

2015

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Gabier, Katie, "Spanish Immersion Programs" (2015). *Honors Projects*. 463.
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Spanish Immersion Programs

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Honors Senior Project

Winter 2015

In America, the Spanish language is growing in usage. It is the most common non-English language. A record 37.6 million persons ages 5 years and older speak Spanish at home as analyzed by the Pew Research Center. As this number is still increasing it is becoming more and more common for students to learn Spanish. Having a second language puts an applicant at a higher advantage for jobs, college selection, and fields. As it is becoming more and more necessary in some fields, people have been advocating teaching it in school younger than has previous been done. Most school districts in the West Michigan area have at least one elementary school that offers an immersion program. These programs are ideal for those trying to get a head start on learning another language. There have been many positives found from learning languages at younger ages. For example, a critical period in human development has been discovered, when children are able to pick up new words and sounds in an almost effortless manner, irrespective of their primary language. It has been discovered that learning a language is best achieved if done by age ten. It is not impossible to learn a language when you're older than this period, however, as a person reaches adulthood it becomes increasingly more difficult to pick up a language. As the popularity of such programs is on the rise I thought it was important to look at benefits of learning a second language at a younger age versus

learning it at the conventional high school or college age that is so common in the United States.

One of the biggest benefits of teaching Spanish in younger generations is the ability to produce sound is better. These students are able to speak fluently with no accent. This is really noticeable in certain sounds like r or t. At the secondary level, phonemes are never taught. The teachers, who had majors in Spanish, claimed they didn't understand these phonemes until they began teaching. They noticed once they started teaching sounding out words made more sense to them, as they understood more. These are not taught later in life and research has shown that if a person doesn't use a phoneme then they lose the ability to produce it. When someone is born they are able to produce every phoneme but based on which ones are used in their geographical location affects which ones a person will be able to produce later in life. It is all based on what you grow up hearing. However, the younger that a person learns a language the more phonemes they will be able to correctly pronounce.

A big reason why Spanish Immersion programs work better than learning a second language in a high school level is the infantile feel. Learning a language is a better idea at an elementary level because it seems more natural than it feels to a secondary aged student. At an elementary age students are repeating words in English as well. It is

normal as children are trying to learn how to express their thoughts and feelings as their vocabulary is still growing and will continue to grow rapidly. Secondary students feel tedious learning vocabulary words like cat, read, or run. These students want to describe their thoughts and feelings, which are more complex. It is impossible for a person who is just learning to express these concepts it takes time to learn all the necessary tenses and vocabulary in order to speak the way one speaks in English at this age. By the time a student gets to high school or college they have been learning English for years so to think they would be able to speak the same sentences is ridiculous. It seems boring for them to learn words they have known for years. Also this vocabulary may not be relevant to their lives so a student. Is unlikely to remember the word. It is more likely they will just memorize the words until they are quizzed then forget them as they are not commonly used words in their lives. Often just repeating a word back or repeating sentences is not a good way for young adults to learn.

Some methods, the teachers shared as being the most useful to the students is, were turn and talk, Pictionary, or a question of the day. This is where students are asked a question or given a statement that they must then fill in the blank and share their answers with the students next to them. The questions can range from something

simple like what is your favorite animal and why to where would you like to go on a field trip. Giving them a question that grabs their attention and can lead into a conversation, not just a single word answer. is an important aspect. If they don't know how to say a word they are able to ask the teacher how to say it. This method helps with vocabulary as it teaches words that they find relevant, which makes them more likely to remember them. This demonstrates a curriculum very similar to that of a student in the English program. So there are no concerns about students not being at the same level because of the program that they are put in. A big part of the immersion program is not translating. It is more important to give them meaningful context so there is understanding not just translating. It is also important to not allow English in the classroom. After the first two weeks, English is not allowed. If students don't understand the word being discussed then the teachers use tactics like acting the word out, describing it in other words, or drawing a picture of the word. Circumlocution is also used to help students understand. When you use more words than are absolutely necessary in order to get the point across. It is more important to the teachers that the students understand the word rather than are able to just translate. This ensures that the students have a better use of the language, since they are able to just speak it fluently rather than having to think of the words in English then to

Spanish. It makes their use of the language more fluid and natural sounding.

It is common that these children come from a background of little to no Spanish spoken in the home. The majority of parents do not speak Spanish. If they have taken any Spanish it was at the high school level and never after that. There is an extra commitment when having a child in an Immersion program but teachers say it is easily manageable. Every week they send out resources to give parents the resources in order to be able to help the students if they have any difficulties completing assignments. If parents utilize these resources it makes having a child in the immersion program equivalent to having a child in the regular program. It is also important to note that the teachers send out an email to the parents about giving the children independence when it comes to school work and only help them if they really need it. They said that it is essential for parents to trust the model. There has been a lot of research put into making the program the most efficient it can be. So it is important for parents to listen to what the teachers suggest.

The student's ability to learn is likely unaffected by which program is chosen for them. It is important to note that if the student is struggling in the Spanish program, they would have struggled in English too. They have noticed no differences in the student's abilities

from one program to another. By fourth or fifth grade, students in a Spanish Immersion program have been shown to perform equally if not better on any types of standardized tests. They usually are able to perform better as they have a better set of skills when it comes to approaching a problem. These students have been shown to be better thinkers, as they are able to more easily think critically of problems given to them.

A big part of an immersion program is that a parent cannot teach their child how to read in English. One should read to their child in English as much as possible. However, if a parent allows their child to follow along and sound out the words it is teaching the child the English phonemes, which is destructive in their learning of Spanish. The teacher has to go back and reteach the child how to pronounce the words they see. They said it is always obvious as to which parents are following this suggestion and which are not.

Switching gears, I also looked into why the teachers I interviewed decided on the career path they are on as well as any advice they would give to any education majors considering following their footsteps.

Job opportunities in this field are plenty. One interesting thing to note is that none of the teachers I talked to originally wanted to teach in a Spanish Immersion program for the beginning. One of the

teachers like Spanish but had always wanted to be an elementary teacher so as she continued learning Spanish and realized there were more opportunities available if a teacher was bilingual. She said she had schools emailing her about jobs as they couldn't find enough qualified candidates for the positions as more and more school districts are offering these programs. She noted a lot of people she graduated with were having issues even getting interviews and she was offered 3 jobs in her first months of being out of school. This field is in demand and qualified candidates are hard to find so anyone considering elementary education should look into adding Spanish to their resumes for a better job opportunity later on. Another one, of the teachers I spoke with majored in Spanish as she feel in love with learning the language. However, besides teaching and translating there are not many opportunities with that degree. A professor suggested that she look into teaching Spanish at an elementary level and she hesitated at first but is now working on getting her masters in teaching Spanish in an Immersion setting. She couldn't believe how much she disliked the idea earlier in her career, since she has fallen in love with the job and couldn't imagine doing anything else now.

I also looked into what advice they would give anyone considering following their career path. They said it is nothing like teaching in English. As a student, one is taught techniques, however,

they said they often don't work in a Spanish classroom. They suggested speaking as much as Spanish as possible in order to get used to it. It is important to feel as comfortable as possible with the language that you will be teaching in. As a teacher teaching Spanish you will need to offer extra support for students as you are teaching them something that is totally unfamiliar. They said to learn as many techniques as possible as you never know what will work for which students. Since there is such an emphasis on language, it is helpful to have as many tools as possible since it is not a conceptual issue.

The benefits are countless as to learning a second language at the elementary age. Many European countries already teach second and even third languages in schools from the beginning. This program is beneficial for children no matter what their future plans may be. It is important to know about the extra commitment level associated with having a child in an immersion. After this realization has set in, the benefits far outweigh any consequences. They get a head start at learning a language that will be beneficial as well as learning better critical thinking skills. It is always important to think about the child individually and think about what would be the best option for them specifically. After much research and getting different perspectives for parents and teachers, I have concluded that in many cases a Spanish Immersion program would be worth looking into for every student and

could be better than a regular elementary program. It is important to get all the facts first and make sure as a parent you are ready to take it on before enrolling your child.

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