

Lessons learned from Intensive French

Abstract

Through research and classroom observation undertaken while developing the Intensive French program in Canada, new perspectives on the teaching and learning of second languages in a school situation have been gained. Eight of these perspectives are presented in this article: the role of primary Core French, the amount of time necessary to develop spontaneous communication, the use of a transdisciplinary approach to FSL, the effect of intensive French on lower achievers, the importance of teaching strategies, the redefinition of accuracy and fluency, the role of the teaching of grammar, and the relationship between oral and written language in teaching communication. The first five are primarily practical in nature and have important implications for improved FSL programs, particularly Core French. The last three, as well as having applications for practice, are of considerable theoretical significance and may have an impact on future research in second language education.

Résumé

Grâce à nos recherches et observations de classes au moment où nous avons développé le régime pédagogique du français intensif au Canada, nous avons modifié nos conceptions concernant l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues secondes en milieu scolaire. Nous présentons ici huit « leçons » provenant de notre expérience du français intensif : le rôle du français de base dans les premières années du primaire, le nombre minimal d'heures nécessaires pour le développement d'une communication spontanée en L2, le recours à une approche transdisciplinaire, les effets du français intensif sur les élèves qui ont des difficultés d'apprentissage, l'importance des stratégies d'enseignement, une redéfinition de la précision (*accuracy*) et de l'aisance (*fluency*), le rôle de l'enseignement de la grammaire, et les relations entre l'oral et l'écrit dans l'enseignement de la communication. Les cinq premières « leçons » sont de nature plutôt pratique et ont d'importantes implications susceptibles d'améliorer les programmes de langue, en particulier le français de base. Les trois dernières, en plus de leurs répercussions pratiques, ont une grande importance sur le plan théorique et sont susceptibles d'avoir un impact sur les recherches à venir dans le domaine des langues secondes.

Intensive French (IF) is a new approach to the teaching of French as a second language. It is inserted into the core French program for a five-month period in one of the grades (four, five or six) of the elementary school, when children are about 10-12 years of age. Initially experimented in Newfoundland and Labrador from 1998-2001,¹ IF was developed in its present form to improve the communicative ability of students of core French.² It is now an official option for core French students in grade six in Newfoundland and Labrador; pilot classes are also being implemented in four other Canadian provinces: Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan (grade 6), and New Brunswick and Alberta (grade five). One school district in British Columbia is beginning implementation of the program in grade five in September, 2004, and two other provinces, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, are planning to implement IF next fall (September 2005). Intensive Welsh, based on the model developed in Canada, is now underway in several pilot classes.

Introduction: Intensive French

IF is based on recent empirical research and theory on second language acquisition and is congruent with current educational theory and practice. The three most relevant research findings about second language learning which influenced the conception of IF are: the importance of time and intensity in increasing performance levels (Lapkin, Harley and Taylor, 1993; Lightbown and Spada, 1994); the need for real language use in developing communication skills (Stern et al., 1976; Hymes, 1972; Paradis, 1994; 2004); and the need for clearly understood corrective feedback involving student uptake in developing accurate language use (Netten, 1991; Lyster and Ranta, 1997). The three most important theoretical considerations underlying the development of the program are Paradis' neurolinguistic theory of bilingualism (1994; 2004), Vygotsky's conception of the commonality of the development of intellectual processes across academic subjects (Vygotsky, 1986) and Cummin's hypothesis on the interdependence of languages (Cummins, 1979; Baker and Hornberger, 2001; Netten and Germain, 2004b). In order to ensure the attainment of a high level of communicative ability, the constant use of an

interactive pedagogy is also a required aspect of IF. This characteristic is based on the importance of enabling input to become intake (Van Lier, 1988); the crucial role of output in developing communication skills (Swain, 1985); and the need to ensure that accuracy is developed as a skill in congruence with fluency in real language use (Netten and Germain, 2000). The use of interactive teaching/learning strategies contributes not only to the development of communication skills in French but also enhances the overall intellectual development of the students (neo-piagetan school of social psychology: Doise and Mugny, 1981; Mugny and Carrugati, 1989; Perret-Clermont, 1979).

While IF has much in common with both core and immersion approaches to the teaching of FSL, it can be clearly distinguished from both. In contrast with immersion, no academic subjects are taught in French; in contrast with core, French is taught as a means of communication using a language arts-literacy approach. Consequently, the principles of the National Core French Study (LeBlanc, 1990; Stern, 1982) have been modified in developing the curriculum for IF (Netten and Germain, 2004c).

The distinguishing characteristics of IF are twofold: increased time and intensity, which entails a reduction of time for other subjects during the intensive semester, and teaching strategies focussing on language use. Fifty to 80% of the school day is conducted in French for the intensive semester, increasing from 3 to 4 times the exposure to French as the means of communication for students: for example, from 90 hours to approximately 300 hours of intensive exposure to the language. In order to obtain this increased time in a concentrated period, the regular curriculum is re-organized, reducing by almost 50 % the amount of time for English arts and other subjects. Although less time is given to the regular curriculum, all the learning outcomes for all the subjects for the grade are attained (Netten and Germain, 2000).

Mathematics, subjects generally taught by specialists such as music and physical education, as well as religion in some school districts, are retained in English.

The results of the program have been positive. Tests of oral and written production conducted with IF students in four provinces indicate that students are able to sustain a conversation, with some spontaneity, on topics related to their level of cognitive development and interests (Germain, Netten and Movassat, 2004). This result is superior to that generally attained by core French students at the end of grade 6; in two provinces where empirical data has been collected, the level is similar to core French students at the end of grade 9 or 10. For writing, students are able to compose a narrative composition in a manner similar to Quebec francophones at grade 3.5; accuracy is similar to results for Quebec francophones at grade 3 and fluency similar to results for grade 4 Quebec francophones (Germain, Netten and Séguin, 2004). No negative effects on English language skill development have been reported (Germain and Netten, 2004). Overall, students participating for five months in an IF program demonstrate, in addition to improved French language communication skills, an increase in self-esteem, autonomy and personal organizational skills, as well as enhanced motivation to study French.³

Lessons learned from Intensive French: New perspectives on teaching/learning a second language

In implementing the IF program in the various provinces, classroom observations have been made frequently in participating schools and considerable qualitative and quantitative data have been collected (Netten and Germain, 2002). Through working with the program, and the empirical research undertaken, the researchers have gained several new perspectives on the teaching and learning of second languages in a school situation. Eight new perspectives will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Lesson 1: Core French in short daily doses (drip-feed method of instruction) in grades 1 to 4 contributes little to the development of communicative ability in French

Oral interviews were administered by the Ministry of Education in one province at the beginning of grade 5 with students in six classrooms who had been enrolled in core French since grade 1. The average level of performance of these students was at level 1 on the provincial interview scale: isolated words or expressions, essentially no ability to communicate. There were no significant differences amongst the classrooms (Table 1).

[INSERT Table 1 HERE]

There are several reasons why this result could occur. Firstly, the development of a skill, and communication in a second language is a skill, requires considerable sustained practice. Short periods of French do not give students enough time to develop oral skills. Secondly, the brief exposure to French, even if it occurs daily, is interrupted by learning other subjects in English; English predominates in the school day. As a result there is no retention of French. Students interviewed said, ‘When you walk out of the room, you forget it.’ ‘It does not stay in your head.’ ‘I knew yesterday; the teacher told us. But, I don’t remember today.’ This lack of progress, unfortunately, can contribute to the development of a negative attitude towards the learning of French. Many students become demotivated, or even antagonistic to the learning of French. Some students at grade 5 offered various comments voluntarily indicating their negative reactions to the program with considerable force.

Our experience suggests that early exposure to FSL must be sufficiently intense for students to reach at least a minimum level of spontaneous communication, as is the case in early immersion, for example, for the learning experience to be considered worthwhile. If students are not able to interact even minimally in the language after three or four years of study, it is questionable

whether the time and resources deployed in this exercise are well-spent. Brief periods of French in the primary and early elementary grades, when that language is not reinforced either inside or outside the school, seem to be an ineffective way of introducing second language study. In order to improve core French, we believe that the program should begin with a period of intense exposure to the language so that a level of spontaneous communication can be reached as quickly as possible. This period of intensity can then be followed by a program based on a limited number of hours of instruction per day, but the content of the program could be greatly enriched. Such a program would enable students to develop a much higher level of communicative ability and motivation, as well as a more positive attitude to learning French.

Lesson 2: At least 250 hours of intense exposure to French is required to reach a level of spontaneous communication

The attainment of a level of spontaneous communication in students' first exposure to French seems to be essential. Once students can interact spontaneously in French, they are more motivated to learn, and use, the language. In addition, they are more autonomous learners (Germain et Netten, forthcoming b). They can benefit more from classroom input, turning more of it into intake, and are able and willing to seek out and initiate interaction in the language (for a more detailed discussion of the importance of the development of WTC – willingness to communicate – see MacIntyre et al., 2003).

The variety of numbers of hours of instruction represented by the many classrooms experimenting IF in the first years of the project, and the results achieved in oral and written production, have enabled us to determine a minimum number of intensive hours required to attain a level of spontaneous communication. While results are not directly proportional to number of hours of instruction, there are some general patterns which are important (teaching

strategies used are also a significant factor: see Netten, 2001 and Netten and Germain, 2002). As may be seen in Table 2, where the number of hours of instruction was between 200 and 250, an average level of performance on the oral scale used of level 3, described as being able to communicate with some spontaneity, was attained.

[INSERT Table 2 HERE]

Lesson 3: Reducing time for English and other subjects by 50% in IF does not affect negatively the attainment of grade level outcomes

Criterion-referenced tests in English language arts given by the departments of Education in two provinces have demonstrated that, after participating in IF, students do not score below their peers who have not taken IF. In Table 3, it may be seen that students in IF scored significantly higher than their peers in the regular program who spent the recommended amounts of time on English language arts in all of the subtests of the provincial assessment.

[INSERT Table 3 HERE]

In another province, results were similar: students in IF scored higher than their peers in the regular program in English reading, English writing, and in science. In both provinces students in IF also scored significantly higher in mathematics, even though there was no reduction in the mathematics time schedule. It is interesting to note that students have only French and mathematics in the intensive semester, and therefore, have more time for mathematics homework than during the regular semester. In most classes included in these tests, some selection of students occurred. Parents were given the option of placing their child in IF; where fewer children were selected for the program than those wishing to participate in it, selection was made on a voluntary basis or in order to maintain the profile of an average classroom. In several situations, immersion programs were also available, and those opting for IF were those whose

parents had not chosen early immersion for their child. Thus, while selection is a factor, results represent those of students from a wide range of ability levels. The higher scores for IF students in the results of these provincial assessments suggest that the extra time devoted to learning French in the IF program does not cause students to under perform in the attainment of the outcomes for English language arts, science and mathematics.

These results are congruent with the theory that learning a second language for communicative purposes contributes to the development of cognitive skills (Bialystock, 2001). In practice, the curriculum developed for IF is based on a transdisciplinary model of learning; it contains tasks modelled on those specified in other subjects of the curriculum for the grade level, ensuring that cognitive processes targeted by other aspects of the curriculum are included; in addition, the language arts approach taken to the teaching of the L2 in IF reinforces the literacy development of the students (Netten & Germain, 2000; Netten and Germain, 2004c; Germain & Netten, forthcoming a).

Lesson 4: Learning to communicate in French is a positive experience for lower-performing students

IF was developed to enable students of all levels of ability to improve their communication skills in French without negative effects on their English language development or achievement in other subject areas. To date, no quantitative analysis of test results for lower performing students has been undertaken, but interviews have been conducted with special education teachers, parents and students about the effects of the program on the lower-performers. Overall results of the program indicate that lower achieving students, as well as developing some skill in communicating in French, show an increase in self-esteem, self-confidence and autonomy, as

well as being more accepted by their classmates (Germain et Netten, 2004). In many cases, there is also improvement in English language development.

There are four hypotheses as to why these results are achieved.

1. *Time factor.* With the intensive French program 20% more time is devoted to the development of literacy skills. In IF, combining the time for French with the time in English, students spend more time on language literacy development than in the regular curriculum. For lower performing students, the increase in time devoted to literacy development is very important as often lower performing students need more time to reach levels of language development similar to those of other students. However, the percentage of time is not the only factor.⁴
2. *“Second chance” hypothesis.* In IF, students are taught to read and to write in French. For lower performing students, this procedure gives them the opportunity to relearn strategies for effective reading and writing a second time. In doing this, they are often able to learn strategies more effectively than they did the first time. Learning the strategies in a different language is also more motivating. They are not doing the same thing that they have been doing for years that has been associated for them with lack of success.
3. *Psychological factors.* In IF, lower performing students are not so different from the other students in the classrooms. They are all beginners in learning French. As a result, lower performing students are not perceived by the others in the class or themselves as being less able to succeed.
4. *Interactive teaching strategies.* In IF, the use of group work and learning through projects is encouraged. These strategies are helpful to the lower performing students as they are not as

isolated in their learning and are part of a group. Other group members take a certain responsibility for helping them to learn.

Learning French through an intensive program is a much more positive experience for lower performing students than learning French through a core program (Wiss, 1989). It is interesting to note that, of 3300 children in the elementary grades who have participated in IF since 1998, *not one has withdrawn from the program.*

Lesson 5: Learning to communicate in French requires the use of interactive teaching strategies

There is a considerable body of both theory and research which has concluded that the teacher does not play an important role in the learning of a second language. Empirical data from several researchers has shown that teaching does not have a positive effect on learning (for example: Gass and Selinker, 1992; Krashen, 1981; Pienemann, 1989). Our research supports the point of view that the strategies used by a teacher are crucial in determining the results for students.

Previous research appears to have been based on a reduced view of language and of language teaching. The emphasis was on language as accurate use of forms, and of language teaching as transmission of declarative knowledge about accurate forms. This limited view of language and language teaching results in the use of teaching strategies that do not, in fact, enhance the development of accurate and fluent communication. For our research we have used a different perspective; we have defined language as the ability to communicate, which implies the development of both accuracy and fluency, and language teaching as creating the conditions in which students can learn to communicate with accuracy and fluency. As may be seen in Table 4, results from a case study of two comparable classrooms indicate that it is in the classroom where over 50% of the teaching strategies used focused on the development of fluency, or accuracy

integrated in fluency that students achieved significantly superior results in both oral and written communication (Netten, 2001). Students in the classroom where 58% of teaching strategies focussed on accuracy scored significantly lower on measures of accuracy evaluated during a real communication situation, i.e., an oral interview.

[INSERT Table 4 HERE]

These results indicate that the type of teaching strategies used affects significantly the development of the ability of the students to communicate both orally and in writing.

Lesson 6: New definitions of accuracy and fluency are required to enhance research on the learning/teaching of second languages

The results of the case study described above suggest that there is no direct relationship between accuracy in spontaneous communication and accuracy taught as declarative knowledge. There are two important implications of this conclusion. First of all, since accuracy as knowledge does not have a pronounced effect on accuracy in authentic communication, the conclusions of earlier research that teaching has little or no effect on results achieved can be explained. If teaching a language is seen as teaching knowledge of accurate forms of the language, then teaching will have little effect on the accurate use of the language in real communication. Secondly, learning to use language accurately in spontaneous communication requires teaching accuracy as a skill rather than as knowledge.

Our research has led us to develop new definitions for both accuracy and fluency that are more congruent with the paradigm of communicative language teaching. Generally speaking in second language teaching, accuracy has been conceived as knowledge of the forms of language. We would like to propose a redefinition of accuracy as the correct knowledge of language or the ability to use language correctly in authentic communication, (a skill as well as

knowledge). These two aspects are quite separate and not interdependent (Paradis, 1994; 2004); therefore, we would distinguish two types of accuracy: *accuracy-knowledge* and *accuracy-skill* (Netten and Germain, 2002; Netten and Germain, in preparation).

In second language teaching, fluency has generally been considered a phonetic phenomenon, consisting of speed of delivery, pauses, hesitations, rephrasing, etc. (Riggenbach, 2000).

According to us, it is not just a phonetic phenomenon which is discerned at the surface level of language; features, such as, pauses, hesitations, reformulations, etc., are only outward manifestations of a problem that exists at a much deeper level. Speakers of an L2, when they hesitate or reformulate what they are trying to communicate are showing that they are having difficulty making all the connections necessary to express their thoughts. Should a speaker of French wish to say: *Nous allons au cinéma à sept heures*, there are many decisions that must be made: verb ending for *aller*, form of the preposition *à* with *le cinéma*, how to pronounce the sounds of the words, what intonation to use, as well as making links between the message to be transmitted and the statements for transmitting it, and between those statements and the socio-cultural communication situation. The extent to which any of these decisions is being made consciously has an effect upon the speed of delivery; the length of pauses, the number of hesitations, and the degree of reformulation depend on the ease with which the speaker of the L2 can put together all the elements of an utterance. Fluency, therefore, is the ability to make all these connections with ease, in other words unconsciously. We would define fluency as the ability to combine with ease the many components of language in an authentic communication situation (Netten and Germain, 2002; Netten and Germain, in preparation).

These new definitions have far-reaching implications for classroom practices for the teaching of a second language for communicative purposes.

Lesson 7: Explicit knowledge is not necessary for accurate oral production; implicit competence is

Our new definitions of accuracy and fluency lead to a change in the role and importance of teaching grammar for oral communication. It is not necessary for young students (ages 10 to 12) to learn grammatical forms or rules before being able to construct sentences; the learning of these rules often leads to over-generalizations, to misapplications and to lack of fluency. The development of both accuracy and fluency in communication requires the continuous and uninterrupted use of the language in authentic communication situations. This point of view developed from our classroom observations and research is supported by neurological theory and research (Paradis, 1994; 2004). Explicit knowledge, which is conscious knowledge, is stored in the declarative memory; implicit knowledge, which is intuitive or not conscious, involves the procedural memory. Research has shown that these two memories are located in different parts of the brain and that there is no direct connection between them. Knowledge that is stored in the declarative memory is not available to be used in the procedural memory. When engaging in communication, which takes place relatively rapidly, without conscious thought about language forms and structures, it is the procedural memory which is involved. The explicit knowledge, stored in the declarative memory, cannot be brought to bear on the procedural; explicit knowledge is not necessary for accurate oral production.

However, implicit competence is (Paradis, 1994; 2004). Language forms are learned by students while they are discussing a topic of interest. Their attention is focussed on the discussion, but they are also acquiring at the same time the language forms and structures needed to communicate about the topic. This is what intensive French does in emphasizing a theme approach that enables students to develop communication skills while concentrating on learning

about a topic that is of interest to them. Modelling by the teacher, and models in the language-rich environment surrounding the students, supply the input; this point of view has some similarities with the view of Krashen (1981). Students must, however, use and re-use this language in authentic communication situations in order to proceduralize it; this point of view is related to the importance of output as described by Swain (1985). What is different, however, is the realization that students do not proceduralize the language rules; what is proceduralized is the actual language used by the students (Paradis, 1994; 2004). Students do not need to be aware of the rules of language in order to communicate orally accurately. Analysis of the language can be undertaken, but is much more useful after some degree of competence in communicating in the language has been attained.

Lesson 8: Explicit knowledge is necessary for certain aspects of accurate written production

However, the situation is different for written language. This is due in part to the fact that written language is produced more slowly than oral language and there is time to bring conscious knowledge to bear on the communication. It is also due to the fact that there are many aspects of written language which are not evident in oral language, for example, the way the plural form of a verb, such as *ils parlent* is written. This aspect of accurate language use in writing is learned more effectively and more efficiently if taught explicitly.

In the early stages of communicative language teaching, a distinction should be made between oral and written language. Oral and written language each has its specificity. Aspects, such as pronunciation, intonation and the prosodic features of language pertain to oral expression; aspects, such as spelling, accents (in many cases), verb-subject agreements, are peculiar to written language.

[INSERT Fig. 1 HERE]

At the beginning stages of L2 development, learning to communicate in written form is a refinement of oral communication ability. In learning to write in the L2, students extend their conscious knowledge of the relationship between sounds and symbols in the new language, and the language forms that are specific to a visible form of the L2.

Our experience in IF classrooms has demonstrated that in using a communicative language teaching approach with young children, language structures are learned most effectively and efficiently when they are learned implicitly through oral use first. These structures may then be transferred to writing, and the aspects of language which are specific to writing can then be taught explicitly. This distinction reduces considerably the amount of explicit teaching of the L2 that needs to take place. In the expression, *J'ai onze ans*, for example, students do not need to be given a rule for the use of the verb *avoir* with expressions of age in French. The expression, *J'ai ...ans*, can simply be learned orally. If there is a mistake in the use of the verb, the correction must be undertaken at the oral level, by use and re-use of expressions dealing with age. The aspect that is of importance from the point of view of writing is to learn that, in this case, the sound is transcribed by the form *j'ai*. This is not something that the student can learn by oral use of the language alone. Furthermore, at this stage of learning the structures of an L2 are common to both the oral and written form; students learn to write what they can say.

Conclusion

There are many points of view, and many myths, about the way second languages should be taught/learned. In developing and implementing IF, many of these myths have come to our attention and our point of view about FSL has been refined. In this paper we have stated that:

- ◆ Core French in the early grades is not an effective way to begin FSL instruction.

- ◆ FSL programs of less than 250 hours of intensive instruction are not capable of enabling students to reach a level of spontaneous communication.
- ◆ Reducing time for English and other subjects by 50% does not have negative effects on the attainment of the outcomes for the other subjects in that year if a transdisciplinary approach to learning French is adopted.
- ◆ Learning to communicate in French can be a positive experience for lower achievers in an IF classroom.
- ◆ Teaching strategies used have a significant effect on results achieved by students in oral and written production.
- ◆ Traditional conceptions of accuracy and fluency are not adequate to enhance research on communicative language teaching theory and practice.
- ◆ Implicit competence, not explicit knowledge, is necessary for accurate oral production.
- ◆ Oral and written language require differentiated teaching strategies at the beginning stages of second language learning; explicit knowledge of language rules specific to writing is necessary for accurate written production.

Taken together, these conclusions are important in developing a new and more effective way of improving the core French program. Given that the federal government has established a goal of increasing to 50% the number of students graduating from high school who are functionally competent in their second language by 2013, improvement of the core French program is essential (Government of Canada, 2003). New Brunswick, the only officially bilingual province in Canada, has set its goal for functionally bilingual graduates at 75% of high school graduates by 2013 (Government of New Brunswick, 2003). The conclusions reached from our research give some indication of changes that should be made in current practices in order to make core

French a more effective learning experience. It is only by the development of more effective core French programs that the expressed goals of governments can be achieved.

In addition, the conclusions reached may be divided into two groups. The first five are primarily practical in nature, and have implications for improved FSL programs. The last three have also considerable theoretical significance and, as a consequence, may have a significant impact on future research on the teaching/learning of second languages and contribute to the development of a more sophisticated understanding of second language acquisition.

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Table 1 – Oral production results after 4 years of Core French (N=153; 6 classes)

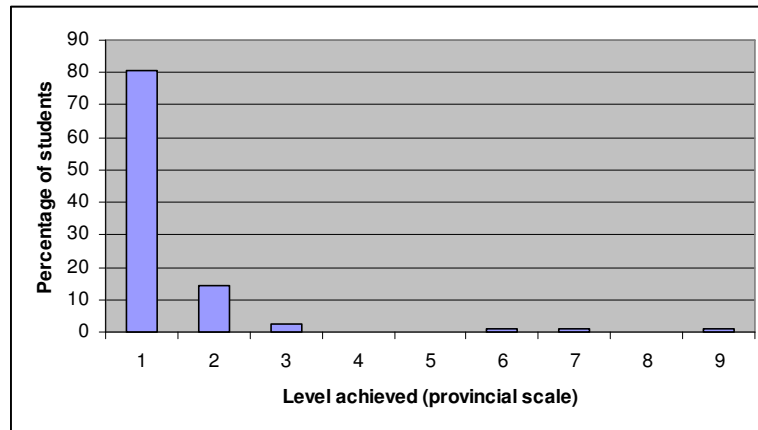


Table 2 – Level achieved/number of intensive hours

Number of hours of intensity	Level	Descriptor
150	Level 2	predictable language
200-250	Level 3	some spontaneity
250+	Level 4	considerable spontaneity

Table 3 – CRT results for English and Math, end of grade 6 (6 schools, 18 classes, 7 Intensive)

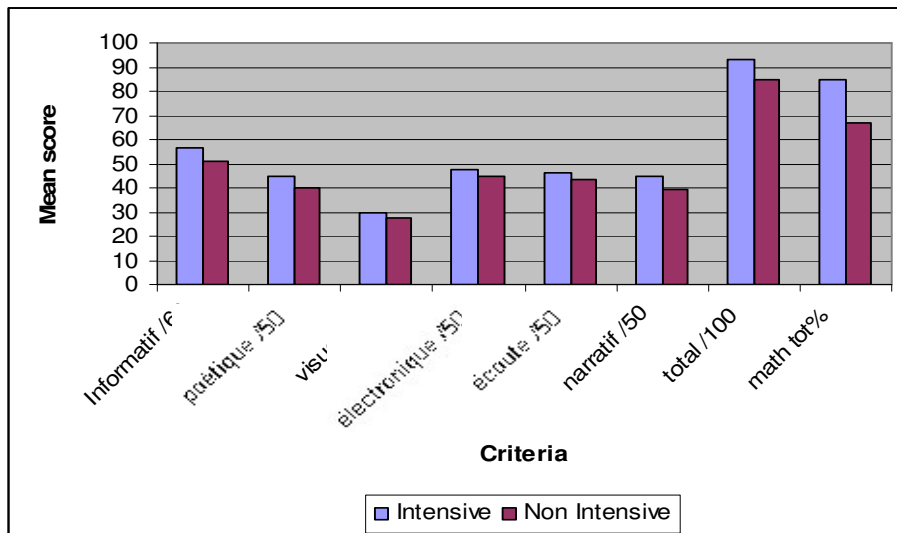
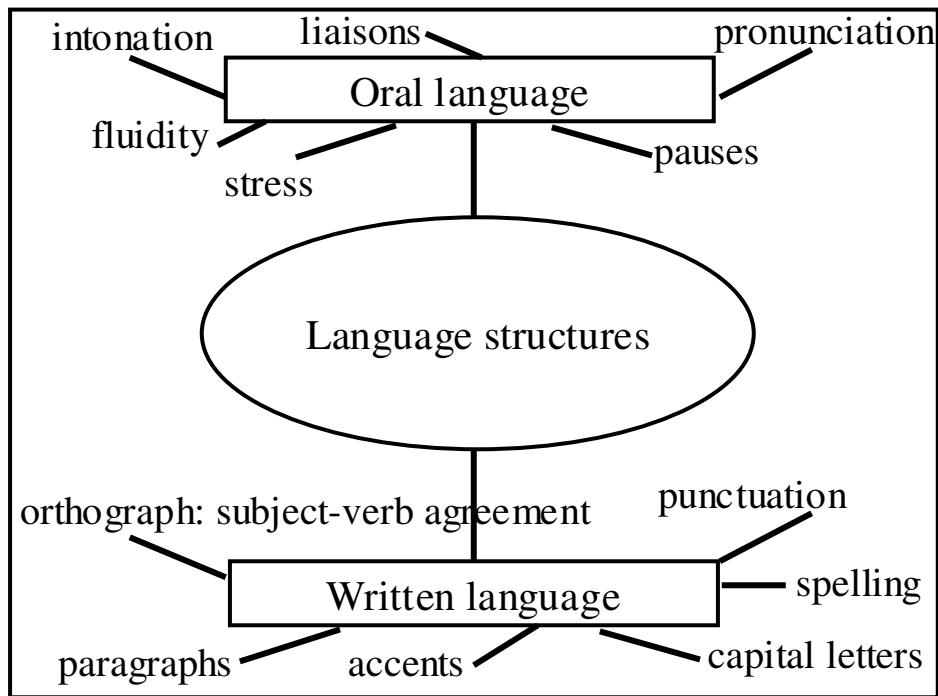


Table 4 – Effects of teaching strategies on communication (accuracy and fluency)

Group	Number of students	Number of hours	% of teaching strategies			Results	
			Accuracy (<i>savoir</i>)	Fluency (skill)	Integration (skills)	Oral production (/25)	Written production (grade level)
1	29	363	58	5	37	17,07	2,66
2	31	372	31	15	54	22,07*	3,13

* significant at ,05

Fig. 1 – Relationship between oral and written language



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² The first experiments with Intensive French were undertaken by Lise Billy, French Consultant with the Mille-Iles School District, north of Montreal, in 1975 (Billy, 1980; Netten and Germain, 2004a). Current IF programs, however, have a different and more complex theoretical base.

³ A survey of the number of students electing to study French in Grade 10 has been undertaken in two school districts. Preliminary results indicate that most IF students enrol in French at grade 10, a considerable change from previous enrolment patterns. In addition, a large percentage of students enrol in late immersion programs, although this is not a goal of the IF program and remains the personal choice of the students and their families.

⁴ Teaching strategies are also crucial. See Lesson 5 below.