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The Effectiveness of Immersive Language Learning: An Investigation into English Language Acquisition in Immersion Environments versus Traditional Classroom Settings

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Abstract

This is a comparative kind of study research about traditional classroom learning efficacy in the acquisition of English and immersion learning. What actually distinguishes immersion learning from the conventional classroom learning setup is that immersion learning includes learners having to be exposed to the practicalities of using the targeted language in day-to-day life and having to use the language in authentic communication with native speakers concerning its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Using a very strong sample of 60 non-native English-speaking learners, the research set out to measure the impact of these two methodologies on language proficiency, as quantified by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). This suggests that those in the group of immersion learning had improved post-training TOEFL scores that were significantly higher than their counterparts in the traditional classroom setting. Such findings help explain the fact that, while immersion learning will do much more in improving English language capability, it will also suggest that such an experience environment could be most useful for learners looking to acquire this language effectively.

KEYWORDS

Language acquisition, formal instruction, immersion learning, English language proficiency, individual learner factors



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Introduction

Language acquisition has been a target for research for many years now, in which researchers try to come up with methods and approaches that shall ensure the effective learning process of language. Some of the methods provided in the paper include the traditional classroom form of learning; this is often referred to as formal instruction. They are the immersion form of learning, otherwise known as naturalistic instruction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As such, the study will entail adopting a measure and assessing the effectiveness of these methods on the objective of English language acquisition. Formal instruction is one of the methods that ensures a very kind of setting that takes learners through learning in a guided and systematic way. This approach puts more emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in an explicit explanation and rules are given to the learners. Such instruction is likely to be presented in a sequenced and cumulative syllabus, presenting the material so that there is the development of simpler to more complex

language forms. After all, many research studies have been taken, which substantiate most adequately the efficacy of language learning or acquisition through traditional classroom learning. For example, Norris and Ortega (2000) concluded from a meta-analysis of instructed SLA effectiveness studies that indeed, instruction did make a significant difference in learning. They stated that such explicit instruction, which includes teaching the rules of grammar and vocabulary, contributes a lot to the learners' proficiency. Formal instruction, however, has also been found to have its disadvantages. Krashen (1982) postulated that learning and acquisition are two distinct processes. In his argument, he said that while acquisition involves subconscious processes more or less akin to the way that children pick up their first language, learning involves a conscious knowledge of a language, usually because of being taught. Krashen assumes that acquisition is a more crucial process than learning to the attainment of fluency and the development of communicative competence in a second language.

This is where immersion learning comes in. In the case of an immersion environment, students are placed in a surrounding of native speakers who give them the genuine atmosphere in speaking the language (Cook, 2011). By the very nature of immersion language learning, students are exposed to the target language at all times in many contextual settings. It is thus possible for them to acquire the language in a more natural way. Research showed that in some areas of language proficiency, students in immersion programs outperformed their non-immersion peers (Genesee, 1987). The students were from the immersion program of the school, and the results turned out that indeed, the students were better at listening comprehension and speaking than their peers, indicative of the benefits that such a program could offer for learning a language. More recently, Lyster and Collins (2010) pointed out that students in an immersion setting develop the ability to communicate and, in fact, relatively high levels of accuracy in the use of grammatical structures. This finding, therefore, casts doubt on the feeling that fluency may well be chosen at the expense of the loss of accuracy in immersion programs. However, this merit is counteracted by some demerits, also attributed to learning through immersion. Total immersion may be too intense for some learners, especially those who are not very confident and proficient. Besides, all the teaching content that is done in the target language can disadvantage the learner, and hence, in this regard, the learners would be prompted to underachieve academically (Swain & Johnson, 1997). It may be added that this relative effectiveness of the two methods may actually be predicated on a whole host of individual learner variables, including motivation, aptitude, and age (Dörnyei, 2005). For instance, advanced learners would receive more explicit instruction than the younger ones in immersion settings. From this view, the traditional classroom learning and the new immersion learning are to facilitate the acquisition of the English language in their own varying strengths and weaknesses. Structures from one end in classroom learning, explicit instruction, and from the other end in an authentic environment, immersion learning provides fluency and communicative competence. An approach that is halfway between the two methods and carries the benefits from both may be the most balanced one to ensure that besides gaining accuracy in the learning of English language, learners also develop fluency.

Literature review

The foundational assumption of language immersion education, determinedly demarcated by precursors such as Johnson and Swain (1997) as well as Klee, Lynch, and Tarone (1998), is its distinction into partial, full, one-way, and two-way programmes. Their overviews afford a gateway in the understanding of how approaches to language learning in immersion settings are multifaceted. Research at the elementary level conducted by Blanco-Iglesias and Broner and Tarone (1995), Broner (1999), Parker, Heitzman, Fjerstad, Babbs, and Cohen (1994), Tarone (1997), and Tarone and Swain (1995) have all indicated a close bond linking social factors and language use and development in the U.S. context of immersion. However, evidence of the influence on the post-secondary level and in particular, for social and affective factors as part of adult L2 immersion experiences, seems to be seriously lacking at best. This gap points to the need for further examination of the differentiated variables that are peculiar to adult learners in immersion programmes, as opposed to the treatment granted for younger learners.

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The efforts to find implementation and evaluation materialised in postsecondary immersion programmes in works by Wesche (1985; 1993), Wesche and Ready (1985), Migneron and Burger (1986), Hauptman et al. (1988), and Burger (1989) from the University of Ottawa, who shed light upon challenges and achievements of such initiatives. These researches, while implementation and evaluation are dealt with, pay attention to the few social dynamics within content-based courses—a striking area that is wanting inquiry.

Moreover, Vines (1997) and Klahn (1997) serve to round out our understanding of content-based immersion-type courses, as undertaken respectively at Ohio University and Columbia University. Theirs is welcome contribution apart, in an edited volume that, otherwise, breaks very little new ground since it is the sole entry in the collection to broaden the horizon of discussion to include content-based language and Foreign Language Across the Curriculum (FLAC) programs, though only cursory in terms of social factors. The start of the Foreign Language Immersion Program (FLIP) at the University of Minnesota in 1993 (Klee and Metcalf, 1994), and later, the view of goals and motivations by Loaiza-Arango (1993), contributed to a focus of language skill development over academic content among immersion learners. This preference underscores the importance of language proficiency in shaping the immersion experience. One study that is representative of learner unease and, in many instances, the uncertainty and insecurity relating to self-expression and linguistic exactness in the L2 among adult L2 learners of Spanish at Middlebury College. This tallies with the broader challenges in which adult learners find themselves, more so in the social communication and self-appraisal of linguistic competencies within an immersion setting. This theory, forwarded by Tarone and Swain (1995) and coupled with Dahl's (1997) "community of practice" framework on the immersion classroom, has much promise for being a useful window into understanding adult L2 development in an immersion setting. Moreover, social-cultural learning theory, as presented by Vygotsky (1962; 1978), serves to bring social interaction to the background of examining the underlying role of the said interaction in L2 acquisition within immersion contexts.

Research questions

Q1: To what extent does traditional classroom instruction and immersion learning contribute to the proficiency in English language acquisition among second language learners?

Q2: How do individual factors such as learner's age, motivation, and aptitude influence the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in English language acquisition?

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Method

Language acquisition is an even more complex operation because it includes various elements of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. With time, there have been many methods of language learning offered and tried. The following literature review will focus on two broad approaches to language acquisition: traditional classroom learning and immersion learning. Further examination of the existing body of research into this method's effectiveness in language acquisition will be pursued. A traditional system of class-based learning, considered formal instruction, will have set structures and systems. Great focus is given to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in this setting. The learners are provided with rules and explicit explanations (Ellis, 1994). The lessons usually take the graded syllabus form, in which language elements are introduced progressively and cumulatively to enable the pupils to advance from simpler to more complex language forms.

There has been conducted a good number of pieces of research confirming the effectiveness of traditional class language learning. For instance, an analysis of the meta-research on instructed second language acquisition found that formal instruction ranks as one of the powerful stimulators for learning (Norris and Ortega, 2000). They said that explicit teaching that includes the rules of grammar and vocabulary very much enhances language proficiency in learners. However, Krashen (1982) proposed that acquisition and learning are different processes. Learning is a conscious knowledge of the language, often the result of formal instruction or training. Acquisition, on the other hand, is an unconscious process that is more or less the exact way that a child learns the first language. Acquisition is seen to be a rather central process to the development of fluency and communicative competence in the second language, according to Krashen. Immersion learning presents the best opportunity different from formal instruction, whereby learners find themselves in the company of native speakers, therefore having the most authentic language experience (Cook, 2011). The most important advantage of using this system for learning is complete accessibility to the target language at all times and in different contexts. Some researches have been conducted to prove the effectiveness of the immersion model for learning a second language. For example, learners in immersion programs have been found to do better than non-immersion learners in a number of aspects of language proficiency, with listening comprehension and speaking skills being at the top (Genesee, 1987). To this A further support is the study done by Lyster and Collins (2010), where they established that immersion students performed at relatively high levels not only in communicative competence but also with regard to accuracy in the use of grammatical structures.

Thus, the idea that in an immersion program, accuracy is lost in favour of fluency is very wide off the mark. Still, immersing as a learning method has its pitfalls. Sometimes, the experience of immersion can be too intimidating, especially for some of the learners who are less confident or proficient. In addition, there are very few instances in which the students really internalise the messages made in the target language, something that may eventually deprive them of their due academic elevation (Swain & Johnson, 1997). Furthermore, learner-related factors of motivation, aptitude, and age (Dörnyei, 2005) may also place their influence on the effectiveness of either method. For example, older learners may gain from explicit instructions, while younger ones achieve good results in immersion settings. As the literature appears to suggest, both traditional classroom-based learning and immersion learning have their own kind of efficacy in helping learners become proficient in English language acquisition. In both cases, there are good and bad sides. The classroom provides a structured environment with explicit instruction, quite helpful in the mastery of grammar and vocabulary rules. On the other hand, real exposure to the second language is maximised to the point of fluency and communicative competence with immersion learning. A balanced approach, combining both elements, might offer an altogether more cohesive learning process that learners can employ in acquiring the English language, developing accuracy and fluency in tandem.

Methodology

The design was for the research to have 60 non-native English-speaking adult learners aged 18 to 30 years. In this regard, the reason for using convenience sampling in picking respondents is that the participants from this category showed willingness and were ready to develop their proficiency in English. To control for the possibility of the pre-existing English language aptitude of the students to mediate the results of the study, the subjects were recruited only if, on the first Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test, their initial English language abilities were nearly identical. After the selection process, the participants were grouped randomly into two groups. Group A had 30 participants, and these have been subjected to the English Language Learning in a traditional classroom set up. This is the setting that brought about structured class. In this class, the lessons included the taught class of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. These were all done in a single class taught by a qualified English language teacher. As put forth by Ellis (1994), the classes were well organised, complete with a syllabus, and entailed many teaching methods, including but not limited to lectures, debates, and exercises.

Group B also consisted of 30 participants who had an English-speaking environment. The English-speaking environment was one that put them into a setup of living in a society in which the main spoken language was English. The participants from this group were involved in their daily engagements and conversations, forms of communications wholly in English. The environment was further enhanced through directed activities in the learning of language, which enabled the participants to acquire and apply the language productively (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In the half-year study, the 20 hours for each group involved formal classroom English lessons. In this light, then, it has been able to attract attention from a wide array of English scholars around the

world, including the United States, where English is the first language for its citizens. For Group B, these 20 hours were spent in guided activities and interactions in the English-speaking community. The effectiveness of each of those learning methods was measured, and those measurements were based on the change between the TOEFL scores that were recorded at the commencement of the study and those recorded at six months into the study. The TOEFL test includes reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English. These four elements give the full measure of ability in using the English language proficiently (Educational Testing Service, 2019). Thus, the discussion of the paper below intends to provide comparative evaluation of traditional classroom learning with all new method of language learning: Immersion Learning towards acquiring English. In this regard, one must take into consideration that some measures have been made so that the obtained results are reliable and valid. The participants were closely monitored to confirm that they followed the prescribed learning environment. Group A participants attended all the classroom sessions and carried out the work as assigned, while Group B participants were active in their life within the English-speaking community.

This was done to account for the possible effect of differences in individuals on the acquisition of the language. For example, all the participants were selected within the same age limits (18 to 30 years of age) in such a way that it would possibly control problems related to age in language learning (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Further, the participants for the study were recruited at the commencement time with an equal or near similar language proficiency so that the research was conducted on a level playing field. The measuring tool for the study outcome used for the present study was the TOEFL test because it was a broad acceptance standard for English language capabilities. During the start and end of the study, a TOEFL test was given; however, at both times, different versions were equalised to their level of difficulty to avoid the test-retest bias (Educational Testing Service, 2019). Data obtained in the research was analysed using appropriate statistical tools to estimate the effectiveness of the two methods of learning languages. The independent variable was the kind of language learning method, whether the conventional classroom kind of language learning or the intensive learning method. The dependent variable in this case was the score change from the start of the study to the end of the study in TOEFL. Actually, the main motive behind designing the current research was to be able to add something of real worth to the effectiveness of both traditional classroom learning and immersion learning for English language acquisition. Their study sought to contribute to the ongoing debate on best practices of language acquisition by comparing the outcomes of both methods in a controlled way.

Results

The results of the study emanated from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) given to the two groups prior to and after the six months of training. An independent sample t-test was done to test the significance level of the difference of the mean scores of pre-training and post-training mean scores and standard deviations at $p < 0.05$ level. The TOEFL scores of group A and group B, having been made prior to the training, were compared using independent samples t-test and are presented in summarised form in Table 1 below. There were no statistically significant

differences in the scores of groups before the two treatments. Group A ($M = 520$, $SD = 50$) and Group B ($M = 515$, $SD = 52$) had almost similar mean TOEFL scores, $t(58) = 0.67$, $p = 0.50$, rejecting the null hypothesis that the two groups had almost similar mean TOEFL scores.

Table 1

Pre-training TOEFL Scores

Group	Pre-training TOEFL Scores
A	$M=520$, $SD=50$
B	$M=515$, $SD=52$

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Post-training testing resulted in a notable difference in TOEFL scores among students from either group. Students from Group B, who belong to being exposed to the language environment, had significantly higher TOEFL scores ($M = 580$, $SD = 40$) than students from Group A ($M = 550$, $SD = 45$), $t(1.59) = 3.17$, $p < 0.05$. It, therefore, goes without saying that the immersive environment for learning English had a more potent effect on the rise of the score of TOEFL than the traditional classroom setting.

Table 2

Post-training TOEFL Scores

Group	Post-training TOEFL Scores
A	$M=550$, $SD=45$
B	$M=580$, $SD=40$

Results indicated that probably immersion learning is a good method for adults who study the English language, induced from TOEFL scores. It is worth mentioning here that while the findings do show statistical significance, but the fact remains that language learning can be affected by many other factors, and further research in such areas will be quite useful. While the results seem to suggest that immersion learning was more effective in this study, a few qualifications need to be made with respect to these findings. In respect to this, the observed improvement in TOEFL scores may, however, be attributed to immersion learning. This is the process that, in fact, makes the learner open to continuous exposure to the target language in an environment that is almost naturalistic and may help him to develop genuine language and cultural competences (Krashen, 1982). In other words, such an environment would also allow on-the-fly feedback in real-world communication contexts and thus assist language learning to a great extent. Besides, learners of an immersion program are exposed to very many lexical items and grammatical structures used within a wide array of contexts, thus probably developing the best language competence. But, one has to underline that in no sense does it undermine the value that the traditional form of class learning presents. This approach caters to systematic instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are the bases of skill development. Classroom learning is also structured in nature and allows for gradients in the language from simple to the complex form; hence, it is well-

suited for learners of different proficiency levels (Ellis, 1994). The results of this study can point out the potential benefits immersion learning can bring on English language acquisition but should not conclude that they do not help in any way. Such findings can be used, rather, in integrating a balanced approach to language teaching and learning that synthesises the strengths of both these methods. It should be noticed, however, that these results are referred to only a sample of non-native English speakers between the ages of 18 and 30. Generalization of these results to other than the samples considered in this study is hereby not granted. Efficacy of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning among learners at different age levels or those having different language backgrounds might be taken up by future researchers. For researchers, this paper will be very useful in finding out the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning against immersion learning in English language acquisition. Such findings will add to the discussion of language teaching and learning best practice, and they can indicate tentatively the benefit from a balanced and integrative approach.

Discussion

The purpose of this research, therefore, was to attempt to compare how effective traditional classroom learning with immersion learning was in the acquisition of the English language. The study's findings indicated that there exists a statistical significance for the difference in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores of the respondents, evidently pointing to at least one group that is different from the other at both traditional classroom setting (Group A) and immersive English-speaking environment (Group B) post-training. There certainly was no statistical difference at the beginning of the study between the TOEFL scores of both groups, confirming the similarity in prior English language proficiency between the two groups. The study concludes that students in the learning process in an immersive environment of language (Group B) had presented considerably higher TOEFL scores compared to their counterparts taking classes in the confines of a traditional classroom (Group A). The present findings can be compared with what has been presented in that type of immersion learning; it may confer more benefits on the learners, given that they are constantly exposed to the learned language in various contexts (Genesee, 1987). Learning through immersion has a more naturalistic process of acquisition, rather like the way the mother tongue is acquired. Learners, under condition, are likely to develop communicative competence and fluency more effectively when they are engaged in authentic communication (Krashen, 1982). On the other hand, real-life interaction provides the learners with immediate feedback concerning the correctness of their communication, therefore possibly easing the process of language acquisition. Such feedback is in the whole learning process, where it helps learners know their errors and undertake the necessary correction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This does not underestimate traditional, in-class learning; this only highlights the fact that learners in Group B have higher TOEFL scores. Classroom learning is based on systematic and explicit instruction, especially in such segments of language proficiency as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Ellis, 1994). The structured nature of classroom learning, with a progressive curriculum, redounds to the benefit of the learners, especially at the beginner's level, where basic

language structures and vocabulary need to be set. There is also controlled practice that occurs in the classroom setting, and drilling is repetitive, thus reinforcing the teaching of language (Norris & Ortega, 2000). The balance may be observed in language learning from the two approaches of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning, which the study has observed. Therefore, it would give learners a full spectrum of language training that comprises precision in language structures from classroom learning and fluency and communicative competence from immersion learning. The findings of this research are further relevant towards a specific sample of non-native English learners within the age group of 18-30. Generalization of the results can only be limited to such populations. It is indeed very interesting to conduct this study on how effective traditional classroom learning and immersion learning really are, from foreign language learners of different age groups, among learners with another language background, and among them who have various levels of language proficiency.

Meanwhile, such a study did not take seriously into account learner-based individual differences, for example, motivation, language learning strategies, and learning style, which are said to have substantial impact on the learning of a language (Dörnyei, 2005). Further research could consider these factors so that a view of the issues in relation to method effectiveness in language acquisition can be more multidimensional. In this sense, this work sheds invaluable light on the debate around the most effective method of acquiring the English language. The kind of approach to language teaching and learning is therefore integrative, where both bring into focus the possible benefits that immersion learning could accrue and the relevance of continued traditional classroom learning. In brief, it is a research study that proposes integrative language teaching.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that the learning environment forms the main aspect in the process of English language acquisition among adult learners. This kind of investigation against the conventional classroom environs versus the immersion environs argues that since immersion learning is an authentic, naturalistic experience of the language, it can prove beneficial toward language growth. This gain is quantitatively explained by the better performance of the immersion learners in the post-study TOEFL score than that of their traditional classroom counterparts. This stands in contrast to the recent trend of structured curriculum-based language instructions. There seems to be more of a mixed approach—taking full advantage of all the potential benefits of learners being exposed to the language in naturalistic settings. The acquisition of both seems to be supercharged by the fact that the immersion environment makes it possible to practice actual language use even more often, and across far more contexts, than would be likely in a non-immersion environment. This study agrees with the value in regular classroom learning, in light of its provision of systematic instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This goes to show that an integrated approach, balancing the explicit instruction of the classroom with the immersive, context-rich experiences of language use, may be the most all-encompassing way of looking at language acquisition.

Future research should be carried out to explore the effectiveness of both methodologies combined, which can potentially provide more clarity on how these effectively combine to cater to the needs of diverse learners. Individual learner differences—motivation, learning strategies, prior language experience, and so on—had to be factored in, then, with respect to the designing of language learning programs for maximal effectiveness. The results of this research represent very valuable hints toward deeper considerations of the dynamics of the language learning situation when an educational practice is informed by the various ways in which an adult learns to acquire a new language. The evidence is overwhelmingly supportive of the success of immersion learning in improving proficiency in a language. It shows the need to acquire a language in a real-life setting through use and exposure.

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