

## An Introduction of "Immersion Program"

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**Abstract:** *Since 1960s 'immersion program' a version of communicative approach has been innovated which is basically meaning oriented and unlike the former methods, attempts to teach a second/foreign language integratively. In fact, in this rather newly developed method learning a second/foreign language is not the main goal; it's the medium of instruction. The present paper tries to provide the reader with a corpus of information about this program. An elaborated introduction of the program, its different types, characteristics, versions, and goals are some of the most important parts of this paper. Two-way immersion and dual immersion are also elaborated in coming pages. At the end, some problems and the positive effects of the program are presented.*

**Key terms:** *immersion program, approach, method*

### Introduction

Throughout the history of second/foreign language teaching, a variety of methods and approaches have been developed and used with the purpose of helping the learners in learning/acquiring a second language. One of the most recently innovated approaches and a very interesting innovation in second language education is 'immersion program', a specific type of integrated language teaching with the instruction of the regular school curriculum. In fact, in this method the school subject matters or contents are taught through the medium of a second language. In their early childhood education through an immersion program, the students are provided with an opportunity to learn the elementary academic subjects along with developing competence in a second language. In immersion schools, the students experience a cooperative learning through which they can acquire a second language while they master the school subject matters or contents. In this method the target language is not the subject of instruction but a vehicle for acquiring knowledge from different subject areas, content instruction, as well as the object of instruction. Language is not taught in isolation, it is integrated with teaching content – subject matters.

### Definition

In a simple way, immersion program is defined as "a method of second language instruction in which the regular school curriculum is instructed through the medium of the target language". Fred Genesee (1987) describes some of the important features of Immersion Program: "Generally speaking, at least 50 percent of instruction during a given academic year must be provided through the second language for the program to be regarded as immersion. Programs in which one subject and language arts are taught through the second language are generally identified as "enriched second language programs." For instance, in English immersion program, English is not the subject of instruction; rather it is the medium through which the school subject matters are taught".

Jim Cummins (2009) tries to look at ‘Immersion Program’ from a different perspective and believes it is used in two different ways. He claims, “ *In the first sense ‘immersion programs’ are organized and planned forms of bilingual education in which students are ‘immersed’ in a second language instructional environment with the goal of developing proficiency in two languages. First language instruction is typically introduced within a year or two of the start of the program and forms an integral part of the overall plan. In its second sense, the term ‘immersion’ refers to the immersion of immigrant or minority language children in a classroom environment where instruction is conducted exclusively through their second (or third) language. He adds immersion program is a form of bilingual education that immerses students in a second language instructional environment for between 50% and 100% of instructional time with the goal of developing fluency and literacy in both languages*”.

Considering the above descriptions of immersion program, it seems that the term “Immersion” denotes any class or school that is taught through the medium of second or foreign language. The programs in which just some subjects such as maths, science, etc. are taught in a second or foreign language or those which do not reach the 50% threshold level are not ‘immersion’. They merit to be referred to as “Content – enriched foreign language classes” (Genesee, 1982), “Language – enriched content classes” (ibid) or “Content – based foreign language classes” (Swain, 1980). Only the programs in which the students are surrounded by or immersed in the second language are called ‘immersion’ (Swain and Johnson, 1996) or ‘content-based instruction’ (Snow, 1990). Whatever they are called, focus on meaning and comprehensibility is the primary feature of these programs, or as Ellis (2005) says immersion program is “predominantly focused on meaning”. Therefore, making their language comprehensible to the learners must be a primary concern for the teachers because contents will be understandable to the students provided that the language of teachers is comprehensible.

### **The Origin of Immersion Program**

There is a general agreement on Canada as the birth place of immersion program. For instance, Walker and Tedick (2000), believe that language immersion program originated in Canada about 40 years ago and is today "a language education program model used for a variety of purposes and across a wide range of social, cultural, and political contexts" (p. 6).

Mike Bostwick (2001) states that although bilingual education can be traced back to 3000 BC, the form of bilingual education called immersion education that they use at Katoh is generally accepted to have started in Quebec, Canada. Melikoff et al. (1972) also believe that the origin of immersion program is in Canada. They argue that the origins of publicly-funded immersion education in Canada were in St. Lambert, Quebec, in the 1960s. An initial group of 12 parents in St. Lambert met in October of 1963 to discuss their concerns regarding the failure of the existing education system to produce graduates with a communicative knowledge of French. Their concerns were expressed within the context of growing recognition by Quebec Anglophones of the importance of the French language in Quebec and in Canada. Olga Melikoff, one of the founding members of the St. Lambert parents group, reported that in 1963, the St. Lambert parents believed that “their children were being shortchanged and should have the opportunity to become ‘bilingual’ within the school system since it was so difficult to achieve this outside of school.” After two years of meeting with other parents, of lobbying their school

board, and of consulting language learning and teaching experts, the parents group finally obtained the reluctant permission of the school board to set up one experimental French immersion kindergarten class in September, 1965. The initial years of the ‘experiment’ were not easy, but the idea caught on and has subsequently spread across Canada (Stern, 1990) and to languages other than French.

There is also another account of the initiation and the emergence of immersion program. In 1965, a group of English-speaking parents succeeded in initiating an experimental immersion kindergarten for their students. Their goal was to ensure that their children achieved a high level of French, as well as English, in Quebec where the French-speaking majority were asserting their rights and taking more power in the political and economic fields. Since then, French immersion has spread across the country and is found in every province and territory. All of the above assertions bear testimony to the fact that the main birth place of immersion program can be assumed to be Canada.

So it can be claimed that Immersion education is most widespread and long – established in Canada. In Canada a Full immersion program means a bilingual program in which a second language (SL) is learned through other areas of curriculum and the two languages share equal time – and which includes an initial period of total immersion in which the entire instruction is in L2. Total immersion, the initial language 'bath' which begins a full immersion program, is thought to be a necessary component of program design if the proper immersion effect is to be experienced (Melikof et al, 1972).

### Characteristics of Immersion Program

The very outstanding characteristic (some take it as an advantage) of immersion program is the teaching of a second language along with its culture and content without the application of the learners’ first language. Of course, it should be kept in mind that the factor of cultural transfer is a controversial issue by itself. Clearly, in some communities there is a kind of resistance to the imported culture. So it can hinder the successful implementation of this program in such communities. The other prominent characteristics of immersion program can be listed as follows:

- ❖ The curriculum of immersion program is the same as the local or non-immersion programs. This means that the same curriculum in maths, science, social studies, etc. is followed as outcome expectations of students in regular “Non-immersion program”.
- ❖ All materials are taught in immersion language, and they are never re-taught in the students’ first language.
- ❖ L2 is not taught explicitly as a “language subject” rather it is used as the medium through which curricular content is conveyed.
- ❖ At least 50 percent of the content instruction is in the target language. It is through this massive amount of L2 input that implicit acquisition of L2 is attained.

Johnson and Swain (1997) summarize eight features of immersion programs as follows:

1. The L2 is a medium of instruction.
2. The curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum.
3. Overt support exists for L1.
4. The program aims for additive bilingualism.

5. Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom.
6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency.
7. The teachers are bilingual.
8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.

Immersion program is not an easily employed method. In comparison to other modern or innovative methods, this program needs the committed supports of many to be characterized as a successful program. So implementation of this program may create some struggles on the side of learners, teachers, or even parents. In general, according to Myriam Met (1987) a successful immersion program can be characterized by 1) administrative support 2) community and parental support 3) qualified teachers 4) appropriate materials in the foreign language 5) time for teachers to prepare instructional materials in the language 6) ongoing staff development.

### Types of Immersion Program

Since the first immersion program in Canada, a number of different immersion programs have been implemented all over the world. Immersion programs are categorized in different categories based on two factors:

*Age:* it refers to the time at which the program is initiated. In terms of time of initiation, immersion program is classified into four groups:

*Early Immersion:* in this type of immersion commencing at the age of 5 or 6, students begin learning a second language in pre – school, kindergarten, or first grade of primary school.

*Middle Immersion (delayed immersion):* it is initiated at the age of 9 or 10 when the students are at the later primary school.

*Late Immersion:* it starts some time between the ages of 11 and 14 when the learners are at the secondary school.

*Late Late immersion:* it begins at the university level.

*Extent:* it refers to the percentage of curricular content covered in the L2. Based on this factor immersion programs can be divided into two types:

*Total Immersion:* the programs in which the entire curriculum is taught in the L2 are classified as *total* or *full* immersion. In this type of immersion almost 100% of class time is in the foreign language. Subject matters are taught in foreign language. Target language is the only medium of instruction. In situations where comprehension is hampered, the teachers apply some techniques like dramatization, demonstration, definition, and use of realia, to resolve incomprehensibility. Since all subjects are delivered in the target language, a threshold level of proficiency is acquired by the learners. In all English total immersion classes, English is taught as a subject along with the other subjects. The instructors have two reasons for teaching English as a subject. 1) To enhance the learners' mastery on some skills like writing academically. Of course this enhancement would be at the service of comprehension of other contents. 2) To teach the literature this is at much higher level than the ordinary language. They get familiar with the different ways of expressing an idea such as prose, poetry, and anecdote. Definitely these genres are not acquired through teaching contents like maths or science in English.

*Partial Immersion:* In partial immersion program about half of the class time is spent in teaching the subject matters in the foreign language. In other words, at least 50% of the curriculum is delivered through the target language.

## Models of Immersion Program

According to Krueger and Ryan (1993), there are three different models of immersion program:

### *Theme-based model*

In this model the syllabus is organized around themes or topics such as ‘pollution’, ‘human rights’, etc. The language syllabus is subordinated to the more general theme. The activities to be performed are mainly based on the problems caused by the use of authentic materials, not around the grammatical or syntactic matters. In this model a general theme such as ‘the green house effect’ can provide organizing topic for some sessions. Briton et al., (1986) say, “Language analysis and practice evolve out of topics that form the framework for the course. A topic might be introduced through a reading, vocabulary developed through guided discussion, audio or video material on the same topic used for listening comprehension, followed by written assignments integrating information from several different sources. Most of the materials used will typically be teacher-generated and the topic treated will cross all skills.” (cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001)

### *Sheltered model*

This model refers to the situation in which the regular school curriculum is presented through the medium of target (second) language. Since mastery on content is the main goal of instruction, the instructor will be required to present the content in a way which is comprehensible to second language learners and in the process use language and tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty. What happens at the immersion schools are the instances of sheltered model. As Briton et al. (1989) state “sheltered instruction takes place to provide a low-anxiety learning environment for students learning content in their L2. This means that the sheltered students are separated from native speaking students.”

### *Adjunct or Linked model*

In this model, students are enrolled in two linked courses, one a content course and one a language course, with both courses sharing the same content base and complementing each other in terms of mutually coordinated assignments. Such a program requires a large amount of coordination to ensure that the two curricula are interlocking and this may require modification to both courses. (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Although these models of immersion program may seem different, they have some common and distinguishing features. As for their commonalities, we can refer to the common features mentioned by Krueger & Ryan (1993) which include **a) content:** the organized and principled curriculum **b) objectives:** the mastery on language and content **c) authenticity:** the authentic language materials and tasks **d) accommodation:** the provided aid for the second language learners learn better.

As for the distinguishing features of the models, Krueger & Ryan (1993) mention the followings:

**Learning focus and purpose:** Purpose is treated differently in these models. In sheltered model, the main focus is on leaning content, mastery on subject materials is the primary purpose; in theme-based model, learning the second language is focused over mastery on content; in adjunct or liked model, the purpose is to learn both content and language. In other words, both learning the language and mastery on content are focused in the last model.

**The role and responsibility of instructors regarding language and content instruction:** In the theme-based model, the instructors teach language besides content. In the sheltered model, the instructors present subject matters through the vehicle of L2 so that they will support

language learning. In adjunct or linked model, each instructor teaches his or her own course while s/he cooperates with the other.

**Level of proficiency:** No special prerequisite level of proficiency is required for the learners in the theme-based model. On the other hand, in sheltered model, because of some probable complexity in the subject matters, the learners are required to have an advanced level of listening and reading skills. In adjunct model, Briton et al. (1989) believe “the presence of native speakers makes it necessary that L2 speakers have even higher proficiency levels”.

### Goals of Immersion Program

Most Immersion program experts divide its goals into two types: *short* range and *long* range ones.

#### *Short Range*

The short range goal of immersion program is to help the learners to understand the language used as the medium of instruction. In English immersion the initial concern is to make the content comprehensible for the learners. For that reason, the language will become meaningful so that language input becomes “ $i + 1$ ”. (Krashen 1980)

#### *long Range*

The long range goals of an immersion program can include 1) Developing high level of proficiency in the foreign language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. 2) Developing positive attitudes toward the native speakers and their culture 3) Developing immersion learners’ first language arts as well as the non- immersion learners 4) Gaining mastery in skills, content, and concepts 5) Gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

### Versions of Immersion Program

According to Wesche & Skehan (2002), an immersion program has two main versions: **strong** and **weak**.

*Strong Version* is the one in which the primary purpose is to teach the subject matters and the secondary purpose is to teach language. Content-based instruction (CBI) is an example of the strong version of Immersion Program.

*Weak Version* is the one in which mastery on content and gaining competence in language are equally emphasized. Although the regular school curriculum is designed based on the subject matters, both teachers and students are aware of the language objectives. In fact learning the subject matters is the main concern in strong version whereas in weak version the focus is on both language and subject matters (content).

#### **Two-way immersion Program**

Two – way immersion is equal to the bilingual education in which it not only helps the learners become bilingual but also widens students’ cultural horizons and sensitizes them to second culture and values (Colin Baker, 2006). The term bilingual education refers to an organized and planned program that uses two (or more) languages of instruction (Cummins, 2009). The central defining feature of bilingual program, he continues, is that the languages are used to teach subject matter content rather than just the languages themselves. Two-way programs integrate language-minority and language-majority students for all or most of the school day and strive to promote bilingualism and biliteracy in addition to grade-level academic

achievement for all students (Christinian, 1994). The programs are to be characterized as two-way should they meet these criteria: 1) Language-minority and language majority students are integrated for at least 50% of the day at all grade levels; 2) content and literacy instruction in both languages are provided to all students; and 3) language minority and language-majority students are balanced, with each group making up one third to two thirds of the total student population.

Craig (1995) stated that, two-way programs use both a second and the first language to teach regular subject matters to elementary school children. The classes are composed of both L1 speakers, and children who are native speakers of the second language, preferably in balanced numbers.

During the school year, different subjects are taught through each language, with at least 50% of the total academic instruction being taught through the second language. This can be done differently, for example, all instruction in the morning may be in L1 while afternoon classes may be held in L2. Or certain subjects, such as science and social studies, may be taught in L1 while mathematics and language arts may be in L2. Another variation is to teach all classes in L1 one day and in L2 the next day.

### Goals of two-way immersion program

In spite of a considerable variation in the implementation and design of the two-way immersion program, its goals are similar in all schools and areas. According to Craig (1995), by teaching regular academic subjects through two languages to children with different native languages, the program aims for bilingual proficiency, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding.

*Bilingual Proficiency:* to teach students to speak, read and write in two languages. The main goal is to promote proficiency in the L2 for both groups of students. Two-way immersion students achieve high levels of bilingual proficiency because both languages are used for learning regular subjects rather than simply being studied as subjects themselves. At the lower grades, kindergarten and students engage in group plays that teach L2 through songs, drama and dance. (Craig, 1995)

*Academic Achievement:* the other aim of the two-way immersion program is that children learn the same subject-matter content as students in the regular L1 curriculum and perform as well as they do in L1. (Craig, 1995)

*Cross-cultural Understanding:* two-way immersion programs have also been successful in helping students to develop positive social attitudes towards the two languages and their speakers. In addition to learning another language, both groups also have constant, daily opportunities to interact with children of their own age who are native speakers of the other language and thus become acquainted with the other culture. (Craig, 1995)

### Dual Immersion Program

Dual immersion is a form of education in which students are taught literacy and content in two languages. Dual immersion programs use the partner language for at least half of the instructional day in the elementary years. The goal is to have bilingual students with mastery of two languages: the immersion and partner ones.

Dual immersion has its own variations. They are in terms of the amount of time spent in partner language and the division of language. In terms of the former factor it is either in full or partial type. And in terms of the latter factor, it happens either by schedule or by instructor.

### **Indigenous immersion program**

It is designed and applied in communities desiring to maintain the use of the native language by delivering elementary school through the medium of that language.

### **Positive Effects of an Immersion Program**

Immersion program like any other methods and approaches has its own benefits and positive effects which are as follows:

- Pairing language with other description raise the students' motivation to begin language study and to continue longer. (Krueger & Ryan, 1993)
- Using subject matter as the content maximizes learners' exposure to the second language. (Krueger & Ryan, 1993)
- Bringing a greater subject area expertise, background knowledge and metacognitive awareness by learners to material in their own fields enhance their ability to read and comprehend second language texts. (Carrel 1991)
- Providing a theoretical basis for the idea that L2 proficiency can improve by concentrating on the content of an academic discipline through that language by taking into consideration the Krashen's "input hypothesis" which maintains that language is acquired most effectively through rich comprehensible input with the conscious focus on message, not on form. (Krashen, 1981, 1984)
- Applying language knowledge to learn subject matters demonstrate to students the importance of second language within the university as a whole and beyond. (Krueger & Ryan, 1993)
- Successful learning of the content of an academic discipline by the students and improving their foreign language proficiency at the same time is the fundamental premise. (Krueger & Ryan, 1993)
- Being successful in three key domains: improving second language proficiency, imparting content area knowledge, and changing attitudes toward language learning and use. (Krueger & Ryan, 1993)
- Having an assessment advantage which means that success is measured by learned content rather than learned language. (Hammerly, 1987) (cited in Kolahi's unpublished dissertation, 1996)

### **Problems of an Immersion Program**

Despite all the positive effects of an immersion program, it has some problems or deficiencies:

The fundamental didactic problem is how to relate concept with context in ways that are effective for learning. The use of concepts (mathematical or linguistic or whatever) requires the ability to actualize their abstraction in meaningful contexts (Krueger & Ryan, 1993).

- Some deficiencies are dependent on rote learning and on the teacher, inability to take independent notes, gather information, and discriminate between essential information and details; and difficulty in applying theory to problem solving and extracting information from diagrams and charts (Krueger & Ryan, 1993).
- Sometimes too much focus on subject matter causes relatively low attention to the formal, linguistic accuracy (Krueger & Ryan, 1993).
- The other problem is related to of knowledge: in order to make use of language, learners should apply it to subjects they know something about in that language (Eskey, 1983).
- Feeling is another equally important problem: learners' feeling that a subject really matters in some way that relates to their personal values and beliefs. The learners' need not only to know about subjects, but also to care about them (Eskey, 1983)
- Cultural misunderstanding may also occur in this program as in any other program (Krueger & Ryan, 1993).
- the degree to which students' background knowledge would have an effect on their content course performance, cannot be anticipated and this may be a problem (Krueger & Ryan, 1993).
- Lack of specific teacher preparation (content teachers for L2 learners or language teachers for content instruction) is another problem of the program (Krueger & Ryan, 1993). (cited in Kolahi's unpublished dissertation, 1996)

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