The bilingual approach

Education for bilingualism

One of the European Union’s language policy goals is to achieve true multilingualism. All children, regardless of their mother tongue, should be able to make themselves understood in at least two languages. The Würth Foundation has chosen Berlin as an environment in which German is the dominant majority language, but there is also an interesting linguistic and national variety among the population.

Acquiring mother-tongue skills takes a long time, so bilingual teaching is one of the most important components of our curriculum. Bilingual teaching takes place mainly in English, the emphasis being on conveying information rather than on the language itself. It is “not the second language itself that is being taught so much as ways of using it to carry out specific learning tasks and working processes”. (Wildhage & Otten [2009], Praxis des bilingualen Unterrichts, Berlin: Cornelsen Scriptor, 18).

International focus

The globalisation of the economy and society is changing the demands on young people from the very start of their working lives. International comparisons show that a higher level of educational attainment is possible than the average currently found in Germany, and this has serious consequences for Germany’s global competitiveness, particularly for those families to whom globalisation offers international work opportunities. As a result, international education is becoming increasingly important.

The Würth Foundation, the non-profit-making organisation which operates the school, seeks to give the students a window on a continually globalising world and an international perspective from an early age, and to achieve international standards of education.

International teachers

To implement this bilingual approach, the foundation recruits teachers from abroad to teach in English. These often have a different view of the educational process, and add to the school’s international dimension. We work closely with the international teacher placement service at the Faculty of Education of Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, and regularly attend educational job fairs in English-speaking countries. The foundation seeks to make classes as diverse as possible, to reflect this international approach and Berlin’s cultural variety.
Bilingual subjects are taught by teachers with qualifications in those subjects. If they are not native speakers, they are required either to have English teaching qualifications or language skills at level C2 of the common European language reference framework. Secondary stage I teachers are required to have level C1 language skills.

Non-German-speakers attend language courses at the Goethe Institute to acquire German language and communication skills and in-house training to gain an understanding of the Berlin school system and syllabus. They are also obliged to participate in continuing education in their subjects.

**How this works in practice**

Subjects taught in English follow the educational methodology and content of the syllabus laid down by the state of Berlin. Students therefore learn the same content as in other local schools, but there may be a difference in emphasis because they use English-language teaching materials or case studies. We aim to teach 40% of primary and secondary subjects in English. From the outset, primary schoolchildren communicate and learn in German for half of their mornings, and English for the other half.

During their first two years, children learn literacy skills in their mother tongue, and focus on oral communication in the second language. From the third year onwards, literacy skills are additionally taught in the target foreign language. In bilingual subject teaching, the children's performance is evaluated on the basis of their understanding both of the subject and the language.

Language errors are taken into account where appropriate, and by the time the child takes their Abitur, their skills are evaluated using the criteria for German-language subjects. Their graduation certificate shows which subjects were taught in the foreign language.

Students take their Mittlere Schulabschluss and Abitur exams in the language in which the subject was primarily taught in that year.

History, physics, chemistry and music are taught mainly in German. Geography, ethics, sports and art are taught mainly in English. Maths and biology may use either language.

The timetable for secondary stage I also includes an additional hour of English in years 7 and 10 to achieve bilingual subject skills. Germany is taught as a foreign language where individually required, and English is available as a first or second language.

Apart from bilingual teaching, we provide active support for foreign language acquisition in the form of English-language projects and excursions, everyday interaction in English-speaking “learning families” and over lunch together, and celebrating English and American festivals.