigrants, the opportunity to showcase their skills and achieve a fulfilling job is often limited by their language competency. They know that they cannot live their dream, that mastering French is out of their reach. Yet, they hold hope that their children will be able to fare better and to attain their goals.

Parents greatly value education. Regardless of socio-economic status, children of immigrants usually achieve excellent academic results, partly due to their parents' high expectations. They often work harder and pursue higher education more than the locals, as indicated by the immigrants' education report generated by Professor Sweet of Lakehead University on October 6, 2010. The report shows that, in terms of nationalities, 31% of secondary students attended higher education among white people, 28% from black communities, and 57% of the Chinese community. But although most second-generation immigrants easily integrate the Quebec school system, others face difficulties. Some students obtain subpar grades, and fail to be admitted into their schools of choice. Poor academics force some families to contemplate moving back to their home country. These issues nearly always stem from a mediocre grasp of the French language.



Don't Let French Be a Torment to Your Child

Throughout the years at Elite College, we've observed that many students deal with significant difficulties while studying French. These are different than the problems faced by their parents. These children of immigrants can be either born/raised here in Canada, or have immigrated themselves from China at a later age.

The former usually experience little difficulty expressing themselves and reading in French. Why, then, would they sometimes be unable to achieve good grades at school? Some parents think that it may be because the child has to learn several languages at once, but this is generally not the case. The problem lies in the methods of learning, or in a lack of effort from the student. Kids fluent in their native tongue are not guaranteed to succeed in French class. They sometimes perform poorly in grammar and writing.

For instance, there was once a student at Elite College born and raised in Montreal. She loved to read French books, and often visited the library. During the summer camp, in the afternoons, while other kids would participate in arts, dance or sports, she would sit in a corner with her books. And yet, her grades in French would not go up. Her mother was very worried, and so she signed her up for French classes at Elite on the weekends. Her teacher discovered that while she liked reading, she only ever focused on the story, rapidly going from book to book. Thus, she read on the surface, without paying attention to the language. She wasn't fully profiting from her reading, and her grades suffered. And so, her teacher and I suggested: when reading, try to notice the vocabulary, the diction and the style, analyze the grammar and syntax, take note of well-written phrases and passages, and write summaries/responses to the work. After changing the way she was reading, the student's grades improved significantly.

As for those who lived their early childhood in other countries, the problems in studying French are far worse. New to Montreal, they first encounter difficulties in pronouncing foreign words. This is their primary obstacle, as new letter and sound combinations leave them helpless. Many Chinese immigrant children are shy and don't like to speak. However, practice is necessary in order to become fluent. Once this bridge is crossed, speaking French becomes much easier. Afterwards, the complex grammar causes confusion for children in welcome classes. These students have difficulties



understanding the material, yet they cannot communicate their problems to the teachers due to their poor competency in spoken French. Thus, the issues accumulate with time and create obstacles in the future. High school students who spent two years in welcome class have trouble following their teachers, and need an extra year to adapt to the rhythm. However, students who have followed welcome class courses at Elite College and kept up with their studies can often enter regular classes in high school after a single year, and in even less time for elementary students. The article "How to Learn a New Language – For Immigrant Children" contains detailed tips for learning French, tailored to new young immigrants. Parents interested in reading it may find it on Elite's website. However, even after integrating regular classes, many kids are still plagued by poor vocabulary, little exposure to French language, mediocre reading and listening skills and average writing capabilities. If their parents aren't proficient in the language, then progress becomes even more arduous.

Let French Be an Asset for Your Child

Immigrants suffer a lot due to the language barrier, which is why it is a priority for them to assure that their children can be fluent in French. You reap what you sow, and through hard work and efficient methods, it is not impossible for second-generation immigrants to surpass the locals. One student of Elite College, Zhang Wenyue, surprised us thus. Her exploits in French filled a page in the *Journal de Montréal*. As a 13-year-old living in Montreal for 5 years, she won second place in Montreal at PGL's dictation competition. Due to her situation, this attracted media attention. It was dubbed a "beautiful success story", and her French was praised as "perfect". During an interview with her and her mother at Elite, Wenyue revealed her recipe for success – a homemade dictionary. When she had started to learn French, she would write down any new words, find their meaning and thus build up her vocabulary. Over the years, she would add to her dictionary words that she'd dig up from books she borrowed outside of school. Once her repertoire increased, she could deduce the meaning of new words using context. Wenyue's success was not the fruit of prodigy, but of efficient methodology, effort, and perseverance. Her mother has penned tips for others who are experiencing difficulty learning French, and they can be found on Elite's website.

Zhao Bo Yang is a student who has attended Elite College since its inception. His prose and



poetry have been featured in Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf's annual collection of award-winning entries from their writing competition. He obtained high scores in secondary school, with an average reaching above 90% (the class average being around 75%), and regularly placed in the top three in his class. It is his excellence in French which allows him to succeed in history, geography and science. Without competency in French, performance in other subjects falters, as they all rely on this language. French is the foundation needed to succeed in other studies, and other subjects will either topple without it, or stand stronger if the language is mastered.

Help Your Child Find the Best Study Methods

Elite College offers help and advice to second-generation immigrants learning French, and hopes that they can work hard outside of class to achieve their goals. But parents too, have a role to play in providing support and encouragement, allocating time and attention towards the challenge their children face in learning a new language.

TIP #1: Read a book every week, and write a summary of the book

The biggest problem in learning French is the vocabulary. It's not enough to study it in the classroom. A teacher at Elite College once said that many immigrants are too passive when studying French, only listening to lectures, but not making any effort outside of class. They need motivation to learn on their own, to think of acquiring vocabulary as a positive accomplishment. The best way to improve vocabulary is by reading and by writing. Parents should encourage their kids to read books, on a regular basis, and to write a journal. But, there are different ways of reading a book. One way is by quickly flipping through the pages and enjoying the story, and the other is by paying attention to details like the grammar, the structure and the language itself in the book. Elite College pushes students to be able to do both.

To practice quick reading, the child needs to find books they find interesting and stimulating. There should not be more than about 20 new words on the first page. Thus, it is not necessary to consult the dictionary. Instead, the student can use the context to interpret the meaning of the vocabulary words. Quick reading is useful to be exposed to new words and to rapidly acquire vocabulary, but it is also essential to be able to do a more thorough reading of the book, to work on



the basics of the language. A more thorough reading requires that, while following the story, the reader pays attention to the writing itself: word choice, style, grammar, etc. Taking notes while reading helps, as they can be collected and reviewed afterwards. This process may necessitate the guidance of a teacher. French classes at Elite College help students learn to read analytically and to take notes. Thus, students can experience more productive readings.

Some kids like to keep a journal, which is great, but it limits them to their own words, whereas writing a book summary allows them to use new vocabulary and to think about what they've read. Writing novel words and expressions daily will help kids remember them, improve their vocabulary, and as a result strengthen their reading and writing skills. With this in mind, Elite College asks its students to read a new book on their own, every other week, and to write a summary on it. This process should be interesting and fun to the child. Parents should be patient at the beginning, and not push them and be critical of them, as long as the kids try, and are continuously doing so. It is also not suggested to have a teacher correct all of the summaries. The student should feel at ease experimenting with new words and expressions, and the corrections may leave them discouraged. It is however a good idea to allow them to correct their own reports after some time, so that they can see their improvement and gain motivation. This will help nurture a positive studying attitude.

TIP #2: Learn conjugations, and study grammar

French is a beautiful language with many precise rules. This makes it difficult to start learning the language. There are no short-cuts. But knowing the basic grammar and conjugations goes a long way in making learning French a lot easier.

Conjugations are a fundamental aspect of French grammar. They have to be memorized and remembered well, as one of the first steps to learning the language. The primary tool for studying them is the "Bescherelle". All of the different conjugations must be known by heart.

In addition, new concepts like plural and masculine/feminine must be mastered, by studying them over time and by using them as often as possible. French reading and writing classes teach the basic elements of comprehension and writing, as well as offering tips and exercises to study the basics of grammar.

Many parents believe that if their child is born here in Montreal, they will have no problems



COLLÈGE ÉLITE
ELITE COLLEGE
英 才 學 院

Montréal: 2565 Centre, #105, Montréal, QC, H3K 1J9
St-Laurent: 625 Ste-Croix, Montréal, QC, H4L 3X7
Rive-Sud: 3875 Grande-Allée, St-Hubert, QC, J4T 2V8
(514)303-8237(o), 582-1068(c), 812-6555(c), 862-1982(c)
www.elitecollege.ca, info@elitecollege.ca

with French. No such guarantee. Many children still find it more difficult than learning a mother tongue, as their exposure at home is limited. While they learn to speak and read French, it's often not at a sufficient level to use it effectively, in situations such as a formal interview. Parents need to focus more attention than Francophone families towards the studying of French in primary and secondary levels.

A COFI (francization) teacher once said: "First-generation immigrants are the bravest people, because they face difficulties that others have not encountered, and often have to deal alone with issues that neither they, nor anyone else, have experienced before". But no matter if the choices are right or wrong, as long as they go through with it, there are no regrets. We believe that the second generation of immigrants will inherit the strength and the heart of their parents, and will strive forward with determination. A Chinese proverb goes: "Indigo blue is extracted from the indigo plant, but it is bluer than the plant it comes from". Second-generation immigrants have the ability to do better than the first generation, to create themselves a bright future and to contribute productively to society.