



Foreign Language Immersion Programs: Features and Trends Over Thirty-Five Years¹

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Foreign language immersion programs, first introduced in the United States in 1971 as a way to incorporate intensive second language education into public elementary schools, have gradually spread across the country and are now viewed by educators and parents as a highly effective way of teaching foreign languages to children (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). Foreign language immersion is an approach to teaching another language that involves immersing students in the target language throughout the school day. Teachers speak only the target language to teach academic subjects, using a wide range of instructional strategies. The ultimate goal of this type of program is for students to become proficient in the target language in addition to English, and to develop increased cultural awareness while reaching a high level of academic achievement (Fortune & Tedick, 2003).

Foreign language immersion programs, also referred to as one-way immersion programs, are designed for English-speaking students. They vary in intensity and structure according to the model implemented. The following are two main types of immersion programs (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2006a):

Total Immersion – Programs in which all subjects in the lower grades (K-2) are taught in the target language; instruction in English usually increases to 20%-50% in the upper elementary grades (3-6), depending on the program. Initial literacy instruction is provided in the target language. Programs may continue in middle school and high school with classes taught in the target language.

Partial Immersion – Programs in which approximately 50% of instruction is provided in the target language. Initial literacy instruction may be provided in either the target language or English or in both languages simultaneously. Programs may continue in middle school and high school with classes taught in the target language.

A variation of the immersion model is called two-way immersion or two-way bilingual immersion. Two-way programs use both English and another language for instruction. One third to two thirds of the students in each class are native speakers of English; the remainder are native speakers of the other language, most often Spanish. Information about these programs is included in the Directory of Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Programs (<http://www.cal.org/twi/directory>) and in the CAL Digest, Two-Way Immersion Programs: Features and Statistics (<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0101twi.html>).

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) has been monitoring foreign language immersion programs over the years, compiling data and tracking their growth through the publication of the Directory of Foreign Language Immersion Programs in U.S. Schools. In celebration of thirty-five

years of foreign language immersion education in the United States, CAL has updated the directory, which is available online at <http://www.cal.org/resources/immersion>, and prepared this digest to provide educators and parents with an update on pre-K-12 foreign language immersion education, show the growth and changes in immersion education over the last thirty-five years, and make recommendations for future program implementation.

Overview of the Data

Data for the Directory of Foreign Language Immersion Programs in U.S. Schools are self-reported. To gather data, CAL contacted all programs in the existing directory to request updated information. New programs were identified by contacting state- and district-level foreign language coordinators.

The directory now includes 310 foreign language immersion programs housed in 263 schools. The term program is used here to distinguish from schools because some schools offer immersion programs in more than one language and thus have multiple programs. The 263 schools are spread across 33 states and 83 school districts (see Table 1). Thirty-nine of these schools identify themselves as private or independent. Although the directory is intended to provide an exhaustive list of public immersion programs in the country, the listing of immersion programs in private and independent schools is not intended to be exhaustive.

The 2006 directory includes 53 immersion programs at the preschool level, 181 at the elementary school level, 89 at the middle school level,

Table 1

Number of Foreign Language Immersion Schools and Districts by State

State	Public Schools/ Districts & Private Schools			Levels of Immersion Instruction*			
	Schools	Districts	Private	Preschool	Elementary	Middle	High
AK	9	2	0	0	5	2	2
AZ	4	2	2	3	4	1	0
CA	13	7	7	7	11	7	3
CO	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
CT	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
DC	4	1	2	3	4	2	0
FL	5	4	0	0	4	2	0
GA	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
HI	26	1	3	4	15	10	9
IA	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
IL	5	1	4	4	5	0	0
IN	7	2	1	1	3	3	3
KY	2	1	0	1	2	1	1
LA	30	10	2	5	23	8	0
MA	14	4	0	0	9	5	2
MD	16	3	0	0	9	9	1
MI	4	2	2	2	3	2	0
MN	24	11	1	1	15	7	5
MO	3	1	0	0	3	2	0
MT	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
NC	4	2	0	0	3	1	1
NY	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
OH	3	1	0	0	3	3	0
OK	2	1	1	0	1	1	0
OR	25	5	5	6	13	7	6
PA	6	4	0	0	4	2	1
SC	4	2	0	2	4	0	0
TN	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
TX	8	5	1	2	7	1	0
UT	5	1	0	0	4	1	0
VA	24	4	1	1	14	9	1
WA	4	1	1	1	2	1	1
WI	5	2	1	4	4	1	1
TOTALS:							
33	263	83	39	53	181	89	37

*The total number of preschool, elementary, middle, and high school immersion schools listed per state (last four columns) is often greater than the total number of immersion schools in the state (second column) because many of the grade levels are combined in a single program, especially preschool and elementary.

and 37 at the high school level. There is overlap among these programs, however; that is, some programs include multiple levels (e.g., preschool and elementary school in a single program). So the numbers add up to more than 310 (the total number of immersion programs in the directory). Consistent with past years, there are fewer middle school and high school programs than elementary programs (Fortune & Jorstad, 1996). This is partly the result of the curricular, staffing, and scheduling challenges of articulating a program from one school level to another. Often, students who attend an elementary school immersion program opt to attend middle schools or high schools in their district that do not offer immersion.

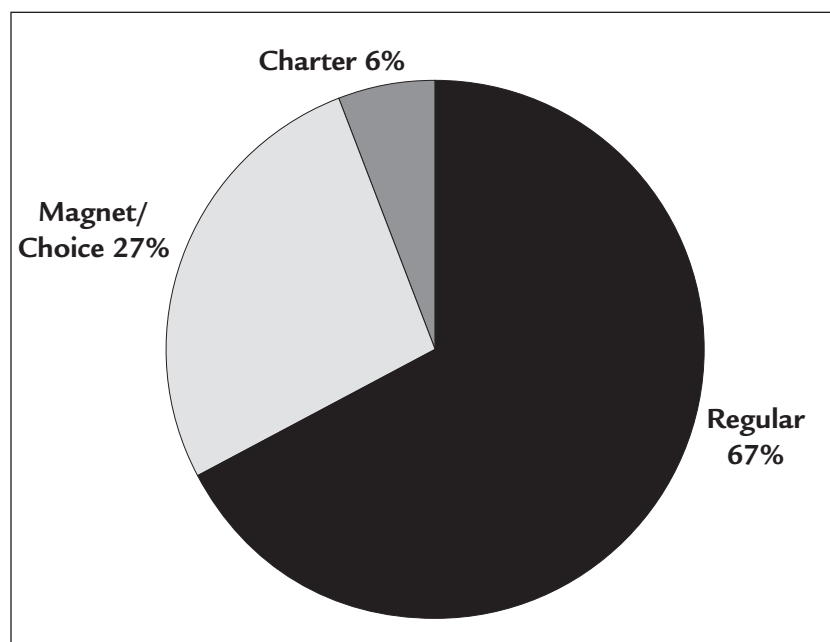
The states boasting the highest numbers of schools offering language immersion programs are Louisiana (30), Hawaii (26), Oregon (25), Minnesota (24), and Virginia (24)². Several factors may contribute to the high numbers in these states, including the promotion of heritage languages (i.e., languages other than English that are spoken in communities in the United States), university collaboration with local school districts, and local district initiatives. Hawaii, for example, has 26 immersion schools and the highest number of schools nationally (9) that continue into the high school years. All of these programs teach the Hawaiian language as part of a successful state-wide effort to preserve the language and culture of the islands. Similarly, Louisiana has a strong French tradition and has been implementing French immersion programs state-wide to help perpetuate the French language and culture. Oregon and Minnesota have high numbers of immersion schools in part because of the interest of local school districts in innovative language education and in part because of the support and encouragement of the universities in the state. Lastly, Virginia has a large number of immersion schools primarily because of the many programs in one district—Fairfax County Public Schools—which has steadily grown its district-wide program since its inception in 1989 to include 19 schools in 2006.

Program Models

CAL collected data from each school about school type, language of instruction, and program model (total versus partial immersion). Thirty-nine of the 263 schools in the directory are private or independent, while 224 are public. Of the 224 public schools, approximately 27% are magnet or some type of choice schools and 6% are charter schools (see Figure A). The majority of the public schools (67%) are regular (not magnet, choice, or charter) schools.

Figure A

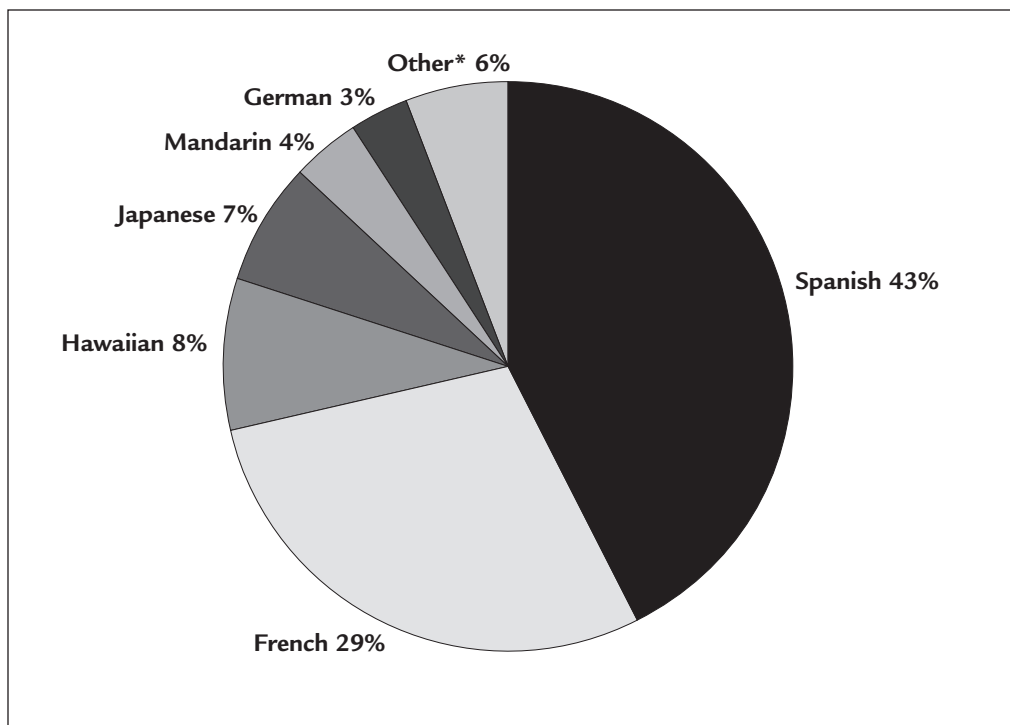
Types of Public Foreign Language Immersion Schools



The 2006 directory shows that there are more languages being offered through immersion than ever before (see Figure B); the current number of languages (18) is double the number offered in 1995 (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2006a). The most commonly taught languages in immersion programs are Spanish (at 43% of immersion programs) and French (29%), followed by Hawaiian (8%), Japanese (7%), Mandarin (4%), and German (3%). The other languages are taught in 1% or fewer of the programs. Of note is the availability of heritage language immersion programs that promote Native American languages such as Ojibwe, Yup'ik, Chinook, and Diné. These language programs are more prevalent now than in the past three decades. Hawaiian language programs have also increased.

Figure B

Percentage of Immersion Programs by Language of Instruction



**The percentage for each of these languages is 1% or less. Other languages include Ojibwe, Arabic, Italian, Russian, Yup'ik, Cantonese, Chinook, Danish, Diné, Greek, Norwegian, and Swedish.*

The final program characteristic identified in the survey, program type, is defined by the amount of instructional time for which the target language is used. The split is fairly even: Approximately 56% of the programs label themselves partial immersion (instructional time is divided equally between English and the immersion language) and 44% consider themselves to be total immersion programs³. This ratio is similar to that of past years. It should be noted that although there is consensus on the definition of the term partial immersion, there are various interpretations among middle schools and high schools of the term total immersion. Some schools list their programs as total immersion if the students studied all academic subjects in a second language in their elementary school years, even if not all subjects are studied in the second language in secondary school. Other schools consider themselves total immersion only if they teach all subjects in the target language through the end of high

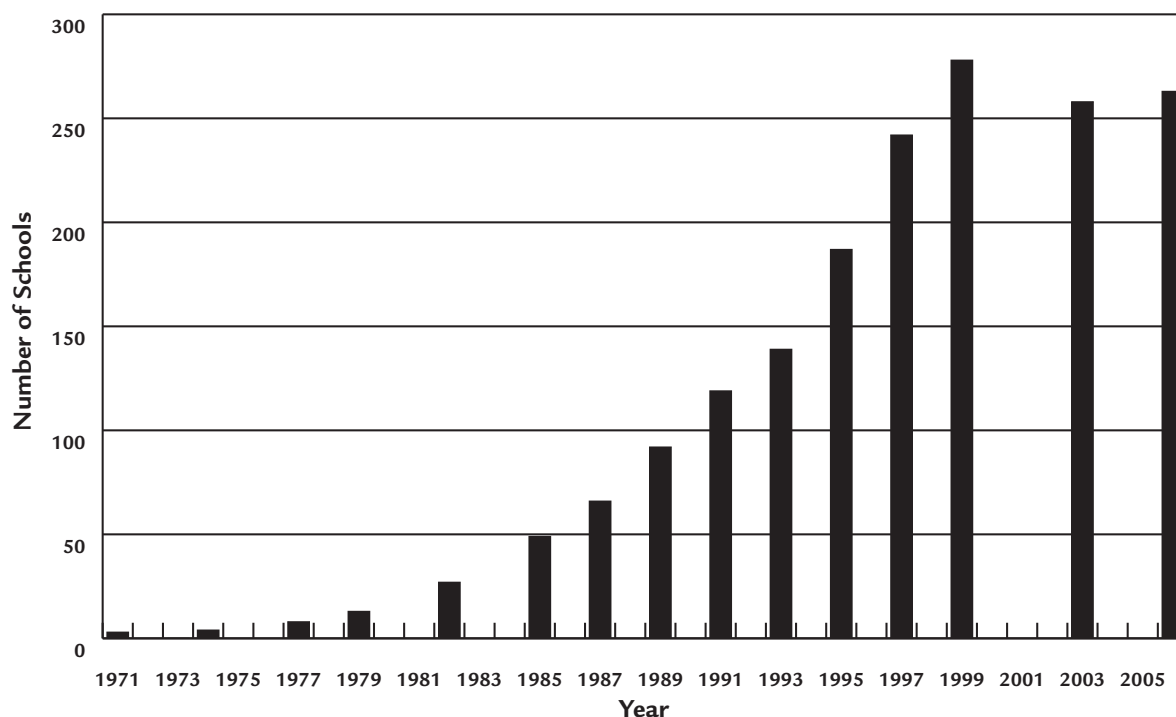
school. Because of the range of interpretations of what constitutes total immersion, there is a wider margin of error for these percentages than for other data in this report.

Trends in Immersion, 1971-2006

A comparison of 2006 results with past years' results (all self-reported data collected by CAL) shows a fairly steady increase in foreign language immersion education in U.S. schools over the last thirty-five years (see Figure C). In addition, survey data show that the total number of elementary school language programs, including the less intensive FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) and FLEX (foreign language experience) models, has also increased (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999). This growth, particularly in immersion programs, can be attributed to at least five factors: (1) strong parental pressure for quality language programs with goals of high levels of proficiency; (2) increased interest in a multicultural approach to education among parents, teachers, and administrators; (3) an increase in schooling options (magnet, choice, and charter schools) that enable immersion to be offered as an educational alternative (as can be seen when comparing immersion schooling options of 2006 with past years); (4) a strong body of published research on the effectiveness of immersion programs

Figure C

Growth of Total and Partial Immersion Schools in the United States⁴



in developing students' language proficiency and academic achievement (see, e.g., Fortune & Tedick, in press; Robinson, 1998); and (5) growing recognition of the need for Americans to be proficient in foreign languages for personal, educational, economic, and national security reasons, as evidenced by the President's National Security Language Initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) and subsequent legislation.

Despite the overall growth of foreign language immersion programs over the past thirty-five years, the 2006 data reveal a slight decrease in the number of schools over the last seven years, although the number of languages offered has increased. A variety of reasons can be offered for the decrease in the number of schools.

First, some of the programs that were originally listed in the directory as total or partial immersion have changed their program model to two-way immersion due to an increase in the number of students who speak languages other than English; these programs are now listed in the two-way immersion directory. Until 1999, schools offering foreign language immersion programs outnumbered those offering two-way immersion programs, but that balance has shifted over the past seven years. As of 2006, there are 338 schools in the United States that offer two-way immersion (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2006b) as compared to 263 schools that offer foreign language immersion. The surge in two-way programs can be explained in part by changes in the policy context for bilingual education and the growing interest, at state and local levels, in two-way immersion as a program that addresses the needs of both English language learners and native English speakers. Both bilingual education programs and foreign language immersion programs have been transformed into two-way programs by integrating the two student populations being served.

Second, some schools reported that implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has increased their focus on mathematics and reading to such an extent that they felt a need to discontinue their immersion programs in order to meet federal standards. Some schools reported that they could not find “highly qualified teachers,” as defined by NCLB, for the immersion classes. These views, however, were not shared by all schools. An immersion program in rural Alaska met NCLB’s rigorous annual yearly progress requirements for 2006, and the principal noted that teaching children academic subjects in a second language actually enhanced student achievement (St. Germaine, 2006). (See also Anderson, Lindholm-Leary, Wilhelm, Ziegler, & Boudreaux, 2005.)

Third, Hurricane Katrina, wreaking havoc in innumerable ways, also played a role in the destruction of several immersion programs in Louisiana (although the state still ranks first in number of schools with immersion programs). Finally, some schools reported a shift in program model from immersion to less intensive programs such as FLES, hoping that there would be fewer demands on the staff.

Recent developments, however, provide reason to believe that growth lies in the future of the immersion model. The National Security Language Initiative calls for action in increasing the availability and quality of long-term foreign language programs to aid in global awareness, national security, and economic competitiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Immersion programs are a proven model to help students acquire the language fluency needed to help us reach these goals.

Not long after the President announced the National Security Language Initiative, legislation was drafted to carry out its goals. Bills such as the New National Defense Education Act (S. 3502) and the National Competitive Investment Act (S. 3936) were introduced in Congress to provide grants and funding incentives for states, teachers, and students. These bills focus on improving standards for teachers and students in math, reading, science, and foreign languages and cultures. It is hoped they will lead to an increase in the number and quality of foreign language programs.

Recommendations

Ultimately, to increase the number of second language proficient individuals in the United States, the country needs to increase the number of immersion and other innovative language programs that aim at developing high levels of proficiency. One way this can be accomplished is by building on successful state- and district-wide immersion initiatives. Exemplary long-running programs can serve as models and share curricula, program designs, and teacher development strategies. Secondly, there is a need to establish more well-sequenced programs that span from pre-K through the college years so that students can develop high levels of proficiency in one or more languages (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Howard, Lindholm-Leary, Sugarman, Christian, & Rogers, 2005). This could be greatly facilitated by increased federal funds targeted for this purpose. Lastly, there is a need for more highly qualified teachers who have advanced language skills and are knowledgeable about how to teach language, culture, and academic content in a second language. More qualified teachers are needed in the commonly taught languages at all grade levels, and there is a particularly strong need for qualified teachers in the less commonly taught languages, such as Chinese and Arabic (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

If national momentum toward the goal of developing a language-competent society continues, one-way and two-way immersion programs will doubtlessly strengthen and flourish, and the number of children and young adults with proficiency in second languages will increase. For now, it is clear that foreign language immersion is a highly successful approach to language instruction for children. It enriches their English language development and provides them with an enhanced sense of global awareness, linguistic confidence, and learning strategies that will be useful in many aspects of life.

Notes

1. This article was originally published as a CAL Digest: Lenker, A. & Rhodes, N. (2007). *Foreign Language Immersion Programs: Features and Trends Over 35 Years*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Reprinted with permission.
2. See “Language Immersion Programs by State” at <http://www.cal.org/resources/immersion>
3. See “Percentages of Programs by Instructional Model” at <http://www.cal.org/resources/immersion>
4. This graph shows the growth of foreign language immersion in the United States from 1971 to 2006 as exemplified by the number of schools with immersion programs. These data, which are self-reported, were compiled from CAL’s immersion directories published over the last three decades. No data were collected for 2001. Not all existing immersion programs and schools were included in each year’s directory because some were not known to CAL at the time. The directories were available in print until 1999, after which time the data became available online. Note that the 2003 data reported here were compiled from the online directory as well as from data collected at a later date. The current directory (2006) is CAL’s best attempt at searching out and including all known total and partial immersion programs in public schools in the country. In addition, some private (independent) schools are included in the directory, though the list of these schools is not exhaustive.

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