

PARTICIPANT REACTIONS TO TWO-WAY IMMERSION (TWI) PROGRAMS

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The purpose of this study was to elicit participant reactions to two-way immersion (TWI) programs in the United States of America. A large number of recent studies have focused on instructor views and perspectives of two-way immersion programs, so this study aimed to gain insight from students who are, or who have, participated in TWI programs throughout North America.

One hundred fifty-one TWI schools throughout the United States were contacted and asked to participate in this study. Two similar surveys were developed, one for current TWI students, and another for former TWI students. Students from these two groups were asked to fill out a confidential online survey that addressed specific linguistic skills, abilities, and preferences, as well as connection to the cultures of the target language. Forty-eight percent of the survey respondents were native speakers of English, and the remaining 52% were non-native speakers of English. The number of respondents to the former student survey was so low that the data were inconclusive, and, therefore, will not be included in this study.

Since the survey was conducted online, the data were stored in a comma-delimited format for further evaluation. The data were then tallied and analyzed for common themes.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Second Language (ESL) has been described by many in recent years as being the fastest-growing component of contemporary American K-12 education (Ovando & Collier, 1998). As a result of this rapid growth, ESL has attracted the attention of politicians, school administrators, and the general public to the point that Congress passed a law called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002. The inclusion of specific ESL guidelines in the NCLB legislation reflects the increasing importance of English-language instruction in the United States (Klingner et al., 2006).

A new, innovative approach that addresses the growing number of English language learners (ELLs) and the increasing importance of multiple-language education is the two-way immersion school. In TWI programs, cognitive development is enhanced and fostered because the two languages are not simply taught as languages (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). The language in which the students are taught is simply a medium for instruction instead of being the sole focus of instruction. However, some TWI schools focus primarily on the cognitive development of their students, effectively scaffolding what

students learn in their native and non-native languages. Other TWI programs focus less on cognitive development and more on direct language instruction, resulting in slower cognitive development. Although most TWI schools in the United States run from kindergarten to twelfth grade, there is a small minority of TWI schools that provide either primary or secondary education. (Cummins & Swain, 1986). Cummins & Swain (1986) present several Canadian immersion schools that use a large variety of cross-curricular lesson plans. Researchers other than Cummins and Swain have concluded that too much attention is being given to the second language in traditional language-learning environments. Bertha Pérez, in her book, *Becoming Biliterate: A study of two-way bilingual immersion education*, comes to the conclusion that there is no perfect formula for any given ESL class; as each individual is unique, so is every class, and as such, special considerations and adjustments must be made for every class to maximize the positive and minimize the negative potentials (Pérez, 2004). All of these examples clearly show that although there is a great deal of support for TWI programs,

researchers disagree as to the most important

features in any TWI program.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Due to the rise of K-12 ESL enrollment in the United States, there has been an increased interest in determining which program models may be most effective.

One type of language program that is receiving increased attention from academic researchers as of late has been the two-way immersion school. The common focus of this research has been on instructive and administrative procedures rather than on the student. TWI programs throughout the world strive to produce graduates who are equally versatile in academic and social contexts in both the native and the second languages. The underlying goal of these schools is to teach language and content curricula in the most effective way possible. The

conflicting theories, approaches, curricula, and instructional programs are where many researchers have points of contention. Much of the current research focuses on the administration and faculty, whereas this study aimed to obtain the personal reflections of current and former students in order to provide valuable information to parents and students who are considering an immersion program. Today, more and more researchers are working to identify those characteristics which directly affect the success of students in TWI programs. The lack of quantitative research on the characteristics of TWI schools is the motivation behind this study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is built on current research on the effectiveness of TWI schools from the point of the view of the students. In order to provide parents and students with the most useful information, this study was designed to focus on the aspects of TWI education that are significantly different from a traditional education setting. The questions

in the survey concentrated on language development and preference, as well as exposure to cultural events. By making these research results available to parents and students, we hope to provide valuable information that will assist in determining whether TWI schools are appropriate for an individual student's goals.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study focused on the personal reflections of TWI program participants. The research was designed to collect data on the participants' language preference and comfort level, their exposure to the cultures of the second language, and their access to

study abroad programs. The main question that drove this study was: Do participants in TWI programs gain valuable language and cultural experience in both their native and their second language?

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This quantitative ethnographic study was conducted to determine the various motivations for and outcomes of attending two-way immersion programs. Since most of the studies and surveys conducted thus far had been completed by asking faculty, administrators, and parents, it was concluded that directly questioning the students currently and previously enrolled students would provide complementary information that was previously lacking. For this reason, the survey was constructed to determine students' reactions to their schools' programs and the perceived

abilities of the students, presumably as a result of the curriculum of the TWI schools. In order to do this, a list of survey questions was created and uploaded onto a survey website. The questions were all multiple-choice and pertained to the general demographics of the students, their comfort in all four communication skills of language, their future goals in general and as they pertain to the language studied, cultural perspectives, and opportunities available at schools to promote cultural awareness and interaction.

Participants

One hundred fifty-one TWI schools were contacted to solicit participation from the students currently and previously enrolled in

these schools. This survey was open to any and all students above the age of 10.

Procedures

A survey was developed that was administered on-line in order to collect data from both current and former TWI participants in 151 schools throughout the United States. These schools were contacted via e-mail to request their cooperation. The schools were asked to refer current and former students to a website, which was constructed expressly for the purpose of completing this survey. The survey was available on-line for approximately six months. At the close of the on-line survey, the data were collated and interpreted. In order to protect the rights of the students, an informed consent letter was provided to the parents or

guardians of each student, outlining the intent, risks and rights associated with the research study. This letter was the initial feature of the on-line survey. Due to the fact that the survey was administered on-line, respondents were not able to sign a document. In lieu of a signed consent form, they were asked to read the informed consent letter and click “yes” if they consented, or if they were minors that they had parental consent, in order to access the survey questions. At no time were participants asked to supply their name, address, e-mail address, phone number or any other information which could be traced back to the respondent.

Data Collection & Analysis

The data were collected with an on-line survey in which no personal information was collected. The survey was conducted in conjunction with the Information Technology Services Department of

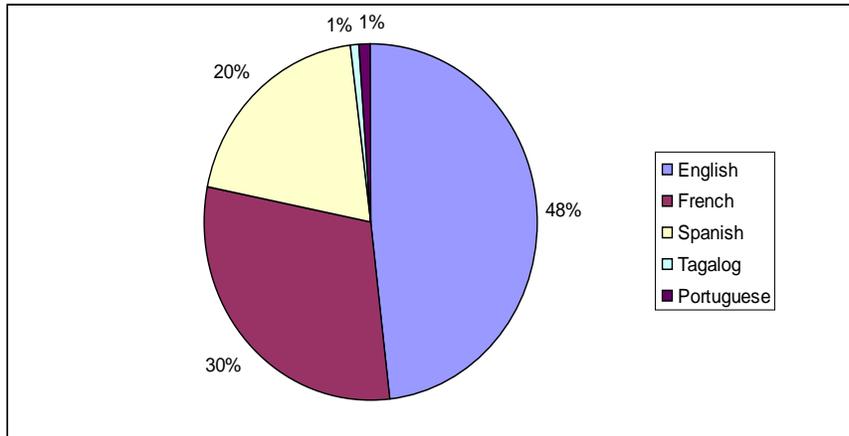
Minnesota State University, Mankato, who stored the survey responses in a database. To analyze the data, a printout of comma-delimited responses was tabulated.

RESULTS

The average age of the 72 respondents was 12.2 years old. Multiple schools responded

speakers of Tagalog, and 1% were native speakers of Portuguese. Twenty-eight

FIGURE 1: Native Languages of Survey Respondents



percent of the respondents believed that both languages seldom had equal value in their school, and 1% felt that both languages were never equally valued. These statistics are noteworthy since two-way immersion programs emphasize

to the survey, but the exact number of schools cannot be known due to the confidentiality of the survey format, and according to the guidelines of Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University, Mankato. As shown in Figure 1, 48% of the

balanced exposure and appreciation for both target languages and cultures. Fifty-seven percent of the students preferred to communicate in their native language in school and 66% preferred to communicate in their native language out of school (Figure

respondents were native speakers of English, 30% were native speakers of French, 20% were native Spanish speakers, 1% were native

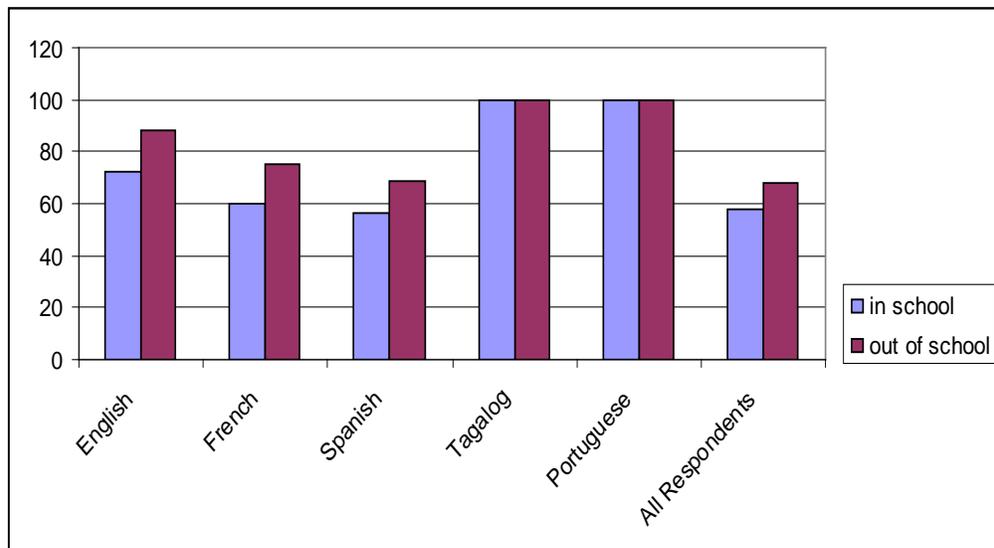


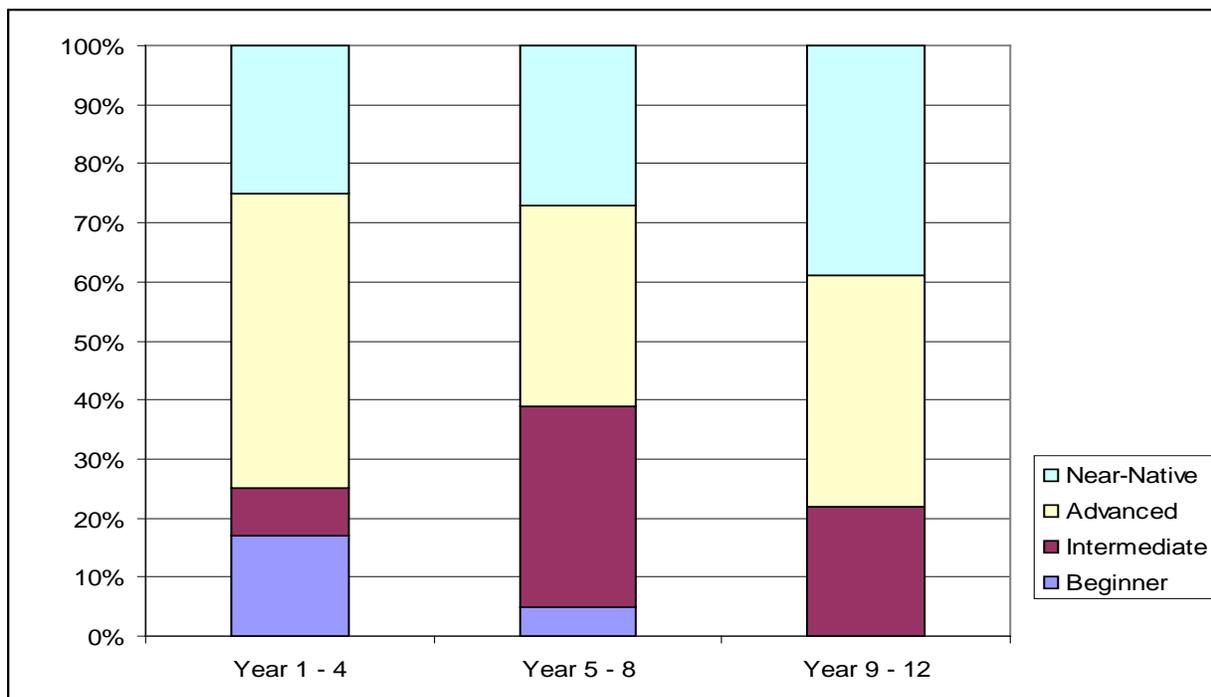
FIGURE 2: Native Language Use In and Out of School

2). The use of the native and target languages inside and outside of school yielded interesting results. Seventy-two percent of native English speakers preferred to speak in English at school, 60% of native French speakers preferred to speak French at school, 56% of native Spanish speakers preferred to speak Spanish at school. Conversely, 88% of native English speakers preferred to speak English out of school, 75% of native French speakers preferred to speak French out of school, and 69% of native Spanish speakers preferred to speak Spanish out of school (Figure 2).

The average time in the program for all respondents was 6.5 years; and although the time in the program was comparable for all

native language groups, native Spanish speakers rated their ability in English at a far higher level than native English speakers rated their Spanish ability. This is to be expected, because native Spanish speakers usually have far more exposure to English outside of school than native English speakers do Spanish in the United States. There are situations in which native Spanish speakers may live in predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, so there are students who may not get as much exposure to English outside of school. Fourteen percent of native Spanish speakers believed that their language ability was near-native (Figure 3). Fifty-eight percent believed that they were advanced. Twenty-one percent rated themselves at the

FIGURE 3: Self-Assessment of Language Proficiency by Survey Respondents



intermediate level, and a surprising 7% rated themselves at the beginner level. In contrast, the native English speakers only rated themselves as advanced or intermediate speakers. No respondent rated himself or

CONCLUSION

One impressive figure is that 83% of the respondents intend to attend college or another form of post-secondary education after completing high school. This is an important statistic for parents considering the impact that attending a TWI school will have on the long-term academic success of their son or daughter. This could result from the fact that the average respondent age was 12.4 years. It would be interesting to track the number of students from this survey group who will go on to receive a post-secondary education. Determining the number of students who continue with language and cultural study and/or participate in exchange programs would help to provide a more complete picture of the long-term benefits of TWI programs beyond secondary education; which would perhaps indicate whether these schools have cultivated an increased interest in the non-native language and culture. It would also be helpful to educators, school administrators, and not least of all, parents

herself at the near-native or beginner level; eleven percent assessed themselves at the advanced level and 89% rated themselves at the intermediate level.

and students to be able to access information beyond the standardized test scores required by NCLB.

It was not too surprising to see that children at this age, or at virtually any age, feel more comfortable in their first language than in subsequent languages. One statistic that varied between the students of the different native language groups was their perception of their second language ability. On average, the native speakers of English rated their second language proficiency at an advanced level, whereas native speakers of French and Spanish rated themselves at an intermediate level. This is surprising since the students learning English as a second language usually would have more exposure to the target language (i.e. English) outside of school than would the students learning Spanish or French. One possible explanation might be the fact that native English students learning foreign languages such as Spanish or French do not have the

opportunity to interact with native speakers outside of the school context. As such, they may have an inaccurate impression of their second language proficiency. Students learning English as a second language use English on a daily basis outside of school, and, therefore, realize the limitations of their English-speaking ability.

It was astonishing to see that 28% of the respondents felt that both languages were seldom held in equal regard in their schools. Without having additional information about the program models and the individual survey respondents, it would be unsound to draw conclusions about why nearly one-third of the respondents felt that both languages were not equally valued in their school. It would be interesting to find out more about the reasons behind this.

While the results of this study will not clear up the contention on the effectiveness of bilingual education, they will help parents and students to make a sound decision regarding TWI enrollment based on the insights of current program participants. The benefits of these programs, in terms of cultural exposure and cognitive development, are convincing. Parents must take it upon themselves to carefully research

the potential program in order to determine its appropriateness for their children, since one cannot assume that all TWI programs are the same. Criteria for parents to consider are exposure to cultural events and extra-curricular activities; access to study abroad programs; the availability of qualified teachers who speak both languages; the amount of support from the community at large in terms of funding, awareness and participation; and the emphasis placed on both languages. Making sure that the TWI program is a fit with both parent and student is crucial to the child being successful in school.

Improvements to this study could be made in a number of areas. There are some questions that could have led to ambiguous results that should be re-worded for subsequent studies. In some cases, very broad questions are posed and a textbox, as opposed to a multiple-choice response in the survey, may have allowed for more conclusive data. A study performed in which the surveyors were familiar with TWI programs would provide clearer data on the question of the languages not being held in equal regard, as well as the availability of study abroad programs. Nonetheless, the conclusions drawn should allow students

and parents to make better informed decisions concerning enrollment in TWI programs.

This study has shown that student attitudes toward their education at TWI schools are in line with the goals of these schools. A great number of students rated their language proficiency as being advanced or near-native. This seems to indicate that TWI schools are able to produce students who are

highly capable, comfortable and confident in their second language. This demonstrates that TWI schools not only teach language, but are able to instill a sense of culture and foster mutual understanding. This small-scale study should further encourage politicians, school administrators, and parents to pursue long-term studies of TWI schools to accurately determine their long-term advantages and disadvantages.

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