

Can Lyster's Model of Immersion Education Apply to EFL in Japan ?

Meredith Stephens

Canada is renowned for its successful experiment with immersion education, which began in 1965 in Montreal. An expert on the subject and former teacher of immersion education in Canada, Dr Roy Lyster, gave a presentation at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, in November 2005. Lyster currently works at McGill University, Montreal, as Associate Professor of Second Language Education. His first presentation was entitled *Introduction to Immersion Education*, and the second, *Effective Pedagogy for Continued Language Growth in Immersion*.

Introduction to Immersion Education

Lyster first outlined the history of immersion education in Canada ; it originated in response to native English-speaking parents' needs to help their children become bilingual in French, in a country in which both English and French are the official languages. Lyster divided the various starting points of immersion education into three broad categories : Early, Middle and Late. Early immersion begins at ages 5 or 6, Middle Immersion at ages 8 or 9 and Late Immersion at ages 11, 12, or 13. Immersion is clearly superior to traditional foreign-language instruction. In particular, there are benefits for comprehension, because this approaches that of the native speaker. However the areas that lag behind native speaker levels are grammatical accuracy, lexical variety and sociolinguistic appropriateness.

Lyster specified some of the limitations of immersion classrooms that help explain why some of these weaknesses persist. One example occurs when teachers recast a learner's incorrect utterance in the correct form. In immersion classrooms (or indeed foreign language classrooms) the teacher is primarily focused on content, and sometimes recasts an incorrect utterance without drawing attention to the mistake. Hitherto foreign language teachers using communicative methodology have been familiar with the notion of the *negotiation of meaning*, but Lyster considered the *negotiation of form* also to be critical. This can be achieved by the teacher feigning incomprehension until the learner produces the correct form, or by repeating the learner's mistake using a special intonation suggesting the error. Furthermore, Lyster suggested *renegotiation of form* as an alternative to recasts. This is achieved by prompting the student to retrieve the correct form rather than having it automatically provided. Lyster argued that renegotiation of form helps learners store the correct form in their long-term memory.

If the students are in control of the content, such as when they talk about themselves, it is clearly important for the teacher to give feedback about the form. However this may be more difficult to implement if the students are unfamiliar with the content, such as when dealing with difficult subject matter. Nevertheless, Lyster insisted that content teaching alone was insufficient. Students expected teachers to intervene, and a good immersion teacher performed a balancing act of the negotiation of both meaning and form. In conclusion, citing Genesee (1991) Lyster noted that research on immersion had implications for L2 instruction in other contexts. Firstly, instruction of language and content should be integrated. Secondly he stressed the importance of interaction, and thirdly, the importance of language planning.

Effective Pedagogy for Continued Language Growth in Immersion

Lyster discussed the limitations of language production in immersion education mentioned above, such as grammatical accuracy, lexical variety and sociolinguistic appropriateness. Lyster attributed these problems to the lack of salience for learners of the items that are not acquired. Teachers can address these problems either *reactively* or *proactively*. A reactive response entails the negotiation of form and meaning that occurs during communicative exchanges. A proactive approach emphasises the role of the instruction of both content and form. A focus on form is not equivalent to traditional grammar instruction ; the instruction of form continues to be in a communicative context. However a focus on form is superior to simple communicative activities because students are introduced to important features of the language that would not otherwise be salient. Lyster reviewed other studies in order to contrast the focus on meaning and form, and concluded that the best long term learning outcomes resulted from communicative activities that drew attention to form.

Lyster then introduced the notion of *Instructional Counterbalance* ; this suggests that a methodology is most effective when it runs counter to the predominant methodology used in a particular institutional context. Hence learners in form-focused classrooms benefit from a focus on meaning, and vice-versa. One way of implementing a focus on form into immersion classrooms is via *Cognitive Theory*. Cognitive theory explains how knowledge is transformed from *declarative* to *procedural knowledge*. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge of language rules, and procedural knowledge is the ability to access and apply that knowledge automatically. The progress from declarative to procedural knowledge is facilitated by practice and feedback.

Lyster outlined three ways in which cognitive theory can inform instruction :

Noticing activities, Awareness activities and Practice activities. Noticing activities are designed to draw attention to important features of native-speaker usage that tend to escape notice. Students' attention is drawn to problematic features, not those learnt incidentally. This may be achieved by producing the salient language points in bold type. Awareness activities, such as inductive rule discovery, require the students themselves to discover language rules by analysing language patterns. Controlled practice activities aim to push the students to overcome potential fossilised forms by heightening awareness through language exercises.

The weakness of communicative activities with an exclusive focus on meaning is that there is less opportunity for students to overcome fossilised language forms. Hence Lyster suggested designing communicative activities that require language forms to be produced in an obligatory context. If an erroneous form is produced, the teacher can indicate this with a recast in which the error appears with rising intonation or stress. Lyster concluded that learners would rise to the expectations of their teachers, and that students had considerable knowledge that required prodding from the teacher to be activated.

Application of Lyster's Methodological Insights to the Japanese Context

What is the local relevance of Lyster's insights? The following is a discussion of how Lyster's discussion of French immersion instruction in Canada could apply to EFL in Japan.

Negotiation of Form and Class Size

Lyster stressed the importance of intervention by the teacher in relation to the negotiation of form. The EFL classroom requires a high level of student-teacher interaction. This level of student-teacher interaction may not be necessary in other

subjects in the curriculum, in which a lecture style may be adequate. However the EFL classroom is highly interactive because of the considerable amount of individual feedback that is necessary in response to students' spoken language. The current class size in Japan of up to forty students may not be appropriate for the intensive amount of feedback that Lyster's approach demands. Negotiation of form may be difficult in a large class, because of the intense kind of attention that must be given to individuals.

Instructional Counterbalance

Lyster's notion of Instructional Counterbalance is certainly relevant to Japan. Japanese EFL instruction has traditionally focused on form (see Nakai, 2005 ; Takeda, 2002). EFL has often been viewed as an exam subject rather than as a communicative tool. Because of the intense pressure for students to enter the best university, teachers have found the most time-efficient method of English teaching to be grammar translation. Accordingly, the introduction of immersion methodology would certainly be a form of instructional counterbalance. This need not mean that there should be a focus on meaning at the expense of form. As Lyster has emphasized, accuracy of form is not automatically acquired in the immersion classroom and needs to be made explicit.

Grammatical accuracy is thus not acquired by osmosis in immersion instruction. The need for grammatical support has been evidenced at Katoh Gakuen, an English-language immersion school in Japan. Gillis-Furutaka, reports Bostwick's observation that Japanese immersion students require additional grammatical explanations in Japanese :

Interestingly, the grammatical accuracy of the immersion English learners is not very good and they have to be given specific instruction in areas of English structure that are difficult for

Japanese speakers to acquire and it is more efficient for this to be taught by Japanese teachers in Japanese. (2005, p. 9)

Accordingly, instructional counterbalance is an attempt to redress an imbalance rather than a replacement of one methodology with another. Lyster's model of recasting to elicit correct forms is ideal, but given time and personnel constraints perhaps supplementary grammatical instruction in the L1 can also be justified.

Cognitive Theory

Lyster described the contribution of Cognitive Theory to immersion instruction, with reference to declarative and procedural knowledge. Arguably, the grammar-translation approach in Japan has resulted in many students who have declarative knowledge but lack procedural knowledge ; they have an understanding of the rules but lack the ability to access that knowledge automatically. Many have attempted to explain the apparent disparity between written and oral skills of Japanese students ; For example, King (2005) attributes student silence to cultural norms related to the difference in power between teacher and student in Japanese society. However this disparity may also be evidence of declarative knowledge that has not progressed to the procedural stage. Native speaking EFL teachers sometimes underestimate Japanese students' proficiency because oral skills may not be readily forthcoming. Despite difficulties in oral communication many of these students are proficient readers because they have a good passive command of vocabulary. Both reading and writing allow the learner to control the pace of input and output. Hence declarative knowledge alone may be an adequate tool to process and produce written texts.

However oral communication permits much less control over the pace of communication and thus requires procedural knowledge. Listening and speaking

skills require automatic processing. The learner may sometimes control input with various communication strategies such as requests for repetition and clarification, but this may not always be possible in a group setting or when under pressure. Long pauses when speaking can frustrate smooth interaction ; the learner is under pressure to communicate quickly and smoothly. These difficulties may arise from the underdevelopment of procedural knowledge.

Language acquisition is essentially the acquisition of a skill. The critical issue for students is how to use their knowledge in spontaneous production. Hence the immersion teacher must provide ample opportunity for practice and feedback until production becomes automatic.

Grammatical Accuracy, Lexical Variety and Sociolinguistic Appropriateness

According to Lyster the three areas that immersion students lag behind native speakers are grammatical accuracy, lexical variety and sociolinguistic appropriateness. These factors must also be considered in the light of English as an International Language. Learners should not be expected to emulate the native speaker. The former two factors of grammatical accuracy and lexical variety are more important for the Japanese EFL learner than sociolinguistic appropriateness. Grammatical accuracy and lexical variety could be considered to benefit learners in an international setting, since they are simply language tools than enhance communication. Sociolinguistic appropriateness however is less important, because this varies in the locales where English is spoken. If learners are aiming to use English in countries where English is spoken as a native language, sociolinguistic appropriateness should be considered, but if learners are aiming to communicate with speakers of English as an International Language in the global context, this becomes an issue of learner choice.

Language Distance

The comparison of language distance between English and Japanese, and English and cognate languages has been reviewed previously (see Stephens & Blight, 2005), but I will include some additional views here. There is indeed variability in the implementation of immersion programs according to the L1 and L2, and these differences have implications for the present discussion. Studies of immersion programs in languages other than French language for English speakers must also be considered. For example, Aronin and Toubkin acknowledge in their study of immersion education in both Hebrew and English as target languages, “many aspects of organising an immersion programme vary depending on the target language” (2002, p. 271).

Students of immersion English from Russian language backgrounds, more linguistically distant from English than French, acknowledge the usefulness of language cognates in a science program :

One boy acknowledges the cross-linguistic transfer of scientific terms, ‘For example, words like ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘homeostasis’ are the same as in Russian and that helps you know what it is in English. (Lemberger & Vinogradova, 2002, p. 65)

Lemberger and Vinogradova attribute this to the transfer of common Greek and Latin roots of scientific terminology in English and Russian.

Read (1996) describes the difficulties of implementing a Japanese-language immersion program at university level in Australia. Japanese is “regarded as ‘difficult’ for Anglophones. It is much easier to implement immersion programs in a cognate language” (Read, 1996, p. 477). Anglophones who have studied newspapers in Japanese language classes with Chinese classmates would readily attest to

the influence of language distance. If language distance is acknowledged as a predictor of difficulty, both Anglophones studying Japanese, and Japanese studying English can expect a multitude of challenges.

English and Japanese differ both lexically and grammatically, and a thus a knowledge of Japanese cannot foster the acquisition of English in the same way that a knowledge of English can foster the acquisition of French. Despite the common pitfalls known as *faux amis* ('false friends'-referring to words which appear similar on the surface but which have different meanings) there are nevertheless many lexical similarities between French and English. *Faux amis* could be considered to be marked ; they are salient because of their divergence in meaning, whereas most lexical cognates are semantically equivalent. Many of the grammatical features, such as verb tenses, are also similar, particularly when contrasted with the differences between English and Japanese verbs.

However, language distance does not necessarily imply difficulty in implementing immersion instruction. In the case of a delayed partial immersion English program in Mathematics in Turkey for middle school students, there was no significant difference whether the tests were administered in Turkish or English (Erktin & Akyel, 2005). This was despite the language distance between English and Turkish.

Both French and English use the Latin alphabet ; this facilitates the acquisition of literacy enormously. Clearly, Japanese and English writing systems differ in direction, formation, complexity, and number, and thus direct transfer is not possible. The acquisition of Japanese literacy takes longer than the acquisition of literacy in languages written in the Latin alphabet, and thus Japanese schools may not be able to devote the amount of time to immersion education that would be possible between two languages that were written in the same script. The importance of literacy is confirmed by Lotherington in her study of Chinese and

Vietnamese content-based programs in Australia :

Bilingual education is utterly dependent on the acquisition of biliteracy. Acquiring a threshold level of the target language must be factored in to the broader educational scheme. In this case, that signalled a need for prerequisite language study and coordinated across-the-curriculum language teaching. (2001, p. 105)

Language Status

There are additional reasons why French immersion education in Canada may be easier to implement than English immersion in Japan. English does not enjoy the same status in Japan as French does in Canada. In Canada, French and English are recognised as official languages. However, according to a French Canadian informant, “The motivation in immersion programs in Canada is essentially economic. Most Anglophones in Anglophone communities want to acquire a certain level of French to get the ‘bilingual bonus’ added to their salary and access to jobs”. Thus one factor in favour of English immersion for Japanese speakers is that English and Japanese do not suffer the kind of traditional rivalry that English and French have. Proficient English speakers may be admired in Japan, but English is not perceived as a possible threat to Japanese in everyday life. According to the French-Canadian informant, “English is perceived as a threat in Quebec and French as a nuisance in English Canada.”

Immersion or Content-Based Instruction ?

Clyne et al. (1995) distinguish between the Canadian immersion programs that have a high proportion of the curriculum taught in French, and content-based instruction, in which the time devoted to instruction in the L2 is more limited. Due

to the importance placed on the national language in Japan, and the sheer number of characters to be mastered, it is likely that content-based instruction, rather than immersion, would be suitable. However, if the level of input is critical, particularly in dissimilar languages, content-based instruction may not produce the same spectacular results as immersion instruction in Canada.

Immersion instruction is essentially an optional subject in the curriculum. Students can alternatively choose to enrol in the traditional foreign language class at the same school. Furthermore students have the choice of abandoning the immersion class and joining the traditional foreign language class. Perhaps Japanese schools could offer a traditional EFL class for all students, and include an option of content-based instruction in one or two other subjects.

Conclusions

Lyster's model of immersion instruction could certainly be transplanted to foreign language classrooms in Japan, with modifications. Since the results of immersion instruction are superior to traditional foreign language instruction, a change to this approach would certainly be justified. Considerable effort is invested in EFL instruction in Japan because it is an important subject for matriculation. In order for this effort to be carried out with maximum efficiency and optimal results, immersion or at least content-based instruction would be advantageous.

The greater language distance between Japanese and English from French and English may mean that the results may differ from the Canadian model. There is less availability of positive transfer between unrelated languages, so immersion instruction may be more time-consuming and painstaking. As in the case of Katoh Gakuen, there may still be a place for grammatical instruction of salient points in Japanese by Japanese speakers. There should not be a complete abandonment of

traditional methods, but rather the best should be chosen from each methodology.

The positive aspect of immersion education outlined by Lyster that would be welcomed in the Japanese context is the fact that immersion education leads to almost native-like comprehension skills. Clearly this is a superior outcome to that which could be achieved using current methods. Most Japanese educators may not wish to make the wholehearted commitment to immersion education that Canada has embraced, but if at least content-based instruction could be implemented, Japanese students could benefit from improved comprehension skills. Furthermore, if we accept the premise that comprehension skills form the basis of productive skills, we could speculate that Japanese students could enjoy benefits in all four skills.

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