



# How do Immersion Programs Work-A Case Study of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School

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It's been a privilege to have the opportunity to visit so many different schools in the U.S.A. As the delegate of New Taipei City Educator, I am allowed to enter the classroom to observe, talk to the students, exchange my teaching ideas with American teachers, recognize different educational system, and even share Taiwanese culture with American students. We visit eight different schools in Massachusetts and New Jersey including Josiah Quincy Elementary School, Sherwood Middle School, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, Ramtown School, Howell Middle School South, Freehold Intermediate School, Freehold Learning Center and Freehold High School. Among these schools, Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School is the most impressive one for me. Those 6-year-old kids can speak Chinese fluently with me, which makes me rethink our English learning environment profoundly.

English is not commonly spoken in Taiwan, where English is taught as a foreign language. Students start to learn English since first grade in elementary school. Traditionally, our English teachers are non-native speakers. They need to major in English in the university, finish their internship, get the teaching license and pass the teaching assessment. Taiwanese teachers use our first language, Chinese, to teach English. Therefore, the students are lack of English listening stimulation, and our kids don't have many opportunities to speak English. However, more and more new teaching methodologies are introduced from other countries. New Taipei City government started to adopt different English teaching policy a few years ago. English Wonderlands and experimental bilingual school provide English immersion program for students. In junior high school and senior high school, the government recruits foreign teachers to co-teach with Taiwanese teachers. The final goal of our English education is to build up the students' English proficiency.

## ***What's Immersion Program?***

Unlike a traditional foreign language course, where students may learn a new language for only part of the school day and through partial use of their native language. Students enrolled in an immersion program are quite literally immersed in the new language. A majority of their instruction will be the second language. Students will learn about general education topics, like math, science, social studies, music and arts in a second language. Parents often choose immersive environments because continuous exposure to a second language environment can help children quickly acquire a new language, especially before the age of 12. Immersion program can accelerate the process of achieving near-fluent language ability. Immersion program may also improve children's mental flexibility, pattern recognition and problem-solving skills. Students studying in the immersion school probably can have a better chance to cultivate a global vision by being educated in a different language.

## ***Introduction of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School***

PVCICS(Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School) is a tuition-free public charter school authorized by the state of Massachusetts. Because it's a public school, student entrance is by lottery. The school prepares K-12th grade students for academic and cross-cultural success through rigorous study and instruction aligned with the state and federal government standards, augmented with Chinese language and culture. PVCICS's goals are to graduate students with excellent scholarship, high proficiency in Mandarin Chinese and English, plus sensitivity to multiple cultures.

PVCICS opened in the fall of 2007 with Kindergarten and 1st grades. Each year since opening, it has added grades and grown. Students come from all over the Pioneer Valley and most have no background in Chinese when they enter the school. PVCICS currently enrolls roughly 500 students in grades K-12 from nearly 30 communities in the Pioneer Valley. PVCICS offers an "IB for All" high school program where all 11th and 12th grade students take all International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. Some high school students fulfill the requirements for the full International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, while others opt to earn IB Certificates in certain subject courses.



## ***Educational Philosophy***

During the meeting with the principal, Ms. Kathleen Wang, she emphasizes that through early and sustained immersion in Chinese, students will be highly proficient in two languages, develop sensitivity and tolerance for other cultures. That's probably true. According to several linguistic experts, the golden age to learn a second language is between two and half and three years old.

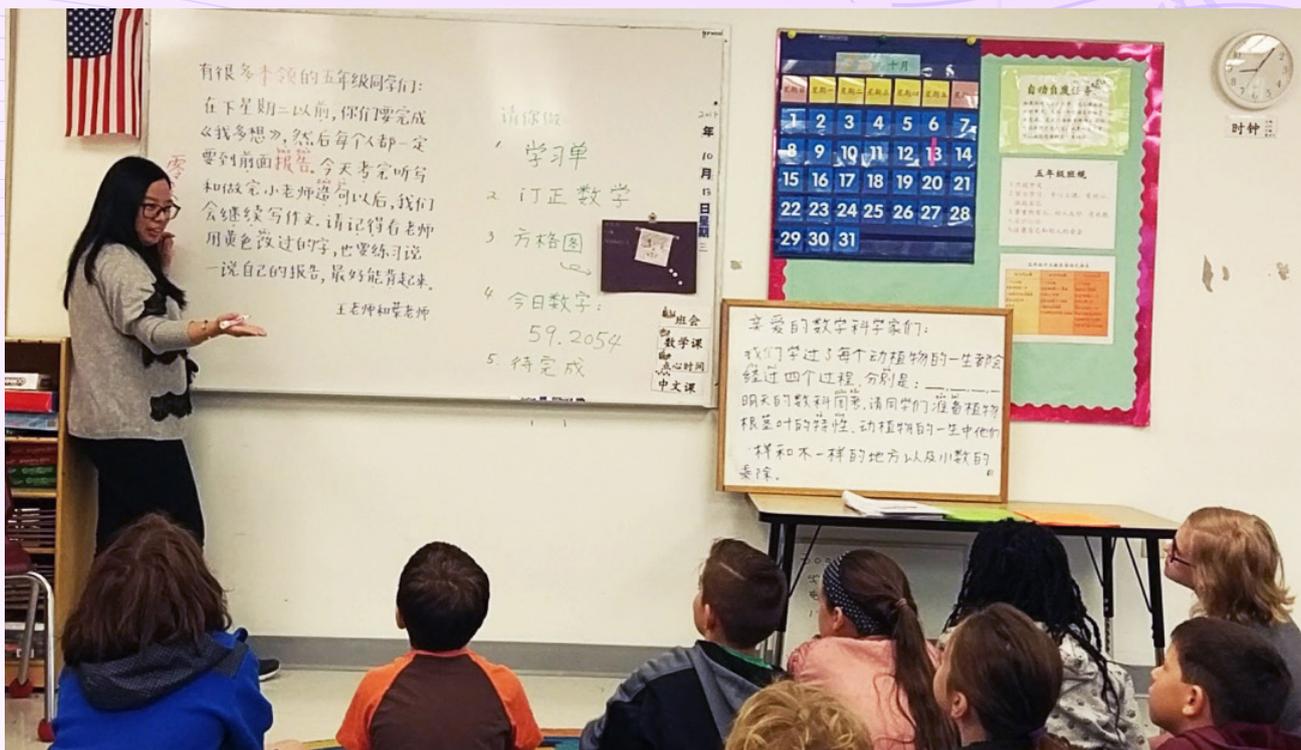
PVCICS uses a one-way immersion model to teach Chinese at school. Most students enter the school without Chinese language skills. First semester in the kindergarten is really a disaster for the teachers, the principal says. Kids don't understand any Chinese, so they can't follow the teachers' instructions. No English is used by the teacher during the Chinese portion of the day, although students can talk to the teacher and one another in English until they gain sufficient proficiency in Chinese. Because of the teachers' insistence, students' Chinese acquisition occurs naturally by using Chinese as the language of instruction. Students' Chinese ability really improves a lot in the second year. They can do the basic conversation and answer the teachers' questions in class.

Culture is another important part in the immersion program. According to the studies, attitudes about race most often take root between four to eight years old. Moreover, the age of ten is a critical time in the development of attitudes toward nations and groups. Chinese teachers not only teach language, but also bring Chinese culture to the classroom. If we don't have this kind of cultural stimulation, the only way for our kids to understand Chinese culture is Chinese food, the principal says.



## **Teaching Methodology**

The majority of students speak English as their mother tongue when they are enrolled in the kindergarten. So how do those immersion teachers use a foreign language to teach? During the class observation, I find out that teachers use a lot of body language and facial gestures to make themselves understood. Besides, teachers initially only use simple Chinese to express their idea, speak more slowly, emphasize the key point and sing the nursery rhymes with kids. While in high school, teachers use more linguistic strategies to make themselves understood, such as paraphrase, exemplification, and literacy as tools for building students' Chinese ability. Students in the 8th grade even need to read Li Bo's poem to experience the beauty of Chinese.



## Curriculum

Grades	% of daily instruction in Chinese	Subjects taught in Chinese	% of daily instruction in English	Subjects taught in English
K-1st	75%	Math, Science/ Technology, History/ Social Studies, Chinese Language Arts and Culture	25%	English Language Arts
2nd - 5th	50%	Math, Science/ Technology, Chinese Language Arts & Culture,	50%	English Language Arts, History/Social Studies
6th - 12th	25%	Chinese Language Arts & Culture	75%	English Language Arts, Math, Science/ Technology, History/ Social Science

Source: <http://www.pvcics.org/academics>

As a Massachusetts public charter school, PVCICS's curriculum is aligned with the Common Core/Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCFs) standards. In K-1 grades, most of the subjects are taught in Chinese, except English Language Arts. Abundant language stimulation is necessary during the age of 3 to 6. Kids' native language might improve slower than other kids during this period. However, a continuous K-12 Chinese immersion program helps students develop high proficiency in both Chinese and English. Subjects taught in Chinese are taught by a bilingual teacher with native proficiency in Chinese. Elementary school subjects are taught by a grade level team of Chinese and English teachers, where each teacher focuses on a particular subject.

Middle school subjects are taught by subject teachers, which is the same like Taiwan. Students take five core subjects (English, Math, Science, Social Studies/History and Chinese) and take three specials classes (art, music and PE) for the entire school year. Students have Chinese class for two hours every day, which prevents their Chinese ability going backward. Studies show that if a non-native speaker doesn't continuously learn or speak that language, his/her second language ability will regress within three years.

As for the high school program, the curriculum is designed to prepare students for the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma programme. The International Baccalaureate programme aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect, which encourages students to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right. Students who take IB courses will be able to connect with people in an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing world.



### **Mini-Culture Lesson**

We not only did the classroom observation, but also had a mini-culture lesson this time. It was an honor to have this opportunity to share our culture with these high school students in America, especially they had been learning Chinese for so long, and some of them even had been to China or Taiwan. Mr. Lu and I even prepared the lesson together several times in Taiwan. We decided to teach the students to make a Chinese lantern, sing a famous Chinese song-The Moon Represents My Heart, and told them a famous folk tale- Journey to the West by playing Chinese hand puppet show.

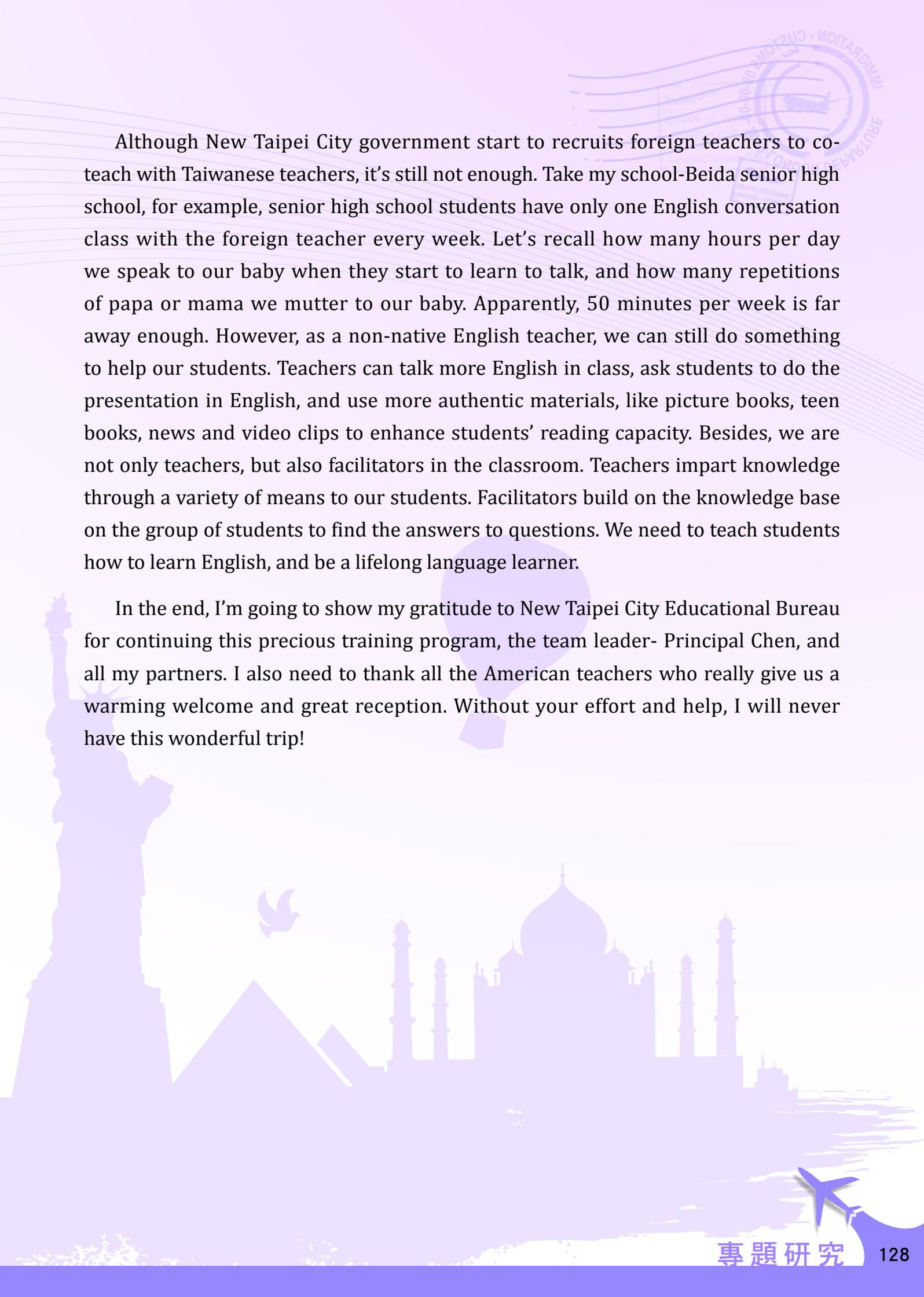
Culture is an integral part of language learning. In the field of foreign language education, teachers refer to language abilities as separate skills, like listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Culture is often referred to as the “fifth skill.” Culture as the fifth skill emphasizes the learners’ ability to perceive, to understand, and ultimately accept cultural relativity. For example, in the mini-culture lesson, the American students mentioned that they have Sesame Street Puppet Show, which is similar to our Chinese hand puppet show, and the audience of Sesame Street Puppet Show are mostly kids, while the elderly like to watch Chinese hand puppet show in front of the temple in Taiwan. Mr. Lu and I hope that students can

not only understand the story of Journey to the West, but they also perceive and recognize cultural differences. I can guarantee that those students in the immersion program really accept these cultural differences. They appreciate and value cultural differences.



## ***Reflection about Taiwanese English Education***

My students are senior high school students. They have been learning English for at least nine years. However, most students don't feel confident about speaking English, and parents are still concerned about children's English ability. Like what I mention above, Taiwan is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country, English is not commonly used in Taiwan. Many students regard English as a subject instead of a language. Because we don't have English-spoken environment, our students' speaking and listening ability is often inferior to reading and writing ability. Traditionally, teachers focus on vocabulary and grammar part in English class and our exam is full of multiple choice questions. That's the reason why our kids don't have the confidence to talk to a foreigner.



Although New Taipei City government start to recruits foreign teachers to co-teach with Taiwanese teachers, it's still not enough. Take my school-Beida senior high school, for example, senior high school students have only one English conversation class with the foreign teacher every week. Let's recall how many hours per day we speak to our baby when they start to learn to talk, and how many repetitions of papa or mama we mutter to our baby. Apparently, 50 minutes per week is far away enough. However, as a non-native English teacher, we can still do something to help our students. Teachers can talk more English in class, ask students to do the presentation in English, and use more authentic materials, like picture books, teen books, news and video clips to enhance students' reading capacity. Besides, we are not only teachers, but also facilitators in the classroom. Teachers impart knowledge through a variety of means to our students. Facilitators build on the knowledge base on the group of students to find the answers to questions. We need to teach students how to learn English, and be a lifelong language learner.

In the end, I'm going to show my gratitude to New Taipei City Educational Bureau for continuing this precious training program, the team leader- Principal Chen, and all my partners. I also need to thank all the American teachers who really give us a warming welcome and great reception. Without your effort and help, I will never have this wonderful trip!