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### For further information and practical advice:

- Verein für frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen FMKS e.V. [www.fmks-online.de](http://www.fmks-online.de). Hier finden Sie als pdf-Datei die folgende aktuelle Broschüre von Professor Wode:
- Wode, H., 2004. *Frühes Fremdsprachenlernen. Englisch ab Kita und Grundschule: Warum? Wie? Was bringt es?* Kiel: Verein für frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen. FMKS e.V.

# Immersion in preschools and primary schools

## Brochure for parents

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## Immersion as a teaching method

Maybe you are familiar with situations in which despite several years of strenuous language learning in school you are not capable to respond spontaneously when someone addresses you in a foreign language. Or maybe you missed career opportunities or failed to come into contact with someone due to language barriers.

Perhaps the reverse is true for you, because you were lucky to grow up bilingually or you never had problems learning a foreign language. Nevertheless, like the majority of today's parents you probably wish that your children have more fun in learning a language and that for them the acquisition is playful and efficient at the same time.

That learning a foreign language can indeed be beneficial is evident in the results gained with the immersive teaching method (IM). IM-learners master a foreign language proficiently. They are able to cope with (age-appropriate) communicative situations.

This leaflet is intended to provide you with answers to frequently asked questions. Next to practical experience of IM-educators this brochure comprises current results of national and international scientific research on IM.

## Academic Supervision

The research network ELIAS supervises nine bilingual preschools in four European countries. Its team members support the network with their experience from IM-projects in Germany, Europe, Canada and the USA. In order to investigate the children's language skills several age-appropriate tests are carried out.

Furthermore, staff members of the involved universities attend proceedings in the preschools and primary schools on a regular basis. These observations shall help the researchers to keep in touch with the children and their educators and thus serve as a basis for the prearrangement of the language tests. ELIAS emphasizes the collaboration between IM-institutions and the supervisory academic institutions.

## Is immersion only suitable for “talented” children?

Many people believe that learning a foreign language is challenging enough for a child and thus only extraordinary talented children would be able to cope with a new language and a syllabus in the respective target language. However, research indicates that immersion does not disadvantage children with learning disabilities but assures comparable results to monolingual education. Additionally, these children profit from this very natural way of language learning, since immersion raises their chances to achieve an incomparably high communicative level.

## How can parents contribute to successful immersion?:

You...

- are enthusiastic and positive about IM,
- take part actively and are interested in the kindergarten and school activities,
- as an experienced reader. constitute a role model by reading to your child on a regular basis,
- conversations at home are of good address,
- compliment and encourage your child on using the foreign language,
- do not push the child to use the foreign language in presence of friends or relatives,
- stay in regular contact with educators and teaching staff.

## What is immersion?

IM is a language teaching and learning method which can be applied in preschools, primary and secondary schools. Research in this field has been extensive and testifies immersion as one of the world’s most efficient language learning and teaching methods. Preschools follow an immersive approach if their usual activities are provided in a foreign language. In immersive schools 50 % to 100 % of the curriculum is taught in a foreign language. IM – programmes have their roots in North America and Australia and are exercised for over 40 years now. Immersive education in Europe can be found predominantly in the Scandinavian countries, Spain and France. In Germany, however, immersion is prevalent in some secondary bilingual schools with only two to three subjects that are taught in a foreign language. German primary schools that make use of the immersive method are only found sporadically.

## How does early immersion work?

The immersive way of learning a language is similar to the acquisition of the mother tongue. IM-programmes thus differ from usual teacher-centred learning methods in so far as they make use of the natural, unconscious way of learning a language.

When interacting with babies, communication mainly takes place via a combination of, speech, gestures and facial expressions. It only needs some weeks for the child to realize that for instance a certain pitch of the

voice is linked to a certain activity. Surely you remember how your child tried to imitate its first sounds and soon started to babble. Like all parents you were probably proud when your child said its first words. Little by little children acquire grammatical constructions and furthermore enlarge their lexicon by mere interaction with their social environment. No instruction is needed for this since the ability to acquire languages is innate and thus can be drawn on at any age and stage of life. Furthermore, language acquisition is a process and errors are a natural part of the acquisition progress.

International research gave evidence to the fact that also a third or fourth language can be acquired rather than learned. Immersion, in contrast to the systematic learning of a language, makes use of the natural acquisition process and thus constitutes an effortless way of learning new languages.

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Also the subject matters are not neglected in immersive primary schools. Children who are taught social studies in a foreign language will accomplish the same level of competence as children in monolingual primary schools. It is quite natural that initially the learning process in IM-programmes proceeds more slowly than in German medium lessons. Yet, once children are used to the foreign language they quickly balance the delay.

- Furthermore, children's cognitive development is positively influenced.

Research in a primary school in Altenholz close to Kiel which has been carried out by Professor Henning Wode and his team confirms the findings of the international research on IM programmes. In the school in Altenholz all subjects except German classes were taught in English. The results show that all children up to the age of 10 can successfully master a foreign language under the following conditions: Early language exposure, a natural language learning environment as well as intense and permanent language contact.

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## How successful is immersion?

International research on IM clearly underlines the efficiency of the language acquisition method. Children who take part in immersion programmes starting in preschool and ending in primary school, and who have a minimum of 50 % of the lessons taught in a foreign language, show the following results:

- Children's knowledge of the foreign language exceeds the results of children who attended conventional language lessons. With the end of primary schooling, the receptive language knowledge equals the competence of native speakers of the same age. Furthermore, they are almost as competent as native speakers when it comes to language production although mostly speaking with a noticeable accent.
- The development of the children's mother tongue is not negatively affected by immersion programmes. On the contrary, some of the children show better competence in their mother tongue than children who attended monolingual schools. This is probably due to the better language awareness children develop when they have to master a second language.

## How does learning proceed ... in the preschool?

From the very first day in the preschool foreign-language educators will be exclusively talking in their mother-tongue (for instance English) when addressing your child. They will only use the ambient language (the children's first language) if really necessary. Nevertheless, your child will always be able to understand the communication, because the foreign language will at all times come along with gestures, facial expressions, pictures and demonstrations. This visually supported performance allows children to relate what has been said and what it means and thus the context becomes apparent to them. Daily rituals such as the morning circle, joint breakfast or the afternoon nap bring about a certain routine which not only structures the day but helps the children to recognize certain phrases. It will not take long until the children can sing along with the songs or repeat rhymes.

At first, the interaction between educators and children will be of bilingual nature. The educators will keep talking in the foreign language whereas children's responses will mainly be in the first/ambient language. Via this bilingual communication children come to know that their educators are able to understand their first language and accordingly are trustworthy contact persons for them.

Similar to the acquisition of the mother tongue, children are likely to make use of isolated foreign words first which are integrated in their German utterances. The educators acknowledge the natural acquisition



process and will encourage, but not push, the children to use the foreign language. Towards the end of their time in the preschool children are capable to articulate short phrases. Their receptive skills however are even more distinctive. Even though children are not able to produce whole sentences they are able to understand everything they face within the daily routine. This finding had been observed in all immersive preschools so far.

### **. . . in primary school?**

In the immersive lessons at primary schools the teacher solely uses the respective foreign language. Similar to immersive preschools, the intention of an utterance is supported by gestures, facial expressions, pictures etc. Children will soon learn that next to active listening they also need to watch carefully in order to keep track of the lesson.

Very quickly children master habits like greetings, farewells, songs and rhymes in the foreign language. It is important for the children's motivation that language acquisition takes place in a playful way since children who have fun in learning a language are curious to learn even more.

At least in the first years in primary schools, lessons will also be rather bilingual in terms of the interaction between teachers and the children. While teachers will keep talking in the foreign/second language, children will probably respond in their first language/in the ambient language. Still, your child can be sure of being understood when it makes use of its mother tongue. It



is the teachers' responsibility to observe the children's language progress and to make sure that all children can follow the subject matter. Children who have not been attending an immersive preschool and hence do not come into contact with the foreign language until the beginning of the first class in primary school will approximately need half a year to articulate their first short sentences.

Concerning the relation of productive and receptive language skills in primary schools the same facts hold true regarding language acquisition in preschools. It is part of the acquisition process that listening comprehension exceeds language production. Furthermore, the first sentences will entail typical learners' errors which clearly display that the child starts to generate a first interlanguage from the language input.

Teachers will be glad to see the children's improvement in the language acquisition process and will moreover provide feedback by complimenting the children on their foreign language performances.

Language corrections are to be carried out indirectly for instance via the repetition of utterances that make use of the correct form. Since immersion is a natural, unconsciously proceeding language acquisition method children are not aware of e.g. grammatical rules. Hence, direct corrections often make no sense and the children tend to ignore them anyway. Sometimes they even lead to frustration and as a consequence discourage the child to use the foreign language. Teachers are trained accordingly and are willing to be patient with the language learners.