



Spanish Immersion FAQs

Why Immersion?

Many countries around the world have embraced the immersion model for decades since learning two, three or even four languages is considered normal. In the last few years, the immersion model of learning has begun to grow in the United States with more schools adding programs. LMS began its immersion program in an attempt to transform lives and change our world through bilingual and bicultural students. The immersion model uses the entire school day to instruct students in another language. Academic subjects are taught in Spanish rather than simply teaching about the language itself. All of this produces much more proficient language results compared to a typical Spanish instruction class. Students develop native-like proficiency by the time they complete the immersion program.

Why Spanish?

According to the latest census data, almost 58 million people in the United States speak Spanish. This translates to 18% of the population. Around the world, over 477 million people speak Spanish as their first language and 74 million people consider it their second language (Ethnologue).

Why begin a second language in Kindergarten?

There are different variations of immersion programs but most schools choose to follow an early immersion model that begins in Kindergarten. Students that begin at this early stage develop both fluency and literacy in another language without any detriment to their English academic skills (Cummins, 1998). At this early stage, children follow a “natural” language-learning model that imitates how they learn their first language. They first develop language through receptive skills, like listening, before moving on to productive skills, like writing and speaking. Also at this early stage children tend to have less anxiety in relation to language learning and view learning in another language as simply, “going to school”.

Another important reason is that the earlier that children begin learning Spanish, the more robust their vocabulary will become. One of the complaints of immersion programs is that children’s academic ability can outpace their language ability, especially in the area of vocabulary. Giving children more time to learn more words will only increase their ability to function at a higher level of learning as they progress through school.

How long will it take to become proficient in Spanish?

Most students will begin to become more fluent and confident in their ability after only two to three years in the program (Fortune and Tedick, 2003). By the end of fifth grade, most students will be considered to be both bilingual and bicultural and will then enter into a maintenance stage of language learning.

What will the school day be like?

The first year of immersion involves lots of songs, movement, and hands-on activities that keep students engaged and having fun while they learn. Teachers make their lessons comprehensible by using pictures, gestures, repetition, and modeling. All LMS classrooms have interactive whiteboards that allow technology to be used each day to further language learning. The first few weeks may be challenging for some students, but children will quickly adapt to being immersed in another language.

What curriculum is used in the Spanish Immersion program?

The Spanish Immersion program follows the same curriculum that is in place in the traditional classrooms. The same standards for language arts, math, science, and social studies are also used, with the exception that all instruction is in Spanish. Bible in the early grades is taught in English but switches over to Spanish once students have acquired a deeper understanding of Spanish. Specials (gym, music, art, and library) are taught in English.

Who are the teachers?

All teachers in the program are either first-language Spanish speakers or Spanish-language learners who have lived in Spanish-speaking countries for an extended period. The teachers in the program are fully committed to its success and provide a loving, nurturing atmosphere that allows all students to succeed.

Will learning in Spanish affect English language literacy?

While it seems like students may have more difficulty with English language literacy, many researchers of immersion programs actually point to the additive bilingualism enrichment principle in explaining the effects of these programs on first language development. Most children will simply add another language to their knowledge base without harming their first language development. After analyzing some thirty years of data on immersion programs in Canada, Cummins states:

The development of additive bilingual and biliteracy skills entails no negative consequences for children's academic, linguistic, or intellectual development. On the contrary, although not conclusive, the evidence points in the direction of subtle metalinguistic, academic and intellectual benefits for bilingual children (1998).

Some studies have shown that children in immersion programs may experience a lag in their reading fluency development (Geva and Clifton, 1994) but most of this is attributed to the fact that children are developing literacy in two languages instead of just one. By the time children reach the intermediate primary grades, most of this difference between their English-only peers has disappeared. As the program at LMS continues, we have found that our students in the immersion program perform comparably to their peers in the traditional tract.

Shouldn't children learn to read in English first?

Strong readers in one language are indeed strong readers in another language. However, the order of learning to read those languages has been found to not be imperative. A comprehensive study of French Immersion programs found that statistically there were no significant differences in reading skills between those who first learned to read in English and those who first learned to read in French (Noonan, Colleaux, and Yackulic, 1997). This study went on to show that "beginning reading skills are similar for all students, regardless of the language used to introduce reading." Students may enter the Spanish Immersion program already able to read in English. If so, those reading skills will be put to good use in learning to read in Spanish. Most students, however, will not yet be literate in English. These students will then use the literacy skills they develop in Spanish to develop their English literacy.

Interestingly, some research has shown that learning Spanish can actually boost a child's confidence in reading English. Spanish has a consistent orthography, meaning there is a regular letter-sound correspondence. Some studies (Campbell and Sais, 1995; Durgunoglu, et. al, 1993) have found that learning to read English alongside learning to read in a language with a consistent orthography, like Spanish, actually enhances English literacy skills. More studies (Labov, 2004 and Reading, 2008) point to students showing more confidence in their literacy skills as they learn in Spanish and then transfer those same skills to English. This research again points to the consistent orthography in Spanish.

How will children develop English language literacy?

In the first three years of the program, students will not have formal English instruction. Despite this, students will still be gaining skills for English language literacy. The linguistic interdependency principle shows that

language academic skills learned in one language will indeed transfer to another language. For example, children learning to read in Spanish will develop the same strategies to become strong readers as they would in English. They will learn the process of sounding out words, rereading, finding meaning, using visual cues, etc. The words may be different but the process is the same. There has even been research into the transfer of phonological awareness skills between Spanish and English among children from preschool age through elementary (Cisero and Royer, 1995; Dickinson, et. al., 2004).

Students will continue to develop their English proficiency due to the exposure to English literacy outside of the classroom setting in addition to the linguistic skills they are acquiring in the classroom. Research has shown that children in immersion programs will develop the same levels of proficiency in all aspects of English as students only educated in English, due to the fact of English being the dominant societal language (Genesee, et. al. 2004; Harley, Hart, and Lapkin, 1986).

Beginning in third grade, students will have time for formal English language instruction. Each successive year more instructional time will be added in English to increase students' abilities in English while maintaining and growing their competencies in Spanish. When students reach Middle School, they will enter into the maintenance phase of their language learning and have one to two classes per day in Spanish, with the rest of their instructional time in English.

What role do parents play?

Parental support is vital to the success of students in the Immersion program. Parents are not required to know Spanish nor is there an expectation that parents will help students learn Spanish. The role of parents is to encourage their children and also provide English support at home. LMS does ask that parents make a commitment to the program that will require their child(ren) to stay in the program for the duration of their schooling. The expectations of parents are clearly spelled out in the Commitment Form that all families need to complete in order to enroll in the Spanish Immersion program.

Can parents help in English literacy acquisition?

While some studies have shown that children may simply transfer their literacy skills from one language to another (Cashion and Eagan, 1990), other children may need more explicit help. Parents are asked to read with their children each day in English, which is the same advice that is given to parents of all children in our school. In working with your child we ask that you allow your child to progress at his or her own pace, knowing that your child is not only learning English but Spanish as well. With this in mind, it is expected that reading in English will not happen as quickly or as fluently as compared to their counterparts in the traditional classes. Parents must be patient and trust in the program's ability to produce bilingual students, even if it happens more slowly than some parents may like.

Is the Spanish Immersion program right for every child?

LMS is committed to the success of each and every student whether that student is involved in the Spanish Immersion program or the traditional classroom. Each family must decide together whether Spanish Immersion is the right fit. Each child has her own interests and abilities and these must be weighed in light of the requirements of the program. We invite families to talk and pray together. We also invite you to come and visit. This is the best way to discover whether Spanish Immersion is the right choice. Please call 717-394-7107 to set up a time to visit a classroom.

References

- Campbell, R. and Sais, E. (1995). Accelerated metalinguistic awareness in bilingual children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 13, 61-68.
- Cashion, M. and R. Eagan (1990). Spontaneous reading and writing in English by students in total French immersion: Summary of final report. *English Quarterly*, 22(1), 30-44.
- Cisero, C. A., and J. M. Royer (1995). The development and cross-language transfer of phonological awareness. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 20, 275-303.
- Cummins, J. (1998). Immersion education for the millennium: What have we learned from 30 years of research on second language immersion? In M. R. Childs & R. M. Bostwick (Eds.) *Learning through two languages: Research and practice*. Second Katoh Gakuen International Symposium on Immersion and Bilingual Education. (34-47). Katoh Gakuen, Japan.
- Dickinson, D. K. et. al (2004). Cross-language transfer of phonological awareness in low-income Spanish and English bilingual preschool children. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 25, 323-347.
- Durgunoglu, A.Y., Nagy, W. E. and B. J. Hancin-Bhatt (1993). Cross-language transfer of phonological awareness. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 453-465.
- Ethnologue. <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/spa>
- Fortune, T. and D. Tedick (2003). What parents want to know about foreign language immersion programs. *CAL Online Resources*.
- Geva, E. and S. Clifton (1994). *Canadian Modern Language Review*. 50 (4), 646-67.

Genesee, F., Bhatia, T. K., and W. Ritchie (2004). What do we know about bilingual education for majority language students? *Handbook of bilingualism and multiculturalism*. 547-576. Blackwell, Malden, MA.

Harley, B., Hart, D., and S. Lapkin (1986). The effects of early bilingual schooling on first language skills. *Applied Psycholinguistics*. 7, 295-322.

Labov, W. (November 2004). When normal children don't learn to read. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Annual Convention. Philadelphia, PA.

Noonan, B., Colleaux, J. & R. A. Yackulic (1997). Two approaches to beginning reading in early French immersion. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*. 53 (4) 730-742.

Reading, S. (2008). Differential effects of French and Spanish immersion education on English literacy skills. *Bilingual Research Journal* 31 (1), 115-145.

United States Census Bureau. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb13-ff19.html