

# **A Proposal for the Introduction of an Early Total Immersion Program.**

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The question of whether to introduce an immersion language program at an early, delayed or later stage in the education system has long been a controversial topic of discussion among researchers and educators involved in the field. There are a number of areas which come under investigation when examining the age at which language study should commence. Some of these issues relate to first language development and academic achievement; and the type of program which should be implemented in a school setting. This proposal will argue that the early introduction of an immersion language program assists the promotion of second language proficiency. The underlying concept, which will form the basis of this paper, is an early total immersion program beginning with kindergarten age students.

In suggesting immersion as a viable option in the maintenance of the first language and continued achievement in school subjects, a number of studies will be examined. Some of these include the Bilingual Education Project of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Swain & Lapkin, 1982), the Ottawa Study (Barik & Swain, 1975), and the St Lambert Experiment (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). In addition to this a partial early immersion program at Katoh Gakuen in Shizuoka, Japan will be investigated (Bostwick, 2001). Although total immersion has been advocated as the preferred form of language instruction there is currently no other program in Japan, which meets this criteria. The Katoh Gakuen program is the first of its kind in Japan. Upon examination of the various programs in operation it will become evident that students can participate in an immersion program from an early age without detrimental effect to the first language or academic achievement in English or other subject areas. However, it must also be mentioned that in order for a program to be successful it must have the full support of parents, educators and community members (Barik & Swain, 1975).

By commencing studies in a second language at the kindergarten level students are given ample time to familiarize themselves with the language, much the same as would naturally occur with first language acquisition. There is no pressure placed on pupils to display proficiency in the use of the target language. As Macnamara (cited in Genesee, 1995) suggests, emphasis is placed on developing the idea of learning another language in order to participate in useful and interesting communication situations. Language proficiency development in such a program often occurs as a result of acquiring knowledge in other subject areas. Unlike more traditional methods of language instruction where the student is required to display

knowledge of the grammatical rules and features of a second language, the introduction of study at an early age provides the learner with the opportunity to “apply his or her ‘natural language learning’ or cognitive abilities as a means of learning the language” (Genesee, 1995, p. 125).

Language studies, which commence at an early age, provide the learner with favorable circumstances to make use of the second language. Ellis (1997) supports this idea by suggesting that a plentiful supply of input that is directed at the student’s level of comprehension promotes the development of L2 proficiency. By allowing younger students to progress at the same rate as they would normally do with their first language, they are given the opportunity to develop proficiency at a more individual pace than would otherwise be possible if studies commenced at a later stage.

According to Ekstrand (cited in Hamers & Blanc, 1995) one of the biggest advantages of introducing a second language at an early age rests on the fact that it allows the learner to spend a longer period of time exposed to the language. It also ensures that the learner initially comes in contact with less complex features of the language resulting in native-like competence and faster acquisition. “The young child does not have a greater facility for learning, but a less complex task for which he has more time” (Ekstrand, cited in Hamers & Blanc, 1995, p. 224). McLaughlin (1978) supports this view with the idea that children can gradually develop their language skills, as they are only required to communicate at a level appropriate for their age. This is perhaps one of the most important considerations in the debate regarding the optimal age at which to commence an immersion program.

It would seem that there are many advantages in placing small children in an environment where they are able to achieve L2 proficiency at a reasonably fast rate. They are also not expected to understand and process a large amount of information due to their cognitive ability. Clyne (1986) points out that young children are able to imitate sounds accurately, including the phonology of a language unfamiliar to them. Other researchers also favor the oral and aural performance of younger language learners (Driscoll, 1999). A further advantage for young learners is their tendency to respond enthusiastically, something often not present with adolescents when studying a second language.

## **Immersion Language Programs**

### **First Language Development**

In a study by the Bilingual Education Project (Swain & Lapkin, 1982) a number of standardized tests were administered to immersion students enrolled at Allenby Public School and the Ottawa and Carleton Boards

of Education. In grade 1 the IM (immersion) students' scores were found to be below that of their EC (English comparison) in the areas of word knowledge, word discrimination and reading. These results continued in grades 2 and 3, with IM students performing below the EC in other areas such as spelling, capitalization and punctuation. It is not often until the end of grade 5 that students are found to perform equally, and in some cases, better than English-educated peers across a number of English language skills measured by standardized tests (Swain, 1978). Following grade 5, IM students have occasionally outperformed the EC in punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and usage.

In the Ottawa Study (Barik & Swain, 1978) it was established that early IM grade 3 students were behind that of the EC in English language skills of capitalization and punctuation. The same students in the previous year were found to be lagging in the area of spelling when assessed using a different test. From the data collected it appears that the students were generally behind in the technical areas of English language skill. By the time the students reached grade 4 they were observed to outperform the EC in vocabulary and usage, being somewhat behind in capitalization. The following year the IM students were achieving better results than the EC in vocabulary, punctuation, usage and language total.

In the St. Lambert Experiment (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) the IM students were tested at the end of grade 1 and were found to perform poorly on word knowledge, word discrimination and reading skills, when compared with the EC. However, on word knowledge and word discrimination the IM students still fell in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for nationwide norms. In terms of reading ability the students were placed in the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile group for English-speaking grade 1 pupils. By the time these same students reached grade 4 they were found to perform equally as well as the EC. On various sections of the *Metropolitan Achievement Test* assessing word knowledge, word discrimination, reading, spelling usage and punctuation, the student's achievement levels matched that of their English peers.

According to researchers (Barik & Swain, 1975; Genesee, 1987; Genesee, 1995; Lambert & Tucker, 1972) the English literacy skills of students in areas such as reading, spelling and writing are generally below that of their peers as a result of having received no formal instruction during the initial stages of elementary schooling. However, what has been found is that IM students perform reasonably well on English-language tests despite a lack of classroom education (Swain & Barik, 1978). Genesee (1995) suggests this may be due to the fact that IM students are able to transfer skills they have acquired in French to the English language, which the students are already familiar with in terms of listening and speaking. Once students have learned to both read and write in French they do not need to complete the same initial training when studying English for the first time. Cummins (cited in Swain & Lapkin, 1982) suggests that knowledge of

two different language systems allows IM students to compare and contrast both French and English and increases their overall linguistic awareness. It has also been found that early IM students are proficient in areas such as listening comprehension, oral communication and aural decoding of information in English (Genesee, 1995).

It has also been observed that once students in IM programs begin formal English language instruction any lag in literacy is soon eliminated (Genesee, 1995; Swain, 1984). Students usually attain a level equivalent to their monolingual peers within a period of one year (Anderson-Curtain & Persola, 1988). This has been found to occur whether English instruction commences in grade 2, 3 or 4. In a study by Genesee, Holobow, Lambert, Cleghorn and Walling (1985) even students who received all curricular instruction in French up until grade 4 were found to achieve parity with an EC within a one-year period. At the start of grade 4 the IM students performed slightly below the EC with spelling and writing. However, at the end of the year there were no differences between the two groups. Genesee (1987) suggests that instruction through the medium of English may be delayed or reduced even further without detriment to the student's future academic achievement.

In further studies conducted by the Bilingual Education Project the writing ability of students in IM programs was examined. In the first study and for the purpose of linguistic analysis, early total IM grade 3 students and an EC were required to write short stories. These were then examined on the basis of vocabulary knowledge, punctuation, spelling and capitalization (under the label of technical skills), grammar skill, story creativity, logical chronological sequence and "the ability to write about events related to, but not depicted in, the story that was provided to the students as a stimulus for the story" (Swain & Lapkin, 1982, p. 39). The results showed that there were differences between the two groups, however the IM students were considered to have performed favorably by the administrators of the test.

In a subsequent follow-up study, the English writing ability, of both groups in grade 5 was examined by teachers who were unaware of the students involved or the purpose of the program. The examiners judged the compositions to be comparable, finding no difference in the composition length or the vocabulary utilized, in terms of both the noun and verb content of the stories (Swain & Lapkin, 1982). Lapkin (1982) points out that the examiners displayed .85 inter-rater reliability, indicating a high degree of consensus.

In a study by Genesee and Stanley (1976) the writing skills of early total IM students in grades 4 and 6 in Montreal were compared with that of an EC. The students were required to write a composition based on one of three sentences provided by the examiner. The student's work was assessed by grade 4 and 6

teachers who were unaware of the purpose of the study, and were unfamiliar with the students involved. Each composition received a score for spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, sentence accuracy, sentence complexity and variety, organization and originality. The subsequent results of the study revealed no major differences between the two groups. In other similar studies utilizing different test measurements the same results have been obtained (Swain, cited in Genesee, 1987).

From a number of tests, which have been carried out at Katoh Gakuen (Bostwick, 2001) to determine the effects of the implementation of language study in early elementary school, the results to date appear positive. In order to measure the achievement level of the students, they were examined in relation to other students the same age throughout Japan, as well as being compared against two previous grades that had not been part of the immersion program. The students were tested at the completion of grade 4, having finished four years of the school curriculum. On the Japanese language test the IM students were found to perform equally as well as their JC (Japanese comparison). In fact, they were almost one standard deviation above the national average. When compared with the previous two grades who had not undertaken an immersion program, the students were found to score 0.77 points below that of the 1995-96 comparison, however 3.39 points above the 1994-95 comparison (Bostwick, 2001). These results being an indication that the IM students had not suffered any detrimental effects on their first language development, with language literacy progressing at the same rate as the JC.

### **Second Language Development**

In the Ottawa Study (Barik & Swain, 1978) the French language skills of early IM students were assessed on the basis of the *Test de Rendement en Francais*. In grades 3, 4 and 5, the students were found to perform as well as between 24 to 40% of the native French speaking population in Quebec. Grade 4, 5 and 6 early IM students in Montreal were also observed to achieve high levels of functional proficiency with scores between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> percentiles.

This test is standardized on native French-speaking students and is used by the largest French school district in the province of Quebec in much the same way that the Canadian Test of Basic Skills or the Metropolitan Achievement Tests might be used by English language school districts elsewhere in Canada or the United States (Genesee, 1987, p. 48).

It is also suggested that the results may be below the full achievement level of the students as they were administered in December rather than June, at the end of the school year. The comparison group was evaluated in June.

In the St. Lambert Experiment the IM students were evaluated in grade 4 using the *Test de Rendement en Francais*. The students were found to “perform better than approximately one-half of the French-speaking pupils at their grade level in the normative sample” (Lambert & Tucker, 1972, p. 148). When the IM students were tested to assess their ability to retell a story in French they were observed to display less than perfect oral competence. However, after being evaluated on a number of indices including, grammatical usage, overall expression, enunciation, rhythm and intonation the students were judged to have a good command of the French language. The point of reference used by the evaluators, French native speakers.

In the French language tests carried out by the Bilingual Education Project some interesting findings were obtained. In the early total IM programs the students were usually assessed in relation to students in foreign language programs where the quantity of French instruction was considerably less. In listening comprehension tests, which were administered from kindergarten to grade 3, with the latter achieving near perfect scores the tests proved too difficult for the foreign language students (Genesee, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). Following this the IM students test scores were compared against native French-speaking students of the same age and grade level. It was found that by grade 1 or 2 the IM students were achieving results equal to approximately one third of native French-speaking students in Montreal. Other studies carried out in Ontario indicate that IM students after six or seven years in a program obtain results in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile band for French achievement (Swain, 1984).

In the study at Katoh Gakuen the student’s English language performance was assessed using three separate measurements. These included - the STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) Level 3, the ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) Level 8 and the oral component of the LAS (Language Assessment Scale) (Bostwick, 2001).

In the Level 3 STEP (*Eiken*) test, which is usually administered to students of both junior and senior high school, the immersion class average at Katoh Gakuen was 67.00%. The publishers of the test state that a score of 65.00% is considered a pass (Bostwick, 2001; Bostwick, 1995).

Passing Level 3 of the *Eiken* is a significant accomplishment for elementary school students in Japan. The percentage of students who pass is not very high, and many schools know that even junior high school graduates find it difficult to pass this test. The fact that over half the immersion students are passing Level 3 or better by the fourth grade is a significant achievement (Bostwick, 2001, p. 294).

While the *Eiken* and the ITBS have a listening component they are primarily written tests that assess the reading skills and knowledge of language usage. The LAS, however is used to assess oral language proficiency. While the results of this test indicate that the students do not have native-like proficiency, most students have no trouble in communicating in their second language. On the LAS scale of one to five, with five being a fluent English speaker, most students fell in the 65-74 test score range, being labeled as level 3 or a limited English speaker (Bostwick, 2001). While such a result may appear disappointing the program is still in the initial stages of development, with the students being tested after only having completed four years of elementary schooling. It would be beneficial to test the same students again at the conclusion of their elementary education, after having spent six years in the program.

While there is a considerable amount of literature available in the area of immersion language learning and its positive effects on second language acquisition, there is still a great deal controversy surrounding the age at which immersion should take place. Having examined the research on early total immersion it would appear to be an ideal age at which to introduce the concept of language study. As immersion students appear to experience no long-term problems with either native-language development or academic achievement (Baker, 1996; Barik & Swain, 1975; Genesee, 1981; Lambert & Tucker, 1972) it would provide learners with an extended period of time in which to develop second language proficiency. This could only help to assist students to become competent second language users.

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