

In This Issue...

Immersion: Why Not Try Free Voluntary Reading? In this short article, Krashen suggests that reading is a powerful source in acquiring language competence. <i>Stephen Krashen</i>	1
Sociopolitical Awareness, Intercultural Sensitivity and the Language Teacher What are the costs to language teachers who remain disengaged from sociopolitical debate in a pluralistic society? <i>Peter J. Heffernan</i>	5
Another Language Teaching Approach: Dhority's Acquisition through Creative Teaching (ACT) Bancroft describes how Lozanov's Suggestopedia has influenced other teaching methods to create yet another approach to second language teaching. <i>Jane Bancroft</i>	10
The Effects of Pleasure Reading Constantino's research supports Krashen's theory on the benefits of free voluntary reading. She identifies the impact it makes on the TOEFL test. <i>Rebecca Constantino</i>	15
Creative Writing: Poetry in the Language Classroom Some "recipes" for writing of poetry to expand vocabulary in the target language. <i>Anthony Mollica</i>	18
Teaching Culture in a North American Context: Columbus Day Background to Columbus' historical voyages. <i>Anthony Mollica and Frank Nuessel</i>	20
Quotable Quotes... What the "authorities" in the field have said on various aspects of second-language teaching and learning. <i>Various Authors</i>	25
From the Editor's Desk	2

Immersion: Why Not Try Free Voluntary Reading?

Stephen Krashen

Immersion programs have not given comprehensible input a real chance. The author suggests reading as one of the solutions.

In recent years, observers of immersion programs have been very concerned about the finding that immersion students do not speak the second language perfectly, even after years of participation.¹ There is the widespread conviction that the solution lies in focusing more on form and using more direct teaching of grammar. I maintain that this conclusion is premature and that immersion programs have not yet given comprehensible input a real chance.

We can explain the "imperfection" of immersion easily without abandoning the Input Hypothesis. As others have pointed out, immersion students are exposed to a limited range of input and have no peer interaction. In addition, immersion has never attempted to exploit one of the best sources of comprehensible input: free voluntary reading. There is an enormous amount of research that confirms that free voluntary reading is the source of a great deal of our reading ability, our writing style, our ability to use complex grammatical constructions, our vocabulary, and much of our spelling ability (Krashen, 1993). Students who participate in free voluntary reading programs in school, such as sustained silent reading, typically outperform traditionally taught comparison students on a variety of measures of literacy competence (second language studies of in-

school free reading include Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Elley, 1991; Pilegreen and Krashen, 1993), and that more reading outside of school is associated with more literacy development (second language studies include Tudor and Hafiz, 1989; Cho and Krashen, 1994; Constantino, 1994).

Immersion children do not read for pleasure in their second language. Romney, Romney and Menzies (1995) reported no relationship between the amount grade 6 immersion students said they spent reading in French, and their scores on a test of reading comprehension. The reason for this result is that the children hardly read at all in French: "They spent an average of 3 1/2 minutes a day reading French books and one minute reading French comics, magazines, and newspapers..." (p. 485). In comparison, they averaged 26 minutes per day reading English books and seven minutes reading English language comics, magazines and newspapers. When asked to name their favourite French authors, only 3% of the students could name an author; in contrast, 81% were able to name their favourite English author.

There is, in addition, no clear evidence that focusing on form is effective. I have argued that focusing on form leads typically to short-term

continued on page 3

Voluntary Reading

continued from page 1

gains for limited aspects of language, and these gains are apparent only on form-based measures; the knowledge gained in this way does not become part of true linguistic competence (Krashen, 1992, 1994a, 1994b).²

In light of the overwhelming evidence that free reading is a powerful source of language competence, the finding that immersion children do not do free reading, and the lack of clear evidence for focusing on form, one is led to the conclusion that free reading should at least be considered as an option. Students interviewed by Romney et al. explained why they didn't do much reading in French: there was little for them to read in French that was both interesting and comprehensible. The solution to this problem means assembling collections of interesting (and comprehensible) books in the second language, providing some sustained silent reading time, reading good stories to students in class, and discussing good books in class. This is certainly an easier, more pleasant, and more promising route than doing more activities that focus on the conditional and Imperfect.³

Notes:

I should like to thank Jeff McQuillan for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. One often reads that immersion students have "fossilized." Harley and Swain (1984), however, conclude that for the early French total immersion students they studied, "there is currently no evidence that immersion students' interlanguage stops developing... while growth towards target language norms in productive language may seem remarkably gradual, we find at any grade level... that there is new development relative to earlier grades" (p. 300). Duchesne (1995) arrives at a similar conclusion. In a study of errors of French immersion students from grades 1 to 6, he found that while some errors did remain, "les erreurs, en général, diminuent en fréquence d'année en année... on obtient une image beaucoup plus dynamique et optimiste de la situation que celle que dessine la fossilisation." (p. 527). Improvement slows down after grade three, but continues to take place.

2. Studies specifically done with immersion students have not made the case for focusing on form: Harley (1989) provided grade six French immersion students with eight weeks of special instruction on the imparfait/passé composé distinction. Her experimental groups averaged 11.9 hours of work on this comparison, while control groups did less than half that amount. Experimental students scored significantly better on two out of three (form-based) measures, but differences on one measure (the cloze test), while significant, were small (less than 3%), and delayed post-testing done three months later revealed no significant differences among the groups.

In light of the overwhelming evidence that free reading is a powerful source of language competence, the finding that immersion children do not do free reading, and the lack of clear evidence for focusing on form, one is led to the conclusion that free reading should at least be considered as an option.

In Day and Shapson (1991), seventh graders focused on the conditional for six weeks and showed better gains than a comparison group on two out of three measures, but tests were form-based, and delayed post-testing was done 11 weeks after the treatment ended. This interval may have been too short: As noted above, Harley's subjects' gains disappeared after three months. Using adult subjects, White (1991) reported that gains from conscious learning were lost when subjects were tested one year later. Scott and Randell (1992)'s adult subjects showed clear declines in performance on consciously learned aspects of French grammar four weeks after post-testing. Their subjects studied each grammar rule for only four minutes while Day and Shapson's subjects had three periods per week of instruction for six weeks. Working much harder, however, may only delay the inevitable). In Lyster (1994), grade 8 French immersion students showed some gains in the use of tu/vous after 12 hours of instruction over five weeks, and held these gains at delayed post-testing one month later; as in Day and Shapson, this interval may have been too short. Improvement in another fea-

ture of politeness and polite closings in letters did not endure to the post-testing. One post-test, a multiple-choice test, clearly focused students on form, and the others, involving written and oral production, had elements of form-focus as well, as students taking these tests had just experienced a great deal of instruction on just those forms required on the tests (e.g. the written task required students to write an informal letter and a formal letter).

I find it very hard to believe that the children love grammar instruction.

Salomone and Palma (1995), in a study of French immersion in the United States, assert that "increased attention to students' grammatical competence... has made this particular immersion school even more successful" (p. 232), but provide no data. In their thorough analysis of six teachers' implicit theories and classroom behaviour, there is no mention of free voluntary reading in French. Duchesne (1995) suggests that immersion students' improvement in certain structures (e.g. agreement of possessive adjectives) was due to an increased emphasis by teachers on these structures, but without a comparison group that did not receive instruction, there is no evidence this is so.

There is a great deal of evidence that children enjoy hearing stories and reading books that they select on their own.

In at least one instance in Salomone and Palma's report, "grammar instruction" was really "language appreciation." Mr. Loffland, the principal, explained: "We're teaching a lot more grammar now. I was observing in an upper-grade classroom, and the children were conjugating 12 verbs. They loved it. One boy couldn't do the passé composé of *lire* so I said: 'Jason, j'ai ...' and he said, 'lu.' They know it intuitively." (Salomone and Palma, p. 230). What Mr. Loffland observed was language performance, not language acquisition or language learning: Jason had already acquired the correct form, and Mr. Loffland elicited it.

I find it very hard to believe that the children love grammar instruction. McQuillan (1994) asked 49

adult second language students who had participated in extensive reading about their preferences: 84% said that reading was more pleasurable than grammar, and 78% felt reading was more beneficial than grammar, suggesting that once students do it, they like it and understand its benefits. In addition, there is a great deal of evidence that children enjoy hearing stories and reading books that they select on their own (Krashen, 1994b).

3. It has been pointed out, most recently by Tarone and Swain (1995), that immersion children lack competence in the nonacademic, conversational style of the second language. Light reading might be of help, because it contains a great deal of everyday language. For some evidence, see Cho and Krashen (1994).

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CATHY

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