

# Getting the Big Picture of Language Immersion Education by Working with Teachers on a Micro Level

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to enlist practitioners in language immersion programs in the identification and elaboration of issues and challenges in immersion language teaching. Through focus groups and extensive individual interviews, six elementary Spanish language immersion teachers in three school settings (a suburban full immersion school and two inner-city magnet programs, one partial and one full immersion) served as informants. Five major themes emerged: the primacy of language, the balance between language and content, the spectrum of learners in immersion programs, and the sociopolitical context of immersion schooling. Within each of those themes teachers describe the particular challenges of immersion teaching, and illuminate the complexity of immersion classrooms on a micro level. In a complex setting where the learning of curricular content and second language acquisition are expected to develop concurrently, teachers are in a unique position to add to our knowledge of immersion schooling.

## Background

Immersion classrooms are complex settings where the learning of academic content and second language acquisition are expected to develop concurrently. As elementary language immersion programs have increased in the U.S. during the past 25 years and built upon the successes of such programs in Canada, the nature of this complexity has been ever more apparent to practitioners, language educators, and researchers. Swain and Johnson (1997) have explored the complexity of immersion education as it is applied within other national contexts, and have identified both core and contributing variables that characterize the nature of such instructional programs. The eight core features distinguish it from other types of second language programs and include: (1) the L2 is the medium of instruction, (2) the immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum, (3) overt support exists for the L1, (4) the program aims for additive bilingualism, (5) exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom, (6) students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency, (7) the teachers are bilingual, and (8) the classroom culture is that of the local L1 community; in other words, the classroom culture mirrors that of the community from which the students are drawn, not that of a community where the target language is spoken. They point out that each of these features should be seen as existing on a continuum and that each of them must be present to some degree in order for a program to be considered an immersion program.

Swain and Johnson (1997) also identify ten variable features that distinguish programs from one another, making the picture of immersion education all the more complex: (1) level within the educational system at which immersion is introduced, (2) extent of immersion, referring to the time of the school day spent in the target language, (3) the ratio of L1 to L2 at different stages within the program, (4) continuity, or articulation, across levels within the educational system, (5) bridging support, or the support provided to help students at initial stages of immersion to move from L1 to L2 medium instruction, (6) resources, (7) commitment on the part of all players, from students to teachers to policymakers, (8) attitudes toward the culture of the target language, (9) status of the L2 in the immersion context, and (10) what counts as success in an immersion program (academic achievement, level of L2 proficiency gained, etc.).

More importantly, they have put forth the view that immersion has evolved over the last three decades to be a language education program model used for a variety of purposes and across a wide range of social, cultural, and political contexts. With that idea in mind, we present here the results of a study which illuminates what we have termed “micro-variables,” or those variables likely to specifically characterize a particular immersion language program within a school site.

Over the years research questions have tended to focus on those issues most of concern to parents and educators: to what extent are students learning content through the second language? (e.g., Genesee, 1985); do first language and literacy development continue successfully when they are not the medium of instruction? (e.g., Genesee, 1987); what kind of second language development can be expected in such a setting? (e.g., Harley, 1984; Lapkin, 1984; Lyster, 1987). The bulk of research on immersion language classrooms during the past four decades has emphasized the product rather than the process. Our plan in conducting this study was to have teachers put forth their thoughts on the nature of immersion language education programs, giving us a more detailed sense of the complexity and intricacy of teaching content within a second language context.

### Objectives:

The purpose of this study was to explore the *process* of immersion education in one metropolitan area through the eyes (and voices) of teachers, to have immersion teachers contribute more fully to the picture of immersion classrooms that has emerged in research. Through focus groups and extensive individual interviews, six elementary Spanish language immersion teachers in three elementary school settings served as informants. The schools included a suburban full immersion school and two inner-city magnet programs, one partial and one full immersion.

This study allowed, across three schools, both native and non-native Spanish speaking teachers to describe for us and to discuss with each other the issues that concern them as both language and content area practitioners. Our initial research questions were: (1) What problems and challenges do immersion teachers face as they offer instruction through the second language? (2) Are issues common across programs? What factors produce unique challenges for each immersion school and how do such factors determine the curriculum and language use choices made in immersion programs? (3) What is unique about immersion language teaching and what factors contribute to its success or prevent successful outcomes?

Methods:

Background information was collected in the form of school profiles for each of three individual schools, and individual teacher profiles. Focus groups consisting of all six teachers were conducted at the beginning and end of the study. Individual interviews were conducted with each teacher during the school year.

<b>Data Sources</b>	
<u>Conversations</u>	
Focus Group #1 with Teachers	Summer, 1994
Teacher Interviews	1994-95
Focus Group #2 with Teachers	Summer, 1995
<u>Background</u>	
Teacher Profiles from Vitae and Telephone Interviews	
School Profiles Gathered from School and District Information	

Through standard inductive, content-analytic procedures, interview and focus group data were examined for patterns and topics that appeared across individuals and programs, as well as those particular issues which arose which seemed unique to an individual or unique to a grade level or school program. Qualitative analytical procedures were utilized in what Tesch (1990) describes as a recursive process that allows for processing of information throughout the study; the stages of data collection, analysis, and formulation build upon one another.

Results:

A profile of each of the three schools, followed by a background profile of each immersion teacher in terms of personal history, professional training, language background in both Spanish and English, teaching history, and philosophy concerning the goals of immersion schooling sets the stage for the teacher data.

<b>Teacher Participants in the Study</b>			
Name (School)	Grade Level	Native Language	Number of Years with School
Gloria (Pierce)	Kindergarten	Spanish	7
Tracy (Pierce)	Kindergarten*	English	5
Antonia (Hughes)	Second	Spanish	5
Claire (Hughes)	Fifth	English	4
Susan (Marshfield)	Third	English	6
Elena (Marshfield)	Fourth	Spanish	3

Table 3: School Profiles				
		Pierce	Hughes	Marshfield
Non-native English language background		5-10%	27%	less than 1%
Ethnicity of students as of 1995 school year	Total non-white	43.12%	66.80%	11.00%
	African American	7.50%	22.70%	2.80%
	Hispanic American	33.38%*	41.20%*	5.80%
	Asian American	1.50%	0.40%	1.40%
	Native American	0.74%	2.50%	1.00%
	White American	57.88%	33.20%	89.00%
Students receiving free or reduced lunch		29%	57%	N/A
Students that receive special services	Title 1	0.0%	100% eligible	N/A
	Sp.Ed.	1/2 time/less: 4.7%	5.0% or less	
	Sp.Ed.	1/2 time/more: 0.0%		
Teachers who are native Spanish or native English speakers	L1 Spanish speakers	64%	35%	25%
	L1 English speakers	20%	64.95%	75%
	Bilingual speakers	16%	.05%	

\* includes L1 Spanish & L1 English students with Spanish surnames, adopted students, & those registered by parents as Hispanic

### The Context of Immersion Education -- General Issues

- The unusual nature and unique status of immersion language programs
- Complexity of decisions needed related to curriculum require special understanding of the nature of immersion schooling
- Issues of L1 and L2 oral language development
- Emerging literacy
- Second language development within an academic context
- Developing bilingualism in a school-age students
- Both native English and native Spanish speakers with academic and language needs
- Attention to growth of literacy skills for academic purposes at particular grade levels

Themes:

The five themes that emerged from the focus groups and the individual interviews form the core of study results. These themes and the issues that teachers raised concerning the issues manifested in immersion teaching pertaining to each theme are discussed below:

*Language*

*Balance between Language and Content*

*Assessment of Student Learning*

*The Spectrum of Learners in Immersion Schools*

*The Sociopolitical Context of Immersion Schooling*

◆ LANGUAGE

- Important (but not the most important on the minds of parents!)
- Use of language for instructional purposes
- Development of language around curriculum
- How good is their second language when they finish 8<sup>th</sup> grade?
- Perspectives of native and non-native Spanish speaking teachers critical here
- Student use of the immersion language, "place" of English within an immersion language program
- Continuing development in English for purposes of achievement testing
- Teacher recognition of the interdependence between L1 and L2
- Dialects of and quality of Spanish used for instruction/teacher proficiency
- Presence of native Spanish speaking students changes the dynamic of the immersion school, classroom, teaching experience
- When should English language literacy be introduced for each group?

◆ BALANCE BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

- Keep in mind that the standard curriculum is the focus of instruction
- How do we maintain high expectations for content learning while at the same time be conscious of continuing growth in the second language?
- When both areas must be carefully monitored, there are challenges presented in terms of curriculum, materials, instruction, and assessment
- At higher grade levels, teachers suggest that they worry about sacrificing content learning and higher order thinking skills when student struggle with instruction through a second language
- Need to provide systematic attention to Spanish language development – formal language instruction is important and necessary
- Language present in content teaching is less than optimal for full development of language proficiency in the target language
  - Grammar instruction not integrated into content teaching
  - Vocabulary teaching limited in scope

- Sustained oral use of the language is minimal
- Teachers don't often attend to errors

#### ◆ ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

- Traditionally weak area in immersion education
- Focus on grade-level and school-focused accountability
- The emphasis on performance on standardized tests in English has defined the arena of assessment for immersion programs
- There is a continual struggle with
  1. Achievement goals (for comparative purposes (tested in English))
  2. Specific grade-level achievement goals (assessed in Spanish)
  3. Examination of Spanish language development
- Second language skills need to be examined in a variety of ways that go beyond the Spanish language tests designed for native speakers (Prueba de Lectura, etc.)
- The need to assess both content and language development in a systematic simultaneous way that recognizes the unique characteristics inherent in students learning through a second language;

#### ◆ THE SPECTRUM OF LEARNERS IN IMMERSION SCHOOLS

- Variety of students
  - Native English speakers (African American and European American),
  - Native English speakers with Spanish language background/Spanish surnames
  - Native Spanish speakers with varying levels of English language proficiency
  - Variety of backgrounds in terms of family income (SES), education, and literacy
  - Varying achievement levels, learning styles, emotional and social needs
  - Increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities
  - Need to attend to unique differences exhibited by younger primary children and older elementary students in immersion programs
- Challenges posed by learner variability: the interaction of language, content, and individual student characteristics
  - At every level of instruction, choice for curriculum, assessment,
  - Issues of open enrollment
  - How do special programs fit in? ESL services for students learning English? Title I? Special education? How do these intersect with the immersion curriculum?
  - Is immersion schooling right for all children?
  - How can we insure L2 development in English?
  - What do we do about L1 literacy development in Spanish?

#### ◆ THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF IMMERSION SCHOOLING

- General questions arise concerning "bilingual" schooling
- Administrative school district support for the unique needs of immersion schooling in terms of:

1. Hiring new teachers with requisite language and teaching preparation
  2. Recognition of immersion schooling requirements in terms of enrollment, entrance, etc.
- Parent issues of school choice, school governance,
  - For parents, a delicate balance between enthusiasm and anxiety
  - Concerns may vary with respect to L1/L2: (English background parents concerned about learning through L2, Spanish background parents concerned about learning English despite a focus on Spanish as the medium of instruction)
  - Expectations for achievement are a given, but parents may differ in their goals for Spanish language and literacy development.

### Discussion

Within each of these core themes, teachers speak to the complexity of instruction through a second language, and the need to attend to the individual needs of learners. We expected to find that the issues they identified were congruent with those commonly considered characteristic of immersion teaching, both in the U.S. and abroad, and our sample of teachers indeed put forth many issues that pinpoint the common daily work of immersion teaching. At the same time, they identified shared beliefs and practices in immersion teaching. What we did not expect to find was the specific and idiosyncratic nature of each classroom within each individual school: the multiple ways in which each of these core themes were played out, the variability between and within language immersion programs, and the particular ways in which micro variables determine the whole of an immersion language program. Indeed, what began to emerge was a culture of immersion education that is as much determined by these micro factors as it is by pervasive philosophies of immersion instruction, district and school-stated goals for such programs, or descriptions of how they should appear in the language immersion literature.

Issues of achievement, literacy, and standardized testing in English have been those most examined in immersion education, without a strong basis for understanding the conflicts, challenges, and, most importantly, the context of an immersion language classroom. The what, where, how, why, and when questions can only be answered in terms of how they apply to a particular group of learners interacting with a particular teacher(s), considering her/his background, philosophy, and in the case of immersion, skill in the target language(s), together with a group of teachers/administrators offering a particular curriculum, within a particular community, dependent upon a particular kind of support by the school district, within a particular region and state, given a level of acceptance within the larger educational community concerning the possible routes to bilingualism and academic learning.

The teachers who participated in our study certainly did outline and describe for us the multitude of choices they face, the challenges of integrating language and content, and the complexity of always considering language and content when thinking about their teaching. What they also provided for us were insights into the complexity of each individual immersion classroom. As we stepped back, we began to see that their individual perspectives on teaching, their students' L1 and L2 needs, and desirable goals for student learning were components of the immersion program as well. At the micro level, each individual classroom in fact was a small immersion program unto itself.

The larger core features defined by Swain and Johnson were critical in the exploration of the nature of immersion schooling. But an awareness of such contextual features, although necessary, is not sufficient for understanding the complexity of immersion education. The features which are necessary for a complete description of immersion schooling are the micro level features that truly drive the larger context – these micro features can be described in terms of three broad categories: the schools themselves, the teachers, and the students.

<b>Micro-Level Features of Immersion Programs</b>	
<b>Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nature of the community</li> <li>• student demographics</li> <li>• degree of parental involvement</li> <li>• make-up of the staff (NS/NNS)</li> <li>• district and school policies re immersion schools</li> <li>• how immersion is interpreted</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• individual backgrounds, philosophies, experiences</li> <li>• preparedness for immersion teaching</li> <li>• choices for professional development</li> <li>• language proficiency</li> <li>• need for curriculum/materials</li> <li>• decisions they make re L1/L2</li> </ul>
<b>Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ethnic and language background</li> <li>• socioeconomic level</li> <li>• levels of proficiency in L1 and L2</li> <li>• level of support in home environment</li> <li>• academic ability, learning styles</li> <li>• special needs, social needs</li> </ul>

When we consider the macro variables and begin to overlay the micro level variables that determine the unique nature of an immersion program, what questions are raised for immersion educators?

Generally, as we consider what we have learned from our discussions with immersion teachers, several questions emerge:

- Given the propensity in education for the development and reification of “curricular models,” what does it mean for immersion education that models may well have to evolve rather than be imposed upon schools?
- When program goals and objectives are based upon the macro- and micro-level variables present in any school setting, how will the decisions made concerning curriculum, staffing, instruction, and assessment reflect the unique nature of the immersion school? Will such differences require immersion teachers with particular kinds of experiences, background, and preparedness?
- What are the conflicting factors that bear upon the emergence of a particular immersion program within a particular school community?

- Can we assume that different program configurations will be expected when students bring different language backgrounds to the immersion setting?
- What should our goals be for both minority and majority language students in terms of L1 and L2 in an immersion language program?
- When considering goals for immersion schooling, what can our expectations be for second language development, content learning, and continued growth in the home language?

#### Importance of the Study:

Our study sought to have teachers identify those challenges most salient to them. We expected to get from them a more complete picture, a wide angle if you will. What we found was that the smaller we focused, the more we understood. The picture that emerged from these discussions revealed a complicated portrait of the interface between ideal curriculum models and the reality of student needs. Where teaching academic content through a second language is concerned, these teachers are making choices at the classroom level that in effect adjust, modify, reformulate, and restructure the ideal curriculum that supposedly guides their work. The studies that have been conducted have supported the belief that immersion teaching is a unique phenomenon, different from the teaching that occurs in other contexts (e.g. Bernhardt, 1992; Boutin, 1993; Day & Shapson, 1993, 1996; Salomone, 1992). Yet the distinct strategies, characteristics, and behaviors that define effective immersion teaching must still be explored (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Indeed, immersion is now being looked to in order to inform content-based language instruction as it is carried out in a number of language teaching settings. The increasing popularity of immersion programs over the last decade has meant an interest in teaching language through content that heretofore was limited to those individuals and programs working with limited English speaking students. Indeed, when we examined one immersion school more closely we found that as it identified student needs most pressing in terms of literacy for a changing student population that included native Spanish speakers, it began to see itself as a dual language immersion program – in fact a bilingual program in the original sense of the term. What does it mean when an enrichment immersion program originally designed for native English speakers faces a changing clientele? What can this tell us about curriculum, language, and learning? What does research on bilingual education have to say to immersion language educators?

The teachers in our study helped us to see that no two immersion language programs will look the same—but for more than just core feature differences, or variation in region, language, or utilization of L1 and L2 within the curriculum. Immersion has evolved internationally over the last three decades to be a language education program model used for a variety of purposes and across a wide range of social, cultural, and political contexts. It is the large purposes and contexts which shape the models, and require us to consider the small questions and work from the inside out when attempting to describe particular programs – to identify what it is they consist of, their purpose, their direction, their focus, what they do, and how instruction is conceptualized, structured, and carried out.

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