

A photograph of two children, a boy and a girl, walking away from the camera in a field of purple flowers. The boy is on the left, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and yellow pants. The girl is on the right, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and colorful striped pants. They are holding hands. The background is a soft-focus field of purple flowers under a bright sky.

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**Bilingual immersion education
at academia International School**

What is bilingualism/ multilingualism?

Bilingualism or multilingualism is the ability to speak and/or understand two or more languages. Most multilingual people have a **“dominant” language**, i.e. they have more in-depth knowledge of one of the languages and often prefer to speak this language. This can be attributed to the fact that language use is very closely associated with the **social environment** of a person – each language is used in different situations and with different persons.

It can moreover be expected that language competences change over the course of time, with initially dominant languages sometimes shifting to the background.

Language development and language acquisition

Linguistics distinguish between language acquisition and language learning. While learning a language implies explicit and conscious learning of a second or foreign language, acquisition of a language is an unconscious acquisition of a native or foreign language without explicit instruction, i.e. through natural and spontaneous contact with the language.

The stages of language development are similar in all children, irrespective of their native language, but the speed at which they are reached varies.

6–8 months: The child begins to babble.

10–12 months: The child starts to form first words.

20–24 months: The child forms first syntactic structures.

It should be taken into account that language acquisition always takes place in a socio-cultural setting. Cultural differences are correspondingly reflected by language use and the time required to reach a specific speaking stage.

Simultaneous bilingualism is the concurrent contact with two languages from birth and leads to children developing most aspects of the two languages in a similar form and speed compared to monolingually raised children. It must however be taken into consideration that there are significant differences between children. Delayed acquisition of a specific grammatical structure is therefore not necessarily an indication of a speech disorder, but may be part of the normal speech development of the child.

Sequential acquisition of a second or foreign language, i.e. when children acquire two languages consecutively. In this instance, the learning takes place in different steps and is based on the knowledge of the native language.

Listening comprehension is developed earlier in children than **language production**.

It is therefore quite natural in the early stages of learning a foreign language for a child to answer in his/her native language when asked a question in the foreign language. Active use of the language follows later. The first, non-verbal phase can last from a few weeks to several months or longer. Parents wishing to assess the language skills of their children should therefore consider the ability to understand the spoken language rather than just the verbal output.

In a later phase, children often start to demonstrate their new language skills in formula-like utterances: single words and short, imitative sentences are frequently the first output in a foreign language. Own sentences are formulated later, with heavy reliance on – at least to start with – their native language skills. Language transfer, i.e. adoption of a grammatical rule of one language in another, manifested particularly in this phase, is an important part of the learning process.

Example of grammatical learning process:

The 4 phases of U-shaped learning

1st phase: The child uses the wrong form; the grammatical rule is not yet analysed.

For example “yesterday I paint”.

2nd phase: The child uses the right form sporadically; the underlying rule is however not yet analysed. For example “I paint” and “I painted”.

3rd phase: The child has analysed the grammatical rule, but makes over-regularised use of it.

For example “I goed”.

4th phase: The child uses the grammatical rule correctly. For example: “Yesterday I painted, I went”.

Learning and acquisition of a foreign language takes place in many forms and over various time spans in different people. It has however been shown that the intensity of contact with the language contributes directly to the competence in the language. Researchers have been able to identify a correlation between interactive language contact and a corresponding active vocabulary in various studies. Relatively short contact with a language can therefore also lead to advanced linguistic proficiency, provided contact is diverse, authentic and intensive or immersive.

Previously, language research claimed that there was a so-called “critical” phase during which first language acquisition must take place in order to be successful. This was justified by exceptional cases of children who grew up isolated and without human contact and who were never exposed to natural human language, and consequently never acquired competence in a native language.

In the meantime, linguistic researchers however believe that there is a “sensitive” period (until approx. 3.5 years) during which the human auditory system’s capacity is most receptive, which is particularly favourable for acquisition of a language. This often quoted “age effect” can be attributed to the fact that the brain structures change for the benefit of other important neurobiological developments, with slightly less priority subsequently allocated to speech development.

This supports the widespread assumption “the earlier the contact with the language the better”. This does not however rule out the possibility that children, adolescents and adults can reach an almost native speaker level in a foreign language even at a more advanced age.

What this means for school lessons

Immersive teaching, as provided at the academia International School Bilingual, therefore takes into account both the advantages and disadvantages of early and late learners of a second language.

Immersion teaching offers a natural, authentic and informal contact, especially for very young children who may be overwhelmed by explicit language instruction.

Older children on the other hand profit from the combination of natural use of the language (e.g. during school breaks, with other students) and formal instruction in both languages (i.e. German or English lessons), during which they can fall back on the knowledge of their native language.

Code switching is the intentional use of two or more languages within an utterance. It is often wrongly interpreted as a linguistic deficit, as a sign that the learner has gaps that have to be “filled” with the native language. Code switching is however more of a natural linguistic phenomenon, in which the speaker purposely reacts to a communication situation in a manner that seems appropriate. The speaker therefore uses words from two or more languages intentionally to adapt what he or she is saying to the given setting.

A study from 2015 showed that code switching can even give rise to cognitive advantages. It also demonstrated a connection between code switching and cognitive conflict resolution. Parents should therefore not discourage code switching, but recognise it as natural behaviour of bilingual children that fulfils a communicative purpose.

What are the advantages of multilingualism?

The European Union recommends that all EU citizens should speak two foreign languages in addition to their native language. Knowledge of foreign languages not only maximises personal advantages on the vocational training and job market, but also increases understanding, tolerance and bonding between people of different cultures. Various studies have moreover repeatedly demonstrated the cognitive benefit of multilingualism. Cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, better results in intelligence and reading comprehension tests, improved ability to concentrate and even delayed onset of dementia are only a few of the advantages of multilingualism in adults and children demonstrated by many studies.

What are the disadvantages of multilingualism?

Parents often worry that learning a foreign language may be too much for their children, or disadvantageous with regard to proficiency in the native language. This assumption is based on the incorrect belief that different languages are processed in different parts of the brain and hence compete for cognitive capacities. This is however not the case. In most cultures of the world, it is perfectly normal for children to grow up with two or more languages.

The frequently cited “delayed” linguistic competence of multilingual persons is based on a scientifically founded fact: multilingual persons have a longer latency in the word retrieval process. This however only involves delays of a few milliseconds, i.e. is hardly perceptible to outsiders.

What is bilingual immersive teaching?

The bilingual immersive concept focuses on the balanced use of two languages. The two languages, whether native or foreign language of the students, are **the languages used during lessons as well as casually between students**. All school lessons – also in non-language-based subjects such as mathematics or sport – are conducted in two different languages in alternation. Students are moreover animated to use the two languages during non-school activities (e.g. during school breaks, lunchtime etc.) and when talking to each other.

The aim of bilingual schooling is to equip the children with functional bilingual linguistic proficiency and an in-depth understanding of the (language) cultures of several language communities by the time they leave school.

Immersion programmes, bringing children with different native languages together in one classroom, are particularly advantageous. The natural exchange in an academic as well as non-school setting considerably increases the authentic language contact of the children and hence acquisition of the foreign language.

Studies have shown that immersion programmes are all the more successful when both teaching languages are used in a **balanced way** yet relatively strictly separate from each other during school lessons. This does not mean that use of the native language should be penalised when the foreign language is required. Instead, it should encourage the children to be able to use both languages in all situations. Separation of the two languages moreover contributes to development of cognitive linguistic boundaries, which makes it easier to learn a foreign language.

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that this teaching concept is similar to natural acquisition of the native language by children and therefore does not overstrain the children. Immersive teaching combines aspects of language acquisition (i.e. unconscious acquisition through natural contact with the language) and language learning (i.e. explicit instruction in a foreign language). This makes it suitable both for very young children (i.e. kindergarten age) and children at primary and secondary school age.

Immersive teaching at academia International School Bilingual takes into account these important findings:

- Equal division of instruction days between English and German in regularly recurring phases during which the children can focus intensively on a second or third language.
- The half-weekly rhythm is helpful for learning specialised subject matter, since any language barriers that may arise can be overcome through lessons in the native language.
- The international character of our pupils gathers children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in one classroom, which significantly increases natural contact with foreign languages.
- Spending time together during school and lunch breaks as well as the after-school programme ensures a natural and informal exchange between different (language) cultures and between different age groups.
- Students at the academia International School Bilingual receive additional support through “booster” classes to supplement teaching in specialised subjects and the informal use of the second or foreign language.

Prerequisites for effortless acquisition of a second language:

- Contact with the language should be as **intensive** and **natural** as possible.
- The **earlier** that contact with a language is made, the easier it is for the children to acquire the corresponding language.
- Contact with the language should be safeguarded over a **longer period of time**.
- Contact with the language should be **diverse in terms of structure and content**, i.e. take into account all linguistic competences (speaking, writing, reading and listening comprehension) and be used in different situations and contexts.

Children who have already attended a bilingual kindergarten have a head start in their ability to understand the foreign language, which is a good basis for bilingual primary schooling.

Studies have however shown that children without previous knowledge can catch up quickly and that a lack of previous knowledge is not an obstacle for pupils.

What are further advantages of bilingual immersive teaching?

Highly gifted children may find bilingual teaching an interesting challenge preventing them from being bored, at least until the new language is mastered. In contrast to conventional school instruction, errors are perceived as part of natural linguistic development and not actively avoided. This encourages the motivation and positive attitude of pupils towards acquisition of the foreign language.

What are the possible disadvantages of bilingual immersive teaching?

Many parents fear that the **development of native language skills** may suffer through immersive teaching in a foreign language. This has been refuted by various international studies which have shown that children at immersive schools perform just as well or even better in language tests as monolingually taught children.

Many parents also worry about the **knowledge in specialised subjects** gained by their bilingually educated children, fearing that they may find it difficult to understand and learn about complex issues in a foreign language rather than in their native language. Research has however shown that children at an immersive school learn specialised subject content with an initial delay, but that this is made up for in the course of time.

Studies on bilingual children and adults have shown that dyslexia and other reading and spelling disabilities can be dependent on the language or language system. This means that children with a **reading and/or spelling disability** in their native language will not necessarily have this problem in their second or third language.

More recent studies indicate that multilingualism can even have a positive effect on reading and spelling disabilities. This may be attributable to the general cognitive advantages of multilingualism (e.g. cognitive elasticity, creativity etc.).

What role do parents play in the acquisition of multilingualism?

Motivation plays a key role in learning a foreign language successfully. It is therefore important that parents support the efforts of their children and, if necessary, encourage the children and tell them about the advantages of language skills early.

Continued support and advancement of the native language of the child is important for successful acquisition of a second and/or third language. Diverse studies have shown that children with sound knowledge of their native language profit most from immersive teaching.

Parents are often advised to follow the “one parent, one language” rule meaning that each parent consistently communicates with the child in one language. This recommendation is however not based on any scientifically founded findings and is often contrary to the natural use of language in multilingual families.

A more recent study has shown that children answer relatively independent of the language used by the parents and that they develop language dominances that are characterised by many aspects including non-family influences. Particularly the ambient language, i.e. the language of the wider social environment of the child, appears to play a decisive role in the linguistic development of the child.

Parents with limited knowledge of one or both of the languages of instruction are often worried that they will not be able to support their children adequately during their schooling. More important than active language support through practice is however the parents' **positive attitude** to multilingualism and approval of bilingual immersive teaching.

Parents can also support the **contact of their children to languages** at home or during their spare time by, for example listening to music, audio books or podcasts in the foreign language, by reading books, magazines or newspapers or by watching films. An increasing variety of leisure time activities focussing on cultural and hence also linguistic exchange of children (e.g. in sports clubs and/or interest groups etc.) is increasingly available.

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