

Langues en contexte et en contact

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PRODUCTION, MOTIVATION AND IMMERSION EDUCATION : SOME RECENT SWISS DATA

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Introduction

In this paper, I will be looking at some recent data collected in Switzerland in connection with an ongoing programme funded by the *Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique*, which coordinates a variety of parallel research projects under the general heading of *Diversité des langues et compétences linguistiques en Suisse*. The present study is derived from a project which focuses on the complex network of relationships which obtain between the competence in the target language and the competence in the subject matter in the context of immersion education (project entitled *Construction intégrée des savoirs linguistiques et disciplinaires dans l'enseignement bilingue au secondaire et au tertiaire*)¹. In the remainder of this paper, the terms *immersion education* and *bilingual education* are used in a general sense which ranges over a variety of pedagogical goals and practices as discussed in the overview provided in Gajo (1999).

One of the many questions which have been at the centre of the investigation mentioned above is that of the interferences and interactions which take place in the learning process between the acquisition of knowledge in the target language and subject-matter related knowledge. In what follows, I will pay closer attention to language competence and discuss some key aspects which - it is claimed - govern written and spoken production in the context of English bilingual education.

One of the recurrent arguments put forward about immersion education is linked to the apparent imbalance between its impact on the passive competence of the students and their active competence. Whereas the former has often been shown to benefit from a bilingual educational environment, the latter is not so demonstrably affected by this educational framework. Genesee (2004 : 552) writes :

[...] many researchers have reported that immersion students' comprehension skills (in reading and listening) seem to be more advanced than their production skills (in speaking and writing).

For this reason, I propose to review some interesting, recent data in connection with the production, both spoken and written, of students who attend an English immersion programme. After a first quantitative approach of the data, I will briefly discuss a possible theoretical framework within which we could account for the effect triggered by a particular type of didactic activity - namely role-play - which has been observed to motivate the spoken production of students significantly.

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Data

The data used in this analysis comes from two different sources. The quantitative data discussed in the first part has been collected by means of a questionnaire and an associated language test which were both devised in the context of an advanced seminar on fieldwork methodologies in 2006². The sociolinguistic questionnaire gathered information on the subject's school environment (grade, curriculum, specialisations), and on classic socio-economic parameters (age, gender, occupation of parents, neighbourhood). A third part in the questionnaire taps into the linguistic specificities of the subject's background (language(s) spoken at home, time of exposure to the target language, expected future use of the target language, time spent in countries where teaching language is the dominant language). Finally, a battery of various language tests selectively assessing the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) was proposed. These tests were specifically designed to evaluate the level of interference and transfers between the two languages (English and French).

The population under scrutiny consists of 81 students at the upper-secondary school level (high-school) in two urban institutions in the cantons of Geneva and Neuchâtel. The study focuses on students who are following a bilingual programme (CLIL) with English as the target language (second year on the immersion programme; $n=47$); a control group has also been set up, which consists of students who are on a traditional programme, with English as a normal subject-matter, and in which the medium of instruction is French (non-immersion; $n=34$).

The qualitative data discussed in the second part of this paper is taken from a series of video and audio recordings (6 two-slot sessions) carried out at the upper-secondary level in two high-schools in Geneva. I should add briefly that these recordings were done within a CLIL environment (with English as the medium of instruction), in which history and biology were the two subject-matters taught in the target language. A control group was also set up.

Production and motivation

One argument heard in the speech of parents, teachers, or politicians who are not in favour of the implementation of immersion programs as part of the national or cantonal curricula, claims that these programs are designed for an elite (see Cummins, 2000, for a discussion). This claim is arguably grounded on a variety of discrepancies between students which range over socio-economic inequalities, regional biases, and achievement at school, amongst others (see the recent article on *La maturité bilingue* in L'Hebdo (#17, April 2007) for an example).

²I wish to take this opportunity to thank the students who attended the *Fieldwork in English Linguistics* seminars and who took an active part in the discussion and, crucially, in the collection of this data. In particular, Barbara Frei, Sylvie Kohli, Olivia Porchet and Andrew Robotham deserve a special mention.

The conditions in the two schools under scrutiny do impose extra-constraints on students who wish to enrol on the immersion program. In both cases, students have to reach a certain threshold in their average grades in their main topics. While in the high-school in Geneva the threshold is set at a fairly low level (4.5/6) which can hardly be regarded as setting the kind of strong bias advocated by the opponents. In the other high-school, the threshold is set slightly higher (5/6). In both cases, however, it appears that these constraints constitute guidelines and can be enforced with some flexibility.

One type of information collected through the questionnaire sheds some light on this first claim. Students were asked to evaluate the time they had spent in English speaking countries. The answers given to this question can function as an indicator of the mobility of the students, which in turn can arguably be regarded as indicative of some socio-economic environment. This type of reasoning, however, is not necessarily going to be extremely fruitful. The data in Figure 1 below primarily shows that the two populations map onto essentially the same pattern. While immersion students tend to spend slightly more time in Anglophone countries on average, the difference between the two population falls below 5% of the mean value. More importantly, the suggestion which was made earlier that this indicator may provide a good predictor of the socio-economic background of the subjects, does not seem to be confirmed by the information collected about the occupation of the student's parents. In other words, the marginal discrepancy noticed here calls for another explanation.

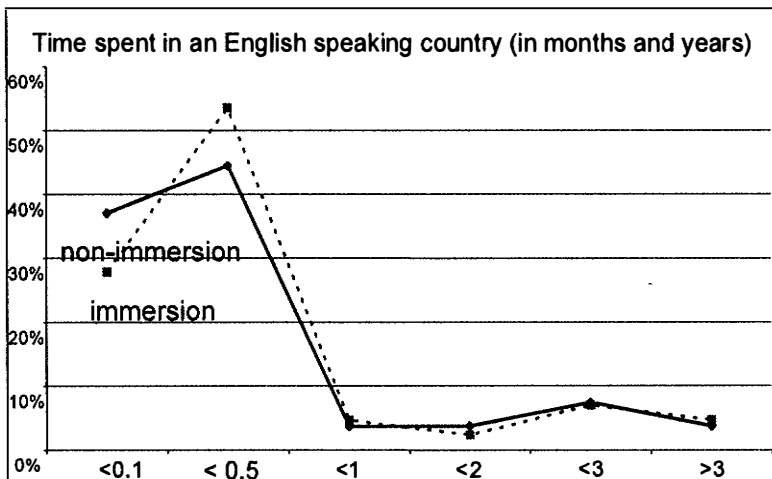


FIG. 1 – Time spent in an English speaking country (n=81)

An alternative view consists in categorising the difference noted in Figure 1 as an indicator of language awareness (towards the target language) in the household in which the informants grew up. While this difference does not seem to reflect a socio-economic bias, it may well be taken to echo a heightened sensibility to the English

culture and language. It should be emphasised that even though this type of differentiation can be expected to bear positively on the production of the test group, it would also be far-fetched and unfounded to use this type of evidence to liken the test group with an elite in any classical sense of the word. In Gardner's (1985) account of motivation in second language learning contexts, this kind of effect would typically be regarded as pertaining to the major - so-called passive - component of parental influence on student's motivation. Dörnyei (2001) also recognises the crucial importance of this factor in the construction of the *integrative* dimension of a learner's motivation (i.e. referring to intrinsic, affective motives and attitudes towards L2).

A promising avenue for research is to be looked for in another series of results obtained with the questionnaire. These results provide a different type of explanation for the type of difference which might exist between the two groups of students. Interestingly, while some linguists, such as Genesee (2004), effectively point out that late optional introduction of immersion programs may induce a bias in the population of students who enrol in these programs, the bias in question is of a different nature. He writes that

The net effect of these selection biases may be to create classrooms in late-entry bilingual/immersion programs that are composed of highly motivated and academically capable students; (2004 : 558)

The notion of motivation mentioned here deserves some special attention in the context of the current discussion. Crucially, it appears that two different trends emerge from the data with respect to the subject's attitude towards their anticipated need for English in their future career. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, even though both populations seem to agree generally that they will have to use English professionally in the future, the immersion group is consistently more convinced of the necessity to master English in their future job. Thus, the trend for the immersion students is markedly steeper.

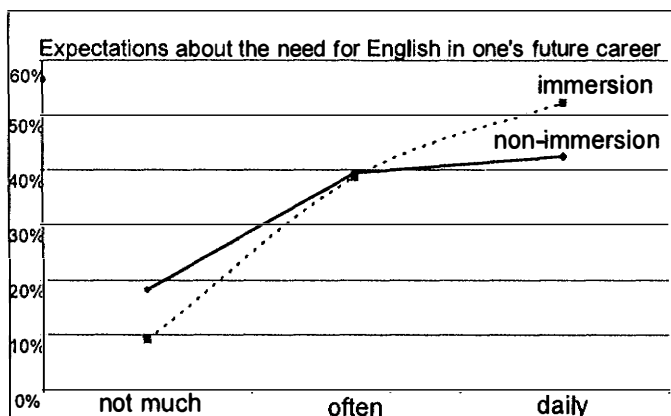


FIG. 2 – Anticipated professional use of English (n=81)

This parameter is taken to reflect a crucial component in the motivation of the students in the two groups surveyed. In Dörnyei’s model of motivation, the evidence presented in Figure 2 points towards an advantage for immersion students in the *instrumental dimension* (2001 : 65) of their motivation to acquire English (i.e. extrinsic, utilitarian factors).

The findings reviewed above are quite interesting when they are seen in connection with further observations made on the language competence achieved by the students. We expect that the motivational advantage noted previously will affect the learners’ acquisition of the target language at all levels. This would include the students’ production in L2.

Indeed, a number of observations made in the results obtained in the last section of the questionnaire, which tested the language competence of the informants, provide support for this expectation. For instance, Figure 3 below shows that in a written production task in which students were asked to compose a letter to an imaginary correspondent, the immersion students’ production exceeded that of the control group by 11% on average. Moreover, their production also demonstrated more complex uses of prepositional constructions, in phrasal verbs for instance (+21%), combined with a greater index of lexical diversity on these constructions (+15%). These findings and other converging observations (for instance about the use of determiners) seem to indicate that bilingual education does lead to an increased written production both in terms of quantity but also in terms of correctness.

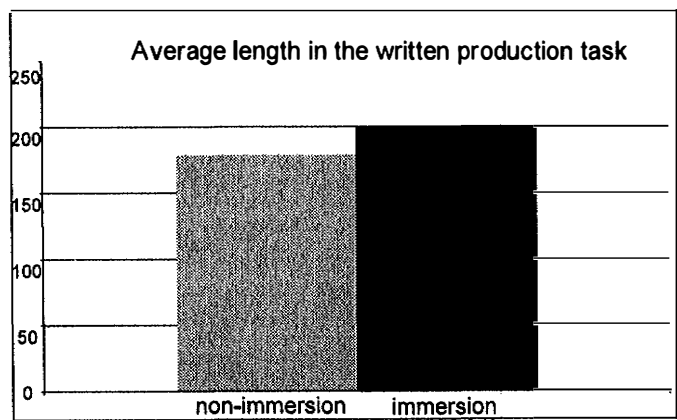


FIG. 3 – Average written production (represented as a number of words; n=81)

Production and pragmatic immunity : the mask effect

In the previous section some possible external factors bearing on the production of students following an English immersion education programme were envisaged. In this last section, a closer, data-driven look is given to the reputedly weaker benefit of bilingual education observed at the level of spoken production.

It has been argued that the spoken production of L2 learners is not significantly affected by immersion education. Some of the classroom interactions collected as part of the qualitative corpus of the project may be seen as confirming this point, where students' spoken productions are mostly limited to one-word utterances. While these limitations can be observed in the data, a much more interesting finding comes from those moments in classroom interaction when the spoken production of the immersion students seems to free itself and reach a much higher level of communicative and discursive complexity. In our data, this kind of burst in the spoken production in immersion contexts is combined with a specific type of didactic activity, namely role-play.

The effect triggered by role-play in an immersion classroom, it is claimed, is both specific to role-play in an immersive framework and of a pragmatic nature. It is argued that L2 functions as a *mask* in immersive role-play contexts and provides the learner with a form of pragmatic immunity whereby the learner's discourse becomes pragmatically disconnected on the referential, epistemic and socio-deictic levels (see Maillat & Gassner, to appear). Interestingly, Genesee (2004 : 571) remarks that "it appears that L2 acquisition is enhanced when students are given extended opportunities to use the language interactively."

This kind of account should be seen in the wider context mentioned by Gajo (2001), who describes a didactic contract which holds between the expert and the learner and "allows the L2 learner not only to break certain rules, but also to acknowledge publicly his competence deficit" (196 ; my translation). Gajo suggests that this didactic contract ensures a form of interactional immunity to the learner. This effect, he proceeds to characterise as a means of licensing, for instance, the lack of appropriate face work in the learner's speech, as well as occurrences of codeswitching, hesitations or metalinguistic comments.

The *mask effect* describes a related phenomenon, but it operates on a different level and has different outcomes on the learner's production. Thus, it does not allow the violation of certain rules ; instead, it facilitates the discursive task by stripping discourse of some of its contextual implications and connections, thereby providing pragmatic immunity. As a consequence, the mask effect enhances spoken production, as it allows the learner to concentrate exclusively on the de-contextualised discursive aspects involved in the role-play which becomes a purely linguistic activity.

To conclude, it can be argued further that the positive impact that the mask effect has on spoken production can be fruitfully analysed within Dörnyei's (2001) motivation model. It can be argued that the pragmatic immunity discussed above boosts the self-concept-related dimension of motivation (i.e. referring to the learner's self-confidence and anxiety) by protecting the learner's self behind an L2 mask. Obviously the preliminary results presented in this paper have to be confirmed by further evaluation and analysis. In particular, further investigation is needed to look at how the various dimensions of motivation discussed here in connection with language competence bear on the acquisition process of the subject-matter (see Serra & Gajo, 1999).

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