

The Bridge: From Research to Practice

Is Immersion Education Appropriate for All Students?

*by Karine S. Gaffney, 4th Grade Teacher
Forest Glen International School, Indianapolis, Indiana*

I originally began researching about the appropriateness of immersion education for all children, hoping to learn more about recognizing and diagnosing learning problems of immersion students. What I realized after just a few articles was that I needed to begin with the following question: Do some students *not* belong in immersion education?

Although my school is a magnet program, it is also a public school and, therefore, we cannot screen students prior to admitting them. Our district has a large and diverse population, and we receive students from one end of the district to the other through our lottery system. Within our immersion population, the majority of our students are from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. We also have students that would qualify as “at-risk.”

I had heard it questioned before if the program was suitable for this or that particular student. Coming from the experience of teaching at an English-immersion school in South America, my answer was always a resounding, “Yes!” Even in that private school in Colombia, I had seen students who could have qualified as at-risk. Yet at such a prestigious school, it was never thought that the English program wasn’t appropriate for a student, even when he/she was struggling. To me, it seemed natural to have a class of students representing diverse learning levels and as a teacher I dealt with it. I didn’t want to see dropping the children from our program as the way to deal with underachieving students. Yet this was the case from time to time.

This attitude, that immersion just isn’t for everyone, leads to “the danger that immersion programs could become elitist” (Genesee, 1992, p. 200). The perception that immersion is elitist jeopardizes the relationship between the program and other parts of the district and community. Within my own school, it has jeopardized the relationship between our immersion program and the global (English only) program. “Send the dumb ones to global” is how one of my global program colleagues so succinctly put it. This strains an already delicate tie between the two programs, delicate because the immersion program isn’t fully understood and because sometimes it receives special allowances.

During my research of this topic, I was looking for affirmation of my personal opinion that immersion is for all students. What I found was that in most cases, yes, immersion can work for any student. What I hadn't expected to find, but did, was that there are those particular cases where immersion may not be the best choice for the student.

Within the articles I researched, at times there was a differentiation made among the different types of immersion education (partial, full, early, late, etc.). For this review, I will generalize immersion education to refer primarily to early/full immersion programs, unless otherwise stated.

Language Development & Academic Achievement in Immersion Students

There has been extensive research and testing done on immersion students concerning language development and academic achievement. The research has generally focused on comparisons between immersion students and their peers that attend English-medium classes. It has been shown in this research that the immersion students demonstrate similar development to their English-only peers. Other testing has demonstrated that bilinguals sometimes show increased cognitive skills (metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and creativity) over monolinguals (Cummins, 1984a). In fact, in some cases, immersion students have been shown to surpass their English-only peers, as in the study in French-medium schools in Montreal. The "...English language development [of French immersion students] was superior to that of students in non-immersion programs..." (Genesee, 1992, p. 204, supported by Swain and Lapkin, 1990). It needs to be stated that for this to occur, English has to be introduced at some point in the curriculum, which is the case in most if not all immersion programs. It has been shown, though, that this introduction can be successfully delayed until grade four without fear of impairing English language development.

Further evaluations have proven that not only does English develop at a normal rate in immersion students, comparable to that of their peers, but also that immersion students readily transfer their language skills and knowledge of subject matter from the target language to English. Students in a French immersion pilot program in Cincinnati were continually tested throughout the grades, and at the end of grade three, the students were tested in English on science concepts. The immersion students fared just as well as their non-immersion counterparts, even though all of their science instruction, since Kindergarten, had been in French (Holobow, 1988). The important concept here, and the one that needs to be conveyed to immersion parents and district administrators, is the idea of transference.

In summary, according to the research, immersion students not only acquire second language skills and learn the academic subject matter and concepts, they also maintain a level of English language development comparable to that of their non-immersion peers. As well, it should be noted that further advantages of immersion education are that their "general language skills are enhanced, general cognitive

development and academic achievement are enriched, and appreciation of the culture and the people represented by the target language is strengthened and broadened” (Holobow, 1988, p. 2).

“At-Risk” Students in Immersion Education

Knowing that all academic problems aren’t linked to the limited acquisition of the target language, how are we to recognize when a student is “at-risk”? At-risk students may be identified “...by the following learner characteristics: 1) below average general ability, 2) poor first language ability, 3) low socioeconomic status, and 4) ethnic minority group status” (Genesee, 1992, p. 119). Once we are able to identify these characteristics in an immersion student, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the particular student is a candidate for transferring out of the immersion program. On the contrary, many findings show that at-risk students are not only as successful in immersion education as they would be in English-medium classes, but that immersion may be their only chance for acquiring a second language.

Fred Genesee, in a 1992 review of (then) current research on at-risk populations in immersion education, broke down the characteristics of an at-risk student and analyzed their effects on students in immersion. The research consisted of a mix of immersion programs (early, late, full, partial) and target languages (French, Spanish, Mohawk, Hawaiian). In all the studies the performance of immersion students (with a particular at-risk characteristic) were compared with that of similar non-immersion students.

Concerning below average general ability, student performance on target language tests showed that they scored lower on literacy based language skills, such as reading and grammar, than students possessing average or above average general ability. On interpersonal communication skills (listening comprehension and speaking), the lower ability students placed at the same level as their average or above counterparts. This outcome also held true for the control group, English-medium students, which, Genesee noted, is not surprising considering the attainment of the two types of skills in first language acquisition—interpersonal communication always precedes literacy based skills. The difference between the two is that literacy based skills are context/experience-reduced, and cognitively demanding language skills, which require more complex thought, whereas interpersonal communication is context/experience-embedded and uses simple language skills (Cummins, 1984b). When these same below-average ability students were tested in comparison to their non-immersion peers in English, the results were surprising. The immersion students scored more or less the same as their English-only peers. Therefore, it can be surmised that participation in immersion education does not impair students in either first language skills or academic achievement.

Students with poor first language ability (or, “language disabled,” for the purposes of this paper) were observed to have difficulties that crossed linguistic

lines (Bruck, 1987). It took "...the disabled children in both programs longer to attain basic literacy and academic skills than their non-disabled peers.... [Disabled students in immersion had developed] linguistic, cognitive, and academic skills at a rate similar to that at which they would develop were they placed in an all English classroom" (Bruck, 1987, p. 65, cited in Genesee, 1992, p. 205). Simply said, the underlying deficiencies that cause difficulties in the native tongue carry over into the second language. These students would experience difficulties no matter what the program, monolingual or bilingual. It is important to remember that if learning a second language is considered valuable for all students, immersion education may be more appropriate for language disabled students than a traditional foreign language program introduced later in the student's school experience and more effective for these students, because immersion programs follow a natural path of language acquisition, one that mirrors the path taken for their first language acquisition. Corrinne Wiss (1989) stated it succinctly: "It is important that learning disabled children not be counseled out of early immersion, as this may be their only opportunity for bilingualism" (p. 201).

When socioeconomic status was considered, the results were similar to those of the first two characteristics. Both the immersion and non-immersion groups scored similarly on English language, math, and science tests. The results of the science tests, given in English, stand out in particular, because the immersion students had received all instruction, since Kindergarten, in the target language. This emphasizes the importance of transference of knowledge cross-linguistically. The only deviation from the norm was the development of language skills. Immersion students did not score as well in literacy-based English language skills as their non-immersion peers. Given that these evaluations were conducted in the primary grades when immersion students receive the vast majority of their instruction in the immersion language, this finding is not surprising. As Genesee remarks, "this is a common finding in the evaluations of all immersion programs" (p. 206). After instruction in English language arts is expanded (Grade 4 and above), the English literacy gap disappears. Interpersonal communication skills were shown to be similar between immersion and non-immersion students.

As with socioeconomic status, ethnic minority group status can at times provide a student with a "language variety which differs from that used for instructional purposes" (Genesee, 1992, p. 208). These students will experience the same entry level difficulty in immersion as they would in non-immersion classrooms (Genesee, 1992). Studies have shown that African American immersion students have scored on a similar level to their African American non-immersion peers and White immersion students score similarly to White non-immersion students. Moreover, when tested in the target language, African American immersion students did as well as their White immersion peers.

From the research cited above and Genesee's analysis, it is logical to say that a student who demonstrates some at-risk characteristics will not be impaired in terms of cognitive development and academic achievement if placed in an immersion

program. In fact, in some instances, placement in an immersion program might be seen as beneficial, since it may be the students' only chance at second language acquisition.

Another possible benefit of placing such students within an immersion program is the teaching methods used in particular by immersion teachers. Because delivery is always in the target language, an immersion teacher cannot assume that students understand once the information has been presented. Immersion teachers rely heavily on multiple forms of delivery to communicate new concepts in the target language, using audio, visual, and many times, kinesthetic methods to deliver the same information. The core instructional strategies or techniques used by immersion teachers have been summarized by Snow (1987). Also, due to the fact that almost all students arrive to immersion programs without any prior knowledge of the target language, immersion programs might even level out the playing field at times, although as in all schools, some students are bound to be better prepared than others to begin their education.

Is the Language the Problem?

With the idea that immersion education not only works, but enhances basic student learning as well, why would we dissuade any student from such a program? It has been argued in my own school (and I'm sure at other immersion schools across the country), that there are certain students who just won't succeed in immersion education. Some parents come to the conclusion that, if their child isn't performing successfully in the immersion program, then it must be the language factor. Furthermore, if they were to pull their son or daughter from the program and place them in a classroom where English is the language of instruction, then all of the problems would disappear. Although seemingly logical arguments, research on immersion students who have transferred out of the program has not supported them. It has been shown that transfer students show some improvement in academic achievement, but continue to show behavioral problems and negative attitudes toward school (Bruck, 1985, cited in Genesee, 1992). Additional examinations of this idea substantiate that those who actually leave immersion programs do not necessarily have the lowest abilities, but do have academic difficulties added to behavioral problems, negative attitudes toward school, and low motivation. When the switch to English occurs, the English teachers often report similar observations, proving that these difficulties are not particular to the immersion setting (Genesee, 1992).

When Immersion May Not Be Appropriate

Although research has consistently shown that immersion education is an effective option for most learners, studies have indicated that there may be a subgroup of students who do not succeed in immersion programs. This subgroup is labeled as "developmentally immature." The cognitive and linguistic skills of these

students have not developed enough to deal with "...the demands of the bilingual academic environment" (Wiss, 1989, p. 190).

Cognitively and linguistically immature students will experience academic problems in either language. If a student has problems recognizing phonetic sequences in English, this will also happen in the target language. It is not the immaturity that is necessarily the problem, but the fact that immersion in a foreign language places too great a demand on the less developed cognitive and linguistic skills of that student (Wiss, 1989). In an English classroom, a student such as this would need to work on developing these skills, but he/she would experience greater control over the language in order to express his/her needs. Generally, when the academic demands are less complex, such as using the language in the home or preschool setting, the student has little difficulty in communicating in the target language (Wiss, 1989). This is why Kindergarten performance may not be a good predictor of continued success in later grades of immersion.

A good example of this was described in a case study of a girl in an early/full French immersion program (Wiss, 1989). At the end of Kindergarten, Stacey showed normal signs of growth and no apparent problems adapting to the target language classroom. By the end of grade one, however, Stacey's teacher had advised that she be held back to repeat grade one due to the difficulty she experienced in developing literacy skills (spelling and reading). Through Stanford-Binet testing in English and similar adapted French testing, it was shown that Stacey was most likely not succeeding in the immersion program "...because she was developmentally young and because she was slow to acquire French comprehension skills" (Wiss, 1989, p. 197). They were able to identify her inadequate development in cognitive and linguistic skills through the English tests, which were then substantiated through the French tests. It was agreed that Stacey was not a good candidate for continuing in the program and was transferred to an English-medium classroom. Stacey's own words testify to the appropriateness of being pulled from the immersion classroom: "[I like it] because I'm in English and the books are in English. Now I can understand what the teacher says. Before I had to guess what the teacher wanted and now I know" (Wiss, 1989, p. 197). In the effort to deliver the possibility of bilingualism to every child, we must be cautious in insisting that immersion programs are for everyone. Students like Stacey might be possible candidates for partial- or full/late immersion programs in which target language exposure begins after substantial development (including literacy development) in English.

Recommendations for the Immersion Program

Using the insights gained from my examination of the research, I believe education of colleagues, administrators, and parents is key to identifying and treating individual cases of students who are having difficulty succeeding in the immersion setting. Three strategies or recommendations come to mind.

❶ Establish a systematic approach to identifying learners with special needs early in the program.

It is pertinent to begin with colleagues and administrators. Within some immersion programs, I have witnessed what seems to be a lack of identification of students with special needs. If one considers national percentages concerning learning disabilities, more or less of 3% of each class in immersion should have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) alone. Granted, there are exceptions to the rule, but even being completely optimistic, there may be potentially more cases in immersion programs than are currently identified.

I attribute the difficulty of identifying learning disabilities in immersion setting to the fact that one is never sure if it is a learning problem or a language problem. Immersion staff may not have enough training, experience, or knowledge to identify early on a student who may be developmentally immature both linguistically and cognitively. It is important to identify as early as possible those students who will not experience success due to their inadequately developed linguistic and cognitive skills. Of course in order to do so, appropriate assessment tools need to be utilized and the assistance of a specialist in the area of learning difficulties is paramount. Parents, specialists, administrators, and teachers together then need to decide what is best for that student. Transferring such students to a school where English is used may limit their school anxiety and ensure that they not lose ground academically.

Yet transferring out of immersion programs may not be the only option. Wiss (1987) has noted that once identification has taken place, there is "...some indication that certain remedial strategies can transfer across languages if children are explicitly taught to do so" (pp. 309-310). It is not known yet whether remediation in one language alone will suffice. More research is necessary. Considering that there are unique phonetic systems for the native and target languages, there is a good chance that remediation would need to take place in both languages.

In my furor (which is equal to that of some of my colleagues) to have equality in immersion education, I worry that we might actually impair a student who would fair better in a non-immersion setting. As professionals we must remember to make informed decisions with the child's best interests foremost in our minds.

❷ Implement a staff development model that will continually prepare teachers in instructional techniques that will prove effective with all learners.

Another recommendation involves ongoing staff development for immersion teachers so that they are continually provided with up-to-date information about learners and about pedagogical strategies that will work with all students. One example of pertinent content for staff development is the recent work on brain-compatible teaching. It was developed by Pat Wolfe in the I.T.T. System. In

Indiana, we have been lucky to participate in C.L.A.S.S. (Connected Learning Assures Student Success), a “how-to” course on brain-compatible teaching, which was developed by Barbara Pedersen and Susan Brash. The idea behind brain-compatible teaching is to understand how the brain works (e.g., pattern seeking, needs context and experience to retain information, the ways in which input travels through the levels of the brain) and use that knowledge to teach for meaning.

It has been said that “intelligence is not the only nor the most important predictor of [target language] achievement. Students’ attitudes, motivation, and anxiety in the [target language] classroom, among other variables, have an impact” (Genesee, 1992, p. 203, supported by Gardner, 1986). Brain-compatible teaching tries to get to the base of those variables. It all begins with the absence of threat. When a threat is detected by the brain, it will “down-shift” into the brain stem, which controls all the necessities of life, such as hunger, sleep, fear, etc. By removing threat (in differing forms) from the classroom, you keep students out of brain stem-mode and keep the channels to cognitive growth open. That is just the beginning of a multilayered program.

Since “traditional” teaching methods don’t exactly align with brain-compatible teaching, some teachers find it harder to adapt than others. Those who were taught “traditional” methodology find it more difficult. Immersion programs need to be aware of this.

Within my township, all teachers who want to attend workshops on brain-compatible teaching may do so free of charge. My school has signed on to be a “C.L.A.S.S. school”; we have agreed to the philosophies and ideals that brain-compatible education espouses. Possibly due to the situation stated in the above paragraph, I have noted that our immersion program seems to partake in only the most surface aspects of the C.L.A.S.S. program. Since there are sides of immersion education that may be contradictory to brain-compatible teaching, such as using only the target language right away in Kindergarten (possibly a threat to a young child who does not even have experience with the concept of “school” yet), I see it even more necessary for immersion teachers to embrace the other parts of the program. By doing so, we may usurp the need for identification in instances where the difficulty is not a learning problem, just an incompatibility for that student’s brain.

③ Educate and involve parents in the process

Parents are also a spoke in the wheel of the issue of identification of learning difficulties. Many learning disabilities and other disadvantages are first visible in the home, when you know what you’re looking for. To address this, I would like for our program to assemble a parent binder. The parent binder would contain pertinent terms and their definitions, articles (such as those I read for this review), appropriate checklists and signs to look for, strategies for addressing special needs at home, etc. It would be a great resource for troubled parents and also a diplomatic way for teachers to breach the topic of learning disabilities.

I feel it is most important to include the research that shows the transference of knowledge between the target language and the native tongue and that which states that many of the problems that students experience in the school setting aren't necessarily linked to the language of instruction. Many times I have dissuaded parents from pulling their students from the program, when they are under one of two assumptions: 1) that their child might do better if s/he were in an English program, or 2) that their child isn't getting the content and/or their English is suffering. It would be beneficial to have the research on hand to challenge these misguided assumptions.

Another way to involve parents is to include them in providing remediation to students who are identified with learning disabilities. Our immersion program has a high rate of parent involvement and we could be using those parents to help with the remediation. To begin, I would seek out a parent who would be willing to coordinate a small volunteer staff to work with special needs immersion students on an individual or small group basis. This group of individuals would receive training in strategies for working with special needs learners. For instance, parent volunteers could learn about learning styles and the multiple intelligences so that they may meet the needs of the individual students (using more than one mode of delivery, such as combining kinesthetic with audio and visual input). They could then work on a roving schedule, moving to classes as needed and/or as their own time schedule allowed. Then, hopefully, some of the knowledge they gain would spread to the general immersion parent community. Parents are key to having a successful immersion program; they are our most fervent supporters. The education and involvement of parents will not only allay their fears and reservations, but will also encourage them to become active partners within the classroom and program.

Conclusion

As explained in this report, immersion education is not only appropriate for most students, it may be the only chance that some students will have at acquiring a second language. It was also noted that in some cases, where a student is developmentally and cognitively immature, it is to the student's benefit to be pulled from an immersion program. The key to deciding on a chosen path for individual students rests with the immersion program's faculty and administration in consultation with parents. ○

References

- Bruck, M. (1987). The suitability of early French immersion programs for the language disabled child. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 3, 51-72.
- Bruck, M. (1985). Consequences of transfer out of early French immersion programs. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 6, 101-120.

- Cummins, J. (1984a). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework*. Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center.
- Cummins, J. (1984b). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.
- Gardner, R.C. (1986). *Social psychological aspects of second language learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Genesee, F. (1992). Second/foreign language immersion and at-risk English-speaking children. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25(3), 199-213.
- Holobow, N. E. (1988). The effectiveness of partial French immersion for children from different ethnic and social class backgrounds. *FLES News*, 2(1), 2-3, 5-8.
- Snow, M. A. (1987). *Immersion teacher handbook*. Los Angeles: University of California, Center for Language Education and Research. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 291 243)
- Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1990). Additive bilingualism and French immersion education: The roles of language proficiency and literacy. In A. Reynolds (Ed.), *Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and second language learning: Essays in honor of W.E. Lambert*. NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wiss, C. A. (1987). Issues in assessment of learning problems in children from French immersion programs: A case study illustration in support of Cummins. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 42(2), 302-313.
- Wiss, C. A. (1989). Early French immersions programs may not be suitable for every child. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 45(3), 189-201.

You can contact author Karine Gaffney at Forest Glen International School, 6333 Lee Road, Indianapolis 46236; (315) 823-5446; e-mail <suaveks@aol.com>