

Language Immersion Programs for Young Children?

Yes . . . But Proceed with Caution

Young children can benefit from dual-language immersion programs that are developmentally appropriate.

By Anne K. Soderman



All photos courtesy: 3e International

Jorge from Mexico jokes in English with Mibo from Japan.

“Are you full?” five-year-old Qin Bin asks his classmate following lunch time.

“Yes, I am very, very, very, very, very, VERY full,” Nora laughs.

“That’s wrong. That’s too many ‘verys,’” Qin Bin responds seriously. “When you are that full, you should say ‘I’m *extremely* full,’ not very, very, very, very full.”

“No,” counters Nora. “I am going to say I am REALLY full!”

ANNE K. SODERMAN is professor emeritus at Michigan State University and is the principal at 3e International School, Beijing, China.



Effective dual-immersion programs need administrators, teachers, parents, and students who consider bilingualism a positive attribute rather than a linguistic, cognitive, and academic liability.

Eira from Finland and Chloë from Korea prepare for student-led conferences in English and Chinese.

While this sounds like the ordinary bantering and language play that goes on in lots of kindergarten classrooms, this conversation is extraordinary because neither child spoke any English until two years ago. Even more striking is that both Qin Bin and Nora could just as easily have this same conversation in Mandarin, a language spoken only by Qin Bin at the beginning of the school year.

Coming from more than 25 different nationalities, many students attending 3e International in Beijing, China, speak neither English nor Mandarin when entering this dual-immersion program. Within a year, they're usually able to communicate conversationally with others in both languages. By 1st and 2nd grade, children who entered as preschoolers can understand academic language and read and write in both languages as well.

3e is an independent international school that is supported by the Choi Koon Shum Foundation in Hong Kong. It is the only dual immersion program in Beijing and one of a few in the world using a Western approach to the teaching of Mandarin and English.

The expansion of the global economy is transforming education worldwide. Providing second language experiences and knowledge about other cultures is key to any country's ability to remain competitive and increasingly recognized as critical to economic success, national security, and international relations (Rhodes and Pufahl 2009). Questions remain, however, about how early and exactly how



Mats, a German child, practices Chinese calligraphy.



Reading about Clifford in both Chinese and English picture books

best to do this. How much do children benefit from acquiring new languages in the earliest years? Is it true that they absorb second languages almost effortlessly? Does learning one or more new languages compromise development of a child's primary language as well as the newly acquired languages? And what are the requirements of high-quality language immersion programs if young children are to succeed academically and socially?

WHY START SO EARLY?

Now in its fifth year, 3e International enrolls children as young as age two through 3rd grade and has been adding one grade of instruction per year. Children in the nursery classes have Mandarin and English teachers providing learning experiences in both languages in the same context. However, beginning at age three through the preschool and elementary programs, children spend three hours per day in English and another three hours per day in Mandarin. Children move from one language immersion environment in the morning to a fully different one in the afternoon, attending school from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Classes have no more than 16 students in order to optimize adult-child interaction and language building.

The curriculum, which was designed specifically for 3e, outlines standards for cognitive development; creative arts; global, cultural, and social studies; English and Mandarin language arts; intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge; and physical development. In the English classroom, students learn English language arts plus science, mathematics, technology, and visual arts. In the Chinese classroom, children turn their focus to Mandarin language arts, global studies, performing arts, and physical education. Both classrooms use a "Western" instructional approach to early education consistent with guidelines from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Teachers combine child-initiated and teacher-directed activities that are thoughtfully connected to the stated curriculum outcomes. Chinese and English teachers have time every week to plan together so that children experience complementary themes and activities across classrooms. A variety of after-school activities (for example, kung fu, ballet, gymnastics, football, sewing, art, drama, board games) are offered in one language or another from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m.

We recognize that children do not wake up one

morning and ask to be enrolled in a dual-immersion language program, particularly one that may not include their own primary language. Their participation is the result of adult agendas — parents and educators. But all decisions about structuring and implementing such programs should always be in the best interest of the students. Because of accumulated research and our own studies, we’re convinced that young children benefit greatly from bilingualism and multiculturalism in a variety of important ways (Soderman, Westcott, and Shen 2007; Soderman and Oshio 2008). Moreover, an immersion model provides the best opportunity for children to attain high levels of proficiency in a target language, but only if children’s everyday experiences are well constructed, engaging, and developmentally appropriate.

COGNITIVE ADVANTAGES

Our work supports other research showing cognitive advantages for early exposure to second languages.

Children are driven to higher levels of cognitive flexibility than are unilingual children in education settings. Learning a new language is greater than simply acquiring a vocabulary and workable syntax. It’s a problem-solving, “knowledge-assembly” task in which children are required to pay greater attention to the context, interact flexibly with others, and decide over and over what is relevant and what is not (Cartwright 2008). Given that, it’s not surprising that research has indicated increased mathematical skill development in bilingual children as compared to unilingual children (Abbott, Caccavale, and Stewart 2007). In fact, some neuroscientists suspect that there may be a “neural signature” that develops in the architecture of the bilingual brain that differentiates it from the brains of monolinguals, exciting increased blood oxygenation levels when given certain language tasks (Kovelman, Baker, and Petitto 2008).

We see children in our program continually juggling multiple mental representations in their attempts to choose the right word for the right context and the right person. They’re driven to reflect on their intended meaning as they respond to a speaker who doesn’t share their primary language, and they must solve the problem of what it will take to have a peer or a teacher understand what they’re trying to say. Their day involves numerous demands to turn the unfamiliar into the familiar (Lei and Moreira 2001).

This is a tough job for our learners, and we’ve discovered that it’s a myth that young children simply “absorb second languages like a sponge.” Until they develop functional language, some lose confidence

or remain longer than others in a silent period, reluctant to try the receptive language they’ve captured. Through teacher observation and documentation using the standardized Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation (SCBE), we’ve documented increased internalized and externalized behaviors in some children that signal a need for added emotional support (Soderman and Oshio 2008). Remarkably, however, children keep at it as they work to express or represent their ideas in a number of different forms, cope with the stress of incomplete comprehension, and evaluate the various meanings from what they’re hearing, seeing, and expressing.



Sharing a task between East and West: the making of tang yuan for the Chinese New Year.

Differentiation is the hallmark of instruction at 3e. To help children take in the “music” of a language — the sounds, patterns, inflections, and rhythms that are different than those in their primary language — activities are carefully sequenced, playful, heavily concrete to begin with, and structured to include planned simplification for the inexperienced child or extensions for those with strong language skills.

Children become more aware of the meta-linguistic structures of language. As dual language learners become more adept at both languages, they increase their abilities to reflect on the unique structures and features of each language and to manipulate them verbally and in their writing (Abbott, Caccavale, and Stewart 2007). There is evidence that this experience will be helpful later on if they want to or need to learn additional languages. Building vocabulary in each language is extremely important, and teachers receive additional training in effective strategies to do so at each age level. In 1st grade, we introduce Pinyin, or the transliteration of written Chinese characters into the English alphabet, to help children build vocabulary and to bring meaning to their early reading and writing of Mandarin;

at the same time, they must also learn how to recognize and reproduce a large number of ideographic characters in a language that is poles apart from the English they're also learning. Children come to understand how these two dissimilar languages vary in syntax as they sort out what can be transferred from one language to another. For example, when Guiliano uses the pronoun "he" to refer to Eira, a female peer, he is corrected by Lyuki: "Not HE," says Lyuki. "Girls not HE," he says, grinning good naturedly while providing a brief but instructive language lesson for his friend. Code-switching — the

turn home, many of our students must switch to a primary language such as German, Korean, Finnish, Japanese, or French.

Young language learners are more likely to develop naturalistic prosody and phonology, the music and rhythms unique to particular languages. Already at birth, our brains are programmed to make sense of the speech sounds we hear over and over and to develop a primary language. However, sometime between nine and 18 months of age and thereafter, human beings gradually lose the capacity to "hear" certain sounds in languages they don't experience on a regular basis or to create the dental/labial shapes needed to reproduce those sounds accurately (Howard and Sugarman 2007; Freeman and Freeman 2006). Doing this becomes increasingly difficult past age nine. Despite proficiency

Parents of 3e students

We chose 3e's bilingual program because the Chinese/English ratio is 1:1. My child is fluent in both languages now, can read and write in both, and has genuine interest in both Eastern and Western cultures. As someone who came from China originally, I'd like my children to have good Chinese skills. In the meanwhile, I would like them to be in a learning environment that fosters creative thinking and promotes international culture.

— Yue Zhuge, China, 2nd-grade parent

In three years, my daughter has learned a completely new language, English, and can use it confidently in her learning and self-expression. At the same time, she continues to develop skills in her third native language, Chinese. She truly enjoys the safe, family-like atmosphere and the interaction with all the adults and other kids as one big group of friends.

— Soile Korhonen, Finland, 2nd-grade parent

When we arrived in Beijing, we looked at more than 20 different schools, both local (Chinese) and international. With 3e, we get the best of both worlds: full immersion in the Chinese language taught by Chinese teachers, and a first-rate international education. After two years, our son is now fluent in both English and Chinese, neither of which is his native tongue.

— Paola Guajardo, Mexico, 1st-grade parent

language learner's tendency to substitute a word in one language for a similar word in another language — is a common occurrence in these classrooms as children subconsciously demonstrate their understanding of appropriate sentence formation and how to negotiate through their conversations without a full and ready bilingual vocabulary. When they re-

with vocabulary and syntax, inserting non-native accents and rhythms into spoken language often muddies communication. Early immersion programs offer young children an escape from the problem of having to later "shake an accent" that can hamper adeptness with second languages. However, here's a caution: In the first years of the 3e program, children were enrolled as young as 18 months and suffered too greatly from unfamiliarity. We determined that children could better benefit by being at least two years old to participate in language acquisition experiences away from their families and have since moved the age of entry up to 24 months.

Young children are fully able to handle bilingualism without becoming developmentally delayed in language or "language confused." Here, the work of Laura-Ann Petitto, an education neuroscientist at the University of Toronto, has been extremely helpful. She has conducted a decade-long series of studies which tracked when bilingual children reached the milestones for acquiring two languages (Petitto and Kovelman 2003). She found no timetable deviances. The children in her studies acquired language on the same developmental schedule in each language. Children who did the worst at grammatical competence, pronunciation, accent, phonology, morphology, and syntax were those who had restricted instruction, rather than immersion, or

We've discovered that it's a myth that young children simply "absorb second languages like a sponge."

children older than nine who had passed a key period of agility in language development. Despite this, an ebb and flow can be expected in developing bilingualism, and it's rare for both languages to be evenly balanced in dual immersion programs. The road to bilingualism is not one without a few bumps. However, bilingual children eventually reach age-level proficiency in a dominant language, given adequate exposure and opportunities to use it (McLaughlin 1995).

Melanie Bendick, 3e's 2nd-grade teacher, notes, "3e stands for 'explore, experiment, and express.' Here, I'm able to use a creative, hands-on approach in teaching science. Because my second language learners are able to experiment, draw their own conclusions, and have time to discuss their findings, I can really see them growing in their ability to make sense of their world and in their language capability."

PREDICTING HIGH QUALITY AND SUCCESS

We've learned a lot in our work with these young language learners at 3e and share our knowledge regularly with visitors from many parts of the United States and other countries who want to create dual immersion programs. The dual immersion model developed at 3e would be equally robust in creating any number of dual immersion combinations (for example, Arabic and English, Spanish and English, Korean and Mandarin) anywhere in the world. As we add new families and bring new teachers into the program, we've grown more certain about the need for the following:

Pedagogy must be addressed from a nondeficit model. Effective dual immersion programs need administrators, teachers, parents, and students who consider bilingualism a positive attribute rather than a linguistic, cognitive, and academic liability. Realistically, this calls for understanding the challenges that second language learners face as they're thrown into education situations where they must interact with others whose language, values, beliefs, and backgrounds may be very different (Lei and Moreira 2001; Soderman and Oshio 2008).

In-depth training and ongoing support must be provided for teachers in second language acquisition and classroom differentiation, even when they're experienced and considered to be expert educators. Our teachers must be proficient in scaffolding instruction and able to design activities that can be simplified or extended easily. Students must find these exercises personally meaningful and useful. Teacher training in dual immersion programs must be provided to staff in *both* languages unless everyone is academically fluent in English; otherwise, those who have English as a second language begin to feel less sup-

ported and valued. We expect teachers to take their cues from the learners in their classroom, to know when to give children cognitive relief by providing low-language load or no-language load activities. Because we want instruction to contribute to both content and language standards, we encourage teachers to collaborate with their instructional partners to create rich experiences for children that bridge across classrooms and the curriculum.

Children do not wake up one morning and ask to be enrolled in a dual-immersion language program, particularly one that may not include their own primary language.

They're challenged to build activities that elicit peer interaction and are related carefully to children's previous knowledge, experiences, skills, and concepts (Soderman, Wescott, and Shen 2007; Soderman, Gregory, and McCarty 2005; Kostelnik et al. in press; Macpherson, Barrera, and Corso 2005). For all of these reasons, 3e does not use textbooks and workbooks.

Hanging on to native-speaking teachers who come from a different culture isn't always easy, and schools hosting dual immersion programs must often go the extra mile in providing comfortable housing, social outlets, and other supports.

Teachers must pay as much attention to classroom climate and organization as to academic planning. Highly stressed children and those who become isolated from others have a more difficult time learning. To counteract this, we encourage informal peer opportunities at school and at home; pair certain children together purposefully during routines; take friendship building seriously; point out friendly, helpful interactions as they occur; help children build emotional intelligence and social skills; and assist shy, peer-neglected, or rejected children to develop satisfying relationships (Kostelnik et al. 2009). All of this is part of 3e's explicit curriculum.

Consistent, ongoing assessment must be included to ensure accountability. Student and teacher performance and program effectiveness are examined by using a variety of authentic assessment measures. Included are observation and notation, teacher designed checklists, teacher-child mini-conferences, child self-appraisal, discussions with parents, and such standardized tools as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and SCBE to document language development and social behaviors (Kostelnik et al. in press; Carrera-Carrillo and Smith 2006). We're experi-



A German child learns about origami from teacher Liu Ting.

menting with methods to accurately track the development of Mandarin literacy, since standardized tools aren't yet available, and we rely on comparisons of children's work at 3e with that of children in local Chinese schools at the same grade level. Children keep dated work samples in portfolios to share with parents during student-led conferences, and annotated reports are shared with parents twice during the school year. Institutional portfolios are maintained from the time children enter the school until they leave for other schools or other parts of the world.

Parents must be maintained as supportive allies through open communication and involvement in all aspects of the program. The parents of the young students at 3e, largely international pilgrims themselves, are eager to provide their children with the many benefits of dual immersion. However, we've learned that without close and ongoing communication, their initial enthusiasm and advocacy may turn to concern and second thoughts about having their children cope with all of the challenges experienced during the initial phases of language learning. Children may balk at going to school, exhibit a

noticeable drop in confidence, or have trouble making friends at the beginning of their participation in the program. Parents who are briefed about the necessity to have patience with skill development in their children sometimes begin to push teachers and administrators inappropriately in an effort to make their children more competitive, or they may overload them with tutoring and extracurricular activities. We don't take parents' trust and continuous satisfaction for granted and know that ongoing surveillance about their comfort levels, sensitive reassurance, and the provision of solid information are often needed.

Longitudinal, ethnographic action research should be built into these programs, and findings should be shared to contribute new knowledge to the fields of early childhood education and language acquisition. The United States is significantly behind in the number of second-language programs in its public schools, particularly at the elementary level. About 97% of the existing programs are in Spanish. There are few Mandarin and Arabic language projects, despite the growing importance of China and our Gulf partners. As educators move in response to the urgent

need to grow dual immersion and language programs, new knowledge will be needed that outlines the pitfalls and the successes experienced by those who have already implemented them.

CONCLUSION

Each child deserves to know that an entire world exists beyond his or her own personal world, and they need to learn how to bridge these worlds effectively. They will need this as they become adults in a world that will favor the citizens of the world over citizens of just a particular country. Bilingual children can be considered to be gifted children — because they're equipped with a skill that's considered an integral and necessary component in a truly educated person's portfolio. To speak more than one language fluently — better yet, to be able to read and write fluently in more than one language — provides each of these children with treasures for the future: the ability to think and express themselves in more than one language, respect for differences in others, and the confidence to move fluidly from one culture to another.

Dual language immersion programs must be carefully constructed and monitored, providing best practice in skill building and language training. Teachers and administrators must be qualified and skilled in effective instruction, assessment, and strategies to protect each child's well being. Parents must be knowledgeable and active partners. Universities must be collaborators in studying outcomes and disseminating useful information about emerging best practices. Given the growing understanding by families and educators about the importance of global perspectives for learners, second language and dual immersion programs are sure to continue to make their way into public and private schools around the world. **K**

REFERENCES

Abbott, Martha G., Therese S. Caccavale, and Ken Stewart. "Cognitive Benefits of Learning Language." *Duke Gifted Letter* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2007).

Carrera-Carrillo, Lore, and Annette Rickert Smith. *7 Steps to Success in Dual Language Immersion*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2006.

Cartwright, Kelly B., ed. *Literacy Processes*. New York: Guilford Press, 2008.

Freeman, David E., and Yvonne S. Freeman. *Teaching Reading and Writing in Spanish and English in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms*, 2nd ed. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2006.

Howard, Elizabeth R., and Julie Sugarman. *Realizing the Vision of Two-Way Immersion: Fostering Effective Programs and Classrooms*. Washington, D.C., and McHenry, Ill.: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, 2007.

Kostelnik, Marjorie J., Alice P. Whiren, Anne K. Soderman, and Kara Gregory. *Guiding Children's Social Development and Learning*, 6th ed. Stamford, Conn.: Delmar/Cengage Learning, 2009.

Kostelnik, Marjorie J., Anne K. Soderman, Alice P. Whiren, and Michelle Rupiper. *Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum: Best Practices in Early Childhood Education*, 5th ed. Stamford, Conn.: Cengage, in press.

Kovelman, Ioulia, Stephanie A. Baker, and Laura-Ann Petitto. "Bilingual and Monolingual Brains Compared: A Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Investigation of Syntactic Processing and a Possible 'Neural Signature' of Bilingualism." *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 20, no. 1 (2008): 153-169.

Lei, Hong, and Antonio Moreira. *Cognitive Flexibility Theory and Teaching English Grammar*. Aveiro, Portugal: Department of Didactics and Educational Technology, University of Aveiro, 2001.

Macpherson, Dianne, Isaura Barrera, and Robert M. Corso. *Skilled Dialogue: Strategies for Responding to Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood*. Baltimore, Md.: Paul H. Brookes, 2005.

McLaughlin, Barry. *Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1995.

Petitto, Laura-Ann, and Ioulia Kovelman. "The Bilingual Paradox: How Signing-Speaking Bilingual Children Help Us to Resolve Bilingual Issues and Teach Us About the Brain's Mechanisms Underlying All Language Acquisition." *Learning Languages* 8, no. 3 (2003): 5-18.

Rhodes, Nancy C., and Ingrid Pufahl. *Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2009.

Soderman, Anne K., and Toko Oshio. "Social and Cultural Contexts of Second Language Acquisition." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ)* 16, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 297-311.

Soderman, Anne K., Betty L. Wescott, and Shen Jie. "Bridging Two Languages: Engaging Activities for Bilingual Immersion Programs." *Young Children/Beyond the Journal* (November 2007): 1-6.

Soderman, Anne K., Kara S. Gregory, and Louise T. McCarty. *Scaffolding Emergent Literacy: Preschool Through Grade 5*, 2nd ed. Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2005.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k1005sod.pdf

Anne K. Soderman, Language Immersion Programs for Young Children? Yes . . . But Proceed with Caution, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 8, May 2010, pp. 54-61.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. **Copies of this article, in print and electronic formats, may not be made, distributed, or posted online without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.**

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at <http://www.pdkintl.org/utilities/archives.htm>.