

Original Paper**A Look at EFL Immersion Programs**

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The success of English as A Foreign Language (EFL) education is at best questionable. As an alternative to the current method of EFL instruction, I argue that the adoption of immersion programs will lead to equal or better second language learning.

In Japan, even though students spend as much as ten years studying English, most of them become somewhat competent in grammar, but are still extremely weak in communication skills such as speaking and listening. Bringing an immersion program to Japan can be the key to enhance success in their language learning. In the United States, there is a growing interest in integrating both language and content instruction. This method, often implemented through immersion programs, is an innovative one and deserves further inspection with the view of adopting it here in Japan.

Definition and History

In the book "Communicative Competence—Theory and Classroom Practice" (S. J. Savignon, 1983), the author defines immersion programs as education programs that offer language instruction in the second language (L2). In other words, the L2 is used exclusively as the means of communication within the classroom and school.

These types of programs were originally designed for use at the elementary school level. The first immersion program appeared in 1965, after some parents in Canada showed a great concern about the teaching of French. The efforts of a group of parents and a team of psychologists at McGill University resulted in the creation of a new alternative—a French immersion program which provided a total French environment for the children from the time they entered kindergarten. Since then, these types of immersion programs have spread, not only in Canada, but also in the United States. There are several kinds of immersion programs (described later), but I would like to focus mainly on the total immersion model.

In "A Conceptual Framework for the Integration of Language and Content in Second/Foreign Language Instruction" (TESOL Quarterly, 1989), the authors, Snow, Met and Genesse, explained that content-based language instruction has received increased attention because of its strong contrasts with many of the existing methods and concepts.

First, for young children, cognitive development and language development go hand in hand. That is, language is a tool through which children both understands the language itself *and* the world around them. In L1 acquisition, these processes are paired naturally. For children learning L2, traditional methods often dissociate language learning from cognitive and other academic development. The integrated approach, on the contrary, brings these domains together in instruction.

Secondly, language is learned most effectively for communication within socially and academically meaningful and purposeful contexts. It provides maximum opportunities for language use with clearly defined purposes such as learning history, math, sciences and other areas of learning. In fact, academically speaking, the very purpose of school is to teach subjects to students. In "Content-area Language Instruction, Approaches and Strategies" (Cantoni-Harvey, 1987), the author

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argues that, when the language learners' second language is both the object and medium of instruction, the content of each lesson must be taught simultaneously with the linguistic skills necessary for understanding.

Thirdly, integrated models provide a substantive basis for language teaching and learning. Content can provide both a motivational *and* a cognitive basis for language learning. Content provides a primary motivational incentive for learning insofar as it is interesting and of some value to the learner, and therefore worth learning. Then, language will be learned because it provides access to content, and language learning may even become incidental to learning the content.

Finally, concerning the intrinsic characteristics of language variation, it is increasingly recognized that language use in schools differs in many ways from language use outside of school, and moreover, that different subject areas are characterized by specific genres or registers. In "Whole Language in TESOL" (Rigg, TESOL Quarterly, 1991), the author notes that knowledge is socially constructed so that the major purpose of language would be the creation and communication of meanings.

Features of an Immersion Model

In "Immersion Teacher Handbook" (Snow, 1987), the author suggests that the key features of immersion education provide a strong theoretical and pedagogical foundation not only for foreign/second language instruction, but also as an effective model for elementary education, in general. A look at those key features reveal:

1. The L2 is used for the delivery of subject matter instruction. As mentioned earlier, immersion education is based on the belief that children are able to learn a L2 in the same way that they learned their first language, by being exposed to authentic input in the second language and being required to use the L2 for actual communicative purposes. It can be viewed that immersion education actually provides a two-for-one type of opportunity.
2. L2 learners benefit from being separated from native speakers of the second language. Since the learners are in the same 'linguistic boat', they receive instruction especially prepared and designed for their developing levels of proficiency in the L2.
3. Immersion programs reflect the broader perspective of the world outside of school. In the United States, for example, English speaking children are in no danger of losing their first language, though they receive the majority of their elementary education in their L2. English is so pervasive in their world, i.e., TV, radio, advertising, conversations with parents and friends, etc., that ample opportunities to maintain their first language are provided.
4. The sequence and intensity of first and second language instruction is slowly integrated from early in the children's education, usually kindergarten. Instruction in the first language is added to the immersion curriculum to some degree (language arts, and/or selected content area such as social studies) from the third grade, and gradually over the course of the remaining of elementary school, more and more first language instruction occurs.
5. Program duration is at least four to six years since L2 learning is a gradual process. It takes many years to develop a strong academic and social foundation in the L2.
6. The principle of "separation of the two languages for instruction" is applied in two major ways in the classroom. First, the same material is never repeated in the two languages and there is no translation of content instruction from the immersion language to the first language, nor repetition of delivery in one language and then the other. Secondly, the roles of the language instructors fall into strict language domains. In earlier grades it is preferable to have both a first- and second-language speaking model. This is often accomplished by setting up second language speaking exchange teachers to conduct certain components (e.g., language arts) in the lower grades.

7. Since the inception of immersion programs, parents have played a very important role in setting up new immersion programs and providing continuous support for the established programs.

Goals of Immersion Programs

In order to get a clear view of the issues, an examination of the goals of immersion programs should be added to the previous discussion. Those goals, as indicated by Lipton, are as follows:

1. To become functionally proficient in the L2 (to be able to communicate on any age-appropriate topic almost as well as a native).
2. To master subject content material of the local school district curriculum that is taught through the L2.
3. To acquire an understanding of, and appreciation for other cultures.
4. To achieve second language arts skills comparable to, or surpassing the achievements of students in monolingual programs.

In addition to the goals above, Snow (*ibid.*) adds that students have a greater opportunity to be schooled in an integrated setting with participants from a variety of ethnic groups.

Factors Determining Success of Immersion Programs

In order to attain the above-mentioned goals, the factors that have the potential to affect the success of the program should be discussed. The targeted students and their surroundings must be considered carefully. Why begin at the elementary level? Recent research from the United States holds that children are more adept than adults at learning a second language. In "Patterns of English Structure, Variation & Change" (Burling, 1992), the author describes how children come to the task of learning a language with something Noam Chomsky called an "Acquisition Device." Chomsky has always argued that children have a head start, having already been given a great deal of specific, though unconscious, linguistic knowledge by their genetic inheritance.

Another factor in the success of immersion programs is the integration of both first- and second-languages alternately to provide variety, freshness and mental stimulation. For example, divide program participants in half, with one half studying the first language in the morning in the first and third terms of the school year, while the remainder study the second language in the afternoons. The groups then switch the times (and thereby the subjects, as well) for the second and fourth terms.

Additionally, immersion programs should be seen as adding to the repertoire of the students' skills, not as an act of giving up their mother tongue. A second language has the effect of increasing the neural network, thus making it easier for children to absorb new information later.

Also critical to the success of immersion programs is the level of support that parents provide to the program. Parents need to watch for signs of emotional strain or deterioration of the mother tongue and supplement its development, as necessary. A parent should remember the courage that it takes to be immersed in a new language, that at the beginning it may leave a child confused or uncertain about all that goes on in class, and the parent must remember to encourage the student. Parental feedback on emotional changes, student development, materials, and possible program changes are equally as critical.

Last, but not least is the active involvement of the school districts, the surrounding community and society. The program can only be successful if students' efforts are appreciated and their skills become useful tools for society.

Immersion Model Variations

Most of the comments in this analysis are in regards to the total immersion model, but immer-

sion programs vary according to the time devoted per day for instruction, according to the age of entrance into the program, and according to budgets, needs and community resources. The six variations of the immersion model which Snow described (*ibid.*) are as follows:

1. **Early Partial Immersion.** This is a program in which less than 100% of the curriculum instruction during the primary grades is in the L2. The amount of L2 instruction varies but the most common formula is 50-50 in each language from Kindergarten through sixth grades. Reading is generally taught in both languages.
2. **Delayed Immersion.** Under this program, the second language is not used as a medium of instruction until grade four or five. Accordingly, students in delayed immersion programs first learn to read in their mother language. Often, students in these programs receive some second language instruction earlier in elementary school when the L2 is taught as a school subject.
3. **Late Immersion.** This type does not offer intense use of the second language until after the completion of elementary, or sometimes secondary school. Late immersion students usually receive some kind of second language instruction in earlier grades but the second language is not used as a medium of instruction for subjects in the regular school curriculum.
4. **Double Immersion.** This program employs two non-native languages as the medium of instruction during the elementary grades. The two languages are usually elected for their sociocultural significance, perhaps for economic or social benefits, or for its religious importance. Double immersion programs sometimes are classified as a type of early immersion or delayed immersion program.
5. **Two-way Bilingual Immersion.** These programs are designed to serve not only a language majority, but also a language *minority* concurrently. In this program, the two language groups are purposefully mixed in the same classroom. In the lower elementary grades (generally, grades one through three), all content instruction takes place in the home language of the minority students with a short period devoted to the oral language of the majority. In the upper elementary grades (generally four through six), approximately half of the curriculum is taught in the home (minority) language and half in the host (majority) language. This two-way approach provides excellent opportunities for students of diverse languages and ethnic groups to work together on problem-solving and interactive tasks, and to serve as peer models to each other, as well. The goals of a two-way immersion program are for both groups to become bilingual, succeed academically, and develop positive inter-group relationships.
6. **Structured or Modified Immersion.** This type of program is a variation of the traditional immersion program which is designed for language minority students. In a structured immersion program, language minority students receive all subject matter instruction in the majority language. For example, Limited English Proficiency (LEP, now often referred to as PEP, Potential English Proficiency) students from Spanish speaking home background receive all instruction in English through structured immersion. That is, the instruction is planned so that all interactive communication can be within a level the second language learner can understand. Students are allowed to use their home language in class, but the teacher (who is typically bilingual) uses English only.

Critique of Immersion Programs

While many people support immersion programs, in "Off to An Early Start" (Williams, 1991), the author warns that some experts question their effectiveness. In "An Integrated Theory of Language Teaching and Its Practical Consequences" (Hammerly, 1985), the criticism is more specific. The author claims that the programs are not working well because most of the students in immer-

sion programs are encouraged to be creative and speak freely before they know the structure. The students make so many errors that immersion teachers give up trying to teach grammar and usage. As a result, he argues, these students can't handle a bilingual situation, like in a job setting, unless it's a low-level job. He recommends that schools only teach a foreign language to students who are ten years old, or older. And even then, he asserts that the language should be taught as a separate subject at least five hours a week, with the emphasis placed on structure and grammar. Hammerly is willing to concede, however, that immersion might work if it is a two-way immersion.

Conclusion

Even Genesse (ibid.), one of the leading researchers on immersion program issues, believes that the programs still need to be improved. He says that problems arise when the teacher is the only native speaker with which the students converse. He advises that schools with immersion programs make sure that students are exposed to the culture and media of the countries where the language is spoken, and suggests that they invite speakers to the classroom who can give students a broader sense of how the language is used.

I strongly believe that immersion programs would work effectively as an innovative method of teaching, not only for elementary schools, but also for higher academic levels, as well as professional levels. I'd like to end this paper with a comment made by the Great Falls Elementary (Virginia, USA) principal, Gina Ross, who is heavily involved in the immersion program there: "I just can't tell you as an educator and an administrator how excited I am. I feel like I am giving my students a gift for the 21st century. Language is our international communication tool."

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