

Top Ten Most Consistent Findings from Research on Foreign Language Immersion

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By Fred Genesee, Professor, Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Since their inception in Montreal, over 40 years ago, second language immersion programs have been accompanied by extensive research to evaluate their impact on student performance. Because early immersion programs provide initial academic and even literacy instruction in some cases in students' second language, there have been concerns about the impact of immersion on students' literacy development and their academic achievement. These concerns have been a major focus of attention in the research that has been carried out. Of course, there has also been lots of research that has examined immersion students' second language development, both their overall levels of proficiency and specific aspects of their second language competence, such as grammatical development. The findings that are summarized below have been reported consistently by studies in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere. These findings all come from studies that have evaluated programs for students who speak the majority language in their community – English in the case of Canada and the U.S.

Un

Immersion students attain the same levels of proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening in English as students in all-English programs. Even students who struggle in their first language can benefit from participation in immersion in acquiring functional competence in a second language and attain the same levels of achievement in English as similar students in all-English programs.

Deux

There is no consistent association between how much time is devoted to English in immersion programs and students' achievement in English. All students acquire age-appropriate native language skills in all domains of English whether they are in programs with little or lots of native language instruction. This probably reflects the extensive exposure to English that immersion students have outside school.

Trois

Immersion students achieve at the same level in their academic subjects as similar students in native language programs. In other words, immersion students are able to assimilate and acquire new academic skills and knowledge even if these are taught through a second language.

Quatre

Immersion programs are suitable for students with a wide range of learner characteristics, including students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and English-speaking students from minority ethnic groups (e.g., African Americans, American students of Hawaiian descent, and Canadian students of Mohawk descent).

Cinq

Students with below average levels of academic ability, as assessed by tests of cognitive ability or intelligence, do just as well in immersion programs when it comes to native language development and academic achievement as similar students in all-English programs. That is to say, their academic challenges do not preclude them from succeeding in immersion and, at the same, time they acquire higher levels of functional proficiency in the second language in immersion than they would otherwise.

Six

Immersion students acquire advanced levels of functional proficiency in the second language – far superior to that achieved by students in conventional foreign language programs.

Sept

There is a general tendency for students' second language proficiency to be related to the amount of exposure they have to the second language in immersion – the more exposure to the second language, the higher the levels of second language proficiency.

Huit

Despite their advanced functional proficiency in the second language, immersion students' second language skills are not native like. They make persistent grammatical errors, have a limited range of vocabulary, and their usage is not idiomatic. These findings speak to the need for immersion students to have opportunities to use the target language with native speakers outside school if they want to achieve native-like competence.

Neuf

Immersion programs appear to be equally effective with languages from very different language families (e.g., Hebrew and English or Hawaiian and English) and with languages from the same or related language families (English and French, or English and Spanish).

Dix

Immersion students develop the same appreciation for their first language culture as non-immersion students and, at the same time, they may develop greater understanding and tolerance of the other culture as a result of participation in immersion.

Reference

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Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) • 140 University International Center • 331 17th Ave SE • Minneapolis, MN 55414 | [Contact CARLA](#)

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