

Bilingual education works - if you do your homework

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Wix is a state-run primary school, which shares a site with the prep school for the independent, fee-charging Lycée Charles de Gaulle.

(PhysOrg.com) -- More schools should consider adopting bilingual education for part of their teaching, according to a language education expert from the University of Exeter, UK.

Teaching subjects like geography, history and music in another [language](#) can be far more effective than having separate French, German or Spanish lessons, but you have to do some [homework](#) to make it successful, according to Dr. Gabriela Meier.

Dr. Meier will present her research on bilingual education and launch a new bilingual education network for the growing number of schools adopting this immersive approach to teaching modern languages at a conference run with Wandsworth Children's Services on Monday 19

March.

The conference will bring together policy makers, governors, head teachers and class teachers to explore the benefits and challenges of a bilingual education.

Bilingual education has been increasing in England over the last decade. In 2002, a study estimated that 47 schools adopted some form of bilingual education, but it is unclear how many there are today. The new network will help to get a clearer picture.

Sometimes known as ‘bilingual immersion’, this approach to teaching involves some classes being taught in a different language. The focus is therefore on using another language to learn content, rather than on just focusing on the language as a subject, as is the case with traditional foreign language lessons.

Bilingual immersion approaches emerged in the 1970s in Canada and have been growing in popularity in Europe since the 1990s. There are two broad types of bilingual education. One-way immersion means that in a mainstream [school](#) a subject is taught in another language. Two-way immersion education, which is more relevant to areas where there are multiple languages, means for instance that those students whose first language is English and those whose first language is French are enrolled in the same class. Students are then taught half the curriculum in one language and the other half in the other language. This increases the opportunities for learning from and with each other.

There seems to be a surge in interest in bilingual education in England. The Government has recently launched a one-way pilot project, for which five primary and secondary schools have been selected by the Training and Development Agency for Schools. There is also great interest in two-way projects, which team up with local language

communities to provide opportunities to use two languages in school on an everyday basis.

Research from Europe – and London – shows that both types of bilingual education can work, but teaching and the environment need to be favourable. It has shown that lessons need to be staged carefully and both content and language need to be taught. It is key that learners use the language as much as possible in the classroom and outside.

Dr. Gabriela Meier of the University of Exeter's Graduate School of Education said: “Bilingual education is based on the view that language is primarily a medium of communication, and is best learnt by using it to convey meaning. My research in London and Berlin has found that students taught in two-way programmes form a more cohesive group, with greater conflict resolutions skills. Therefore, one-way and especially two-way immersion programs could form part of a wider language acquisition and social cohesion strategy, and should be considered by schools and policy makers as a viable option.”

The event will highlight the first two-way immersion project in England, founded in 2006 in Wandsworth. Wix is a state-run primary school, which has shared a site with the prep school for the independent, fee-charging Lycée Charles de Gaulle since 1993. When Marc Wolstencroft took over the headship of Wix in 2004, he developed a bilingual stream with the then head of the Lycée. English and French teachers worked out a curriculum that satisfied both their respective national authorities. Marc Wolstencroft and his current French counterpart Paul-Marie Blanchard will present the story of their cooperation.

Dr. Gabriela Meier's research at Wix was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. She explained: “Wix is an exciting project and shows that introducing a bilingual stream can have very positive effects on a whole school. However, this approach should be carefully considered, and the

whole school needs to open up to new ways of doing things and to a continuous learning process for all its students and staff.”

Tim Willetts, Head of Curriculum Development for Wandsworth Council said: "Wandsworth Education and Children's Services Department is pleased to be hosting this conference and delighted it has attracted so much interest. Wandsworth Council supports schools developing bilingual approaches to learning - in addition to Wix Primary School's programme two other schools are developing and establishing bilingual programmes - because they increase choice and diversity in education and provide pupils with great advantages, as demonstrated by Dr Meier's research."

The [Bilingual Immersion Education Network](#) will contain a directory, which will chart the growing number of bilingual education projects in England, and enable schools to get in touch with one another to share ideas. It will also provide information and resources for policy makers, parents, schools and other interested parties. A summary of the conference will be available from the network website after the conference.

Provided by University of Exeter

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