



International Journal of  
**MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

**ISSN: (Print)** ISSN 1987-9601

**(Online)** E ISSN 1512-3146

**Journal homepage:** <http://multilinguaeducation.org/>

---

## **Multilingualism in Germany and the Role of Submersion and Immersion Programmes**

**Mathias Hutz**

Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, Germany

Email: [hutz@ph-freiburg.de](mailto:hutz@ph-freiburg.de)

To cite this article: Mathias Hutz (2023): Multilingualism in Germany and the Role of Submersion and Immersion Programmes: International Journal of Multilingual Education, #24; DOI: 10.22333/ijme.2023.24008; pp. 94-100.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2023.24008>

**Mathias Hutz**

*Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, Germany*

## **Multilingualism in Germany and the Role of Submersion and Immersion Programmes**

### **Abstract**

As a result of recent immigration, Germany has become a multilingual country with a great need for multilingual education. In the first part of the article the roles of minority and immigrant languages in Germany are discussed. Some demographic changes are briefly outlined as well as the implications for the general education system. In the second part, submersion and immersion approaches are discussed and evaluated in the context of the German school system. It is argued that classroom interactional competence is a crucial factor in promoting students' linguistic skills.

**Key words:** *Multilingualism, immigration, SLE, submersion, immersion*

### **1. Multilingualism in Germany**

When looking at a map of Germany, one might be inclined to think that Germany must have numerous minority languages since the country is located centrally in Europe and is surrounded by nine countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, France, Switzerland, Austria, Poland and the Czech Republic). However, there are hardly any substantial numbers of minority speakers in Germany's border regions apart from approximately 50,000 Danish speakers in Schleswig-Holstein.

According to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, Low German, Sorbian, Danish, Frisian and Romany are officially recognized as minority languages in Germany. Low German is recognized as a regional language in some of the northern German states. Sorbian is an official minority language in Brandenburg and Saxony with approximately 30,000 speakers and Danish in Schleswig-Holstein. Romany, which is spoken by approximately 200,000 people, also has the status of an official minority language although it cannot be assigned to a specific state territory. Frisian is spoken by approximately 20,000 people, mainly in Schleswig-Holstein.

However, taking into account that Germany has a population of more than 82 million people, these numbers are relatively low compared to other European countries with great numbers of ethnic minorities in border regions like Estonia or Slovenia, for instance.

Nevertheless Germany has moved from a largely monolingual country to a country which is *de facto* multilingual within a relatively short span of time due to a great influx of immigrants. Unlike countries like Canada or the US which have a long tradition of immigration and which have well-established educational programmes to attend to the specific needs of newcomers, immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Germany since the country has experienced a dramatic increase in immigration in recent years.

Even in the 1950s Germany had been a largely monolingual country. Since then, however, there have been three major waves of migration which, taken together, have led to a great deal of multilingualism and multiculturalism:

- a) During the 1960s many working migrants (e.g. from Turkey, Italy or the former Yugoslavia) were asked to come to Germany many of whom decided to stay in the country.

b) In the 1980s and 1990s resettlers and repatriates of German descent from East European countries (e.g. Russia and Kazakhstan) emigrated to Germany. In 1990 alone, almost 400,000 people came to Germany.

As a result of these two waves of migration, some languages are widely used throughout the country, including, for instance, Russian (3 to 4 million speakers), Turkish (2 million), Kurdish (500,000 to 800,000), Polish and Arabic. Although they have not been given any official status so far, speakers of these languages outnumber the speakers of the official minority languages by far.

c) Most recently, large number of refugees and asylum seekers came to Germany. In fact, more than one million have arrived since 2015, including more than 400,000 from Syria alone. Most of the languages spoken by refugees are non-European.

The following table shows the number asylum seekers based on their country of origin:

2015 Country	Total	2016 Country	Total	2017 Country	Total
1. Syria	162,510	1. Syria	268,866	1. Syria	50,422
2. Albania	54,762	2. Afghanistan	127,892	2. Iraq	23,605
3. Kosovo	37,095	3. Iraq	97,162	3. Afghanistan	18,282
4. Afghanistan	31,902	4. Iran	26,872	4. Eritrea	10,582
5. Iraq	31,379	5. Eritrea	19,103	5. Iran	9,186

Source: Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (2017)

<https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/DE/2016/201610106-asylgeschaeftsstatistik-dezember.html>

Thus, due to immigration processes, the demographic structure of Germany has undergone some radical changes in the last few decades. In fact, at present Germany has become the second most popular immigration destination in the world after the US and thus has become *de facto* a multilingual and multicultural country.

In 2015, 21% of the population had a “migration background“. A person with migration background is generally defined as someone who does not have German citizenship or whose mother or father does not have German citizenship. The younger the people, the more likely it is that they have a migration background. In the age group below 5 years, 36% had a migration background, compared with only 10% in the age group over 65.<sup>1</sup> And these statistics do not even include the high number of refugees coming to Germany from 2015 onwards.

Thus, one of the greatest challenges for modern German society is to deal with the growing social, linguistic and cultural diversity. It is obvious that the integration of immigrants and refugees will be a long-term process and a major challenge for the entire education system in Germany.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2016/09/PD16\\_327\\_122.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2016/09/PD16_327_122.html)

## 2. Submersion education

Since the latest immigration wave occurred under largely uncontrolled circumstances and Germany does not have well-established immigration programmes like Canada, for instance, let alone an immigration law which would help to manage the flow of immigration, the German government, as well as local authorities, was forced to develop programmes quickly to manage the flow of newcomers and integrate them into the new environment. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that there is no centralized education and language policy in Germany. Instead, the 16 federal states (“Bundesländer“) each have their own Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs and can determine their language policies more or less autonomously, for example, the question when to introduce foreign language teaching in schools.

One of the results of the dramatic increase in immigration numbers was the necessity to provide language classes in German since the main objective was to integrate immigrants into the school system and the job market as quickly as possible. Since 2005, so-called “Integration courses“ have been offered for adults which consist of a language course and an orientation course. The language course comprises 600 lessons and covers many aspects of everyday life, including work and career, raising children, going shopping, filling out forms etc.

The orientation course comprises 60 lessons and deals with Germany’s history, culture and its legal system, among other things. At the end of the integration course there is a final examination. The objective is to attain language level B1 in the language section of the final examination. Depending on the participant’s official status, the course is free of charge for some while others may have to contribute to the costs.

Children are normally integrated directly into regular classes. This process of placing language minority children into mainstream education is also called “submersion“. This concept “contains the idea of a language minority student thrown into the deep end and expected to learn to swim as quickly as possible without the help of floats or special swimming lessons“ (Baker, 2010: 211). The students are taught exclusively in the majority language, in this case German, and are expected to use it in the classroom. In general, the main objective of submersion programmes is the rapid social and cultural assimilation of language minority speakers and to shift the child from the home minority language to the dominant majority language. Hence, it is often considered a necessary and effective tool of integration from a political perspective.

Within mainstream education there is often a provision of classes in GSL (German as a Second Language) which aims to promote language skills for curriculum purposes. Typically, these are “pull-out“ or withdrawal classes offered by regular German teachers or by foreign language teachers, but quite often by people who were not specifically trained in teaching German as a Second Language. Young adults who came as refugees may also attend special reception classes (“Internationale Förderklassen“) which last for a year and which prepare them to go to university, for example.

Multilingual and heterogeneous classes with substantial variations in student language ability are likely to create enormous challenges for teachers and students alike. The main problem for language learners is to cope with the curriculum demands despite their insufficiently developed language skills and their difficulties to absorb the input and to understand the teachers’ instructions. Thus in submersion programmes they may eventually “sink, struggle or swim“ (Baker, 2010: 211). When such students do not receive any any specialized language services and are just assigned to regular classrooms, this may eventually lead to frustration or non-participation and potentially also to their dropping-out of the educational system (Valdés, 1998: 7) and economic disempowerment. A further problem they have to face that there is little or no support for their first language.

For teachers, one of the greatest problems in such mainstreaming classrooms is that the regular classroom teachers are usually not trained in GSL methodology and may have little expertise in modifying their instruction to accommodate such children, in particular when the class contains students ranging from fluent language majority speakers to those who can understand very little (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002: 3). In other words,

one of the key competences these teachers need is Classroom Interactional Competence (cf. Walsh, 2014, see chapter 5).

Although there is a great demand for it, language support in the first language is in general low and restricted to those schools where a substantial number of students speaks a common language, for example, Turkish or Arabic. At some schools a few lessons per week may be offered, sometimes even to different age groups.

### 3. Bilingual education

According to the official data available, existing CLIL and bilingual programmes in Germany target more than ten foreign languages. This would include two regional or minority languages (Danish and Sorbian) in some federal states, and numerous bilingual institutions where German is taught together with a different language (e.g. Chinese, Czech, Dutch, English, French, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish or Turkish).

Bilingual education is officially promoted by ministries of education and by school authorities and provided in primary, lower secondary and general upper secondary education. The following table shows the number of schools at the different levels of education:

Primary Schools ( <i>Grundschule</i> )	Lower Secondary Schools ( <i>Realschule</i> )	Comprehensive Schools ( <i>Gesamtschule</i> )	Upper Secondary Schools ( <i>Gymnasium</i> )
119 (7.5 %)	63 (16.6%)	167 (10.5%)	1,038 (65.4%)

#### Bilingual schools in Germany in 2013 (n= 1587)<sup>2</sup>.

With just very few exceptions, all 16 federal states offer bilingual tracks, bilingual modules and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as well as binational schools or tracks.

At first glance the official data may look very promising, but there are numerous restrictions and drawbacks:

- Bilingual education, in general, does not seem to be very widespread. Even when all the different forms are combined, only 4.7% of the 33,493 schools in Germany offer some sort of bilingual education.
- Approximately two thirds of all schools offering bilingual education are upper secondary schools (“Gymnasien“). The number of primary schools and lower secondary schools offering bilingual education is very low (cf. Elsner & Keßler, 2013: 18).
- In relation to the total number of schools, bilingual education is found more often in the private sector; in the public sector it is often restricted to bilingual tracks and modules and to CLIL lessons in specific school subjects (e.g. geography and history).
- Bilingual education is mainly associated with English, not with any minority or regional languages or other foreign languages, even in border regions.

One of the main reasons for the lack of bilingual schools is that there is a general shortage of qualified teachers. Competence is required in at least one non-language subject and a high command of the foreign

<sup>2</sup> KMK (2013): „Konzepte für den bilingualen Unterricht – Erfahrungsbericht und Vorschläge zur Weiterentwicklung“. [http://kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen\\_beschluesse/2013/201\\_10\\_17-Konzepte-\\_bilingualer-\\_Unterricht.pdf](http://kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2013/201_10_17-Konzepte-_bilingualer-_Unterricht.pdf) (Zugriff 28.1.2018)

language used, typically at C1 level. In addition to this, specific methodological skills are required to teach CLIL classes, for instance. Relatively few universities offer teacher training programmes for CLIL teachers.

#### **4. Immersion bilingual education**

Immersion programmes have numerous advantages. Immersion is considered to be a very natural form of language acquisition and typically results in “additive” bilingualism where students develop proficiency in a second language while at the same time they continue to develop their first language. Immersive education also fosters the integration of content and language teaching (“Getting two for the price of one”) and the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as well as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS).

Numerous studies (e.g. Genesee, 2008: 6, Piske, 2013: 32, Piske & Burmeister, 2008) have shown that immersion students can attain a considerably higher L2 proficiency compared with traditional language teaching, while no major negative effects have been found concerning the students’ development in the first language. The students’ development of subject knowledge is comparable to monolingual students.

In addition to this, it has been shown that immersion is adequate for children from all social classes, irrespective of their L1 (Elsner & Keßler, 2013: 19, Massler & Burmeister, 2010). Immigrant children may also benefit greatly from such immersion classes in a foreign language (e.g. English) since they are put in the same basic situation as children who speak the majority language.

Taking into account all these benefits and the positive research findings it is quite surprising to note that there are still only very few immersion schools in Germany, in particular in primary schools (Elsner & Keßler, 2013: 18). However, in recent years a gradual increase of immersion programmes, in particular in the private sector, was noticeable.

A good example of this development are the Phorms Education schools which are located in various cities in Germany (e.g. in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Frankfurt). The schools at Phorms Education offer immersion classes at primary and upper secondary level (“Gymnasium”). Most of the teaching at primary level takes place in English. Initially, approximately 70% of the instruction is in English and 30% in German. At secondary school the distribution of both languages is more even. The pupils are mainly German-speaking, but some of them come from bilingual families.

Teachers are either German or native speakers of English – both groups teach in their native language. Additionally, each class has a teaching assistant who usually speaks the language which is not spoken by the regular teacher. German and English therefore enjoy equal status as working languages in the classroom and for everyday communication. Subjects are either taught in English or German which allows the students to acquire the relevant specialist vocabulary equally in both languages.

In the last part, one specific aspect of immersion will be discussed that is of great significance for the potential success of immersion programmes, namely the role of providing language support.

#### **5. Providing supportive feedback in an immersion context**

Apart from an early start and the continuous and intensive exposure to the new language one of the most important factors responsible for the success of immersion programmes is the provision of language support and scaffolding strategies which helps to foster language development (cf. Singleton & Ryan, 2006; Piske, 2013: 30).

Establishing a safe and cooperative learning environment is one of the most important objectives in an immersion setting. Learners should be encouraged to engage in classroom interaction in such a way that they can develop oral fluency and can experiment with the non-native language (Coelho, 2012: 238).

A metaphor which is often used to convey the idea of providing language support through collaborative dialogue is “scaffolding” (e.g. Gibbons, 2002: 15, Klewitz, 2017):



“Just as construction workers rely on scaffolding to support a new building as they construct one storey on top of another removing the scaffolding only when the structure is strong enough to stand without it, teachers build on students’ existing knowledge or skills to enable them to go one step further in their learning.” (Coelho, 2012: 232)

Scaffolding is an essential factor for all learners who study content in a language they are not fully proficient in, no matter whether this learning takes place in an immersion classroom or in a submersion context where learners require additional support compared to native speaker learners.

It is essential that learners receive sufficient comprehensible input which is ideally slightly beyond their current level of proficiency, but at the same time learners also need to be engaged in classroom interactions with their teachers and their peers. This forces them to produce meaningful output which will eventually help them to revise and improve their language use in the long run.

A simple classroom exchange like the following extract which was recorded in an immersion classroom in Grade 2 in one of the Phorms schools can provide essential scaffolding for language learning. It is obvious that the teacher wants to ensure that the learners have many opportunities to try out their oral language skills in meaningful contexts even though they are still beginners. Therefore, he simply asks his learners to share what they did during their weekend:

T: Excellent. Thank you very much for sharing Emma... eh Tom, would you like to share something?

L1: Yes.

T: Alright, go ahead, Tom. We're all listening.

L1: [slowly] On Saturday I.I....I.I I was em looking the football game. \*\* And... then on the next day [giggling] I was em my mum has birthday

T: Oh yesterday your mum had a birthday.

L1: Yes [T: oh ok nice] and there was coming a friend. And then we play...Then we were em [Pause]

T: What did you play?.. play - a game?

L1: \*\*\*

T: You can say it in German!

L1: We were../grɪln/

T: Barbecue? Cooking?

L2: Barbecue is that.

T: Yeah, making food... yeah

During this short conversation the teacher uses numerous general strategies and specific techniques to encourage the learner to express what he would like to say.

The teacher shows a great amount of error tolerance. In many cases, the learner is not explicitly corrected even though his output contains wrong constructions. In the dialogue the learner uses a wrong collocation (“I was looking the game“), for example, but this is not corrected by the teacher, presumably because comprehension is not impaired and the message is clear. An explicit correction would unnecessarily interrupt the natural flow of conversation and draw attention to the form and not to the meaning.

If correction occurs, it is often done implicitly. For instance, when the learner says (“My mum has a birthday“) this sentence is remodelled by the teacher using the correct tense form. Such indirect forms of correction have the advantage that they are normally not interpreted as interruptions by the learner and can also be used to signal comprehension and to negotiate meaning as in this case (“Oh, yesterday your mum had a birthday“).

The teacher also offers linguistic help by implementing the technique of “bridging“ (“... play – a game?“) and when that fails he encourages the learner to use his native language to convey the message which signals to the learner that the teacher is entirely interested in the meaning. When the learner uses the German expression “grillen“ (/grɪln/) the teacher asks clarification questions to make sure that he understood the message.

Techniques like implicit error correction, bridging, prompting, asking clarification questions and back-channelling provide the necessary scaffolding for learners. These contextual cues not only help them to infer the meaning more easily, but also encourage them to produce oral output. Along with general strategies like a high degree of error tolerance, the acceptance of code-switching or the provision of positive feedback, this helps to create a learning environment where learners feel safe to express themselves.

## 6. Conclusions

Both in immersion classrooms and in submersion settings language learners are faced with numerous challenges. A student speaking the majority language who is learning a second language (e.g. English) in an immersion classroom, is initially confronted with a large amount of input which may appear to be almost incomprehensible. This problem may also occur in a submersive setting where a learner speaking a minority language is required to deal with content which is taught in the majority language. In both cases this basic situation poses numerous challenges for learners and teachers alike.

In particular, the problems associated with submersion programmes should not be ignored since there is a great risk that numerous learners will eventually not become sufficiently proficient in the majority language to be integrated into society.

Immersion, which aims for additive bilingualism, has proved to be a very effective way of language learning both in the context of language maintenance as well as in foreign language teaching. Although the circumstances are very different, some of the findings from research on immersion may be transferred to mainstream education, too. Above all, classroom interactional competence (cf. Walsh, 2014) is a crucial factor in promoting learners' linguistic skills. The first step to develop this competence is to make teachers more aware of how they use language in the classroom so that they can adjust their speech when working with language learners, no matter in which context this occurs and to make them aware of the important role of supportive feedback and the provision of scaffolding for the development of linguistic skills. Learning is much more likely when students are involved in meaningful classroom interactions in which they are encouraged to produce output in a safe learning environment.



## References

- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Carrasquillo, A.L. & Rodríguez, V. (2002). *Language Minority Students in the Mainstream Classroom*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Coelho, E. (2012). *Language and Learning in Multilingual Classrooms: A Practical Approach*. Multilingual matters: Bristol.
- Elsner, D., & Keßler, J. U. (2013). "Bilingual Approaches to Foreign Language Education in Primary School". In: *Bilingual Education in Primary School: Aspects of Immersion, CLIL, and Bilingual Modules*. Tübingen, p. 16-27.
- Genesee, F. (2008). "Early Dual Language Learning". Online available at: <https://www.ryerson.ca/mylanguage/images/Genesee.pdf>
- Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning. Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Klewitz, B. (2017). *Scaffolding im Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Massler, U., & Burmeister, P. (2010). *CLIL und Immersion. Fremdsprachlicher Sachfachunterricht in der Grundschule*. Braunschweig: Westermann.
- Piske, T. (2013). "Bilingual Education: Chances and Challenges". In: *Bilingual Education in Primary School: Aspects of Immersion, CLIL, and Bilingual Modules*. Tübingen, p. 28-40.
- Piske, T. (2006). "Zur Entwicklung der Englischkenntnisse bei deutschsprachigen Immersionschülerinnen und -schülern im Grundschulalter". In: Schlüter, Norbert (ed.): *Fortschritte im Frühen Fremdsprachenunterricht. Ausgewählte Tagungsbeiträge Weingarten 2004*. Berlin: Cornelsen, p. 206-212.
- Piske, T., & Burmeister, P. (2008). "Erfahrungen mit früher Immersion an norddeutschen Grundschulen. In: Schlemminger, Gerald (ed.). *Erforschung des bilingualen Lehrens und Lernens. Forschungsarbeiten und Erprobungen von Unterrichtskonzepten und -materialien in der Grundschule*. Baltmansweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren, p. 131-148.
- Valdés, G. (1998). *The World outside and inside School: Language and Immigration Children*. In: *Educational Researcher* 27 (6), p. 4-18.
- Walsh, S. (2014). *Classroom Interaction for Language Teachers*. Alexandria, Va: TESOL International Association.
- Weitz, M., & Andreas R. (2010). "German children's L2 English vocabulary in bilingual kindergarten programmes in Germany: Why do the children's scores differ so strongly from each other?" In: Christiane Bongartz & Jutta Rymarczyk (eds.): *Languages across the Curriculum*. Frankfurt: Lang, p. 51-70.
- Wode, H. (2009). *Praxis Frühkindliche Bildung: Frühes Fremdsprachenlernen in bilingualen Kindergärten und Grundschulen*. Braunschweig: Westermann.
- Zydati, W. (2000). *Bilingualer Unterricht in der Grundschule. Entwurf eines Spracherwerbskonzepts für zweisprachige Immersionsprogramme*. Ismaning: Max Hueber Verlag.