



Refining Curriculum in the Language Immersion Certificate Program: Using Improvisation

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Editor's note: The author of this Bridge insert has agreed to share an excerpt from curriculum developed during course work she completed while participating in the University of Minnesota's Language Immersion Certificate Program. The Language Immersion Certificate Program, offered by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education and Human Development, is the first of its kind in the U.S. incorporating a set of courses designed specifically for practicing immersion teachers. Program participants can earn the certificate as a stand alone qualification or as part of a graduate-level degree program. To learn more about this professional development program, visit <http://www.education.umn.edu/SPS/programs/certificates/LanguageImmersion.html>

Traditionally, second languages have been taught through a structured approach that focuses on the grammar and functions of language. Strangely enough, this is not the way first languages are acquired. In fact, with first language acquisition, the grammar and functions of language are not customarily taught until the end of primary or the beginning of secondary school, long after individuals have mastered communicative fluency in their native tongue. The immersion model of language learning comes closest to replicating the natural way in which humans acquire their first language. However, attempting to learn a second language (L2) strictly using an osmosis approach, where attention to language functions and structures is not woven masterfully into the content curriculum, has proven insufficient for mastery of a language. The immersion model (depending on the degree or level of immersion since this model has many variations of implementation) is a content-based model of instruction (CBI) where language is taught and acquired simultaneously with course content. It necessitates an element of lesson preparation which focuses on specific language structures, vocabulary and functions that are inherently present in a given content-based lesson. The teacher weaves these functions and structures into the content of the lesson so that the two, content and language, are taught and learned as if they were one.

Many bodies of research regarding second language acquisition stress the importance of providing students with active and meaningful language practice. Providing a meaningful learning context for language acquisition is key to developing oral proficiency. According to Cloud, Genesee and Hamayan (2000):

...when students are engaged in an activity or task that interests them, they learn language incidentally and naturally...The best environment for developing language proficiency in a second language is one in which significant portions of the new language are learned incidentally and in the context of doing something that is inherently meaningful. (p. 56)

Language in classrooms is more than just isolated utterances produced to meet the academic goals teachers have for their students. It is a communicative process with a purpose that stems out of contextualized settings, feelings and relationships. As such, there are four areas naturally occurring in theater and drama, the subject matter focus of this curriculum, that enhance language use in different contexts. They are setting, role and status, mood, attitude and feeling, and shared knowledge (Smith, 2000). By putting language into a particular situation, the meaning of the communication is seen as a whole and not as a series of utterances where meaning is isolated from real situations. Using drama and theater as a content base in the immersion classroom, a focus is placed on co-creating real life situations whose goal is to communicate and not just repeat back the teacher's intended language goals. According to Smith (2000), students' language should emerge out of a situation. For this to occur, more than just oral communication abilities are needed. It also requires quick analysis of character, body language and relationships between characters. The nature of content-based language learning begins with meaning and works its way to analysis of text and structure. Given the inbuilt language practicing elements in theater and drama, it makes good sense to use theater/drama as a content base within the immersion setting.

As an elementary school immersion teacher I had found it fairly easy to implement the immersion approach in my teaching. I had an entire class of students at my disposal for the whole school day. I had the flexibility to maximize teachable immersion moments throughout the day and the independence to work towards weaving the L2 into the content of lessons. Continuing to do this at the upper levels of middle and high school, however, became more challenging. Secondary students receive less and less of their instruction in the L2 due to increasing academic demands (for standardized test preparation in particular), their class time is limited and they undergo increasing societal pressures to be like their non-immersion peers. Within my school district I have had the good fortune of being able to create an immersion course for middle school students while participating in the university's Immersion Certificate Program. With my background in theater it seemed only natural to capitalize on the elements inherent in drama to create a course for my 7th graders. Drawing upon various certificate program readings and resources, I was able to tailor many of the lessons for this new theater class as part of my immersion certificate program course work. Here is a lesson taken from a curriculum unit I designed to teach students about the use of improvisation and character development as a creative tool. It has been refined over time with feedback from course instructors and immersion certificate peers and represents the ways my understanding of weaving content and language learning together has evolved.

References

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- Smith, S. (2000-2005), *Using drama as a resource for giving language more meaning*. Developing Teachers. com. Retrieved from http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/drama1_sam.htm

Additional Recommended Readings

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- Prescott, J. (2003). The power of reader's theater: An easy way to make dramatic changes in kids' fluency, writing, listening and social skills. *Scholastic Instructor*. Retrieved on March 26, 2005 from <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/instructor/readerstheater.htm>
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Program Model: Secondary continuation program for early total immersion
Content Area: Theater and Drama
Immersion Language: French

Intended Student Audience: Grade 7 students have a much reduced number of classes in French and their motivation for speaking French had greatly declined compared to their elementary experience. Students' proficiency in French is at about an Intermediate Advanced level based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines.

Unit Theme: Using improvisation as a creative tool

Generalizations/Enduring Understandings:

- A character's personality traits and physical attributes will inform what he/she says and does.
- Improvisations occur in real life.
- Improvisation is a tool that actors use to explore and develop a character.
- The spontaneity of improvisation brings out spontaneity in language.

Related Concepts:

- Character development
- Personality characteristics
- Theater skills for developing physical traits
- Building confidence and trust
- Stage presence

Lesson 1

Generalization: A character's personality traits and physical attributes will inform what he/she says and does.

- How can a character's physical attributes inform what he/she says?
- How can a character's physical attributes inform what he/she does?

Description of Learning Activity

Students will analyze the physical characteristics and personality traits of characters in a children's picture book that has been rewritten into a play. As sources, students will use both the picture book and the play. They will use these analogies to develop their particular character's behavior and language. Though I am using this lesson to help students develop the characters they will perform for improvisation and a play, this activity can be modified and used as a literature tool to examine and analyze characters in stories. Instead of creating the language and gestures that the characters might do, students could look for language and behaviors in the literature that clearly relate to the kind of physical and personality traits they have identified.

Content:

Students will:

- Identify physical and personality traits of their character.
- Demonstrate understanding of how a character's physical and personality traits influence its behaviors and language by predicting possible language and gestures based on those characteristics.

Language: Content Obligatory

Students will:

- Use adjectives with their proper gender agreement such as fat or big (*gros/se*); little (*petit/e*); soft or quiet (*doux/ce*); aggressive (*agressif/ve*); kind or gentle (*gentil/le*); mean or mischievous (*méchant/e*); calm; strong or loud (*fort/e*); *courageux/ue*; fearful (*crainitif/ive*); low/high (voice) (*voix grave/aigue*); brave; *timide*; young (*jeune*); old (*vieux/vieille*) to describe a character's physical and personality traits with a peer.
- Make predictions about their characters using expressions such as: he/she is/has... so (*il/elle est/a ...donc...*); His/her personality is ... so (*sa personnalité est... alors...*); because of... he/she (*a cause de...il/elle...*); thanks to his/her ...he/she (*grâce à son/sa/ses...il/elle*); Given that...the animal probably ...(*étant donnée...il est probable que l'animal...*)
- Use conditional sentences such as: instead of ...he would be able to (*au lieu de...il pourrait...*) to predict how their character would act and what it would say.
- Use key vocabulary words such as physical traits (*caractéristiques physiques*), defining features (*les traits physiques les plus importants*), behavior (le comportement), gestures (*les gestes*) and characters (*les personnages*) to converse with peers and present to the class.

Language: Content Compatible

Students will:

- Review the following animal body parts to discuss and list the physical characteristics of their assigned character: fangs (*les crocs*); mouth (*la bouche*); hooves (*les sabots*); paws (*les pattes*); ears (les oreilles); fur (la fourrure); hair (*les poils*); snout, (*le groin*); muzzle, (*le museau*); whiskers (*les moustaches*); horns (*les cornes*); tail (*la queue*).
- Use the verb "to have" with the definite article of animal body parts to discuss characteristics of their assigned character (e.g. *le loup a de gros crocs...*/the wolf has big fangs).
- Use the third person singular of the following verbs/verb expressions to talk about their characters with a peer : to be (*être*); to have (*avoir*); to eat (*manger*); to look like (*ressembler*); to look/appear/seem (*avoir l'air*); to speak (*parler*); to use a voice (*utiliser une voix*).
- Use first person plural of verbs such as: to identify (*identifier*); to find (*trouver*); to think (*penser*); to believe (*croire*) to present their ideas about respective characters to the class.

Learning Strategies

Students will:

- Work cooperatively with a partner to fill out two graphic organizers.
- Use a cause and effect flow chart to list the physical characteristics and personality traits that give rise to a character's language and behavior (figures 1 and 2).

Time Frame: Two- 45 minute sessions

Materials Needed:

- A short children's picture book scripted into a play or an already existing play. I am using a play I have written based on a story titled, *Le loup est revenu*.
- Overhead transparencies of the graphic organizers for teacher use.
- Copies of the graphic organizers for students (one per pair of students).

Description of Task: Preview Phase

As an introduction to the lesson, the teacher will solicit answers from the class to the following questions: In what situations in life do our physical traits influence the activities we choose to do? How might these traits help us develop a character? Give me some examples as to how you think your physical traits and personality determine the words you choose. For example, as a young student, I would ask permission to leave the classroom; I wouldn't give orders.

Teacher explains that the students will be examining the physical and personality traits of the characters they will be performing and organizing this information on a chart to develop language and behaviors for their character.

Teacher will review the characters that are portrayed in the children's story *Le loup est revenu* making a list on the board. (While students do not have to have read the story to complete these three lessons it is assumed that they have already done so prior to this lesson.) Using one of the characters as a model for students' focused learning (I have chosen the rabbit), she will ask the question: Which physical traits of this character are the most outstanding and help define the character as a rabbit? (See Content Obligatory language objectives under Learning Objectives) The class should come up with two or three physical characteristics. The teacher then lists these on the behavior and gesture transparency graphic organizer (see Figure 1) that the students will also use. Addressing each of the characteristics listed, students are asked how it affects the kind of gesture or behavior that the rabbit might have, e.g. Instead of stroking his chin, he might stroke his long ears; He might have to walk funny because his feet are so big. She lists these appropriately on the graphic organizer. This is repeated for the two to three characteristics that the class has come up with.

Then, using the graphic organizer for the language of the character (see Figure 2), the teacher does the same, this time focusing on what kinds of expressions or words the character might use based on his physical and personality traits, e.g. The rabbit might say things like, Jumping carrots! when he is excited.

Focused Learning Phase

Students get together with a partner who will play the same character and fill out the graphic organizers for their character as modeled in the preview phase. Before beginning their work, the teacher will go over the content compatible and content obligatory language needed to complete the activity with the whole class. This information should be left on display for student referral during their partner work.

Figure 1 Behavior and Gesture Graphic Organizer

Student name(s): _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Le lapin

Objectif: Identifier le comportement et des gestes que ce personnage utiliserait basé sur sa personnalité et ses caractéristiques physiques.

Consignes: Avec ton partenaire, trouve deux traits de la personnalité et deux caractéristiques physiques "importantes" du personnage que tu vas jouer dans cette pièce. En respectant ces caractéristiques, note le comportement et des gestes que ce personnage utiliserait. Sers-toi du vocabulaire listé ci-dessous pour discuter avec ton partenaire. Sers-toi du vocabulaire listé en classe pour pouvoir parler de la personnalité et de la physique de ton personnage.

Personnalité:

Personnalité:

Caractéristique physique:

Caractéristique physique:

Comportement et Gestes:

Vocabulaire pour discuter: Il/elle est/a... donc...; Sa personnalité est... alors; A cause de... il/elle...; Grâce à son/sa/ses... il/elle...

Customizable graphic organizers posted on the CoBaLTT website: www.carla.umn.edu/cobalitt/modules/strategies/gorganizers/index

Expansion Phase

During the second session, partners will finish their graphic organizers and prepare to talk about their ideas for developing their character to the class. Prior to students presenting their work, the teacher should remind students of the language necessary to talk about drawing conclusions. (See the previous content obligatory and content compatible sections on predicting information.)

Assessment Procedures

Students will hand in their completed graphic organizers for assessment.

Figure 2 Language of the Character Graphic Organizer

Student name(s): _____

Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Le lapin

Objectif: Identifier les mots et expressions que ce personnage utiliserait basé sur sa personnalité et ses caractéristiques physiques.

Consignes: Avec ton partenaire, trouve deux traits de la personnalité et deux caractéristiques physiques "importantes" du personnage que tu vas jouer dans cette pièce. En respectant ces caractéristiques, écris les mots ou expressions que ce personnage utiliserait. Sers-toi du vocabulaire listé ci-dessous pour discuter avec ton partenaire. Sers-toi du vocabulaire listé en classe pour pouvoir parler de la personnalité et de la physique de ton personnage.

Personnalité:

Personnalité:

Caractéristique physique:

Caractéristique physique:

Comportement et Gestes:

Vocabulaire pour discuter: Il/elle est/a... donc...; Sa personnalité est... alors; A cause de... il/elle...; Grâce à son/sa/ses... il/elle...

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