



OLD SCHOOL IMMERSION  
IS OUT.

**WHY RESEARCH-  
BASED, DATA  
VALIDATED  
LANGUAGE  
ACQUISITION IS IN.**



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[isdenver.org](http://isdenver.org)

It is time to turn the old-school, traditional thinking of language immersion on its head. Research is debunking the previously held approaches to immersion education and giving way to methodologies that should be shaping the way that we as language school educators think and teach.

-Bob Carignan  
ISDenver  
Head of School





# Let's clear the air on something.

## A person of *any age* can learn a new language.

For many years, it was widely accepted that language acquisition was only possible for young children. In recent years, however, the study of neurology and the brain has evolved to prove this school of thought wrong. **While there are certainly advantages to starting young, people of any age from 3 to 103 can learn a language.**

The Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah, is a great example. MTC is the largest language training school for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Every year, about 36,000 students come to the center before they leave on missions around the world to spread the Mormon faith.

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center is another example. It's one of the world's foremost language schools, located in Monterey, California, to prepare linguists for the U.S. Armed Forces in over a dozen languages.

At the International School of Denver, we had to adapt our stance around this for school admissions. Historically, we only admitted students ages 3-5 to our Chinese, French, and Spanish language immersion programs. We know the obvious benefits of language acquisition from an early age, including time in full immersion and the ability to sound like a native speaker. We also know when a second (or more) languages are learned before the pre-pubescent years, fMRIs show that there is an increase in size of the pre-frontal cortex. (This is the home of executive functioning, language, math, and science.) There is also a direct correlation to a deeper social and emotional context of words when language is started from early on.

However, **language learning isn't accessible to everyone from an early age and better late than never!** In 2019, we changed our Admissions requirement for full grade-level proficiency in Primary School to accommodate novice-speakers in the Spanish Program. The program offers small-group Spanish-language instruction as well as inclusion with fully grade-level proficient peers. In 5th grade, students travel to Spain for two weeks to fully immerse themselves in the language and culture.



# BICS and CALP Explained.

Jim Cummins identified two categories of linguistic proficiencies:

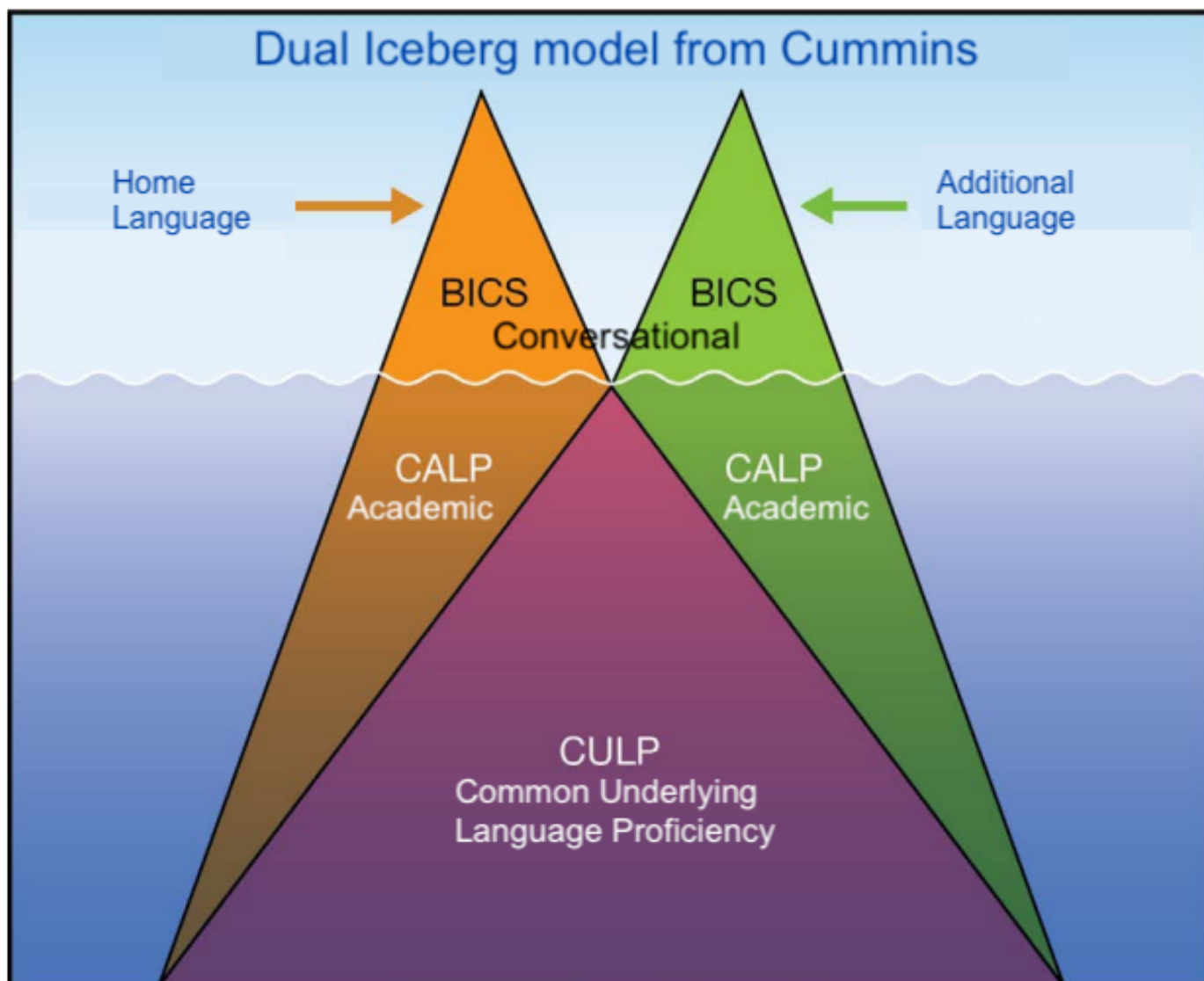
- Conversational which he refers to as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and
- Academic or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

BICS and CALP are **different areas** of language proficiency.

- **Conversational language** acquisition comes from the early immersion model, it is used for **social interactions**.
- **The academic language is cognitively more demanding and usually takes place in a classroom setting**. This academic language is not familiar to the students, it is introduced later on.

Cummins' Common Underlying Language Proficiency Theory explains that the language knowledge and skills that a student acquires in their first language build a base that can be used for the development of any additional language. That foundation grows as the students become more proficient in their first language and target language.

Pedagogically, this means **language learners leverage all the knowledge they have in any language to help them transfer into their other language**.



# A strong mother tongue fosters a strong language development.

As a student begins to use their target language in more sophisticated ways, a concept called translanguageing comes into play. **Translanguageing is using all languages known by someone to communicate and understand the world around oneself.**

Translanguageing represents an approach to language pedagogy that affirms and leverages students' diverse and dynamic language practices in teaching and learning. (Vogel & Garcia, 2017)

**Students learn best when they make connections, and sometimes their limited vocabulary in the target language gets in the way.** Their connections need to be made in their native language and then internally translated into their target language, making both languages stronger. This research-based pedagogy is being championed by French Education organizations and they have worked with us in this area over the last five years.

## Here are a few examples of how translanguageing is applied in the classroom:

1

Jose is a fully proficient Spanish and English speaker in the French program. In his essay to show understanding of a text in French related to social studies concepts, Jose uses Spanish and English words and phrases when he cannot express himself in French. In this way, he uses all three languages he knows to fully respond to the writing prompt instead of limiting himself to just French.

(The goal of the essay in this example was to assess conceptual understanding alone and not vocabulary knowledge. This specific vocabulary will be reviewed with the teacher and assessed at a different time.)

2

A third grade math class studies fractions. The vocabulary and concepts are first introduced in English to establish a new vocabulary and add to their lexicon. The lesson is then augmented upon in target language after they've established the language and their conceptual understanding in English.

## At the International School of Denver, we fully support students using all of the “tools” they have in their toolbelt to express themselves.

We believe a strong mother tongue is paramount to language acquisition and the transfer of conceptual understanding to the additional language. The old school model favoring emphasis on the target language alone doesn't take into account or leverage existing knowledge of the student in their home language.

Our teaching practices allowing translanguageing in the classrooms reflect current neuroscience research. We are presenting our methods at the MLF (Mission Laïque Française) French American School's conference we are hosting in April 2024.



# The International School of Denver Approach.\*

- **Early Childhood Education:** Our early learners develop language foundation in a full immersion environment, developing at their own level.
- **Primary School:** Using our translinguaging approach, English is incrementally added every year to establish both English and their target language as academic languages. Even though they still have the majority of the time in their Target Language in G1 and G2 using both languages allows all our students to reach a conceptual understanding of the content taught (e.g. math). Once students reach G3 they can acquire more sophisticated academic language (as their academics are getting harder).



*Translinguaging refers to both the discourse practices of bilinguals, as well as to pedagogical practices that use the entire complex linguistic repertoire of bilingual students flexibly in order to teach rigorous content and develop language practices for academic use.*

- Ofelia Garcia

- **Immersion and International Baccalaureate Framework are a powerful duo.** The benefits of the bilingual brain are compelling. But it isn't enough just to be bilingual. Together with language, we need to equip our students with 21st century skills that are now a must to succeed. At the International School of Denver **we teach in and through language** (known as the CLIL methodology) within the inquiry-based, student-centric curriculum framework known as International Baccalaureate. This model works.

*\*ISDenver language programs are accredited by ministries of education in France and Spain and recognized by the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), which is affiliated with the China Ministry of Education.*





## Immersion + IB works. **The data is compelling.**

Assessment data validates our immersion and International Baccalaureate model. The data shows that ISDenver students are meeting *and* exceeding the norms for their age levels across English language usage, reading, and math - while in a bilingual immersion school setting. (Take a moment to let that sink in. Our students are exceeding norms even though our students' first academic languages are Spanish, French, or Chinese!)

As demonstrated in our most recent MAP Assessment data (Spring 2023) for Grades 2-8, our students significantly outpace the average student in both public and private schools in levels of English language usage, reading, and math at every age. Our data on Kindergarten and G1 learners are also indicative of this trend. ([Read the full report here.](#))

This bilingual model sets students up for more growth and success in our middle school, and in high school and college as they move to a more English-based learning curriculum.

More than the data, we see this play out for our ISDenver graduates. Our students are moving on to thrive not only in high school, college, graduate school, and the workforce. Read more in our [Portrait of a Graduate](#).

**Want to know more about what makes an ISDenver education so special? Contact our [Admissions team](#) today to see the school for yourself.**



## About the International School of Denver.

### Mission

Our inclusive, globally minded community develops highly motivated and academically successful bilingual learners who are inter-culturally adept and make positive contributions in a complex world.

### Vision

ISDenver will be an exemplary, multi-lingual international school in the world-wide community, distinguished by its commitment to:

- A cohesive Pre-K – 8 community of students, faculty, staff, parents and alumni
- An outstanding faculty that is continually embracing best pedagogical practices
- An individualized approach to student learning to ensure that all students are challenged and successful
- Enhanced knowledge and skills in math, science and technology that prepare students for a changing future
- Students' personal development ensuring that they are well rounded individuals exhibiting ISD values and beliefs
- Internationalism in the curriculum and school culture

### Values & Beliefs

- Diversity
- Integrity
- Compassion
- Responsibility
- Perseverance

**Multilingual Education.**  
**Global Mindset.**  
**Extraordinary Impact.**