



An online forum and service for parents, educators and language professionals

The role of Irish immersion education in the development of multilingualism

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Ucom: Who are we?

We are a group of linguists from the School of Communication and IRiSS (Institute for Research in Social Science) at the University of Ulster with a central interest in the study of multilingualism.



UCoM and its services:

UCoM is a network established to provide information and support to parents, educators and speech and language therapists on issues and questions related to multilingualism.



Why we founded UCom

- Parents raising or thinking of raising bilingual children were anxious about the impact on children's linguistic and cognitive development
- This anxiety was often compounded by professionals who often had a less than positive view of bilingualism, or did not know much about it



 We were conscious that the linguistic research on bilingualism, which is overwhelmingly positive, was not being made available outside academia



Language survival

 We knew that the survival of many minority languages was threatened, and that parents who saw bilingualism as a disadvantage, or thought children could not be equally good at 2 languages, often decided only to speak the majority language to their children: this could (and has) lead to the disappearance of languages within a generation



Why promote bilingualism?

- Advantages in learning 'third' languages
- Metalinguistic awareness
- Positive effects eg on attention switching
- Scarcely any disadvantages have been found

The immersion advantage

- Immersion education produces 'sequential bilinguals'
- It is across the board overwhelmingly more successful than traditional secondary classroom second language teaching, which produces some very successful learners but a widespread mediocre level of attainment – the original motivation for French immersion in Canada

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 It offers pupils from monolingual homes the opportunity to benefit from the cognitive and instrumental advantages of bilingualism



Some advantages of immersion

 Although learners are not as willing to engage with the target language outside the classroom as we might like, they are nevertheless much more willing users of the language in general than secondary classroom L2 learners, who typically show much more concern not to be seen to make errors



Native-like attainment

 Ideally it would be hoped that attainment in immersion education would be native speaker-like



Attainment in Immersion

- By age 11, children perform at a native-like level in oral and written comprehension
- They are not quite native-like in speaking and writing

Some problems that are real but (mostly) solvable

 In second language acquisition, learners have particular difficulties with acquiring and consistently using features that are not used in their first language: this is called the Failed Functional Features hypothesis



An example

 Chinese learners of English even at a very high level show problems with using tenses, because there is no tense in Chinese

 On the other hand, French learners of English do not have problems with tense, because tense is present in their L1, even though the tense system is very different

And in Irish

- English learners of Irish do not have great problems with the tense system
- But they do have problems with the copula, since Irish distinguishes two forms of 'be' while English does not
- It is not just a question of 'transfer' because many aspects of English do not transfer into learner Irish (Subject-verb-object order for

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A typical fossilizing error with the Is/ Tá distinction

*Tá sé múinteoir

This is an error that 'fossilizes' and continues to secondary level and beyond.

When 'correcting children, teachers tend to use the structure with 'ina' rather than use Is



 The copula is considered 'difficult' and seems to be avoided at nursery level – but it may be important to be exposed to the is/ta distinction early



Reversing Fossilization

 Fossilization of a few structures is common in Immersion settings. For example in French immersion in Canada, the avoir/etre distinction in perfects is not acquired, and avoir is used for all perfects. This is a distinction not present in the L1 English



- Il est monté
 He is climbed
- Il a parlé
 He has spoken

- Immersion learners:
- Il a monté

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BUT

 The use of 'have' for perfects in Frenchspeaking Canada is taking over from the use of 'be', verb by verb

 So learners are making a change also found in native speakers



Reversing fossilization

 Reversal seems to need explicit instruction or 'focus on form'



It's not that children lack input

- We found that teachers use *Is* in about 1 sentence in 20.
- The teachers we studied never made mistakes in the use of the copula.
- It takes 'focus on form' input, games involving the use of the problematic form, and indeed explicit grammar teaching.

When immersion seems incomplete but is not

- 'Textbook' grammars may not represent a fully possible language
- Language change is ongoing and universal
- Some of the 'errors' in learners' grammars are also found in early L1 learners —they are natural errors which will pass

 Some of the 'errors' are found in the usage of L1 speakers in Gaeltacht areas; they may not be grammar book Irish, but they are the Irish of native speakers



Concern about English influence is largely unwarranted

 Beyond word borrowing, a long period of contact with English and bilingualism with English has had little influence on core aspects of Irish such as Verb-initial order



Lexical borrowing

- Common in bilingual communities
- Also serves to permit communication where learners do not know the word in the target languages

(about Santa Claus slipping off a roof)

Slide sé ar na tiles

Revived Irish

- Cannot be expected to be identical to L1 Irish.
 And particularly not to grammar book Irish
- Nevertheless is very similar to it, and shows little evidence of 'corruption' from English

What about children with language problems or learning difficulties?

 Parents, often with the advice of professionals, tend to think that learning more than one language will compound the problem



On the contrary....

- Studies generally find that children growing up with 2 languages are at least no more seriously affected than monolinguals;
- eg children with Specific Language
 Impairment (Paradis 2010, Paradis et al 2003)

- or Down's Syndrome (Bird et al 2005):
- Perform at least as well' as monolingual peers

To summarize:

- Being bilingual has many cognitive and instrumental advantages for the learner
- Having the language actively used by many speakers (rather than just by a few gifted second language learners) is a great advantage
- Classroom second language learning at secondary school is more often a failure than a success, while immersion education is across the board successful
- Not producing fully native-like speakers should not be of overwhelming concern supporting

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