

Huge cognitive and linguistic benefits for children who learn a second language

Two independent schools are leading the way with language immersion, delivering the many proven benefits for students who learn a second language.

By Melinda Ham

About two-thirds of new students arrive at Deutsche Schule Melbourne in Fitzroy North with little or no prior German knowledge. They soon learn. Every teacher is fluent in German and English, and 80 per cent of the classes in the foundation year are conducted in German and then reduced to 50 per cent by year 5.

"It's pure immersion," says Jörg Dopfer, principal of the independent primary school, adding that students without a knowledge of German can also enter later in primary school as part of the school's accelerated pathway program. "It's a leap for those children, but they all make it."

At the International Grammar School (a K-12 school) in Sydney's Ultimo, parents of preschoolers choose a teacher who is a native speaker of French, Mandarin, German, Japanese or Italian. Their child is immersed in a second language for at least 50 minutes a day, increasing to 80 minutes a day in primary school.

Only a handful of schools in Australia offer immersion in a second language for young children, even though research shows the many cognitive and linguistic benefits for children of doing so.

The richer their exposure, the more chance they have to develop fluency and ability long term, says Dr Nadia Selim, associate lecturer in Arabic language and cultures at the University of Sydney.

"There's no comparison between being in an immersive context and a decontextualised language class – the immersive situation is far superior," Selim says, adding that when children are immersed in a language they tend to acquire it more easily.

"It is the language that they hear all the time and eventually they start to pick it up."

NO COMPULSION

Learning a second language is the least popular subject area for year 12 students across Australia. Only 8.6 per cent of students chose to study a second language in 2021 according to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). This compares to 40 per cent in 1960.

Language education is a state decision. Queensland and Tasmania have no compulsory hours, and NSW has the lowest number of mandated hours, requiring children to learn only 100 hours across their entire 13 years at school.

By contrast, Victoria requires students to learn a second language for 1203 hours across their school years.

IMPROVED COGNITIVE ABILITY

Learning a second language is a real leg up for children's cognition, says International Grammar School principal Shauna Colnan. "It's a big advantage because they are switching between language systems from a very young age. There's plenty of research to say how beneficial that is for brain development."

When children become bilingual, research shows they may have improved memory, better concentration and think more creatively, Selim says.

In particular, where the level of bilingualism is highly established, research suggests that bilingual children may do better at solving problems, recognising patterns and thinking divergently.

Deutsche Schule Melbourne has a special pathway for non-German-speaking



French students at International Grammar School in Sydney (above).

Principal Jörg Dopfer and students at the Deutsche Schule Melbourne (below right).

students to enter later in primary school. Initially, they spend half their day with a stronger language acquisition focus.

With a ratio of five to seven children per teacher, the students slowly transition over six to 18 months to join their peers at their year level. The teacher contacts parents weekly to ensure a smooth transition.

Dopfer says he enjoys seeing siblings at the school having a lot of fun, especially if their parents aren't German speakers.

"They feel like learning another language is like a superpower," he says. "They can speak it outside the school and feel like it's a secret language."

The school's curriculum seamlessly integrates key aspects of the Victorian and German curriculums, ensuring alignment with the standards mandated by the Victorian and German authorities.

In 2025, Deutsche Schule Melbourne is expanding to include a secondary school

and plans to offer the Mixed Language International Baccalaureate (IB) as a leaving certificate. This international program echoes DSM's approach of nurturing students' curiosity, with a focus on critical thinking and problem-solving.

The globally recognised IB gives students access to more tertiary opportunities, including university courses in German.

Selim from the University of Sydney says that some research also suggests that literacy in a child's first language can improve by learning a second language.

"They develop enhanced linguistic awareness," she says.

With greater competence in a second language, children may develop greater sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues than those who are monolingual.

"Knowing another language gives them richer concepts and ideas to draw on to express themselves," Selim says.

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Nadia Selim

CULTURAL IMMERSION

At IGS, Colnan says that it's impossible to teach a language in isolation from the culture it originates from. The school's motto is "unity through diversity". Students come from 40 different cultural heritages and they have many events and performances at school assembly that celebrate those cultures.

Under the NSW curriculum, schools aren't required to offer a second language until year 7. By contrast, if they choose to, IGS students can start learning a third language (a choice of Spanish or Mandarin) in year 7.

Studying a language subject for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) is compulsory at IGS and only a few students get an exemption. Most embrace this requirement with gusto, Colnan says, and in year 10 many take an accelerated HSC language subject early, either at beginner's, continuer's or extension level.

IGS students also have the opportunity to go on an overseas language exchange, during which they live with a local family and attend a local school.

"Most of our children go on exchange speaking a language that they have been immersed in since primary school," Colnan says. "This is their opportunity to polish this language, get deeper into the culture and become really close with a family."

Immersion in a second language equips students to go out in the world, Dopfer says.

"We strive to empower our students to become global citizens who may shape a peaceful and sustainable future with their confidence, knowledge, skills and critical thinking," he says.

