

Teaching Methodology in a First-Grade French-Immersion Class

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Abstract

This micro-ethnographic classroom-based case study explores the teaching methodology in a first-grade French-immersion class. This study was carried out in a public elementary immersion school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where English-speaking children throughout the school learn the school curriculum through a second language (French), starting in kindergarten. The findings of the study indicated that the two team teachers of the first-grade French-immersion class established a learning environment in which they consistently used interactive dialogues, humor, challenging activities, imaginary characters, prefabricated language patterns, and concrete learning experiences to teach the second language and content matter simultaneously.

Introduction

The research studies done on immersion education have focused mostly on the outcomes. Researchers have sought to learn about the effectiveness of immersion teaching on student language proficiency, the characteristics of one-way and two-way immersion programs, and the outcomes of these programs on student academic and language learning. However, research studies on the teaching processes in immersion classrooms are also necessary in order to identify instructional practices that promote second language (L2) learning in immersion classrooms.

In immersion programs, the foreign language is the vehicle for teaching the regular school curriculum, rather than the subject of the instruction. Immersion programs immerse the learner in the target language, as the elementary school curriculum is taught in the target language (Heining-Boynton, 1998). However, immersion education should not be confused with

“submersion” or “sink-or-swim.” In an immersion classroom, instruction is delivered in the L2, but it is carefully structured in order to maximize students’ comprehension. Children are not expected to function immediately in their L2, and they can also express themselves in their first language (L1) (Lyster, 1998; Lessow-Hurley, 1996). The French-immersion elementary school in Milwaukee, where this study was conducted, is an immersion program where native English-speaking children are taught in L2 (French), beginning in kindergarten.

The French-Immersion Elementary School Program

The goal of the French-immersion program is to provide students the opportunity to become bilingual both in French and English, as well as to provide them with a high-quality, multicultural education. Students in the French-immersion school are monolingual English-speaking children. They are immersed in French, beginning in kindergarten; students in the program range from age 4 to 10. Students receive instruction in reading, language arts, mathematics, and science in L2 in the first grade. Language arts instruction in English begins in Grade 2, and the amount of English instruction is increased in Grades 3–5. Students spend approximately 45 to 90 minutes per day in English instruction in Grades 3–5.

The French-immersion school is a magnet school where children from all parts of the city can enroll in the program. The admission process is open to any child in 4-year-old kindergarten, 5-year-old kindergarten, and Grade 1. Admission for children in Grades 2–5 is dependent upon students’ prior French background.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study used qualitative methods to construct a micro-ethnographic case study. The data were collected from the first-grade French-immersion class through onsite observations, videotaping, and audiotaping. Structured and semistructured interviews were also conducted with the two teachers.

Participants

The participants of this study were recommended by the program implementor of the school as exemplary educators. The first-grade classroom in the French-immersion school was team taught by two teachers. Mademoiselle F., who was in her mid-20s, had 2 years of teaching experience. Monsieur L., who was in his early 40s, had 6 years of teaching experience.

In the first-grade French-immersion class, there were 24 students (13 girls and 11 boys). The class was a part of the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program. SAGE is a state-funded program that calls for a

maximum of 15 students in a class. Since there were 24 students and SAGE requires a ratio of no more than 15 students per teacher, the class was team taught by two teachers.

Data Analysis

In L2 classroom studies, ethnography has been recommended as a way to give a comprehensive description and to provide a deeper understanding of language learning in a classroom context (Nunan, 1992). The data analysis of this study was based on qualitative research techniques from ethnography and case study research. The constant comparison method based on grounded theory was employed during the data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A Typical Day in Room 21

The class begins the day with half an hour of seat work. The children come into the classroom and do their seat work while soft music is playing. During the seat work, Mademoiselle F. takes attendance and the lunch count. The daily schedule of the class is presented in Figure 1.

<u>Time</u>	<u>Subject</u>
9:00–9:30 a.m.	Morning seat work, attendance, lunch count
9:30–10:00 a.m.	Integrated skills on the carpet
10:00–10:15 a.m.	Word wall vocabulary/phonics/spelling
10:15–10:40 a.m.	Journal writing
10:40–10:50 a.m.	Break
10:50–11:15 a.m.	Math
11:15–11:30 a.m.	Singing, rhymes, learning games
11:30 a.m.–12:15 p.m.	Lunch break and recess
12:15–12:30 p.m.	Reading aloud
12:30–12:45 p.m.	Silent reading
12:45–12:55 p.m.	Book sharing
12:55–1:00 p.m.	Break
1:00–1:45 p.m.	Puppet theater
2:30–2:45 p.m.	Snack and break
2:45–3:15 p.m.	Science or social studies
3:15–3:25 p.m.	Songs, rhymes
3:25–3:35 p.m.	Preparation for dismissal

Figure 1. Daily schedule of the first-grade class.

Carpet time, reading aloud time, puppet theater time, and math time were the main learning contexts and the daily classroom routines in which the children were involved in various learning experiences in language arts and math lessons in the first-grade French-immersion class. The goal of carpet time is to integrate language arts and math skills. Most of the time, Mademoiselle F. is in charge of carpet time. Developing students' phonics ability by decoding and pronouncing words, teaching them the grammar of the L2, and building their vocabulary knowledge are the key learning objectives of carpet time. The teachers used flash cards, word walls, and letter-sound cubes to introduce the French alphabet and its related sounds and to build students' awareness of the relationship between letters and sounds in the L2. The children sit on the carpet, and the teacher is in front of them. Under the guidance and modeling of the teacher, the children first tell the day and month on the calendar. Then they count the numbers on the calendar together. There is also a leather bear hung on the wall (see Figure 2). It is called Mr. or Miss Bear, and the children get to dress the bear, based on the place picked on the globe. Sometimes the teachers and the children say aloud what the bear is going to wear. At other times, a student comes to the board and guides the class as to what Mr. or Miss Bear should wear by asking questions of his or her classmates. Then Monsieur L. and the children start to work on phonics on the carpet. Monsieur L. introduces the sounds, and the children make sentences with the words.



Figure 2. Miss Bear.

Around 11 a.m., before lunch, math time starts and takes about an hour every day. Math time is generally conducted by Monsieur L. Most of the learning experiences are hands on and require the use of various mathematical tools and materials, such as interlocking cubes, unlined paper, blocks, play money, egg cartons, and plastic cups. The math activities are sometimes done with the whole group, and at other times, they occur during small-group work or in pairs. The teachers use an overhead projector to explain mathematical concepts and to solve problems. For the assessment of group work, there is an evaluation rubric that is written on the board. Each group is evaluated, based on whether the children used the target language, followed the instructions, and worked cooperatively in order to accomplish the group goal.

After lunch, the children start to read the books that they picked that morning from the class library. Mademoiselle F. sets the timer to 15 minutes, and silent reading time starts. Some children read at their desks individually, and some of the children read on the carpet to each other. At the end of the 15 minutes, the children get ready for book sharing. The teachers pick a couple of children each day to share what they have read. Each child who is picked by the teachers comes to the front of the chalkboard and summarizes what he or she has read. After book sharing, the children gather around the teacher on the carpet, and the teacher reads aloud while the children listen.

After reading aloud time, the puppet theater starts, which takes approximately 45 minutes per day. The goal of the puppet theater is to practice a story structure (e.g., setting, characters) within a context in which the children improvise a story. Three children are chosen every day to improvise a short play by using puppets that they make themselves. The theme and the content of the play are created by the three children under the guidance of Monsieur L. The puppet theater stage is located in the middle of the carpeted area, where the children and Mademoiselle F. sit. The children are supposed to take notes while they are watching the puppet show, since a question session will follow the show. The class asks questions of the children who have acted out the play, and those children answer the questions. After puppet theater, the students go to gym, art, or music classes, which are conducted in English. Monsieur L. mentioned, "Those are prime opportunities to be using second language, but we don't have teachers for those special areas." Then the students come back to the class and have a snack, which takes approximately 15 minutes. They often sing during that snack time. The day ends with either social studies or science, done with a lot of hands-on activities.

Room 21 has two children assistants per day: They have jobs and take orders from the teachers all day. They know what the tasks involve because they have learned from the other assistants who did them. For instance, the teachers might ask the assistants to bring a dictionary from the table; or, if there are visitors at the door, the teacher might ask the assistants to open the door and welcome them. According to Monsieur L., these kinds of management routines are important for language learning because the children not only do

what the teacher says, but they also sometimes have a question about what they are supposed to do. This is particularly important to L2 learning because the children use L2 for real purposes, and in this way, they are exposed to authentic learning contexts.

The walls of Room 21 feature plenty of posters, word walls, and pictures that display vocabulary. In the carpeted area of the classroom, there are a calendar, a season wheel, and place-value charts. These charts are on the wall and the children learn to tell the day, month, and season on the calendar and the season wheel. They count the numbers on the calendar together. The place-value chart is used to reinforce the number concept, and the children practice the hundreds, tens, and ones on the chart. The class library is inside the carpeted area. The stage for the puppet theater and a little rocking chair are also in this carpeted area. The manipulatives—math and science teaching materials (e.g., cubes, blocks, egg cartons, toy animals, and plants)—are located on the shelves.

Immersion Teaching Methodology in Room 21

The immersion teachers participating in this study provide their students with a structured learning environment that is shaped by main learning contexts and daily routines. Through these learning contexts, the first graders attend to language and content matter while trying to use the target language. The teachers frequently use multisensory experiences reinforced by visual aids, gestures, and manipulatives in order to enhance the students' understanding of the target language and content matter. In the first-grade class, the teachers provide continuous revision and repetition of the content material in order to reinforce the students' language and learning processes.

The Use of Prefabricated Language Patterns

As Curtain and Pesola (1994) have stated, teachers can increase communication by teaching functional chunks of the target language. Teachers should model target language structures and expect the children to use these language patterns within various learning contexts. Monsieur L. and Mademoiselle F. believe that they need to model L2 for their students in learning contexts, such as carpet time, reading aloud time, and math time.

Monsieur L. believes that modeling by providing language structures and consistency in the lessons helps the children feel safe enough to participate in activities. For example, the following scene took place when Mademoiselle F. told the students they were in Wisconsin during the winter and asked them what Mr. Bear was going to wear.

Sharon: *Monsieur Ourson va porter une casquette en hiver à Wisconsin.*

[Mr. Small Bear will wear a cap in the winter in Wisconsin.]

Mademoiselle F.: *Qui d'autre? Sally?*
[Who else? Sally?]

Sally: *Monsieur Ourson va porter un manteau en hiver à Wisconsin.*
[Mr. Small Bear will wear a coat in the winter in Wisconsin.]

Vesterbacka (1991) emphasizes that the use of prefabricated language patterns is particularly crucial in early, total immersion programs since children start without any knowledge of L2. Vesterbacka states that children's use of prefabricated language patterns gives them confidence to express themselves in L2 during the early stages of L2 acquisition.

In the following example, the class was working on addition and subtraction, and they were making word problems. The sentence patterns and vocabulary taught in the following example included: "*Ça fait* [There are]," "*Il y a* [There is]," "*Combien* [How many]," "*Arrivent* [Arrive]," and "*Partent* [Leave]."

In the following scene, Lilly came to the front of the class and read the math problem she had written, and the rest of the class tried to answer the question.

Lilly: *Dix renards marchent ensemble. Deux autres renards arrivent.*
Ça fait combien de renards en tout?
[Ten foxes walk together. Two other foxes arrive. How many foxes are there all together?]

Monsieur L.: (to the class) *Vous avez entendu? Lilly, tu n'as pas fini!*
Tu as posé une question. Il faut demander à quelqu'un.
[Did you hear? Lilly, you're not finished! You asked a question. You have to call on someone.]

Lilly: Sam!

Sam: *Douze! Ça fait douze renards en tout.*
[There are twelve foxes all together.]

Monsieur L.: *Tout le monde!*
[Everyone!]

Students: *Ça fait douze renards en tout!*
[There are twelve foxes all together!]

The teachers use prefabricated language patterns when the children work with math concepts, such as number facts (addition and subtraction), calculation, and math word problems. During math time, the teachers provide the children with sentence patterns and vocabulary that they can use when they express their mathematical thinking while they are communicating with their teachers and classmates. The teachers provide language patterns for the students to help them proceed in a learning experience and to build communication among the students.

The teachers frequently use peer teaching in carpet time. Mademoiselle F. mentioned that they model enough for the children to know exactly what they will be doing and saying, since they are doing the same thing every day with only slight variation. Mademoiselle F. said that the students like to be “teachers,” and peer teaching is also useful for the real teachers in seeing what the children are actually learning.

The following scene occurred when Sam, one of the class’s most proficient L2 students, was leading the class in carpet time. The teachers were at the back of the room, watching how the students were doing.

Sam: *Aujourd’hui, c’est?*

[Today is?]

(The children raised their hands.)

Sam: Kathy?

Kathy: *Aujourd’hui, c’est mercredi.*

[Today is Wednesday.]

(Kathy came to the board and answered in front of the calendar by pointing at Wednesday.)

Sam: *Merci. Quelle est la date?*

[Thanks. What’s the date?]

(Hands raised.)

Bob: *La date est le 28.*

[The date is the 28th.]

(Bob came in front of the board to answer.)

Sam: *Quel est le mois?*

[What’s the month?]

(Hands raised. Sam called Timothy’s name.)

Timothy: *Mars!*

[March!]

Sam: *Viens le montrer!*

[Come to show it!]

Timothy: *C’est déjà là!*

[It’s already there.]

Then Sam moved to the front of the bear and picked three word cards for clothing items. The children clapped their hands, and then everybody began to scream and point at the bear on the wall. With Sam pointing to the bear’s different clothes, the whole class said aloud what the bear was wearing. Then, to make a joke, Sam put the cap on the bear’s hand. Sam was about to leave and then stopped and laughed. The children all laughed.

Creating Meaningful Communicative Contexts

The opportunity to engage in meaningful oral exchanges in a classroom setting is a necessary component in L2 acquisition. Swain (1988) states that sustained talk provides opportunities for variety and complexity of language use, so teachers need to structure the content of the lessons to permit more opportunities for students' sustained use of language.

In the following conversation, the children were talking to Mademoiselle F. about when they speak French outside of class:

Mike: *Quand je fais mes devoirs, moi, je parle beaucoup en français, mais pas en anglais!*

[When I do my homework, I speak a lot of French, but no English!]

Mademoiselle F: *Oh là là! Gina?*

[Wow! Gina?]

Gina: *Mon amie parle français et mon autre amie ne parle pas français, juste anglais, et moi et mon ami, nous parlons toujours en français, et mon autre amie se fâche: Parlez anglais!*

[My friend speaks French and my other friend does not speak French, just English, and me and my friend, always speak French, and my other friend gets angry: Speak English!]

Monsieur L. said that unstructured time, such as word games that the children play before carpet time, also encourages them to talk to each other. LaVan (2001) points out that teachers need to create a classroom context with clear expectations for the use of the target language. In other words, teachers should make clear to students that they are expected to use the target language as much as possible. In addition to clearly established rules and expectations, teachers also need to create a nurturing environment, which encourages the use of the L2 and provides opportunities for its use (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000).

In the first-grade French-immersion class, the majority of the children used French in their social interactions with their peers. Here is an anecdote from the French-immersion class when Monsieur L. described an incident concerning two girls in his class:

The other day, there was a conflict between two girls. One said, "Sarah has been bothering me a lot and I'm afraid of her." I said to go into the hall and talk to her.

So they went out into the hall and standing there, so I just wanted to see if they were speaking in French or English. They had their whole

conversation in French. I didn't say, "Have your conversation in French." They didn't know that I was gonna be walking over there, too, which I supposed I invaded their privacy, but I wanted to know.

Monsieur L. was amazed and at the same time pleased that the two girls were speaking entirely in French when they were discussing a personal problem between themselves. Monsieur L. emphasizes building play language in the classroom. The children communicate in French within the classroom. Since the language of the class is French and the teachers' expectation in the class is that the children speak the target language, the students continue to use L2 also in their social interactions with one another.

Conclusion

Young children learn language best when there is an emphasis on relevant, meaningful content rather than on the language itself. The integration of content in language instruction provides a substantive basis for language teaching and learning since content can provide both a motivational and a cognitive basis for language learning. Therefore, it is essential for immersion teachers to organize the classroom environment in a way that makes children feel comfortable interacting with others and taking risks in using L2 (Cloud et al., 2000). The students in the first-grade French-immersion classroom enjoyed learning L2 and answered the question "Do you like learning French?" with affirmative statements. Some of the children's answers included:

1. "Yes, because I learn a lot and I know a lot."
2. "Yes, because it's just very fun."
3. "Yes, because I'm the only one in my family that can do it, and it's really cool."
4. "Yes, because first I didn't know French, and then I [got] used to it, and then after when I was learning, I keep learning more French all over and all over."

This study presented what immersion teaching looked like in one first-grade French-immersion class in which children were instructed in L2 beginning in kindergarten. The two teachers in this study created a learning community where the children shared, discussed, and learned both L2 and content.

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