

Issues and Options in Immersion Pedagogy

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The success of immersion programs has been thoroughly documented with respect to both first language (L1) development and academic achievement (e.g., Genesee, 1987). Research in a variety of immersion contexts has shown that (a) immersion students' L1 development is equivalent or superior to that of non-immersion students and (b) achievement in subjects that immersion students study through the L2 is similar to that of non-immersion students studying the same subjects in L1.

Because immersion education has proven to be successful in so many regards, this paper will focus on the one important area where there is still room for improvement: namely, the development of more native-like production skills in the immersion language. Specifically, research has shown that immersion students develop (a) much higher levels of proficiency than do non-immersion students studying the L2 as a regular subject; (b) almost native-like comprehension skills as measured by listening and reading tests; (c) high levels of strategic communicative ability and confidence in using the L2; and (d) production skills that are considered non-native-like in terms of grammatical accuracy, lexical variety, and sociolinguistic appropriateness (Allen et al., 1990). The absence of more native-like proficiency has been attributed to various limitations that arise in classroom contexts. For example, Swain (1985, 1988) observed that immersion pedagogy was primarily input driven and that students were not given adequate opportunities to produce the immersion language and to receive helpful feedback. Swain also observed that language used to teach subject matter is functionally restricted, and does not, on its own, provide adequate exposure to the L2. That is, many L2 features either do not occur in classroom discourse (e.g., certain verb tenses) or are not salient enough for students to actually notice.

In the early days of immersion, in the 1970s and 80s, immersion pedagogy was not designed to address these limitations. Instead, the principles underlying immersion pedagogy were such that students' L2 learning was expected to parallel and be similar to their L1 acquisition, and so L2 learning was thought to be primarily incidental, without the need for any explicit attention to language. In contrast, researchers now stress the importance of integrating language instruction into regular subject-matter instruction, to allow students to notice otherwise infrequent or non-salient features of the immersion language. To integrate language and content teaching, teachers can draw on both *reactive* and *proactive* approaches to L2 instruction.

Reactive approaches

Reactive approaches occur during communicative interaction with students and include the negotiation of meaning and the negotiation of form. The negotiation of meaning facilitates comprehension during classroom interaction as teachers adopt a range of techniques to

transform subject matter into comprehensible input for L2 learners Met (1994) describes a variety of negotiation of meaning strategies used by immersion teachers to enable their students to comprehend content presented through the L2:

- use of body language, visuals, objects, and other contextual clues
- use of predictability in classroom routines and redundancy in repetitions, paraphrases, examples, definitions, and synonyms
- extensive use of their students' background knowledge
- use of intonational stress on key words and grammatical forms in teacher talk
- in the beginning grades, use of teacher talk that is slower than normal and that contains high-frequency vocabulary and simple grammatical structures

The negotiation of meaning also provides teachers and students with useful communication strategies and provides supportive scaffolding when target forms are beyond the students' production abilities. Scaffolding occurs when teachers make rich interpretations of students' attempts to communicate, by responding with various reformulations and expansions that also serve to confirm the truth content of student messages. This allows students to communicate messages that they would not be able to produce on their own without the support of teacher scaffolding.

In second language acquisition (SLA) research, where the goal is to account for the development of L2 knowledge and skills, negotiation of meaning has been operationalized more specifically as a set of conversational moves used in dyadic interaction. According to Long (1996), negotiation of meaning comprises the following types of interactional features:

- input modifications (e.g., stress on key words, decomposition, partial self-repetition);
- semantically contingent responses (e.g., recasts, repetition, expansions);
- conversational modifications (e.g., confirmations, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, clarification requests)

Long (1996) argues that these interactional features converge to provide L2 learners with a primary source of *negative evidence* (i.e., information about ungrammaticality) in ways that benefit L2 development.

One type of semantically contingent feedback that figures in Long's (1996) taxonomy of negotiation of meaning strategies, and that has received increasing attention in both L1 and L2 contexts, is the recast—a well-formed reformulation of a learner utterance with the original meaning intact, an example of which follows (examples throughout are adapted from Lyster, 1998, 2002a, 2002b):

Teacher: *What smells so good? Allen?*
 Student: **Sap maple*.*

Teacher: *Maple sap. That's good. Are you ready?*

Although the most frequent type of teacher feedback in immersion classrooms, recasting, as defined in the L1 literature and as observed in immersion classrooms (i.e., an implicit target-like reformulation of a learner's utterance), is not the most effective way of drawing young L2 learners' attention to form. Even though teachers frequently use recasts to respond to ill-formed utterances, they also use a similar proportion of repetitions of well-formed utterances, as in the following example:

Teacher: *What do we call the baby of a hen? Nicole?*
 Student: *Chicks.*
 Teacher: *Chicks. That's good.*

Recasts of ill-formed utterances and repetitions of well-formed utterances together appear to confirm or disconfirm the content or veracity of a learner's message, not its form. Moreover, teachers frequently use of signs of approval as positive feedback, again to respond to the content or veracity of a learner's message, not its form. These include affirmations such as *Yes*, *That's right*, and *O.K.*, and praise markers such as *Very good*, *Bravo*, and *Excellent*. In the preceding examples, both the recast and the noncorrective repetition are indiscriminately accompanied by the same sign of approval (*that's good*). Lyster (1998) found that such signs of approval were equally likely to follow well-formed and ill-formed student utterances in immersion classroom discourse.

We see the negotiation of meaning at play in the following excerpts, extracted from a science lesson about the water cycle taught by Marie, who draws consistently on negotiation of meaning strategies to present content to her grade 4 mid-immersion students. The discussion centers on the adventures of a lone drop of water, brought to life as the young Perlette.

1) Marie: *What's a stream again? Yes?*
 2) StA: *It's like a small lake.*
 3) Marie: *A small lake; is that what we said?*
 4) StA: *It's an* little river.*
 5) Marie: *That's it. It's a little river; O.K.? Because a lake is a, it's like a, a place where there's water but it's a ...*
 6) Sis: *Like a circle.*

Marie begins by asking students what a stream is. She repeats the first student's response (*a little lake*) in a confirmation check at line 3 to disconfirm this incorrect yet well-formed response. The next student's answer (*an little river*) is correct in terms of content, but ill-formed. Marie approves the content with *That's it*, and then unobtrusively modifies the form in her recast before moving on with the lesson. The topic then turns to Perlette's encounter with a fish:

1) Marie: *And when he's talking to Perlette, what happens to the fish?*

- 2) St: *He's going to drink her.*
- 3) Marie: *He's going to drink Perlette? No, he's not going to drink Perlette.*
- 4) St: *Um, the fish is *the friend of her*.*
- 5) Marie: *Yes, that's it, the fish is her friend and they talk together. Then suddenly what happens? Yes?*
- 6) StD: **A person fishing took*.*
- 7) Marie: *Exactly. There's a hook with a little worm on it and so the fish turns around.*

When Marie asks what happens to the fish, a student at line 2 replies that it intends to drink Perlette. Marie repeats this at line 3 as a confirmation check because the student's well-formed statement is untrue and is subsequently disconfirmed by Marie in the same turn. A true but ill-formed statement is then proposed at line 4 (*the friend of her*), which is met first with approval (*Yes, that's it*), then with a confirming recast (*the fish is her friend*) before Marie continues with her questions about what happens next. The next student's nontarget utterance at line 6 (*A person fishing took*) is again followed by approval (*Exactly*) and then an expansion of the student's message, but without clearly recasting any specific forms. Marie's next question about Perlette elicits two responses.

- 1) Marie: *Why does she want to get warm do you think? Yes?*
- 2) StA: *Because she *has* too cold to go into all the [?]*
- 3) Marie: *Because she is too cold, O.K. Yes?*
- 4) StB: *She *has* too frightened.*
- 5) Marie: *Because she is frightened, yes*

The first response at line 2 (*because she has too cold*) is followed by a recast at line 3 (*because she is too cold*) as well as by the approval marker *O.K.* The next nontarget utterance at line 4 (*she has too frightened*) is also followed by a recast at line 5 as well as by a sign of approval, *yes*. Recasts provided as implicitly as this may be particularly ambiguous and may even confirm that the two forms (*has, is*) are interchangeable.

Marie's lesson on the water cycle lesson is typical of interactive content-based classrooms where meaning is negotiated as teachers frequently repeat or recast learner utterances, using numerous expansions, confirmations, and confirmation checks to do so. In these contexts, negotiation of meaning is unlikely an effective strategy for drawing learners' attention to form, but arguably an effective strategy for content delivery, because it allows teachers to keep their students' attention focused on content in spite of their gaps in second language proficiency.

For the sake of comparison, we can say that the negotiation of form serves instead to draw attention to interlanguage forms and to prompt learners to retrieve target forms from what they already know. The negotiation of form thus helps students to develop automaticity, while maintaining the communicative flow in teacher-student interaction. The negotiation of form includes at least four types of feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997):

Clarification request

❖ *The teacher pretends that the message has not been understood and that a repetition or a reformulation is required:*

- *Pardon me?*
- *I don't understand*

Repetition

❖ *The teacher repeats the student's erroneous utterance, adjusting the intonation to highlight the error:*

- *He goed?*

Metalinguistic clues

❖ *The teacher provides comments or questions related to the accuracy of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form:*

- *Do we say 'goed' in English?*
- *No, that's not it.*

Elicitation

❖ *The teacher directly elicits correct forms from students by asking questions such as:*

- *How do we say that in English?*
- *He what?*
- *Try again.*

To illustrate the use of these prompts, we will examine exchanges in a grade 4 science lesson, taught by Rachelle to her 9-10-year-old students, on how various mammals defend themselves against their enemies. Throughout this lesson, Rachelle draws attention to her students' non-target output in ways that encourage them to peer- or self-repair. Rachelle is able to do this more frequently than Marie, because her early-immersion students have had more exposure to French than Marie's mid-immersion students.

1) Rachelle: *The hare. Joseph could you tell us what are the means of defense that you see from this picture?*

2) StA: *It runs fast and it hops.*

3) Rachelle: *It runs fast.*

4) StB: *It jump.*

5) Rachelle: *It jump?*

6) Sts: *It jumps.*

7) Rachelle: *It jumps, from the verb...?*

8) Sts: *To jump.*

9) Rachelle: *To jump. It jumps about. Right, it jumps. Next, Joseph?*

Rachelle begins at line 3 by repeating *It runs fast* to confirm one of Joseph's contributions from line 2. Then at line 5 she repeats the student's ill-formed utterance to draw attention to the non-target

form, *It jump*. Other students immediately provide the target form, *It jumps*, which Rachelle confirms by repeating at line 7, then asks for its infinitive form. At line 8, several students propose to *jump* which Rachelle confirms by repeating twice at line 9, before calling on Joseph to continue.

The next topic is porcupines and the negotiation is about the precise word for quills:

- 1) Rachelle: *How does the porcupine defend itself? Sara?*
- 2) StA: *It is the pines on its back, it's ...*
- 3) Rachelle: *The pines. Do we say "pines"?*
- 4) StB: *The upines.*
- 5) Rachelle: *The...?*
- 6) StC: *The quills*
- 7) Rachelle: *The quills. Very good. The quills.*

In response to Sara's suggestion at line 2 (*the pines*), Rachelle provides her with a prompt at line 3 by repeating the error and giving a metalinguistic clue as she asks, *Do we say "pines"?* Another student proposes an equally erroneous term at line 4 (*The upines*), which incites Rachelle to use a prompt at line 5 (*The...?*) that not only aims to elicit the target form but also serves as a rejection of the non-target form and thus as negative evidence. This simple move succeeds in eliciting *The quills* from Anne at line 6, the correct term approved and repeated by Rachelle at line 7.

Form is next brought into focus in an exchange about the skunk's means of defense:

- 1) Rachelle: *And so the skunk, what does it do? Karen*
- 2) StA: *Um... it does... Well there's *a stream of perfume* that doesn't smell very good...*
- 3) Rachelle: *A stream of perfume, we'll call that a ...?*
- 4) Sts: *Liquid.*
- 5) Rachelle: *Liquid. A liquid...?*
- 6) StB: *Smelly.*
- 7) Rachelle: *A smelly liquid. [...]*

At line 2, Karen describes it as a stream of perfume that doesn't smell very good. Although the meaning is clear, Rachelle looks for a more accurate term than *perfume* at line 3—her repetition of Karen's non-target-like utterance is followed by an elicitation move (*we'll call that ...?*). Students then provide the more accurate term *liquid* at line 4, which Rachelle repeats at line 5 first to confirm then again to elicit a qualifier, which is produced by a different student at line 6 (*smelly*).

Immersion classrooms are not exactly three-ring circuses, but good immersion teachers need to perform juggling acts. That is, they need to orchestrate both form-focused and meaning-focused negotiation in accordance with instructional context and students' abilities, without abandoning form at the expense of meaning, nor meaning at the expense of form.

Proactive approaches

Proactive approaches involve planned L2 instruction designed to draw attention to various features of the immersion language. Proactive approaches include content-based instruction form-focused instruction. At the core of immersion pedagogy, content-based instruction requires teachers to identify *content-obligatory language*, which may then become the primary focus in language arts lessons (Met, 1994; Snow et al., 1989), as a means of systematically integrating language and content. Content-based L2 instruction provides substantial exposure to contextualized language use and promotes lexically-driven L2 learning.

Whereas content-based instruction promotes lexically-driven L2 learning, form-focused instruction is designed to induce learners to notice non-salient or infrequent morphosyntactic features of the immersion language. Designed to draw learners' attention to linguistic form, form-focused instruction can be planned to include noticing activities, awareness activities, and practice activities. Noticing activities are designed to draw learners' attention to problematic target features that are contrived to appear more salient or frequent in oral and written input (e.g., input enhancement, input flood). Awareness activities include inductive rule-discovery tasks and opportunities to compare and contrast language patterns. During practice activities, learners are encouraged to use (and re-use) target features in contexts of interaction that involve either communicative practice or controlled practice. To illustrate differences between communicative and controlled practice activities, reference will be made to five classroom intervention studies that investigated the effects of form-focused instruction on problematic target language features known to be difficult for L2 learners of French (see Lyster, 2004b).

Communicative practice activities involve lots of negotiation of meaning among peers in meaning-focused interaction as they collaborate to accomplish a given task. For example, in an experimental classroom study on the effects of form-focused instruction on the use of perfect and imperfect past tenses in French (Harley, 1989), students created childhood albums and described childhood memories, along with authentic photographs brought from home, while using the two past tenses appropriately. In Day and Shapson's (1991) classroom study investigating the effects of form-focused instruction on the use of the conditional mood in French, students worked together to design a futuristic space colony, using conditionals to express possible yet uncertain outcomes in the future.

Communicative practice activities help students to develop fluency and also to develop communication strategies, which include avoidance strategies and use of L1. In this regard, Skehan (1998) questions whether such activities lead to changes in accuracy. In fact, Harley (1989) found no long-term benefits on any measures between students who engaged in these activities and those who did not. Similarly, Day and Shapson (1991) found short- and long-term benefits in written production, but none in oral production, supporting their observation that, during the oral tasks, students tended to avoid the conditional as they interacted together in groups, using the present

tense instead.

In contrast, controlled practice activities are designed to push learners to use target forms that are in competition with more easily accessible interlanguage forms. Controlled practice activities can include peer tasks, language games, and role plays in contexts of interaction with opportunities for feedback. For example, in a classroom study investigating the effects of form-focused instruction on the use of second-person pronouns in French (Lyster, 1994), students alternately addressed either a friend or an adult stranger in various role-plays and games that allowed for peer feedback. In classroom studies investigating the effects of form-focused instruction on the use of grammatical gender in French, second-grade students had to recall and associate nouns with similar endings in games such as 'Concentration' and to associate gender-specific articles with target nouns in games such as 'Bingo' and 'My Aunt's Suitcase' (Harley, 1998); similarly, fifth-grade students had to assign gender-specific articles to target nouns in curriculum-related materials and language games involving crossword puzzles and riddles. Controlled practice activities such as these were designed to help students improve their accuracy through opportunities for restructuring interlanguage representations stored in memory, and indeed resulted in short- and long-term benefits in both oral and written production.

One might have expected the communicative practice activities involving childhood memories and futuristic space colonies to have been more effective than the controlled practice activities involving role plays and linguistic games, because the former were arguably more interesting and engaging for students. Instead, it appears that that effectiveness resulted not from intrinsically interesting activities, but rather from activities that were intrinsically different from the other instructional activities going on at the same time in other parts of the immersion curriculum. In other words, the activities about childhood memories and futuristic space colonies are so similar to other types of content-based activities routinely encountered in immersion, that they were less effective at making significant changes to target language accuracy. In addition, controlled practice was likely more effective than communicative practice across these five studies because of the selected areas of difficulty, all of which are well-known sources of persistent error. In other words, continued opportunities for the same type of meaning-based interaction so characteristic of immersion classroom discourse is unlikely to change the students' use of easily accessible and recalcitrant interlanguage forms. There is little doubt, however, that opportunities for more open-ended communicative practice and negotiation for meaning can contribute to other aspects of second language development. For example, Harley (1993) suggested that the experiential approach underlying content-based instruction allows young learners to internalize key aspects of the target system, such as phonologically salient and high-frequency lexical items, as well as syntactic patterns that are congruent with their first language. Moreover, it is certainly important to stress that the controlled practice activities identified here as effective may have been effective precisely because they are complemented in the immersion context by its communicatively rich backdrop of subject-matter instruction.

Conclusion

Students in immersion classrooms benefit from years of exposure to target input and ample opportunities for authentic communication involving negotiation of meaning. This type of interaction facilitates comprehension and also provides supportive scaffolding when target forms are beyond learners' current production abilities. As a result of these opportunities, immersion students develop high levels of strategic communicative ability, but their interlanguage appears to reach a developmental plateau in terms of accuracy. Continued reliance on communication strategies and negotiation of message comprehensibility arguably loses its effectiveness, over time, for promoting continued language growth in the immersion classroom context. To drive their interlanguage development forward, therefore, these learners need to be pushed to access target forms that are in competition with more readily accessible interlanguage forms. Teachers can do so by incorporating into the overriding focus on content a more systematic approach to language development by strategically orchestrating, on the one hand, both negotiation of form and meaning, and on the other, a balance of instructional options that integrate noticing and language awareness with production activities designed in tandem with strategic opportunities for feedback. In the long run, such an approach is likely to make students more autonomous language learners as they are pushed to take responsibility for their use of the immersion language and its continued growth.

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Table 1: Summary table of five studies of form-focused instruction in French immersion classrooms

age of learners	target features	length of treatment	DESIGN FEATURES				(relative to comparison groups without instruction)
			measures	immediate posttest	delayed posttest		
Harley (1989)	perfect & imperfect past tenses	12 hrs/ 8 weeks	Written production	no	no	no	
Day & Shapson (1991)	conditional mood	17 hrs/ 6 weeks	Written production	yes	yes	yes	
Lyster (1994)	second-person pronouns	12 hrs/ 5 weeks	Multiple-choice test	yes	yes	yes	
Harley (1998)	grammatical gender	8 hrs/ 5 weeks	Binary-choice test	yes	yes	yes	
Lyster (2004)	grammatical gender	9 hrs/ 5 weeks	Text completion	all treatment groups	all treatment groups	all treatment groups	
			Object identification	prompt group	prompt group	all treatment groups	
			Picture description	recast & prompt groups	prompt group	all treatment groups	

Table 2: Examples of form-focused instructional options in three intervention studies

	NOTICING ACTIVITIES	METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS	CONTROLLED PRACTICE
Focus on second-person pronouns with 13-14-year-olds (Lyster, 1994)	Students classified utterances as either formal or informal Dialogues extracted from a novel drew students' attention to different uses of 2 nd person pronouns	Students contrasted language features characteristic of either formal or informal utterances Students discussed L2 rules of politeness and made comparisons with L1	Various role plays required students to provide peer feedback as they alternately addressed either a friend or an adult stranger Students produced formal and informal letters and invitations
Focus on 8-year olds (Harley, 1998)	Identification labels displayed around the classroom drew students' attention to co-occurrences of nouns with gender-specific articles Students listed for noun endings in games and songs	In tasks such as the game of 'Concentration' students had to match nouns with similar endings Students created of gender-specific dictionaries, one for masculine and another for feminine entries	To win Bingo, students had to name all objects in their winning row, accurately using gender-specific articles To play 'My Aunt's Suitcase' students had to name various objects with similar endings and correctly assign grammatical gender
Focus on 11-year-olds (Lyster, 2004)	Students read curriculum-related texts in which endings of target nouns were made to appear salient by means of typographical enhancement Songs and rhyming verses drew students' attention to noun endings	Inductive rule-discovery tasks required students to (a) group nouns with similar endings together, (b) determine their gender, (c) predict the gender of other nouns with similar endings	Students assigned gender-specific articles to target nouns in curriculum-related materials and language games involving crossword puzzles and riddles Students created rhyming verses

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