



Dual Language Immersion: An Overview

Adapted from: What Parents Want to Know About Foreign Language Immersion Programs, by Tara W. Fortune, Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota and Diane J. Tedick, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Minnesota

Dual language immersion programs are designed to enrich a child's experience at school by teaching academic content in two languages. In other words, bilingual communication skills are developed by focusing on meaning rather than form. The goal is for students to gain developmentally-appropriate content knowledge, as well as become bilingual, bi-literate, and bicultural.

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

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 in today's global environment. In the GLOBE School Dual Language Immersion Program, instructional time is divided equally between English and Chinese. In the early years, immersion teachers (who only use the target language in the classroom) realize that their students will not understand everything they say. As a result, they use creative instructional methods that are beneficial to all students. They use body language, visuals, manipulatives, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonation to communicate their meaning. To draw students into using the new language, teachers combine engaging content and activities with such language-rich forms as songs, chants, rhymes, and stories. In addition, they carefully structure the day with familiar routines and phrases. In the early grades, it is common and acceptable for students to use their home language when speaking to their teacher and socializing with classmates. As the years progress, students naturally use more and more of the new language in the classroom context.

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

Immersion programs are the fastest growing and most effective type of world language program currently available in U.S. schools. Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places. It has been suggested that the processes learners use to make sense of the teachers' meaning make them pay closer attention and think more deeply. Over three decades, studies have consistently shown that immersion students achieve as well as, or better than, non-immersion peers on standardized tests administered in English.

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

Parents may initially worry that immersion will have a negative impact on their child's English language development. But research consistently finds that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development. Many cognitive processes, including those that support reading, transfer from one language to another.

What if my child is learning languages that are significantly different?

Immersion students who learn to read in two languages that are markedly different, such as English and Chinese, will need to learn and practice literacy skills that are specific to each language. As with all students, it is important for parents to provide their child with experiences that will enhance their home language skills. For example, they should read to their children every day and involve them in games and activities that strengthen their home language. Research shows that the stronger the development of the home language, the greater the proficiency in the immersion language. Children who enter an immersion program with a strong base, regardless of the language, will succeed more easily.

Will my child become proficient in Chinese? How long will that take?

After a few years in an immersion program, students demonstrate fluency and confidence when using the immersion language. However, achieving high levels of oral and written proficiency in a new 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 base upon which to continue moving toward proficiency in Chinese and to develop proficiency in subsequent languages. Language learning is influenced by many factors, including student commitment, parental support, and teacher involvement. Success requires the active involvement of these stakeholders.

Is immersion an appropriate choice for all children?

The majority of immersion programs are open to all students. Research indicates that immersion may be an effective program model for children, regardless of their home language. Students who speak English, Chinese, or another language at home can all benefit from learning a new language with their peers. In addition, many children with mild learning disabilities do well in immersion programs. Parents and educators need not assume that learning in two languages will be overwhelming. In fact, many instructional techniques used in immersion are similar to techniques recommended for struggling learners. On the other hand, it is recommended that parents consider the impact of more serious language-processing challenges prior to enrolling a child in an immersion program.

What can I do to support my child's immersion experience if I don't speak both languages?

The GLOBE School provides families with learning support that empowers students to practice both English and Chinese at home. This support will include the use of technology tools to make practice at home productive and engaging, regardless of the home language. In addition, parent workshops will be offered to help them become informed participants in their child's language learning adventures.

For more information, visit us online at www.globeschool.org.