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## What can EFL Teachers Learn from Immersion Language Teaching?

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### Abstract

*Immersion language teaching has developed techniques that enable teachers to make their subject matter, through a second language, more comprehensible. It is argued in this article that EFL teachers can also use techniques used by immersion language teachers in their classrooms. In doing so, teachers will increase the amount of input in the SL provided to their students, make their classroom rich with comprehensible input and thus potentially achieve a better language outcome. The techniques that are briefly discussed and examples provided are: Questioning downward, rephrasing, recasts, modelling or demonstrating, and the use of visuals and realia.*

One of the most effective ways of learning a second language is, what is now known as, immersion language teaching. The programs that have used such techniques have been called immersion (Swain & Johnson, 1996), content-based instruction (Snow, 1998), two-way bilingual education program (Cazabon, Lambert, & Hall, 1993) (the last program being different from the other two because the languages used for instruction are L1 for some of the students in class). In each of these types of bilingual programs there has been an emphasis on meaning, and more particularly on conveying content matter to the students. Teachers of such classes therefore have to learn how to make their language comprehensible to their students so that through an understanding of this language (second language, in most cases) students can develop an understanding of the content that is being taught. Teachers skilled in teaching immersion classes (immersion will be used as a short-hand for all types of programs where content is taught through a second language) show a number of common techniques, all designed to help students understand meaning.

Teachers of EFL might wonder how immersion language teaching techniques can be relevant to their context in which they are not focused on teaching content. EFL teachers are, nevertheless, increasingly using more communicative approaches to second language teaching. One of the primary characteristic of this approach is a focus on meaning, or as (Ellis, 2005, p. 217) recently put it, that instruction is ‘predominantly [focused] on meaning’. One of the reasons for the limited amount of second language learning that occurs in a foreign language context is that there is such a limited amount of second language input provided or available to students. Where the teacher speaks the first language of the students there is a great temptation to do much of the explanation in the first language so that during a class of 40 minutes, the second language is heard or read only a small fraction of the total

class time. In other words, input provided to learners is frequently quite limited and if we are agreed that input is vital for language development (Ellis, 2005; Krashen, 1994; Lighbown, 2000; VanPatten, 2003), then improved outcomes in our foreign language classrooms are more likely to occur if the amount of input in the second language in class is increased substantively.

The argument in this brief paper is that EFL teachers can increase the second language input in their classes by adopting some of the immersion language teaching techniques: questioning downward, rephrasing, recast, modelling or demonstrating, and the use of visuals and realia. All these techniques result in a greater focus on meaning and understanding the second language without recourse to translation.

### **1. Questioning downwards**

This is a technique that can be best used with both reading and listening comprehension. It is a way of helping students to reach the textual meanings through establishing what students might already know about the topic. The idea of ‘downwards’ is a metaphor of trying to establish what the students know and then building their comprehension of the text from that starting point. In educational terms, it is constructivism at its operational level (Larochelle, Bednarz, & Garrison, 1998), as teachers build students’ knowledge of a text from what knowledge they already possess about the subject matter of the text. For example, in a short piece of reading text on seasoning food, it is suggested that novices wanting to use spices and herbs in cooking their food should underseason the food. The following dialogue shows how downward questioning might occur.

T: *What advice does the writer give a cook who is not used to cooking with herbs and spice?* [No response from the students.]

T: *If someone was not experienced at cooking using ginger what advice would you give him/her about using this spice?* [If there is still no response from the students or still show signs of not understanding, then an even easier form of questioning might be required – that is, down-shift further.]

T: *If you were cooking and you did not how much spice to put into the food, what would be a good strategy for you to follow: put only a little bit of the spice into the food, or put quite a bit into the food?* [At this stage, one presumes there will be an answer, and the teacher can begin to question ‘upward’ now, if necessary tracing the questions previously asked, but in reverse order.]

The point about such questioning is that it is carried out in the second language, that the focus for students is meaning, and that an implicit message is conveyed to students that they often



any errors made by the learners, in ways that is found in the language data of interactions between parents and their young children. Both instances can be regarded as recasts, though they perform a slightly different function. In the first case, teachers recast a learner's utterance keeping meaning intact but giving it under a slightly different form, as in these two examples:

*S: It is better to put in only a little ginger.*

*T: Yes, it is better to underseason the food.*

*S: She had some problems she ah overcome – by her positive self motivation*

*T: She was a very motivated person [Example provided by colleague Ann Dashwood]*

The second case is found frequently in language teaching classrooms (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) and represents those cases where teachers provide a correct version of the utterance. This may be done as in the example below:

*S: The boys goes to town.*

*T: Yes, the boys go to town.*

Such recasts may be carried out in class with or without any intonational emphasis on the correct form. Research data suggests that those done with some emphasis, particularly on the incorrect item slot, may be more salient for learners, thus increasing the potential for change in the learner's interlanguage than might be the case in those situations where there are no such overt signals (Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001). In the latter case, it is quite likely that they are interpreted by students as confirmation of the content (Lyster, 1998) and the input is thus not available for language development.

The role of recasts in language acquisition is quite complex (for example, it is found more at lower levels whilst at upper levels of proficiency, corrections might be more explicit) and readers might like to look at Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada (2001) who summarise some of the research in both L1 and L2 acquisition as it relates to recasts and discuss some of the complexities surrounding their role in language learning.

#### **4. Modelling or demonstrating**

Modelling and demonstration of meanings is more usually associated with vocabulary items where teachers may demonstrate, for example, what an oblong is by the use of their hands. Such visual cues help students to understand new words and store them both as linguistic

items as well as a visual representation of them. An establishment of this practice in one's classroom also sends a message to students that the first recourse in case of incomprehension is not necessarily the dictionary. Here is an example from Mangubhai et al., (1999) that shows how demonstrating brings forth an answer.

[The teacher is comparing two animals.]

*T: Can you tell me something else that is the same? ... Iva, can you tell me something else that is the same? [waits for an answer]. What do you know? What did we learn last week? (as he asks the last question, he bends around points and touches his own spine).*

*Iva: Backbone*

## **5. Use of audiovisuals or objects**

Use of visuals in classroom is a powerful way to convey meanings to students. To try to convey the idea of *globalisation* a very good starting point can be a picture of *globe* (or better still a model of globe itself). The visual aid can lend itself equally well to teach the converse of globe, the *local*. At early stages of second language learning the use of visuals or objects can be effectively used through a teaching approach called Total Physical Response Method, where a teacher might be able to introduce a series of names of fruit, for example, in the second language through use of fruit, or colours through the use of coloured pens. The following example from Mangubhai et al., (1999) shows the use of students' bodies as physical objects.

[The teacher has got students to take on the name of each of the planets in the Solar System. They then introduce themselves as "I am Saturn" and so forth.]

*T: Now this time I want you to re-organise yourself –if you know the answer – from the biggest to the smallest.*

[She has the diameters of the planets on a chart, so students have to understand the figures and remember names of the planets (i.e. other students) and get into the right order.]

To sum up, the techniques used by immersion language teachers are in essence good teaching techniques that can be employed in other contexts also. The critical mode of behaviour for the teachers is that they endeavour to use language in such a way as to facilitate students understand of it. In the process of doing so, teachers will have also increased the amount of input they provide in the second language to their students.

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