

Wired for Language Learning

By Linda Bonder, *International School*



If you have ever watched a child on a computer, you have witnessed how children learn some things more easily than adults do. Language is one of those things, since young children's brains are wired for language learning. According to an October 2004 report in the science journal *Nature*, young children not only learn language more easily, but their brain anatomy actually changes when they become bilingual at a young age.

Reinforcing this finding, many studies since 1972 have described and documented the positive effects being bilingual on mental development, flexibility in thinking, and general reasoning and verbal abilities.

Many children become bilingual and gain those benefits by starting language immersion programs in preschool or kindergarten. Dr. Merrill Swain, researcher and professor in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning department at the University of Toronto, reviewed ten years of language immersion research and concluded that language immersion programs started at a young age enable children to become remarkably proficient in a second language.

Dr. Swain found that the level of proficiency achieved is linked to two main variables: exposure to native-speakers and number of hours in the immersion environment. She concluded that students become more fluent with native-speaking teachers versus non-natives, and that children become more proficient in full immersion as compared to partial immersion programs because of the number of hours spent learning in the second language. Effects on English and subject matter learning.



The biggest question for many parents is whether students in language immersion programs will achieve well in subject matter and English studies. Reassuringly, the research shows that children in full immersion programs acquire the fluency needed to learn subject content in their second language without any difficulties. Studies consistently show that early immersion students perform as well as or better than their non-immersion peers on tests of cognitive abilities and performance in math, science and social studies.

As far as English skills go, the studies show that immersion students are initially behind but catch up quickly after English classes are introduced into the curriculum in first or second grade. Since so many literacy skills apply across languages, (i.e. parts of speech, organizing thoughts, paragraph structure), literacy skills can be learned in one language and then transferred to the other.

Portland-area immersion options

There are many choices for children to learn a second language in Portland - from weekly toddler classes to full fledged language and cultural immersion in Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, French and German. Many families choose a language program simply for the brain development benefits, and the choice of language is secondary. Some families choose a language based on a personal connection to or affinity for a particular language or culture. Even more families choose a language based on visions of their child's future, their child's personality or convenience of the program. Many families do not speak their child's immersion language, and children develop pride and confidence in learning something their parents don't know.

Learning more

The best way to learn more about language immersion options is to see them in person. Touring any school with your child is a good way to picture him or her in that environment. When visiting an immersion program, most toddlers and preschoolers are focused on the toys and bright décor - they hardly notice that the teacher's greeting is not in English, and thus they start learning their second language.

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