



Facts About a Foreign Language Partial Immersion Program

What is a foreign language partial immersion program and how does it work?

In partial immersion programs, instructional time is divided equally between English and the immersion language throughout the elementary grades. At Blythe Academy, students spend 50% of the instructional day learning math and science content in either French or Spanish.

The goal of immersion is to provide educational experiences, beginning in kindergarten and ideally sustained through Grade 12, that support academic and linguistic development in two languages and that develop students' appreciation of their own and other cultures. Immersion education adds knowledge about a new language and culture while building on a child's English language skills and knowledge of U.S. culture.

In order to make academic lessons comprehensible to learners and to support their second language learning, immersion teachers—who are highly proficient in English and the immersion language—use a vast repertoire of instructional strategies as they cover the school district's curriculum (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Snow, 1987).

In the early years, immersion teachers realize that their students will not understand everything they say. They use body language, visuals, manipulatives, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonation to communicate their meaning. In kindergarten it is common for students to speak English with their peers and when responding to their teacher. As the years progress, students naturally use more of the immersion language. To draw students into using the language, teachers often use songs, useful phrases, chants, and rhymes and carefully structure the day with familiar routines.

Why should I consider enrolling my child in an immersion program?

Immersion programs are the fastest growing and most effective type of foreign language program currently available in U.S. schools. Most immersion students can be expected to reach higher levels of second language proficiency than students in other school-based language programs (Met, 1998).

Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places, and many parents want to provide their children with skills to interact competently in an increasingly interdependent world community. In addition to reaping the social and economic advantages of bilingualism, immersion learners benefit cognitively, exhibiting greater nonverbal problem-solving abilities and more flexible thinking (see reviews in Met, 1998). It has been suggested that the very processes learners need to use to make sense of the teacher's meaning make them pay closer attention and think harder. These processes, in turn, appear to have a positive effect on cognitive development. However, a high level of second language proficiency is needed in order to experience the positive cognitive benefits that come with bilingualism (Cummins, 1981). From the standpoint of academic achievement, over three decades of studies consistently show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1987).

What are the goals of the partial immersion program at Blythe?

The long-range goals of an immersion program include: 1) developing a high level of proficiency in the foreign language; 2) developing positive attitudes toward those who speak the foreign language and toward their culture(s); 3) developing English language skills commensurate with expectations for student's age and abilities; 4) gaining skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum in keeping with stated objectives in these areas.

The goals of a foreign language immersion program are to acquire subject matter knowledge and concurrently build proficiency in the second language.

How does the partial immersion program support district and national language goals?

As part of the vision, philosophy, and goals for the school district's world language programs, students will exit our school system equipped with the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and proficiency necessary to use a second language in their personal and professional endeavors, and in their studies at the postsecondary level.

The National Security Language Initiative calls for action in increasing the availability and quality of long-term foreign language programs to aid in global awareness, national security, and economic competitiveness (U.S. Department of State).

For more than 30 years immersion programs have shown that students can learn subject content and language simultaneously and successfully. It is for that reason that the school district opted to implement a partial immersion program at Blythe Academy.

How will immersion benefit my child?

Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places, and many parents want to provide their children with skills to interact competently in an increasingly interdependent world community. In addition to reaping the social and economic advantages of bilingualism, immersion learners benefit cognitively, exhibiting greater nonverbal problem-solving abilities and more flexible thinking (see reviews in Met, 1998). It has been suggested that the very processes learners need to use to make sense of the teacher's meaning make them pay closer attention and think harder. These processes, in turn, appear to have a positive effect on cognitive development. However, a high level of second language proficiency is needed in order to experience the positive cognitive benefits that come with bilingualism (Cummins, 1981). From the standpoint of academic achievement, over three decades of studies consistently show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1987). Achievement data of Blythe Academy students also support the value of participation in the French and Spanish partial immersion programs.

What eventual effect do immersion programs have on verbal and mathematical skills in English?

Studies (Holobow et al., 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1991) have consistently shown that immersion students do as well as, and may even surpass, comparable non-immersion students on measures of verbal and mathematics skills.

How will learning everything in a second language affect my child's English language and literacy development?

Many parents are initially fearful that immersion may have a negative impact on their child's English language development. However, research consistently finds that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000).

Will my child become proficient in the second language? How long will that take?

After only 2 or 3 years in an immersion program, students demonstrate fluency and confidence when using the immersion language, and their listening and reading skills are comparable to those of native speakers of the same age. While these skills remain native-like, students' speaking and writing skills lag behind those of native speakers (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Research finds that immersion students' second language

lacks grammatical accuracy and does not display the variety and complexity produced by native speakers of the language. Achieving high levels of oral and written proficiency in a second language is a long-term process. A long-term commitment is essential, and parents need to understand that native-like proficiency in every skill area is unlikely. Still, immersion students will have a strong second language base upon which to continue moving toward full proficiency and to develop proficiency in subsequent languages.

Language learning is influenced by many factors, including students' personality and motivation, teacher expectations, parental support, program leadership, and support at both the school and district level. Student success requires the active involvement of all of these stakeholders

What do I do if I think the immersion program may not be appropriate for my child?

Every classroom has a student population that represents a spectrum of interests, motivations, and abilities. The immersion classroom is not different. Just as in an English-speaking classroom, students may experience difficulty in an immersion class based on both academic and non-academic factors. Every program, including partial immersion, must provide support for students who may experience academic difficulty and create a classroom environment that meets the needs of a wide range of learners and to help them learn content through a language they are still acquiring.

The following procedures will be followed when concerns arise regarding a student's success in the partial immersion program at Blythe Academy:

1. The parent will submit a letter to the principal requesting that the student be withdrawn from the partial immersion program, and provide reasons for the request.
2. Upon receipt of the written request, the principal will contact the district world language consultant to arrange a language screening to assess the student's language ability to function in the partial immersion classroom.
3. Once the language screening is complete, the principal will convene a committee to gather and review student performance data and other pertinent student achievement information. If the student's performance data indicate that there may be a learning issue, the student will go through the OnTrack process to rule out any learning problems. An improvement plan will be developed and implemented. The improvement plan will include specific strategies and the length of time the plan is to be implemented. School administration will discuss the plan with the parents and the grade level teacher and communicate with them regularly regarding the student's progress during the plan implementation.

4. At the end of the improvement plan, school administrators, parents, and the teacher will meet to review and discuss the student's progress and make a decision regarding the student's status in the immersion class.
5. Should a home-based student be removed from a partial immersion class, the student will have his or her schedule changed and may be assigned to a new teacher. If a magnet student withdraws from a partial immersion class, the student will return to his or her home-based school.