

A NEW LOOK AT CORE FRENCH: INTENSIVE FRENCH IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

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Intensive French is a three-year research project, now in its third year, which has been undertaken in two school districts, one rural and one urban of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It has been undertaken with the support of the provincial Department of Education and is funded by the federal Department of Canadian Heritage. It is a new approach aimed at improving the communicative competence of the regular core French student. Participants in the urban school district are volunteers, but represent a wide variety of ability levels; those in the rural district include all the students in the class.

Intensive French : How did it begin?

There is a considerable contrast between the communicative ability of immersion students and those in core French, yet 94 percent of the students studying French in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in Canada for that matter, are in the core French program. Therefore, throughout Canada people have been looking for ways to improve the teaching of core French. The introduction of the communicative approach and the multidimensional curriculum has done much to help core French become more effective, but French in the core classroom for the majority of students does not really become a language of communication. Research has indicated that, in order to learn to communicate in French, students have to use French in authentic communicative exchanges and use it in this way for extended periods of time. These two factors, authentic language use and extended language use, are the essential conditions for learning to communicate in French. They are present in the French immersion program; the challenge is to find a way to bring them into the core French program.

Definition of Intensive French

Intensive Core French, then, is defined as an enrichment of the core French program by the creation of a period of intensive exposure to French enabling students to receive three to four times the number of hours of instruction normally devoted to French in the school year in which the program is offered. Until now in the Newfoundland and Labrador context, this enrichment occurs at grade six.

Necessary Conditions

In order to create the conditions for Intensive French, three major adjustments had to be made to the curriculum: a reorganization of the instructional time, a reorientation of the curriculum, and the adoption of an interactive pedagogy.

1. The reorganization of instructional time is necessary to create the intensive exposure to French. This is achieved by compacting the regular English curriculum and creating a concentrated block of time in one semester of the school year devoted primarily to the learning of French. In general, two types of arrangements have been developed in order to respond to the constraints of different school situations; either 80% (the greater part of the school day) or 50% (approximately half of the school day) is devoted to Intensive French. The total amount of time devoted to French is increased from the normal 90 hours for grade 6 to from 200 to 400 hours.

Thus, intensity in the Newfoundland school situation has three organizational components: an increase in instructional time, a concentration of instructional time in one semester and, as far as possible, uninterrupted time, that is a block of time for French activities uninterrupted by time devoted to other subject areas each school day.

In order to achieve the amount of time required for Intensive French, the regular curriculum had to be compressed. To this end the amount of time spent on certain subject areas was reduced, or the subject eliminated altogether for the five month period when Intensive French is being offered. In most schools the English language arts curriculum was considerably reduced. The choice of other subjects and the amount of instructional time depended upon the priorities of the school involved; in general, subject areas compressed included science, social studies, health and religion. Mathematics was not compacted in any of the participating schools. In the other semester, the regular curriculum was followed, with the usual time allotments; core French formed a part of that curriculum, as is normally the case.

Intensive French was conceived as a program which would enable a wide spectrum of students to profit from the advantages of a communicative experience in French, particularly students in rural areas where immersion programs cannot be implemented. Therefore, it was not deemed appropriate that the entire regular curriculum should be taught in the second semester, and therefore, faster than would normally be the case. Nor was it considered desirable to increase the amount of homework which would be given to students in order to assist them to complete the regular curriculum more quickly. Consequently, it was decided to compact the regular curriculum; in compacting the curriculum, the subject matter goals for all affected subject areas for grade 6 were maintained, but the number of resources used to achieve these goals were reduced. Thus, students follow the regular curriculum at a rate that would be normal for grade 6 pupils, but by using a smaller number of resources.

There is a theoretical basis for this compacting of the curriculum. This theoretical basis may be called a transdisciplinary approach to second language instruction (Netten and Germain, submitted). The approach integrates three main components: Cummins's (1979) hypothesis of the interdependence of languages, Vygotsky's (1962) conception of the relationship between instruction and intellectual development and the neo-piagetan view of the relationship between social and intellectual development (Mugny and Carugati, 1989).

2. The second major adjustment is the enriching of the French curriculum.

It was not possible to use the regular core French texts, as they are conceived for teaching periods of approximately 40 minutes per day; teachers needed a sequence of activities that would last for three to five hours in a day and keep students actively using French in authentic communicative situations. Nor could lessons be developed from resources used at the higher grade levels because they were not suited to the level of cognitive, social and personal development of grade 6 pupils. Therefore, a new curriculum was developed by the participating teachers with experience teaching both the regular curriculum and core French at grade 6. The curriculum which they developed is based on the core French goals for grade 9, but activities are adjusted to the cognitive and social level of grade 6 students. A theme approach that enables teachers to explore and develop areas of interest to particular pupils, or groups of pupils, thus implicating them in their learning to a greater degree than is often the case in a regular core French classroom and increasing their motivation to use French was adopted. The curriculum is cognitively demanding, and increases in complexity of language use, tasks and knowledge base during the five months. It integrates some information from other subject areas; however, it is to be remembered that, unlike French immersion, the goals of all teaching activities are linguistic ones related to communication; no subject matter goals are specified. In addition, because the linguistic goals are communicative, no specific vocabulary or grammatical sequences are specified; this aspect is developed by the teacher according to the needs of the students.

In addition, the curriculum was conceptualised as a language arts experience for the pupils. A whole, or integrated, approach to language learning was adopted, and all activities were based on authentic language use. All four skills are integrated in the program from the beginning. The use of a whole language approach to learning French provides considerable language enrichment beyond that of a regular core French classroom. In particular, reading activities, both in class and independently at home, are undertaken right from the beginning. Writing also is an integral part of the curriculum; students keep a personal journal, as well as engaging in various types of writing activities to complete their tasks.

3. The third major aspect of the program targets the teaching strategies. Regular use of an interactive pedagogy, such as cooperative learning (work in pairs and small groups) and la *pédagogie du projet*, is an essential part of Intensive Core French as conceived for Newfoundland and Labrador. Through projects, students are able to work cooperatively, assisting each other in their learning as well as undertaking tasks that are of particular interest to them or congruent with their particular skills and abilities in the second language. Projects also permit students to use language in many different contexts, enabling them to use more types of language functions (explaining, gathering information, asking questions, negotiating meaning) as well as integrating knowledge from different sources using complex language structures (scaffolding). The use of this type of pedagogy is crucial not only because of the frequency and complexity of language use but also because of the increased possibilities for the development of cognitive, social and personal capacities, and the organizational skills of the learner. In recommending to teachers the frequent use of more complex interactional types of activities we believe that teachers contribute to the development of the cognitive capacities of the students. Thus, the adoption of an interactive pedagogy related to the accomplishment of intellectually interesting and complex tasks through social interaction with peers enables students to enhance both the linguistic aspects (knowledge) of the learning of a second language as well as the cognitive aspects (capacities) of learning to use it. In addition, it is our belief that the use of this interactive pedagogy enhances the development of other cognitive, social and personal capacities and organizational skills which are transdisciplinary and which contribute to the overall development of the individual. The effective use of this pedagogy, however, is based on the teacher's ability to develop tasks that are carefully sequenced linguistically.

What are the Results of Intensive French?

Eighty percent of the students in the Intensive French program were able to attain at least Level 3 of the French 3200 oral interview, that is "to show some spontaneity in language production and to initiate and sustain simple dialogue" (Level 3 descriptor, French 3200 oral interview protocol developed by the Department of Education of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1992). Results for written production indicated that students were able to write in French at the same average level as native francophones in Quebec in grade 3. In addition, students demonstrated a high degree of accuracy as well as fluency. Thus, all students benefited from the program whatever their ability level.

At this point no quantitative measures of the effect of the Intensive French program on the development of English language skills has been undertaken. However, anecdotal evidence from teachers and principals suggests that no negative effects are indicated. A comparison of year end marks in English language arts for grade 6 for the Intensive French students with their year end marks in grade 5 does not show any noticeable deviations. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents also suggests that students who were considered to be weak in English language skills have, in many cases, not only learned to communicate in French, but have also improved their ability to write in English.

No empirical study of the effects of Intensive French on the learning of other subjects has been undertaken, but anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that no negative effects have been perceived. A comparison of year end marks in other subject areas for the Intensive French students does not indicate any major differences in subject matter attainment.

Furthermore, principals, parents and teachers have commented on the increased self-esteem and confidence of students. Principals have also commented on the increased initiative and responsibility of students participating in the program. Teachers have also commented that students are more willing to use dictionaries, reference works and the Internet to find information, and that they are more autonomous, undertaking more independent work than would be expected for the completion of the regular curriculum.

Overall, the effects of Intensive Core French appear to be more positive than anticipated. It is our hope that this experience will revitalize the core French program, not only in Newfoundland and Labrador, but in the rest of Canada as well as it is envisaged that Intensive French will eventually expand to some other provinces in Canada.

¹ A longer version of this paper was presented at the Conference of the Modern Language Council of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, October 2000. To be published in *Mosaic*.

² We would like to thank the teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador for being the pioneers in this experiment.

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