



Bilingualism and immersive learning

Bilingualism as a living language model

Bilingualism is the ability to understand and speak two languages. Bilingual learning is an extended educational model in which two languages and two cultures coexist on an equal level.

Immersion: the most natural way to learn a language

Learning by immersion means that the children are immersed in a "language bath". They hear, speak and learn the language in authentic everyday contexts and experience it in their familiar surroundings. They thus learn the new language as naturally as their mother tongue - without any pressure or vocabulary stress. The immersive method places great emphasis on facial expressions and gestures. The children can thus understand what is being said from the context. As receptive skills increase the children gradually absorb the new language into their everyday language use. With the immersion method, children acquire languages automatically based on meaningful daily learning rather than rote memorisation.

One Person, One language

The early years is the ideal time to introduce children to a foreign language for the first time, because at this age children absorb new knowledge and new words like a sponge.

At Rainbow, everyday life is basically organised according to the principle "one person - one language" with both English and Hebrew speaking staff. When playing, painting, doing handicrafts or eating together, the children always hear and speak both languages, which means that they move naturally in them.

An increased ability to stay focused

Research from Harvard's Dr Luk supports the notion that bilingualism also affects the brain for a lifetime. We know that the immersion student who has been exposed to multiple languages is better able to focus attention on relevant information and enhance their thinking skills. As adults, many of us may have a hard time overcoming the fear of making mistakes, yet it has been proven that students who learn in an immersion setting are more open to asking questions, collaborating and asking each other for assistance in resolving any linguistic nuances. Not only do bilingual students learn how to solve problems and decipher information, they also develop a keen sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues, as they search for meaning around them.

The immersion classroom has a multi-layered focus, which differs from mainstream education. In these classrooms, language, literacy and intercultural skills develop during subject-matter learning. As elaborated upon by Dr Sorace, professor of developmental linguistics at the University of Edinburgh, students in immersion classes develop an enhanced ability to 'task switch' due to the number of times they change how they communicate throughout the day. They learn to pay focused attention without being distracted and develop a heightened ability to switch from one task to another.

Bilingualism promotes multitasking

Naturally, students who share the same native language will seek one another out, in order to be part of something that feels familiar and inclusive. They often form groups based on their common language, since it allows them to feel connected to others, gives them a sense of belonging and gives them the opportunity to express themselves in a more advanced way. When interacting in the classroom environment, children will further rely on each other to learn,

making use of their knowledge of different languages to communicate and to help increase their overall awareness. This 'translanguaging' ability is a powerful tool for learning and understanding. As explained by Dr Garcia, professor of bilingual education at The Graduate Center, CUNY, students are 'drawing upon their full linguistic repertoire and cognitive resources to create meaning' and this, in turn, 'maximises communicative potential without creating unnatural boundaries between words'.

5 Advantages of bilingualism and immersion

1. Authentic language learning

Immersion teaching provides the optimal framework for authentic situations and actions. It is the most natural way for children to learn languages - intuitively and without the rigid learning of grammar and vocabulary.

2. Language acquisition without pressure to perform

It has been scientifically proven that the immersion method allows a higher level of foreign language learning to be achieved than with conventional foreign language teaching. In addition, the method is more suitable for children, as the children immerse themselves in the new language by means of facial expressions and gestures and soak it up like a sponge.

3. Better understanding of other cultures

Early access to multilingualism as well as the common everyday life with children from different nations promotes a stronger awareness and understanding of other cultures, their ways of life and values among children.

4. Increased ability to concentrate

Children who are taught according to the immersion method often have a better ability to concentrate. It is easier for them to switch between different tasks in their minds. In general, these children gain easier access to other languages as adults.

5. Versatile future opportunities and career prospects

Early knowledge of foreign languages promotes intellectual development. The children are more creative in solving problems. They learn to think flexibly and look for alternative solutions. They also try to express themselves well and put themselves in the shoes of those who do not understand them so well. All these soft skills provide the best prerequisites for versatile and promising perspectives in later professional and private life.



Things to remember:

Bilingual Approach | Immersion language learning

- ⇒ Children will not understand every word the practitioner is saying, but that they will always know what the practitioner wants them to do.
- ⇒ Over time children will understand and will begin to use the language themselves.
- ⇒ Do not expect children to start speaking the second language immediately, and do not try to force children to speak.
- ⇒ Children will start to use the second language it when they are ready.
- ⇒ Do not ask children to perform in the second language (and encourage parents to do the same). Children intuitively understand that language is the means through which they communicate with real people in real-life situations.
- ⇒ Many parents of immersion students are often worried that their children never use their second language at home or when prompted – only to be amazed later upon hearing their children speak it with a native speaker in the community.
- ⇒ Do not ask children to translate. This requires high-level skills that are not a part of the programme. You can ask for 'help' in explaining something, but stick to ONE language
- ⇒ Teach children the songs and nursery rhymes that are part of their own cultural heritage, and from your backgrounds, this will not confuse, but encourage wider use of language
- ⇒ Research has consistently demonstrated that learning in two languages enhances academic growth and develops the cognitive abilities of children
- ⇒ In the beginning, staff should ensure children are made to feel safe and secure through nurturing and reassurance. After a few days, children do not focus on the fact that the practitioner is speaking in another language.
- ⇒ To achieve the benefits of immersive learning staff working with the children must stick to ONE language and should not mix, or attempt to translate for children, this will damage the beneficial impact of the programme | **One person, One Language**