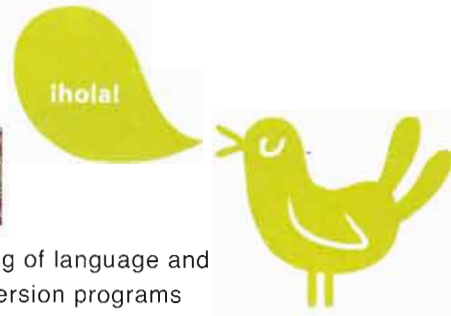


Spanish Immersion

By Stacey Vanden Bosch and Nancy Pyle



Five years ago a group of parents, passionate about having their children learn to speak other languages and experience other cultures, approached principal Bill Van Dyk of Zeeland Christian School. Thus began the first Spanish immersion program in the Protestant Christian school community. Although Spanish immersion programs are a relatively new educational option in the United States, most European countries and many developing nations have been educating students in more than one language for decades. Most current immersion models followed in the United States are based on Canadian Early French Immersion (EFI) programs. With the ultimate goal of connecting the French and English speaking communities living separately in Canada, educators developed the total language immersion model.

Based on the EFI programs, total or full immersion programs are a proven method of educating children by immersing them in a second language so they become bilingual. These programs generally begin in preschool or kindergarten and add a grade level each year. In preschool through first grade, students receive all instruction in Spanish. In second grade, students receive approximately three hours per week of English Language Arts instruction. The time students spend in English increases from third through fifth or sixth grade by fifteen-minute increments. In middle and high school, students are considered bilingual and enter the “maintenance phase,” in which classes in social studies or literature are taught at the appropriate language level for students to maintain fluency.

Besides developing bilingual students, immersion programs offer cognitive, academic, and social benefits. Because students are learning in their non-native language, their brains create new neural pathways to develop more flexibility in thinking as they acquire the second language. On standardized tests, most immersion students score at the same level as or above their monolingual peers in areas such as reading, math, and science. Also, bilingual students have a “mental flexibility” that allows them to learn a third and fourth language far more easily.

Although the cognitive and academic benefits immersion students reap are great, the deep understanding and ability to move with ease through intercultural situations may perhaps be the most powerful tool immersion students gain. In an age when the United States government is recognizing the need for its citizens to develop a deeper

understanding of language and culture, immersion programs might well begin to change the way we “do education” in this country. Former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell summarizes our current political and social situation, saying, “To solve most of the major problems facing our country today...will require every young person to learn more about other regions, cultures, and languages.”

But does learning other languages and connecting with other cultures have an even deeper grounding for followers of Christ—beyond the cognitive, academic, and social benefits? Reflecting on where God has brought Zeeland Christian School in the past five years, I have to answer with a resounding YES. As the program has grown from sixty students to over two hundred, and we have hired teachers from different Spanish-speaking countries, we have experienced challenges, discomfort, and joy. When our Spanish immersion teachers share with their students what is happening in their countries and towns of origin, they impart a deep insight into loving the world as Christ calls us to do. Recently we had second graders ask their families to pray diligently for a community in Mexico rife with violence and deprivation due to gang activity. The people for whom the students and their families are praying become treasured individuals because of the connection to their adored teacher. People in separate parts of the world become united through the power of prayer, and God’s redemptive purpose unfolds a bit more.

Zeeland Christian is currently partnering with a private company, *add.a.lingua*, to help other Christian schools establish successful Spanish immersion programs. For more information, please go to: www.addalingua.com.

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