The Bridge: From Research to Practice

Help! They're Using Too Much English!
The Problem of L1 vs. L2 in the Immersion Classroom

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The challenges and rewards inherent in the life of an immersion teacher are many. Much of the journey is rewarding, but we all know that certain legs of the journey can present quite a challenge. Certainly, one of the most persistent and challenging parts of the immersion journey (especially farther along the road, in the upper grades) has to be the decline in the use of the immersion language among students, and the apparent decrease in their motivation to use it with each other.

I know from personal experience, and from talking with other immersion teachers, that the issue of second language (L2) use in the upper grades is a persistent dilemma. I would venture to assume that it is an issue in the majority of immersion programs. And yet, when I set out to explore this issue I found very little research dealing specifically with this topic. Why is the increased use of the students' first language (L1) in the immersion setting a problem, and why is it worth exploring? First, I've noticed in my fourth grade classroom that students begin the year attempting to use the L2 consistently because we establish it as a high priority. However, once English language arts is introduced into our daily schedule (in October), the students' use of English gradually increases, until it begins to creep into other areas of learning when it should not be the medium of communication. In addition, outside of the classroom, in the hallways, cafeteria, and specialists' classes, English is definitely prevalent. I believe this increased use of the L1 has a definite effect on the students' progress and motivation in the L2. I begin to notice more English being inserted into Spanish conversations, more "Spanglish," and less of an effort made to use cir-cumlocution and find a way to express ideas completely in Spanish. I even note a decrease in the accuracy of pro-nunciation and correct usage of the L2.

Having moved from teaching first grade to fourth grade a year ago, I knew that I would find many differences in my new grade level, and that one of the biggest issues I would be confronting would be the decline in L2 use. In the first grade, after mid-year, it was relatively easy to encourage my students to use the L2 (Spanish) exclusively. A number of factors probably influenced this success, mainly the fact that at no time was English taught or used by the teacher. In addition, first graders were discovering a whole new world of words and ideas in a second language, and it was fun for them to use their new language. They were also less worried about the type of language they were using (vernacular or social language vs. academic language). On the other hand, I have found fourth graders to be more influenced by peer pressure and driven by the need to socialize with their peers in their L1. They also appear to be less "in awe" of the novelty of being able to communicate in a second language. Furthermore, fourth graders receive instruction in English for one hour a day, creating a window of opportunity for the L1 to "spill over" into other parts of the school day. This spill-

over effect is the phenomenon I would like to explore in this paper. Specifically, I'm interested in the following:

- Why does the use of the second language decline over time, especially among fourth and fifth graders in an elementary immersion setting?

- Are there strategies that effectively reduce the students' use of their first language?

Background: What Does the Research Say?

It has long been noted by teachers and researchers in both the U.S. and Canada that in general there is decreased use of the second language in the upper grades of immersion programs (Swain, 1985; Tarone & Swain, 1995). Yet, as previously mentioned, the research in this area is minimal and some studies that have been initiated are as yet not available. Tarone and Swain (1995) note the striking lack of such research. They summarize the results of informal research observations, which suggest that immersion students in the upper grades tend to use the immersion language for structured classroom tasks, whereas they choose the L1 for social interaction. Interview data support this pattern (Tarone & Swain, 1995).

In a recent study, Broner (2000a; 2000b) collected data over the course of one academic school year in a Spanish immersion fifth grade classroom. She observed three students who wore microphones during the observation times. She found that while these students consistently used Spanish when interacting with the teacher and during structured activities, their use of the L2 varied during social interactions. These patterns demonstrated that the interlocutor (i.e., the person with whom the student interacted) had a measurable impact on the use of the L2 in the classroom. She found that whether students were on-task or off also influenced the amount of their L2 use, and that the activity and content of the lesson made a big difference. When the task involved focusing on the L2, such as creative writing and reading activities, the students used the L2 much more. In addition, she found that some students may influence the language use of their peers, as in the case of one student who consistently used the L2, thus provoking his peers into using it more as well.

As Broner states in her study, younger students use a great deal more of their second language in the immersion classroom, especially when involved in structured activities. Why is it easier for them? One reason may be that in the younger grades students are just acquiring the language they need to get their meaning across, and much of their talk is directed toward academic interactions. And while initially they have little control over "code switching," or language mixing, which is part of the natural development of bilingual proficiency, younger students appear to be less concerned with other language forms. As students get older, code switching becomes more common, and teachers see more L1 being inserted into conversations. This should be avoided as much as possible, however. Since language is still developing, it is most likely that students are code switching because it's easier, not because they're controlling it for social reasons (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2000).

According to Tarone and Swain (1995), the pattern of increased L1 use for social interaction as children become older is predictable when viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective. They argue that the immersion classroom can be viewed as a diglossic speech community, where the L2 is used as a superordinate, formal language for academic purposes,

and the L1 is used as a subordinate, informal means of communicating socially. As is true in all populations and all languages, there are different reasons we use language, and there are different styles of language we use, depending on the social context of the situation. Sociolinguists point out that a speech community of children has special needs, namely that of a subordinate language style, or vernacular. This language serves the language functions specific to the children, such as establishing power relationships, and engaging in competition, comparisons, arguments, and teasing (Tarone & Swain, 1995). Using the vernacular is a way of establishing identity, of being part of the group. Children have a powerful need to use a vernacular language with each other, especially as they get older, and normally, the only vernacular language at their disposal is that of their L1. Therefore, children who remain in the L2 (superordinate) may be marked as non-members of the group (Tarone & Swain, 1995). Their need to use a vernacular makes them "…impervious to threats or inducements…" from the teacher (Tarone & Swain, 1995, p. 170). It is also important to note that at around the fourth-grade level, the L2 also becomes more difficult, and it is natural to choose a language that is simply easier, especially for social interaction.

In a language immersion classroom the majority of L2 input students receive is provided by the teacher, and is academic in nature. Therefore, at the upper levels students are well-equipped to communicate in the immersion language as it relates to academic purposes. It has been my experience that students do not "fight" in their L2 with me, or with other Spanish-speaking adults in the building. In fact, they fre-quently slip into Spanish during English instruction periods when speaking with me. With their peers, however, it is much more difficult to encourage their second language use. This makes sense when considering the importance of a vernacular form of speech for social interactions. Immersion students do not receive instruction in the L2 vernacular; therefore, they do not have vocabulary and colloquial structures at their disposal in the second language.

If immersion students had access to the vernacular of the L2, would they use it? Tarone and Swain cite a study by Liu (1994), in which a Chinese boy named Bob was observed in the classroom. With the teacher, he took few risks with the language, and most of his communication in the L2 was limited to short responses. With his peers, however, he did use the L2 more assertively, as well as using vernacular expressions. It's important to note, however, that Bob's second language was English, and he was in an English language majority environment. It has been found in dual-immersion programs in the U.S., where majority-language students have easy access to native speakers of a second language, that the English vernacular is more frequently used by all students in social interactions. Leah Radinsky, a kindergarten teacher in a dual immersion school, quotes a native Spanish-speaking student as saying, "Even when we were in a class that was all in Spanish, it felt like to speak Spanish was like being a dork or something" (in Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000, p. 52).

Tarone and Swain (1995) inter-viewed an immersion graduate about her perception of L2 use during her immersion experience. They found that the student was very aware of the fact that she used a different "language" with her parents than with her peers, and that in the immersion setting she was not taught the vernacular she needed in order to communicate with her peers in the L2. She expressed an interest in learning the L2 vernacular, but felt it would not have been possible in the immersion setting. This is a very good perception on the student's part. Although immersion students may show an interest in learning the vernacular of a second language, the most the teacher can provide is isolated vocabulary and idiomatic expressions; the teacher will not be able to provide the social context for its use. In essence, for

an immersion student to learn the L2 vernacular, they would need frequent interaction with native-speaking child-ren, something not always possible. Furthermore, as Tarone and Swain point out, there are many different countries where the same language is spoken, yet the vernacular used in each country is different. Which one do you choose to teach, and are the teachers familiar with it?

The research suggests that the use of the students' native language will not be completely eliminated from the immersion classroom. This is an impor-tant point for immersion teachers to recognize and use to diminish some of the frustration and misperceptions that may exist in an immersion setting. Viewed from the sociolinguistic per-spective we can eliminate these negative perceptions, and instead focus our efforts on engaging our students in a learning environment that promotes maximum L2 use. We should be encouraged to note that there are strategies immersion teachers can use to increase the use of the target language in the classroom between older students. In the following section, I would like to present some of the strategies recommended by the research for increasing the use of the L2 in the older immersion classrooms, as well as strategies I have used in the classroom or that other teachers have shared over the years.

Strategies for Encouraging More L2 Use in the Classroom

1. Create a classroom and school context with clear expectations for L2 use.

Teachers need to establish rules of conduct for the classroom, and make clear to students that they are expected to use the L2 as much as possible. In addition to clearly established rules and expectations, teachers also need to create a nurturing environment, which en-courages the use of the L2 and provides ample opportunities for its use (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2000). It appears that the lack of a nurturing environment to encourage language use causes with-drawal, loss of motivation, lowered esteem with respect to L2 ability, and a negative attitude toward the second language. Researchers have also found that concrete activities related to themes, which provide for interaction between students, are important to ensuring L2 use. Topics that are relevant to students will be of more interest to them. Immersion teachers should create a learning environment that encourages students to talk to one another and to the teacher for real purposes.

In addition, the immersion student must believe that the second language is important throughout the school. This involves elevating the status of the immersion language in the school and classroom context, not an easy feat in an English-dominated culture! Teachers in the immersion school should always use the immersion language with one another to model the importance of the language. The use of announcements in the immersion language and the availability of other adults in the building who speak it can also increase the status of the L2.

2. Establish clear separation of the two languages in the classroom.

Language learning has been found to be most effective when the two languages are kept separate, and one language is taught for an extended period of time. There are different ways this can be accomplished. For instance, in some programs different teachers teach dif-ferent languages. It is highly recom-mended that immersion programs hire different teachers to do

English language instruction. The more the regular class-room teacher can stay in the L2, the better. Some dual immersion programs teach the two languages on alternate days of the week; still others assign different subject matters to the two languages (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2000). Perhaps the most common way to separ-ate the two languages is to split the school day into separate language times. It is comforting to note that no one system has been found to be more effective than another, so immersion teachers have some flexibility in how they choose to deliver instruction in the different languages.

Immersion teachers who are not pleased with their current arrangement for separating the L1 and L2 should try a new arrangement for teaching the L1 in the immersion setting. For example, instead of scheduling an hour of English instruction each day, try to schedule an "English day"—instead of breaking up each day's schedule to allow for those 45 or 60 minutes of English instruction, all English would be taught on the same day. This may result in less spill-over the other four days of the week. This could also result in less interruption to the flow of a lesson, and provide time for exploring content in more depth. By having one day devoted to English, students would have more time to read and discuss one story in depth, as well as working in centers, which could involve a variety of comprehension activities, allowing for different learning styles. In addition, it would allow for more concentrated time to work with "writing workshop" in English.

3. Acknowledge that neither rewards nor punishments affect behavior positively.

Cloud, Genesee and Hamayan (2000) remind us that "there is nothing you can do to force students to use a language in which they are not profi-cient, especially if they share a fluent native language" (p. 75). Research con-firms that many incentive programs (rewards, classroom point systems, etc.) to promote social use of the L2 among students will meet with limited success. Teachers are discouraged from using incentives and material rewards, as they have proven to be ineffective in the long term, and create an artificial situation that may discourage students from using the language for authentic, real-life purposes (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2000). Kohn (1993, cited in Cloud et al., 2000) has written extensively about the damage done to intrinsic motivation by the use of rewards and consequences in the classroom. He cites study after study demonstrating how extrinsic motivators are counterproductive, and lead to a decrease in students' intrinsic motivation to perform tasks for which they were rewarded. At the risk of stating the obvious, it's important to mention that the use of punishment or negative con-sequences for L1 use is counter-productive as well.

4. Set language learning objectives.

Immersion teachers should take a proactive approach by incorporating specific language teaching objectives into their instructional plans. When thematic units or activities are planned with language in mind, benefits to language development can be seen. A proactive approach as defined by Lyster (1998) aims to make children aware of specific language rules, and to provide oppor-tunities for them to practice those language aspects in meaningful, com-municative activities. Thus, by incor-porating specific language objectives into content lessons, the immersion teacher can increase language awareness and proficiency in the learner.

5. Develop non-academic vocabulary.

Even though it's likely impossible to teach students the vernacular in the L2, it is possible to expand their vocabulary beyond the academic subject matter. Teach vocabulary related to everyday topics, such as clothing, food, toys, sports, greetings, family, shopping, travel, feelings, etc. Encourage students to share information about their likes and dislikes, family, and weekend activities (Stein, 1999). In addition, plan activities that incorporate these topics, such as cooking (recipes), role-playing a shopping excursion, discussing current events, etc. Start a book or dictionary of colloquial expressions and slang. Have an "expression of the week," and encourage students to use it throughout the week.

6. Organize classroom activities and provide opportunities that maximize students' L2 output.

➢ Use group and pair activities.

Group and pair activities provide a rich source of interaction between students, and take a variety of forms:

- Peer tutoring
- Group work (and arranging the classroom in groups to allow for talk)
- Dyad activities (pair work)
- Peer-to-peer dialogue
- Cooperative learning

All of these group/pair activities are beneficial. Peer support can lower anxiety, clarify conceptual understanding, encourage communication in the L2, and provide for different learning styles (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). In addition, group work creates communi-cation and thus increases opportunities for language practice. It has also been shown to improve the quantity and quality of student talk. Students were found to use a wider variety of speech and negotiate meaning more in group activities (Snow, 1990). Cooperative learning is another excellent way to encourage communication naturally in the classroom. If it is implemented in a structured manner, cooperative learning requires that all members participate and contribute to the work of the group. In addition, the division of tasks allows students to use their unique strengths and learning styles.

➢ Develop an activity-centered classroom.

Activity-centered classrooms allow students to participate in hands-on activities. The goal is to improve aural comprehension and oral fluency, but students can also be involved in reading and writing activities. A theme is suggested by the teacher, and students choose their own area of study. They investigate the topic, then present their findings in the form they choose. Students use each other and the teacher as resource persons (Stevens, 1983). This type of learning can provide a multitude of opportunities for using the second language as students will be motivated by real-life learning and being able to choose their topic. In addition, they will be reading and writing in the L2, and have the opportunity to use the L2 in informal discourse with the teacher and other students. The final presentations are also conducted in the second language. Activity-centered classrooms can also incorporate discovery-oriented

activities, in which learners are responsible for discovering, constructing, or creating something new and the teacher acts as facilitator.

➢ Plan for creative expression in the L2.

Students can also be encouraged to use the L2 throughout the day via short, yet fun activities. A list of possible creative language activities include:

- Songs (culture, grammar, vernacular use, artistic styles)
- Dance (culture, movement)
- Puppet plays (students can be given a topic or theme, then write and perform a play; an excellent area for incorporating specific language objectives)
- Linguistic games (bingo, jeopardy, etc.)
- Dialogues (again, easy to incorporate language objectives)
- Role plays (can be designed around daily activities and vocabulary)
- Simulations
- Picture dictionaries (create a list of vernacular terms the students would like to learn, or synonyms that portray different meanings in different countries)
- Video performances (news reports, weather reports, current issues)
- How-to presentations (write instructions for performing a task and present to class; a great way to incorporate the imperative tense).

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