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Understanding Immersion Education: What can we learn from research and successful practitioners?

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Language Immersion Parents' FAQs:

1. How can acquiring a second language in an immersion program benefit my child?
2. What are appropriate expectations regarding my child's second language acquisition?

*Adapted from a handout developed by T. Fortune

3. Are there costs to English language and literacy development for immersion students?
 4. How can parents support their child's success in immersion both at home and in school?
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Research Findings on the Benefits of an Immersion Education

Academic/Educational

- Decades of research on English-speaking immersion students of various academic abilities shows that these learners are capable of achieving high levels of functional proficiency in the immersion language while at the same time achieving academically at or above their non-immersion peers on standardized tests administered in English (Genesee, 1987, 2004; 2007; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). In addition, students from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are successful in these programs (Caldas & Boudreaux, 1999; Holobow, Genesee, & Lambert, 1991).
- Contrary to initial concerns about the possible detriment to English language development, foreign language immersion students who achieve relatively high levels of second language proficiency demonstrate enhanced levels of English language skills and of metalinguistic awareness, a skill that positively impacts learning to read because it facilitates decoding abilities (Harley, Hart & Lapkin, 1986). All students acquire age-appropriate L1 (native language) skills in all domains of English whether they are in programs with little English instruction initially (e.g., full or total immersion) or with more English instruction initially (e.g., partial immersion).
- Foreign language immersion programs have been found to be an effective program model for third language children by offering a learning environment that "levels the playing field" (Bild & Swain, 1989; deCourcy, Warren, & Burston, 2002; Dagenais, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 1991).
- When students are schooled through a second language they acquire the language as well as the content without needing to allocate additional instructional time for the specific teaching of a foreign language at the expense of other subject areas (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

Cognitive Benefits

- Research finds evidence for the greater cognitive flexibility (Bruck, et al., 1976), and better nonverbal problem-solving abilities of foreign language immersion students (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1990). These findings point towards a relationship between second language proficiency and the development of symbolic reasoning.

- *Fully proficient* bilinguals outperform monolinguals in the areas of divergent thinking, pattern recognition, and problem solving (Bialystok, 2001; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Peal & Lambert, 1962).
- It is important to remember that cognitive benefits accrue in relation to the level of second language proficiency attained. As Cummins (1981) cautions, there is a certain threshold of second language proficiency necessary before cognitive benefits will develop.

Economic and Political Benefits

- Proficiency in a second language and intercultural competence open up employment possibilities in areas that require involvement in the global economy such as international businesses, tourism, communications, and the diplomatic corps. High-level, high-paying employment in the future will necessitate competence in more than one language (Garcia & Otheguy, 1994; Halliwell, 1999).
- Foreign language abilities are increasingly important to national security, economic competitiveness, delivery of health care, and law enforcement in the US. (Department of Defense, 2005).

Sociocultural Benefits

- Bilingual and multilingual individuals are capable of communicating with a much wider range of people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Knowing other languages enriches travel experiences and allows one to enter another culture more deeply and access foreign media, literature and the arts.
- Becoming bilingual leads to new ways of conceptualizing one's self/LC1 (first language/cultural group)/LC2 (second language/cultural group), and thus, an expanded world view in which one not only knows more but knows *differently* (Fantino, A., 2003 ACTFL presentation).
- Second language proficiency can serve as an initial step towards understanding, navigating, and enjoying intercultural difference. An early start in the study of second languages can lead to respect, positive attitudes and an appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity (Pesola, 1991).
- Little research exists to support the notion that positive attitude change towards members of other languages and cultures is a to-be-expected by-product of second language learning over time (Byram & Morgan, 1994).

Expectations for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through Immersion

- Foreign language immersion programs are the most successful school-based language learning program model currently available and immersion students typically achieve higher levels of proficiency when compared with students in non-immersion programs (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes, & Snow, 1985; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

- Native English-speaking immersion students display fluency and confidence in their second language develop native-like levels of comprehension, i.e., listening and reading skills, in their immersion language (Genesee, 1987).
- Native English-speaking immersion students develop *less native-like* levels of language production, i.e, speaking and writing skills. Outcome-oriented research consistently finds that English-speaking immersion students' oral language lacks grammatical accuracy, lexical specificity, and is less complex and sociolinguistically appropriate when compared with the language native speakers of the second language produce (Harley, 1984; Mougeon & Rehner, 2002; Pawley, 1985; Salomone, 1992; Spilka, 1976).
- Students' immersion language appears to become increasingly anglicized over time (Lyster, 1987), and is limited to a more formal academic discourse style (Fortune, 2001; Potowski, 2004; Tarone and Swain, 1995).
- Student use of English during instructional time in the immersion language has been found be greater than their use of the immersion language at the upper elementary grade levels (Carrigo, 2000; Fortune, 2001; Pierce, 2002; Potowski, 2004). This finding is supported in both one-way and two-way immersion contexts. Supporting student use of the immersion or "minority" language in the classroom is a constant challenge for teachers (LaVan, 2001).
- Some partial immersion teachers of the upper elementary grades report particular difficulties in teaching advanced-level subject matter because students' cognitive development is at a higher level than their proficiency in the immersion language. Promoting student understanding of more abstract and complex concepts becomes increasingly difficult resulting at times in teacher use of English to ensure concept mastery (Met & Lorenz, 1997). This issue may be of particular important in character-based language immersion programs, such as Chinese (Met, 2002).
- Finding the time and identifying appropriate tools with which to meaningfully assess students' immersion language (IL) development across the grade levels is difficult for immersion programs (Anderson, M., Lindholm-Leary, K., Wilhelm, P., Ziegler, M., & Boudreaux, N., 2005). By not assessing IL growth, programs may be inadvertently communicating that this is not perceived as an important outcome of an immersion education, thus undermining one of the three main goals of this program model.

Basics of Second Language Acquisition

- Language learning is a long-term process and long-term commitment and support to this process is essential. Mastering *academic language* in a second language, the kind of language frequently used in schools and in textbooks, may take second language learners up to 7 years and beyond, and longer for character-based languages.

- Language learning involves hypothesis construction and testing. Errors are integral to making and testing one's current hypotheses about a language.
- A "silent period" is normal, since understanding language usually precedes producing it. However, learners will eventually need to be expected to produce the language or language acquisition will be impeded. Most early total immersion programs target the mid point of first grade as the time to expect students to use the immersion language only in the classroom.
- Language learning and academic success are influenced by many sociocultural factors such as personality, prior schooling, teacher expectations, parental support, etc.

"Early start + Long-term Sequence = Successful second language learning"

Recommended WWW Resources:

<http://www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/>

The Immersion Projects at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota provides a resource for immersion educators.

<http://www.cal.org/earlylang/>

The Center for Applied Linguistics serves as a national resource for early second language learning.

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0304fortune.html>

Article available online by Tara Fortune and Diane Tedick (2003) *What Parents Want to Know about Foreign Language Immersion Programs*. ERIC Digest, Center for Applied Linguistics.

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