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# Immersion in Primary School

## A Guide

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## Part A

# BACKGROUND OF IMMERSION

### 1. Preface

Immersion programmes in primary schools in Germany have gained more and more recognition over the last few years (Wode 1995, 2009, Zydati&szlig; 2000). Private schools as well as state schools have recognised the necessity for pupils to acquire a very good knowledge of a foreign language and therefore have adapted immersion as a method for language teaching.

Every new immersion school faces the problem of providing a concept which will be put into practise with the help of personnel who have normally not been trained specifically for this task. The purpose of this guide is to answer frequently asked questions about immersion at the primary school level and aims at helping practitioners to implement immersion programmes. The basis for this guide are experiences with immersion in the context of international research, for example immersion models in Canada, Wales or Spain, as well as experiences in Germany, especially from the immersion programme at the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz near Kiel (Northern Germany) and at the Trilingual International Primary School in Magdeburg.<sup>1</sup>

The Claus-Rixen-School, a state primary school, began in 1999 and has a German-English immersion programme. In its vicinity, there is an AWO preschool which started to work bilingually in 1996. Due to the immersion programmes at this preschool and in the following primary school, the children attending the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz achieve a very impressive level in the target language English. The results from this school, as well as experience from all over the world encourage us to promote this model as much as possible.

### 2. Why Multilingualism?

Good language skills are increasingly important for personalised success in Europe and the globalised world. The European Union requires knowledge of foreign languages as an important key competence and recommends that all children should have command of their native language as well as two foreign languages at a high functional level (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). As research has amply shown, early immersion is a suitable tool in order to achieve this aim.

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<sup>1</sup> This guide is based on experiences from the schools as well as intensive scientific research in both schools led by Prof. Dr. Henning Wode (University of Kiel, e.g. Wode 2002, 2004, 2009) and Prof. Dr. Christiane M. Bongartz (University of Cologne, e.g. Bongartz 2007, Bongartz & Kersten 2007, Kersten 2005, in print), as well as the research network ELIAS (Early Language and Intercultural Acquisition Studies, webpage: [www.elias.bilikita.org](http://www.elias.bilikita.org)).

### 3. The Concept of Immersion

"Immersion" has its origin in the word "*to immerse*", such that this concept is generally understood as a "language bath", in which the children are immersed (e.g. Genesee 1987). The language is not systematically taught, but is used as the medium for everyday activities in the preschool or school. The aim of immersion at school is the development of (at least) two languages, the native language and the second or foreign languages (L2), as well as the appropriate knowledge of the (subject) content and intercultural competence. Immersion follows the insights of psycholinguistics which, among other things, is concerned with the acquisition of languages. The conditions of learning through immersion programmes closely resemble those in first language acquisition with regard to language input and language contact. Therefore, immersion learning does not make excessive demands on children (see chapter 3.6). This type of language learning is free from pressure and (perhaps precisely for this reason) the most successful method of language learning in the world (e.g. Genesee 1987).

Immersion programmes can be found in nurseries, preschools as well as primary and secondary schools. For over forty years, experiences of running immersion programmes at the preschool level have been positive, and not just in Canada. Immersion programmes are also found in Scandinavia, Australia, North America, Spain and France and many other countries. In Germany to date, more than 600 preschools are bilingual, comprising about one percent of all preschools.<sup>2</sup> Bilingual nurseries for very young children (e.g. below age 3) and bilingual primary schools are so far rare in Germany.

Second language acquisition is effortless and similar to first language acquisition if children are able to access the foreign language in a natural setting. To ensure this process, the following critical conditions should be met (see Wesche 2002: 358):

- Language contact starts as soon as possible.
- Language contact is intense and includes 60–70% of the teaching instruction at primary school.
- Language contact takes place over a long period of time.
- The language input is age-appropriate and comprehensible and is lexically and structurally rich.
- Language contact is action and content oriented.

In primary school classes which offer immersion programmes, at least half of the subjects are taught in the foreign language. In order for language and subject learning to take place, the lessons plans promote multi-sensory learning (see below). Since language comprehension develops faster than production, the pupils will respond mainly in their first language / the ambient language during their first year of learning the language.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the study of the FMKS for the distribution of bilingual preschools and primary schools in Germany [www.fmks.eu ⇒ Infos ⇒ Download (2010)]

### 3.1 Selection of language and quantity of foreign language input

In principle, the immersion method can be applied to all languages. However, it is important to note that not all foreign languages are learnt equally fast by speakers of a particular language. To elucidate, languages which are similar are learnt more easily than languages which are very different (Ringbom 2006). For example, a speaker of a Germanic-based language (e.g. German, English, Dutch) might find it harder to transition to a 'tonal-based' language (e.g. Thai, Vietnamese, Mandarin, etc.). In the Trilingual Immersion Primary School in Magdeburg with English and French as foreign languages, it was found that the children who attended the English cohort learnt the foreign language more quickly than the children attending the French cohort, as English is more similar to German than French (Kersten et al. in press).

Another factor that has to be considered is the onset of immersion education and the amount of time spent in the foreign language. In case of partial immersion, it is important to start as early as possible and provide as much language contact as possible. It is more effective to have more intense input over a shorter period of time, than distributing the same amount of input over a longer period of time (Wesche 2002). This was also found in a comparison of two immersion primary schools in Germany: The immersion children attending the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz (target language English) who had 70% of their lessons in English showed better results in English language tests than the immersion children in a primary school in Magdeburg, where English in the classroom only made up 50% of all lessons (Kersten et al. in press). Additional research is required in order to determine how much contact time is needed to adequately teach the increasingly complex subject content in the foreign language (Wode 1994, de Bot 2000).

### 3.2 Prior knowledge from preschool

Should primary school children enter school with language knowledge acquired at a bilingual preschool? Children who attended a bilingual preschool have already developed good comprehension skills. This, in turn, provides a very good basis for immersion teaching at primary school, yet it does not mean that prior exposure is a necessary condition.

In the first year of the immersion programme at the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz, there were too few children who had attended the bilingual preschool beforehand to arrange a separate class. The Claus-Rixen-School therefore decided to set up an immersion class including at least 50% of children from bilingual preschools, i.e. children with and without prior knowledge of English. This system turned out to be working quite well. After the first year the children without prior knowledge had been able to catch up with the rest, due to the fact that children do not just learn from the teacher but also benefit from their peers.

It is also possible to start immersion teaching if a class consists only of children without any prior knowledge of the target language (see the successful examples from immersion teaching in Zaunbauer & Möller 2007, 2010). However, it is important that the first language skills of children who take part in immersion programmes exhibit an age-appropriate level.

### 3.3 What distinguishes bilingual preschools from bilingual primary schools?

Usually, bilingual preschools adhere to the "one person one language principle" (Döpke 1992, see also Wode 2006, 2009). For example, in the AWO preschool in Altenholz in the vicinity of the Claus-Rixen-School, which offer a partial immersion programme,<sup>3</sup> there are two preschool teachers in each group: One teacher speaks only German and the other teacher uses exclusively the target language (English in this case). The preschool teachers employ nonverbal features such as gestures, miming, pictures, etc. in order to illustrate what is being said. In this way, the child can make a connection between words and their meaning (e.g. Burmeister & Steinlen 2008, Burmeister in press, Wode 2006, 2009). Foreign language comprehension skills develop quite well after the three years in preschool and are always superior to active speaking, because there is little necessity for the children to express themselves in the foreign language (see also Wode 2006).

At school, on the other hand, pupils are more often required to speak the foreign language, although, at first they are, of course, allowed to respond in German. As their knowledge of the foreign language progresses, children are more and more encouraged to actively use the foreign language. Some children do this spontaneously, whereas others need more encouragement from the teacher.

### 3.4 Selection of subjects

The most suitable subjects for teaching in a foreign language are those which are descriptive and not abstract and where a number of illustrative materials are available to visualise the contents of the subject. This is, for example, the case for the science subjects (which are taught as general science or in an interdisciplinary way, see Burmeister & Ewig 2010). However, mathematics is also suitable for immersion teaching: The coding of language in terms of numbers and signs and the readily available illustrations facilitate communication about the subject content. In Canada (with the target language French), where the teaching of mathematics in immersion programmes has been observed for a long time, no deficits were found in the pupils' academic achievements (see e.g. Genesee 1987, Holobow et al. 1987, Johnstone 2002). These results are corroborated by studies in a German school (Zaunbauer & Möller 2006, 2007, 2010). Even in subjects such as art (Lepschy 2007), physical education or music (TAKE OFF! 2/2008, 4/2008, see also teaching materials in Massler & Burmeister 2010), the results were very positive.

The methodological concept of interdisciplinary teaching, as stated for example in the curriculum for the German Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein, is very important for immersion teaching. For example, the subject "local history and geography" (HSU) introduces a topic and the corresponding vocabulary. The other subjects use this vocabulary and extend and apply the new words and concepts to their respective contexts. In this way, the foreign language is used in different situations and in different subjects. This way of teaching not only improves vocabulary learning but seems to enhance general learning processes as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Partial immersion: In contrast to total immersion, only a certain proportion of lessons are taught in the foreign language in primary school. In preschools, partial immersion is usually characterised by the language-person bond.

### 3.5 Literacy training

In the Claus-Rixen-School, German reading and writing skills are taught systematically during the first years, although English reading and writing skills are not focused on explicitly. However, as written English skills are important for the subjects in later primary school years, the children early engage in reading and writing English words and sentences. Research has shown that children are able to transfer their knowledge of text structure and coherency from German to the foreign language and back (e.g. Burmeister & Pasternak 2004, Burmeister & Piske 2008, Burmeister 2010).

Recent studies from primary schools teaching English as a foreign language confirm that simultaneous literacy training is the best way to teach children reading and writing in both languages. The results showed that there is no virtue in delaying the introduction of the writing system. Doing so typically leads to children writing English words phonetically according to the German model (*häpi* instead of *happy*). If these forms are memorised, it is harder at a later stage to re-train children not to use them (Rymarczyk 2008). Correct spelling is introduced and reinforced through worksheets containing English texts and terms that the children have to copy and match correctly. This method of introducing writing seems to be successful. First studies of written texts from fourth graders at the Claus-Rixen-School have shown that only about 8% of language errors are spelling errors (Burmeister & Piske 2008, Burmeister in press).

### 3.6 Didactic-methodological principles of immersion

Successful immersion is dependent upon a teaching method that is based on didactic-methodological principles for creating a rich learning environment, such as illustrating contents, providing a rich foreign language input and supporting interaction (for example Snow 1990, Burmeister 2006a,b, Kersten et al. 2010, Massler & Ioannou-Georgiou 2010).

#### a) Illustrating contents

In order to be able to learn language and content of lessons simultaneously, it is crucial that children can follow the subject content at all times. Because the children initially have little or no knowledge of the target language, classes have to be organised in such a way that everything can be understood without language, like in a silent movie (Burmeister 2010). In other words, the teacher constantly provides visual aids to accompany what is being said, for example by using gestures, miming, pictures, films, objects, etc. Since the topics covered are still quite tangible in the first year, it is possible for the children to understand the contents without needing to identify every single word of the foreign language (Snow 1990).

#### b) Providing rich foreign language input

In order to stimulate foreign language acquisition in children, the teacher provides variety in the input (e.g. Snow 1990). This means, on the one hand, that the language level has to be age-appropriate and, on the other hand, that the input should not be simplified with respect to grammar and vocabulary. In order for the child to be able to match language and content, the

language is used in conjunction with the respective action. The teacher labels objects by using clear gestures and by stressing important words. With the help of innate lexical strategies that the children use unconsciously, they are able to learn object labels quickly, provided that there is a clear relationship between the word and the object (e.g. Rohde 2005, 2010). Especially in the first year of learning and when new content is presented, a large quantity of the teacher's language input is imperative. The teacher will accompany all actions with verbal explanations in order to provide as much language input as possible (Weitz et al. 2010; for an overview of teaching principles see Kersten et al. 2010).

In immersion teaching, it is also important to support learning in class through linguistic and structural "scaffolds" (e.g. Perego 1991, Burmeister 2006 a,b, Massler & Ioannou-Georgiou 2010). Teachers are encouraged to establish routines in the classroom which are repeated every day and thus provide recurring linguistic structures for the children. Such frequent repetitions help the children build a small repertoire of chunks and phrases in the L2 in a very short time. Such scaffolding routines not only give a structure to classroom management and activities (Edelenbos et al. 2006), they also enable the children to understand and produce output from the very beginning, which usually motivates them and helps them feel at ease with the foreign language. Such scaffolds can be either non-verbal signals such as bells or pictures to indicate an activity, routines such as "weather", "date", or "classroom duties", or verbal scaffolds such as recurring phrases, formulaic expressions, rhymes or songs. Even though the children may not be able to process phrases word by word, they understand the meaning in its entirety and refine their understanding as the language learning process proceeds.

### **c) Supporting interaction**

In order to foster language acquisition, the teacher will provide ample opportunities for language interaction, namely through authentic tasks in varied communication situations, in which pupils have many opportunities to "negotiate meaning" with each other (e.g. Long 1996). During the first few months of immersion teaching, the children find out how they can compensate for their lack of foreign language knowledge in order to take part in class interactions. While the teacher only speaks the foreign language, the children communicate either in their first language, non-verbally (for example through gestures or by miming) or using German sentences containing English words (i.e. *code-mixing*). In any case the teacher responds to the children's contributions and, if necessary, transfers the utterances to correct foreign language models (e.g. Snow 1990, Burmeister 2006 a,b, Kiely 2010, Kersten et al. 2010, Weitz et al. 2010).

In general, the teacher is the only foreign language model in class and, therefore, a very important communication partner for the children. S/he is the one who initiates activities that are carried out in pairs or in groups. It is well known that peer learning is advantageous for foreign language learning, as children learn from each other. As research has shown, it is not true that they pick up other children's mistakes, as is often thought (e.g. Swain et al. 2002).

Furthermore, it is very important to enable multi-sensory learning, that is, to create an environment which stimulates children to use different senses (e.g. Kersten et al. 2010). Children should be encouraged to carry out their own research by using different materials, so that they are increasingly able to devise hypotheses, to test these in various activities and

to formulate results in the target language as their language competence gradually improves (Burmeister & Ewig 2010).

### 3.7 Increase in learning

Research has amply demonstrated that multilingual speakers have cognitive advantages over monolingual ones, e.g. better language awareness, metalinguistic competence, attention and concentration, to name but a few (see Bialystok 1991, 2005, Festmann & Kersten 2010, Zaunbauer & Möller 2007, 2010). It is, unfortunately, not yet clear as to how much foreign language input is actually necessary in order to improve these cognitive skills (e.g. Wode 1994). Given these findings, the higher the proportion of L2 input in a partial immersion programme is, the better the outcomes will be.

#### 3.7.1 What results may be expected in the target language?

In a bilingual preschool, the children generally develop very good comprehension skills. Active language use, on the other hand, develops later, in the primary school years.<sup>4</sup> L2 English production was regularly tested at the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz by Prof. Henning Wode and his team from the University of Kiel. At the end of each school year, the pupils were asked to tell a story from a picture book (Kersten 2005). On the basis of these stories it is possible to show the progress in terms of the children's English production skills.<sup>5</sup> A study by Kersten (2009), for example, shows that children from the primary school in Altenholz, who were exposed to 70% immersion, were able to attain a level of English grammar at the end of fourth grade which was comparable to natural second language acquisition. This included children who already started at preschool as well as those who only started English at primary school.

Further observations from the Claus-Rixen-School indicated that the children are able to communicate in English on all age-appropriate school topics by the end of the fourth grade. This is particularly impressive, as the children have no inhibitions to use the language and to reformulate if words or concepts are missing in the foreign language. They read age-appropriate texts for English-speaking children despite the fact that reading in English is not specifically taught during school time (compare Part A, section 3.5).

#### 3.7.2 What results are to be expected in German?

Many parents are concerned that the reduced input of the German language would have a negative effect on the development of the native language. International research has shown, however, that compared to children who were taught in a monolingual school,

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<sup>4</sup> This is particularly the case for children who attended German preschools. In countries where preschool teaching is based more strongly on methods of instruction as used in schools and where children are already taught at preschool level to use the foreign language, language production has been observed to start earlier.

<sup>5</sup> A summary of these results can be found in the following brochure: Wode, Henning (2004). *Frühes Fremdsprachenlernen*. Kiel: FMKS e.V., ISBN 3-00-013651-7 [can be ordered via [www.fmks.eu](http://www.fmks.eu), 1,00 €]

immersion children showed a similar or even a higher level in their native language, even though they have fewer native language lessons (Genesee 1987, Thomas et al. 1993). In particular, this is true for total immersion programmes, where the children initially do not have any lessons in their L1 (first language). Once the L1 is introduced, the immersion children catch up with their monolingual peers in relatively short time.

Similar results were reported for partial immersion programmes in Germany for the grades 1-4 (Zaunbauer & Möller 2006, 2007, 2010, Zaunbauer et al. 2005). In these studies the immersion pupils performed as well as or even outperformed their monolingual peers in their reading and spelling skills in German. By comparing different variables, the studies demonstrated that children's achievements, in fact, depended more on their intelligence and memory skills than on the type of school they attended, i.e. immersion or not (Zaunbauer & Möller 2007). However, it is not clear so far whether these effects were due to the positive effects of immersion learning or due to selection criteria which are used to admit children to school. Due to the relatively small sample of these studies, further research in this area is clearly needed.

### **3.7.3 Which results can be expected in the other subjects?**

Canadian research found no negative effects of early immersion programmes on the academic achievements in other subjects (Genesee 1987, Johnstone 2002, Wesche 2002). It was repeatedly shown that subject knowledge of immersion pupils initially improves more slowly than that of children who are exposed to native language teaching only. However, the immersion children catch up throughout the course of time. In the Claus-Rixen-School, the differences were reported to disappear by the end of the second year. In addition, the specific terminology used in these subjects was found to be learnt equally well in both languages. The Zaunbauer studies indicated that this is, for example, the case for achievements in mathematics. In grades 1-4, the immersion groups did not obtain lower results than the monolingual comparison group; in some cases they even outperformed their monolingual peers. These tests were, in fact, carried out in German, even though mathematics was taught in English. Therefore, the positive results for the immersion children indicate that they were able to transfer the words and concepts of the subject mathematics from English to German.

### **3.7.4 Assessment of subject content in immersion classes**

In grades 1 and 2, the teachers at the Claus-Rixen-School assess their pupils' academic performance by using rubrics instead of grade reports (in Germany, the subjects are graded from 1 to 6). In order to assess achievements in English, additional categories are added: For example, for grades 1 and 2, the emphasis is on language use, i.e. how intensely the child has used the foreign language during classes and to what extent the child has been able to understand the explanations of a speaker (be it the teacher or another child).

In grades 3 and 4, reports generally consist of grades for all subjects (as required by the 'Bundesländer'). However, the children's use of the English language is reported in the same manner as it was in grades 1 and 2. In addition, the children's comprehension of texts and

their own compositions is now included in the assessment, although the quality of their English language level for each subject is not reported.

It has to be pointed out that it is very difficult to generalise the developmental level of each pupil, as the acquisition of language in immersion programmes follows a very individual path. Every school has to find individual solutions tailored to their specific needs in order to assess foreign language competency in their programmes.

## Part B

# PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF IMMERSION PROGRAMMES

## 1. Prerequisites

### 1.1 Legal and school political prerequisites

In Germany, education is regulated by the individual 'Bundesländer' (Federal States), therefore, the possibilities for implementing immersion programmes differ accordingly. Please contact the education ministry in your 'Bundesland' to determine the respective situation. In Schleswig-Holstein, immersion programmes are officially accepted and the prerequisites for such programmes are stated in the regulations of the Ministry of Education.<sup>6</sup>

It is generally easier to introduce immersion in private schools than in state schools because private schools are often more flexible and have fewer restrictions imposed on them. Nevertheless it is still possible to offer immersion in state schools, and the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz is one example.

In order to introduce immersion, it may be necessary to apply initially for a school trial and it is helpful at this point to ask for backup by a research team from a university. In order to obtain a license for immersion, the school forwards a detailed plan, as outlined below. For further reference, addresses of bilingual primary schools can be found on the homepage of the FMKS<sup>7</sup>.

### 1.2 Planning time

The development of a new school concept requires thorough preparation. If done well, it saves time, worry and pressure later. One to two years of prior planning is a reasonable assumption, yet this depends on the specific conditions and may take even longer (Kersten 2010). It is important to take note of possible application dates as this determines a realistic time schedule. The most important prerequisites include the location of the school, lesson planning, official agreement and the selection and employment of teachers.

### 1.3 Close cooperation between bilingual preschool and bilingual school

Whenever possible, it is advisable to establish a close cooperation between a bilingual preschool and a bilingual primary school because the children benefit best from this

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<sup>6</sup> Decree of the Ministry for Education and Women 6<sup>th</sup> June 2006 - III 301. NBI MBF.Schl.-H., S. 169 (see page 27 for the decree text). Schleswig-Holstein permits bilingual lessons at primary schools. For further information, please read the interview with Prof. Dr. Petra Burmeister [www.fmks.eu ⇒ Infos ⇒ Download].

<sup>7</sup> See the website <http://fmks-online.de/bilischulen.html> for further details.

combination. The following advantages are in favour for such a close cooperation, for example (Wode 1998, 2009, Wode et al. 1999):

- A cooperation between the two ensures continuity of education,
- the foreign language skills acquired at preschool will be enhanced appropriately in primary school,
- the children from bilingual preschool have developed solid foreign language comprehension skills. This pays off at primary school where they quickly develop their productive skills, which positively affects the performance of children without such foreign language background.

#### **1.4 Setting up a private school with an immersion profile**

When setting up a new private school, clarification on a number of issues apart from the contents of actual lessons must be determined before lessons can begin. One such issue is the community surrounding the school. A bilingual school is an important and innovative local factor for the community, but the school should also benefit from the surrounding neighbourhood. When selecting the location of the school, the following questions should be considered:

- What is the social class of the neighbourhood? Is there any interest in bilingual learning?
- Is the building suitable (i.e. affordable, appropriate in size and easy to access)?
- Are there enough children to attend the bilingual school?
- Is there a bilingual preschool in the near vicinity or is there interest in introducing immersion in one or several preschools nearby?
- Can you find cooperation partners in the community?

Financing an immersion school is not crucially different from organising a monolingual private school. The additional costs for running an immersion programme are low. The conditions for financing private schools and for financial help are very different in each 'Bundesland', so that information should be acquired locally. In order to receive financial support for private initiatives, it is, for example, possible to find an affluent sponsor, to cooperate with private schools already in existence, or to set up a charity which is concerned with the organisation of the new school.

As far as lessons in private schools are concerned, the Ministries of Education often ask for justification why such specific teaching is needed. The amount of detail required varies from 'Bundesland' to 'Bundesland', but more often than not specific details may be required on the following issues:

- Is the concept the same for all classes in the primary school?
- How are children integrated when they join later in the school year?
- Which teaching methods are used when children change from an immersion class to a monolingual class?
- How will children be taught who are specially gifted or who have special needs?
- What are research results with respect to immersion programmes?
- How can the bilingual school be accessed?
- How will the aims of the 'Bundesland'-specific education curriculum be achieved?

### **1.5 Integrating an immersion programme into an existing school**

If a school decides to implement an immersion programme, the head of the school is the most important key figure. Among other things, the head has to be prepared for change which affects the whole staff and should therefore expect a higher work load, at least temporarily. S/he should be able to look ahead and prepare the new concept in time. If parents are the one who require an immersion programme, they will contact the head of the school first.

The next steps involve the school inspector and, if necessary, the Ministry of Education of the respective 'Bundesland'. It is often difficult to convince these committees, especially where state schools are concerned. For this reason, the organisers want to look for supporters who are willing to aide the process, e.g. politicians, university staff or other known persons from various backgrounds. Together they should prepare the prerequisites and the contents of the application in detail. In Schleswig-Holstein, for example, introducing immersion programmes is possible under certain conditions (see chapter B 1.1, decree "Bilingual classes in primary schools"), but this is not the case for all 'Bundesländer'. Before an application is handed in, the most important prerequisite is, of course, to convince the teaching staff and parents who may still be sceptical about the new immersion programme.

When parents and teachers have been convinced, the final decision lies with the highest authority of the school (or the appropriate decision-making body). After the agreement, the new immersion programme can then be put into practise.

## **2. Additional Efforts for the School**

Even though the additional financial costs for immersion teaching are relatively small, there are still other financial matters to be taken into consideration.

### **2.1 Additional subject costs**

Immersion teaching does not require any additional hours for language teaching, since lesson time is used for language and content teaching at the same time. Additional subject costs arise through the initial allocation of teaching materials in the target language. Further advice on where to find such teaching materials can be found at the end of this guide.

### **2.2 Selection of teachers**

The success of immersion teaching at primary school largely depends upon the level of qualification of the teachers (Met & Lorenz 1997). Teachers need to be experienced as primary school teachers; they should have 'instructional competence', as well as the ability to use a broad range of methods. In addition, they have to have excellent foreign language skills, in order to teach the curriculum in a way that the L2 input covers a large range of lexical and structural variation. Native speakers of the immersion language or teachers who have studied the subject at university are suitable, but the selection does not necessarily have to be restricted to these groups and may include, for example, teachers who have taught at German schools abroad and have learnt the target language in the country. Knowledge in

the area of second language acquisition is an important prerequisite as well. Furthermore, teachers should be able to work in teams, not only for individual lesson preparation but also for using the same L2 content in different subjects.

Finding suitable teachers is a long-term undertaking; in any case, the school should be involved in the decision process. Private schools are more flexible in the selection of teachers, often because teachers in a private school do not always need to have certain certificates required by the country or 'Bundesland'. It is important in this respect that the selection committee consists of people who are experienced in teaching and familiar with immersion programmes, especially if it is not the school which decides directly but a different decision-making body. As experience has amply shown, an immersion programme is only as good as the teachers involved.

It would be best to know the teacher beforehand or to, at least, interview the person. In addition, it is advisable to observe the new teacher teaching classes. If it is not clear whether the teacher is suitable for the school, it is often possible to arrange a period of probation. When recruiting an immersion team, it is important to ensure that the different necessary qualifications are covered by the teaching team.

Schools can get additional support by employing foreign language assistants (e.g. Comenius assistants). These can be applied for through the respective ministries.<sup>8</sup> In Germany, the education exchange service (PAD, Pädagogischer Austauschdienst)<sup>9</sup> distributes the language assistants to the respective ministries which, in turn, assign them to schools. Language assistants are usually young people who want to spend a year abroad, but who do not necessarily want to become teachers. In general, they arrive after the summer holidays and stay for about nine months. As they sometimes lack knowledge in teaching methodology and teaching qualifications, they are not allowed to teach on their own. However, their presence in the class may be an asset as long as these language assistants are guided well by the teacher.

The extent to which teachers from abroad are able to work as teachers in Germany depends on the 'Bundesländer', and guidelines are continuously changing. Schools need to contact the respective authorities in each 'Bundesland'. Further advice can be found in the guidelines of the FMKS "How to become a teacher in Germany?".<sup>10</sup> In order to find teachers, the job section available on the FMKS website may be used at no cost ([www.fmks.eu](http://www.fmks.eu) ⇒ Jobs).

So far, there is, unfortunately, a lack of suitable university courses and professional training for bilingual teaching in Germany. However, the report from the Conference of Ministries for Culture and Education (KMK 2006) also includes some university courses which prepare students for bilingual or immersion teaching. This information can be found at the end of this guide. University courses for "European teachers" in Baden-Württemberg (PH Karlsruhe, PH Freiburg) seem to be particularly suitable for this purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> Schools have to submit an application for a language assistant to their appropriate ministry; preschools can contact the education exchange service directly. [[www.kmk.org](http://www.kmk.org)].

<sup>9</sup> The web link for the *Pädagogischer Austauschdienst* is as follows: <http://www.kmk-pad.org>.

<sup>10</sup> "How to become a teacher in Germany" (2005) [[http://www.fmks-online.de/\\_wd\\_showdoc.php?pic=77](http://www.fmks-online.de/_wd_showdoc.php?pic=77)].

### **2.3 Additional costs for personnel**

At the beginning of the immersion programme, there may be some costs for additional personnel because the school often has to reduce hours for teaching staff due to the additional preparation time needed for lesson planning. This has to be accounted for early in the planning and included in the budget plan.

### **2.4 Work load for teachers**

Apart from the head of school, teaching staff will also have to expect a higher work load (e.g. Massler & Steiert 2010). This is the case at least in the beginning when few teaching materials are available. To some extent the teachers will have to develop the materials themselves. Lesson planning is, therefore, more time consuming than for monolingual lessons and requires a good knowledge of teaching methodology. The preparation and initial stages of the immersion programme should allow enough time in advance to ensure that sufficient teaching materials are available in order to provide high quality teaching and minimise teacher stress from the beginning. Examples of tested teaching units can be found at the end of this guide (cf. also Massler & Steiert 2010).

### **2.5 Team building**

Due to the unusual nature of immersion teaching, immersion teachers often receive more attention compared to teachers who teach monolingual classes. This may lead to an imbalance among the members of the staff or to low self-esteem ("My work is no longer interesting or good enough"). To rectify these problems, open discussions and communicating clearly regarding the immersion programme are warranted. It is important to ensure that everyone involved is aware that these situations may occur and how to solve such problems.

Existing expertise at the school should always be integrated with the new immersion approach. Ideally, all staff should be aware of the benefits of multilingualism and immersion programmes, believe in and follow common goals, support the general concept of the immersion curriculum and feel proud of what the school can offer.

Whenever people of different cultures work together, e.g. native speakers of the foreign language and German teachers, misunderstandings may arise: People from different cultures, for instance, may feel irritated by different situations, due to different educational backgrounds, teaching styles, diverging forms of communication, means of communication, status, etc. It is vital that such issues, which give rise to conflict, are recognised early, and that the teaching staff is open and tolerant, and prepared to develop further as a team and to try out new methods to further improve their cooperation. If problems arise, professional trainers for intercultural communication may also be of help to remedy the conflict (contact the FMKS to locate such trainers). In immersion teaching contexts, mutual appreciation and respect are essential features in order to create a beneficial atmosphere for the staff members.

## 2.6 Selection of children

### 2.6.1 Suitability of children

Are there any children who are not suited for immersion teaching? Ideally, both primary school and preschool decide together which children will join the immersion programme. In general, the following selection criteria have proven to be useful for a child's admittance to an immersion programme:

- An age-appropriate level in the native language
- The ability to concentrate
- Perseverance
- Commitment
- Communication abilities<sup>11</sup>

However, the development of children is not over once they enter school and their language acquisition process should appropriately be fostered. Also, children with more reserved personalities should not be dissuaded from participating in an immersion programme, since they too can progress well when exposed to immersion teaching.

North American research has repeatedly shown that even weaker pupils benefit from immersion teaching. They also acquire a comparably good foreign language competence in addition to subject matter. They are not disadvantaged and achieve the same level as they would in monolingual lessons, provided they received the same level of support as there (Bruck 1982, 1984, Holobow et al. 1987, 1991).<sup>12</sup> Research in the USA examined whether the academic achievement of children who changed from immersion programmes to monolingual programmes would improve. Such improvements were, however, not found in these studies and experiences from the Claus-Rixen-School confirm these findings.

### 2.6.3 Dyslexia

So far, there are no clear results with respect to the effects of dyslexia in immersion teaching. Some schools are careful and advise parents and children with severe dyslexia not to take part in immersion programmes in order to prevent possible difficulties. As dyslexia is often not yet diagnosed when the child starts school, there are no guidelines. In Germany, it is possible to test dyslexia prior to starting school using for example the "Bielefelder Screening" test (BISC, Jansen et al. <sup>2</sup>2002).

At the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz, it has been observed that problems due to the dyslexia were not severe. Interestingly, immersion teaching had no additional negative effects. In fact, these children developed better foreign language skills as compared to their peers who attended monolingual classes, so that one can tentatively conclude that dyslexic

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Claus-Rixen-School discourages parents from registering their children for the immersion programme when they have "very significant" perceptual deficits. Such children need a large amount of energy to learn successfully. This is why, according to this school, they should not be burdened by additional demands at school, i.e. learning subject matter while learning a foreign language at the same time.

<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive list of references on the topic "language immersion and the underperforming learner" may be found on the website [www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/bibliographies/ul.html](http://www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/bibliographies/ul.html).

children even benefit from immersion programmes as long as they receive appropriate support.

#### **2.6.4 Children with a non-German language background**

Is immersion teaching also suitable for children from migrant families or for children with a multilingual background (Piske 2007)? For these children, the foreign language in school would be the third or even fourth language that they have to master.

Generally, children will not experience any problems with English in school as long as their other languages are developed age-appropriately. The parents are therefore strongly advised to properly support the home languages. Children from multilingual families should be encouraged to use all languages as often as possible and in as many situations as possible. International research has shown that multilingual children in particular benefit from immersion teaching because they are already accustomed to learning new languages (Wode 1995). If possible, multilingual children should also learn to read and write in their native language/s, although this may be not always easy to achieve.

Finally, all children are in the same situation at the beginning because the foreign language is new to all of them, independent of their language background. As immersion teaching is based on a close relationship between action and language, also children whose L1 is not German have ample opportunities to learn the foreign language.

### **3. What do Parents Expect and What is Expected of Parents?**

Many parents cannot imagine that teaching may take place in a foreign language. In particular, they have doubts that their children learn the subject contents. They worry that they cannot help their children with their homework and, in addition, they may feel insecure – perhaps because the parents themselves lack skills in the foreign language. Also, sometimes doubts are expressed in such a way that a primary school child is too young to learn a foreign language and should learn proper German first.

All these fears and worries are understandable but, fortunately, they are unwarranted. Research has shown that all children are able to learn several languages from very early on, because there are no biological limitations to learn languages. Parents do not necessarily have to speak the language in order to support their children's learning throughout school. Instead, it is important that parents support the concept of bilingual education and are aware of the benefits of multilingualism. A positive attitude towards languages supports children's learning (Kersten et al. 2010). At the same time, there is nothing wrong with parents taking language courses and either refreshing their language skills or learning a new language – this is another way for parents to show their children that languages are important. However, there is no need to practise the foreign language at home. In particular, there should not be any pressure for the children to speak the foreign language in front of other people. On the other hand, there is no harm when parents try to increase the contact time with the foreign language and buy CDs, tapes, books, films or holiday in the country, as long as the children have fun. In addition, another possibility outside school is to enrol the children in clubs where the foreign language is spoken, as in some after-school clubs for example.

Most importantly, parents provide interaction and communication with the child, so that the native language is supported at home by positively engaging in conversation. Furthermore, book reading activities are important to foster language skills and children may also be encouraged to read themselves.

Parents of children attending immersion or private schools are often more involved in the school programme. Some criticism was raised that immersion schools compete with other schools to attract parents who are highly concerned about their children's progress and learning situation. Often, these parents who are interested in immersion programmes are also more up-to-date on educational debates and want their children to take part in high quality and up-to-date education programmes. Teachers may find that the involvement of these parents is a bonus, as these parents are generally more supportive and may even take part in different school projects. In private schools, parents are often involved in the set-up of the school or act as members of the school board.

On the other hand, the particular interest in the school by the parents may become problematic, particularly if teachers feel monitored or if parents have unrealistic expectations about the speed of language acquisition. However, some school regulations do stipulate that parents have the right to visit classes. If this is the situation, teachers should have enough time to prepare the classes and it is, therefore, advisable to arrange such visits well in advance.

Finally, it is important to determine where and when parents should be involved in the decision making process. The process should, however, generally be transparent to parents at all times. This, of course, does not concern the case regarding conflicts between teachers or internal discussions among staff, which should always be solved internally.

#### **4. Research and Exchange**

In order to assess children's academic achievements, research conducted by people from outside the school may be helpful, e.g. by university teams (Kersten 2010). This way, the teachers do not need to deal with very detailed assessments, which may, for example, include the level of language skills in the foreign language, analysing teacher input, support in developing immersion teaching further, etc. (see Kersten et al. 2010). Researchers also benefit from such cooperation because they obtain naturalistic data for their research which can be used to develop further support for immersion teaching. It is advisable to contact teacher training colleges and/or universities in order to find researchers who are interested and specialised in this subject area.

#### **5. Follow-up after Primary School**

In secondary school, the existing foreign language skills of children should be fostered and teaching would be aimed at the level of foreign language competence that the children acquired in primary school. If children from immersion primary schools enter 'traditional' teaching together with children who are complete beginners in the foreign language, immersion children will not feel sufficiently challenged and their achievements may stagnate as a result.

When changing to secondary school, other problems may arise because primary and secondary schools tend to have different points of view as far as teaching children is concerned:

- Secondary school teachers may not be familiar with immersion teaching and may fear that immersion children are too demanding and challenge their competence.
- Traditional teaching and immersion teaching differ in a number of respects: In the former, children learn in a structured way where errors should be avoided, whereas the latter regards errors as an integral part of development.
- Immersion teaching encourages children to talk about the subject content. Traditional teaching, on the other hand, focuses on the structure of the language and grammar.
- Immersion teaching encourages language development in a natural way. Traditional teaching focuses on the given teaching materials, yet the way they are structured does not necessarily reflect the stages of language development.<sup>13</sup>
- Teachers in secondary schools complain that immersion children make mistakes in their writing and that they are not able to apply grammatical rules. Primary school teachers, on the other hand, are disappointed when their former pupils no longer express themselves naturally but become inhibited to speak the foreign language.
- In order to understand these differences and improve the situation, it is very important to contact secondary schools in good time and to start an ongoing discussion about the different learning approaches. In addition, secondary school teachers should get to know the primary school immersion children beforehand in order to obtain an impression of their skills and abilities before they enter secondary school.

The different class sizes in primary versus secondary school are also problematic. Classes at primary school are smaller than secondary school classes. This means that the secondary school level either has a small immersion class or the immersion children are put together in a class with other children who may already have some prior knowledge of the foreign language, but do not share the same level of foreign language skills. In this case, some subjects may then be taught in the foreign language while others are not.

Despite these difficulties, there are many immersion secondary schools which introduce interesting topics, read interesting, longer texts and present lexical and structurally rich language input but do not over-emphasise correct language use. In such a way, children can further develop their strengths while being guided sensitively in areas that still need further development. Teaching subject content in the foreign language from the beginning of secondary school is beneficial for all children, whether or not they have prior knowledge in the foreign language, especially in subjects such as physical education or mathematics for example, as research amply demonstrated (Weshe 2002).

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<sup>13</sup> Insights from psycholinguistics have shown that these phases of development follow a particular order and that phases cannot be skipped. 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular -s in English (*he wants, she cries*) for example is acquired very late (during the 5<sup>th</sup> language acquisition phase, according to the model by Pienemann 1998). In foreign language teaching materials on the other hand, -s is introduced early. This means that children are expected to learn a structure that they are not ready to process cognitively. Further information can be found in the chapter "Spracherwerb in der Schule. Was in den Köpfen der Kinder vorgeht" (Pienemann 2006).

Furthermore, it is desirable that every child receives individual support by determining their foreign language skills from the very beginning of secondary school and by taking this level as a point of departure for further developing their skills. A diagnostic second language test is currently being developed: "Rapid Profile" (Keßler 2005) is a comprehensive test run on a computer that takes about 15 minutes. It is carried out by the teacher and provides a specific language profile for each child. Afterwards, the teacher can readily select tasks which correspond to the child's specific developmental level. In addition, the test can be used to compare learner groups.

Ideally, the first foreign language is continued to be taught at the secondary school using immersion methods. The second foreign language can then be introduced in grade 5, using the same method. This way, enough time would be left to learn a third language until at least grade 9 or 10. Such a model of language learning is called the "3+ formula" (Wode 2001a, b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2009). Using immersion programmes to teach foreign languages would be a possible means to finally achieve the goal set by the EU which stipulates that children should have mastered their native language as well as two foreign languages at a functional adequate level once they have finished school.

## 6. Other Questions

Often, children who attend immersion programmes are referred to as "elite children". As a result of this stereotype, many parents, therefore, may prefer not to enrol their children in such schools. However, as the Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz could show, these worries are unnecessary: Their immersion classes are attended by very many different children, not only by "elite children". However, there are some reasons why immersion learning is only taken up by relatively few children. One of them is that there are, unfortunately, not many opportunities so far for immersion teaching at German primary schools.

Especially gifted and talented children may find the immersion teaching method rewarding: As the language input in these lessons is generally lexically and structurally rich and varied, gifted and talented children are able to take in and process additional (linguistic) information. These children are therefore sufficiently challenged in immersion programmes, because foreign language skills require a long time to properly develop into the intended target language.

## 7. Conclusion

Although immersion is the most successful method to learn a foreign language and superior to any other teaching methods, it is a challenge for all persons involved. Differing ideas and conceptions need to be transformed into effective, concrete lessons, while at the same time many logistical restrictions have to be taken into consideration (Walker & Tedick 2000).

As illustrated previously, the beginning stages of an immersion programme requires many important decisions in order for the programme to run smoothly. Also, to plan and create a programme's concept takes time and research, yet remembering established practises may reduce the pressure of this phase. We hope that this guide will help to consider important aspects in setting up such an immersion programme, although every school will have their

own preferences and will need to make their own choices. Yet, the reward for persevering through these demands and stresses will be the exceptional language skills which the pupils acquire and exhibit.

## 8. Lesson Materials and Practical Help

"Leuchtturmschule" Claus-Rixen-School in Altenholz/Kiel:

<http://www.claus-rixen-schule.lernnetz.de>

### Lesson materials:

- [www.innovative-teachers.de](http://www.innovative-teachers.de)
- [www.proclil.org](http://www.proclil.org)
- Journal *Grundschule*, Heft 4 (April 2007):
  - Burmeister, P., Pasternak, R. (2007) "Exciting and dangerous." Das Thema "Fire" im fremdsprachlichen Sachfachunterricht. *Grundschule*, Heft 4, 36-40.
  - Fischer, U. (2007). "Von Herausforderungen und Chancen." *Grundschule*, Heft 4, 32-34.
  - Schlemminger, G. (2007). "Un village de magasins d'usine a Roppenheim?" Sachfachlernen im bilingualen deutsch-französischen Unterricht der vierten Klasse. *Grundschule*, Heft 4, 45-41.
- Journal *TAKE OFF! Zeitschrift für frühes Fremdsprachenlernen* (Westermann Verlag)
- "Discover and Explore", Work Sheets (Schroedel-Verlag)
- Nine modules in Massler, U., Burmeister, P. (2010) (eds.). *CLIL und Immersion: Fremdsprachlicher Sachfachunterricht in der Grundschule*. Braunschweig: Westermann.
- Modules on environmental education and bilingual science learning at [www.elias.bilikita.org](http://www.elias.bilikita.org) ⇒ Materials

### University courses

University course "European teacher" at the Universities of Education in Freiburg and Karlsruhe:

University of Education in Freiburg:

[www.ph-freiburg.de/fr/studium/studiengaenge/lehramtsstudiengaenge/europabuero/allgemeines-zum-studiengang-europalehramt.html](http://www.ph-freiburg.de/fr/studium/studiengaenge/lehramtsstudiengaenge/europabuero/allgemeines-zum-studiengang-europalehramt.html)

University of Education in Karlsruhe: [www.ph-karlsruhe.de/cms/index.php?id=1013](http://www.ph-karlsruhe.de/cms/index.php?id=1013)

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## Schleswig-Holstein permits bilingual lessons in primary school:

### "Bilingual lessons in primary schools"

Decree of the Ministry for Education and Women, 6th June 2006- III 301

In addition to obligatory English classes in the academic year 2006/07 from school year group 3 onwards, primary schools can introduce bilingual lessons using available resources if there is sufficient demand. These classes can be organised in different ways, for example specific to subjects, learners or year groups. Schools who are interested in this possibility are advised to get in touch with the respective school inspector beforehand. When introducing bilingual classes the following are important:

1. Permission to introduce bilingual classes is given through the school inspectorate.
2. Permission is granted under the following conditions:
  - The offer is open to all pupils
  - It is possible to show that existing staff resources are sufficient both quantitatively and qualitatively
  - The division of lessons can be documented; obligatory English classes from year group 3 are secured
  - Submission of an outline which states the aims of the lessons offered, gives details of the structure of the groups of learners, basics of the curriculum and the teaching methodology
  - In case of a long-term plan to document agreements with secondary schools to secure continuity of education as much as possible
  - Schools are accountable and obliged to evaluate the education programme in conjunction with the school inspectorate
  - The decree takes effect on the day of publication.

## 10. Imprint

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We have tried hard, however, there is no guarantee that all details and references in the text are correct.

