Having the 'Immersion Talk' with Young Language Learners

by Valerie Magna Borey

Whether you teach in an all-day language immersion school, a dual-immersion program, or a language club that adopts immersion methodology as an approach to teaching language, one solid step towards creating a positive community of language learning in your classroom is having a conversation with your students up-front about what it means to participate in immersion-style learning contexts. The "immersion talk" is a 20-minute conversation you can have as a class on that first day after a short period of exposure to the environment, in the students' native language (NL), that encourages both new and returning students to think about what strategies they can use to be successful in an immersion environment. It is a talk that can help you to frame expectations about learning through immersion, in child-friendly language, and allow you to welcome students in with the strategies they need for becoming productive members of the learning community in your classroom.

This article expands upon teacher guidelines for an "immersion talk" originally developed by B. Hegstad (2012), entitled, "What is Immersion, and How Can I Be Successful in That Environment?" The document is a strategy-based outline used in Concordia Language Villages' Language Discovery Programs, with conversation starters for orienting pre-school and elementary-aged students to the language immersion environment. As a teacher and now as Assistant Dean of Language Discovery Programs, I have seen the "immersion talk" used to great benefit in well over a hundred sessions of day camp, pre-school, and after-school programs, with children aged 3-12 years old, to introduce them to the concept of immersion and help teachers engage in age-appropriate discussions of how to learn in an immersion environment.

Given the usefulness of these guidelines to Language Discovery teachers, it seems to follow that its relevance extends beyond the scope of our own programs at Concordia Language Villages. I have thus expanded points of the original document to share with the larger language community in hopes that the suggestions contained herein will encourage teachers to help their learners successfully engage with immersion and encourage young language learners in programs across the country to dig in and keep going.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE THE "IMMERSION TALK"

Students of all ages can feel a great deal of anxiety when experiencing immersion for the first time. They may not know what is expected of them or worry about appearing foolish in front of their peers. Some are distressed by that disorienting feeling of not knowing what is going on. A good "immersion talk" will help put students at ease and give them concrete tools to use as they embark upon their new adventure. Open discussion about expectations and learning strategies can help to increase students' level of motivation and engagement, reduce some of the disruptive behaviors that may emerge in immersion contexts, and foster a sense of accomplishment in being able to take charge of the learning experience.

Motivation in foreign language learning is a complex phenomenon, involving multiple dimensions that relate to factors as diverse as the desire to do well in academic contexts, concepts of identity (as a learner or as a member of a specific culture), to ideals of communication with others in a classroom context, or in the community beyond (Dörnyei, 2009). The motivation of individual learners may additionally be affected by their perception of whether or not they will be successful in this enterprise and the extent to which they feel comfortable in the environment and in control of their own learning process (Dörnyei, 2009).

Willingness to engage and communicate in the target language (TL) is closely related to the motivational drive. Students make complex decisions about participation by weighing questions about themselves, their conversational partners, and their environment. Diary entries by immersion students in a study of willingness to communicate in a middle school French immersion program (Macintyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011), for example, included concerns about excessive error correction, a desire to be in charge of deciding when to communicate in the TL, not wanting to appear stupid or like a "teacher's pet," or feeling put upon to show off in artificial situations for family friends. Students were most likely to choose to communicate in the language when participation felt authentic and useful, when language could be used to establish a social in-group, and when error correction was minimized in favor of a more communicative approach (Macintyre et al., 2011).

While we can't always know, especially on that first day of class, what motivates (or demotivates) individual learners, we can help to swing the controls in their direction by giving students a chance to think about strategies they may already be using in those first few minutes of immersion. By listening to what other students have to say, our learners may pick up some new strategies and feel, at least, like they are not alone in the process. Talking about those "clues" or "tricks" of communicating successfully within an immersion environment will not only redirect the focus from an "I don't understand anything" to an "I can understand some things" mindset, it will also bring students together into a community that approaches learning in the same way, with a common foundation for how to proceed together. Along these same lines, being explicit about the value of making mistakes and being silly will help to alleviate some of those concerns about being wrong or "looking stupid." All language learners can look forward to making mistakes. It is something we can stake our common identity on.

Using the "immersion talk" to promote motivation and engagement in our learning community should also be considered a component of positive classroom management. In "Classroom Management in Foreign Language Education: An Exploratory Review," Diego Fernando Macias (2018) discusses the need for additional work pertaining to behavior management in world language classrooms, particularly in the areas of research and teacher preparation programs. According to Macias, immersion classrooms confront unique challenges in that, unlike other subjects, they are taught primarily in a language that the students do not fully understand and require pedagogical methodologies that emphasize group work, gesture, movement, and maximizing student interaction, at varying levels of proficiency. Immersion teachers, in a frantic attempt to manage the complexity, often find themselves having to resort to unplanned use of the NL of their students, as the only way they can get their students to listen to and understand them (Macias, 2018, pp. 158-160).

Our proposition is that it is better to have purposeful, carefully isolated "islands of native language," in which strategies for using the TL are discussed, rather than a TL lesson peppered through with random attempts to grab attention and maintain order in the NL. Off-task behaviors that arise from not understanding the directions, not feeling connected to the group, or relating to anxieties about "appearing stupid if I try," can be addressed by revisiting the common foundations set up in that initial "immersion talk." Bringing up questions like, "What strategies are we using? Is it okay when we make mistakes?" can help to re-set some of the group norms and help learners co-construct their own mental model of a successful language learner. The power of the "immersion talk" lies in its ability to involve students as active learners and experimenters who are all in this experience together.

Finally, evidence from Chamot and El-Dinary's (1999) work on the use of children's learning strategies in immersion classrooms suggests that coaching children on strategies at their disposal may yield positive results, giving children greater flexibility and helping them avoid becoming entrenched in irrelevant detail, as the researchers found happening with many students who relied on less-effective strategies. Using think-alouds to record and evaluate the various types of strategies used by third- and fourth-graders in language immersion, the authors concluded that "across age levels, good learners seem

to be adept at monitoring and adapting strategies....[Effective young language learners] reported a variety of strategies that they tried for a particular task, suggesting they recognized the need for flexibility in their use of strategies to accomplish language learning tasks." (Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999, p. 332). We suggest that coaching students to explore the range of options available to them may help to foster greater self-reliance in the learning process and give them a greater autonomy and purpose in their own language journeys.

FACILITATING THE "IMMERSION TALK"

The first day of class, set aside about 20 minutes to gather your learners together to discuss what immersion is and how they can best navigate through it. Instead of approaching it as a lecture ("This is what immersion is, and let me tell you how to do it."), encourage students to offer their own suggestions and theories. This will help to ensure that the language matches up with their level of understanding. Below are some steps you can take in your classroom, along with practical tips and examples of how to discuss immersion in child-friendly language.

1. Before having "the talk," let language learners experience immersion for 20-40 minutes.

Play a simple name game as a group or sing songs together incorporating movement. Make it fun and encourage group participation so that you do not put individual children on the spot. This will allow students to experience the process of immersion in a non-threatening way before discussing it.

- Example: Sing "Heads, shoulders, knees, and toes" in the TL, starting slowly, going progressively faster each time you sing. Challenge the group to see how fast they can sing the song.

2. Signal that you are transitioning to the students' native language (NL).

Mark your transition to the "island of native language (NL)" by turning off the lights or making a funny sound or movement to grab attention. Establishing an "island of NL" will help you, as a teacher, to be conscientious about when you are using the NL and also help children to manage expectations about how much of the NL will be used.

3. Give young language learners credit for what they have already accomplished, and ask them how they did it.

Start the talk out by recapping what you have already done. Invite children to really think about what strategies they used to understand what was going on, and let them put these thoughts into their own words.

- Example: "So far, we made name tags, played a game, and sang two songs! Do all of you already speak [the TL] every day, all the time, with no problems understanding any of the language? No? Well, then, how did you know what to do? How did you know that you were supposed to write your name? How did you know that I wanted you to come stand in a circle?"

4. Use leading questions to guide children toward discovery of strategies.

Using specific examples from the activities just completed, guide children towards discovering what strategies they used, by asking, "How did you know that you were

supposed to _____?" Listen for what strategies students name and validate these by rephrasing in simple language. Students' responses might include:

- (Context cues) "You were holding a marker and a nametag and pretended to write"
- (Cognates) "You said a bunch of words I didn't understand, and then 'pizza.'"
- (Copying others) "I didn't know what you were saying, but everyone else stood up, so I did too."
- (Asking a friend) "I asked Kaitlyn what we were supposed to be doing."
- (Faking it) "I had no idea. I just guessed and tried."
- (Previous knowledge) "I wasn't sure, but in other classes, teachers usually want us to sit cross-legged."

5. Let children know that it is OK if they do not understand everything and give them a lifeline.

Immersion programs can be very anxiety-provoking for children who think that they are expected to understand everything. Let them know that you will try hard to be understood and that you want them to try hard to understand, but it is totally OK if they do not understand 100% of what you are saying 100% of the time.

- Tip: Insert a little levity and ask, "Do you all know how to do the 'I-don't-understand-face?'" Contort your face, and show students how to do it. Say, "If I see you using that face, I will know you do not understand and will try harder so that you can figure it out."
- Tip: Use this point to discuss what your expectations are regarding use of students' NL. We often find, for example, that children become anxious about questions like, "What if I have to go to the bathroom, and I can't remember how to say it?"

6. Encourage participation.

Let young language learners know that the more they pay attention and participate, the more fun they will have.

- Example: "How many of you would prefer to have fun and learn a lot in this class? Do you know that I can plan lots of fun and interesting things for us to do, but that is really only half of the fun? Where does the other half come from? That is right – you! It is not really that much fun if I just sit here with my own plans by myself. The other half is what you all bring – the more you jump in and try new things, play games together, sing songs, or work on projects, and help one another out, the more fun we will all have AND the more we will all learn together! It is OK if we make mistakes or look silly or whatever – the most important thing is that we are having fun together and learning a lot this year!" *(Acknowledgment for this portion of the talk must be given to Tove Irene Dahl, Dean of Skogfjorden, the Norwegian Language Village at Concordia Language Villages, who uses similar language on the first day of the session to encourage campers to jump in and participate.)*

7. Name it – this is called "immersion."

Once you have talked about the various strategies, make a point of naming immersion explicitly as a language learning approach. Some children will have heard the term before, other not.

- Example: "Pretend we are getting ready to go swimming, but instead of water, we're going to be swimming in language. Some people like to dip their toes in first. We are going to start wading out there until it is just deep enough for us to try swimming. In the beginning, while we are getting used to things, we might stick a little closer to shore, where the language feels safe, but the more everyone starts to feel comfortable with it, the further out we can all go, and that is where the adventures start! This is a way to learn language that is called 'immersion,' because we are immersed in, or surrounded by, language."

8. Ask children if they have any questions.

Give children an opportunity to chime in about their concerns. You can do this on the spot, but you can also offer to come back to it on another day, as a check-in to see if they have thought of any additional questions to ask you.

- Example: "I am so impressed with how hard you all try to understand everything! I see you paying attention and watching my gestures, making good guesses, and asking questions if you need help. You look like you are feeling pretty comfortable with immersion, but I wanted to ask you: 'How is it going? What have you noticed about understanding and speaking another language? What is difficult? What has been easy so far?'"

As issues or questions pop up throughout the year, you can always return to this conversation and use some of these same questions to address anything from peer relationships ("How do we depend upon other people to help us learn language?") to enthusiasm ("What part of language learning is most fun for us?") to classroom challenges ("When is it most challenging for us to do activities in the language? What strategies can we come up with?"). Keeping students involved in personal observation and discussion of what works in an immersion environment will allow you to share that responsibility for maintaining the environment with them over the long term and hopefully give them skills to succeed when they pass out of your classroom and into someone else's.

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