Bilingualism in a Plurilingual Canada Podcast Series

Prime Candidates for Form-Focused Instruction, by Roy Lyster

Author
Roy Lyster is a professor at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University in Montreal. His research focuses primarily on immersion and content-based classrooms, including both observational and experimental studies of teacher-student interaction, form-focused instruction, and corrective feedback.

Summary
Roy Lyster shares some common French grammar challenges that teachers can help their students master through what he refers to as form-focused instruction – which is drawing students attention to particular grammar forms throughout their learning process.

Facts

- One of the most appealing advantages of teaching French through immersion is that students pick up a great deal of the language just by being exposed to it. However, we also know that many features of the French language are simply not absorbed through exposure. Your students in immersion can benefit from having their attention drawn to these problematic features through form-focused instruction.

- Form-focused instruction refers to any attempt to draw your students’ attention to language and this can be done on the fly during subject-matter instruction. You have a range of form-focused instructional options at your disposal. In addition to corrective feedback, form-focused instruction includes noticing and awareness activities that draw your students’ attention to forms that they might otherwise not notice, as well as practice activities that provide opportunities for your students to use forms that might not otherwise occur in regular classroom interaction.

- Grammatical gender is definitely worthy of instruction in immersion classrooms. Grammatical gender is difficult to learn through only exposure to meaningful content, because it does not carry much meaning at all. The gender 80% of the nouns could be predicted based on their endings, operationalized as orthographic representations of rhymes. For example, most words ending in -ette and in -elle are feminine, whereas most words ending in -eau and the sound -an are masculine.
Some pronouns in French are also notoriously difficult for second language learners and thus require well-planned instruction. Third-person object pronouns, for example, are tricky, because, unlike English, direct and indirect forms are different and they also come before rather than after the verb. Another difficulty with pronouns in French is the distinction between *tu* and *vous*. Your students need to have their attention drawn to the functions of these second-person pronouns, especially if their primary language makes no such distinction.

The French verb system is especially difficult to master. For example, French makes an important distinction between perfective and imperfective past tenses through the use of the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. Because English makes similar distinctions but in very different ways that preclude any one-to-one mapping between French and English, students whose primary language is English need to have their attention drawn to these cross-linguistic differences. Because these past-tense forms do not occur frequently in regular teacher talk, your students will benefit from lots of opportunities to compare and contrast the different functions of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* in meaningful contexts.

**Further Reading**

