Challenges Facing Beginning Immersion Teachers

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The rapid growth of immersion programs in the United States[1] means that many new immersion teachers are hired each year. Because immersion programs integrate both content and language, teachers in these programs face unique challenges that cannot be addressed through preparation programs designed for traditional elementary settings. However, no state requires an immersion teaching license, and, until recently, no professional preparation programs[2] designed specifically for one-way, foreign language immersion education existed in the United States (Met & Lorenz, 1997; Walker & Tedick, 2000). This lack of comprehensive education programs is reflected in the teachers' survey responses; in a national survey of Canadian French immersion teachers, Day and Shapson (1996) found that 67% of practicing immersion teachers received no specialized immersion preparation during their pre-education. While many of these teachers (31%) received professional development after completing their initial preparation, the majority of those surveyed still felt that they had inadequate professional development opportunities (Day & Shapson, 1996). Although the situation has been improving, the responses of these teachers indicate that, even in countries where immersion is firmly established, immersion teacher education and professional development need to progress further.

Myriam Met and Eileen Lorenz describe the ideal immersion teacher as "someone who demonstrates excellent skills in elementary education and who has native or near-native proficiency in the language of instruction" (1997, p. 246). However, they acknowledge that these individuals are rare, particularly in contexts where no preservice programs specifically for immersion exist. In addition, this definition leaves out critical immersion teaching skills: the abilities to teach elementary content in a second language and to teach students to use the language correctly through the content. To this end, Bernhardt and Schrier (1992) argue that language proficiency and preparation in elementary education are actually prerequisites for engaging in immersion teacher development, making it clear that both skills are necessary, but insufficient, for successful immersion teaching. The wide variety of necessary skills and the lack of preservice programs mean that most immersion teacher education takes the form of inservice professional development (de Courcy, 1997; Met & Lorenz, 1997). This practice means that many beginning immersion teachers enter the field with an elementary teaching license, proficiency in the target language, and little knowledge of immersion pedagogy or what they can expect in their classrooms. As immersion programs and pressure for "highly qualified" teachers continue to grow, the need for preservice immersion teaching programs is likely to grow.

As a graduate student in the Dual Language and Immersion Education Certificate program at the University of Minnesota,[3] I met many beginning immersion teachers who were personally struggling with the ins and outs of immersion teaching and became interested in understanding more about

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their experiences and professional development needs. I decided to do a study on this topic as part of a Master of Arts degree in Second Languages and Cultures Education at the University of Minnesota. In this study, Making the Transition to Immersion Teaching, six first- and second-year immersion teachers from two early, total foreign language immersion schools were interviewed (see Appendix A). A qualitative method was selected in order to meet the goal of gaining insight into the experiences of beginning immersion teachers and the kinds of preparation they see as most beneficial to their practice. Individual interviews were held in Spring 2006, when the participating schools had been open for either one or two years.

Choosing Immersion

First, the new teachers were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their jobs. Nevertheless, they confessed to having a lack of knowledge about immersion education. For example, when one new teacher talked about finding his school, he said, "I looked specifically for a teaching job teaching Spanish…and I had never before thought of doing immersion or anything like that, but I thought that it was cool." Additionally, half of the teachers indicated that during the application process they did not feel qualified for the available teaching position, either because they lacked experience (immersion or traditional) or felt that their language skills were not strong enough. Finally, one teacher who did have experience with immersion education (in Ecuador) had difficulty being hired due to an out-of-state teaching license. However, in all cases, despite the teachers' personal reservations, the hiring committees found these young teachers to be the most qualified of all their applicants.

Classroom Organization and Curricular Concerns

After starting their jobs, these novice immersion teachers shared similar concerns. They all faced challenges unique to immersion that were not addressed in their preservice programs. Explaining daily routines to kindergarten or grade 1 students was one of the biggest challenges, as new students have had little exposure to the target language that teachers use to clarify rules and routines. As one teacher pointed out, switching to English for "more important" things undermines the common immersion goal of raising the target language's status. It also diminishes the need for students to learn to construct meaning for themselves, a necessary skill for later success in a content-based second language classroom such as immersion. The teachers of older students faced a similar problem with abstract vocabulary terms, finding that teaching content-area vocabulary took significantly more time and creativity in the immersion setting. One teacher spontaneously began a TPR demonstration as he talked about teaching the word "motor":

"[In immersion] you need the car, or at least a picture of the car, the motor, but preferably the car, with the motor that comes out, so you can pass it around and say, here's the motor, touch the motor, put the motor on your head, put the motor under your arm…"

This impromptu lesson shows how adept immersion teachers become at helping students acquire vocabulary, as well as how time-intensive the process can be when compared to what transpires in a traditional classroom.

Another challenge that the new teachers encountered was modifying curriculum and materials designed for use in other contexts. A music teacher pointed out that all the tricks she had learned to help her students master techniques did not make sense in Spanish. Another teacher, whose school adopted textbooks from a target-language country, had trouble with the words that were used for teaching alphabet sounds. While a native speaker would recognize the object and be able to associate the word with the target letter, the non-native speakers who populate immersion programs would not immediately know the vocabulary. Consequently, the immersion teachers must first teach that vocabulary, which may or may not be valuable to the students. Finally, one of the teachers pointed out that there were few resources designed for kids in the target language; her students preferred American books because they "were more interesting and the pictures were better." While American books are increasingly available in Spanish, materials in other languages are less common; moreover, teachers are interested in using authentic target culture materials. Finding and paying for these authentic materials seemed to be an on-going issue for immersion teachers.

Professional Development and Sources of Support

Aside from adapting materials that were not designed for immersion, new teachers must also modify their professional development to fit within the immersion context. All of the teachers had attended professional workshops and conferences that did not target immersion teachers. A consistent theme was that they had to sift through information and activities to determine what would be applicable to immersion and what would not. In addition, all spoke positively about immersion-specific workshops that they had attended. However, most felt overwhelmed by the amount of research and information presented at these workshops and said that they were looking for more practical information. Looking back on his first immersion workshop, one teacher stated that it was helpful, but, "I remember just thinking, I have no clue how to use this…I really needed solid, just this is what you do, this is how you start the day, this is what a typical day would look like."

While the teachers did see value in formal professional development, they overwhelmingly felt that informal support from other experienced

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teachers was more useful. Contact with more experienced teachers was mentioned by nearly every interviewee as a source of information and support. The music teacher turned to an experienced teacher from another immersion school for support with curriculum design, while other teachers commented on the value of grade-level colleagues, even in cases where the colleague had only one or two years of experience. One participant felt lucky because his fellow kindergarten teacher had had ten years of immersion experience in another school, commenting, "If I hadn't had him, I would have been completely lost last year." The value of mentor teachers has also been cited in immersion research. Met and Lorenz (1997) refer to a school that had "significant success" with a mentoring program where experienced teachers served as "mentor consultants" to new teachers. Although the schools in this study lacked formal mentoring programs, the teachers were able to benefit from the presence of experienced teachers.

Interestingly, while acknowledging the helpfulness of more experienced immersion teachers, the interviewees tended to compartmentalize their answers when asked specifically about sources of support. As a general rule, the teachers preferred to get language help from native speakers, curriculum development ideas and teaching techniques from curriculum directors and/or other teachers at their schools, and behavior management strategies from other non-immersion teachers. While this may be logical, it seems to ignore the fact that many of their colleagues would be equally helpful with language and behavior strategies. It also indicates that these teachers are still compartmentalizing their jobs in terms of different classroom responsibilities, which could be reflective of their preparations. Tedick and Fortune (forthcoming) point out that, because of the lack of coherent immersion teacher education programs, immersion teachers spend time in multiple departments, each with its own goals and ways of thinking and teaching: one for grade-level licensure, one for target language proficiency, and another for immersion pedagogy. It is not surprising that these teachers, in the field, continue to separate their jobs and sources of support.

The Preparation the Teachers Wish They Had Received

Finally, when asked about the preparation they wish they had received, the novice teachers said it would have been helpful to observe in an immersion classroom. In most other educational contexts, future teachers first experience a classroom as a student, then as a student teacher, and finally as a teacher. Because most students do not attend immersion schools, there are few prospective immersion teachers who were immersion students themselves, and since most of the teachers in this study seem to have found their jobs by accident,

it is not surprising that none of them had student taught in an immersion setting.

Even the teachers with the most prior exposure to immersion felt there were weaknesses in their teacher preparation. One commonly mentioned area of need was information about language arts instruction in a second language (L2). Day and Shapson (1996) note that 57.1% of the immersion teachers they surveyed rated this as an area of "great need" or "some need" for their own development. These teachers recognized that their own L2 learning experiences (in high school and college) and their professional development for teaching English language arts did not fully prepare them to teach language arts in the target language. While this need was articulated only by the most experienced teachers, it is reasonable to expect that the more novice teachers, who were more worried about classroom procedures and daily activities, would also benefit from professional development in this area.

Implications of the Research

It is critical for the success of immersion programs that they be able to attract and retain their teachers. The recommendations below reflect both the comments of the teachers in this study and current research on immersion education.

- Introduce students, who come into teacher education programs with second language skills, to information about immersion education, and encourage them to observe and student teach in immersion classrooms. For situations where distance makes observation unrealistic, updated versions of the Montgomery County Public Schools' video series on immersion teaching could serve a similar function.
- Create immersion-specific programs to help interested native speakers, language education students, and traditional elementary education students fill the gaps in their respective educations. This means providing the relevant pieces (elementary education or language practice) to each group as needed, along with immersion pedagogy to all.
- Use current research on immersion education to develop an immersion-specific program of ongoing professional development designed to work with the new-teacher induction processes in their schools.
- Support new teachers in finding mentors or using online mentoring tools when face-to-face mentoring is impractical.
- Improve online resources for sharing materials, including already-created scope and sequences that schools can use as a starting point for developing their own language arts curricula (Day & Shapson, 1996).[4]

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- Foster communication between beginning immersion teachers and immersion teacher educators so that beginning teachers feel that their practical concerns (What should I do on the first day of school? Should I speak English during a fire drill?) are being addressed, while they also become more aware of issues that immersion experts have found to be critical to classroom teachers' development (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008; Lyster, 2007; Met, 2008), such as the challenges of balancing the teaching of content and language in the target language.
- Work with local school districts and funding bodies to help immersion programs find and hire new teachers as early as possible, providing better opportunities for observing classrooms and attending summer workshops prior to beginning the school year.

A final lesson derived from this project is that the teachers in this study are highly committed to their work. In one teacher's words, "People are here because they believe in immersion…I think it helps it... be a cohesive team and helps us work well together." They take on the extra challenges of immersion because they believe in the philosophies of the schools, love the language, and desire to share what they have learned through their travels and international experiences. Such individuals, due to the specific hiring requirements, can be difficult to find. Investment in teachers, and specifically in professional development for new teachers, is money well spent, particularly if the teachers remain as supportive of their schools as they were in these interviews.

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Editors' note: See also the CARLA-MAIN website at **http://www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/main** ***for additional research and administrator perspectives on teacher recruitment and hiring.***

Footnotes

1. See Lenker, A. & Rhodes, N. (2007). Foreign Language Immersion Programs: Features and Trends Over Thirty-Five Years. (in The Bridge: From research to practice [insert]). The ACIE Newsletter, 10, (2). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.
2. While there are no teacher licensure programs that explicitly target the foreign language immersion context, the TWI section of CAL's website (*http://www.cal.org/twi/FAQ/faq10.htm*) identifies a few teacher preparation programs for two-way immersion settings.
3. For information about the Dual Language and Immersion Education Certificate program at the University of Minnesota, visit *http://www.cehd.umn.edu/students/Certificates/LanguageImmersion.html*.
4. For examples of online scope and sequence documents developed for dual language and immersion programs, visit Portland Public Schools ESL/Immersion K-12 Spanish Language Curriculum Framework at *http://enrollment.pps.k12.or.us/.docs/pg/12795* and the Center for Applied Linguistics' Two-Way Immersion Spanish Standards and Benchmarks at *http://www.cal.org/twi/standards.htm*.

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Appendix

"Making the Transition to Immersion Teaching" Interview Questions

1. What kind of teaching experience did you have before you began teaching at an immersion school?
2. What is your background in the target language?
3. How did you first learn about immersion education?
4. What led you to take a position at your immersion school?
5. What kind of training were you given before the school year started?
6. Do you feel that the training prepared you well for your job? Which parts of your training were most/least helpful?
7. Are there specific areas in which you feel more training would have been helpful?
8. How does your average day at your current school compare to that at your old school?
9. What are the biggest challenges that you have faced this far as a teacher?
10. Where do you go/who do you ask when you have questions about teaching methods, language, curriculum or materials?
11. How much of your own course material do you design? Is this a change from your previous job(s)?