

Christer Laurén  
University of Vaasa

## **Assessing the impact of immersion programmes**

### Background

I am a linguist interested in pedagogy since my original teacher training in the beginning 60s. For some years I worked at secondary school and college as teacher. Language usage has been one of my areas of research, but I always been interested in trying out new ideas and new approaches together with colleagues and students at my department.

I believe that I do not have to rehearse basic information about immersion in Canada, Catalonia and elsewhere with an audience of language professionals. Neither is it necessary to stress that the early total immersion starts at kindergarten, that boys tend to avoid immersion if it starts later, that it is an option – however not any more in Catalonia, where it started in 1983 as an option. In the language planning of Catalonia, the immersion approach played an important role after a long period of suppression of Catalan. You will also know that reading and writing in this context of immersion starts in the second language.

When almost everybody attended the Catalan immersion schools it was made compulsory in all of Catalonia. It ceased to be immersion. However, when it was an immersion programme in Catalan, it was a very progressive program, and considering the mainstream approach in language education also the teachers were very modern. The Catalans had to acquire their language, which had been forbidden at school during Franco.

We learned much from the Canadians about the products of immersion. When we started immersion in Finland we had to compare the results with the results achieved in Canadian schools; as for the process and the pedagogy were consulted the Catalans. When in the 1980s a school in Catalonia wanted to work by using Catalan, the school authorities established a project for the school, including pedagogical support: continuous education for the teachers, also in Catalan culture, and teaching material.

In this presentation I will concentrate on one case of immersion programmes, i. e. on Swedish immersion for Finnish speakers as it functions since 1987. I interpret the title of my presentation fairly freely: I will try to describe what we researchers and teachers have learned from working with immersion. My own background as a teacher of Latin and Swedish as the first language (mother tongue) made it - from my point of view - a natural strategy to work together with the teachers. So when starting in 1987 I had to introduce every new teacher into the pedagogy of such a programme and at the same time being responsible for starting a follow-up research project. From 1991 the number of teachers involved in immersion made it necessary to provide more formal continuous training for the new teachers who came into the immersion classes.

### Defining immersion pedagogy

The Director of the school administration of the city of Vasa, where I worked as professor of Swedish at the local university, proposed setting up a working group of parents, school administrators, teachers and researchers in order to facilitate communication between the

groups involved, and to take fast decisions if necessary. Especially in the first years of immersion this group was an important link for us.

From the very beginning, we arranged for this group to visit Canada for creating contacts with pedagogy in theory and praxis and with researchers, and for observing immersion schools and classes. At that time immersion pedagogy was usually regarded to be old-fashioned, or else Canadians told us that immersion was not for everybody but only for bright pupils. This was even said by an administrator of schools in a big city. It has to be stressed that there does not exist any specific pedagogy of immersion in Canada. During our excursion 20 years ago we realized that there existed old-fashioned classes and schools of immersion, as well as excellent cases. However, we had to find out ourselves which schools had the most interesting pedagogy.

When preparing this excursion, I was in contact with a colleague, a sociologist, at Carleton University, professor John de Vries, whose sons were at an immersion school. I expected him to be well informed. He proposed us to visit Glen Ogilvy School and its Head Spencer Stanutz, who also was thoroughly familiar with all the history of Canadian immersion. To his staff of teachers also belonged an excellent teacher trainer Michael McLellan. Spencer Stanutz visited us many times for our teacher training courses together with McLellan.

Glen Ogilvy was a modern school in many ways. All the classes were built around the important centre, the library. Classroom doors were mostly open because there was a constant flux of people between classrooms and the library. Many single kids or groups of kids worked with their tasks in the corridor or at windows of the building. But there were parents as well, at least one of them preparing teaching materials. Those parents who were able to come were welcome to work and assist the teachers.

For the first six years at school the students worked with themes. One theme always concerned many school subjects. There was an object of learning and the language was the tool. Parents had been involved with preparing the theme work. At an earlier stage themes were planned and developed in a cooperation between teachers and pupils.

This immersion is used in dual track schools in Finland, i. e. there are also non-immersion classes at all levels. The follow up group established by the city was prepared for problems between the two groups of students. There were no problems. In the beginning the neighboring classes complained about the noise of the immersion way of working. So the teachers had to explain why they had this noise also outside classrooms. With the passage of time the non-immersion teachers started to work in the same way. The non-immersion students were so interested that they also wanted to show that they could utter themselves in Swedish. Until now I have not heard about any mobbing because of immersion. So, pupils as well as teachers of neighbouring classes were strongly influenced by the immersion approach, and, hence it was a positive effect we had not anticipated.

There was one rough rule at Glen Ogilvy regarding the role of a teacher. The teacher should not speak to all the class more than 20 % of the time they are together. The reason of the rule was that teachers in immersion tend to use too much of the time, which in reality leads to only some minutes of linguistic interaction per student during one year. The rule of 20 % was based on practical experience.

The teacher should really not be the only model of language use. The students themselves must be active. The open door of the classroom was part of the policy and so was the way of working thematically. When students worked together in small groups they needed some more space. The concept of Whole language was very often used as an argument for ways of working. This was in the end of the 80s. Piaget and Vygotsky were important names and none of the teachers and Head Masters mentioned the name Noam Chomsky.

### ”Deschooling Society”

It was realized in Canada that a capacity for linguistic interaction in a new language could not be developed in classroom training only. The students should meet people who used the immersion language in as many natural contexts as possible. In Glen Ogilvy school they also arranged meetings by inviting to the schools parents with interesting professions. Of course, meeting like this had to be well prepared by the students and the visits were analysed afterwards. This was one way of expanding one domain of content. In too many cases there is a problem that the teachers go too fast from theme to theme. Hence, when a student may regard himself/herself ready for using the language the teachers already go to the next theme.

This situation reminds me of Ivan Illich (1926-2002) and his book *Deschooling Society* (1970). Illich maintained that schooling was a model of the centralized consumer society. Schools teach the students to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there is, the better are the results, or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby ”schooled” to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. In brief, institutions tend to end up working in ways that reverse their original purpose.

This description seems to apply fairly well to many European classrooms. We may only think of many European students who learn about language without acquiring language. Or think of boys who may behave as if languages were for girls only. The relation between grammar classes and language usage is not clear. This realism, if we may call it that, of many boys means that they have learned how little they master a foreign language for practical usage. It is indeed difficult to actualize rules of grammar when participating in a discussion.

How many pupils never come to a point of speaking a foreign language? I suppose that teachers at school and professors at universities do not even dare to think about this loss of time. And, even if urban milieus nowadays become more multilingual and multicultural they are mostly not deliberately used for encountering between languages and cultures, one reason being the time needed for preparing such regular meetings, with many incidents not foreseen at the planning. Hence, real interaktion with the others.

When pupils and adults as well meet a foreign language/a second language they may differ in their basic attitude towards a new language. Simply spoken, they are serialistic or holistic. The holistic learner finds it a natural approach to start with a newspaper, a television programme or comics in a related language. The serialistic learner prefers to start with textbooks and grammars.

At the immersion schools of the Ladins in Alto Adige in Northers Italy for the first grades at schhol, teachers give a list of 4-5 books for youngsters to be read and reported during one school year. As a consequence they read authentic texts in German without having yet

talked about case and flexion in that language. This is a way of supporting holistic behaviour. Is the holistic approach the natural one when acquiring another language or, is the holistic way in approaching the surrounding the efficient one for small babies? Do schools make holistically endowed pupils to behave serialistically?

### Learning how to acquire another language

In a dual track school in Finland at third grade the teacher of German decided to talk German only with the Swedish immersion class from the start on. She did it and the pupils followed intensively. They used their experiences of listening and concentrating in order to understand, and they did succeed. She could go on teaching German by using German. Because of the success she decided to start in the same way with the non-immersion parallel class. This class protested immediately. They did not even try to listen. They behave as some of my students who tell me that they do not speak French. When I go on with asking about their French course, they answer that they had French for only three years and, hence, they are totally ignorant of French.

As in Canada our immersion programme engages with success pupils who develop very high levels of understanding text as well as understanding oral speech and oral interaction. When those students reach the 7th to 9th grades at school they have practically functioning skills of the foreign language.

After 6 years at comprehensive school they encounter a system with mostly teachers who work with one or two subjects. Those teachers work with student's examination in their mind. The teacher of, say French, German etc. is shocked by these orally very skilled pupils and he realizes that their knowledge of grammar and its rules are not accurate. His teaching will therefore be concentrated on grammar even more than normally done. He has no time to make use of the fluency and interaction capacity of the pupils – and, the pupils who know that they have good interaction capacity are dismissed. This was not the way they wanted to study language, they were already able to use it.

I have to underline the fact that CLIL and immersion are different concepts. We also know a lot more about immersion, due to many projects in Canada since the 1960s. In immersion emphasis is on content; language is a tool. In CLIL emphasis is on language learning. Immersion may be defined as a pedagogic structuring principle with at least 50 % of the time the immersion language is in use.

### *Very partial ways of immersion*

However, the pedagogic principles can be used within (very) partial immersion as well. At one of my seminars for immersion teachers a teacher of English wanted to have as her theme a real immersion project in sort of a mini scale. She was a class teacher working as well as teacher of English at grade four of primary school. The theme and the goal should be defined in collaboration with the pupils. All in all, the teacher should give responsibility and activity to perform to the pupils as much as possible. The teacher should have a role of being an expert available when needed. Time reserved for the project was one month, containing 8 hours of English.

The fourth grad has 26 pupils. In English they are divided into two groups. One of the groups selected as their theme the space. The comet Hale Bop was a natural theme because it was

approaching our Earth in spring 1987, and those who read newspapers could not avoid realizing it. The pupils organized themselves as smaller groups who defined their tasks themselves. Only their imagination could define the border lines for their activities. All preparations of the pupils were done by using English. The material collected for the work partly came from the homes of the pupils, partly from the city library.

The goal of the teacher was to work within the 8 hours in English only, to use authentic material, not produced for the school, to arrange a rich input for the pupils, to arrange work tasks demanding linguistic interaction between the pupils; the most important thing: the students had to make the most important decisions themselves.

When half of the time had gone, i.e. 4 hours, there was a short discussion about the work done. And, it would have been possible to make some changes if needed. The pupils worked in pairs and the pairs defined their tasks in the beginning. The outcome were documents and oral presentations and discussions about black holes, one poster on our solar system, one science fiction drama, and a collection of information on Hale Bop. The engagement of the students also led to optional work outside school .

When the project work was about to end a planetarium visited the city, and it fitted perfectly as a final event.

At the end of the project the teacher asked her pupils about their reactions. It was clear for the pupils that they could go on by investigating Hale Bop and related phenomena. There were many who maintained that they had difficulties in understanding English in the beginning. And, there was one who all the time had problems with understanding. Most pupils used English during the project. They appreciated the independence they had while working. The teacher thought herself that she could have prepared herself better, she could have specified goals better and she should have made a written treaty for the participants. She said that she had imagined herself that she talked a lot in English but realized by the comments of her pupils that this was not quite true.

Immersion ways of working are easy to implement also in small scale projects, even if early total immersion is the most efficient way to start. There are textbooks for the Finnish school also in Swedish, all modern media function also in Swedish (and Sweden is close to us), in the foreign trade Swedish is a frequent language for us. But for schools: Swedish age mates are not far away and in the cities at the coast, Swedish cultural production is available. All these resources of course can be used for Swedish in its regular role as an obligatory language at school.

### *The variables of pedagogy*

When studying learner language very often or mostly the variables of the classroom are forgotten. The researcher does not mention anything about visits at school. He has his material collected by assistants who only made short visits for this restricted task. The variables of the classroom are difficult to handle, that is right, but what about the interpretation of the linguistic outcome?

As university professor I do not have any special relations with schools. Parents are much more important for school authority decisions. That is why immersion in Canada and in many European milieus has been started by demands of parents and parental organisations.

Because I gave the impetus to the parental activities leading to political decisions in favour of immersion, I was expected to support by research projects and teacher training. I had to do this together with my doctoral students who delivered a series of dissertations on immersion. I pushed them to sit in classrooms as long as their research lasted. Normally I proposed an ethnographic way of finding out what they should focus on in research.

In the classroom they made notes about what happened and they were sparring partners for the teachers. This role was important for the teachers who were glad to get feedback, or to have somebody present who was interested in her work. As a result the dissertations delivered usually contain observations concerning teachers' approach as well and some discussion about reasons and consequences. And together with invited immersion experts from other countries they participated at continuous education seminars for the teachers. The distance between my young linguists and the teachers was not such a gap as it could have been. The feedback from research came faster than the publication. My question is: How can researchers work with analyzing pupils' production without knowledge about what happened in the classroom?

There exists one important Canadian article on this theme: Joan Netten and William Spain, Student-teacher interaction patterns in the French immersion classroom: Implications for levels of achievement in French language proficiency in the Canadian Modern Language Review 45:3. (1989). It is the first study of the interaction between teachers and students: i. e. what behaviour gives which result!. It had been obvious through assessments in Newfoundland and Labrador that the pedagogical approach may have caused differences between groups of students. The variation between the pupils was to its tendency much bigger among immersion students than among non-immersion ones. This was an alarming result, especially taking into account that cognitive tests in the beginning showed that the immersion class students formed a rather homogenous group. This was the reason why the researchers expected to find differences in pedagogy.

Netten & Spain used a material of high and low achievers (3 + 3 per class) from 23 classes. With a distribution on the first three grades. They assume that the differences between the groups will mirror the differences between pedagogical measures.

At class C a fifth of the time was used for a very formal lectures. Formal drill exercises and administration/organisation occupied one third of the time, i.e. half of the time together was used for stereotype activities or for teacher talk while students were listening. Class B had less lectures and drills, a third of the time the teacher worked with single students.

In class A there was almost no formal teaching. The teacher used instead a question-answer-communication. Class A, a fourth of the time was used for independent work, a tenth of the time was in use for group work and the teacher assisted single groups.

This class A had a very natural dynamic and advanced interaction between the members. Messages to low achievers were frequent, two times more than to high achievers. To sum up: A gave to its members more possibilities to use language, this for high as well as low achievers. The relatively rich possibilities given to low achievers to communicate made it possible for them to develop their acquisition of knowledge and skills. The teachers were also asked about their priorities and about personal viewpoints.

The teacher of C gave discipline the highest priority, the teacher of B on the affective development, the teacher of A on the cognitive aspect; The teacher of A had a most advanced work with language. Understanding was supported by linguistic tools, understanding was checked, the teacher had time to help low-achievers.

Netten & Spain conclude that learning strategies should be investigated in order to see what is most efficient for single students.

Differences in classroom work lead to:

- all students do not have the same possibilities in the classroom,
- language acquisition is focused more in some, less in some classrooms
- some classrooms have a restricted milieu for linguistic interaction
- some students can develop their language use more than others
- especially the low achievers are losers, even if there is no necessity behind it,
- These students have a tendency to receive more negative response, thereby influencing their possibilities to reach higher levels of knowledge and skills.

I would like to stress this list of consequences of classroom pedagogy. Much more of the students can reach higher levels if they are given the possibility.

#### *Polyglots: Multilingual youngsters with Downs syndrome*

And last but not least shortly about a multilingual group in Northern Italy. In the province of Alto Adige/Südtirol, in the municipalities of Gröden and Gadertal there is a Raetoromanic variety spoken by the so called Ladins. Their schools used to be called immersion, even if they have characteristics of their own. The Ladin language has until our time mostly been regarded as a spoken language, so the schools have almost half of the time teaching in German, half of the time in Italian, and 1-2 h in Ladin. But the Ladin youngsters themselves outside school prefer to speak Ladin.

Youngsters with Downs syndrome are integrated into the Ladin classrooms. They have different assistants dependent on their capacity.

I have made a series of interviews with the youngsters in their homes together with their parents and one teacher. Antonello who worked within the Italian school authority spoke Italian, a Ladin teacher spoke Ladin and I spoke German with the persons we interviewed. Our agreement was to be consequent in the choice of language and each of us had to stick to the role. We were invited and at the coffee table discussed with the person with Downs and his parents. I have published five interviews.

When we talked with the youngsters they, all of them, followed us by immediately changing language according to our choices. They were eager to discuss school matters, skiing, horse riding etc. according to their interests. Their parents insisted that they were given the same access to foreign languages as their mates at school. The immersion was their possibility to learn a profession in an Alp region with tourists. Only down in the cities special education teachers proposed that parents would not accept their child to learn foreign languages. In the Alp valleys of the Ladins it was regarded a self-evident thing that these youngsters should be given all languages of the school.

*Many languages for everybody?*

The only problem is that the Downs children could not reach the language via grammar! Grammar is too abstract. They succeeded by using languages. They would not be able to play piano, but of course, to play improvisations. They are slim and sporty because they go to the same school as their mates. My way of testing them was efficient enough to show that they were able to talk and discuss in many languages. A sort of limit for their capacity is their Latin. As good as their mastering of Latin will also be the optimal result in other languages?