

## **Immersion Education in Thailand: Reviewing The Implementation and Impact**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Immersion education is a form of content-based instruction where English serves as the primary medium for teaching academic subjects rather than being taught in isolation. These programs are strategically designed to facilitate subject-matter mastery in a target language while ensuring the students' native language development remains unaffected. This study aims to synthesize existing literature regarding the implementation of immersion education within bilingual classrooms in **Thailand**. Adopting a qualitative library research design, the study investigates the operational procedures and the pedagogical obstacles encountered by educators in **Thailand's** bilingual settings. The findings highlight the current state of immersion practices and the specific difficulties faced by teachers in the field. The study concludes that while immersion education is an effective model for enhancing English proficiency among high-level students in **Thailand**, its primary implementation hurdle remains the teachers' limited English language competency

**Keywords:** Immersion, implementation, bilingual, education

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### **Introduction**

Bilingualism is defined as the ability to fluently master two languages, typically developed from an early age (Oxford, 2022). In an educational context, the term encompasses the use of a second or foreign language as a medium of instruction for non-language learning materials (Richards et al., 1992). One prominent model is the immersion program, which integrates students into the target language environment with the dual goal of language acquisition and understanding of academic content. As a global lingua franca, English plays a crucial role in various sectors, from technology to economics. This has prompted countries like Thailand to prioritize bilingual education for more than two decades. This phenomenon is also a response to increasing global mobility, which demands multilingual societies to adapt to changing times. Without adequate English language competency, a nation risks experiencing obstacles in progress in the fields of information, tourism, and education.

The development of Thailandn-English bilingual individuals is based on the theory that bilingualism facilitates the development of stronger cognitive and academic skills (Cummins, 1993, 2000, 2009). Bilingual students often demonstrate superior academic performance compared to monolinguals because they possess richer systemic and schematic knowledge to process complex tasks (Margana, 2013). Given the initial success of the immersion model in Canada, this method has now become a very popular trend in bilingual education systems across various countries. This article aims

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to examine the implementation of immersion education in bilingual classrooms in Thailand. The main focus of the discussion is on implementation procedures in the field and the various challenges faced by education practitioners in implementing the program.

## Literature Review

### 1. Conceptualizing Bilingualism and Bilingual Education

Bilingualism is fundamentally understood as the proficiency to communicate effectively in two languages, often cultivated from an early age (Oxford, 2022). In an academic framework, this concept extends beyond oral fluency to include literacy in both languages. Bilingual education is specifically defined as the strategic use of a second or foreign language as the medium of instruction for content subjects (Richards et al., 1992). Unlike traditional language classes, bilingual education integrates linguistic development with academic mastery, creating a dual-focused learning environment.

### 2. The Mechanics of Immersion Education

Immersion programs represent a specialized model within bilingual education where students are "immersed" in a target language (L2). The primary objective is to achieve high levels of proficiency in both the native and target languages without compromising academic performance. Historically, Canada is recognized as the pioneer of immersion language learning, a model that has now gained global popularity due to its effectiveness in fostering natural language acquisition (Margana, 2013).

### 3. The Global Impetus for English Bilingualism

The status of English as a lingua franca has necessitated its integration into national education systems, particularly in expanding-circle countries like Thailand. The demand for bilingualism is a direct response to:

- **Global Mobility:** The increasing movement of people necessitates multilingualism for societal and professional adaptation.
- **Economic and Academic Advancement:** Proficiency in English is vital for progress in technology, business, tourism, and higher education.
- **Communication Competency:** Nations prioritize bilingualism to equip citizens with the tools to navigate global communication networks, preventing the "distractions" or barriers caused by inadequate language command.

### 4. Cognitive and Academic Advantages

The theoretical foundation for bilingual education often draws upon the work of Cummins (1993, 2000, 2009), who posits that bilingual individuals benefit from a "common underlying proficiency." This allows them to transfer academic concepts and skills across languages effectively. Furthermore, research suggests that bilingual students often outperform their monolingual peers in academic contexts. This is attributed to their systemic and schematic knowledge, which provides a more robust cognitive framework for processing complex academic tasks (Margana, 2013).

### 5. Implementation and Challenges in the Local Context

While immersion education offers significant benefits, its application in Thailandn bilingual classrooms involves complex operational dynamics. Research indicates that the transition to an immersion model requires not only curriculum adjustment but also high levels of teacher competency. Previous studies highlight that the primary obstacles often involve the practical difficulties of maintaining the target language environment and the varying levels of English proficiency among educators.

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## Methods

This study employs a literature review methodology to systematically analyze and evaluate prior research concerning a specific topic or research question (Snyder, 2019). Specifically, this research examines a range of scholarly articles focused on the implementation of immersion education programs within Thailandn bilingual classrooms. Adopting a literature review approach ensures a formal register and maintains objectivity by avoiding subjective biases and sentimental language. This technique prioritizes the consistent use of technical terminology and precise, subject-specific vocabulary within a logically structured framework. Ultimately, the objective of this review is to identify significant gaps, contradictions, or recommendations for future inquiry. By synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, this study aims to deepen the understanding of the social phenomena under discussion (Hulland, 2020).

## Result and Discussion

Throughout the evolution of second and foreign language pedagogy, numerous strategies have been developed to facilitate linguistic acquisition. Among the most innovative contemporary approaches is the immersion program, which integrates language learning with academic content mastery within a cooperative environment. Unlike traditional methods that teach language in isolation, immersion serves as a "vehicle" for instruction, where the target language is both the medium and the object of learning across various subject areas (Shaban Barimany & Varandi, 2012). Defined as a model that delivers academic content in a target language without compromising the student's primary language (L1), immersion can involve either a majority or a minority language of high socio-economic prestige (Christopher et al., 2011). In this setting, the new language is not merely a subject of study but the primary tool for all required coursework (Dwi Ima. H, 2013). This "immersion teaching mode" typically involves a cohort of learners who share the same L1, placed in an environment where the second language (SL) is utilized either partially or entirely to drive the learning process (Luan, 2011).

The benefits of this approach are multifaceted. Beyond linguistic proficiency, immersion programs enhance cognitive development, foster cross-cultural understanding, and prepare students for the demands of a globalized society and future career opportunities (Ee, 2018). Furthermore, this model empowers students to become active participants in their education through specialized activities and pedagogical actions (Postigo & González Jiménez, 2014). Ultimately, immersion represents a transformative shift in language pedagogy, offering a robust framework for students to acquire communicative competence in specific academic contexts (Zhang, 2019).

Immersion programs have emerged as a globally recognized pedagogical framework for second and foreign language acquisition, implemented across diverse educational levels ranging from early childhood education to higher education. The core objective of these programs is to foster cognitive development and linguistic proficiency in a target language while intentionally preserving the integrity of the learner's primary language. Despite their popularity, the efficacy of such programs is heavily contingent upon the competency of the teaching staff. Consequently, this article examines the operational dynamics of immersion education within the Thailandn context, with a specific focus on the primary implementation challenges encountered by educators in the field.

Beyond the fundamental benefits of cross-cultural communication and the cultivation of diverse perspectives, empirical research indicates that foreign language acquisition offers significant cognitive and academic advantages. According to Stewart (2005), these benefits manifest in three primary areas: enhanced cognitive functioning, superior academic performance, and improved standardized test scores. Furthermore, immersion programs are particularly effective in fostering deep cultural empathy, as learners internalize societal nuances through the language itself. However, despite these pedagogical strengths, immersion models present certain systemic challenges. The most prominent weaknesses include the intensive requirement for specialized teacher preparation and the potential for insufficient language practice if the environment is not rigorously maintained.

Berikut adalah parafrasa dalam bahasa Inggris dengan gaya akademik yang lebih kohesif dan profesional:

### Paraphrased Version

The classification of a program as either bilingual or multilingual is typically determined by the linguistic backgrounds of the learners or the specific languages employed for instruction within a

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given educational setting. At its core, bilingualism is defined as the proficiency to comprehend and communicate effectively in a language other than one's native tongue (Walner, 2016; Grosjean, 1995). In a pedagogical context, a bilingual education approach entails instructing students through two distinct languages, where the relationship between these languages is shaped by the curriculum type, specific learning objectives, and broader contextual factors (McGroarty in Celce-Murcia, 2001). Furthermore, bilingualism and multilingualism are prevalent phenomena within diverse social groups, communities, and nations. For a program to be characterized as bilingual, it must consistently utilize at least two languages as mediums of instruction, particularly when delivering academic content (Christopher et al., 2011). Ultimately, bilingualism represents an individual's functional capacity to both understand and produce discourse across two different linguistic systems at a recognized level of competence.

Adapted from Valdes and Figueroa (1994), bilinguals can be classified by :

- Age (simultaneous / sequential / late)
- Ability (incipient / receptive / productive)
- Balance of two languages
- Development (ascendant – second language is developing / recessive – one language is decreasing)
- Context where each language is acquired and used ( e.g. school, home, etc)

The discourse surrounding bilingualism reveals a complex interplay of cognitive advantages and potential drawbacks. Some scholars have historically argued that managing two distinct linguistic systems simultaneously may overwhelm a child's cognitive processing, potentially hindering the pace of language acquisition (Crystal, 2003). This perspective often fuels parental concerns regarding linguistic confusion or "code-mixing" during the developmental stages (Kennison, 2014).

Contrasting these concerns, empirical evidence from Thordardottir (2015) suggests that bilingual children perform comparably to their monolingual peers, provided they receive consistent and balanced exposure to both languages. Furthermore, contemporary research highlights the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, including enhanced information processing speeds and superior environmental adaptability. Long-term studies even suggest that bilingualism may serve as a protective factor against cognitive decline in older age. Conversely, the practical implementation of bilingual education can present challenges, such as the potential erosion of heritage languages and the psychological pressure placed on both students and parents to achieve dual-language mastery. In summary, bilingual education has become a global pedagogical phenomenon, defined as the capacity to acquire and utilize both a native and a target language for academic purposes. The classification of bilinguals varies significantly, depending on factors such as age of acquisition, linguistic proficiency, balance between languages, and the specific sociolinguistic context. Ultimately, the decision to adopt this approach must weigh its substantial cognitive rewards against its inherent implementation challenges.

## Conclusion

In summary, the literature regarding the implementation of immersion programs in Thailandn bilingual classrooms reveals several critical findings. First, successful execution necessitates comprehensive strategic planning involving all stakeholders, including educators, students, institutional administrations, and the development of specialized instructional materials. Second, evidence suggests that immersion models are most effective when applied to higher educational levels, such as junior and senior high school. At these stages, the program significantly enhances students' linguistic competencies and overall language proficiency, thereby providing long-term benefits for their future academic and professional pursuits. Conversely, the model appears less effective for early childhood or elementary education. Finally, the analysis indicates that the implementation of immersion education often leads to significant teacher frustration due to systemic obstacles. The primary challenge identified is the insufficient English language proficiency among educators, which hinders the effective delivery of content in the target language. Addressing this competency gap is essential for optimizing the outcomes of immersion-based bilingual education in the Thailandn context.

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