

The Rationale for Immersion at Waddell Language Academy

As a public school in North Carolina, the immersion instruction at E.E. Waddell Language Academy strictly adheres to the Common Core State Standards and the Essential Standards for Science and Social Studies as the guiding curriculum for any planning, instruction, assessments, and data collection. The program complies with educational mandates formulated by State and Federal regulations to the fullest extent.

Taking the previously formulated limitations into account, the immersion language dominates as the language of instruction to the highest possible degree in the subject areas Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies at the elementary level. This is in contrast to most other public immersion programs that limit the target language instruction to only two out of the four subject areas. The North Carolina World Language Essential Standards define the exit proficiency expectations for dual/immersion programs for alphabetic and logographic languages. Those standards explicitly limit the proficiency expectations to intermediate levels by the end of 8th grade. The continued English Language Arts instruction in the target language at middle school level is restricted to 75 minutes every other day. Hence, the middle school language program does not fulfil the minimum requirements of an immersion program.

The Language immersion philosophy follows four immersion-related goals:

1. to achieve proficiency in the target language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing),
2. to acquire comparable English Language Arts skills as peers in traditional schools,
3. to reach cultural competency in surface features and deep features of cultural perspectives, practices, and products,
4. to gain mastery in content areas compared to peers instructed in traditional school.

The effectiveness of immersion instruction has been well researched with a significant impact on foreign language teaching at large: first, foreign language programs also shifted to more content-based instruction in authentic language situations; second, immersion programs constitute the largest growth rate of all language programs in the USA. Four principles lead to those developments:

1. The school setting provides a meaningful social context, in which students develop their language skills in a natural way.
2. The school setting also provides a wide range of formal and functional environments that are conducive to language acquisition on varied levels.
3. The students' motivation level is generally high, because the contents studied in a foreign language meet the appropriate developmental and interest level.
4. Introducing a target language other than the native language enables a complex integration of language, cognitive and social development, which generally stimulates higher achievement levels in either area. (compare Met, 1987)

Immersion programs have undergone a long genesis from their first modern occurrence in Canada in the 1960s. Immersion practice in the USA is directly derived from the Canadian model. Research from the Canadian model and immersion practices in the USA have been done primarily through the Center of Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) in Minneapolis. Originally, it was assumed that students could absorb language properly by mere exposure to the teacher model. Consequently, the

target language was maintained to greatest possible extent during instruction. With improving language tests, there has been an increasing awareness of fossilized errors and relatively low presentational skills compared to the interpretive skills emerging across all immersion programs (Williams Fortune, 2013). Most currently, J. Cummins (2005) – originator of the generally acknowledged *Interdependence Hypothesis* as visualized in his *Dual-Iceberg Representation*, which also explains for instance “consistently significant correlations between L1 and L2 reading abilities (p.4) – denotes that “we should actively teach for transfer across languages in bilingual/immersion programs” (p. 8) and “use of target language ... should not be implemented in a rigid or exclusionary manner” (p.16). Recent studies in immersion programs support Cummins’ approach (compare e.g. Salmons Madriñan, 2014).

In addition to current research, curricular and assessment changes introduced mainly with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards impose an increasing pressure on immersion programs in the public school system. The number and weight of state and federally mandated tests, all of which have to be administered in English, force the school to provide increasing amount of English instruction to meet the academic standards and to prepare for the tests. The Common Core State Standards pushed abstract concepts especially in Science and Social Studies into lower grade levels, which does not permit an age appropriate visualization anymore, immanent to make concepts comprehensible in the target language. The load of specific academic terminology per topic has drastically increased. Memorizing over-specialized vocabulary lists is not considered conducive to the overall foreign language development. All instructional material provided by the district is in English. The sheer amount of necessary translations is no longer possible, especially so in the light of frequently changing instructional programs and the absence of corresponding instructional material in the target languages.

Overall, language immersion is an evolving concept in an ever changing educational setting, driven by a dynamic immersion research platform on the one side and accountability mandates on the other side. The advantages of language, cognitive, and social learning aspects in an immersion learning environment over traditional school concepts are consistently evident in every research study.

For instance, one of the latest research conducted on student performance in immersion programs with randomly assigned students within the Portland Public Schools (comparable to E.E. Waddell Language Academy) comes to the following conclusions:

- “• Students randomly assigned to immersion outperformed their peers in English reading by about 7 months in grade 5, and about 9 months in grade 8.
- We find no statistically significant benefit, but also no detriment, for math and science performance.
- We find suggestive but not statistically significant evidence that the immersion benefit in reading is higher for students in Spanish immersion programs, and that math benefits are higher for students in the less-commonly-taught languages (Japanese, Mandarin, and Russian).
- We find no clear differences in immersion effects by native language. Reading effects for students whose native language matches the classroom partner language appear as high as or higher than for Native English speakers.

- Immersion students have 3-point lower rates of classification as English Language Learners (ELLs) by sixth grade, and this effect is larger (14 points) if students' native language matches the classroom partner language.
- On average, immersion students reach intermediate levels of partner-language proficiency by grade 8." (Bacon et al., 2015).

Language immersion in NC has come a long way with currently more than 100 schools. E.E. Waddell Language Academy, the second such program in NC has been one fine example and model of best practice of immersion teaching for many other immersion programs and universities in the state, the USA, and internationally. The school has been honored in 2012 with the ACTFL Melba D. Woodruff Award for Exemplary Elementary Foreign Language Program (Sponsored by Wright Group/McGraw Hill in collaboration with the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and in 2010 as the Magnet School of the Year (currently listed in the top category: *Magnet School of Excellence*).

Immersion mission at Waddell: "Creating bright futures in six languages."

References:

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