Learning to communicate effectively through intensive instruction in French

Joan Netten and Claude Germain

In Canada there are basically two types of programs for the learning of French as a second language (FSL): French immersion and Core French. Immersion is a program in which the subjects (such as social studies, science, etc.) are learned through the medium of the second language. There are several variations of this program: early, middle and late, depending on the grade level at which the program starts. Participation in this program is a very effective means of learning to communicate in French. However, for many reasons (political, administrative, social, pedagogical, etc.), only 15% of the English-speaking student population studying French participate in this program; universal participation is not feasible. Thus, 85% of the English student population learn French through what is generally called “Core French”. In this program French is normally taught daily for brief periods of time (30 to 40 minutes/day), usually starting in grade 4 (students 9 years of age). Participation in this program tends to be compulsory until the end of grade 9 or 10 (age 14-16), at which time about 90% of the students drop the program. Therefore, despite the fact that Canada is a bilingual country, only a small proportion of its anglophone population are bilingual.

Rationale for developing Intensive French

The studies of Core French that have been undertaken in the last 30 years indicate that the results of Core French are not satisfactory (Shapson, Kaufman and Durward, 1978; Stern, 1982; Lapkin, Harley and Taylor, 1995; Calman and Daniel, 1998; Turnbull, 1999). In an attempt to make the program more effective, a National Core French Study was undertaken to make it a more communicative approach (LeBlanc, 1990). While the suggested changes brought about some improvement, they did not radically change the teaching strategies used in the program. As a result Core French has not been able to achieve the goal of developing communicative competence for most students.

For the past five years, oral interviews have been given by provincial evaluators to a large sample of students at the beginning of grade 5 or 6 in four provinces/territories. Results indicate that 98% of the students tested are unable to communicate in French after between 360 to 450 hours of Core French instruction (Netten and Germain, 2005, 2006a). Even at the end of grade 9 or 10, interview results have shown that students are still unable to communicate in French (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Government of New Brunswick, 2005). Since students do not experience success in the program, motivation to study French declines and attitudes towards learning French become negative.

Intensive French: Description of the program

Intensive French was conceptualized by the authors of this article to improve the communication skills and the attitudes of Core French students. It is a five month program that is inserted into Core French in grade 5 or grade 6, when students are 10 to 12 years of age and are still at the beginning of their second language learning experience. The program is open to all students, including those with learning difficulties (Netten and Germain, 2004).

Results are very positive. After five months of Intensive French students are able to communicate spontaneously on topics of interest to them at a level that is congruent with their cognitive development. They also are able to write a narrative composition of one or more paragraphs, without the use of a dictionary, similar to compositions written by native Quebec francophones between grades 2 and 3. These results are based on data collected from over 1500 Intensive French students in five provinces (Netten and Germain, 2006b).

The program began in 1998 as a three year experiment in Newfoundland and Labrador where was considerable interest in improving Core French due, in particular to the impossibility of implementing immersion programs in the many very small rural communities. The provincial department of Education
decided to adopt the program as an official alternate to Core French in 2002. Once the program was established in this province, it began to expand across the country. Departments of Education or school districts in all the other provinces, except Quebec, and two territories have initiated pilot projects in their jurisdictions. From September 1998 to June 2007, over 10,000 students have participated in Intensive French across Canada, and the number continues to grow.

**Differences from the mainstream understanding of a communicative approach to FSL**

There are two major changes from the regular Core French program that characterize Intensive French. One is the increase in both time and intensity of exposure to French during five months of the school year. Research has shown that intensity of exposure to second language (SL) instruction increases significantly student achievement (Lightbown and Spada, 1994). Since French is taught for approximately 70% of the school day, instruction in French is increased from the normal 90 hours a year to around 300 hours. In order to achieve this amount of time, no other subjects are taught during the five months of Intensive French except mathematics, and some other specialist subjects, such as religion, art and music, which are taught in English; in the other five months, the students return to the regular timetable where all subjects are taught in English, except French, which returns to only 10% of the curriculum.

The tasks undertaken in the FSL classroom are similar to those undertaken in other subject areas, thus assuring the cognitive development of the students. For example, students do a survey of the musical tastes of their peers, and report the results by using graphs, as they would do in a science class. English language instruction is reduced by 50% as a large proportion of the goals are met through Intensive French, as, for example, communicating ideas effectively or writing paragraphs of various types. All the learning outcomes of the grade 5 or 6 curriculum are achieved because of the transdisciplinary nature of the Intensive French curriculum (Germain and Netten, 2005a and forthcoming). In this way SL instruction is integrated with instruction in the regular curriculum.

Despite the reduction in time for the other subjects, students show no lags in English language development in the provincial tests at the end of grade 5 or 6. Students also show no lags in the learning outcomes specified for other subject areas, particularly with respect to cognitive processes and skills. Parents and teachers also indicate that the students develop greater learning autonomy in general, and a more positive attitude to the learning of French (Germain and Netten, 2004). The theoretical foundations for this part of the program are found in the work of Vygotsky on the unified nature of cognitive development (1986) and of Cummins on the interdependence of languages (2001).

The second major change is in the teaching strategies used for both oral and written communication. Since the advent of the communicative approach to FSL instruction, the general pattern that has been followed in the development of curriculum resources is based on the need for explicit knowledge of the language patterns to be used. This may be expressed as follows: knowledge of vocabulary, verb forms, and pattern or rule, followed by practice exercises to internalize the pattern, followed by activities to encourage spontaneous communication using the learned structures. An examination of the most widely used curriculum programs in Canada demonstrates this pattern. The underlying assumption is that explicit knowledge becomes a skill which enables students to speak spontaneously. However, this assumption is not supported by recent neurolinguistic research which indicates that knowledge cannot become a skill; the two are located in different areas of the brain, with no direct connection between them (Paradis, 2004). In addition, implicit competence is acquired incidentally and unconsciously (without focusing on it) by using the language. Learning a language for the purposes of oral communication is a constructivist activity on the part of the student; each student must construct his own internal grammar; external grammars are only useful for writing activities. The ability to use a language orally is a skill and is acquired by use in an authentic situation. In Intensive French, oral language learning is contextualized in a real situation.

Current Core French resources also assume that the ability to read and write is simply transferred from the first language. In Intensive French the processes involved in reading and writing are re-taught for use in the second language. For reading, this includes the development of word recognition skills, a new set of sound-symbol relationships and development of strategies necessary for successful comprehension of print material. For writing, the difference between what is heard orally and the written form of the same words or sentences needs to be taught. This is the moment when explicit knowledge can be taught, as in written work students have the time to mentally consult consciously learned information about word forms. The reteaching of reading and writing skills enables students with learning problems to be included. Because of the emphasis on literacy, oral development precedes reading and writing, and the latter two
skills are closely related to their oral foundations (Germain and Netten, 2005b). For written communication, which includes both reading and writing, teaching strategies based on a literacy approach to language teaching are used.

Intensive French has many similarities with immersion education. Both programs offer an intensive exposure to the target language in the beginning stages and are based on the acquisition of implicit competence in the language in order to ensure the development of spontaneous communication, and a literacy approach to the teaching of reading and writing. In contrast with immersion instruction, students in Intensive French do not learn subject matter at the same time. In Intensive French, the focus is on the learning of the language first.

Intensive French is very different from mainstream Core French instruction. It begins with an intensive exposure to the target language rather than short periods of instruction. It is based on the premise that oral competence in a language can only be achieved through language use rather than the learning of vocabulary and rules; it is an approach which is centred on the sentence rather than on words. Thirdly, it teaches students how to read and write in the target language; it does not assume that students can transfer these skills from English to the FSL classroom. Consequently, it enables children to develop biliteracy, “the ability to use language and images in varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas, to share information, to interact with others, to make meaning” (Government of Ontario, 2004) in both French and English. These changes enable FSL instruction to be integrated into the general educational development of the students and the learning of the language itself is contextualized and integrated into the life of the student.

Descriptive example

The four teaching strategies which are crucial to the success of Intensive French are: modeling, use and reuse, and the use of complete sentences in order to make links between the elements of the language, as well as correction. The strategies are not in themselves completely new; many teachers use them from time to time. In Intensive French we require that teachers use them all of the time to the exclusion of use of other strategies.

1. Modelling. Each unit, lesson or pedagogical theme begins with oral modelling. If we suppose the theme is domestic animals with the help of gestures or even pictures, a teacher can say: *J’ai un chien. Il s’appelle….* If the teacher doesn’t have a dog, he or she can talk about a friend’s or relative’s dog, or about a cat or a bird, as the case may be. Similarly, if the theme is music, the teacher can use the same teaching strategy, and begin by saying, for example, *J’aime la musique pop.* Naturally, still in the interests of authenticity, the teacher would make sure to present right from the beginning some useful negative forms: *J’aime la musique pop mais je n’aime pas la musique country.* This format is important in order to give the model to the student of the sentence that he must use. This personal involvement is necessary in order to motivate the students to want to communicate their real likes and interests. A similar strategy can easily be used to introduce another theme, such as sports, and so on for most themes covered in the classroom in the beginning stages of L2 instruction.

The use of this strategy is in contrast to beginning a lesson or unit with the presentation of new vocabulary words, or examples of structures and rules of grammar out of context. It is more authentic than the latter because it immediately enables the learner to communicate a message; it focuses the attention on the learners and encourages them to become actively involved in the learning process.

2. Use and reuse of the modelled sentence. To encourage use and reuse of the language in the classroom, the teacher creates multiple situations giving the students numerous opportunities to use the previously modelled sentence. It is to be noted that this strategy does not mean that learners repeat without any alteration the sentence modelled by the teacher; each student replies to the question with his own information. Thus, students hear and use the modelled sentence several times, but with slight variations. It is also to be noted that the modelled sentence is not simply “repeated” out of context, as was the case with audiolingual methods. Rather, it is reproduced in a form adapted to the students’ personal situation in such a way as to demonstrate effectively that a language is, in fact, a means of communicating through the use of real information. It is this type of use of the language that has been termed the development of “creative automaticity” (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, 2005) as elements of the sentence are changed with its use by different individual learners. In the classroom, this teaching strategy takes four different forms.

   a) Asking the question which requires the use of the modelled sentence, slightly adapted according to the personal situation of the student, as the answer. To return to one of the examples given above, suppose the teacher has provided the students with the following linguistic model concerning pets: *J’ai un*
The teacher then continues immediately afterwards by asking the question: *Et toi? As-tu un chien? Comment s’appelle-t-il?*

The vocabulary words that students will need to convey their messages are then provided orally by the teacher upon request. Vocabulary is much more likely to be retained by learners if it is provided to answer a need, and not in a series of words without a context. It is to be noted that integrating all new vocabulary into a real sentence (*J’ai un chien. Il s’appelle…*) effectively demonstrates that a language is not used primarily to describe, as is implied by the content of most textbooks on the market which begin lessons with *Qu’est-ce que c’est? – C’est…*, but rather, to communicate. It is also important to note that the teacher does not write on the board during the oral part of a lesson, as doing so interferes with the development of the student’s auditory memory.

b) Interacting with students. If we return to our example of a discussion on domestic animals, after preparing the students by modelling the sentence, and the interaction pattern, the teacher will then ask students to ask the question to other students in the class, thus ensuring that students can use the question correctly, and at the same time modelling the activity which will follow.

c) Encouraging students to interact with each other. The students engage in short conversations with each other, using the question and answer learned. In pairs, each student in turn asks his partner the questions ‘As-tu un chien?’ (un chat? etc.) *Comment s’appelle-t-il?* and replies. The students also change partners and ask the same questions a second time.

d) Encouraging listening and participation amongst all students. In order to stimulate interaction in the classroom and as a way of giving students further opportunities to reuse the interaction pattern, the teacher questions the students on what their partners have said as for example: *Quel est l’animal favori de Nicole? Quelle sorte de musique est-ce que Kelly aime?* and so on, referring to the personal answers given previously by the students. After learners have become familiar with the use of this strategy, the teacher can have the students ask the questions.

The development of the ability to communicate includes developing both fluency and accuracy in the L2. In Intensive French specific teaching strategies are required for each of the processes. The next two teaching strategies are related to these two particular characteristics of communication.

3. Using complete sentences to make links. In the beginning stages of learning to communicate, we encourage the use of full sentences in reply to all questions. A student who is asked: *Comment t’appelles-tu?* should answer using the complete sentence *Je m’appelle …* (rather than by simply stating his or her name). The same applies to answering the question *Quel âge as-tu?– J’ai onze ans* (and not simply: *onze*).

While using complete sentences may seem somewhat contrary to our desire to use authentic language in real situations, there are very valid reasons for using this teaching strategy. Through the use of complete sentences in answer to questions, the student becomes adept at making connections between all the linguistic elements (on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and discursive levels) necessary to speak with fluency in the target language. The use of full sentences also assists the student to develop his internal grammar. How can a student succeed in developing fluency and form hypotheses about the language by using only one word answers, reciting a list of out-of-context vocabulary words by heart or conjugating a verb orally?

4. Correction of language used. Once the teacher has modelled a sentence and has encouraged its use by asking a student the question, the teacher must correct the response of the student, should it be incorrect. The correction is achieved by modelling the correct form, and having the student use the corrected form. Thus, if we return to the example used previously and extend it further:

T. *As-tu un chien à la maison, David?*
S. *Oui, j’ai un chien à la maison.*
T. *Tu as un chien à la maison.*
S. *J’ai un chien à la maison.*

It is essential that the teacher immediately give the correct model for the answer given by the student, and that the student repeat this model accurately. All correction must be followed by use by students of the correct form in a complete sentence; it would not be enough to indicate that there is an error because this would produce only declarative knowledge. Furthermore, an explanation of why what was said is incorrect is not necessary. It is also important for the development of the student’s internal grammar that the form used is correct.

Once a certain implicit competence of an oral corpus has been developed, attention is then turned to the development of reading and writing skills with this corpus. In the development of these skills the development of both implicit competence and explicit knowledge is addressed. There are three stages in each lesson: pre-reading/writing activities, the teaching of how to read/write, and post-reading/writing
activities. The pre- and post- activities are included specifically in order to develop literacy skills, making the links between speaking, reading and writing. All reading and writing activities begin with an oral communication which provides the contextualization of the language skills to be learned. The teacher leads a discussion enabling students to see the relevance of the topic to their lives and also to link what they are able to say (communicate orally) with what they are about to read or write. After the reading/writing lesson has been undertaken, there is further use of the information, integrating what has been read/written with the other skills areas and with previously learned material. This is an essential element of a literacy-based approach to language learning.

In the reading/writing lesson itself, the four strategies of modelling, use and reuse, making links and correction are followed. For reading, the teacher models the text to be read, given the students a correct model of the words and sentences used, and also ensures its comprehension. Then students read the text aloud for various purposes. During this reutilisation of the text the teacher encourages students to read full sentences with natural intonation, and corrects any errors, such as incorrect interpretation of relationships between sound and graphic symbol, in order to encourage accuracy in reading. Once explicit knowledge of the new system of sound-symbol relationships is developed, students are able to read independently. For writing, at the beginning stages of the program, the teacher writes a model paragraph from suggestions given by the students for the topic chosen. Once written, students read aloud the paragraph with the teacher, and afterwards the teacher assists the students to see the aspects that could be changed in order for each student to write his own personalized version, using complete sentences. The teacher also assists students to recognize aspects that are specific to written language, such as punctuation, agreements, etc., in order to encourage accuracy in writing that is based on explicit knowledge of language forms. The students then compose their own paragraph. As students advance in the program, they begin to write more and more independently, and use of the writing process (draft, correction, final copy) is encouraged.

These strategies are used to develop both implicit competence in reading and writing in the target language so that students are able to think in French rather than translating what they read and write, and explicit knowledge of how the language functions in order that they are able to read and write with accuracy. In addition, the reading and writing activities follow the speaking activities all in the same day. Once language items have been developed in this way, they are then integrated with previously learned items to pursue a more complex activity, as for example, a project; thus, the language skills developed are integrated to develop literacy in the target language.

Conclusion

Intensive French is a highly effective way for young students to learn to communicate spontaneously in French, as well as to develop literacy skills in the target language. The increase in time and, in particular, intensity enhances the rate of development of these skills. However, its success is due primarily to the teaching strategies used which encourage the development of implicit competence for fluency and accuracy in oral communication and its use of strategies to develop literacy skills. The skills are presented in sequence, but are then integrated in a project or other activity. The whole language learning process is contextualized, from the use of complete sentences in oral discussions to the writing of paragraphs, in authentic communicative situations that have real meaning for the students. This type of approach to the teaching of Core French makes the learning of a second language in a school situation a more valuable educational experience and integrates FSL more effectively in the regular school curriculum.

WORKS CITED


Recommended reading:
