



EARLY PRIMARY PARTIAL IMMERSION (EPPI) IN FRENCH THE WALKER ROAD EXPERIENCE

What is 'early primary partial immersion' at Walker Road Primary School?

This is the UK's first initiative in early partial immersion in a foreign language. From Primary 1 onwards, children receive some of their education through the medium of French, and some through the medium of English. This form of early bilingual education contrasts with the more usual approach to teaching modern languages in the primary school where pupils receive a relatively small amount of foreign language from Primary 6 onwards or sometimes earlier.

Compared with this approach, EPPI has two key advantages. Children have more time for learning and using French, as they start earlier and learn *through* French. The experience is more intense, because they are challenged not only to learn French but also to use it to acquire knowledge and skills in different areas of the curriculum.

How long has the Walker Road EPPI project been running?

The initiative began in 2000. The first group of pupils to start EPPI when they entered Primary 1 at Walker Road are now in their first year of secondary school education. Most are attending Torry Academy in Aberdeen.

Who are the teachers?

At Walker Road three qualified teachers who are native-speakers of French work in collaboration with class teachers to enable the children to hear and respond to classroom activities in French.

Is the Walker Road EPPI initiative unique?

Immersion programmes, where children learn through the medium of another language, are well-established in several countries, particularly in Canada where early immersion in French has been developed since the mid-1960s. In Spain there is a large-scale national project on early bilingual education. In Scotland, Gaelic-medium education at primary school is a form of immersion, since many children do not have Gaelic as the language of their home.

How successful is this model of language learning?

International research has shown that immersion learners (compared with non-immersion learners) develop a much greater proficiency in the immersion language, and in many cases derive benefits to their general cognitive, linguistic, social and intercultural development. Although parents sometimes express concern that children educated in this way will be less competent in their first language or less advanced in other school subjects, the research on immersion programmes around the world shows that this is not the case. The national research on Gaelic-medium primary education in Scotland showed similar results.

How successful has EPPI been at Walker Road?

An independent evaluation, conducted by Professor Richard Johnstone and Robert McKinstry, of the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (Scottish CILT) of the Stirling Institute of Education, concluded that EPPI at Walker Road Primary School has been an outstanding success. In the era of Curriculum for Excellence, the initiative has prepared pupils very well for true international citizenship, not only through their outstanding proficiency in another major language but also in their confidence and international outlook.

Younger EPPI pupils are able to listen with close attention, to act out, dramatise, move around, sing, chant, and do simple calculations all in French, particularly in work in the Expressive Arts area. Older pupils can also read and write in French in a variety of subjects, including home economics, science and environmental studies (taught jointly in French and English) in ways which demand increasing sophistication.

Pupils are able to cope with subject content that becomes cognitively more challenging as they proceed from one year-group to the next. Although some pupils are naturally more able than others to communicate in French (as would be the case in English) and some pupils experience learning difficulties of various kinds, the evaluation found that EPPI pupils did not seem to be anxious or intimidated by learning in French. There were no visible signs of pupils having mentally or emotionally 'opted out' of learning through French.



The evaluation focused on pupil performance in *English, Environmental Studies, Mathematics* and *French*. The evidence shows clearly that pupils have not been disadvantaged in the first three subjects by receiving some of their education through the medium of French. Indeed, in English, EPPI pupils demonstrated markedly greater fluency, range and confidence than their non-EPPI counterparts from the same year-group. In French, in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, EPPI pupils have reached a level of proficiency which goes far beyond what can reasonably be expected of other pupils in Scottish primary schools. They have shown that they can profitably learn other subjects through French. Their ability to cope with a fast flow of French input from their native-speaker teachers was particularly impressive.

What do key participants think of EPPI?

Pupils

EPPI pupils are very positive. They clearly view EPPI as an enjoyable experience and would like to see the initiative extended to other Scottish primary schools. In class they show high levels of confidence and motivation and willingness to communicate.

Parents

EPPI parents have been enthusiastic from the start and remain so throughout the time their children are at Walker Road. For them, the benefits lie not only in their children's impressive proficiency in French but also in their positive outlook and confidence. They feel their children are better prepared to be international citizens. They are keen for their children's bilingual education to continue in some form at secondary school.

The native-speaker teachers

The native-speaker (French) teachers are highly impressed by what their pupils can do in French, and by their confidence in doing it, particularly in comparison with the results of conventional French teaching in primary and secondary schools in Scotland.

What are the key factors in EPPI's success?

Among the key factors associated with the success of EPPI are:

- appropriate funding and other support from Aberdeen City Council and the national authorities;
- commitment and enthusiasm of school staff, particularly the Headteacher, well supported by the local authority Curriculum Support Teacher for Modern Languages (CSTML) and by two colleagues from the Faculty of Education (University of Aberdeen);
- interest and enthusiasm shown by EPPI parents;
- appropriate numbers of supernumerary native-speaker (French) teachers, and the commitment, knowledge and skill which these have shown;
- an early start (from Primary 1 onwards);
- substantial amount of time (both time within each week and time over the years);
- substantial increase in intensity of experience (not only learning an additional language but also learning vitally important other subject matter through this other language);
- creation of a friendly, supportive but also highly challenging environment;
- research-based evaluation during the course of the initiative to provide evidence and raise issues to support developments.

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