LITERACY-BASED APPROACH

The Intensive French (IF) program differs from the Core French program in its approach to how a second language should be learned in order to be able to use it for purposes of communication. The approach is similar to that used in learning a first language (L1), and, as a result, is based on the concept of literacy development. However, the pedagogy is somewhat different because it takes into account aspects of developing literacy that are specific to the learning of a second language. Consequently, we have a pedagogy specific to developing literacy in a second language: in IF the second language (L2) is taught in the same way as the L1 with adaptations for the L2 context. The emphasis is therefore on authentic communicative situations rather than on language forms, and the language is used by the students as a means of expressing their own thoughts and opinions. Also, from the perspective of a conception of literacy specific to L2, reading closely follows oral production, writing closely follows reading, and these three language skills are linked in that the reading and writing activities use the same language forms used in the oral component. Students are taught how to read, and how to write, in French, rather than assuming that they can transfer these skills from what they can already do in English. In this way IF programs constitute a literacy experience for students and contribute to developing their “ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas”\(^1\) [at the appropriate levels] in both their first and second languages. This approach also enables teachers to take into account individual differences in learning, from the perspective of both individual differences and multiple intelligences, giving to students the opportunity to undertake more demanding tasks than is the case in the Core French program. These factors contribute to a greater development of both language and cognitive skills for all students.

Importance of the oral component

In a neurolinguistic approach to teaching oral competence, emphasis is placed on the development of oral communication first. As is the case for all authentic communicative situations, oral comprehension and production are closely linked (Brumfit, 1984). In IF, only French is used in the classroom. It is necessary to create an environment where French is the language of communication from day one. In order to create this atmosphere, interactive teaching strategies must be used regularly in the classroom; teachers must interact with students regularly in French and encourage the students to interact regularly in French. Gradually, students will start conversing with each other in French. It is not possible to learn to speak French by speaking . . . English. Speaking English does not develop the internal grammar needed to communicate in French.

In addition, during oral presentations, students must not read a text that has been written previously. They must speak with some spontaneity, and “improvise”, so to speak, in front of the other students. In actual fact, reading a text in front of the class is… a reading activity, not an oral presentation. A true oral presentation requires that the student not read a text. Furthermore, the presentations should be planned in such a way that the other students in the class can participate, for example, by asking questions to the presenter, or by responding to questions posed by the presenter.

From the perspective of literacy development, as is the case for their L1, students should be able to talk with some spontaneity about a topic, such as their activities and their personal experiences, before learning to read and write about them. Therefore, it is necessary, in L2, to give much greater importance to oral development, because, contrary to what happens in L1 instruction, L2 learners, at the beginning of instruction in L2, have not already developed the internal grammar (neurolinguistic connections) that enables them to communicate orally. However, once able to discuss a subject orally, even if in a limited manner, the learner can begin to read and write on the same subject. Possessing an internal grammar assists in the development of reading and writing.

**Importance of the oral component in reading and writing**

However, communication does not refer uniquely to the oral use of the language. Communication also includes reading and writing skills. Learning to communicate includes the integrated development of oral, reading and writing through authentic communication situations. Reading and writing are, therefore, taught (without assuming an automatic transfer from L1 to L2 of these skills) by introducing these skills much sooner than is usually the case for Core French classes at grades 4, 5 and 6. Therefore, although a topic is introduced orally, reading and writing activities follow almost immediately afterwards. Success in learning to read and write is dependent upon having previously acquired an adequate oral foundation Teachers and textbook writers seem sometimes to forget the oral component’s importance in learning how to read and write an L2 (Germain & Netten, 2005).

Reading is above all an activity during which students extract meaning from a print text, and in the process, they establish a link between what they are reading and what they can say about their lives, thus avoiding the necessity of translating. However, in addition, for the L2 learner, there is the need to comprehend a new sound-symbol system. An L2 student who can understand orally, and even use in oral production a word such as oiseau/bird (as in the sentence J’ai un oiseau à la maison/I have a bird at home), is not immediately able to recognize the same word in a reading text (for example: Un petit oiseau bleu est perché sur le rebord de la fenêtre/A small blue bird is sitting on the window ledge). It is impossible for the student to realize that, in a reading text, putting the letters o-i-s-e-a-u together in a sequence represents putting together the sounds /wazo/ in French (Germain & Netten, 2005). This is why, in IF, teaching strategies that are normally used in the primary (understood here in the English usage of the term, meaning
grades 1, 2 and 3) classroom are adapted and used in the context of teaching reading in the L2 in IF.

It is equally important to remember that, when students are learning how to write texts in the L2, their written productions are limited to a reproduction of what they can say. It is important that the teacher make use of this normal process, and before having students write, have students say what they will write, which gives the teacher the opportunity to correct any errors the students make orally. In this way, students can use in their written production the corrected forms. For example, an anglophone student learning French has a tendency to say *Je suis fini* instead of *J'ai fini*, because of the structure used in English, the L1. As long as the correct form of a structure is not used systematically and spontaneously in oral production, it is unlikely that the student will use the structure correctly in written production.

As a general rule, one can say that literacy in its truest sense consists of an integration of the three strands of language, oral, reading and writing. It is important to “complete the cycle”, so to speak. In other words, from the point of view of learning a language, the students read about a topic already discussed in class and then write about that topic. Writing is not a flow of disconnected phrases on a random topic. However, in terms of language use, when we write a message, the goal is to have this message read. Therefore, all texts written by the students must be read (by other students in most cases), and once these texts have been read, students should be able to talk about them. In this way “the cycle is completed”. In most Core French textbooks, if composing a text is included at all, it marks the end of the unit or lesson: the “cycle is incomplete”. In the accompanying chart, note that the left side of the circle refers to the introduction of new language components, and the right side of the circle (with dotted lines) refers to the integration of the newly learned language components of the L2 with those already learned.

As shown, the oral component plays a key role, not only in learning oral communication, but also in learning how to read and write compositions. Reading and writing are two types of language skills that rely heavily on the early development of the learner’s oral language skills.