



Developing Oral Proficiency in the Immersion Classroom

by *Miriam Stein, Ph.D., Immersion Specialist*
Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA

Elementary immersion teachers are generally hired as *content teachers who can teach in a second language*. In reality, however, immersion teachers are much more than that—immersion teachers are also *implicit language teachers*. Thus, immersion teachers are not only responsible for the child's knowledge and achievement in content areas such as math and science, but for the child's second language development as well.

Immersion programs are based on the theoretical assumption that language is acquired through comprehensible input in the classroom (Swain, 1985). This is in accordance with Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985) which states that to be exposed to an environment rich in comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition to take place. According to Krashen, language input that is comprehensible exceeds somewhat the learner's current knowledge of the language ($i+1$) and is offered in a low affective filter environment. Most second language acquisition theorists endorse the input hypothesis in some form. However, many also argue that comprehensible input is not sufficient for language acquisition to take place (e.g., Swain, 1985; White, 1987).

Research on the second language development of immersion students shows that while immersion learners demonstrate native-like competence in listening comprehension and reading skills, they generally fall behind native speakers in their productive language skills such as writing and speaking (Genesee, 1987; Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985). Such findings have led researchers to challenge what they see as an overemphasis on the role of comprehensible input in the second language acquisition process. Comprehensible input, although constantly available to the immersion student, does not appear to be the *only* necessary factor for acquisition. In addition to comprehensible input, it is important to consider the role the *learner's own output* plays (Swain, 1985).

Learner output can be considered in terms of oral and written proficiency. This article will center on the question of how to foster the development of the immersion student's *oral* proficiency through a discussion of what immersion programs are doing successfully in this area as well as where immersion programs need to improve. Finally, I offer a list of strategies that immersion teachers can implement to address more comprehensively the development of oral proficiency with their students.

Second Language Oral Proficiency

Oral proficiency includes the ability to communicate verbally in a *functional* and *accurate* way in the target language. A high degree of oral proficiency implies having the ability to apply the linguistic knowledge to *new contexts (topics) and situations* (Omaggio, 1986).

What Immersion Programs Do Well

❶ Encourage learning the second language in its entirety

An important characteristic of immersion education is that the second language is introduced as a holistic system with the purpose of communicating meaning at all times. Immersion students are typically exposed to a range of academic vocabulary and linguistic structures from the very early grades without having to go through the process of learning them piece by piece. Therefore, learners' language output tends to be meaning-focused and lexically and syntactically varied from the early stages.

② Increase fluency

Fluency implies automaticity. Immersion learners can converse without apparent difficulty, especially about familiar academic topics and classroom routines. They use a varied academic vocabulary without halting pauses and stumbles or searching for words.

③ Support the development of strategies for getting the meaning across

Immersion learners are accustomed to processing language for meaning primarily; that is, they pay attention to the *substance* of an utterance. Additionally, they are used to communicating the meaning of an utterance in any way they can without taking into account *how* they are communicating (Swain, 1985). While trying to communicate the meaning of an utterance sometimes results in a kind of developing language (e.g., [yo] *tiene hambre* [I **is** hungry]), immersion learners are resourceful at using different strategies such as circumlocution and occasional use of L1 to make their meaning understood at all costs.

Where Immersion Programs Need To Improve

① Develop nonacademic vocabulary

While immersion learners' academic vocabulary develops over the years, the development of their non-academic, everyday vocabulary appears to lag behind. Examples of everyday topics are clothing, toys, food, sports, greetings, family, professions, shopping, travel, likes and dislikes, feelings, etc. Tarone and Swain (1995) refer to immersion students' lack of a vernacular to explain the increased use of L1 as students progress through the grade levels. They suggest that the sociolinguistic environment within the immersion classroom might be described as diglossic. A diglossic language context reserves the use of one language for certain communicative purposes and the second for others. Students in immersion classrooms have been observed to use the immersion language to communicate about academic topics but to switch to their first language for informal, nonacademic speech.

② Attend to accuracy

The term accuracy relates to correct use of linguistic structures (grammatical accuracy), appropriate use of register (sociolinguistic accuracy), precision of vocabulary (semantic accuracy), and proper use of cohesive devices (rhetorical accuracy) (Omaggio, 1986). Immersion research, which for the most part has concentrated on grammatical and sociolinguistic accuracy, shows that immersion learners fall behind native speakers in both of these types of accuracy (Genesee 1987; Harley et al., 1990; Harley & Swain, 1984; Swain, 1985).

③ Increase ability to make form-meaning connections

Making form-meaning connections can be described as the language learners' ability to attend to or notice (Schmidt, 1990) the linguistic structure while they interpret or express the meaning of an utterance. Immersion learners, who process language primarily for meaning, need instruction that includes encouraging the learner to process language for *meaning and form* at the same time.

This does not mean that the learner can explain a linguistic rule such as noun-adjective agreement or talk about nouns, adverbs, etc. For example, the learner might notice that "*casa*" [house] takes a feminine determiner and modifier, but might not be able to explain the agreement rule in that particular example, nor might he/she know how to identify the determiner as an article and the modifier as an adjective. What is important is the learner's *accurate interpretation and use* of the adjective in feminine contexts (e.g., *la casa bonita* [the pretty house]), and not whether the learner can explain a rule.

Strategies for Promoting the Development of Oral Proficiency in the Immersion Classroom

👂 Perform a needs analysis.

Listen to your students' use of the language when they talk to you, when they give oral presentations to the class and when they interact with each other while working in groups. Ask yourself, "What strengths does their oral language show? What weaknesses?" More detailed questions might include:

- Does Johnny always use masculine articles and adjectives for every noun, including the feminine nouns?
- Does Allison use only the infinitive form of verbs?

- Can Pedro talk about a marine mammal but has trouble talking about how he helps at home?
- Can Ann talk about electromagnetism but can't describe the clothes she is wearing that day?
- Do your students always address adults with the informal *tú* rather than the more socially appropriate formal *Ud.*?



Key Elementary (Arlington, VA) Spanish Immersion Students

📖 **Familiarize yourself with the linguistic structures in the target language (phonology, morphology and syntax).**

Knowledge of the linguistic structures enables you to assess your students' needs. Some examples of specific phonological differences and linguistic structures include:

- the difference between the sound of “p” in Spanish and in English (phonology)
- article-noun-adjective agreement features (syntax and morphology)
- subject-verb agreement (syntax and morphology)
- use of prepositions (syntax)
- the verb system (tenses, aspects, moods) (syntax and morphology)

📖 **Encourage use of *nonacademic vocabulary* in your classroom.**

Many of the daily activities in the lower elementary grades lend themselves well to the development of nonacademic vocabulary, such as “show and tell.” The challenge becomes greater in the upper elementary grades at which time the teacher needs to be creative and specifically plan to incorporate activities that include everyday vocabulary. For example, you can organize activities around the topics of food and nutrition (recipes), shopping, traveling, and clothes, relating them to the different seasons and situations. By making use of storybooks and activities that emphasize everyday vocabulary teachers can strategically support its use.

📖 **Include *linguistic objective(s)* in addition to the content objective(s) in your lesson plans.**

For example, a linguistic objective in a first-grade science class that focuses on “What scientists do” could look like this:

The students will:

Use verbs related to the scientists' world (verbs of measurement, prediction, etc.). In addition to learning the content-related verbs, emphasis can be given to subject-verb agreement for the first and third person plural in Spanish (Govea & Perdomo, 1999).

📖 **Encourage more *oral production* in your classes.**

Do you interact *with* your students? Research shows that teachers in immersion classes do most of the talking (Allen et al., 1990). Use a tape recorder to record and listen to how much talking your students do and how much talking *you* do in the day. Here is a list of helpful tips to guide these teacher-student interactions:

- Relate your questions or points of discussion to your students' lives.
- Ask students what they did the day before, for example, especially if it was a weekend.
- Encourage students to tell you about their families, their friends, their siblings, what they are wearing and what their preferences are for food, movies, TV programs, etc.

- Discuss current and everyday events.
- Take time for games, word games, Jeopardy, guessing games, Twenty Questions, etc.
- Above all, make the conversation real and interesting. Students will begin to look forward to these moments every day.

Allen et al. (1990) also found that student output is often limited to one or two words in the target language. Therefore, immersion teachers need to create an interactional environment that encourages the use of extended discourse among the students. Well-structured cooperative communication activities such as Jigsaw tasks and information gap tasks provide students with opportunities to engage in more language-rich interaction (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). Inviting students to collaboratively plan and give oral presentations about a topic facilitates student use of academic language as well. In order to encourage the use of extended discourse in the classroom, teachers can ask open-ended questions, such as, “Why do you think soap floats?” or “Tell your partner what you think might happen next in the story and why you think so.”

🗨️ Encourage *accurate* oral production.

One way to encourage accuracy is through the concept of focus-on-form (Long, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998), which targets students’ errors that are systematic, pervasive, and remediable (Long, 1991). The use of focus-on-form techniques in the classroom allows the teacher to provide error correction at the *time* the error occurs. Long describes this method in the following way:

...whereas the content of lessons with focus on forms is the forms themselves, a syllabus with a focus-on-form teaches something else— biology, mathematics, workshop practice, automobile repair, the geography of a country where the foreign language is spoken, the cultures of its speakers, and so on— and overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise *incidentally* in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (Long, 1991, p. 45, italics added).

An effective way to provide oral focus-on-form in the classroom is by providing linguistic feedback (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Linguistic feedback lets the learner know that something in the utterance is not entirely accurate or acceptable to a native speaker. For example, feedback might be used to encourage subject-verb agreement. There exists a variety of feedback types that teachers can choose from (for an overview of different types of feedback, see ACIE Bridge, by Tedick & DeGortari 1998). They can be used either one at a time or in combination, e.g., recast followed by a tag question (Stein, 1998).

S: *la manzana rojo* “...the red (masculine) apple.” (Inaccurate noun-adjective agreement)
 T: *la manzana roja, ¿no?* “The *red* (feminine) apple, isn’t it?”

For feedback to be effective Doughty and Williams (1998) also recommend that it:

- be consistent
- target one error at a time
- integrate attention to meaning and form
- be given *precisely* when the error is detected during a *meaningful* activity

Conclusion

Immersion students need much encouragement and plenty of opportunities to develop their oral proficiency. The present article has offered some strategies the teacher can use to promote the development of oral proficiency in the immersion classroom. These strategies may be used in the target language content classes as well as in language arts classes. What is important is the teacher’s commitment to developing students’ oral proficiency in a systematic and consistent way at all times. ○

References for this article are provided on page 6 of the newsletter. You may contact author Miriam Stein at Arlington Public Schools, Education Center Foreign Language, 1426 N. Quincy St., Arlington, VA 22207; (703) 228-6013; e-mail <mstein@arlington.k12.va.us>.

