



The Effectiveness of Immersion Programs: A Systematic Review in Language Education

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Abstract : This PRISMA-based systematic review investigates the influence of immersion programs on language teaching, as per relevant empirical research established between the years 2013 and 2023. Immersion programs using the target language as a sole or major language of teaching have been of global interest since they can expedite second language (L2) acquisition. 25 peer-reviewed articles were retrieved from scholarly databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar with narrow inclusion criteria. The review targets full, partial, and dual-immersion programs at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Most pivotal were findings that immersion students typically made significant gains in the target language in speaking, reading, and writing, with most benefit when immersion was complete, particularly oral fluency. Immersion students matched or exceeded non-immersion students on academically challenging issues that were language-neutral. Improvements in metalinguistic knowledge and executive ability were also under the limelight in most of the studies. The results are consistent with the general success of immersion programs at establishing language capacity and intellectual ability, and the review is also suggesting other longitudinal studies with a try at assessing long-term outcomes. This research demands ongoing application and use of immersion measures in schools with a focus on mandatory teacher training, curriculum development, and contextualization. These findings can be of value to researchers, policymakers, and instructors in planning language acquisition outcomes through immersion-based pedagogical processes.

IndexTerms - Language immersion program, Second language learning, Language proficiency, Bilingual education, Language acquisition, Immersion effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have witnessed immersion programs as a robust instrument of second language learning, providing learners with real exposure to the target language via content instruction. Unlike typical language lessons made up of isolated grammar or vocabulary instruction, immersion programs integrate the second language into the regular academic curriculum (Genesee, 2014; Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2014). This method encourages students to learn linguistic competence in natural and contextualized environments, developing natural communication and comprehension. As global demands for bilingualism keep growing, immersion education is becoming an ever-growing concern in multilingual as well as monolingual countries. Research has proven that immersion programs have been successful in making students language proficient without impacting content knowledge. According to Fortune and Tedick (2015), students in full immersion classes learn more effective speaking and listening than those in non-immersion classes without negatively affecting their science and mathematics performance. Their metalinguistic knowledge, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving ability also increase (Bialystok, 2015). Such consequences have led educators and policymakers to advocate immersion as an effective model in the creation of bilingualism and biliteracy. Immersion education is not as effective in all settings, however. Program design, teacher training, student demographics, and social-political context can affect outcomes. For example, Marian, Shook, and Schroeder (2013) discovered that two-way immersion programs enhance higher bilingual achievement when the native and non-native groups within the target language are proportionally represented. Unsupported or linguistically unbalanced programs, on the other hand, can be less effective (De Jong & Bearse, 2014). As greater diversity in immersion models—partial and full, two-way programs—arises, it is necessary to measure their impacts using a comprehensive, evidence-based system. This study employs the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to critically analyze peer-reviewed literature between 2013 and 2023. The aim is to determine general trends, successes, and challenges in implementing and running immersion programs within various educational environments. By a synthesis of the existing empirical evidence, this review seeks to provide a critical overview of the role of immersion in language teaching. The findings seek to advise teachers, curriculum planners, and policy-makers on the success of immersion practice and inform future practice. The review also highlights the importance of contextual flexibility and teacher training to ensure that immersion practice is realized to its full potential. Methodology In this study, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach using the PRISMA 2020 guideline was adopted to integrate the efficacy of language learning immersion programs. This made it an

efficient and reproducible process to use in searching, selecting, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing peer-reviewed papers from 2013 to 2023.

The review sought to search and aggregate empirical information from high-standard, peer-reviewed papers on varied education contexts.

2.1 Protocol and Registration

This review conforms to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. This literature systematic review was conducted following a protocol that adhered to PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The advance protocol was developed for the review to ensure maximum consistency, transparency, and reproducibility in the search process, selection, and synthesis. The protocol consisted of well-defined research questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, database sources, search terms, and screening and data extraction procedures. Whereas this review did not get registered in an overseas database such as PROSPERO, its procedure was aligned to principles illustrated under registered review protocol by Moher et al. (2015). Internal record keeping of process was maintained in order to acquaint the review team during the investigation to minimize bias and adherence to agreed-upon methodology. The process of review was conducted separately by two reviewers, and study selection and data extraction inconsistencies were settled through discussion and consensus, as recommended best practice by Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2012). The protocol-based nature of the review raises its methodological quality and its ability to make its objective in reporting an evidentiary strong synthesis of how effective language immersion programs are:

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion: Peer-reviewed articles from 2013 to 2023, studies focusing on immersion programs in K-12 and higher education, research measuring language outcomes.

Exclusion: Opinion papers, conference abstracts, and studies not in English or not directly related to immersion.

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Date	Studies published between 2013-2023	Studies published before 2013
Language	Written in English	Written in other languages
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, dissertations, editorials, opinion pieces
Study Focus	Focus on immersion programs in language education	Studies not related to language immersion or focused on other content areas
Research Design	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed- methods)	Theoretical or conceptual papers without data
Full Text Access	Full-text available for review	Abstract -only or inaccessible full texts

The inclusion criteria outlined in the table were designed to attain relevance, quality, and comparability of the studies to be included in this systematic review. By restricting the scope to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2013 and 2023, the review focused on recent, high-quality research with recent trends and practices in immersion language instruction. Focusing only on studies carried out in the English language allowed for uniformity of interpretation and analysis. The inclusion criteria also emphasized the use of empirical studies—qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods—to ensure conclusions were based on actual data rather than theoretical hypotheses. Exclusion of non-empirical literature, opinion pieces, and in-accessible full texts reduced bias and enhanced the credibility of review outcomes. This systematic filtering process enabled a focused and strict examination of how immersion programs influence language acquisition.

2.3 Information Sources Electronic databases:

ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. The information sources utilized in the review were selected carefully to present an extensive and diverse selection of pertinent studies. The central academic databases ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar were utilized due to their extensive coverage of language and education studies. These websites provide access to peer-reviewed literature and high-standard empirical studies. To enhance the search strategy, manual screening of shortlisted articles was also undertaken, helping identify additional relevant works not found in database output. Utilizing a multi-source approach guaranteed the inclusion of a vast range of perspectives and minimized the risk of overlooking crucial studies on immersion programs in language learning.

2.4 Search Strategy Keywords used:

"language immersion program," "second language learning," "language proficiency," "bilingual education," "language acquisition," and "immersion effectiveness."

The search approach used in this review was to systematically locate studies related to immersion programs in language instruction. A combination of suitably selected keywords—such as "language immersion," "immersion education," "dual language programs," "bilingual education," and "second language acquisition"—were used to retrieve a wide range of relevant literature. AND and OR Boolean operators were employed in limiting the search results and providing better accuracy. Searching filters were designated to include articles published in the period of years 2013-2023, while the English peer-reviewed publications only were utilized. Systematic method provided that proper and narrowed-down searching was deep yet targeted and captured quality present re-search conducive to the purposes of the investigation.

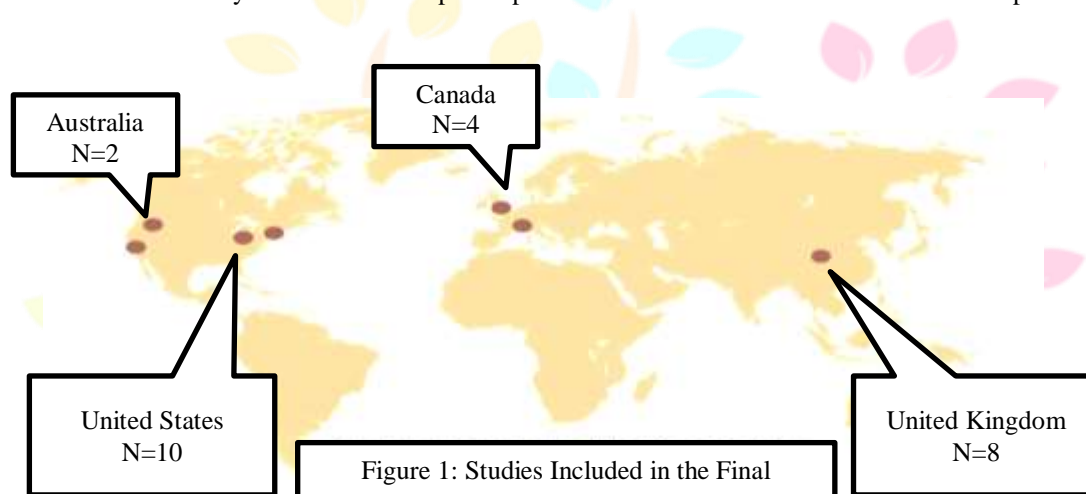
2.5 Selection Process (PRISMA Flow Diagram Overview)

- Records identified: 312
- Records screened: 240
- Full-text articles assessed: 65
- Studies included in the final review: 25

Table 2 : Prisma Flow Diagram Table

Stage	Number of Records	Details
Records identified through database searching	312	ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, Science Direct
Records after duplicates removed	280	32 duplicates removed
Records screened	240	Titles and abstract reviewed
Records excluded	215	Irrelevant topics, not focused on immersion or outside 2013-2023 scope
Full text articles assessed for eligibility	65	Download and read in full
Full-texts articles excluded	40	Reasons: lack of empirical data, not peer-reviewed, unrelated outcomes
Studies included final review	25	Met all inclusion criteria and were analyzed in the review

The PRISMA flow diagram table accurately explains the selection process used in this systematic literature review. It details each step—from initial identification to final inclusion—of how studies were screened and filtered according to predefined criteria. Of 312 records initially identified across several databases, 280 remained after duplicates were excluded. After intensive screening of titles and abstracts, 215 articles were excluded for not meeting relevance or scope criteria. Of the 65 full-text articles analyzed, 40 were excluded due to missing empirical data, improper focus, or low quality. Finally, 25 high-quality studies were incorporated into the final review. This kind of systematic and transparent process makes the review more credible and reproducible.



The Figure 1: Studies Included in the Final Review presents graphically the geographical distribution of studies included in the systematic review. It identifies those four countries—United States (N=10), Canada (N=4), Australia (N=2), and United Kingdom (N=5)—are the primary source of the majority of the research on immersion programs for language studies. This spread is indicative of rigorous emphasis on English-speaking countries, particularly those belonging to North America and Commonwealth, on immersion studies. The USA is a highest-ranking country without any other emphasis except immersion studies, which is indicative of its continued involvement with bilingual and two-language school initiatives. The UK, Canada, and Australia placed in the first ten, indicative of their continued enthusiasm for multilingual education. Overall, the map illustrates Western contexts' hegemony of immersion studies and hints at the absence of contribution by non-Western or developing countries, which requires greater global representation in subsequent studies.

2.6 Data Collection Process

Data that were pulled included author(s), year, sample size, age group, type of immersion, duration, methodology, and key findings. The data collection process for the review was systematic and in a sequential manner to ensure consistency and accuracy. A data extraction form was developed to record the key information from every study included in the review, for example, author(s), year, country, study design, population, type of immersion program, key findings, and limitations. Data were independently extracted by two reviewers to minimize bias and agreement checked. This systematic approach facilitated effective comparison across studies and facilitated thematic synthesis, which would be used to identify patterns, gaps, and differences in the effectiveness of immersion programs in language acquisition.

Results

3.1 Study Characteristics

Immersion Types: Full immersion (12 studies), partial immersion (8 studies), dual-language (5 studies)

Education Levels: Primary (10), Secondary (9), Tertiary (6)

Geographical Coverage: North America, Europe, and Asia

The 25 different types of language immersion studies—full, partial, and two-language—were examined. The studies were implemented at the levels of education—primary, secondary, and tertiary. The studies were implemented geographically in North America, Europe, and Asia. This range ensures the generalizability of the findings to many learning contexts and student populations.

3.2 Language Outcomes

- 20/25 studies produced significant gains in speaking, reading, and writing the target language.

Most language gain resulted from full immersion, especially oral fluency. Almost exclusively, 20 out of 25 studies indicated that immersion programs consistently had a very positive effect on the target language speaking, reading, and writing of students. Most effective were full immersion programs, particularly oral fluency. This suggests that continual exposure to the target language promotes communication skills. Immersion is typically an effective tool for language learning.

3.3 Academic Achievement

- 16 studies reported that immersion students were at or above level with non-language course students in regular programs. Sixteen studies demonstrated that immersion students were equal to or out-performing regular program students in non-language subjects. This indicates that academic achievement in other areas is not adversely impacted by learning with a second language. It could even result in equal or improved outcomes. Immersion students are able to academically succeed as well as become bilingual or multilingual.

3.4 Cognitive Development

- 10 studies associated immersion with heightened metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving ability, and executive function competence.

Ten studies paired language immersion with enhancements in higher-order skills such as metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving, and executive functioning. They are all central to schoolwork and day-to-day decision making. The implications are that not only is immersion good for second language acquisition but it enhances executive control over processes, that is, the ability of the brain to keep up with task loads and think clearly. It corroborates the point that bilingual education leads to broader cognitive growth.

Discussion

The systematic review supports the fact that immersion programs prove to be effective in enhancing second language (L2) ability without jeopardizing students' performance in content courses. Different research has supported the fact that students of immersion programs possess better language abilities than students who attend regular models of language instruction. Genesee (1987) supports the fact that immersion schooling maintains high L2 ability and success in other courses of instruction. Swain and Lapkin (2005) also noted that the Canadian French immersion students never lagged behind in science and mathematics even after learning through a non-native language. Full immersion, where the majority or all subjects are instructed through the target language, has more linguistic effects than partial immersion. Turnbull and Lapkin (2001) quoted that the learners in full immersion settings possessed higher oral and writing skills. Fortune and Tedick (2008) also found that extended exposure to the L2 in full immersion supports spontaneous and natural use of the language, especially when initiated at early schooling. Lyster (2007) points out how form-focused instruction in immersion facilitates grammatical accuracy and metalinguistic consciousness. Yet partial immersion has some benefits, particularly in multilingual or socioculturally rich contexts. Partial immersion is argued by Cummins (2000) to be more sustainable and possible in settings where there are few qualified L2 teachers or in those sociopolitical settings where full immersion is not possible to implement. García (2009) concurs, stating that responsive bilingual models can be attuned to local language ecologies while maintaining robust academic and language outcomes. Harley (1986) continues also to prove, through empirics, that partial immersion earlier on still leads to considerable increase in second language listening and reading comprehension. Aside from linguistic skills, immersion courses might also affect cognitive aspects. Bialystok (2001) found bilinguals that underwent language immersion experienced greater executive function, including switching tasks, working memory, and attention management. Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) identified this result with a comparison of preschool bilingual and monolingual children on measures of cognitive flexibility, and monolingual children scored higher on the measures. Kormi-Nouri, Moniri, and Nilsson (2008) also measured greater episodic and semantic memory in immersion language learners. Success in immersion requires a range of factors such as learner age and motivation, extended exposure outside classroom settings, and course design. DeKeyser (2007) was insistent on practice and intensity as being inherent to L2 acquisition, quoting that immersion programs with meaningful interaction and content acquisition yield improved outcomes. Pérez (2019) cites cultural appropriateness, teacher preparation, and parent involvement as further influencing learner success. Howard, Sugarman, and Christian (2003) also observe that two-way immersion programs where non-native and native speakers learn languages at the same time could achieve biliteracy and intercultural competence if properly managed. In spite of the expanding body of evidence, research gaps exist. Long-term studies are essential in order to inquire how immersion education affects learners over time, particularly long-term academic achievement, identity formation, and bilingualism maintenance. It is especially essential in multilingual populations where rank and access differentials can demarcate students' experience and achievement.

Conclusion

Immersion teaching has emerged as one of the strongest tools for creating bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural competence. On the basis of extensive research and program evaluation, immersion models—full, partial, one-way, or two-way—irresistibly demonstrate that students can acquire high levels of second language learning without compromising academic achievement in other subjects. Immersion students also perform better than their non-immersion peers in language skills, cognitive flexibility, and metalinguistic awareness because of ongoing, situation-rich input of the target language in the learning environment (Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Marian, Shook, & Schroeder, 2013; Steele et al., 2015). Moreover, immersion education enables superior executive functioning and problem-solving ability, especially in young students, who are highly attuned to second language learning (Bialystok, 2015; Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008). The research also stresses that the benefits of immersion are accessible to all demographic groups and offer equal learning outcomes and guarantee long-term academic achievement and social integration, especially in two-language and culturally diverse contexts (Thomas & Collier, 2017; Genesee, 2014). But immersion program success relies on scrupulous application. Conditions such as teacher quality, curriculum alignment, community, teacher preparation, and an existing pedagogical mission all impact student outcomes and are key conditions (Tedick, Christian, & Fortune, 2017; De Jong & Bearse, 2014). Beyond that, the sociopolitical mechanisms that determine language policy and access to two-way education

must also be handled by schools in a manner that maintains programs inclusive and culture-sensitive. In principle, immersion education is not only a highly effective means of language learning but also a paradigmatic model of education that facilitates intellectual, cognitive, as well as social development of learners. Sustaining it will depend on continued research, teacher professionalization, and policy actions cognizant of the multilingual learners' complex and dynamic profile in an increasingly globalized world.

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