

Language Immersion Programs for Young Children

by Francis Wardle

One of my daughters has just returned from teaching English for a year in two public schools in the middle of France. Another of my daughters is so fluent in French that native French speakers frequently comment on her accent. When my children were young they attended the Denver International School, a school partially funded by the French government that offers parallel Colorado and French curricula. Students start in preschool and kindergarten, where only French is spoken. Then, in grade 1, French-English instruction is divided 80:20; in grades 2 and 3, 70:30; and by grade 4, 50% of instruction is in French, and 50% in English — remaining that way through middle school.

My wife and I chose the Denver International School because we are avid believers that the early years are the optimum time to learn a second language; further, we believe that every child in this country should learn another language besides English. When our children attended the school, French was the only foreign language offered; now German and Spanish are provided, and Mandarin Chinese has been proposed. We are glad our children learned French. My brother works a lot in Africa, and was forced to learn French because French is the official language of many African countries. Further, our children are US and English citizens, which means they have full access to all the countries in the European community, including France.

One of the things we loved about the Denver International School was that many of the students were native French speakers — either from France, or countries where French is spoken, such as Canada, Madagascar, and Hong Kong.



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The school was truly international. Our children and their classmates spoke French on the playground and on the phone when discussing their homework.

Global marketplace

I have a good friend in Brazil who owns a polling company. While he does much of his work in Brazil, he also works in Portugal and past Portuguese colonies, where he is hired because of his proficiency in Portuguese. Thus, competitiveness in the global economy is largely based on the ability to speak the local language, or at least the country's official language. And, despite what we North Americans would like to believe, English is not spoken in many countries, especially in day-to-day activities.

For us to remain globally competitive we must teach our children other languages: Portuguese (Brazil is a huge country and the 9th largest economy in the world), Russian, Japanese, Chinese, French, and Spanish. Further, we cannot be arrogant enough to assume other countries will simply learn English. Parents should be encouraged to choose the language they prefer their child to learn. And I believe the early years — starting in preschool or kindergarten — is the ideal time to start teaching a second language. Young children engage in the kind of risk-taking required to learn another language; further, they are open to the sounds of every language.

Full immersion instruction

Many believe total immersion is the most effective way to develop proficiency in a foreign language. The model was pioneered in Canada, and is a method of instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught in a foreign language, or the targeted language (Met, 1993). In total immersion programs all schooling in the initial years is conducted in the foreign language, including reading and

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language arts. English is introduced usually in second grade, with more and more English instruction until a 50:50 balance is achieved in later elementary school. However, some programs are maintaining the 80:20 ratio, because students in these programs continue their mastery of the foreign language without any drop-off in English proficiency (Met, 1993).

Most full immersion programs in this country start in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. And students who attend these programs are fluent in the foreign language by grade 2 or 3.

While many US educators and parents believe that learning the school's curriculum in another language will limit the child's English language and core subject proficiency, research continues to show full immersion students do as well, or even surpass, comparable non-immersion students in English and math (Met, 1993; Swain & Lapkin, 1991). This certainly was our experience. Apparently children who learn grammar and vocabulary rules in one language then apply them to the new language. Students in partial immersion programs, using a 50:50 model, do not attain the same level of proficiency in the foreign language (Met, 1993).

Denver International School

It's a crisp, Colorado morning. There's a dusting of powder snow on the sidewalk, and the sky is a cobalt blue. I'm outside a stately old public elementary school in a quiet residential area in south Denver. Built in the early 1900s, the school represents the typical public school buildings of that time — massive walls, high ceilings, wide hallways, and high windows.

This is the home of Denver International School — a 25-year-old French-English immersion school substantially subsidized by the French Ministry of Education to serve children of French citizens in Denver. However, many non-French children attend the school.

Seven four-year-olds are sitting around a large table in the middle of the room, working on Christmas cards and worksheets. There are two girls and five boys; one child is absent. Two of the children have a French family background, and thus speak French; the rest do not. Vicky, a young French Canadian from Quebec City, talks to the children in rapid, conversation French. Occasionally she switches to English, then back to French — but 90% of her conversation is in French. She provides feedback in French, gives instructions in French, and praises the children in French.

One child asks to go to the bathroom in English, but, after modeling by the teacher, he repeats his request in French before leaving the classroom.

The room is a high-ceilinged old classroom, with high windows, old oak wood trim, and large blackboards at each end. Various learning centers radiate out from the central table. French songs, *les regles de la classe* (classroom rules), numbers and letters in French, days of the week and months of the year in French, are all up on the walls. There is a huge world map with the message, "Christmas Tour of the World" (in French) and a *les continents* map (both have Europe in the center, rather than the Americas). There are French tapes, books, and computer programs.

The teacher comfortably switches between the children working at the table and different children rehearsing for the evening's school-wide Christmas program. All the dialogue is in French. Children converse with each other in French and English. While the teacher speaks primarily in French, she does not admonish the children when they speak in English. When they ask her a question in English, she responds in French.

Vicky tells the children it's recess, so they hustle out into the hallway to retrieve their outdoor clothes. The whole class then leaves for the snow-covered playground, basking in the bright winter sun.

(Wardle, 2003, p. 482. Used with permission.)

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Dual language immersion programs

A popular variation of full immersion language programs is dual language immersion programs. In these programs English as a second language is paired with teaching English-speaking children a foreign language. Children in these programs are immersed for at least 50% of their day in the target language. The Chicago public schools has such a program for approximately 5,000 students, a program implemented from pre-K to third grade (Soltero, 2001). The core curriculum is taught in both languages, and the two groups of children — English language learners and native English speakers learning a foreign language — interact together most of the day, recognizing the powerful impact of socialization on language learning (Soltero, 2001).

While dual language immersion programs usually use a 50:50 model of instruction, some of the Chicago public schools immerse children in the target language 80% of the time, because they recognize that children's language interactions outside of school are almost totally in their native language. While most of the Chicago schools provide English-Spanish programs, two schools offer Chinese and English. In the Chicago programs students learn to read and write first in their native language, with formal literacy instruction in the second language beginning in second grade.

There are, of course, a number of variations of the dual language immersion programs, but in all the programs the targeted language (English for non English speakers, a foreign language for English speakers) is used at least 50% of the time (Soltero, 2001).

Staffing

At the Denver International School native French speakers certified by the French Ministry of Education taught my children. Advocates of full immersion programs believe staff should not only be native speakers trained in the school's curriculum, but also be familiar with the country's culture. The teachers in my children's school imbued them in French culture.

Staffing for immersion programs is particularly difficult because of a dearth of native language teachers. Maybe we could learn from the French(!): recruit native speakers from other countries to teach in our programs, much like the program my daughter worked in.

Brain development

The exciting new knowledge about how the brain develops in young children has been used to justify almost every educational idea and innovation! Maybe this is because it has given scientific justification to many good early childhood practices. Justification for early second language learning is no exception (Genesse, 2001).

Brain research supports early second language learning in at least two areas: it shows that young children have the brain capacity and neural flexibility to undertake the challenging task of second language learning, and second language learning through immersion develops and creates new neural networks in the brain that increase the brain's capacity for all sorts of future learning, not just language learning (Genesse, 2001). This is important, because in the past much of the educational establishment argued that second language learning at the young age takes away children's learning of important academic basics (Wardle, 2003). The opposite would seem to be the case.

Recommendations for early childhood programs

Here are a few ideas for early childhood programs considering implementing full immersions or dual immersion foreign language programs:

- Find creative ways to attract foreign language teachers. International students, exchange programs, and foreign language associations are all possibilities. Also work with foreign language associations in your community and local colleges for support and joint community events.
- Educate parents that full immersion second language programs do not negatively affect a child's learning of English and basic academics.
- Emphasize the culture of the country whose language is being taught in teaching a second language.
- Poll parents to determine which second language you will teach. Since parents will have to support your program, their buy-in is essential.
- Optimally, start your foreign language immersion program in preschool or kindergarten.

- If you have a dual language program, make sure children from each language group have ample opportunity to learn with each other.
- If you have a dual language program, consider providing more than 50% of instruction in the target language. This results in more effective acquisition of the second language, with no reduction of learning basic skills or the child's home language.
- Work with educators — state departments of education, local AEYCs, etc., to encourage and support second language immersion programs during the early years.
- Educate professionals, including psychologists, speech therapists, and curriculum specialists, about the values of teaching a second language during the early years.

Conclusion

Full or dual immersion language programs for young children are an exciting way to teach native English speakers a foreign language. Programs should work closely with parents to determine which language to teach, although in programs that have a significant non-English population that speaks one language, this decision is simple. For these programs to succeed, we need to find ways to prepare teachers and/or attract teachers from other countries. Not only do foreign language immersion programs prepare our students for the global marketplace, but they also provide authentic cultural exposure to US students who need to see beyond their own cultural borders.

Resources

American Council on Immersion Education (ACIE)
University of Minnesota
<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/ACIE.html>
Advocates for Language Learning,
PO Box 32083, Kansas City, MO 64111

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
(ERIC/CLL)
4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859
(800) 276-9859

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Is language immersion for you?: Wardle makes a case that one way to learn a second or third language is to use an immersion approach. Does this idea appeal to you or the families you serve? If so, explore ways to increase the amount of time and resources spent on a second language and how to reach immersion levels.

Getting ready: If adding second or third language instruction to your program seems like a good option, consider carefully where to start. This author shares the gradual process of adding additional languages and the type of resources needed. Make sure you are ready before you take a leap that may not be sustainable. Recruitment, second language staff funding, and careful planning will predict success.

What is available in your area?: Explore dual language programs in your community and arrange for interested teachers to visit and glean ideas to explore in their classrooms or in the program.