

Choosing An Immersion Model: The Moorhead Experience

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The Moorhead (MN) Public Schools, at a school board meeting in the spring of 1998, made the decision to establish a Spanish immersion program for two classes of kindergarten and two classes of first grade, beginning in the fall of 1999. The impetus for the program was a long-held dream of the superintendent, Bruce Anderson, based on the advantages his own children had experienced because of fluency in two or more languages. This is the story of the path leading to that board decision, and of the important characteristics of two immersion models that were considered.

The district proceeded with investigation and planning of an immersion program in a very careful way, closely following the steps recommended by Rosenbusch (1991) and others. The initial planning committee consisted of classroom teachers, administrators, world language teachers, parents, and representatives of the local colleges. The insights and experiences of each group were welcomed and valued as the committee first considered rationales for immersion and other early language programs, and then went on to make a recommendation as to which program model should be adopted.

The distinguishing characteristic of all early immersion programs is the fact that half or more of the content of the grade-level curriculum is taught using the new language, without translation or re-teaching in the native language. The target population is primarily students whose native language is English. Special techniques are used to insure that learners understand new concepts and also develop the language skills necessary to function effectively and independently in the classroom and in the wider target language (TL) context. Immersion may well be the most thoroughly researched of all types of language instruction, so the committee had many resources at their disposal.

Encouraged by the rich body of research supporting the value of immersion education (see Rubio), and because support from the superintendent and the school board was very strong, the committee decided to focus attention on two basic early immersion program models: full immersion and partial immersion. Dual immersion, where children from two language backgrounds learn content through the languages of both groups, was rejected as an option at an early stage, because the community lacks a stable population of children whose native language is not English. Characteristics of each type of program were taken into account, as described below.

FULL IMMERSION MODEL

Program Characteristics:

The program typically begins in kindergarten or grade 1, and all classroom instruction takes place in the TL.

In kindergarten through grade 2 or 3, all classroom instruction is delivered in the TL; English is not used by the teacher.

- Instruction of standard school curriculum takes place in the TL
- Specials (music, physical education, art) and special services are provided in English, unless qualified personnel are available
- Reading is introduced in the TL

English language arts are introduced in grade 2 or 3.

- Usually 30 minutes per day
- Literacy proceeds rapidly, because it is already established in the TL

60% to 80% of all instruction continues in TL through grade 5.

Native or fluent speakers of the language often support the program as classroom aides.

Original Canadian models increased the amount of English used in the classroom yearly after its introduction, reaching half the day in each language by grade 5. Recent experience, however, suggests that greater fluency in the new language is obtained when a higher percentage of TL instruction is maintained until the end of elementary school. Many programs have moved to 80% TL through grade 5 or 6 (grade 7 in Canada), at no loss to English fluency and academic performance (Met, 1987).

Student Outcomes:

Research shows that full immersion students attain the highest level of TL development of all program models (Campbell et al., 1985).

Near-native proficiency in listening and reading

High degree of fluency in speaking and writing by the end of elementary school

Compared with non-immersion peers, immersion students show equal or better academic performance by grade 4, even when tested in English (Genesee, 1987).

Special Considerations:

In early years, students often experience a lag in English punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Parents enrolling children for early full immersion need to make a commitment to continued participation in the program in order to realize its full benefits.

Teachers must be qualified elementary school teachers and fully fluent in the TL.

TL materials are required for all components of the curriculum.

PARTIAL IMMERSION MODEL**Program Characteristics:**

Beginning in kindergarten or grade 1, 50% of the school day is taught in English and 50% in the TL, and this pattern continues throughout the program.

Usually, though not always, different teachers are used for the English and the TL instruction.

English Language Arts instruction occurs simultaneously with the target language.

Subject content to be taught in each language is a local decision, and varies from program to program.

Often native or fluent speakers of the TL support the program as classroom aides.

Student Outcomes:

Students attain a high level of proficiency in the TL by the end of elementary school, though not as high as that of full immersion students.

Compared with non-immersion peers, immersion students show equal or better academic performance by grade 4, even when tested in English.

Special Considerations:

Students generally do not experience any initial lag in English skills.

One partial immersion TL teacher can teach two groups of students daily, causing less impact on staffing patterns for a new program.

Greater attention must be paid to the development of TL skills necessary to deal with the curriculum, especially as students move into higher grade

levels.

Teachers must be qualified elementary school teachers and fully fluent in the TL.

TL materials are required for all components of the TL curriculum.

CONCERNS AND DECISIONS

Initially, both parents and elementary school teachers on the Moorhead committee expressed concern about the academic welfare of students enrolled in an early immersion program, despite the research evidence and the assurances of consultants experienced in the immersion concept. It was only after visits to immersion schools in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area that excitement began to replace concerns. By the time a final vote was taken, the committee was ready to endorse the immersion concept and make its recommendation. It was clear, however, that committee members would have to become strong advocates for the program in the community in order to encourage initial participation and confidence.

Because the initiation of an immersion program in Moorhead Public Schools is in itself a bold step for the district and the community, the committee decided to recommend the program with the potential for the most dramatic language results: full immersion, beginning in kindergarten and grade 1. Thus in fall of 1999, children in Moorhead, Minnesota will join over 40,000 children in the U.S. and some 317,000 children in Canada who currently learn all or part of their school curriculum in a new language. While many challenges must be met before the program begins, the process of making the decision about the program model has led to strong confidence in the success and the future of the program itself.