

Switzerland

Early French – why it doesn't work

by Marita Brune-Koch*



Marita Brune-Koch.
(Picture gk)

In most German-speaking cantons in Switzerland, pupils have been taught French in primary school for over twenty years. This has not been successful, as pupils are not learning enough. Some cantons have therefore decided to discontinue early French (Years 5 and 6) and only start teaching

French in secondary school (Year 7). This has sparked controversy – far beyond school circles. Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider – a member of the Swiss government – even threatened to force the cantons to retain early French. This is even though the cantons have sovereignty over education. We are contributing further to the discussion on this topic.

"Singing 'Frère Jacques' three times a week doesn't teach you any French." That's what my colleague, a Romanist languages specialist and experienced French teacher at a secondary school, said years ago. He and his colleagues agreed: the pupils who enter secondary school today are completely unmotivated to learn French. They have generally not achieved their learning goals and cannot even conjugate the two central verbs "être" [to be] and "avoir" [to have]. Their failure has put them off learning French. Before the introduction of early French, things were different. Pupils entering Year 7 were usually motivated and excited about the new subject. Teachers were able to build up the language systematically and in accordance with subject-specific knowledge and teaching methodology. Now, after early French, this is hardly possible anymore. Pupils have no language structure and no longer want to know anything about the language. Letting children play around with French two or three times a week without



The failure of early French is linked to many factors.
(Picture keystone/ Gaetan Bally)

really teaching them anything spoils their desire to learn because they do not succeed.

Are pupils less intelligent than previous generations? Certainly not. If you want to understand the sense or nonsense of early French, you must look at the whole picture: the language is not taught systematically, and learning grammar and vocabulary is frowned upon. Instead, a "language bath" in which pupils are immersed two or three times a week is supposed to introduce them to the language automatically, without any effort or personal contribution on their part. However, this only works if the language to be learned is spoken by familiar people in everyday life over a long period of time, allowing the child to absorb the language. And even then, it only really works if the child is courageous, confident in its ability to learn and has encouraging, attentive caregivers who are proficient in both languages.

It is evident that early French fails at these hurdles: two to three lessons a week do not constitute "language immersion". In addition, we are now often dealing with children who do not have a good command of their own mother tongue. There are many reasons why so many children suffer from language deficits. One of the causes is the excessive use of digital media – by children, but often also by their parents. This can inhibit or prevent a healthy language development. Added to this is the fact that many foreign-language children attend school. Once they have

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mastered their own mother tongue, they must learn German first. And Swiss German too, because otherwise they will not be able to relate well to their peers – and this in turn inhibits learning at school.

The demand that German-speaking Swiss children should learn French is entirely justified. Without a common language, there can be no communication, and without communication, there can be no understanding – the common culture and cohesion are thus certainly at risk. But the way it is currently being done is certainly not the right approach.

The following conditions are necessary for language acquisition:

1. Children must have a good command of their mother tongue.
2. Children must have a good command of German. This is not always the same thing.
3. Children should once again be able to enjoy good, systematic instruction in all subjects, based on proven teaching methods for the individual subjects.
4. Teachers today are often *coaches* or *learning guides*. To give pupils a chance to succeed in their learning, teachers must be able and allowed to teach again; most people can only

learn independently on a solid foundation, as adults.

5. The relationship between the teacher and the pupils must become supportive again.
6. Pupils should focus on their teachers again; they must learn to listen to their teachers and classmates again.
7. Pupils must learn to focus on one thing again, to try and to overcome obstacles.

As can be seen, the failure of early French is linked to many factors. Simply demanding it is of little use. Continuing as before is a waste of time and money and discourages pupils.

In view of the many problems facing our schools, it certainly makes sense to suspend early French. The time gained can be used for a systematic development of the German language. This will enable pupils to acquire the foundations they need to learn a new foreign language properly in upper secondary school.

The systematic language development could be supplemented by pupil exchanges and exchange language stays between German-speaking Switzerland and French-speaking Switzerland. This is certainly more effective than an artificial “language bath” twice a week.

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