

What Parents Want to Know About Foreign Language Immersion Programs

TARA W. FORTUNE, CENTER FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
 DIANE J. TEDICK, DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Modeled after the pioneering French immersion programs developed in Canada in the 1960s, foreign language immersion programs in the United States are designed to enrich the education of native-English-speaking students by teaching them all of their academic subjects in a second language. The goal is for students to become proficient in the second language and develop increased cultural awareness while reaching a high level of academic achievement. Students develop proficiency in the second language by hearing and using it to learn all of their school subjects rather than by studying the language itself.

Parents who are considering an immersion program for their child usually have many questions. This digest provides introductory responses to some of the questions most commonly posed by parents.

What is a foreign language immersion program and how does it work?

In foreign language immersion programs, the regular school curriculum is taught in the immersion language for at least half of the school day. In *partial immersion programs*, instructional time is divided equally between English and the immersion language throughout the elementary grades. In *full immersion programs*, teachers use no English at all in the early grades. In Grade 2, 3, or 4, teachers introduce English language arts and reading for one period per day and gradually move toward an even distribution of English and the immersion language by Grade 5 or 6. In the secondary school grades, immersion students typically have access to at least two course offerings in the immersion language, most often in social studies and language arts.

In U.S. programs, the immersion language is most often a world language spoken by large numbers of people, such as Spanish, French, or Cantonese. In some cases, it is a heritage language being revitalized, as in the Hawaiian and Yup'ik (an Alaska native language) immersion programs that serve indigenous communities. The goal of immersion is to provide educational experiences, beginning in kindergarten and ideally sustained through Grade 12, that support academic and linguistic development in two languages and that develop students' appreciation of their own and other cultures.

One of the key principles of immersion education is that linguistic and cultural knowledge is a resource—the more you know, the better off you are. Immersion education adds knowledge about a new language and culture while building on a child's English language skills and knowledge of U.S. culture.

In order to make academic lessons comprehensible to learners and to support their second language learning, immersion teachers—who are highly proficient in English and the immersion language—use a vast repertoire of instructional strategies as they cover the school district's curriculum (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Snow, 1987). Many of these strategies appear on the *Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist* (Fortune, 2000) developed by immersion teachers and researchers at a summer institute at the University of Minnesota.¹

In the early years, immersion teachers realize that their students will not understand everything they say. They use body language, visuals, manipulatives, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonation to communicate their meaning. In kindergarten it is common for students to speak English with their peers and when responding to their teacher. As the years progress, students naturally use more of the immersion language. To draw students into using the language, teachers often use songs, useful phrases, chants, and rhymes and carefully structure the day with familiar routines.

Why should I consider enrolling my child in an immersion program?

Immersion programs are the fastest growing² and most effective type of foreign language program currently available in U.S. schools. Most immersion students can be expected to reach higher levels of second language proficiency than students in other school-based language programs (Met, 1998). Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places, and many parents want to provide their children with skills to interact competently in an increasingly interdependent world community.

In addition to reaping the social and economic advantages of bilingualism, immersion learners benefit cognitively, exhibiting greater non-verbal problem-solving abilities and more flexible thinking (see reviews in Met, 1998). It has been suggested that the very processes learners need to use to make sense of the teacher's meaning make them pay closer attention and think harder. These processes, in turn, appear to have a positive effect on cognitive development. However, a high level of second language proficiency is needed in order to experience the positive cognitive benefits that come with bilingualism (Cummins, 1981). From the standpoint of academic achievement, over three decades of studies consistently show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1987).

How will learning everything in a second language affect my child's English language and literacy development?

Many parents are initially fearful that immersion may have a negative impact on their child's English language development. But research consistently finds that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). It should be noted that full immersion students' English development may lag temporarily in reading, word knowledge, and spelling while instruction is occurring exclusively in the immersion language. However, after a year or two of instruction in English language arts, this discrepancy disappears (Genesee, 1987). It is important for parents to understand that this lag is temporary and to be expected.

In full immersion programs, children develop initial literacy in the immersion language. Many cognitive processes that underlie the ability to read, such as understanding the relationship between the spoken language and the written word, transfer from one language to another (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). But when the immersion language differs significantly from English (e.g., languages that don't use our alphabet) literacy skills developed in one language will not necessarily transfer to the other language. Immersion students who learn to read first in a language that is markedly different from English, such as Arabic or Japanese, will need to learn and practice literacy skills that are specific to each language (Kanagy, 2001).

It is assumed that immersion students will have consistent exposure to and support for English at home and in the community. Parents need to provide their children with experiences that will enhance their English language and literacy development. For example, they should read to their children every day and involve them in games and activities that complement their classroom learning. Research shows that the stronger the development of the native language, the greater the proficiency in the immersion language, so children who enter an immersion program with a

strong base in English will succeed more easily than those whose English skills are not as strong.

Will my child become proficient in the second language? How long will that take?

After only 2 or 3 years in an immersion program, students demonstrate fluency and confidence when using the immersion language, and their listening and reading skills are comparable to those of native speakers of the same age. While these skills remain native-like, students' speaking and writing skills lag behind those of native speakers (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Research finds that immersion students' second language lacks grammatical accuracy and does not display the variety and complexity produced by native speakers of the language. Achieving high levels of oral and written proficiency in a second language is a long-term process. A long-term commitment is essential, and parents need to understand that native-like proficiency in every skill area is unlikely. Still, immersion students will have a strong second language base upon which to continue moving toward full proficiency and to develop proficiency in subsequent languages.

Language learning is influenced by many factors, including students' personality and motivation, teacher expectations, parental support, program leadership, and support at both the school and district level. Student success requires the active involvement of all of these stakeholders.

Is immersion an appropriate choice for all children?

The vast majority of immersion programs are open to all students. There is no admission test or pre-screening process. Research findings on the effectiveness of immersion education hold true for a wide range of students, including those from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Genesee, 1992). As is sometimes purported, these programs are not intended exclusively for middle- and upper-class Anglo families. In fact, some recent research indicates that immersion may be an effective program model for children who speak a language other than English or the immersion language at home (deCourcy, Warren, & Burston, 2002). It is hypothesized that these learners may benefit from a levelling-of-the-playing-field effect that occurs when all of the students in the class are functioning in a second language. Students who are not native speakers of English are able to be on par with their native-English-speaking peers and enjoy the same kinds of success with learning.

There are, however, many unanswered questions concerning the suitability of language immersion for children with language-based learning disabilities. Research on this topic is scant. Some researchers and immersion practitioners argue that children whose first language acquisition is seriously delayed or who struggle with auditory discrimination skills may be overtaxed in a language immersion program (see review in Genesee, 1992). Previously identified language-processing challenges should be considered prior to enrolling a child in an immersion program. Still, many children with mild learning disabilities, knowledgeable teachers, and supportive families can and do achieve well in immersion programs and develop proficiency in a second language. Parents and educators need not assume that learning in two languages will overtax these children. In fact, many instructional techniques used in immersion are similar to techniques recommended for struggling learners. Understanding how to make language immersion classrooms more inclusive for a broader spectrum of learners is one of many topics of interest to immersion educators.

What can I do to support my child's immersion experience if I don't speak the second language?

Like all parents, parents of children in immersion programs should maintain an active role in their children's education by providing experiences that help develop their English language skills and enhance their cognitive and affective development. They should read to them daily and engage them in activities where they need to apply what they are learning in class. For example, third-grade students studying measurement can do activities at home that involve measuring, such as hanging a picture or baking cookies. Parents should also communicate with the teachers on a regular

basis about their children's academic, social, and language development. They should become well informed about immersion education, make a commitment to keep their child in the immersion program, and support their children's use of the immersion language outside the school context, for example, by providing reading materials in the immersion language at home and encouraging a pen/keypal friendship.

While volunteering in classrooms is often a good way for parents to be involved in their child's education, parents need to be careful that their volunteering efforts don't compromise children's use of the immersion language. Some programs designate one afternoon per week for parent volunteers, encourage volunteering during periods when English is used, or have parents volunteer their time for activities that don't involve classroom interaction.

Conclusion

Immersion education offers an exciting opportunity for students to reach high levels of academic achievement and to acquire strong proficiency in English and another language. Parents who are interested in immersion for their children should become as well informed as possible about this program model. It is hoped that this digest will serve as a useful starting point.

Notes

1. This checklist can be found online at <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/Immersion/checklist.html>.

2. To access the directory of foreign language immersion programs maintained by the Center for Applied Linguistics, see <http://www.cal.org/ericcll/immersion>.

References

- Cloud, N. Genesee, F., & Hamayan, E. (2000). *Dual language instruction: A handbook for enriched education*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In *School and language minority students: A theoretical framework*. Los Angeles: California State University; Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center.
- de Courcy, M., Warren, J., & Burston, M. (2002). Children from diverse backgrounds in an immersion programme. *Language and Education*, 16(2), 112-127.
- Fortune, T. (2000). Immersion teaching strategies observation checklist. *ACIE Newsletter*, 4(1), pp. 1-4 (Insert).
- Genesee, F. (1987). *Learning through two languages: Studies of immersion and bilingual education*. Rowley, MA: Newbury.
- Genesee, F. (1992). Second/foreign language immersion and at-risk English-speaking children. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25(3), 199-213.
- Johnson, R. K., & Swain, M. (Eds.) (1997). *Immersion education: International perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kanagy, R. (2001). Hai, Genki Desu: Doing fine in a Japanese immersion classroom. In D. Christian & F. Genesee (Eds.), *Bilingual education* (pp. 139-150). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Met, M. (Ed.). (1998). *Critical Issues in early second language learning*. New York: Scott Foresman—Addison Wesley.
- Snow, M. A. (1987). *Immersion teacher handbook*. Los Angeles: Center for Language Education and Research.

This digest was prepared with funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Library of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0090. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED, OERI, or NLE.



Second Language Learning: Everyone Can Benefit¹

Kathleen M. Marcos²

The 1990s have been a decade of renewed interest in language learning. As always, political and economic concerns play a major role in the nation's perception of the value of learning a second language (Met and Galloway, 1992). In addition, there is now a growing appreciation of the role that multilingual individuals can play in an increasingly diverse society, and there is also a greater understanding of the academic and cognitive benefits that may accrue from learning other languages. During the past five years in particular, researchers, policymakers, educators, employers, parents, and the media have reexamined the advantages of foreign language learning.

In 1989, a presidential resolution declaring the 1990s the "decade of the brain" was announced. An increased level of research on brain development has been under way throughout the 1990s. Some of this research has analyzed the effect of language acquisition on the brain. The results of these studies have generated media interest in how early learning experiences—including first and second language acquisition—promote cognitive development. *Newsweek* magazine, for example, devoted a special edition to the critical first three years of a child's life and indicated that there is a window of opportunity for second language learning that begins when a child is one year of age (Lach, 1997). A recent article in *Time* magazine suggested that foreign languages should be taught to children as early as possible (Nash, 1997). And the television newsmagazine *Dateline NBC* aired a segment on first and second language acquisition in November 1997. (See in this issue, "Brain Mechanisms for Language Learning" by Sonia Jurich)

This article summarizes findings from numerous sources on the benefits of studying second languages and offers suggestions to parents and educators for encouraging language learning at home and at school.

Benefits of Second Language Learning

Personal Benefits

An obvious advantage of knowing more than one language is having expanded access to people and resources. Individuals who speak and read more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more fully from travel to other countries. Introducing students to alternative ways of expressing themselves and to different cultures gives greater depth to their understanding of human experience by fostering an appreciation for the customs and achievements of people beyond their own communities. Ultimately, knowing a second language can also give people a competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities (Villano, 1996).

Cognitive Benefits

Some research suggests that students who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991). Other studies suggest that persons with full proficiency in more than one language (*bilinguals*) outperform similar monolingual persons on both verbal and

Is Earlier Always Better?

Although people can learn languages at any age, some studies suggest that children who learn a language before adolescence are more likely than older learners to attain native-like pronunciation (Harley, 1986; Patkowski, 1990). A number of researchers have found that children have an innate ability to acquire the rules of any language, and that this ability diminishes by adulthood (Curtiss, 1995; Johnson and Newport, 1989).

Older language students should take heart, however, in the results of other studies that report that although young children acquire pronunciation easily, they are not particularly efficient learners of vocabulary or other aspects of language structure (Genesee, 1978; Swain and Lapkin, 1989). Of course, the more years devoted to learning a language and the more opportunities available to use it in everyday situations, the greater the proficiency achieved (Curtain, 1997).

nonverbal tests of intelligence, which raises the question of whether ability in more than one language enables individuals to achieve greater intellectual flexibility (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

Academic Benefits

Parents and educators sometimes express concern that learning a second language will have a detrimental effect on students' reading and verbal abilities in English. However, several studies suggest the opposite. For example, a recent study of the reading ability of 134 four- and five-year-old children found that bilingual children understood better than monolingual children the general symbolic representation of print (Bialystok, 1997). Another study analyzed achievement test data of students in Fairfax County, Virginia, who had participated for five years in immersion--the most intensive type of foreign language program. The study concluded that those students scored as well as or better than all comparison groups on achievement tests and that they remained high academic achievers throughout their schooling (Thomas, Collier, and Abbott, 1993). Finally, a study conducted in Louisiana in the 1980s showed that regardless of race, sex, or academic level, students who received daily instruction in a foreign language (taught as a separate subject rather than through immersion) out-performed those who did not receive such instruction on the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade language arts sections of Louisiana's Basic Skills Tests (Rafferty, 1986). Numerous other studies have also shown a positive relationship between foreign language study and English language arts achievement (Barik and Swain, 1975; Genesee, 1987; Swain, 1981). All of these results suggest that second language study helps enhance English and other academic skills.

Some studies have found that students who learn foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized college entrance exams than those who do not. For example, the College Entrance Examination Board reported that students who had averaged four or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who had studied four or more years of any other subject (College Entrance Examination Board, 1992; Cooper, 1987). These findings, which were consistent with College Board profiles for previous years (College Entrance Examination Board, 1982; Solomon, 1984) and with the work of Eddy (1981), suggest that studying a second language for a number of years may contribute to higher SAT scores.³

Societal Benefits

Bilingualism and multilingualism have many benefits to society. Americans who are fluent in more than one language can enhance America's economic competitiveness abroad, maintain its political and security interests, and work to pro-

mote an understanding of cultural diversity within the United States. For example, international trade specialists, overseas media correspondents, diplomats, airline employees, and national security personnel need to be familiar with other languages and cultures to do their jobs well. Teachers, healthcare providers, customer service representatives, and law enforcement personnel also serve their constituencies more effectively when they can reach across languages and cultures. Developing the language abilities of the students now in school will improve the effectiveness of the work force later.

Benefits for Children with Disabilities

Generally speaking, students with learning disabilities can learn a second language and enjoy the many personal benefits of familiarity with a second language and culture (Baker, 1995). One important study of learning-disabled children taking a foreign language reported that students of average and below-average IQ performed as well as students of above-average IQ on oral production and interpersonal communication tasks (Genesee, 1976). Special multisensory techniques that emphasize the direct and explicit teaching of speech sounds through drill cards and reading, writing, and speaking exercises can facilitate the language learning of special student populations (Schneider, 1996; Sparks and others, 1991).

Some speech pathologists and pediatricians may discourage early foreign language learning, particularly when a child is diagnosed with dyslexia, aphasia, or a hearing impairment or scores low on tests of intelligence (Baker, 1995). A language specialist should be consulted before a child with a severe learning disability begins a second language program, but many students with learning disabilities can and do benefit from second language learning experiences.

Benefits for Gifted Children

Because linguistically gifted students are particularly good candidates for attaining native or near-native proficiency in other languages, some educators have advocated offering foreign language instruction early in childhood to fully develop that potential (Brickman, 1988). Typically highly verbal and with advanced vocabularies, these students ideally should be taught using curricula specially geared to their innate strengths, such as strong language, conceptualization, socialization, and productivity traits (Allen, 1992). Early exposure to second languages and cultures will help parents and teachers identify those children likely to exhibit strong language aptitude.

Why Immersion?

From "The ACIE Newsletter" Volume 2, February 2001

The answer seems so obvious now, but 6 years ago the concept seemed too radical to seriously consider. Sending my baby off in the care of strangers and trusting them to teach her reading, writing and arithmetic in English was difficult enough. Surely asking her to learn from people who spoke in a language neither she nor her parents understood was an unnecessary complication. Fortunately we decided to explore language immersion before rejecting it, and in doing so completely changed our minds, and our children's' futures.

Now that we are in our fifth year (and second child) of immersion schooling, answering the question of "why immersion?" has become easy. At an ACIE workshop with other immersion parents, as well as other conversations, I have learned that we all had similar reasons. Perhaps sharing my top seven reasons will encourage other parents to fully explore immersion for their children.

1. Children of today will need to be bilingual to be successful in the global society and economy of their adulthood. Today two languages are useful - tomorrow they will be required, and a third language will be desired.
2. Childhood is the best time to develop an appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures, peoples and perspectives in the world. Preschoolers are aware of differences, but the harmful prejudices develop during the elementary school ages. Consistent positive exposure and interaction are the best prevention.
3. Humans learn language best prior to age 12. Research on brain development in recent decades have confirmed this fact, with wide discussion in the popular media. Our brains are wired to produce all sounds, but if we don't learn to make certain sounds, we can lose that ability. (Some of us use this as a convenient excuse for our difficulty in learning another language as an adult, but it isn't a barrier, just a reason to start young.)
4. Children learn language by listening and repeating, and don't have any fear of a "foreign" language. This was one of those *clic!* moments for me, when I realized that immersion teaching taught the immersion language in the very same manner children already learn English - by speaking and repeating in context. It is very natural for children. My children attended a university preschool, where many of the children spoke a different language at home, yet even the newest children participated fully, understood, and quickly spoke in English. Again there is research to support this concept, and schools recruiting students should make copies available, but it is a commonsense explanation as well.
5. Academic skills are actually enhanced. Studies consistently show that immersion students do as well as or better than comparable non-immersion students in English language skills, math, science, and social studies. If you've studied another language, you know that those classes taught you much of what you know about English grammar. Increasingly research has also demonstrated the connections between math, music and language skills.
6. Children are guaranteed to be challenged. Immersion learning takes extra effort from children (and parents) in that reading and writing skills need to be practiced in two languages. I was surprised to learn that nonetheless programming for gifted children can be difficult in the early years, when their minds work faster than their developed vocabulary in the new language. A successful immersion program provides both gifted and special education assistance to meet the needs of all students.
7. Parents will be involved. In most districts, parents have to choose to send their child to an immersion school. I expected, and it is true, that the parent community would be supportive of the school, the children, and each other. Involved parents are one of the most critical elements of a successful educational program.

So how did we learn these things, and how can you share them with others? I went to an open house, before our school even existed. Copies of many research summaries were provided, and I read them all. I talked to parents in other immersion programs, who reinforced the research by confirming that their children's skill levels were age-appropriate in all subjects. Most importantly, I watched the teachers who would be opening our school demonstrate a lesson in Spanish with a group of English-speaking kindergartners. The kids participated and responded, even with an audience. Those "strangers" to whom I was going to entrust my child were no longer strangers, and were obviously skilled. Suddenly it was clear what our decision would be. My heart followed where my head had led, and as Robert Frost first said in *The Road Not Taken*, "I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."