

DELFL Prep: Necessary or not?

With over twenty DELF exam centres across Canada and 97% of diploma recipients coming from the DELF Scolaire, whereby exams are coordinated and offered within a school division or by a Ministry of Education, questions are often raised by parents, teachers and administrators concerning the preparation process prior to the exam. This brief article will explore the following questions in hopes to provide insight for the variety of different learning contexts and the necessity of DELF preparation:

-  Must one prepare the students?
-  Is it time-consuming? How much time should be allotted?
-  Is it onerous?
-  Do students succeed if they don't prepare?
-  Are teachers required to utilize preparation books originating from Europe?

The DELF-DALF exam centre within the framework of the French Language Resource Centre in Grande Prairie has been offering DELF Scolaire exams since the spring of 2007. As a collaboration of thirteen partners comprising of seven schools boards in northwestern Alberta, each participating school has approached the preparation period differently. For the purpose of this article, classroom teachers, who also are accredited DELF examiner/markers and who have implemented the DELF exams in their respective groups, be it French Immersion (FI), French as a Second Language (FSL) or Francophone schools, were asked on how they approached preparation for the exam.

Based on the Common Framework of Reference for Languages, the DELF exams equally evaluate French reading, writing, speaking and listening. Our program of studies (POS) for both FSL and FI contain learning outcomes that are 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 in April of 2009 whereby teachers were unable to prepare their students after the examiner training session and the actual exam session. All students passed the exam.

Albeit, setting the appropriate levels according to the grade level is a vital component to success for all. Levels initially set by Edmonton Public Schools correlate well with our POS in both FSL and FI.

A1	Grade 9 FSL	Grade 5 French Immersion
A2	Grade 12 FSL	Grade 8 French Immersion
B1	Grade 12 Advanced FSL (IB or AP)	Grade 10 French Immersion
B2		Grade 12 French Immersion

The levels established for the FI students allow the majority of students to pass the exam, even those with learning difficulties since 50% is considered a pass. On a national and international level, B2 is known as the level to achieve when finishing grade school, since attaining a B2 diploma

permits university-entrance into France without writing a linguistic test. Setting the levels for a certain age group enables teachers to prepare an entire class for a certain level. In essence, it becomes *to what extent a student achieves* a certain level? As in any proficiency exams, levels of achievement vary considerably.

The action-based approach visible in the DELF exams, the Framework and the European Language Portfolio, opens the door to infinite possibilities in transforming the second language classroom. Accredited DELF examiners who are also teachers in the classroom have a solid base and 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 recreation of real-life situations found within the exam and more importantly, within the Framework. As a result, students are better prepared to write a DELF exam when they are taught equally all four language competencies in the classroom. Those who do prepare their students often will use the activities as a part of formative and summative assessments.

Anecdotally, we have discovered that those who are better prepared for the exam, meaning for example, those who understand the format, who have practiced oral interview situations with their peers, who have practiced similar 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 a format of after-school or noon hour preparation time for only 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 FI students. Even if there are those who choose not to write the exam, activities are used for assessment purposes.

It has become obvious to our team of examiners that schools taking even a small amount of time to introduce the students to the format of the exam note that candidates appear to display more confidence during the interview component. DELF preparation booklets are available from several European publication houses. These books are available to our teachers from our library which has a French Resource Centre. In general, teachers appreciate the well-designed resource since it takes the learner 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 taught in the classroom, are beneficial and appreciated by both student and 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 oral proficiency and the DELF preparation allows them the time to concentrate on this skill whether it be employing concrete expressions (A1) or arguing a point (B2).

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

In light of the above exploration, one can safely respond to the initial questioning with the following responses:

-  DELF preparation is not essential, yet it is most helpful.
-  DELF preparation is not time-consuming. Overviewing the format of the exam can be accomplished the week prior.
-  DELF preparation is not onerous; rather it is effective and closely aligned to curriculum.
-  Candidates have demonstrated success without preparation.
-  Teachers are not required to use the European books in order to prepare. However, most have found the resources to be effective and beneficial.

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