

# HOMEWORK, PROJECTS AND PRESENTATIONS

## How Can Parents Help?

**By Dr. Millie Park Mellgren**

*The following article is an adapted and abridged excerpt from *The Language Immersion Life: A Guide for Families* by Millie Park Mellgren (2017). This book features answers to the most common questions Dr. Mellgren was asked as an elementary immersion principal. The volume features commentary and data gleaned from surveys given to hundreds of former students, parents and educators. This input combined with Dr. Mellgren's years of immersion experience, creates a comprehensive guide offering insight on selecting an immersion program and navigating through the K-12 immersion years with success. While most of the quotes from survey participants have been deleted from this excerpt, that additional commentary can be found in the full text.*

Parents who are competent in the language of the immersion school have few concerns about understanding assignments sent home with students. However, many parents of children in immersion settings are not fluent in the target language. The majority of my students' parents either have never studied a language or have studied in high school or college but have never attained a high level of competence or have lost their previous skills. Due to lack of confidence or competence, parents are justifiably worried about helping their child in school.

Homework therefore becomes one of

parents' biggest worries as their children advance through the elementary immersion program. In surveys about their experience as immersion parents, a large majority listed language-related fears as their biggest concern about the immersion life: not being able to understand the teacher, not being able to help with homework, and not being able to read books. It is possible these fears are related to their own prior experiences, and not those of their children. The fear that their child wouldn't understand the language was never listed.

If hundreds of children can take language risks every day, then I believe parents can too. Thousands of parents have navigated these waters successfully and come out on the other side with no regrets. The very first day is the time to jump in and face fears and concerns about language. Parents would expect no less from their children.

So, how do parents help their child when they can't read the language? The answer is to simply be supportive. The teacher does not expect parents to know the target language. In the early grades, teachers are really just starting to teach the "concept" of homework. This concept involves taking something home, doing it, and bringing it back to school. If children can master the *take it home, bring it back* concept they have gained a huge skill that will help them throughout

their education.

Parents should know that homework issues are usually less than they are imagined to be. Teachers share the goal for students to be successful as well and need parental support to provide a consistent environment for the student to complete assigned tasks. Generally, the child will know exactly what to do on a homework assignment with no further explanation or assistance on the part of parents. However, there are many things that parents can do to assist their children with language immersion schoolwork.

***Read, read and read some more***

The request that parents read with their children can be heard from any elementary teacher whether in an immersion school or in a school where English is the language of instruction. However, in an immersion school, this activity is critical. By reading in English at home on a regular basis, parents are preparing the child for that future date when English will be introduced. The child's English vocabulary and understanding of literary sentence structure and dialogue are increased every time parents open a book. If one points at the words while reading, the child learns that those symbols on the page represent the words being spoken. Children intuitively learn that reading goes from left to right; the left side page is read before the right side of the page in English. Parents are

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teaching reading skills just by sharing this special activity and time with their children. When instruction in English reading starts, the children's transition from target language reading to English reading happens quickly, often overnight. They have received the vocabulary they need through family reading time. Children who are already fluent in English, their native language, may learn to read at school first in the target language. This does not supplant the native language. The more time spent reading together, talking together and playing together will help the transition from the target language to English go seamlessly.

Many parents say, "but my child already knows how to read in English!" My response to this has always been to follow the child's natural rhythm and flow. Sometimes they will want to read in English and sometimes read in the school's language of instruction. If the child can read in English already, parents can take turns with the child, each reading a page. Families should just enjoy the reading time together and make it as consistent as tooth brushing.

### **The Time Commitment**

Finding enough time for homework can be the biggest struggle parents face. In this over-scheduled world confronting today's families, finding a regular study time in a consistent location is difficult at best. Many children are relegated to completing homework in the car, at a restaurant or at a sibling's sports practice – hardly ideal settings for academic success! If parents can master a consistent time and place for homework to be completed, they will most likely succeed at this part of the language immersion experience. I encourage parents to keep a regular homework time 5 days a week in a consistent place in the home. Even if the child has no homework that evening, it is best to insist that the time be used for reading silently or doing some other educational activity such as puzzles or word or math games.

A rule of thumb that many use to determine an appropriate amount of time to be spent on homework is 10 minutes per grade in school (e.g., 10 minutes for first grade and 60 minutes for sixth grade). I think it is reasonable to spend this amount of time every school night doing homework, educational activities or reading. As the child progresses through school, parents will be grateful for establishing this habit early. Children who have a designated study area and time are more likely to develop the habit of bringing home the necessary work in order to get it done. The "I don't have any

homework" excuse will drift away over time if this habit is enforced consistently. If the child is spending a great deal more time than the rule of thumb described earlier, a discussion between parents and the teacher should occur and they should work as a team to solve the problem. Once the student knows that parents and teacher are communicating directly it will greatly enhance study time productivity.

It is important that parents evaluate any rewards associated with this time. For example, if the child is rewarded with time on the computer when there is no homework, parents will soon find that there is never any homework. It is important to evaluate the behavior being rewarded and make changes if needed. A child studying or reading for 20 minutes in second grade deserves a star on a chart and an end-of-week reward, such as a special family activity, or dinner choice on Friday, or whatever helps get the job done. As a former college professor said to me once, "You have to find out what each child's M&M is." What motivates this child? There has been a trend recently in some schools for a *no homework* policy. If this is the case in your school, families may still choose to hold a regular study time which can be replaced with reading together or doing family activities together. This is a goal of the no homework movement, to allow children more time to be children and families more time to spend quality time together. Extra family time could be used to engage in a language or cultural experience to reinforce the school day experience in a positive way.

I see advantages to both approaches. The extra family time and free childhood time of the no homework movement is quite intriguing and has many merits. On the other hand, small and manageable homework assignments do prepare children for the rigors of the educational experience they will face, as they grow older. Good homework study habits created by young learners pay dividends in reduced stress over homework later on.

### **Target Language Comprehension**

"I can't read the instructions!" is a common cry of language immersion parents. Of course, if the instructions are all in the target language it may be entirely true that parents can't read them. However, parents should give it a try and see how much can be gleaned from what is read. Students learn by risk-taking and guessing all day long at school, consequently, this would be a perfect time for parents to be positive role models and do some language risk-taking themselves.

When children bring home a target lan-

guage assignment parents should remember that the teacher has explained it carefully to the class several times. Parents should ask their children, "What did the teacher say you were supposed to do?" Students probably know but aren't always willing to let their parents know that. Unfortunately, this is a game that language immersion students learn early on. If they pretend they don't understand what to do, they might get away with not doing it. Students learn the *language game* early and play it well. If mom or dad can't read the assignment or don't know what to do, children can use this to their advantage and appear to not know what to do either. If this occurs in your family, parents and children should sit down together and try to figure it out.

When trying to work through homework instructions with their children, some parents invent their own games. One is the *silly assignment* game. They lead their child in a really goofy, silly direction for the assignment and watch as their child leads them back. For example, if the assignment is to write a paragraph about their favorite hobby the parent might say, "I think you are supposed to write about the lunchroom cook." The student will most likely immediately correct the parent with "No, we're not. We are supposed to write about a hobby!" Children love to correct their parents. Another idea is to let children take on the role of being the teacher and instructing their parents. As families study together, and parents say a word incorrectly, children will probably laugh at the mistake and correct their parents. After laughing together, the activity can continue, and parents will have learned something new.

Some parents are motivated to take language classes when their child enters immersion. It is great if parents want to learn the language as long as they understand that they may not keep up with their children. As long as parents realize this, their own experience can serve as a model for the importance of language learning. That being said, it is not necessary for parents to learn the target language for students to be successful in language learning. Immersion works quite well for children no matter their parents' skill or lack thereof in the target language.

In an immersion setting, after English is introduced in second grade, more of the homework is given in English than in the target language. This is not because most of the day is in English but just the opposite. Some teachers try to keep as much of the school day in the target language as possible and send some of the work home in English.

Teachers struggle with the need to compress all school subjects into the school day, especially when they are trying to do language arts in two languages. A solution for teachers is sometimes to send some of the English work home which many parents find is a relief.

Another strategy that some language immersion teachers have used to avoid the parent language comprehension issue is to send home math practice that doesn't involve a lot of language, particularly in the early grades. Parents can look at a math book and figure out the language of math even if they don't know the words in the target language. Math becomes much more language intense after fourth grade, however, and will become more difficult for parents to assist with ease. Once again, parents should team up with the teacher and keep those communication channels open.

Another extremely useful strategy is for parents to establish a calling, texting, Facebook, email group, or Google Drive with other parents in the classroom where they can check with each other for assistance with understanding the homework assignment. This is a great tool and enables problem solving to take place prior to contacting the teacher. In this way, work can be completed the same day it is assigned rather than waiting for the following day for teacher contact to occur.

Those in a dual immersion program might think about additional ways to make contacts with other parents in the program for help. As one teacher noted, "I am in a two-way immersion program so I would encourage parents to connect with a family who speaks a different home language to get support." Helping each other to make the most of the language immersion life effectively makes good sense and helps form wonderful supportive relationships with other families.

Many teachers keep up-to-date web pages with parent information and assignment explanations. If parents have used all tools available and tried strategies to work through understanding an assignment with their children and have worked with other parents as well, they should definitely let the teacher know the difficulties they are having, especially if concerns and stress run high. This will help the teacher make adjustments on future assignments to clarify instructions and work with parents to establish a plan that works for all concerned. This helps children know the boundaries and expectations of their adult team (i.e., parents and teachers) and will help bring homework battles to an end. Of course, if the student is extraordi-

narily creative, the parent/teacher team will also need to improve their plan to stay ahead of new methods for putting off homework effort.

### Organization

At times, lack of organization seems to be a student's barrier to success with the home-school homework process. If parents have reason to believe there might be homework, but their child never seems to bring work home to complete, they should first check with the teacher or the teacher's website to see if this is the case.

Often the problem lies in *backpack issues*. Parents may check the website and see that their child is supposed to complete a task that was started at school that day. When the parents ask to see the homework, they discover that it's not there but rather in a desk or locker at school after the school is locked for the day. Three possibilities occur: either the child intentionally forgot the work at school so as to avoid having to do it, or they truly don't know what happened to it; or, they remember leaving it at school. Any one of the three former scenarios, if happening consistently, requires a plan of action. The sooner a child develops homework accountability, particularly in a language immersion program where communication requires an extra layer of processing, the better for the stress levels of all involved. It is important to first develop a plan with the child, possibly a positive reinforcement reward system, to increase the consistency with bringing home needed materials. If this doesn't work, the teacher and parents should team up yet again to improve consistency with the child's efforts at bringing home schoolwork and returning it to school. Teachers are likely to have many viable solutions for working with families to increase the homework behaviors everyone wants to see.

When it comes to homework and school projects, no two teachers, two grades, or two schools will have the same approach. Strategies and techniques that work for the teacher and the family need to be clarified to keep that teamwork going. Finally, parents should remember to relax and just approach this part of the language immersion life with good parenting skills. When asked for their best advice to parents regarding homework, immersion teachers respond repeatedly, "Relax!" and "Stay positive." Parents need to provide love, emotional support, confidence, and enrichment at home in as many ways as possible. Most students remember their parents as being "highly confident about my success in language immersion." Very few

recall their parents having any concerns at all and remember them as being very confident that everything would work out.

*"My parents believed that immersion education was a positive challenge for me. They supported me in school and were confident that I would have success. If they had concerns, they never expressed these to me."*  
- Language Immersion Student

*"Honestly, it was easy. We couldn't help the kids a lot with their homework, but we just trusted that it was going well."* - Language Immersion Parent

Families should get through the homework hurdle as early as possible and establish good habits. Parents of children entering those pre-adolescent and teenage years will be grateful for these earlier efforts. It's even possible that one day in the future older immersion students will thank their parents and teachers as well for the many skills they have learned to complete their schoolwork.

**Dr. Millie Park Mellgren** is the author of *The Language Immersion Life: A Guide for Families* (2017). She is a retired educator, having taught language all ages from preschool to PhD students. Her greatest passion however is for elementary immersion, having worked as teacher, administrator, researcher, advocate and consultant for many years. She began work with immersion programs on a U.S. Dept of Education grant working with the Minneapolis Public Schools in the mid-1980s. She went on to teach many years in the Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion school in Robbinsdale, Minnesota and later became the founding principal of the Ada Vista Spanish Immersion school in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During her career she published numerous articles in the professional journals of teacher education as well as language learning. She continues to write and publish in retirement, both fiction and personal essays. Dr. Mellgren lives in Traverse City, Michigan and most days wears an artist hat in front of her easel.

