

Immersion Benefits and Challenges: Does One Size Fit All?

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Select Findings on the Benefits and Challenges of an Immersion Education

Research-supported Benefits

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; Genesee, forthcoming; 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; Slaughter, 1997).

Linguistic Benefits

_ 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).

_ 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).

_ 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).

_ Bilingual students display greater facility in learning a third language than monolinguals (Cenoz & Valencia, 1994).

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).

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 (García & Otheguy, 1994; Halliwell, 1999).

Sociocultural Benefits

_ 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 and thus, an expanded world view in which one not only knows more but knows *differently* (Fantino, A., 2003 ACTFL presentation).

_ 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).