

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Department *of* Education

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IMMERSION EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Findings

- The relationship between cognitive development and bilingualism is an area where conflicting views are expressed throughout the literature surveyed.
- The academic achievements of immersion pupils across a range of subjects are very much in line with the attainments of their peers in English-instructed comparison groups.
- An easy transfer of literacy skills from one language to the other was commonly reported.
- Immersion education is suitable for all children, including pupils with special educational needs, provided that remedial resources are available within the immersion system.
- Studies in Canada highlight the importance of considering the language behaviour of immersion students outside the school environment. Positive attitudes of pupils are only sustained while real social contact with members of the target language continues.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Introduction

1. The remit for this project was to review the literature related to the education of native English speaking children who have experienced their education through the medium of another language.
2. Although the body of literature addressing issues relating to immersion education is vast and strong patterns can be identified therein, certain key areas are marked by conflicting views or by a lack of research focus. There also appears to be a need for more long-term investigations in order to complement the information gained from the more prolific short-term studies. The overall aim was to sift through a broad base of existing literature and to extract relevant data which would provide an informed background to any consideration of immersion education in Northern Ireland. Parameters for the review were determined by the specific interests of the Department of Education. The analysis focused on the following areas: policies, assessment, pedagogical considerations, cognitive aspects, academic outcomes, biliteracy, special needs, sociocultural aspects. These issues were examined across a range of documented materials produced principally in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and, most prolifically, in Canada.
3. The report firstly seeks to clarify the many definitions of bilingual education to be found in the literature and identifies both common and differing characteristics within a range of immersion programmes. The main findings of the report are reflected below.

Policy Development

4. Regarding policy implementation in relation to bilingual education (and more specifically immersion education), it is noted that considerable diversity in approach is found across the geographical boundaries considered and also within countries like the U.S.A. In Wales, policy decisions have impacted upon the language in such a way that Welsh medium education is simply one of several “normal options” rather than anything exceptional. The Maori language in New Zealand is also cited in relation to policy development and strategic planning.

Assessment

5. Attention is drawn to the most pertinent issues related to assessment in the bilingual context. Clearly, difficulties are experienced when children in bilingual programmes are assessed using procedures designed for monolingual children. The implementation of more sensitive testing procedures can identify many advantages to bilingualism. The application of Jim Cummins’ two-dimensional model of language proficiency to curriculum related assessment of bilingual pupils is considered as a matrix which could help teachers to build up a picture of the child’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of cognitive demand and to gauge the level of contextual support required to achieve success in a range of different situations (Cline and Frederickson, 1996).

Pedagogy

6. The pedagogical developments within immersion education reflect those theories which describe the most effective methods for second language acquisition. Research has followed the extension of this pedagogical approach, based on the underlying principle of comprehensible input, into schools which have introduced a second language as a functional medium for teaching other subjects.

7. This relationship between comprehension of content and language development based on analytic activities in immersion schools has been the focus of research in Canada where the need is recognised to build linguistic competence in both the form (grammar, vocabulary, structure) and function (practical application in a meaningful context) of the language, hand in hand. The development of such a form-function relationship is not guaranteed by the use of the language as a medium to teach subject matter content. Similarly, formal grammar lessons may not facilitate the meaningful use of relevant distinctions in message-oriented language. Pedagogical developments seek to integrate these 2 approaches within the immersion setting.

Cognitive Development

8. The relationship between cognitive development and bilingualism is one of those areas where conflicting views are expressed throughout the literature surveyed. Early research, in particular, documents examples of bilingual children being outperformed on intelligence tests. The validity of testing procedures used, in many cases, is later questioned. After the mid-sixties, the main thrust of academic research suggests a positive association between cognitive functioning and bilingualism in “additive” settings¹. Within this linguistic setting, children who reach a threshold level of linguistic competence in both languages may benefit from the potential advantages associated with bilingualism. Successful attainment of this threshold level is influenced by social, attitudinal, educational and cognitive factors.

Academic Outcomes

9. Analysis of academic attainment within the bilingual system is one indicator of pupils’ success which must be interpreted within a fuller context and must also be balanced by an analysis of a broader range of relevant variables. Nevertheless, data on academic outcomes within the immersion system were of particular interest to the Department of Education.

10. Although this area is thoroughly investigated in Canada, for example, and also has been critically examined in Wales, statistical data which would allow comparison of exam results in Irish and English medium schools, in the Republic of Ireland, are not available. In Scotland, the attainments of Gaelic-medium primary school pupils have been analysed by Johnstone et al. (1999) and are in concurrence with general findings from the broad base of international research.

¹ Defined as settings where children have positive experiences of both their mother tongue and the second language, with the latter giving added value to the former.

11. The common conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that the academic achievements of immersion pupils across a range of subjects are very much in line with the attainments of peers in English-instructed comparison groups. Indeed, the emerging pattern in some studies suggests that children in immersion programmes have a competitive edge on their monolingual peers, with regard to academic outcomes.

Biliteracy

12. Both the pedagogical and cognitive dimensions were considered in the literature reviewed, concerning the development of biliteracy. An easy transfer of literacy skills from one language to the other was commonly documented. Differences were recommended in the choice of language to be used for the introduction of reading among minority language children and immersion children. The latter develop basic literacy in the school language and later transfer skills to reading in the dominant language of the environment. The importance of language proficiency, which was reported in relation to cognitive development, is also evident in relation to literacy development. Research also shows that bilingual pupils require added support with semantic and grammatical cues, in particular, in comparison with monolingual peers.

Special needs

13. Special educational needs is another area where further research is clearly needed. The Welsh researcher, Colin Baker (1995), identifies the advantages associated with bilingual education. However, the ability to benefit from these potential advantages assumes that the bilingual child with learning, behavioural, cognitive, emotional or physical problems has access to special needs intervention within the bilingual system. The research findings of other authors also conclude that immersion education is suitable for all children, including pupils with special educational needs, conditional upon remedial resources being available within the immersion system.

Socio-Cultural Links

14. Lessons derived from studies in Canada highlight the importance of considering the language behaviour of immersion students outside the school environment. Although there is evidence of some breakdown of ethnolinguistic stereotypes among immersion pupils, positive attitudes of pupils are only sustained while real social contact with members of the target language continues and classroom contact alone cannot achieve socio-cultural goals.

15. Parental attitudes were examined in a study by G Maguire which focused on the impact of attendance at an Irish-medium school in Belfast upon the language behavioural patterns of pupils' families. This is another component in the socio-cultural dimension of immersion schooling which casts light on the socio-cultural role and aims of immersion schools.

Teacher Training

16. The need for qualified teachers for immersion programmes, particularly at secondary level, appears as a universal difficulty in many of the reviews and analyses.

Overall Conclusions

17. Notwithstanding the difficulties which are related to immersion provision, examined in the literature, there is a general recognition of potential advantages and an acknowledgement of the effectiveness of immersion schooling as an educational choice - now considered a regular rather than an exceptional choice in places like Wales and Canada. Among the conditions which favour the transfer of these potential advantages into a reality, the “additive” setting is emphasised. The development of proficiency in both languages and adequate resources - particularly in staffing terms - also appear frequently in references to favourable conditions in key areas covered, such as cognitive development, biliteracy and special educational needs.

18. The report concludes with an overview of those factors which are considered to have contributed to the success of immersion schooling.

The Project

19. The project was undertaken by the Graduate School of Education at Queen’s University, Belfast, and St. Mary’s University College. The cost was £5,000.

Full Report

20. The full report entitled ‘ Native English language speakers immersed in another language - a review of the literature’ by Peter Neil, Gabrielle Nig Uidhir and Fiona Clark is available from the Department of Education, price £5¹.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

¹ Each educational institution and library is entitled to one free copy.

References

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