

Private classes help children boost their English skills

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Language arts: Under the watchful eye of teacher Danielle Serfaty, Hugo Grillot, 8, and Noémi Olivier-Cordeau, 7, put English lessons into practice at Kodojo language school in Verdun.

Photograph by: Normand Blouin

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It's career day in Danielle Serfaty's class of 6- and 7-year-olds. She holds up a picture of a mailman to her somewhat distracted students.

"What is this?" she asks the mainly francophone students.

"Un facteur," one answers quietly.

"A mailman!" another voice calls out.

"That's right," Serfaty says, then prompts the children to describe his attire — "Blue coat! Brown shoes!" —

before they dissolve into giggles when a classmate points out in English the mailman has a moustache.

It's a Saturday afternoon at Kodojo school in Verdun, and these students are here for something their parents think they don't get enough of in their regular curriculum: English-language instruction.

In the last few years, more private schools offering English second-language (ESL) courses have been opening in Montreal.

Two such ESL schools in particular, **Kodojo** and **Kazelfa**, focus specifically on English courses for children, and offer classes for those as young as 3.

The students attending these schools come from various ethnic backgrounds, but during the week, most attend French, usually public, schools.

Jonathan Sullivan, an anglophone whose parents sent him to French school, started Kodojo in 2011. That first session, he had 65 children. Now, about 100 children are registered per session, which last three months in the fall and four-and-a-half months in the winter.

"Every single one of the parents tells me, 'We're here because they're not getting what they need in the public sector,'" Sullivan said.

His classes, aimed at children ages 3 to 17, take place on weekdays and weekends and the school also offers private tutoring. Prices for the classes range from \$227 to \$454.

Last summer, the school held its first ESL day camp, where kids would learn in the morning and play in the afternoon, all in English. This year, he's also

offering French second-language courses.

Kazelfa school offers classes in the Plateau and the South Shore, and is adding a third location, Rosemont, this spring.

Maryse Dion, a former French and Spanish teacher, founded the school six years ago because she wanted her children, who spoke French and Spanish, to be fluent in English as well.

When she couldn't find classes for them, she decided to start her own.

Dion put out ads to find like-minded parents who would be future customers, found teachers and drew up a curriculum. Kazelfa's first class welcomed 37 kids, ranging in age from 5 to 12.

The school now has a total of 400 students registered for the 2014 winter session. The session is comprised of 16 90-minute classes, held on weekends and costing between \$228 and \$280.

Sullivan and Dion say their classes act as a supplement to the English instruction the students get at their regular schools.

ESL schools fall outside the purview of the Education Department. The provincial government doesn't have to give permission for them to open, and has no say in what they teach.

At Kazelfa, all the instructors have at least a bachelor's degree and work as teachers during the week. Kodojo's instructors all have teaching experience as well as experience working with children.

Classes focus on teaching concepts and reinforcing those concepts during

activities. The students are divided according to age and sometimes ability. Class sizes are small — at Kodojo, the maximum is eight students per class, at Kazelfa, it's between eight and 14 — which allows the teachers to interact with each child individually and make sure they understand the material.

In Serfaty's class at Kodojo, each week follows a theme and the activities serve to reinforce that theme. The kids learn to pronounce and write words related to the theme, then play a game, read a story together and complete an arts and crafts project. They also get a short homework assignment that is reviewed at the beginning of the next week's class.

During the recent career day, Serfaty asks each child in the class to pronounce the name of a profession out loud before she moves on.

When one student correctly pronounces the word "cook" after a short struggle, Serfaty gives him a celebratory high-five. Mistakes are made, but are quickly corrected by the teacher or sometimes by a fellow student.

During the class, students speak to each other in French, English, or both, depending on the child. Serfaty, who has been teaching at Kodojo for more than two years, doesn't chastise the students for speaking French. When younger students speak French, she repeats what they say in English. And with older students, she asks them to repeat their French phrases in English.

Despite a lack of formal marks, the teachers track each student's progress, and both Dion and Sullivan say many parents find their child's school grades improve as a result of attending the classes.

Philippe Poyet's 7-year-old son, Orion, attends a private international school that offers four hours of English instruction per week. Poyet doesn't think that's enough, so he enrolled his son at Kodojo.

Poyet is Québécois and his wife is Chinese — neither is fully comfortable in English, but he wants to make sure his son is. "You become inaccessible if you don't learn (English)," he said.

Both French and English were new to Daniel Villamizar's daughter Daniela when she started school in Quebec three years ago. She and her family emigrated from Venezuela when she was 5, and soon after she began at a French school, she fell behind in English.

Now 8, Daniela has been taking English classes at Kodojo for a year and a half and says she understands much more than she used to.

"I thought it was just school to learn English, but I play games and that makes it easier," she said.

Her father says his daughter, who was frustrated at being unable to communicate with anglophone friends at school in their mother tongue, is now much more motivated.

English classes in public French-language elementary schools begin in Grade 1, although the Parti Québécois government has expressed interest in pushing the start time to Grade 4.

According to the Education Department, students at French-language elementary schools receive between one hour and 90 minutes of English instruction per week.

At Quebec's public English-language schools, French classes begin in kindergarten.

Concordia University education professor Joanna White said it's important that the time spent on second-language acquisition is concentrated, so that students can engage more with the language.

One extra hour a week of English classes won't make as big a difference as if the kids were attending multiple nights a week for several years, she said.

But White acknowledged that the owners of these schools are on to something.

"(Parents) are recognizing that (what's provided by the school system is) not enough. Everybody knows it's not enough, but that's what fits in the schedule," she said.

Parents of children at Kodojo and Kazelfa say they know an extra 90 minutes of English a week isn't going to make their children fluent, but that the more practice they get, the more comfortable they will be in the language.

They also hope learning English will open more doors for their children in the future.

Sullivan and Dion say that regardless of whether the province will ever boost the amount of English instruction in French schools, there will always be a place for the classes they offer.

"There will always be a need for having kids in small groups, practising their English," Dion said.