Two-way language immersion in Estonia: parents' expectations, experiences, and assessment of programme performance

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Summary

In our rapidly globalising society, already acquiring multiple languages at pre-school age is becoming increasingly important, as it creates more opportunities for children to socialise with others and widens their pool of potential educational institutions and jobs. One of the most widespread opportunities for learning a second language is language immersion, which has been used in Estonian kindergartens to teach Estonian as a second language since 2003. In order to offer equal opportunities to children whose first language is Estonian and to those for whom it is Russian, in autumn 2015, the first two-way language immersion (TWI) groups were launched in Estonia, where learning activities are conducted in both Estonian and Russian. There are two teachers in these groups: one teaches the children in Estonian and the other in Russian.

TWI programmes are aimed at minority- and majority-language students. Studies of children's academic achievements (Genesee, 1983; Thomas & Collier, 2002) show that children in TWI programmes outperform their peers. Marian, Shook and Schroeder (2013) state that since the aim of TWI programmes is to support the academic achievement of students regardless of the language, TWI is used as a means of shaping the view of the world and developing the knowledge and skills of both minority- and majority-language students. It is also pointed out that the ability to communicate in two languages and with a larger group of people is an advantage in an increasingly globalised world. Language immersion should, therefore, be implemented even more in the field of education (Marian, Shook & Schroeder, 2013).

The parent is a key partner in supporting the development of the communication and language skills of the child in co-operation with the nursery school. According to Craig (1996), studies show that the support of the parents whose children are in these groups has been a key factor in the wider spread of TWI programmes. López (2013) claims that the methods of TWI should be

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introduced to parents so that they are aware of the available options and can expose their child to a bilingual learning environment if they so wish. Parents who are aware of the programme can also initiate the creation of new TWI groups by passing their knowledge, experience and expectations on to local governments and other concerned authorities.

In preschool education, it is essential to promote the availability of high-quality education in Estonian to all children and to ensure this opportunity is available to all children whose home language is not Estonian. It is also important, from an early age, to enable Estonians to learn other languages and provide all children with an equal opportunity to learn about other cultures and establish friendships with other nationalities. TWI is well-suited to achieving these objectives. However, since the programme has only been implemented in Estonia for a few years, it is important to receive feedback from different parties in the programme with regard to their expectations, experiences, and improvement proposals to maximise the full potential of the programme. In this article, we focused on the feedback received from a written survey filled out by the parents whose children were in the first four TWI groups, with the objective of providing an overview of the parents' expectations, experiences and evaluation of the effectiveness of the programme based on the language spoken with the child at home.

Methodology

The study was conducted using the method of a written survey – a total of 54 parents from the first four TWI groups in Estonia participated in the survey. Parents were contacted through teachers, and the survey was provided to them in either Estonian or Russian, depending on their home language. Of the parents who participated in the survey, 31 were Estonian-speaking and 23 Russian-speaking. Questions in the survey were grouped into five categories, all relating to the parents: 1) general data, 2) previous experience, 3) expectations, 4) experience with two-way language immersion, and 5) assessment of the implementation of the programme at the nursery school.

The SPSS 24.0 statistical data analysis software program

Key findings and discussion

The results showed that Estonian-speaking families primarily chose a TWI group for their child due to the expectation that learning two languages in nursery school supports the child's memory and facilitates the learning of other languages at school, and increases the child's competitiveness in the labour

market in the future. Other reasons why Estonian-speaking parents decided in favour of a TWI group included the desire to allow their child to get to know another culture and to expand their communication circle. The most important factors for Russian-speaking parents included the desire to prepare the child for learning in another language at school, to expand the child's communication circle and the expectation that their child will acquire the national language better in this group rather than in any other group. Craig (1996) also mentions that parents' reasons for joining the language immersion programme are related to the expectation that, in addition to the early acquisition of a second language, the programme will also help build the child's tolerance of other cultures. The parents who participated in this study found it important to raise their child's career opportunities, improve their understanding of other people and cultures, and preserve their family heritage. The study showed that both Estonian- and Russian-speaking parents expected teachers to create an environment where linguistic and cultural differences are respected. Additionally, the parents deemed it essential to establish good relationships between children and ensure that children of both languages play together in a group. Parents who spoke both languages prioritised good communication skills of the teachers and their ability to co-operate with different parties.

As the positive attitude of the parents towards the programme and their support at home helps children better adapt to the nursery school, the parents were asked which language learning they supported at home. The answers revealed that slightly more than half of Russian-speaking parents support the acquisition of both languages more or less equally at home, whereas more than half of Estonian-speaking parents primarily support the acquisition of the child's mother tongue. At the same time, there were some Estonian-speaking parents who were worried that they could not support their children in learning Russian. Nevertheless, according to the assessment of both Estonian- and Russian-speaking parents, the children have adapted to the group well or very well (on a five-point scale $M \geq 4.4$), and most of the parents are very pleased with the language development of their child. The following was pointed out: the child is used to the foreign-language environment and establishes friendships with children who speak a different language, the child is interested in learning, their vocabulary is significantly broader, the child communicates with both teachers using the respective language they teach. Most parents could not name a single problem related to the TWI programme. Some Estonian- and Russian-speaking parents did, however, mention that in their free time, the children still prefer to play with friends who speak their mother tongue.

When assessing the TWI programme, the parents mainly noted that they were very happy with the programme through which their child develops in many ways and learns about both their own and another culture, regardless of their home language. Overall, the parents found that the programme was also beneficial for adults as it broadens the mind and helps eliminate prejudice against people with a different mother tongue.

Keywords: multilingual education, two-way language immersion programme, nursery school, parents