

INTENSIVE FRENCH IN CANADA

In Canada there are basically two types of programs for the learning of FSL: French immersion and Core French. Immersion is a program in which the subjects (such as social studies, science, etc.) are learned through the medium of the second language. There are several variations of this program: early, middle and late, depending on the grade level at which the program starts. Participation in this program is a very effective means of learning to communicate in French. Since its inception in 1965, immersion has grown so that over 300,000 students are enrolled each year. However, this number represents only 15% of the English-speaking student population studying French. Efforts to increase participation in this program continue, but for many reasons (political, administrative, social, pedagogical, etc.), universal participation is not feasible. Students not in immersion learn French through what is generally called “Core French”. In this program French is normally taught daily for brief periods of time (30 to 40 minutes/day), usually starting in grade 4 (students 9 years of age). The Core French cohort represents 85% of the English student population studying French.

Rationale for developing Intensive French

In Canada, most FSL research in the last 30 years has focused on the immersion programs. The few isolated studies of Core French that have been undertaken (for example, Shapson, Kaufman and Durward, 1978; Stern, 1982; Lapkin, Harley and Taylor, 1995; Calman and Daniel, 1998; Turnbull, 1999) indicate that the results of Core French are not satisfactory. In an attempt to make Core French more effective, a National Core French Study was undertaken to reconceptualize the program along more communicative lines (Leblanc, 1990; Stern, 1982). While these changes brought about some improvement in the program, it has not been able to achieve the goals of developing communicative competence for most students.

For the past four years, oral interviews have been given by provincial evaluators to a large sample of students at the beginning of grade 5 or 6 in four provinces/territories. Results indicate that 98% of the students tested are unable to communicate in French, even after between 360 to 450 hours of Core French instruction. Since students do not experience success in the program, motivation to study French declines and attitudes towards learning French become negative.

Description of the program

Intensive French is a five month program that is inserted into Core French in grade 5 or grade 6, when students are 10 to 12 years of age and are at the beginning of their second language learning experience. During this period of time 70% of the school day is devoted to the learning of French through tasks designed to engage students cognitively in using the language. The program is open to all students, including those with learning difficulties (Netten and Germain, 2004b).

There are two major changes from the regular Core French program that characterize Intensive French. One is the organization of time that increases both the time and the intensity of exposure to French for five months of the school year. Since French is taught for approximately 70% of the school day, exposure to French is increased from the normal 90 hours a year to around 300 hours. Only mathematics and some other specialist subjects, like religion, art and music, are taught in English during the five months of intensive exposure to French; in the other five months, the students return to the regular timetable where all subjects are taught in English, except French, which returns to only 10% of the curriculum. Despite this arrangement, all the learning outcomes of the grade 5 or 6 curriculum are met (Germain and Netten, forthcoming). The theoretical foundations for this part of the program are found in the work of Cummins (hypothesis of the interdependence of languages, 2001) and Vygotsky (the unified nature of cognitive development, 1986).

The second major change is the teaching strategies used to enable students to learn to communicate in French. An initial emphasis is placed on the development of implicit competence in the second language, rather than the development of explicit knowledge of grammatical rules (language awareness). This change is based on recent neurolinguistic research on the development of oral competence in young children in a second language (Paradis, 2004). In addition, a literacy approach is taken to the teaching of the language. Students are taught to read and write the second language, in much the same way as they are taught to read and write in their mother tongue in the primary grades. The use of this approach to the teaching of Core French is a major departure from the usual way in which it is taught in the school system.

Resources used to implement the program include current teachers of FSL, a guide for teachers to assist them in implementing the program, access to a relatively large number of supplementary readers, and the students themselves. Current teachers of French are given a week-long professional development session to prepare them to teach the program. The guide is used during this period of preparation, and later in the classroom. Supplementary readers are chosen to integrate with the themes of the guide, and assist the students to learn to read and write in the target language. The program is student-centred; all themes are chosen according to the interests of the students, the students choose the projects that they will undertake, and the conversations in the classroom are deliberately focused on the students themselves.

Implementation

Intensive French began as a three year experiment (1998-2001) in two school districts, one rural and one urban, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. In this province there was considerable interest in improving the core French program, due particularly to the impossibility of implementing immersion programs, which must be optional, in the many very small rural communities. Results were very positive, and the provincial department of Education decided to adopt the program as an official alternate to Core in 2002. Once the program was established in this province, it began to expand across the country. Departments of Education or school districts in seven other provinces and two

territories have initiated pilot projects in their jurisdictions. Since 1998, over 10,000 students have participated in Intensive French across Canada, and the number continues to grow exponentially.

Differences from the mainstream understanding of a communicative approach to FSL

Since the advent of the communicative approach to FSL instruction, the general pattern that has been followed in the development of curriculum resources is based on the need for explicit knowledge of the language patterns to be used. This may be expressed as follows: knowledge of the pattern or rule, followed by practice exercises to internalize the pattern, followed by activities to encourage spontaneous communication using the learned structures. An examination of the most widely used curriculum programs in Canada demonstrates this pattern. The underlying assumption is that explicit knowledge becomes a skill which enables students to speak spontaneously.

Recent neurolinguistic research has shown, however, that knowledge does not turn into a skill, and that, in order to promote competence in speaking a second language, implicit competence needs to be acquired. This means that students must develop an unconscious understanding of how a language works, if the student is to speak with spontaneity. Learning a language for the purposes of communication is a constructivist activity on the part of the student; each student must construct his own internal grammar. Thus, implicit competence is acquired incidentally and unconsciously (without focusing on it) by using the language, and is stored automatically in a part of the brain that is distinct from that which stores learned rules (Paradis, 2004). Many teachers have encountered students who are able to complete fill-in-the-blank tests correctly, but are unable to use those same forms correctly in spontaneous communication. The opposite situation exists, also: students who are unable to fill in the tests correctly, but are able to use the forms well in spontaneous communication. In order to avoid these situations, the emphasis in Intensive French is on the acquisition of implicit competence for oral spontaneity.

In Intensive French the emphasis is also on the fact that second language learning should be contributing to the development of literacy skills. There are two major changes in instruction from regular FSL instruction once this principle has been accepted. First, it cannot be assumed that the ability to read and write is simply transferred from the first language; reading and writing in the second language need to be taught. For reading, this includes the development of a new set of sound-symbol relationships and new strategies for word recognition. For writing, the difference between what is heard orally and the written form of the same words or sentences needs to be taught. This is the moment when explicit knowledge can be taught, as in written work students have the time to mentally consult consciously learned information about word forms. The second principle is that the literacy aspects of learning a language must be maintained. Students learn to read and write the structures of the language that have been already been acquired orally. Thus, reading and writing activities must be directly linked to each other and must be based on previously developed oral competence, making the link between expressing thoughts both orally and in written form (Germain and Netten, 2005). In

addition, once the language corpus has been developed in sequence, from oral to reading to writing, this corpus is integrated with previously learned material to be developed in a variety of oral and written activities where each skill is used authentically, and each set of activities has an authentic communicative purpose. This develops in children the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas in French.

Thus, in contrast with mainstream Core French instruction, Intensive French is based on the premise that there are two different processes involved in learning to communicate in a second language: one for oral communication and another for written communication. Once the students have developed a certain oral spontaneity with a small repertoire of language items, they are then taught to read and write this oral linguistic corpus. These steps are undertaken in succession, but once learned, students are then encouraged to use this linguistic corpus integrated with previous linguistic knowledge a variety of ways to transmit various messages in oral and written form. This procedure enables children to develop biliteracy, the ability to share information, to interact with others, to make meaning in both French and English. Thus, speaking, reading and writing in French become the basis for the development of literacy skills which can be transferred to and used in their mother tongue. It is to be noted, however, that transfer of literacy skills from the second language to the first can only occur once a degree of spontaneity in the second language has been attained (Bournot-Trites and Tellowitz, 2002).

In contrast with immersion instruction, students in Intensive French do not learn subject matter at the same time. In immersion programs students must be highly focused, as they are learning not only the content of the curriculum, but they are studying it in a new language that they are learning at the same time. In Intensive French, the focus is on the learning of the language first. The similarities between Intensive French and immersion rest in the development of implicit competence in the language first, in order to ensure the development of spontaneous communication, and the teaching of reading and writing in the target language.

Descriptive example

In order to give an example of how the Intensive French program is constructed, we will examine first the oral component, and then the written component of instruction, emphasizing the teaching strategies used.

There are four teaching strategies which are used for the development of oral communication skills: modeling, use and re-use, correction, and making links. The first phase in any new oral activity requires modeling, which consists of the teacher providing students with verbal models of the language structures necessary to discuss a subject. Beginning each unit, lesson or pedagogical theme with modeling places the emphasis primarily on the principle of language as communication. In so doing, our intention is to reinforce the notion that the primary use of language is to communicate authentic personal messages.

The use of this strategy is in contrast to beginning a lesson or unit with the presentation of new vocabulary words, or examples of structures and rules of grammar out of context. It is more authentic than the latter because it immediately enables the learner to communicate a message about himself, or his interests. Furthermore, it enables the acquisition of implicit competence because it focuses the attention on the learner, and it encourages him to become actively involved in the learning process.

Immediately after giving the model, the teacher asks questions to permit use of the modeled utterance by the students, but adapted to their own situation. To encourage use and reuse of the language in the classroom, the teacher creates multiple situations giving the students numerous opportunities to use the previously modelled utterances. However, the strategy requires that students do not just repeat the modelled utterances, but use them in reference to their own situation with authentic answers.

It is to be noted that this strategy does not mean that learners repeat without any thought or alteration the utterance modeled by the teacher. Each student replies to the question with his own information; thus students hear and use the modelled utterances several times, but with slight variations. It is this type of use of the language that has been termed the development of “creative automaticity” (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, 2005) as elements of the utterance are changed with its use by different individual learners. This represents the linguistic output necessary for the acquisition of implicit competence.

Interaction between the teacher and the students or between students within the context of group activities presents numerous opportunities to use the language being learned in an authentic context. When a student manages to focus primarily on the message he wants to convey during an interactive activity, and to use and re-use a limited number of linguistic structures, with some internal variations, in a variety of situations, these activities contribute to making the linguistic structures more and more automatic or “proceduralized”; that is, to developing implicit competence in the L2. In this way the student develops his interlanguage.

Should the student make an error it is essential that the teacher give the correct model for the answer given by the student, and that the student repeat this model accurately. All correction must be followed by repeated reproduction or use by students of the correct form in a complete sentence; it would not be enough to indicate that there is an error because this would produce only declarative knowledge. An explanation is not necessary. Students are able to learn the correct forms of utterances to be used without being able to explain why what they said was wrong. In order to eradicate the error, the learner must develop implicit competence in using and re-using the utterance accurately.

In the beginning stages of learning to communicate, we encourage the use of full sentences in reply to all questions. By using complete sentences, the student becomes adept at making connections between all the linguistic elements (on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and discursive levels) necessary to function effectively in the target language. But also, the use of full sentences assists the student to develop

his internal grammar. Complete sentences enable the student to form implicitly hypotheses about the functioning of the L2.

The use of these four strategies is essential to the development of an implicit competence in the second language that is both accurate and fluent. The strategies are not in themselves new; many teachers use them from time to time. In Intensive French we require that teachers use them consistently and regularly, in all oral discussion. Strategies which focus on the development of explicit knowledge of the language are not used in the oral communication activities.

Once a certain implicit competence of an oral corpus has been developed, attention is then turned to the development of reading and writing skills with this corpus. For reading, the teacher undertakes a shared reading lesson with a book on the topic just discussed. In order to develop literacy skills, and make the links between speaking, reading and writing, the teacher begins with a discussion of the topic of the book, relating it to the experiences of the students.

Immediately after the reading lesson, a writing lesson is undertaken. The writing lesson also begins with an oral phase when the teacher asks students what they could say about the subject, thus making the link between speaking and writing that is necessary to the development of literacy skills. At the beginning stages of the program, the teacher models these sentences for the students, and the class writes a composition together. When writing, the teacher assists the students to see the differences between what one says and how it is written. The students then write, and illustrate, their own composition based on the model already prepared. As students advance in the program, they begin to write more and more independently.

The reading and writing activities follow the speaking activities in the same day, with the language items learned orally first, and are based on the type of activities that are used in the primary grades for the development of mother tongue literacy. Once language items have been developed in this way, they are then integrated with previously learned items to pursue a more complex activity. Thus, while new material is introduced first, for oral development, then for reading and subsequently for writing, the material is subsequently used in a way that integrates all three skills, as for example, in a project, to develop literacy in the target language.

Results

After five months of Intensive French students learn to communicate spontaneously on topics of interest to them at a level that is congruent with their cognitive development. They also are able to write a narrative composition on demand of a paragraph or more that is similar to compositions written by native Quebec francophones at grade 2. These results are based on data collected from over 1500 Intensive French students in five provinces.

In addition, students are able to transfer their skills to English, and show no lags in English language arts in the tests given by the provinces at the end of grade 5 or 6. They also show no lags in the learning outcomes specified for other subject areas, particularly with respect to cognitive processes and skills. Parents and teachers also indicate that the students develop greater learning autonomy in general, and a more positive attitude to the learning of French (Germain and Netten, 2004).

Conclusion

Intensive French is a highly effective way for young students to learn to communicate spontaneously in French, as well as to develop literacy skills in the target language, which can later be transferred to English. Its success is due primarily to the teaching strategies used which encourage the development of implicit competence for spontaneity in oral communication, and which encourage the development of literacy skills. The increase in time and, in particular, intensity enhances the rate of development of these skills.

Pedagogical Implications

In discussing pedagogical implications of Intensive French, first of all, it must be understood that the goal of the instruction is to develop spontaneous oral and written communication skills in the target language. If this is the goal of instruction, then the **major** pedagogical implications of Intensive French are the need to:

- spend more time on developing implicit competence rather than explicit knowledge of the target language, including the regular use of strategies such as:
 - modeling the language to be used,
 - creating opportunities for student to use and re-use these language items in a variety of contexts,
 - correcting student output orally by modeling and enabling students to use and re-use the corrected form,
 - encouraging the students to make links between the various linguistic items used by the use of full sentences;
- develop the second language as a literacy experience that can contribute to the enrichment of literacy skills in the first language;
- focus on intellectually demanding tasks that develop general cognitive skills and processes, rather than language knowledge;

- consider the students as resources in the teaching/learning process, involving them directly in their learning through their input to topics discussed and projects;
- devote both time and intensity to FSL instruction at the beginning stages of learning a second language.

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