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Math lessons in Mandarin? Local schools go global

In a growing number of Seattle-area classrooms, students spend half their school day immersed in a language other than English. One example is Beacon Hill International School in Seattle, where kindergartners can study in Spanish or Mandarin Chinese.

By **Linda Shaw**
Seattle Times education reporter

For nearly an hour, no one speaks a word of English in this first-grade math class.

Not the teacher, Ying Ying Wu, who talks energetically in Mandarin's songlike tones.

Not the students — 6- and 7-year-olds who seem to follow along fine, even though only one speaks Mandarin at home.

Even the math test has been translated, by Wu, into Chinese characters.

At Beacon Hill International School, many students learn a second language along with their ABCs by spending half of each school day immersed in Mandarin Chinese or Spanish.

It's an approach parents are clamoring for because they want their children to be able to communicate in our increasingly international world. The waiting list at Seattle's first international school — John Stanford, in Wallingford — has been long since its program began in 2000.

Beacon Hill, which had no waiting list to speak of before it adopted a similar program 1-½ years ago, had to turn away 75 families last fall.

Yet such programs are still rare in Seattle and throughout the country, despite all the talk about global competitiveness and the fact that anyone will tell you it's best to learn languages when you're young. The United States is perhaps the only nation where foreign-language instruction typically doesn't begin until middle or high school. Even in Africa, elementary-school students are studying Chinese.



KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Mandarin-immersion teacher Ying Ying Wu offers instruction to first-grade students Abby Zhou, left, and Cyrus Davies at Beacon Hill International School.



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Number of language-immersion programs statewide: No precise count, but it's in the dozens.
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For a non-Mandarin-speaking visitor, Wu's class is a puzzle. The only way to figure out what's going on is to observe the children. It's only when they write their names on the top of their tests or answer a math problem that it's clear what Wu has just asked them to do.

Occasionally, students pipe up in English. That's OK — they aren't expected to be fluent speakers just yet. Still, if Wu believes they could use Chinese instead, she'll pretend, in fun, that she doesn't speak English.

"Wo ting bu tong," she tells one boy. Literally: *I hear you, but I don't understand.*

In the afternoon, these students will move to another classroom to study reading, writing and social studies in English. But in the morning, they learn math and science in Mandarin, picking up the language through repetition and physical cues from Wu.

At first, the strongest interest in Beacon Hill's language-immersion classes came from English-speaking and Chinese-speaking families, Principal Susie Murphy said. Many Spanish-speaking families were wary, she said, worried their children might not learn English well. But interest among those families is now strong, too, Murphy said.

Beacon Hill International's teachers hope the two-language approach will lead to academic gains for all their students, especially the school's many immigrant children, who often fall behind academically while they still are learning English.

There's research to bolster that hope. At John Stanford, for example, the school compared students in its first Spanish-English class with those who were one grade ahead and taught only in English. On the state's fourth-grade test, the children in the Spanish-English program scored about 20 percentile points higher in reading and math.

And there are signs that the approach also helps boost confidence.

A few years ago, when Beacon Hill staff members were interviewing Spanish-speaking teachers for the Spanish-English program, they asked applicants to teach a sample lesson. Spanish-speaking students who usually said little in class suddenly were raising their hands high. One boy who'd had a hard time paying attention all year was on his knees, waving his arms to get called on.

That put tears in some teachers' eyes, said Murphy, the principal.

As the math lesson winds down in Wu's first-grade class, a social-studies lesson is starting up nearby in Kathy Ritzer's Spanish-English kindergarten class.

"Vamos a aprender algo nuevo," Ritzer tells them. *We're going to learn something new.*

She introduces the words *ocean* (*ocean*) and *continente* (*continent*), and then *norte* (*north*), *sur* (*south*), *este* (*east*) and *oeste* (*west*).

The students practice those words in a kind of Simon Says game. Arms up when Ritzer says *norte*. Arms down for *sur*. Arms to the left for *oeste* and right for *este*. As the students wave their arms in unison, it's like they're leading a sports-stadium wave.

When the lesson ends and they line up for lunch, one student stops to show a visitor some of his drawings.

Does he speak Spanish at home?

No, he says, Romanian.

John Stanford elementaries and Hamilton and Denny middle schools in Seattle.

Features of Seattle's international schools: All students learn more about global issues and perspectives, and parents may enroll children in language-immersion classes, in which students spend part of the day learning in English and part learning science, math or other subjects in another language. The languages per se are not taught, but students learn through repetition and teachers' visual clues. The schools also have English-only options.

Entrance requirements for Beacon Hill immersion classes: None for kindergartners and first-graders; other students must have some understanding of the selected language.

Source: *Seattle Public Schools and Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction*

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Which means he's working on his second and third languages in this ever-shrinking world.

Linda Shaw: 206-464-2359 or lshaw@seattletimes.com

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