Improving Immersion Student Oral Proficiency by Fostering the Use of Extended Discourse

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Introduction

During the summer of 2001, Isabelle Punchard, a French immersion teacher, participated in the annual CARLA "Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education" summer institute. The topic for the week-long institute led by Tara Fortune and Diane Tedick was "Addressing the Quantity and Quality of Student Talk." Participants explored researcher and practitioner perspectives on the topic. This article synthesizes a number of the summer institute ideas presented in a paper co-written with Mary Livant, third grade teacher at Normandale Elementary French Immersion, in Edina, MN. In addition, it identifies a variety of new and known instructional activities that immersion teachers can use to foster extended discourse and increase their students' language production.

Research Review

Through the social and linguistic process of negotiating meaning in the classroom, immersion students develop the vocabulary and sentence structures needed to achieve high levels of functional proficiency. Yet research carried out in the Canadian immersion context shows that this proficiency has limitations. As Kowal and Swain (1997) note in their review of the literature, "although immersion students can reach native-speaker levels on receptive tasks such as listening and reading comprehension, their productive skills, spoken and written, remain below these levels" (p. 285). More specifically, research finds that English-speaking immersion students' oral language lacks grammatical accuracy and sociolinguistic variety, becomes increasingly anglicized over time and is less complex than the language produced by native speakers of the second language (Harley, 1984; Harley, Cummins, Swain, and Allen, 1990; Pawley, 1985; Spilka, 1976). These less-than-desirable evaluations have caused researchers and teachers to question the nature of immersion classroom language use and to suggest possible relationships between student language use and the development of oral proficiency in the immersion language.

What do we know about the ways immersion students use language in the classroom that can inform our understanding of their underdeveloped productive skills?

Whereas research on immersion education provides copious amounts of evaluative information on students' academic achievement and language skills, relatively few studies are able to inform our understanding of students' day-to-day language production within the classroom. Swain and Carroll (1987) offer a rare example of one such study. They investigated classroom interaction in nine grade 3 and ten grade 6 French immersion classrooms in Ontario. After analyzing several hours of audiotaped data, they reported that students *as a group* average two turns of talking per minute. Further, 44% of these talk turns are best described as "minimal," that is to say, consisting of one to two words. In fact,

only 14% of the interactional time in grade 6 classrooms could be described as "sustained," meaning that the language produced contained more than one clause. In a subsequent discussion of this finding, Swain (1991) argues for the importance of extended student discourse and states that "sustained talk provides both opportunities for variety and complexity of language use, and it forces the learner to pay attention to how content is expressed" (p. 237).

The idea that immersion students will benefit by increased opportunities for sustained language production and interaction with "more capable peers" is also supported by the social learning theory of the late Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978, p. 86). Vygotsky posited that learning and cognition are interrelated processes mediated primarily through language. He described the teaching-learning process as situated within the social interactional space between a learner and a more competent other, be that an adult or a more knowledgeable peer. According to Vygotskian theory, learners co-construct knowledge through social interactions with more knowledgeable conversational partners. In his synthesis of the key lessons of immersion education, Genesee (1995) concurs and writes, "language is acquired most effectively when it is learned for communication in meaningful and significant social situations" (p. 1). He goes on to emphasize immersion students' need for regular opportunities to hold extended conversations in order to be able to further develop the immersion language.

A traditional teacher-led question-answer session, such as that frequently found in classrooms, will not create frequent opportunities for sustained language use, and by extension, continuous language development. As Harley (1993) notes "in the typical content-oriented school classroom, the teacher does most of the talking; unless provision is specifically made, there may be little opportunity for students to produce sustained discourse" (p. 247). Thus, in a given classroom there are simply too many students for language development to depend on teacher-student interactions during teacher-fronted activities.

How can teachers create an environment in which meaningful and sustained student talk is likely to occur?

Immersion teachers need to create learning environments and design activities that are conducive to students communicating with each other in meaningful ways, striving to help each student stretch his/her language skills a little farther each time. Research in second language classrooms has pointed to the effectiveness of well-structured pair and cooperative group tasks and activity-centered learning (Long and Porter, 1985; McGroarty, 1989; Stevens, 1983).

Structuring pair and cooperative group tasks is an effective way to promote extended student discourse and encourage interaction among all students. The information gap technique, in which each student is held accountable for acquiring or supplying a missing piece of knowledge, is one example. Carefully constructed cooperative group activities can also help elicit the repeated use of vocabulary, academic content concepts and a variety of language structures. The depth and

length of the student discourse will, of course, vary based on the student's level of proficiency. Below are some activity structures teachers can use to promote sustained interaction with immersion classrooms.

Fostering Extended Discourse through Structured Interaction

Pair Activities for the Primary Grades and Beginning Proficiency Levels

1. Back-to-Back Infogap

Student A describes the clothing he/she drew on a person to Student B, who must duplicate that drawing without seeing it. *Variation*: Student A draws an imaginary monster that Student B has to duplicate.

2. Sequencing Activity

Students collaborate to put in sequential order pictures depicting a child's day (with or without sentences) before retelling the story of the pictures to another pair of students.

3. Runners and Writers

Students work together as a 2-person team to recopy a content-related text word for word that is displayed in various places around the classroom. Student A, the runner, runs to the displayed text, reads as much of the text as she/he can recall, and returns to the writer, Student B, to dictate the text as recalled. They continue in this manner until the entire text has been reconstructed. Throughout the activity, Student A checks the accuracy of the reconstructed text and draws attention to errors in spelling, capitalization, etc. as they occur (E. Bigler, personal communication, August 15, 2002).

Pair Activities for the Upper Elementary Grades and Intermediate Proficiency Level

1. Reconstructing a Text

Students work in partnership to fill in the missing information in an authentic text that supports the theme topic of study. Depending on the students' grade level and theme topic, the text could be an invitation, a piece of children's literature, a TV schedule, a letter, or a newspaper article. The authentic text is modified to include blanks for missing words in different parts for each student. Student A rebuilds the full text by asking student B questions about the missing information. These questions require Student B to use skimming and scanning strategies to locate the needed information. Student B, in turn, must obtain the answers to a different set of questions from Student A. Prior to interacting to reconstruct the text, students will need time to read it through and generate a list of meaningful questions.

2. Poem Completion

Students join together to complete a poem with missing words. Rhyming as well as context and meaning must be taken into account to complete the poem. Specific language structures such as adjective-noun agreement or verb tense can also be a focus of this activity. Students are encouraged to be creative with the language when this activity is completely open-ended. By choosing poems of various levels of difficulty, this activity can be adapted for beginning or more advanced proficiency levels.

3. Story Sequencing

Students interact with one another to accurately sequence paragraphs (or sentences) cut up and presented in parts from a familiar story or text. Each pair then prepares to explain to the whole class why paragraph A would logically need to precede paragraph B. They continue with pair presentations until the whole class reaches the end of the text.

Cooperative Group Activities for the Beginning and Avanced Proficiency Levels

1. The Cooperative Jigsaw Activity (Aronson, Blaney, Stephen, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978)

In a jigsaw (see figure 1, page 5), each member of a base group is assigned a letter (Students A, B, and C, for example), to indicate their membership in a second group, as well as a part of a text or information-gathering task. For example, in a unit on insects, Student A might be responsible for learning about the stages of the life cycle of the butterfly, while Student B focuses on the differences between moths and butterflies, and Student C studies the migration of monarchs. Student A then meets with other A students who are also members of other base groups. Together they research information, design an activity for teaching the life cycle of butterflies to their base group, and practice teaching this piece of the jigsaw with each other first. Student B does the same with other B students as does Student C with other C students.

Once the "expert" groups of A, B, and C have learned and collaboratively prepared and rehearsed how to teach their material, the students return to their original base groups. Each base group includes at least one person from expert group A, B, and C. Student A then teaches base group members about the butterfly life cycle to Students B and C, and so on. By taking on the role of the teacher, students will need to communicate for an extended period of time. They are also far more likely to retain the information and vocabulary they taught since, as Glasser (1993) maintains, we remember on average 10% of what we hear, but 95% of what we teach.

Jigsaws are a very effective strategy for increasing student language output from second grade on. However, younger students need more structure than upper elementary students in terms of where to find information and how to teach the major points to their base groups.
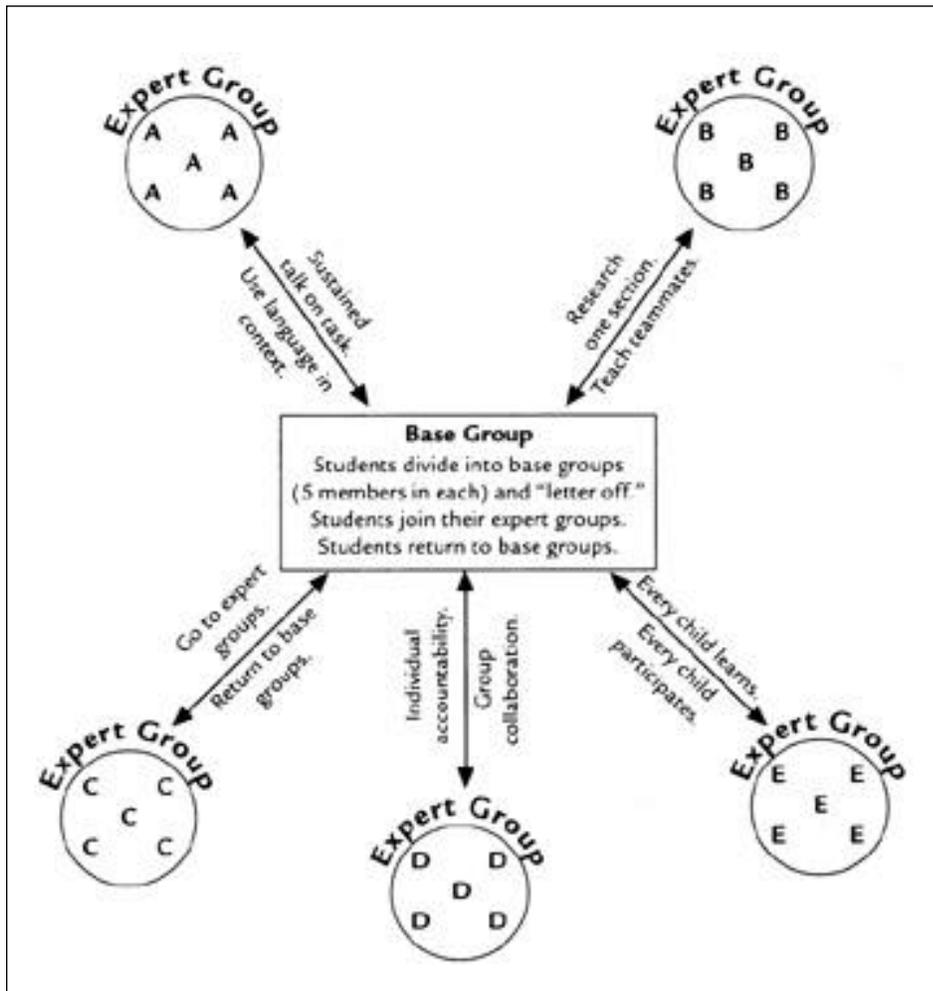
Figure 1: Cooperative Jigsaw (Adapted from Meyers, 1993)

Cooperative Group Activities for the More Advanced Proficiency Levels

1. Simulation (Jones, 1982)

In a social studies or a language arts context, students can adopt viewpoints for and against controversial topics, such as genetically engineered food. Base groups could once again consist of Students A, B, and C. Student A's task might be to represent those marketing the food and to defend the promises of genetically engineered foods, while Student B assumes the identity of a developing country's farm representative arguing from this perspective, and Student C becomes the concerned parent of a young child. A jigsaw format can be used to help the base group members prepare their position with other students who will be asked to represent the same point of view. Simulations also work well to analyze major historical events from multiple cultural perspectives.

2. Strategic interaction (DiPietro, 1987)

Prepared in a similar way to the simulation described above, a strategic interaction activity invites students to role-play a certain scenario, in which each participant has a different and potentially conflicting agenda, one that is unknown to the conversational partner.

For example, in the context of a theme-based unit on the colonization of Africa, Student A represents an African head of state who wants the French government to build roads between the major cities of his country. He believes these roads will help to develop commercial relationships within his country and with the world beyond. Student B is a representative of the French government whose job it is to communicate that the French government will only provide financial support for the construction of roads that will connect the gold mines and the coast. By establishing these roles with conflicting agendas the potential for an extended communication has been created. Strategic interaction also involves cooperative group work. Prior to the interaction itself, students receive their assigned role in small groups and jointly brainstorm the language necessary to engage in the interaction. One representative from the small group, then, carries out the role-play with the option of returning as needed to the group for assistance with language or ideas. An important final step in this activity is the debriefing stage where the teacher leads a discussion on characteristics of the language used.

3. Story Writing

Students jointly construct a creative writing text, collaborating both on content and conventions of language. This can also be organized as a sequential story where one group writes the introduction and then passes the story on to another group. To make this even more fun, the previous part of the story can be covered up, leading to some strange storytelling upon completion! Reading the stories aloud to the whole class group by group makes for a great ending to the activity.

Fostering Extended Discourse with an Activity-centered Classroom

Another purposeful way to foster extended discourse is to create an activity-centered classroom. Stevens (1983) describes it as an environment where:

- Students choose their own areas of study within the theme suggested by the teacher.

- Students do whatever is necessary to find the information required to pursue their projects.

- Students present their findings in some form that they have selected, such as a model, a picture, a written handout, or whatever means they consider appropriate.

- Students use each other as well as the teacher as resource persons.

Stevens (1983) compared late French immersion students who spent 40% of their day in the target language in an activity-centered classroom with early French immersion students who received their instruction in a predominantly teacher-centered classroom. She found

that the "French language skills of students involved in the [activity-centered] AC program were comparable to those of students in the [teacher-centered] TC program, despite the time differences" (p. 262). She attributed this success to "the motivation provided by the use of the language in real situations and the opportunities for extended discourse among peers" (p. 262). Genesee (1995) echoed this sentiment when he wrote that "the success of the activity-centered classes can be attributed to two main factors: 1) students had regular opportunities for extended discourse; and 2) students were highly motivated because they used the target language in situations of personal choice" (p. 2).

Conclusion

The teaching strategies and activity ideas described above show how teachers can successfully encourage immersion students to collaborate with each other, seek information, hold discussions about language and co-construct knowledge. Immersion teachers need to provide as many opportunities as possible for their students to learn from each other and to communicate with each other in meaningful ways. If teachers keep these goals in mind, they can create meaningful and motivating activities that will maximize and increase their students' production of the immersion language.

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