

Immersion Education – Academic Achievement with a Language Twist

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Increasingly, educators across the U.S. are turning to the language immersion program alternative for developing proficiency in new languages beginning in the early primary years. Immersion programs offer families a content-driven, content-accountable approach to language learning. That means, teachers speak the language students are learning during subject matter instruction and students demonstrate mastery of the academic material as they are learning to understand, speak, read, and write the new language. While a number of programmatic variations have developed since the 1960s when the immersion model was first introduced to public schools, all immersion programs begin by teaching through the immersion language for at least half of the elementary school day. This minimum level of language learning intensity helps create the “need to know,” one of many immersion program characteristics that have led to its well-documented success.

Immersion education is grounded in the principles of additive bilingualism and cultural pluralism. This orientation views language and culture as resource, and thus, being bilingual and bicultural as being resource-rich. The goals of an immersion education are three-fold:

- (1) high levels of academic achievement,
- (2) bilingualism and biliteracy, and
- (3) heightened sensitivity to and understanding of diverse cultural groups.

As an educational program model, immersion has evolved to serve a few different purposes. Each of these purposes can be viewed as one of three distinct branches of immersion education known as one-way, two-way, and indigenous immersion.

One-way programs, also referred to as foreign language immersion, build proficiency in a regional and/or world language and are intended for children from English-speaking families. In the U.S. the majority of one-way programs are either Spanish or French immersion, though programs that target less commonly taught languages, such as Mandarin and Japanese, are increasing in number. Two-way immersion programs, also called bilingual immersion, bring children from different language backgrounds together to learn each other's languages and to promote cross-cultural understanding. The vast majority of these U.S. programs are Spanish-English; however, a few bring together other language groups, for example, Korean-English or Mandarin-English speakers. The third branch of immersion education targets Native peoples and is known as indigenous immersion education. Indigenous immersion programs use language and culture education as a means of revitalizing endangered Native languages and restoring an empowered sense of indigenous cultural identity. Such programs have existed for over two decades and include languages such as Hawaiian, Yup'ik, Mohawk, Diné (Navajo), and Ojibwe.

Decades of research carried out in a wide range of contexts support immersion program efficacy. Hundreds of program evaluation studies consistently report positive academic achievement outcomes in which immersion students are found to perform at least as well if not better than their demographically similar, non-immersion counterparts. These findings apply to learners from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and ability levels. In early total immersion programs that delay instruction through English until sometime between grade 2 and grade 5, studies suggest there may be a temporary English language lag in areas such as spelling, punctuation, and breadth of vocabulary. However, within a year or two of English-medium instruction the lag no longer exists, and in exchange for waiting students in these programs gain a higher level of immersion language proficiency.

A growing body of research points towards additional cognitive and linguistic benefits of an immersion education. Studies indicate, for example, that immersion students exhibit greater non-verbal problem-solving skills and heightened awareness of the components of languages and how they function to create meaning. More recently, studies suggest a third language learning advantage exists for already bilingual immersion learners. Moreover, third language children, who enter an immersion school speaking a language other than those used for instruction, have been found to perform well both academically and linguistically. Increasingly, immersion programs are exploring the largely untapped third language learning potential of immersion education.

Like any educational model, immersion programs experience certain challenges. Research finds that students' speaking and writing skills are often lacking in grammatical accuracy, lexical variety and sentence complexity. Many teachers report difficulty in getting students to use their second language, especially beyond the primary grades and with other students in the classroom. Program administrators also acknowledge staffing challenges and a constant search for high-quality curricular and instructional materials in the immersion language.

In spite of these and other obstacles, immersion educators and the families they affect espouse a unique level of passion for and commitment to the program model. This highly successful approach to language and culture learning in the schools merits continued support here in the U.S. and abroad. For more information on immersion education, visit the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition's Immersion Projects at www.carla.umn.edu/immersion.

References:

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