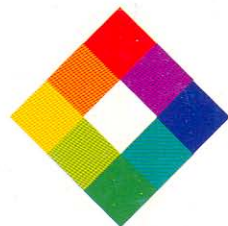


Edited by

David Marsh, Paula Oksman-Rinkinen & Sauli Takala

MAINSTREAM BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE
FINNISH VOCATIONAL SECTOR



NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

1. EDUCATION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN OLD CONCEPT

Education in a second or foreign language is no new phenomenon. Similarly, bilingualism and multilingualism have undoubtedly existed at all times whenever different language groups have been in contact with each other. In the Western world, systematic language teaching as well as teaching in a foreign language started in ancient Rome. When the expansion of the Roman empire made Greece dependent on Rome, many learned Greeks became tutors to the children of Roman nobility. Learning fluent Greek was considered a mark of an educated person. Greek tutors often spoke only Greek, and thus the form of teaching resembled the form of bilingual education discussed in this report.

When the school system developed in Rome, learning Greek and studying Greek literature was an essential part of the curriculum. It was also common for young noble men to be sent to Greece to finish their education in famous Greek schools. Thus, student exchange and study abroad, which are so strongly emphasised these days as one means of internationalisation, are by no means new. They were there from the very beginning of organized instruction in the western world.

Doing most of one's studies in a second/foreign language has long roots in former colonies. The educational systems in some of these new states still resemble to a smaller or greater extent those in their former imperial centres in terms of curricula, teaching traditions, textbooks and examinations. Study abroad is still a very common pattern.

It is also common knowledge that dozens of generations in medieval times went to school and university where the language of instruction was Latin. For centuries, Latin was the lingua franca of the church, the state, the school, research and high culture in general. Universities are a fairly recent institution in several parts of the world. Thus, for instance, in medieval Finland, it was common for young men to go abroad and study in the famous European universities on the Continent. This was, in fact, so common throughout Europe that students from a given nationality banded

together to be better able to look after their interests. The language of research literature has always tended to be international, first Latin and in more recent times increasingly English.

On the basis of the above discussion we can conclude that bilingual education and the use of foreign languages in for academic purposes are no recent phenomena. In fact, in a historical perspective, such practices have been the norm rather than an exception.

2. STUDIES THROUGH A L2 IN FINLAND

There are many reasons why bilingual education has been introduced in Finland. I have discussed these in earlier publications (Takala, 1992, 1994) and will address this question only briefly here. One reason for recent interest in using a foreign language as a medium of instruction is that we have seen the interesting and promising work done in immersion teaching, which was pioneered in Canada and has subsequently spread all over the world.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) system has also been introduced in Finland which further demonstrated the feasibility of education using a foreign language as a vehicle of instruction. Another reason is that we have found out through a number of large-scale surveys of language needs that we must take steps to improve the quality of language skills throughout the whole population. There have been several national commissions and working parties that have submitted proposals for the systematic development of language teaching in Finland. One of the more recent committees stated that, due to national needs and interests, Finland should be among the leading countries in the area of language teaching. There is a need for better and more diversified language skills as a tool for coping with the challenges of increasing international contacts. One of the means for doing this was seen to be the increasing integration of language teaching and other subjects, referred to in this report as mainstream bilingual education.

There are several arguments for immersion teaching and for bilingual education. There have been, among others, cognitive, linguistic, neurolinguistic, social, motivational, and attitudinal arguments for using foreign languages as the medium of instruction. I would like to argue, however, that educational research provides an even stronger – and actually very simple argument – for mainstream bilingual education.

Research has shown consistently that one of the most powerful predictors of learning outcomes is what is called OTL, the opportunity to learn. If there are limited opportunities to learn, the results are correspondingly modest. If all students are given an opportunity to learn foreign languages, the level of language proficiency is bound to rise. We

have seen this in our own country. In a nutshell, mainstream bilingual education can be seen as an attempt to increase the opportunities to improve foreign language skills – while learning content – by increasing the exposure to the language in context and by adopting an approach that utilises what is known about effective ways of learning foreign languages.

Mainstream bilingual education is designed to increase the time available for language learning and to take advantage of what is currently known about effective language acquisition and learning. One advantage of this type of education is that it is an innovative challenge which makes it necessary to look for novel solutions. It can – and should – build on the best traditions and experiences of traditional language teaching but should also develop new approaches when they are called for, and then utilise the latest knowledge about learning, language acquisition and learning, and effective teaching.

3. SOME RESEARCH RESULTS CONCERNING IMMERSION TEACHING

There is relatively little research-based information on mainstream bilingual education. For comparative purposes, ie. to put the research on this area in perspective, it seems useful to take a look at another form of intensified language teaching, immersion teaching. In Finnish it is referred to as “linguistic bath”, which is actually the name used originally in French (*bain linguistique*). Since immersion teaching was introduced in Canada and has been operating there on a large scale for several decades, most of the available research results come from that country. Rebuffot (1993) is a good and quite up-to-date review of world-wide immersion teaching and of its results. A special issue of *Die Neueren Sprachen* (Heft 1/2), *Bilingualer Unterricht*, from 1993, gives a good account of the status of bilingual education in Germany. A recent doctoral dissertation by Björklund (1996) is evidence that the immersion experiment in Finland (more particularly in Vaasa) is producing not only important practical know-how but continues to produce also interesting research-based information.

Listening and Reading Comprehension

There are a number of studies dealing with the quality of the listening and reading comprehension of immersion students. Lambert and Tucker (1972) found that the first graders' results were good and almost comparable to the native French speaking students. Swain (1979) found that the results were better than those attained by students who received regular instruction in French and 35% obtained results comparable to native- speaker

students. Genesee (1987) also found that the results in the immersion group ranked higher than in the control group. Cummins and Swain (1986) estimated that young students need 6–7 years to learn adequate listening and reading comprehension skills in French.

There have also been some critical views. Among others, Bibeau (1991) has argued that the positive comparisons have to do only with school language. For example, language used outside the school was sent to cause difficulties. According to Lyster (1987) immersion students have difficulties in understanding films and the vocabulary of literary language. Hammerly (1989) suggests that listening comprehension really should be good after as many as 7000 hours of exposure. He argues that nuances are not understood and the level of native-speaker students is not reached.

Oral and Written Production

The consensus of researchers cited above is that immersion students' oral and written production does not equal that of native speaker students'. This is true of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

There are more problems in the mastery of the structures of language and in situation-appropriate language than in producing comprehensible and logical oral or written text. Immersion students tend to leave out certain syntactical elements: auxiliary verbs, determinants – especially the definite article, and pronouns. The overuse of the masculine gender can also be noticed alongside use of the past instead of *passé composé*, the overuse of the auxiliary *avoir* in *passé composé* at the expense of *être*, avoidance of the passive form. More critical voices (eg. Hammerly 1982) have maintained that while there are seldom any communication blocks, immersion students do not possess very good French linguistic maturity and tend to produce language, which contains a number of errors and interference (“*Français*”).

These results have led researchers increasingly (Harley, Allen, Cummins & Swain 1990, Harley 1991) to stress that immersion instruction needs to pay attention not only to meaning, as was suggested in earlier stages, but also specifically to form. There is a reason to diagnose problems in students' language. This means that the teaching of grammar (or formal knowledge of the structure of language) is receiving some of the attention it has always received in traditional language teaching.

General Communication Proficiency

Immersion researchers tend to disagree in respect of general communication proficiency: some argue that the students ultimately become bilingual while others maintain that communication will continue to suffer from problems, specially those related to sociolinguistic competence.

Learning of Subject Matter

a) Mother tongue/English

Genesee (1987) summarises the findings concerning the effect of immersion French on the students' mother tongue (English) by stating that certain delay of skills (level of reading, spelling, vocabulary) that is quite common in early immersion disappears when systematic teaching of the mother tongue is introduced.

b) Other school subjects

Several research studies have indicated (eg. Genesee 1987, 1988; Swain & Lapkin 1982; Swain 1979) that the level of attainment of immersion students in mathematics, science and history does not suffer any deterioration. The school achievements of late immersion students may suffer temporary delays.

Social and Psychological Impact of Immersion

The research literature cited above indicates that the majority group students (i.e. English-speaking students) have a positive attitude towards their linguistic environment, i.e. they can be characterised by the term 'additive bilingualism'. Their sociocultural identity has changed relatively little. Their motivation is often only instrumental (utilitarian), not integrative, which means that they do not have any strong desire to identify with the minority. Their attitudes towards the minority are initially very positive but become less so over time, and start resembling the attitudes of their environment, reflecting its social pressure.

Studies have also shown that immersion students report that they generally use French without difficulty or anxiety when they meet French-speakers. Nevertheless, the language of the school does not nearly always resemble the kind of language skills needed outside school. Immersion students use French in a natural way to respond but do not generally actively seek opportunities to use French during their freetime or hobbies. Research has also indicated, not surprisingly, that the social and psychological effects of immersion are dynamic, multifaceted and changeable.

Early Immersion vs. Late Immersion

Research indicates that late immersion students do better in French in all aspects of French proficiency than students receiving ordinary language teaching. There are also only small differences between early and late immersion students. In written production, in particular, the differences are negligible.

Students' opinions indicate that 82% of early immersion students think that they understand French without difficulty or quite easily, while the corresponding figure for late immersion students is 62%. It should be noted, however, that early immersion students obtain about 7000 hours of French exposure while late immersion usually covers some 3000 hours, alongside regular classroom language teaching about 1200 hours.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Mainstream bilingual education is one of the most interesting and promising innovations in "formal" (ie. school-based in a broad sense) language teaching and learning. It is a demanding approach which properly implemented promises improved results in terms of language proficiency. It is important that there is proper preparation before it is introduced. Similarly, it is necessary to monitor what happens when this is done. By now, there have been several small-scale studies but comprehensive surveys are lacking.

There are a range of questions that are asked about mainstream bilingual education such as:

- Is MBE an effective way of learning foreign languages?
- At what stage are the students ready to start MBE?
- Should MBE be limited to those students whose cognitive and affective pre-requisites are exceptionally good?
- Should/does MBE produce as good content learning as study through the mother tongue?
- How motivated are the students to start and continue MBE?
- What happens in the school/institution when MBE is introduced?
- What is the optimal exposure to MBE for positive results to be forthcoming?

These are examples of the types of key questions which are addressed in this report in relation to forms of mainstream bilingual education in Finnish vocational and professional education.

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