

IMMERSION EXPERIENCES

Getting the best out of the immersion experience

Language Education & Exchange Programmes – the use of ePortfolios
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(NB Details of language immersion opportunities available to teachers can be found on the following websites: AFS – www.afs.org.nz ILANZ – www.ilanz.ac.nz)

During the process of formulating the 2004 learning languages strategy, the Ministry of Education reviewed second language learning research, initiatives and needs. Increased teacher competence was identified in (The Teaching of International Languages in New Zealand Schools in Years 7 and 8: An Evaluation by Gibbs, C and Holt, R (2003)) as essential for the effective teaching of languages – as was a need for teachers to have knowledge of current issues related to cultures relevant to their work. Gibbs and Holt Page 71 of their report states:

"since...the key to successful learning is predominantly the teacher, consideration needs to be given to providing additional support to develop further both the teacher's own IL proficiency and their understanding of IL (International Language)-appropriate methodologies."

This article relates specifically to language immersion programmes of which the expected outcomes are that teachers will:

- increase their knowledge and skills in the target language and culture
- better enable students to communicate effectively and appropriately in the foreign language within lessons and ordinary classroom routines
- promote a curiosity and awareness about language and culture
- critically reflect on their planning, practices and achievements
- increase their networks in terms of teaching and learning
- use new knowledge relating to teaching practice to impact positively on student achievement.

Participants in language immersion programmes are now expected to set learning goals prior to departure and to reflect on their teaching practice with a focus on the need to provide evidence of impact of the immersion experience on teaching practice and consequently on student achievement. This is a move away from the more descriptive style of participant reporting in recent

years, which has tended to be based on a "travelogue" of enjoyable and significant experiences.

Teachers who have recently enjoyed the privilege of being part of language education programmes report positively on their experiences and feel that they have enriched their lives as well as their teaching practice – whether they have taken part in a short or longer-term experience. Analysis of post-programme reports from participants describe improvements in:

- Languageskills/knowledge
- Confidence
- Motivation
- Cultural awareness
- Increased awareness of methodology
- Impact of changes in teaching practice on students

with improvements being strongest in:

- Language confidence and confidence
- Understanding of culture/values
- More effective use/selection of materials
- Building relationships with other countries

Evidence of impact upon student achievement is, however, still largely anecdotal.

An analytical approach is being taken by programme providers when summarising data from post-programme returns but the data is currently based on participant perception rather than solid evidence of their increased skills as teachers and the impact of this on student achievement. There is an identified need to provide greater proof of the effectiveness of programmes.

The need for evidence –based reporting is accompanied by a challenge to " think about how we use data and other evidence to improve teaching, learning and student achievement." (Consider the Evidence – see below). Consequently many professionals working in the learning languages area are searching for ways to record relevant data that can then be used to plan changes in teaching practice and to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the immersion programmes. One method of recording data that is currently a subject of discussion is the use of the portfolio or dossier.

A presentation by Richard Johnstone (Profiling the successful languages learner) at the NZALT Conference in Auckland in 2006 made reference to the use of the

European Languages Portfolio that emphasises the use of the following:

Languages passport

- Owner's linguistic identity
- Languages-learning achievements
- Self-evaluation

Languages Biography

- Sets intermediate goals
- Reviews progress
- Records significant languages-learning & intercultural experiences

Dossier

- Collects samples of his/her languages & intercultural activity and achievements

(the use of a dossier format was discussed in an article by Wendy Thomson in Polyglot No. 31, December 2006 – "Keeping record of an intercultural experience – Buenos Aires 2005")

The European Languages Portfolio is designed:

- to encourage lifelong learning to any level of proficiency
- to facilitate mobility by providing a clear profile of key skills
- to contribute to mutual identity by promoting plurilingualism

ELP owners use it:

- to keep a record of their languages learning (in or outside the educational system)
- to develop their capacity to plan, monitor and evaluate their own languages-learning and -use achievements
- to record significant experiences and collect evidence of key skills
- to document their languages-learning and languages-use achievements

For Guidelines for the use of portfolios go to commonweb.unifr.ch/cerle/pub/cerleweb/portfolio/background/documentation/

Similarly, a recent series of presentations at AUT (Auckland Flexible Learning in NZ Series) – website reference described the possibilities of using ePortfolios as "a collection of evidence that is gathered together to show a person's learning journey over time and to demonstrate their abilities" Items which could be added to an ePortfolio included:

- a text-based reflection
- any Word or PDF document
- a digital image, such as a photograph
- a multimedia file- a link to another website

Follow the link below to access presentations from the seminar and find out more about ePortfolios.

<http://www.fllinnz.ac.nz/moodle/course/view.php?id=16>

The resources described above obviously have a variety of possible uses and, as Johnstone states, can be part of a process of life-long learning.

In Summary:

- The 2004 Learning Languages Strategy identified increased teacher fluency and cultural awareness as essential for effective language teaching.
- Language immersion programmes provide opportunities for teachers to gain increased skills in the target language/culture.
- Participants in immersion programmes are expected to gather evidence of increased skills and the impact on student achievement.
- Data gathered from returning participants is currently based on participant perception rather than being evidence-based.
- ePortfolios/dossiers can be used to record relevant data and track the impact of increased skills upon student learning.

Relevant background material:

- Ministry of Education priorities for effective teaching - expressed in "Educate" - MOE Statement of Intent-2005-2010" www.minedu.govt.nz
- A recent resource provided to schools -Consider the Evidence – evidence driven decision making for secondary schools) - by the MOE to assist schools to review their use of data and other evidence is an example of some of the support mechanisms being put in place to support educators. The Consider the Evidence Resource is built around an evidence-driven decision – making cycle (see slides 27-31 of the resource describing the cycle - http://www.tki.org.nz/r/governance/consider/index_e.php
- "Evaluation of language teachers' immersion professional development exercises: the contribution to quality teaching and learning" (Hallmark Associates 2005 published in The New Zealand Language Teacher Vol 31 November 2005 pgs 22 -25 A report commissioned by the Ministry of Education
- "Language teachers' professional development immersion experiences: their contribution to quality teaching and learning". June 2005 - commissioned by the Ministry of Education)
- Practitioner Research for Educators - A Guide to Improving Classrooms and Schools Viviane Robinson Mei Kuin Lai. Corwin Press A Sage Publications Company, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218

The book contains information on: the relationship between teachers conducting their own surveys and improvement in student achievement, methods of conducting a detailed investigation and evaluation

of practice, ways to involve others in evaluation of theories of practice. It includes details of how to conduct interviews, feedback meetings etc.

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