

## Strategies for Teaching English Abroad: The Immersion Classroom

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### Abstract

*English language development is best laid on the foundation of natural and social interactions which requires a great deal of sacrifice from educators who teach abroad (Snow, 1997). Learning to speak a new language grants learners a passport and highly coveted citizenship to a culturally interconnected world (Met & Lorenz, 1993); however, educators often face a daunting challenge. They must come up with comprehensive strategies which ensure that learners obtain requisite skills faster than might otherwise be deemed necessary. They must also employ non-verbal communication in place of the native language and secure a total commitment from students (Fortune, 2000). Finally, educators must leverage the brain's information processing and retention ability against a very formidable threat: forgetting. The paper focuses on language immersion classroom strategies currently being used around the world, along with a discussion on how technology has been used to increase language and cultural competencies. This research has implications for educators and administrators who are interested in the impact that technology access has on learning when paired with a total immersion approach. This paper will present recommendations for international English language immersion programs, whose*

*goals are to develop a total cultural competency for students aged 5-25 in environments where there are limited resources to aid in language immersion.*

**Keywords:** educators, ELD, immersion, learning styles, resources, skills

### Introduction

When learning to swim for the first time, children are sometimes dropped at the deep end of the pool. Their parents are told that there is safety in learning to survive this way. Despite every warning bell going on in their heads, parents are cautioned to allow their children to master their fears and with assistance, learn to tread water and swim. This method of learning, also known as immersion, is readily applied to English Language Development (ELD) for students who live in countries where English may not be the primary language in use. Language immersion is an intense educational experience, which supplies English language learners with skills they need to be naturally and socially competent communicators. English fluency among students in China, Pakistan, and India, for example, affords learners a highly coveted citizenship to a culturally connected world. Essentially, the challenge is to come up with comprehensive strategies, which allow learners to obtain requisite skills faster and more completely than might otherwise be deemed necessary. Because English language development among the speakers of other languages is best achieved in an immersion environment, the teachers who aid students abroad face significant constraints and must possess several personal and professional skills and resources to be successful.

### Learning strategies

**Bloom's taxonomy.** Bloom's Taxonomy is a two-tiered, six level tool which "represents levels of complexity in thinking" (New Jersey World Languages Curriculum Framework, n.d., p. 279). In Bloom's Taxonomy, "The ability for students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize their language skills is evidence of more complex levels of thinking with lesser emphasis placed upon knowledge and comprehension" (New Jersey World Languages Curriculum Framework, n.d., p. 279). While application of language skills can be a complex task, it is placed firmly between the higher and lower skill levels in Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom urges teachers to employ, "A variety of instructional strategies and products" (New Jersey World Languages Curriculum Framework, n.d., p. 264), which can be tailored to each level of thinking. Research shows that a variety of learning activities, which require students to use different levels of thinking, will better provide opportunities for a diverse student demographic to learn well information processing theory. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is most effective when it is grounded in a set of observations, developmental patterns [and when it] can be reduced to a more basic set of operations, processing procedures (McLaughlin, 1987; Pienemann, 1998). McLaughlin (1987) advances two major concepts in his approach to SLA and language processing: automaticity and restructuring. While automaticity refers to whether or not language development is processed using controlled or automatic mechanisms, restructuring refers to the replacement of existing procedures by more efficient ones (Pienemann, 1998). Cognitive psychology offers ELD immersion classrooms a unique view of the learning experience. Not all learning can be converted into words or demonstrated on tests. There is a great deal of incidental learning occurring in immersion classrooms

that can only manifest itself in a casual, accidental fashion (Pienemann, 1998). This unrehearsed learning is the type of natural and easy skill which translates well to English language usage in modern society. Bruner (1961) argues that language codes aid life experiences so that individuals do not have to constantly work at the level of interpretation. This automatic processing provides a complex yet flexible cognition and is the very purpose of education in the first place. Transferable learning skills are one of the many hallmarks of the total immersion classroom.

**Constructivist theory.** Constructivism offers a host of strategies for empowering ELD students and equipping ELD instructors. Using discussions, journal assignments, and cultural and family reports give students an opportunity to reflect on knowledge and information they already have to create something in a new language. Curriculum must bear evidence of cultural and environmental differences. Scaffolding is sensitive to difference, while encouraging content mastery by breaking up learning objectives into small chunks. Scaffolding gives English language learners a chance to acquire and apply requisite skills without pressure or overload. It also allows instructors to teach students at their own pace (Marzano, 2003; Reiss, 2008). Constructivism uses

show and tell, student disclosures, turn-and-talk teams, pre-instructional vocabulary (introduced with photos, videos, and through other engaging strategies), visual aids, and persistent attempts to gather feedback to keep students motivated and learning (Alber, 2011).

**Immersion education abroad.** Teaching English abroad in an immersion classroom setting requires instructors to have a great deal of knowledge, flexibility, and experience which readily

translate to teaching students with many different styles of learning in a language which is not their own.

**Personal skills and resources needed.** English language development is best laid on a foundation of natural and social interactions (Snow, 1997), which requires a great deal of sacrifice from educators who teach abroad. The willingness to commit to the community over a long term and make permanent one's residence in the country where ELD program is being constructed should be a primary consideration. As core competencies are various and very challenging for the average teacher, it is essential that teachers be involved with the evolution of the program and be present to provide continual support to learners as they rapidly progress through various stages of their language development (Harrison, 1993).

**Requirement of professional skills and resources.** Different skill sets coalesce to form the model for a successful English teacher in a country where English may not be the first language. At least, that is the theoretical basis behind noted author and researcher, Erban (2004), who in his article *Emerging Research and Practices in Immersion Teacher Education* discusses the professional and educational components of immersion teachers. Erban identifies five different skill areas which are beneficial to immersion teachers:

1. Foundation studies. Encompass sociology, philosophy, and psychology of education. It helps educators to learn and effectively articulate why education is important and to understand methodologies used.
2. Teacher development studies. Includes planning, classroom management, assessment/evaluation, curriculum creation, and the

core elements of any teaching program.

3. Discipline studies. Includes bilingualism, applied linguistics, foreign language pedagogy and methodology, and cultural studies. These studies help to more fully understand the context of culture and how it relates to teaching.
4. Curriculum studies. Covers all basic subjects, that is, science, social studies, and the arts.

Research shows that when a teacher combines these competencies in the immersion classroom and relates them to a practicum experience, learning can be successful (Erban, 2004). Language immersion at the primary and secondary school levels, or internships in the country in which the teacher will be teaching can familiarize her with the culture of the host country and other ancillary information that will help (Erben, 2004).

**Institutional resources needed.** In 1984, New Zealand's National Department of Education permitted a primary school in the Waikato region of the country to establish an indigenous language immersion program, which would lead to successive efforts to improve immersion education, language shifts, and revitalization of the local Maori language of the indigenous peoples in European colonies. The Language Commission was established and it immediately began to gather statistics and conduct research to align the stated purpose of programs with the actual activities going on in the classroom. Efforts to support and maintain the Maori language were multi-pronged; school districts received financial support for their Maori language programs at several different levels of schooling. The early successes increased the demands for Maori speakers who could work in schools, government agencies, radio, and television broadcasting and across

many different industries. New television program was established to support early childhood language development. Language immersion preschool programs or nests helped children from birth to five years of age and were the responsibility of preschools and families (Harrison, 1993; Harrison, 2009).

### **New approaches: Technology aid in ELD**

New strategies for teaching English are being developed all the time. The Basic Training and Resources for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (BTRTESOL) is a tool that simplifies English language education for teachers in many different cultural settings by taking a unique back-to-the-basics approach. Most teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) provide instruction for a very short period in their lives, in only one country and without the added burden of immersion. BTRTESOL uses many media-rich resources to aid instructors in ELD preparation. A traditional textbook is supplemented by online textbook, videos, and audio, which can be easily located on a website and is broken down into ten, easy-to-manage units. The introduction or the basic concepts deal with the differences between tutoring and teaching and how to navigate cultural differences. The program urges instructors to use games and songs to teach children and to employ creative methods of evaluating and assessing skills (Henrichsen, 2010).

In an article published in 2009, an ESL teacher Lynn Zimmerman shared some anecdotal evidence which supports the importance of technology in ELD immersion programs. Zimmerman (2009) recounts her work teaching English in Poland. She used Ning Technology to help students engage in online discussion and

cites Internet access as a key factor for teaching English in the 21st century. Zimmerman regularly sent out PowerPoints to students and used Skype to privately tutor those who had questions or were stuck on certain concepts. Zimmerman also used the text function on cell phones to give her students the phonetic spelling of words so that they might be easier to pronounce. She gave students opportunities to write out commonly-used phrases and allowed them to thread vernacular into some of the lessons (Zimmerman, 2009).

Zimmerman's next account comes from an Australian ESL teacher, who focuses on the usage of Smartboards to connect students to their interactive classroom. On the downside, the teacher noted that some students fall victim to the ease of communicating online and through SMS and text messaging. Additionally, the researcher noted that most of her students were women who had child care duties at home. Mothers would rarely post online when they were not in class or even check the website due to family responsibilities.

### **ELD success**

Immersion teachers make mastery and high proficiency the goal of their second language lessons. During the first phase of language development, academic lessons are made comprehensible to learners through the use of a vast repertoire of instructional strategies as they cover the school district's curriculum (Snow, 1987). Many of these strategies are on the Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist (Fortune, 2000) developed by immersion teachers and researchers. Body language, visuals, exaggerated facial expressions and vocal inflection, and intonation help learners to grasp the meaning of communication. Automatic

and effortless language use is made less complex when teachers use songs, phrases, and rhymes as a part of regular learning routines.

### **Conclusion**

Total immersion is not a language development program that fits the needs of every student uniformly. Just as not all parents will be interested in supporting their children through a total immersion program, not all school personnel and administrators are prepared to make necessary adjustments to help motivate students to mastery a new language through immersion. Total immersion requires highly trained and skilled teachers for each immersion class. These professionals are hard to find and the demand for immersion staff can leave single-language teachers displaced as schools stretch their tight budgets to accommodate language learners (Fortune, 2000).

Immersion is not without its share of critics who argue that it is short-sighted and dangerous with ends, which do not justify the means. Others are concerned that English language immersion programs threaten the viability of native languages, particularly those in danger of extinction, because they do not award equal status to the native tongue (Genesee, 1992; Harrison, 2009; Pease-pretty on Top, 1996). Still, others are concerned that educators and administrators must navigate an unnecessarily high rate of student attrition to be successful (Mannan, 2007; Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer & Perna, 1995) with overly-ambitious programs that threaten the mastery of other subjects, like math and science (Cantoni, 1999; Polythress, 2011, Rigaud, 2005; Watanabe, 2010). And yet, there is considerable evidence that the most ambitious total immersion programs will yield the best long term gains. Once learners are motivated

and have decided to commit themselves to acquiring the cultural, curriculum, and language competencies of fluent English speakers, they can learn whatever they need to learn in the new language, whether they are 5 or 25 years of age (Marzano, 2003; May 2008; Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989; Swain & Lapkin, 1991). However, total English language immersion in a non-English speaking country remains a significant hurdle that can only be matched to special skill sets among the brilliant and determined few (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes & Snow, 1985).

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