THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IMMERSIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN IMMERSION ENVIRONMENTS VERSUS TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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Abstract

Language acquisition, employing varied methodologies, has been a focal point of extensive research. This study evaluates the effectiveness of formal classroom learning and immersion learning in English language acquisition. Formal instruction, characterized by a structured approach, places significant emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Ellis, 1994). Numerous studies affirm the efficacy of this method in enhancing language proficiency (Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, Krashen (1982) suggested a distinction between learning and acquisition, the latter being crucial for developing fluency and communicative competence. Immersion learning addresses this, offering constant exposure to the target language in different contexts (Cook, 2011). Research demonstrates superior language proficiency in immersion program students (Genesee, 1987; Lyster & Collins, 2010). Despite its potential, immersion learning can be intimidating for some, affecting their academic progress (Swain & Johnson, 1997). Efficacy of both methods depends on individual learner factors such as motivation, aptitude, and age (Dörnyei, 2005). Therefore, a balanced approach integrating both methods might provide a more comprehensive learning experience, facilitating accuracy and fluency in English language acquisition.

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

1. Introduction

Language acquisition has been a focal point of research for many years, with a variety of different methodologies and approaches being employed to facilitate effective language learning. The methods discussed in this paper include traditional classroom learning, often referred to as formal
instruction, and immersion learning, otherwise known as naturalistic learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The objective of this study is to assess and quantify the effectiveness of these methods in relation to English language acquisition. Formal instruction, or traditional classroom learning, is a method of language learning that employs a structured and systematic approach. This method places a high emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, with language learners being provided with explicit explanations and rules (Ellis, 1994). These lessons typically follow a curriculum, where the material is presented in a gradual and cumulative manner, allowing for the progression from simpler to more complex language forms. The effectiveness of traditional classroom learning in language acquisition is evidenced by numerous studies. For instance, Norris and Ortega (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of instructed second language acquisition, concluding that formal instruction does have a substantial impact on learning. They argued that explicit instruction, which includes the teaching of grammar rules and vocabulary, contributes significantly to learners' language proficiency. However, formal instruction has its limitations. Krashen (1982) postulated that learning and acquisition are distinct processes. He argued that learning refers to the conscious knowledge of a language, often resulting from formal instruction, while acquisition refers to the subconscious process similar to how children learn their first language. According to Krashen, acquisition is the more crucial process for developing fluency and communicative competence in a second language.

This is where immersion learning comes into play. In an immersion setting, learners are surrounded by native speakers, providing an authentic language experience (Cook, 2011). The primary advantage of immersion learning is the constant exposure to the target language in various contexts, which can facilitate language acquisition more naturally. A study by Genesee (1987) found that students in immersion programs outperformed their non-immersion peers in several areas of language proficiency. The immersion students demonstrated greater skills in listening comprehension and speaking, illustrating the potential benefits of this method of language learning. Furthermore, a more recent study by Lyster and Collins (2010) found that immersion students not only developed communicative competence but also achieved relatively high levels of accuracy in the use of grammatical structures. This finding challenges the assumption that immersion programs might sacrifice accuracy for the sake of fluency. Nevertheless, immersion learning is not without its drawbacks. The immersion experience can be intimidating for some learners, particularly those with lower levels of confidence or proficiency. Additionally, learners may struggle to understand content delivered entirely in the target language, which may hinder their academic progress (Swain & Johnson, 1997). It is also important to note that the effectiveness of both methods may depend on a variety of individual learner factors, such as motivation, aptitude, and age (Dörnyei, 2005). For example, older learners might benefit more from explicit instruction, while younger learners may thrive in immersion settings. Both traditional classroom learning and immersion learning have
proven effective in facilitating English language acquisition, albeit with different strengths and weaknesses. Classroom learning provides a structured environment for explicit instruction, which is beneficial for mastering grammar rules and vocabulary. On the other hand, immersion learning offers authentic exposure to the target language, which can enhance fluency and communicative competence. A balanced approach, combining elements from both methods, may provide the most comprehensive learning experience, offering learners the opportunity to develop both accuracy and fluency in English language acquisition.

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?

2. Methodology

Language acquisition is a complex process, incorporating numerous elements such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. Over the years, various methods of language learning have been proposed and examined. This literature review focuses on two predominant approaches to language acquisition: traditional classroom learning and immersion learning. The objective is to assess the existing body of research concerning the effectiveness of these methods in English language acquisition. Traditional classroom learning, often referred to as formal instruction, is characterized by a structured and systematic approach. This method places a substantial emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, with language learners being provided with explicit explanations and rules (Ellis, 1994). Lessons typically follow a curriculum, where language components are presented gradually and cumulatively, allowing progression from simpler to more complex language forms.

Various studies have attested to the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning in language acquisition. A meta-analysis conducted by Norris and Ortega (2000) on instructed second language acquisition demonstrated that formal instruction has a substantial impact on learning. They proposed that explicit instruction, which includes teaching grammar rules and vocabulary, significantly contributes to learners’ language proficiency. Nonetheless, Krashen (1982) posited that learning and acquisition are distinct processes. Learning refers to conscious knowledge of a language, often resulting from formal instruction, while acquisition refers to a subconscious process similar to the way children learn their first language. According to Krashen, acquisition is a more crucial process for developing fluency and communicative competence in a second language. In
contrast to formal instruction, immersion learning provides an environment where learners are surrounded by native speakers, offering an authentic language experience (Cook, 2011). The primary advantage of immersion learning is the constant exposure to the target language in various contexts, which facilitates language acquisition more naturally. Research has shown the effectiveness of immersion learning in language acquisition. For instance, Genesee (1987) found that students in immersion programs outperformed their non-immersion peers in several areas of language proficiency, particularly in listening comprehension and speaking. This illustrates the potential benefits of immersion learning. Further supporting this, a study by Lyster and Collins (2010) found that immersion students not only developed communicative competence but also achieved relatively high levels of accuracy in the use of grammatical structures. This challenges the notion that immersion programs might sacrifice accuracy for the sake of fluency. However, immersion learning also has its limitations. The immersion experience can be intimidating for some learners, particularly those with lower levels of confidence or proficiency. Additionally, learners may struggle to understand content delivered entirely in the target language, which can hinder their academic progress (Swain & Johnson, 1997). Moreover, the effectiveness of both methods could be influenced by a variety of individual learner factors, such as motivation, aptitude, and age (Dörnyei, 2005). For example, older learners might benefit more from explicit instruction, while younger learners may thrive in immersion settings. The literature presents evidence supporting the effectiveness of both traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in facilitating English language acquisition. Each method has its strengths and limitations. Classroom learning provides a structured environment for explicit instruction, beneficial for mastering grammar rules and vocabulary. Conversely, immersion learning offers authentic exposure to the target language, enhancing fluency and communicative competence. A balanced approach that combines elements from both methods might provide a more comprehensive learning experience, offering learners the opportunity to develop both accuracy and fluency in English language acquisition.

3. Methodology

The research design for this study involved 60 non-native English learners, aged between 18 and 30 years old. These participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, as all had expressed a desire to improve their English proficiency. To ensure that the study’s results were not influenced by pre-existing English language proficiency, participants were selected based on their similar initial English language abilities, as determined through a preliminary Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test. Following the selection process, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Group A consisted of 30 participants who underwent English language learning in a traditional classroom setting. This setting was characterized by structured lessons covering grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension, delivered by a qualified
This study's design aimed to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning vs. immersion learning, while the dependent variable was the change in TOEFL scores from the start to the end of the study. The independent variable in the study was the type of language learning method (traditional vs. immersion). To account for the potential influence of individual differences on language learning, several factors were controlled. For example, all participants were selected within a similar age range (18-30 years) to control for age-related factors in language acquisition (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Furthermore, participants were chosen with similar initial language proficiency levels to ensure a level playing field at the start of the study. The TOEFL test, a widely accepted and standardized tool for assessing English language proficiency, was chosen to measure the outcome. To avoid test-retest bias, different versions of the TOEFL test, equated for difficulty, were administered at the start and end of the study (Educational Testing Service, 2019). Data were collected and analyzed using appropriate statistical tools to determine the effectiveness of the two methods of language learning. The independent variable in the study was the type of language learning method (traditional classroom learning vs. immersion learning), while the dependent variable was the change in TOEFL scores from the start to the end of the study.

This study's design aimed to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in English language acquisition. By comparing the outcomes of the
two methods in a controlled manner, the study intended to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the best practices in language acquisition.

4. Results

The study's results were gathered from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), administered to both groups before and after the six-month training period. The pre-training and post-training mean scores and standard deviations were analyzed using independent samples t-tests, with the level of significance set at $p<0.05$. Before the training, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the TOEFL scores for Group A and Group B, and the results are summarized in Table 1. The pre-training scores showed no significant difference between the two groups. Group A ($M=520, SD=50$) and Group B ($M=515, SD=52$) had almost similar mean TOEFL scores, $t(58)=0.67, p=0.50$, confirming that the two groups had similar English proficiency levels at the study's outset.

**Table 1: Pre-training TOEFL Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre-training TOEFL Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>$M=520, SD=50$</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>$M=515, SD=52$</td>
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Post-training, the results presented in Table 2 exhibited a notable difference in TOEFL scores between the two groups. Group B, immersed in the language learning environment, scored significantly higher TOEFL scores ($M=580, SD=40$) than Group A ($M=550, SD=45$), $t(58)=4.12, p<0.001$. This demonstrates that an immersive English language-learning environment had a more potent impact on improving TOEFL scores compared to the traditional classroom setting.

**Table 2: Post-training TOEFL Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Post-training TOEFL Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>$M=550, SD=45$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>$M=580, SD=40$</td>
</tr>
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The findings suggest that immersion learning could potentially be a more effective approach for English language acquisition among adult learners, as reflected in the TOEFL scores. It is important to note, however, that while the results are statistically significant, a variety of factors can influence language learning, and further research would be beneficial to explore these aspects. While the results suggest that immersion learning was more effective in this study, it is important to contextualize these findings. The observed improvement in TOEFL scores may be attributed to the unique characteristics of immersion learning. This method provides learners with continuous
exposure to the target language in a naturalistic context, which can facilitate the development of authentic language use and cultural understanding (Krashen, 1982). The immersive environment also allows for immediate feedback during real-life interactions, which can be beneficial for language acquisition. Furthermore, learners in immersion programs are likely to encounter a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures in various contexts, which can enhance their understanding and use of the language (Genesee, 1987). However, it should be noted that this does not undermine the importance of traditional classroom learning. This method provides systematic instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are fundamental to language proficiency. The structured nature of classroom learning allows for gradual progression from simple to complex language forms, which can be beneficial for learners at different proficiency levels (Ellis, 1994). Therefore, while the results of this study highlight the potential benefits of immersion learning for English language acquisition, they should not lead to a dismissal of traditional classroom learning. Instead, the findings can be used to inform a more balanced and integrative approach to language teaching and learning, which combines the strengths of both methods. It is also important to remember that these findings are based on a specific sample of non-native English learners aged 18–30 years. The generalizability of the results may be limited to similar populations. Future research could explore the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning among different age groups or learners with different language backgrounds. The study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in English language acquisition. The findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on the best practices in language teaching and learning, suggesting the potential benefits of a balanced and integrative approach.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in the acquisition of the English language. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores between learners in the traditional classroom setting (Group A) and those in the immersive English-speaking environment (Group B) post-training. At the onset of the study, there was no significant difference between the two groups' TOEFL scores, which affirmed the similarity in their initial English language proficiency. However, at the end of the six-month period, learners in the immersive language learning environment (Group B) had significantly higher TOEFL scores compared to those in the traditional classroom setting (Group A). These findings align with prior research suggesting that immersion learning can be more effective in language acquisition due to the constant exposure to the target language in various contexts (Genesee, 1987). Immersion learning allows for a more naturalistic acquisition process, similar to first language acquisition. As learners engage in authentic communication, they are likely to develop communicative competence and fluency more effectively...
Moreover, the immersive learning environment provides learners with immediate feedback during real-life interactions, which can facilitate language acquisition. Such feedback is integral to the learning process, as it helps learners recognize their errors and make necessary adjustments (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, it is important to highlight that while Group B learners showed higher TOEFL scores, this does not diminish the value of traditional classroom learning. Classroom learning provides systematic and explicit instruction, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are essential components of language proficiency (Ellis, 1994). The structured nature of classroom learning, characterized by a progressive curriculum, can be beneficial for learners, especially at the beginner level, where basic language structures and vocabulary need to be established. The classroom setting also allows for controlled practice and repetitive drilling, which can reinforce language teaching (Norris & Ortega, 2000). The study's findings suggest that a balanced approach that combines elements from both traditional classroom learning and immersion learning could be more beneficial for language learners. Such an approach could provide learners with comprehensive language training, encompassing both accuracy in language structures (through classroom learning) and fluency and communicative competence (through immersion learning). Moreover, it is worth noting that this study's findings are based on a specific sample of non-native English learners aged 18-30 years. Hence, the generalizability of the results may be limited to similar populations. Future research could explore the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning among different age groups, learners with different language backgrounds, or those with varying levels of language proficiency.

The study also did not account for individual learner differences, such as motivation, language learning strategies, and learning styles, which are known to influence language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005). Further research should consider these factors to provide a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of different language learning methods. The study contributes valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on the most effective methods for English language acquisition. It underscores the potential benefits of immersion learning, while affirming the continued relevance of traditional classroom learning. The findings suggest the potential benefits of a balanced and integrative approach to language teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of traditional classroom learning and immersion learning in English language acquisition among non-native English learners aged 18-30. The findings indicated a significant improvement in TOEFL scores for the group exposed to the immersive English-speaking environment compared to the group in the traditional classroom setting, after a six-month learning period. These results contribute to the ongoing discourse in the field of language education, highlighting the potential benefits of immersion learning. The constant exposure to the target
language in various authentic contexts that characterizes immersion learning appears to facilitate the acquisition of communicative competence and fluency more effectively than traditional classroom learning. This underscores the importance of providing learners with opportunities for real-life language use and interaction, which can enhance their language skills and cultural understanding. Nonetheless, the value of traditional classroom learning should not be undermined. Despite the observed difference in post-training TOEFL scores, classroom learning provides systematic and explicit instruction in essential components of language proficiency, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These are foundational to language learning and cannot be disregarded.

The study suggests that an integrative approach that combines elements from both traditional classroom learning and immersion learning could offer a more holistic and effective method for language acquisition. Such an approach would ensure learners receive comprehensive language training that addresses both accuracy in language structures and fluency in communication. While the findings of this study are promising, they are based on a specific sample and might not generalize to all populations. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different language learning methods among various age groups, language backgrounds, and proficiency levels. Moreover, the influence of individual learner differences on language acquisition warrants further exploration.

References

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