



## Graduates of a Language Immersion Program: What Are They Doing Now?

*By Millie Park Mellgren, Superintendent, Gerrish Higgins School District, Roscommon, MI,  
and Emily Somers, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN*

Language immersion programs have been growing in popularity in the United States for the past thirty years. Research conducted in immersion schools and reported throughout the professional literature on immersion education states over and over the benefits of a language immersion education. Students not only gain skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking in both English and the second language but their academic achievements equal or better those attained by peers in English-only programs (e.g., Genesee, 1987, 2004; Turnbull, Lapkin & Hart, 2001). Schools that we have been associated with have posted academic results at the top of their respective school districts and have supported the broad body of literature claiming positive academic results for students.

In addition to the overwhelming academic results, immersion students can also lay claim to gains made in cultural awareness and appreciation for interacting with people who are different from themselves. Sarah Jerome (2007), past-president of the American Association of School Administrators, has called the world a “family of nations” and charges us to create schools where learning about the world and learning to live in harmony are basic lessons for all children. She contends that educators’ efforts must be driven by the common goal of developing truly global citizens. Yong Zhao, director of the U.S.-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence, points out that an essential skill for all workers is the ability to interact effectively with people who speak different languages and hold different values. He notes, “What used to be required of a small group of individuals – diplomats, translators, cross-cultural communication consultants or international tour guides – has become necessary for all professions” (Zhao, 2008, p. 24.) Many language educators have long noted the importance of cultural education within the curriculum (Brown, 2005; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Knight, 2008; Lambert, 1984; Lipton, 1998; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Seelye, 1984; Swain, 1984), but now it is being recognized that global awareness must be integral to the curriculum and can no longer be seen as a “luxury item” (Wilberschied, 2005).

Immersion teachers have a very special bond with their immersion students and do not seem to forget those special kids, especially those who were enrolled in the first years of their programs. Those pioneer students stay in their hearts because they were the ones who forged a path, just as their teachers did, for many students to follow. Immersion educators wonder about those students and what they are doing with their lives. There is an intense curiosity about the long term impact of immersion education among teachers, and they often wonder if the immersion experience truly shapes the education, career choices, and attitudes of these individuals.

## Surveying Graduates

Robbinsdale Immersion School, a K-5 Spanish immersion program located in a suburban Minneapolis school district, celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2007. A large celebration was held and all former educators, students and families were invited. This celebration provided a wonderful and rare opportunity to survey language immersion graduates as they either gathered to attend the celebration or made contact electronically in the planning process. The Robbinsdale school district offers immersion education for students from Kindergarten through 12th grade, and these graduates were from the classes of 2000-2007, the first eight graduating classes of the Robbinsdale Immersion School. In total, 729 students graduated from the K-5 immersion program in those first eight years. We used two means of surveying graduates, an electronic survey and a traditional paper survey. The electronic survey was developed and distributed, and answers were received from 166 graduates via createsurvey.com. In addition, 34 surveys were collected from other graduates who attended the anniversary celebration. These were collected via the traditional paper method but reflected the same questions that appeared in the electronic version. This brought our survey respondent total to 200 graduates or about 27% of the total number of immersion graduates between 2000 and 2007.

## Survey Results

One of our first areas of questioning on the survey dealt with the continuation of immersion study throughout the K-12 sequence. The results indicated that most of the survey respondents remained in immersion classes in middle school (Table 1) with an increased drop off in high school (Table 2). Of those who did not continue their immersion study, several commented that this was due to their parents moving away from the school district at some point in their K-12 experience and to the fact that immersion study was not offered in their new school location.

Table 1

Continued Immersion Study in Middle School	
Yes	85%
No	15%

Table 2

Continued Immersion Study in High School	
Yes	80%
No	20%

We also asked the graduates about their high school grade point average (GPA). A common tenet of immersion education is that it helps students in all areas of their studies through the brain development that occurs at a very young age and the cognitive benefits that bilingualism

brings (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Lazuruk, 2007).

Table 3 demonstrates that, among our respondents, nearly all had solid GPAs in high school with slightly over half (51.78%) reporting stellar GPAs.

*Table 3*

High School GPA	
0.0-2.0	00.02%
2.1-3.0	14.72%
3.1-3.5	31.47%
3.6-4.0	51.78%

When asked if they had attended college, nearly all responded affirmatively (Table 4). It is possible that only our college graduates responded to the survey, but even if so, one might conjecture that a high rate of immersion graduates do attend college. Of those who attended college, nearly half either majored or minored in Spanish.

*Table 4*

College Attendance of Immersion Graduates	
Yes	99%
No	<1%

Of the 82 respondents who listed Spanish as a major, nearly all also listed one or two additional majors. Only two of the 200 respondents majored solely in Spanish. Fully 62% of the respondents majored

in language or culture related fields, as highlighted in Table 5 below, while the remaining 38% pursued other fields of study. We found it interesting that many of the graduates emphasized that they wanted to study fields that would either allow them to travel or to work with people from various cultures. While many immersion graduates wished to continue with their language studies, it seems important that they also wished to combine their Spanish skills with a career in other areas. It was rewarding to note that the cultural gains of immersion study seem to have as great an impact in later years as the language itself. One can also see that immersion graduates, like graduates of any English-only program, have a wide variety of interests that lead them in many different directions.

*Table 5*

College Majors/Minors related to Language and/or Cultural Studies	
Spanish major or minor	41%
International focus (may or may not have Spanish as a major or minor): International Business, International Relations	4%
Cultural focus (may or may not have Spanish as a major or minor): Ethnic Studies, Global Studies, Latin American Studies, Anthropology	8%
Language focus (may or may not have Spanish as a major or minor): English, Portuguese, English as a Second Language, Italian, Arabic, Linguistics, French	9%

Many immersion students in the Robbinsdale district took Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish classes during high school. Others took placement tests in college and received college credit. Some took

college-level dual-enrollment classes, receiving both high school and college credit for courses while still in high school. Of those students who went to college, 68% received college credit for their AP or placement tests or dual-enrollment.

We asked students if they had studied other non-English languages. In the Robbinsdale program, fifth grade is the last grade of elementary school with the sixth grade at the middle school. Fifth grade teachers have often heard their

students exclaim that they were ready for and desired to study another language. The results indicate that 60% of the immersion graduates who responded to the survey stayed with Spanish, however, and did not take additional languages. Of the 40% who did study other languages, a variety was selected as demonstrated in Table 6.

*Table 6*

<b>Study in Languages Other Than Spanish</b>	
French	36%
Italian	17%
German	10%
Portuguese	7%
Japanese	7%
Arabic	6%
Chinese	4%
American Sign Language	4%
Hebrew, Russian, Gallegan, Haitian Creole, Welsh, Finnish, Danish, Polish	<1% each

Study abroad is another area of interest as the focus of immersion programs is also upon global awareness and cultural studies. Sixty-two percent, or 124, of the 200 respondents have studied or plan to study abroad. This number does not take into account any unreported study or work abroad by students who did not even respond to our survey. Study abroad locations varied widely among respondents and are reported in Table 7. Given that the American Council on Education (2008) reports that fewer than 5% of college students study abroad, this is clearly a high rate of participation in study abroad for this immersion subset of the school population. Several additional respondents indicated that while they had not studied abroad, they had traveled extensively. It is also interesting to note that many of the electronic survey responses came from sites all over the globe where these graduates are currently studying, living and working.

*Table 7*

<b>Location of Study Abroad by Immersion Graduates n = 124</b>	
Spain	61%
Mexico, Costa Rica	9% each
Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia	3% each
Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Peru, Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Thailand/Laos, France, England	1% each

The respondents to our immersion graduate survey indicate that they have had multiple opportunities to use their language skills in a work setting. Seventy-three percent had experienced opportunities to speak Spanish with customers, co-workers, as teachers with students or parents, in sales, in customer services, marketing, mission work, tutoring and translation. It was satisfying to read comments about how many graduates use their Spanish skills every day, principally with Hispanic populations. Many employers depend on our graduates to translate on a regular basis.

In rating their own language skills, we asked our respondents to use a non-traditional rating scale rather than one of the scales commonly used within the language profession, such as the ACTFL Guidelines (1999), which are used with the Oral Proficiency Interview. Most graduates still feel they have an adequate use of the language even though many have not taken a formal class in several years (Table 8).

*Table 8*

<b>Self-Rating of Spanish Proficiency by Immersion Graduates</b>	
I understand a few words here and there but can't speak it.	1%
I understand some and have a basic vocabulary.	6%
I understand most and can carry on a basic conversation.	28%
I have fluency in reading, listening, speaking and writing.	65%

The final question we asked our immersion graduates was if they felt their education in the Robbinsdale Language Immersion Program had been valuable in their lives. As indicated in Table 9, the results demonstrate an immense sense of satisfaction with the immersion experience.

*Table 9*

<b>Value of Language Immersion Education in Graduate's Personal Life</b>	
Strongly Agree	80%
Agree	17%
Neutral	1%
Disagree	1%
Strongly Disagree	1%

## **Conclusion**

The Twentieth Anniversary Celebration of the Robbinsdale Language Immersion Program offered an incredible opportunity to gather graduates together for discussion about their experiences. In addition, with the electronic opportunities available to the graduates and their willingness to contact each other to complete the survey, we enjoyed a long-sought-after experience in which immersion teachers were able to catch up with their students and find out the impact of their years of language study. The young adults we saw were confident, successful and full of hopes and dreams for changing the world. Many had studied Spanish for nearly fifteen years or more and were shining examples of the bonuses of immersion education. As students stated:

- ♦ My life would be completely different without immersion.
- ♦ I believe the Language Immersion Program (LIP) really opens the eyes of students at an early age and helps them in our globalizing world.
- ♦ The value contributed to my life has not come in the way of the use of Spanish, but rather in the early development changes that the program instilled in my brain during immersion education.
- ♦ Putting me in the LIP was one of the best things my parents ever did for me!
- ♦ My years in the LIP program continue to positively impact me. I will always regard the experience as one of the most beneficial of my life.
- ♦ The LIP is one of the best things that has ever happened to me! It has had more of an influence on my life than my parents could've ever imagined.
- ♦ The LIP is the reason for my Spanish proficiency, and hence, my passions and career goals!
- ♦ It has affected everything I do and everything that I want to do. It is so beneficial to be able to understand and relate to other cultures. It makes you more open minded and more able to interact with different kinds of people. We have all been given an amazing gift that will help us be successful all throughout our lives.
- ♦ When I was little I assumed everyone learned to read Spanish before they learned to read English.



*Marcie Dunham and Stephanie Berglund, graduates of Robbinsdale's Language Immersion School, are now both 2nd grade teachers in Spanish immersion classrooms in Minnewashta Elementary School in Minnetonka, MN.*

What an amazing legacy immersion education gives to students! As one of our graduates stated at the celebration, "Our parents thought it was about the language. I'm here to tell you it's not about the language but it's about the acceptance and understanding of other cultures. That is what



*Marcie, bottom row third from left, and Stephanie, bottom row fifth from left, were Robbinsdale Language Immersion School classmates in 2nd grade during the 1992-93 school year.*

has made the biggest impact on my life" (Cisneros, 2007). Curtain and Dahlberg note in their work with immersion programs that children only achieve the full potential of their extended experience in language learning when they also achieve a measure of competence in the areas of cultural appreciation, empathy for other people and global awareness. Elementary language learning may be the best way to teach the next generation not to discriminate against or be unaccepting of people simply because they are culturally different (Lipton, 1998). The data from this survey supports these beliefs held and documented by many language professionals.

As we look at immersion education and review the data available about the academic success of immersion students, there is a wealth of positive reasons to consider, develop and continue immersion education. However, as this survey indicates, the real gifts of immersion education reach far beyond academic success. Immersion education develops the kind of global graduate we need in our changing world. The immediate success is obvious; the long-lasting effects are forever.

# References

- American Council on Education, Art & Science Group, & The College Board. (2008, February 25). In spite of global uncertainties, student interest in study abroad and international learning ranks high. *Higher Education and National Affairs Online News*, American Council on Education. Retrieved on September 10, 2008, from [www.acenet.edu/AM](http://www.acenet.edu/AM).
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1999). *ACTFL proficiency guidelines - speaking*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL. Retrieved Oct. 28, 2008 online at <http://www.actfl.org/files/public/Guidelinespeak.pdf>.
- Bamford, K. and Mizokawa, D. (1991). Additive-bilingual (immersion) education: Cognitive and language development. *Language Learning*, 41(3), 413-429.
- Brown, C. (2005). Why does the United States need to celebrate 2005 as the Year of Languages? In P. Boyles & P. Sandrock (Eds.), *The Year of Languages: Challenges, Changes and Choices* (pp. 3-14). Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Eau Claire, WI: Crown Prints.
- Cisneros, M. B. (2007, May 18). Student presentation at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Robbinsdale Immersion Program, Robbinsdale, MN.
- Curtain, H. A. and Dahlberg, C. A. (2004). *Languages and children: Making the match* (3rd ed). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Genesee, F. (1987). *Learning through two languages: Studies of immersion and bilingual education*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Genesee, F. (2004). What do we know about bilingual education for majority language students? In T. K. Bhatia & W. Ritchie (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism and multiculturalism* (pp. 547-576). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Jerome, S. D. (2007). Leading schools for global literacy. *The School Administrator*, 64(9), 60.
- Knight, S. M. (2008). A model for teaching cross-cultural perspectives. In A. Moeller & J. Theiler (Eds.), *Turning today's students into tomorrow's stars: Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (pp. 19-36). Milwaukee: Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
- Lambert, W. E. (1984). An overview of issues in immersion education. In R. Campbell (Ed.), *Studies on immersion education: A collection for United States educators* (pp. 8-30). Sacramento, CA: California State Department of Education.
- Lazuruk, W. (2007). Linguistic, academic, and cognitive benefits of French immersion. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(5), 605-628.
- Lipton, G.C. (1998). *Elementary foreign language programs*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

References, continued on page 8

## *References, continued from page 7*

- Omaggio Hadley, A.O. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Seelye, H.N. (1984). *Teaching culture: Strategies for intercultural communication*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Swain, M. (1984). A review of immersion education in Canada. In R. Campbell (Ed.), *Studies on immersion education: A collection for United States educators* (pp. 87-112). Sacramento, CA: California State Department of Education.
- Turnbull, M., Lapkin, S., & Hart, D. (2001). Grade 3 immersion students' performance in literacy and mathematics: Province-wide results from Ontario (1998-99). *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(1), 9-26.
- Wilberschied, L. (2005). Fostering philoxenia: Understanding and integrating culture. In P. Boyles & P. Sandrock (Eds.), *The Year of Languages: Challenges, Changes and Choices* (pp. 15-23). Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Eau Claire, WI: Crown Prints.
- Zhao, Y. (2008). What knowledge has the most worth? *The School Administrator*, 65(2), 20-26.