

DELFL prep: necessary or not?

The following article was contributed by Lesley Doell, French Language Consultant with the French Language Resource Centre based in Grande Prairie. It first appeared in the fall 2011 edition of the Canadian Parents for French, Alberta Branch newsletter.

The *Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELFL)* and *Diplôme approfondi de langue française (DALF)* are assessments of French-second-language skills. For more information go to "CEFR and the DELFL" in the "For educators" section at www.cpfalta.ab.ca.

With over twenty DELFL exam centres across Canada and 97% of Canadian diploma recipients coming from the DELFL Scolaire¹, whereby exams are coordinated and offered within a school division or by a provincial education department, questions are often raised by parents, teachers and administrators concerning the preparation process prior to the exam. This article explores the following questions as they relate to a variety of different learning contexts:

- Must one prepare the students?
- Is it time-consuming? a lot of extra work?
- Do students succeed if they don't prepare?

The French Language Resource Centre in Grande Prairie is a collaboration of 13 partners, including seven school districts in northwestern Alberta. Its has been offering DELFL Scolaire exams since the spring of 2007. For the purpose of this article, classroom core French ("FSL"), immersion and French first language teachers who also are accredited DELFL examiner/markers were asked how they approached preparation for the exam.

The importance of choosing the right level

Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the DELFL exams equally evaluate reading, writing, speaking and listening. Our Programs of Studies (PoS) for both core French and French language arts (immersion) include learning outcomes that correlate closely with the descriptors in the Framework. Thus, teachers adhering closely to the PoS in the course delivery will see that their students can succeed on an exam with virtually no preparation. This was the case for students in Ottawa-Carleton who participated in a pilot project in the spring of 2010: the teachers did not have time between their examiner training session and the date of the

exam to prepare the students, but all 84 passed.²

However, setting the appropriate DELFL exam levels for the students to challenge is a vital component to success for all. The levels initially set by Edmonton Public Schools correlate well with our Program of Studies in both core French and immersion:

	core French ("FSL"):	French immersion:
A1:	Grade 9	Grade 5
A2:	Grade 12	Grade 8
B1:	advanced (IB or AP)	Grade 10
B2:		Grade 12

The levels established for the immersion students allow the majority, including those with learning difficulties, to succeed, since 50% is considered a pass for the DELFL.

Setting the levels for the different programs and grades enables a teacher to prepare an entire class for the same exam. The question then becomes, "to what extent will each student succeed at this DELFL level?"

(Nationally and internationally, B2 is known as the level to achieve when finishing high school, since attaining a B2 diploma permits a second-language student entrance into a university in France without writing a linguistic test.)

The value of preparation

The action-based approach reflected in the Framework

I don't exactly "prepare" my students, but I use certain resources from the DELFL prep books with my class because they correlate with the program of studies. I especially use the oral and written comprehension activities. The DELFL activities are used as a trampoline towards extended writing and oral projects. As far as oral and written production is concerned, these competencies are already part of our daily learning, so my students are automatically prepared for two components of the exam. I don't spend a lot of extra time to prepare my students and I don't waste time in class either. Everyone wins thanks to the ready-made resources on interesting age-appropriate subjects, and the students who participate, succeed, without having to "study just for the test." - senior high French immersion teacher

opens the door to infinite possibilities in transforming the second language classroom. Accredited DELFL examiners who are also classroom teachers have a good understanding of the Framework. While still respecting the PoS, they are able to include authentic, action-based listening activities and oral communication situations in their everyday teaching.

These teachers and their students place great value on the re-creation of the sorts of real-life situations found within the exam and, more importantly, within the Framework. Students are better prepared to write a DELFL exam when equal weight is given to all four language competencies in the classroom. Those teachers who do prepare their students often also use the

activities as a part of their formative and summative assessments.

Anecdotally, we have discovered that students who are better prepared for the exam—for example, those who understand the format, who have practiced oral interview situations with their peers, who have practiced DELF-type listening activities—experience less stress and anxiety the day of the exam.

Preparation periods range from one forty-minute French class two months prior to the exam to two concentrated weeks of DELF preparation to virtually no preparation at all. Some schools, especially secondary schools, offer after-school or noon-hour prep time for those who choose to write the exam.

Other schools will prepare an entire class to write the exam, as is the case with our Grade 5 immersion students. Even if some of those students choose not to write the exam, the activities are used for regular assessment purposes.

It has become obvious to our team of examiners that when a school takes even a small amount of time to introduce the students to the format of the exam, the candidates display more confidence during the interview component.

Resources to assist the teachers

DELf preparation booklets are available from several European publishers. In general, teachers appreciate these well-designed resources as they take the students through many practical activities on their language learning journey. As an example, French immersion high school teachers have noted that the listening activities, often not included in the classroom, are beneficial to and appreciated by their students.

Since DELF A1 and DELF A2 and the Alberta Education outcomes for FSL 9 overlap, I start practicing for the DELF exam with my students from day one. I do so numerous ways. Students have to answer questions when I am handing out the day's lesson (oral production). We listen to audio clips (oral comprehension). We write postcards and fill out registration forms (written production). We "speed date," introducing ourselves and asking our peers questions (oral production). And we read texts and debrief about what was read (written comprehension). - high school core French teacher

The oral interview has been, by far, the most exciting part of the DELF exam in terms of delivery and preparation. Ultimately, our students desire to attain strong second language speaking skills, and the DELF preparation allows them the time to concentrate on this area, whether it be employing concrete expressions (A1) or arguing a point (B2).

Perhaps the most useful tool has been the DVD produced by Edmonton Public Schools which shows local students being interviewed for the DELF exams. Used as a tool for training sessions, information sessions and for student preparation, it has been efficient and effective for all involved to see examples of Canadian students succeeding on an international exam.

The answers to our questions

In light of the above exploration, one can safely respond to our initial questions as follows:

- ✓ DELF preparation is not essential, but it is most helpful
- ✓ DELF preparation is not time-consuming
- ✓ DELF preparation is closely aligned to the curriculum, and can be offered in a variety of ways.

For more information:

- *International Language Proficiency Accreditation for Immersion and Core French Students* at www.cpfalta.ab.ca/Educators/DELf.pdf
- *Frequently Asked Questions about the DELF in Canada* at http://acpi.ca/documents/delf_depliant_en.pdf
- at www.cpfalta.ab.ca, look under "For educators" for "CEFR and the DELF"

¹ Other versions of these assessments are available to both youth and adults through agencies such as the Alliance française.

² Technical Report: Grade 12 French Proficiency Test, Spring 2010 Pilot Project, Quality Assurance Division, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, October 2010



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