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Creating Immersive Language Learning Environments for Young Learners

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ABSTRACT: Creating immersive language learning environments for young learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has been a topic of considerable interest and debate among educators. Despite numerous constraints such as time, curriculum, and stakeholder expectations, it is feasible to develop effective immersive environments. This paper explores the concept of immersion language learning, tracing its historical development and highlighting its benefits, particularly for young learners. It discusses the distinctions between total, partial, and dual-immersion programs, emphasizing the critical role of using the target language as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, it examines the cognitive and academic advantages documented in seminal immersion programs like Saint-Lambert and Coral Way. By synthesizing research and offering practical strategies for EFL settings, this paper underscores the importance of teacher commitment, the selection of appropriate materials, and the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principles. Ultimately, the findings affirm that immersive environments significantly enhance language proficiency, cognitive flexibility, and academic achievement, advocating for their broader implementation in EFL classrooms.

KEYWORDS : *CLIL, EFL, immersion, young learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, a major concern of teachers who instruct young learners has been: "Is it possible to create immersive educational environments for young learners in English as foreign language (EFL) contexts?" The short answer is: "Yes;" however that hardly answers the question. Although numerous constraints can hinder the implementation of immersive language learning in an EFL context such as time constraints, curriculum constraints, and stakeholder constraints, it is still possible to create immersive language learning environments in an EFL setting. This paper aims to describe what immersion language learning is, give examples of how it developed, outline how it benefits learners, especially young learners, and discuss how effective immersive environments can be created in young learner classrooms.

Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of "immersion language education" there is one very important aspect or characteristic that differentiates immersive language learning environments from other forms of language education. This fundamental aspect or characteristic is that the target language is used as the medium of instruction (Johnson & Swain, 1997) [1]. This is also known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or Content-based Instruction (CBI). This means that immersion-based language programs use the target language as the primary medium of instruction for non-language-related subjects like mathematics, science, and social studies. Students learn a new language while learning other academic content.

Another characteristic that describes variation between and among immersive language programs is the amount of immersion that the learners are exposed to. This is typically broken down into three categories: total immersion, partial immersion, and dual immersion. In total immersion programs, students are fully immersed in the target language for the majority of their instructional time (Johnson & Swain, 1997) [1]. The Saint-Lambert program is an example of a full immersion program (see below). Partial immersion programs, however, usually provide instruction in both the target language and the student's native language. This means that some subjects may be taught in the target language, while others are taught in the native language. Partial immersion programs tend to have a high degree of variation in target language use due to context constraints and the program's design (Lindholm-Leary, 2001) [2]. The final category of immersion education is dual-language immersion.

These are two-way immersion programs that usually bring together students from different language backgrounds to receive instruction in two languages. The Coral Gables “Coral Way Program” is an excellent example of this kind of immersion program (see below). These programs try to promote bilingualism and biliteracy among their students while fostering cross-cultural understanding (Coady, 2020) [3].

Finally, immersion programs may also vary based on the age of the students; especially the age at which students begin to receive instruction in the target language. There are two categories: early immersion programs and late immersion programs. Early immersion programs start in the early elementary years, while late immersion programs begin later in elementary or secondary school (Genesee, 1987) [4].

II. A SHORT HISTORY OF IMMERSION

Although the history of immersion in second language learning may well go back to ancient times, it was only at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and the second half of the twentieth century in North America that immersion became the focus of academic study and interest.

For Europe, it was their colonial endeavors that brought European scholars, especially linguists, into contact with many new languages and most of these languages had no written form. This in turn spurred the creation of the International Phonetic Alphabet in 1886 by a group of British and French linguists and language teachers led by Paul Passy (Howatt, 2004) [5]. Contact with a multitude of new languages also initiated discussions about the nature of language, language learning, and the best ways to teach it. From these discussions came the natural language learning methods such as the Berlitz Method and the Direct Method which both share an emphasis on oral communication, and immersive language learning through direct interaction and communication in the target language (Richards & Rogers, 2014) [6].

Unlike Europe which quickly adopted immersive approaches to foreign language at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Coleman Report of 1929 undermined the adoption of more immersive approaches in the US. As Richard & Rogers (2014) [6] note: “The Coleman Report in 1929 recommended a reading-based approach to foreign language teaching for use in US schools and colleges” (p. 58); consequently, US schools and universities continued to use more traditional grammar and translation based methods of language learning. It wasn’t until concerns about declining foreign language proficiency surfaced after World War II that initial interests in immersive methods of foreign language learning were ignited. For example, after the Red Scare of the 1950s, the US passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) (1958) [7]. The NDEA was enacted to strengthen foreign language education and other areas deemed essential for national security. It funded language programs, including immersion initiatives, in schools and universities nationwide (Diekhoff, 1965) [8]. Another example is the MLA report (1961) [9] which highlighted deficiencies in foreign language education in the United States and called for reforms to address them. It emphasized the importance of immersion and other innovative approaches to language learning. Thus, these laws and reports are what laid the foundation for modern ideas of immersion language education in the US.

III. INITIAL FINDINGS FROM IMMERSION PROGRAMS

There were two immersion programs in the 1960s that had a profound effect on immersion as a model for language education. One program was in Coral Gables, Florida (started in 1963) and known as “The Coral Way Program,” and the second was in Saint-Lambert, Quebec (started in 1967). Although both programs were highly influential, the Saint-Lambert program has been the most researched (see Cummins, 1977 & 1978; Genesee, 1983, 1987; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Swain, 1985) [10, 11, 12, 4, 1, 12, 13].

These studies have found numerous benefits for using immersive environments in language education. For example, Genesee (1987) [4] found that students who participated in the Saint-Lambert immersion program demonstrated high levels of bilingual proficiency in both English and French. They were able to communicate effectively in both languages, demonstrating proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In addition, students in the immersion program performed as well as, or even better than, their monolingual peers on standardized tests of academic achievement (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) [12]. This suggests that bilingual students did better across a range of subjects which reaffirms that they have strong literacy skills in both languages. There are also cognitive benefits to learners who are engaged in immersive learning environments. For example, Cummins (1977, 1978) [10, 11] has shown that bilingual students demonstrated advantages in cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and problem-solving skills compared to their monolingual peers.

Although the Coral Way program was not as well documented in the research literature, it has found similar results as the Saint-Lambert Program. For example, Thomas & Collier (2002) [15] noted that students in the Coral Way program performed as well as, or even better than, their monolingual peers on standardized tests of academic achievement. These students also developed strong biliteracy skills, allowing them to read, write, and communicate effectively in both English and Spanish. Like Cummins (1978) [11], Genesee et. al (2006) [16] found that the Coral Way program provided cognitive benefits in addition to dual language learning. These benefits included enhanced metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving skills, and cognitive flexibility. Moreover, research on the Coral Way Program also indicated that the program fostered positive social and emotional development among students (Lindholm-Leary, 2001) [2].

In summary, there are a multitude of benefits if one learns language in an immersive environment. These include enhanced proficiency in multiple languages (Genesee, 1987) [4], cognitive benefits such as attention, memory, problem-solving, and multitasking (Bialystok, 2007; Cummins, 1977, 1978; Genesee, et. al., 2006) [17, 10, 11, 16], confidence in communication in real-world situations (Wong Fillmore, 1991a; 1991b) [18,19], and positive social and emotional development such as willingness to collaborate, the ability to embrace challenges and persevere (Howard, et. al, 2003; Lindholm-Leary, 2001) [20,2].

IV. THE BENEFITS OF IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR EFL LEARNERS

Although the learning contexts for the two programs described above are quite dissimilar from a foreign language learning setting, research on immersive language learning environments in a foreign language learning environment has been shown to offer similar benefits to learners. For example, EFL immersion programs have been found to promote bilingual proficiency and academic achievement among students (Genesee, 1987) [4]. Students in these programs develop strong English language skills, allowing them to communicate effectively in both English and their native language (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016) [21]. As Cummins (1977, 1978) [10,11] noted above, EFL early immersion programs provide cognitive benefits for learners such as improved executive functions and enhanced cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and problem-solving skills (Baker & Wright, 2021) [22]. Moreover and perhaps most importantly, longitudinal studies of early immersion programs have shown that these benefits persist over time and generally lead to better outcomes for the students involved when compared to learners who did not experience early immersion (Collier & Thomas, 2017) [23].

Moreover, besides the benefits provided by immersive environments in general, there is also the fact that the goal of studying a second language is to become proficient in that language. One of the conclusions that has been reached from research on immersion is that "second language proficiency tends to increase the earlier immersion begins and the more second language exposure the learner has" (Genesee, 1987, p. 191) [4]. Consequently, students who attend early total immersion programs will tend to realize higher levels of second language attainment than students who attend early partial immersion programs, delayed immersion programs, or late immersion programs. Nonetheless, any time learners spend in a second language immersive environment is better for the learners than no time spent in a second language immersive environment. Therefore, based on these findings, the goal for any teacher is to maximize their learners' exposure to and use of the target language, and the best way to do that is to provide learners with an immersive second language learning environment.

V. CREATING IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN AN EFL CONTEXT

In an EFL setting, creating an immersive environment means designing instructional activities and classroom practices that maximize exposure to and use of English in meaningful contexts. There are several strategies that teachers can use to create immersive environments.

The first strategy requires the teacher to be committed to using the target language throughout the day. This recommendation is neither new nor novel since it has been advocated as a method of instruction since the 1890s. The Direct Method requires teachers to convey meaning in the target language and to avoid the use of translation (Richards & Rogers, 2014) [6]. Moreover, Krashen (1992) [24] claims that languages are learned most effectively when learners are exposed to lots of comprehensible input in real communication contexts. For learners in an EFL context, the classroom may be the only place where they have exposure to comprehensible. Hawkins (1987) [25] once compared foreign language teaching to "gardening in a gale" (p. 97). In this analogy, the teacher's job is to plant seeds, but there is a problem; between lessons, these seeds are constantly being blown away. So, to thwart the wind, the teacher needs to plant as many seeds as possible, and for this reason, the teacher must be committed to using the target language as the medium of instruction.

For a teacher to stay in the target language for the duration of the class, the topic of a lesson needs to be selected with care; that is, the teacher needs to select the language that learners are ready to acquire. As Duly, Burt, and Krashen (1982) [26] noted certain structures are only acquired when learners are mentally ready for them. Readiness is also an important feature of the Multi-dimensional Model (Meisel, Clashen, and Pienenmann, 1981; Pienenmann, 1985) [27, 28]. To ascertain learner readiness, lessons almost always begin with a warm-up activity that reviews their prior knowledge and lays the groundwork for the new language that will be introduced in the lesson. This indicates that sequencing in immersion lessons is quite important, so after checking readiness, the teacher will then provide comprehensible input to the learners. This comprehensible input will introduce the new lexical items and new language forms to the learners, and as Ellis (2002) [29] outlines language instruction moves through five basic kinds of activities: 1) listening/reading to comprehend, 2) listening/reading to notice, 3) clarifying and understanding the patterns, the language or forms 4) confirming and internalizing the patterns, the language or forms 5) using the patterns, the language or forms.

Another important strategy when creating an immersive environment is choosing appropriate materials. Research on mass-produced, language textbooks has shown them to be inadequate and in opposition to current theories of Second Language Acquisition. For example, Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara & Rubdy (2001) [30] identified a resurgence of grammar-based syllabi by major British publishers of ELT textbooks. Gilmore (2007) [31] recommends exposure to natural language in use. The best way for learners to be exposed to natural language is through authentic materials, such as newspapers, songs, videos, and other real-life artifacts of language in use. These materials provide learners with exposure to the language as it is naturally used by native speakers. This helps learners understand how the language functions in real-world contexts, including idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and colloquialisms.

A final strategy that facilitates the implementation of immersive language environments is taking an approach to language instruction that relies heavily on the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010) [32]. This approach to second language instruction facilitates second language acquisition by integrating the teaching of content subjects (such as science and history) with language instruction. This dual-focused approach provides meaningful contexts for language use, enhancing both language and content learning (Dalton-Puffer, 2007) [33]. Other benefits of this approach to instruction include meaningful contexts for language use, increased exposure to the target language, enhanced cognitive engagement, and development of academic language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010) [32].

VI. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the paper the question was posed: "Is it possible to create immersive educational environments for young learners in English as foreign language (EFL) contexts?" Yes, it is possible to create immersive learning environments in EFL settings and the research has shown that such environments are beneficial for EFL learners. "Is it easy to create these environments?" No, because teaching is never a simple endeavor, but if one follows the recommended strategies outlined in this paper, then implementation is possible. Creating an immersive environment for learners starts with a commitment from the teacher; a commitment that advocates the use of the target language as the medium of instruction, and a willingness to use authentic materials within a CLIL approach.

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