
Immersion Confusion

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Often, people misunderstand the meaning of the word, *immersion*. This misunderstanding of immersion leads to school policies, which hurt some children's opportunity to access knowledge. Think of it this way: If *WinkWorld* were written in Polish or Swahili, would you learn anything? Would you care? Would you even bother to try? Or, would you simply hit delete?

While reading about the new anti-bilingual education movement in the state of Oregon, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2008/06/november_ballot_in_oregon_to_h.html and Zehr's second article on it: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2008/06/the_oregon_ballot_initiative_f.html, I thought of a short article which I published in 1991. I'm often hesitant to read, much less share, anything I wrote in the early 90's, however, some of the national dialogue leads me to share it again.

Similar ideas were published in *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*, 3/e, pp. 72-79 (http://www.joanwink.com/cp3/cp3_pgs72-79.php)* and also in another article which we published with Jill Mora. See Mora, Wink, and Wink, *Dueling Models of Dual Language Instruction: A Critical Review of the Literature and program Implementation Guide*, at http://brj.asu.edu/content/vol25_no4/html/art3.htm

For more on immersion, see:
ELL Advocates of Language and Education Policy Institute
<http://www.elladvocates.org/issuebriefs.html#immersion>

* In addition, if you like to see a gorgeous water color of the three perspectives, painted by a treasured graduate student, Dayna, see <http://www.joanwink.com/cp3/3perspectives.php>.

Wink, J. (December 1991/January 1992). Immersion Confusion. *TESOL Matters*(1)6.

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In the media and even in the professional journals, the use of the word, immersion, is very confusing. Immersion has many different and even contradictory meanings. It often is used to mean a specific methodology whereby the medium of instruction is the second language. Immersion also is used to refer to a variety of program models: (1) French Canadian model, (2) two-way, interlocking, or dual immersion, and (3) structured immersion. It is no wonder that the general population is often confused about this word. As, these programs vary greatly and have the potential to harm and/or help specific populations, it would seem that a clarification is necessary.

Immersion methodology means nothing more than content taught through the medium of the second language. The language is the medium, not the object, of instruction. At times, this methodology is appropriate in a wide variety of programs: two-way immersion models, French Canadian models, developmental bilingual programs, adult and K-12 ESL, and foreign language programs. In immersion methodology L2 is the medium of instruction. In structured immersion, English is the object of instruction. Immersion methodology is based on additive bilingualism whereby L2 is added, and L1 is maintained. Structured immersion is based on subtractive bilingualism whereby L2 is added, and L1 is subtracted.

French Canadian immersion is a term used in the United States to refer to a program which is modeled after the famous model of education begun in Montreal in 1965 to serve only the language majority population. A small group of English-speaking parents wanted their children to be bilingual. The goal of this model was and is additive bilingualism, high levels of literacy in two languages, and academic success. There are successful similar models in the United States which, once again, serve only the dominant population.

Two-way immersion models are designed to serve both the majority and the minority language students. The goal of two-way immersion is additive bilingualism, complete biliteracy, academic success, and positive intergroup relations. Theoretically, this model appears to hold great potential because (1) the language majority students would benefit from the spontaneous and natural language of the language minority students in class and on the playground; and, (2) the language minority students would benefit from the stated goals of the program, the high status, the active parent involvement, and quality curriculum.

However, many districts have been experimenting with this model, and the results tend to be as varied as the programs. Further study is necessary to understand this variability.

Structured immersion which has recently received much public attention is a model designed for language minority students only. The goal is monolingualism, English. This program places non-native English speakers in a special environment of English-only, for one year with teachers who are to have knowledge of second language acquisition. The goal is to prepare these students to learn in English in mainstream classes at the end of one year. Research clearly and consistently demonstrates that it takes even the most enriched students 6-7 years to attain enough L2 in order to continue their learning at appropriate grade levels. Structured immersion advocates often point to the successes of the French Canadian model; however, the goals of the two programs are diametrically opposed. In addition, structured immersion is designed to serve language minority students, and French Canadian immersion is designed to serve the language majority students. Often, structured immersion is nothing more than submersion dressed up in new language. If nothing else has been learned in the field of second language acquisition in the last several decades, it is clear that submersion is the quickest way to drown language minority students in a sea of meaningless words.

Cummins, Krashen, Lambert, Hakuta, and Lessow-Hurley have all written and spoken extensively on the use and misuse of immersion. Krashen has repeatedly stated that from immersion we have learned that subject matter teaching, when it is made comprehensible, is language teaching. Cummins' work, in particular, has focused on a critical perspective of the abuse of French Canadian immersion as a rationale for structured immersion.

The purpose of this discussion has been to suggest that second language professionals need to be very careful of the use of the word, immersion. It means many different things to many different people. It is imperative that we conceptualize and articulate immersion so that others will understand that these multiple and contradictory meanings have the power to hurt or to help specific populations of students.