

Immersion program



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Immersion Program Fred Genesee's "Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from Immersion" (1994) is a study looking into the language immersion programs offered primarily in Canada as a means of teaching English-speaking students the nation's other official language, French. The study revealed several important lessons that can be learned by other countries attempting to achieve language integration. These lessons are not unique to immersion programs exclusively, but are applicable to all types of second language acquisition classes. As a result of this analysis, it can be deduced why this particular immersion program was so successful in accomplishing its goals.

The first lesson learned was that language taught in a meaningful context is acquired much easier and more completely than language taught in isolation from other subjects. Rather than focusing attention on the academically correct grammar and syntax of the language, the lesson learned here was that language taught with a focus on meaningful communication between and among students and teachers is much more successful than language focused on academic proficiency. In addition, by placing the language instruction in the context of other academic pursuits, the main focus on learning is not placed as severely on the language acquisition itself, but on the academic subject matter, with language acquisition merely a part of communicating information about this subject with the teacher and with other students. By taking the pressure and focus off of the language itself, it becomes less of a burden to students and more of a challenge to accomplish. In addition, this context provides stimulation and encouragement for students to learn more about the language as a means of communicating more about the subject involved.

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A second lesson learned through the research was that while comprehension among immersion students was far higher than that among students taught in isolation, the speaking and writing skills of these students remained at a much lower level than those of native speakers of the language. The study theorized that the reason for this shortfall was due to the lack of actual language use by the students while participating in their classes, often responding to questions posed by the teacher rather than formulating their own ideas in the second language. This hypothesis was backed up with discussion from various other studies that have been conducted all seeming to reach the same conclusion. This reveals the importance of providing ample opportunity for students to not only learn in the second language, but also to interact with each other in the second language while being engaged in stimulating activities that themselves encourage interaction.

Despite the benefits of a less formalized structure in teaching a second language as has been shown in the first two lessons – the need to include second language acquisition within an important and meaningful context other than language acquisition and the importance of encouraging students to communicate their ideas in this second language during the course of this instruction – it was also shown that there remains a need for formalizing the objectives to be met in this type of instruction. The third lesson identified through this study relates to this important aspect of immersion programs. Because there was less formalized identification of the goals and objectives expected, teachers ended up demonstrating a tendency to keep their syntax simple and straightforward, ignoring the opportunities presented to introduce other tenses of verbs, other forms of expression or greater command of vocabulary. While spontaneity and heavy interaction among

students was deemed very important to the success of students learning a second language, it was also decided that total absence of a formalized plan for language and academic integration could significantly reduce the effectiveness of the program.

Through this study, it seemed to emerge that the reason this immersion program in Canada was successful at all was because of the ability of the students to establish a meaningful method of communication regarding a subject they would have occasion to discuss in some setting. Because the students wanted to perform well in the academic subject, they found it necessary to understand the second language in which it was taught.

However, improvements were identified through this and other studies that would help capitalize on this learning. In particular, it was suggested that students who are actively engaged with the second language while participating in learning activities of their choice would have a greater ability to express themselves in the foreign language while formalized instructional goals provided to teachers would reduce the tendency to revert to simplified language and encourage expansion of second language knowledge and learning.

References

Genesee, Fred. (1994). “ Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from Immersion.” Educational Practice Reports. N. 11. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. Washington D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.