

Student Language Use Tells an Interesting Story

The ACIE Newsletter, February 2002, Vol. 5, No. 2

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Thirty years of research in Canada and the U.S. has shown that with time the English language and academic achievement of immersion students consistently equals or surpasses the achievement of same age, non-immersion peers (Cummins, 2000; Genesee, 1987). However, learners' development of native-like levels of second language proficiency remains a concern. Research finds that English-speaking immersion students' oral language proficiency lacks grammatical accuracy, becomes increasingly anglicized over time and is less complex when compared with the language native speakers of the second language produce. Teachers express concern about student use of English and the challenge of facilitating language growth, particularly as students progress beyond grades three and four.

Classroom observation research has found that subject matter-oriented immersion classrooms provide limited opportunities for students to engage in extended language use, expose students to a restricted range of language forms and academic functions, and lack a well-integrated focus on language (Allen, Swain, Harley, and Cummins, 1990). In response to these findings several studies were carried out to assess the impact of curriculum units designed to draw attention to less frequently addressed language forms within the context of content-based, collaborative learning activities (Day and Shapson, 1991; Harley, 1989; Harley, 1993; Lyster, 1994). A discussion of this research is beyond the scope of this article, however, results from this research support the value of language-oriented pedagogical modifications.

While these quasi-experimental studies are interesting and informative, they do not provide us with an understanding of the nature of student language production as it naturally occurs in an immersion classroom. To address this question, Tarone and Swain (1995) called for systematic, classroom-based research studies of immersion students' actual language practices in immersion contexts. This research project, completed as a dissertation at the University of Minnesota (Fortune, 2001), joins others in responding to this call (Broner, 2000; Carrigo, 2000; Gayman, 2000). In addition to documenting immersion student language use and interactional patterns, this study systematically elicits participant understandings of classroom language behaviors. In sum, this research seeks to describe how and understand why immersion students use their languages the way they do.

Two study participants and their classmates collaborate on a science project.

Research Design and Methodology

Using interpretive case study methodology this 8-month project explored the nature of students' oral language use and interactional patterns in one fifth grade Spanish immersion setting during the 1999-2000 academic year. Interpretive case study is one methodology used in research to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon within a particular context as well as its meaning for those involved. The case or bounded unit of study for this investigation is a process-based phenomenon fifth grade immersion students' oral language use and interactional behaviors in the classroom.

Study participants include a native Spanish-speaking classroom teacher, four fifth grade Spanish immersion learners in a U.S. classroom, two native English speakers (one male, one female), a native Spanish speaker (female), and one from a bilingual culture (male). The students were selected to reflect the more linguistically and culturally diverse student population found in this urban program. Specifically, this study explores how contextual and interpersonal factors influence student language use and interactional behaviors. Features of language use, such as language choice, as well as amount, focus and communicative function of language produced, were analyzed in relation to contextual factors (expected language, activity type, and participant structure) and interpersonal factors (interlocutor role, interlocutor relationship, and the linguistic and cultural background of interlocutor).

Triangulation, the use of multiple voices and perspectives to explore the same phenomenon under study, strengthens the findings of interpretive research. Data for this study are multi-dimensionally triangulated. First, there are three distinct sources of data used in this study: (1) classroom interaction and language use as interpreted and categorized by the researcher, (2) the retrospection and reflections of four focal students, and (3) the reflections of their fifth grade classroom teacher. Secondly, there is purposeful use of several data collection and analysis techniques. These techniques include the use of: (1) home language use and family background questionnaires, (2) various proficiency assessments measuring focal student language skills in English and Spanish, (3) various standardized achievement measures to assess the academic progress of focal students, (4) real-time coding of select features of focal student language use (e.g. language choice, amount produced, etc.) supplemented by extensive field notes during 55.4 hours of non-participant classroom observations, (5) audiotapes of language produced by focal students, (6) videotapes of focal students within a classroom setting for each of 38 sessions, (7) twelve audiotaped data-prompted interviews eliciting student retrospection on language use, (8) student reflections based on two index card activities designed to elicit understanding of immersion student oral language and interactional behaviors, and (9) two audiotaped data-prompted teacher interviews about students' language use.

Research Findings

This study found that these four fifth graders use English frequently (90% of the time observed) and they use more English than Spanish even during "Spanish time," when students understand that they are supposed to be using Spanish. For example, during Spanish time, students use English 45%, Spanish 33%, Mixed Language 11%, and No Language 11% of the time. This finding corroborates similar observations in most other studies of upper elementary and middle school Spanish immersion students (Carranza, 1995; Carrigo, 2000; Heitzman, 1993; McCollum, 1999; Parker, Heitzman, Fjerstad, Babbs and Cohen, 1994). Though students are provided with multiple opportunities to use language in the classroom, the larger challenge of maintaining student use of the immersion language persists.

While the task of promoting the continuous use of the immersion language is daunting, the data also reveal relationships between focal student use of Spanish and the nature of learning experiences in the classroom. That is to say, certain activity types and participant structures were found to positively influence focal student use of the immersion language. Student-led oral presentations, creative writing tasks, project-based math activities, and structured group work served to elicit greater amounts of Spanish that was sustained (more than one verb clause), that focused on some aspect of the language itself, and that was academic in style. These language features are theorized to be necessary for language and academic development. Broner (2000) also reported that creative writing tasks among peers promote more sustained student use of the immersion language.

Some immersion teachers have stated a tendency to use whole class, teacher-led instruction as a means of keeping the students in the immersion language. However, data from this study indicate that focal student interaction among peers produces more sustained and more language-focused amounts of language when compared to whole class interaction with teachers or teaching assistants.

Language use data from this study also indicate an interactional context oriented towards developing the Spanish language. As an example, student interaction in Spanish displayed a greater language-related focus (16-26%) than interaction in English (6%). In addition, focal students produced more academically-oriented language in Spanish (42-45%) when compared to English (22%). In other words, these four immersion students use Spanish more for academic purposes and English more for social communication suggesting an interactional environment that may offer more support for academic and language development in Spanish than English. Given the linguistic and cultural diversity present in this classroom, this finding begs further consideration.

A more unexpected finding in the study is that while there is evidence that interaction with the native Spanish-speaking student increases a native English-speaking student's use of Spanish, there is also evidence that the native Spanish-speaking student in this study was reserving her use of Spanish for other native Spanish speakers in the classroom. While one might predict that the most proficient speaker of Spanish would be likely to use more Spanish overall, this was not the case. Moreover, the native Spanish speaker in this study was exposed to less language-focused and academically-oriented English. Given the large disparity in academic achievement between the native Spanish speaker and the native English speakers in this study, this interactional discourse may not be appropriately addressing the linguistic and academic needs of this language minority student.

Implications for teaching and future research

This study suggests that immersion students are influenced to use the immersion language when teachers design classroom experiences that involve writing, in particular collaborative writing that calls forth student creativity. Student-led oral presentations of content-related learning and project-based math activities also elicit increased use of the immersion language that is more often sustained, language focused, and rich in academic functions. Furthermore, if teachers thoughtfully plan activities that focus on a particular aspect of language, such as the use of the subjunctive to express concession, within meaningful content-related curriculum, students are influenced to increase their use of the immersion language. In addition to incorporating such activities, teachers will want to remember that for these focal students structured peer interaction elicited more use of the immersion language than teacher-led, whole class instruction. While there is value in using a variety of participant structures for various purposes throughout the school day, structured group work positively supports student language use. This information is useful to immersion educators who daily strive to promote continuous language and academic development through content-based instruction.

At the same time, student findings about the amount of English spoken among peers, regardless of immersion language proficiency or cultural background, challenge immersion educators to question certain assumptions. For example, immersion student use of language may have less to do with proficiency levels than with a wide range of non-language factors. As identified by the participants in this study, these factors include, but are not limited to, the linguistic and cultural background of the interlocutor, perceptions about interaction etiquette in an immersion classroom, and a need to maintain a sense of personal comfort, connect socially with peers, and express the authentic self.

Finally, data from this study reveal that these immersion students are exposed to more academic language in Spanish and more social language in English. This is an important area for further research particularly in programs with a linguistically and culturally diverse population. Immersion programs that bring together language majority and language minority students in one program may need to adapt curricular and instructional practices to ensure that the linguistic and academic needs of all students are being addressed.

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