# What immersion education still needs:
## Views from the Irish Year Abroad experience

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**ABSTRACT**

*Immersion education is justifiably acclaimed. This success is achieved in the classroom and relates to language structures. Recent research, however, demonstrates that one area of acquisition lags behind in immersion speakers' speech; sociolinguistic competence. Quantitative studies show that acquisition of native speaker variation patterns is less successful in the classroom than in situations of contact with native speakers. This paper provides quantitative evidence on the production of Irish students on a year in France, whose rates and patterns of native variation approximate native speakers more closely than those of students whose access to input is restricted to immersion classroom. The paper presents data in French from secondary level speakers at Irish immersion schools and from Irish Year Abroad university learners, comparing them to Canadian immersion students and charts the effect of contact with native speakers. We conclude that an element of naturalistic learning might be incorporated into the acquisition process of immersion speakers at university.*


**RÉSUMÉ**

*Le succès de l'éducation immersion est bien connu. L'immersion a lieu dans la salle de classe et se réfère normalement aux structures linguistiques. Les recherches récentes démontrent pourtant qu'un aspect de l'acquisition connait moins de succès que les autres : la compétence sociolinguistique. Cet article présente des données quantitatives sur la langue d'étudiants irlandais qui passent une année en France. Les taux des variantes ainsi que les structures de variation chez ceux-ci sont plus proches de ceux des locuteurs natifs que ceux dont l'intrant s'acquiert uniquement dans la classe d'immersion. L'article présente des données en français sur des étudiants d'immersion irlandais et des étudiants universitaires (année passée en France), les compare aux étudiants canadiens d'immersion, et montre l'effet de contact avec les locuteurs natifs. Notre conclusion : le programme de langues de l'université devrait contenir un élément d'apprentissage naturel.*

## Introduction

The Canadian immersion education experience has been one of the most successful language experiments in the world. However, researchers have found that the French spoken by immersion learners is not actually native-like. While having an excellent proficiency level, the second language (L2) speakers do make some mistakes in grammar and structures. But, more importantly, students in immersion programmes feel that they are "not like" native speaker youth of their age. Research indicates that one of the main reasons for this feeling is difficulty with one particular area of L2 acquisition: sociolinguistic competence. This article will address this particular area of language acquisition and analyse the role it plays in the learning process. First we evaluate the literature on sociolinguistic competence in relation to Canadian learners in immersion education and then focus on the experience of Irish learners in relation to the same area of acquisition. Finally conclusions will be drawn as to how this language skill can best be developed throughout the L2 learning process. Results from basic research should provide indications for future policy making in relation to language acquisition in general and in relation to immersion education in Canada.

A secondary and related aim of the paper is to compare three different contexts of acquisition in the light of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence:

1. Immersion education students in Canada;

2. the experience of Year Abroad Irish students in Europe; and

3. the naturalistic context of Anglophone learners in Montreal, reporting on recent research in the three areas, but focussing particularly on the Year Abroad experience with the ultimate view of comparing it with the other two contexts.

For many years, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research focused mainly on the acquisition of the grammar and structures of whatever language people were learning and speaking. Most of the work carried out in the early days of SLA focused on morphology and syntax, and even on a relatively small number of topics such as the acquisition of negation, interrogation, relative clauses. From this very linguistic centred research we learnt a lot about acquisition: the "natural order", developmental sequences, the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition and so on. But in the nineteen eighties, a new strain of SLA research began to look at different aspects of acquisition. It became obvious that knowing a language implies more than a knowledge of some grammatical structures, since communication with real people in real life situations involves more than simply knowledge of linguistic structures. It involves knowledge of other areas of language such as discourse patterns, pragmatic knowledge

and also knowledge of native speaker speech patterns; in short, sociolinguistic competence.

## *Sociolinguistic competence*

Since the late nineties a line of research has been investigating this area of language acquisition which had previously been more or less ignored. Many aspects of this have now been examined, including discourse, pragmatic and general psychosocial aspects of language use. This paper deals specifically with the acquisition by L2 speakers of variation speech patterns as they are used by native speakers, including native-like use of the vernacular at different linguistic levels, phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic. This contrasts with research on variability in relation to categorical forms and focuses on the acquisition of what is variable in native speech. It examines the alternation between various native target forms which have social significance such as *je sais pas* vs *je ne sais pas*. Variationist research sees knowledge of this type of variation as part of linguistic competence and maintains that it goes deep into the grammar of the language (Guy, 1993; Adamson, 2009). For this reason, variationist research on L2 acquisition maintains that this is a crucial part of L2 acquisition also. In the same way as native speakers, L2 speakers develop as part of their acquisition process, a knowledge of frequencies of production of alternating forms as they are found in native speaker speech and to the extent to which they have access to appropriate input.

There have recently been very interesting developments in relation to this area of acquisition in Canada in relation to immersion education (Mougeon, Rehner and Nadasdi, 2004). The immersion education experiment since it started out in St. Lambert in the nineteen sixties has been a resounding success which has become the gold standard for learning languages in classrooms throughout the world. The excellent results of immersion language education are well known and we now have immersion classrooms all over the globe. Despite some initial concerns, earlier outcome-focussed research found that there was no negative effect on L1 development (Lambert and Tucker, 1972; Genesee, 1983; Genesee, Holobow, Lambert, Cleghorn and Walling, 1985; Genesee, 1987). The results of all the research carried out on immersion programmes was reassuring and remains positive to this day (Swain, 2005). The children, when tested on vocabulary, reading comprehension, spelling and writing, were found to be at least equal in standard to children in English medium schools. In fact, they did slightly better. In relation to knowledge of content, the children in immersion education were found again to be better than children in English speaking classes (Krashen, 1984; Swain, 1985; Genesee, 1987; Cenoz and Genesee, 1998). As regards L2 acquisition, the children from immersion programmes did significantly better than those who were not in immersion programmes, and research (Genesee, 1983; Genesee et al., 1985) found that im-

mersion students do as well as Francophone students on listening and reading in French. And they do much better in French than those children in traditional French classes. However, Krashen (1985) and others found that the immersion learners were not fully native-like in terms of pronunciation and other language competences. And one of the language areas which has been found to be less successfully acquired in immersion education is sociolinguistic competence.

Interestingly, unlike the situation in many other countries, reflection on objectives for L2 acquisition is significantly developed in Canada. This area of acquisition (Communicative competence generally) is an implicit government policy objective with regard to second language acquisition programmes in Canada. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2000, p. 5), in its directives for the teaching of French in French immersion programmes, specifies that by the end of their studies, students should:

1. be capable of using familiar and idiomatic phrases
2. be able to express themselves using formal and informal registers
3. be aware of nuances in different varieties of oral French
4. be capable of identifying and understanding accents, lexical variation and varieties of continental and Canadian French.

As noted earlier, the performance of immersion students on skills such as speaking and writing is impressive, and immersion students score like native French speakers on listening and reading comprehension, while using creative communicative strategies. In terms of general effects, immersion provides the closest possible situation to a naturalistic context for acquisition while remaining within a classroom. Content is successfully taught and the children are academically on target. In addition, the psychosocial effects are positive in relation to the students' attitudes to French and the French-speaking community. But, equally, immersion learners are generally found to be not quite native-like in certain areas (such as sociolinguistic competence), and this is beginning to produce studies such as Lyster (1994), which focused on the effect of pedagogical materials in the immersion classroom in relation to sociolinguistic competence.

The detailed evidence for proposing that immersion is less effective for sociolinguistic competence comes from recent work on immersion and the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence that situates itself within the wider research programme mentioned earlier that combines SLA and sociolinguistic theory. This programme's approach is quantitative and variationist and provides detailed empirical evidence of the immersion language studied (for a general description, see Bayley and Regan, 2004).

A significant body of basic research is now being carried out in this area in Canada. Mougeon and his colleagues (Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi, 2003)

investigate the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, and in particular, the acquisition of native speaker variation patterns by learners in immersion programmes in Canada (Mougeon and Rehner, 2001). Mougeon and his colleagues investigate thirteen variables in spoken French in Canada as they are acquired and used by immersion students. They determine to what extent students in immersion programmes have acquired the variation patterns which characterise spoken French in Canada. Can the students emerging from immersion programmes interact appropriately with native speakers of Canadian French? Have they acquired native speaker variation as it relates to formal and informal occasions? The researchers categorise the variables they study according to levels of formality and (importantly) they investigate the input the students receive from teaching materials and teacher speech.

On the whole, they found that immersion speakers tend to use vernacular variants less than native speakers do. For instance, in the case of *nous/on* alteration, immersion students use the standard variant in 44% of occurrences compared to 1% for native speakers (Rehner et al., 2003) and for *ne* usage, the standard variant is used 70% by immersion students, while native speakers of Canadian French use it at only .5%. In addition, certain vernacular features used regularly by native speakers are entirely absent from immersion students speech; for example, the researcher found the restrictive *rien que* 'only' or the first person futur *m'as* 'I will' so frequent in native Canadian French, were absent from the immersion speech. In relation to /l/ deletion, Uritescu, Nadasdi, Mougeon and Rehner (2001) found that French immersion students delete /l/ less than 2% of the time, where native speakers of French in Canada delete about 94% of the time (depending on the context). In addition, where native speakers vary greatly according to style (93% in interview style as opposed to 7% in reading style) the immersion speakers hardly vary at all between reading and interview styles. Thomas (2002) investigates phonetic variation in L2 Canadian speakers of French. He compares Canadian university students who have stayed in Canada to those who have spent a year abroad, for a number of phonetic variables: the use of liaison, schwa and pre-consonantic *il*. As in Regan (1996), the students in Thomas' study after a stay in France approximated more closely native speaker casual rates of variants in all three variables studied, although, equally like the Irish students, the Canadian students also had a tendency to over use the casual variants. Despite having become much closer to native speaker norms than those who did not go abroad, they had not mastered the appropriate proportion of formal versus informal variants, in the way as native speakers vary their speech according to a formal/informal style continuum. Thomas recommends increased contact with native speakers, either by stay abroad experience or by exchanges which bring native speech norms into the classroom. Failing either, he advocates the introduction of spontaneous variants into the classroom French curriculum rather than confining the taught

norms to the formal academic ones.

### Evidence from Irish learners and the Year Abroad:
### ne *deletion, /l/ deletion,* nous/on *alteration and future tense usage*

In Ireland we carried out research on a different context of acquisition; in this case, the Irish L2 speakers went to France for a full academic year. The work included both a longitudinal study and several cross-sectional studies (Regan, 1995, 1996, 2004; Howard, Lemée and Regan, 2006; Howard, 2005, Lemée 2002). The primary study presented is a longitudinal one in 3 main phases, looking at variable deletion of *ne*. This study compared language production from the 3 different times over 3 years:

1. speech of speakers from a traditional language learning classroom in Ireland before they had experience of being in France;

2. after a year spent on a Year Abroad in France; and

3. after a further year back in the traditional classroom.

The study charted the acquisition of a vernacular speech variant in French, the deletion of *ne*, a mildly stigmatised variant. This study of a morphosyntactic feature was followed up by further studies of other variables, /l/ deletion, a morphophonological variable and the alternation of *nous/on* as well as variable use of future tenses; all of these variables are features of vernacular, contemporary spoken French in France. The variationist approach used has the advantage of holding a magnifying glass up to speech by doing fine-grained, empirical analysis providing detail of language use which would otherwise be difficult to access. The principal aim of the study was to define better the role of Year Abroad as a causal variable in the acquisition of native speaker sociolinguistic variation and ultimately to compare this context with others with a view to maximising the benefits of different contexts as a strategy for learning another language.

   The subjects for the first three-year longitudinal study were five informants.[1] These were advanced learners, university students who were studying French as one of two subjects for their BA degree. They had all studied French for five years at secondary school. Several had had short stays in France (two weeks to two months on average) but none had lived there for a long period. Most of them were studying a second European language and all had studied Irish from the age of four or five. They were all about the same age (from nineteen to twenty one years) and were mainly middle class. They participated in a programme (Erasmus), funded by the European Union, which helps university students to spend an academic year in another European country. During

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[1] Subset of a larger longitudinal study of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by seven Irish-English learners of French L2.

the year abroad the students attended the regular courses at the university and got credit for these. They generally lived in university residences. There was a system in place whereby the students were assigned a host French family which invited them on occasion to spend time in their home. This was taken up by the students with varying regularity. In general, the amount of contact with native speakers in interactive situations varied with the individual. Most of them reported an interest in working in and living in a French-speaking country eventually.

In relation to *ne* deletion, the study showed that the speakers deleted considerably more after their stay abroad. In other words, they were approximating roughly — though not exactly — the native speaker norm. A multivariate analysis, in the form of a computer programme designed especially for naturally occurring speech data (Varbrul), was used. This showed, amongst other things, the probability figures for *ne* deletion from Time 1 and Time 2. A separate factor group in the analysis contained two factors: Time 1 (before time abroad) and Time 2 (after time abroad) and the relative importance of each of these stages of development was estimated. A comparison was made which showed whether reweightings of these figures took place and which ones they were.

### Data elicitation

Three sociolinguistic interviews of forty-five minutes to an hour long for each speaker, were tape-recorded by the author. The interviews were transcribed orthographically. Every token of negation was coded in a string which formed the input into the Varbrul program. The production of *ne* in the data represents a choice for the speaker. The speaker chooses either to use the more formal "ne . . . pas", or the more casual "∅ . . . pas". To obtain the most parsimonious model of variation possible, each factor group in each data set was tested for significance. A detailed account of the results can be found in Regan (1996). The general findings of the study were:

1. The overall rate of *ne* deletion increases dramatically between Time 1 and Time 2.

2. The constraint ordering remains the same except for one factor group.

3. The constraint ordering is generally the same as for native speakers and becomes even more similar to them for Time 2 and even Time 3.

Given the dramatic increase in the rate of *ne* deletion after the stay in the native speech community, it seems clear that living abroad for an extended period does something to the learners' usage which classroom input does not. Also of interest is the fact that while the rate of deletion more than doubled, most of the linguistic factors which condition this deletion remained the same. Other studies, for instance, have found that the constraint ordering changed, for

example from low proficiency speakers to high proficiency speakers (Young, 1991). It seems that for these advanced learners of French, their structures in relation to negation remained basically the same, but their sociolinguistic knowledge increased significantly. They have now almost acquired the vernacular grammar of the native speech community. They seem to understand the symbolic power of *ne* deletion for native speakers. In general, the Varbrul analysis showed a close-up picture of the grammar of the learners.

**The third year**

The input which the students received during the third year back in the classroom in Ireland was formal French in general, provided mainly through lectures and small group seminars. The instructors were lecturers, and French "assistants" who, though young people themselves, would have used a relatively formal register in the classes they taught. The students did not maintain links with native speakers they met in France to any significant extent.

These learners of French L2 had spent a year in a native French-speaking environment. Their behaviour in relation to the native community norms and, in particular, the native patterns of variation, had altered considerably. On their return from France, they were now behaving almost like native speakers in relation to the particular variable studied, *ne* deletion. As previously noted, some Year Abroad studies have found similar improvements in proficiency in several areas of language competence. What had not been explored up to this were the long-term benefits of such a stay in the community. One of the research questions which the third phase of the study posed was whether the speakers lose the benefits gained when they return to Ireland and the classroom. Do the students grow less native-like when back in their own country, taking into account the importance of input? Once away from the native speech community and back in the classroom, would the speakers de-colloquialise and behave less like native speakers in relation to *ne* deletion? This would mean that the rate of deletion would decrease.

The Varbrul probability figures for deletion rates for the three years compared were: Year 1: .36, Year 2: .59 and Year 3 was .54. So, where there was a dramatic increase in *ne* deletion after the year abroad (Phase 2), after a year back in the classroom and without further contact with the native speech community (Phase 3), the speakers seem to remain generally stable in their deletion rates.

*Individual differences*

In all three phases, there is considerable variation between individuals. Table 1 compares a subset of speakers (Regan, 1995).

Of the five speakers, three increased from Time 1 to 2, and generally maintained their rates after their return to the classroom. Two, Miles and Cathy, in-

TABLE 1

Rates of deletion for individual speakers in Time 1, Time 2 and Time 3

|        | Time 1 | Time 2 | Time 3 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Judy   | .79    | .93    | .85    |
| Cathy  | .08    | .31    | .44    |
| Sally  | .46    | .30    | .38    |
| Donna  | .00*   | .22    | .14    |
| Miles  | .15    | .39    | .56    |

*In the first analysis, Donna did not delete at all, and so could not be included in the Varbrul analysis. To run the programme it was necessary to collapse three speakers who deleted almost never.

creased their rates of deletion steadily during the three years, even after their return to Ireland. Of those who continued to increase, one reported from introspective accounts that they felt more confident once having the time to "put into practice what they had learnt in France". Interestingly, a similar effect was reported in a case study by Hashimoto (1993) of one student in the home stay environment, which indicates that the student "developed a sensitivity to the feature of variation in Japanese, but that it was not until her return to Australia that she began to incorporate variables of politeness into her speech." Dewaele and Regan (2001) also suggest that individual speakers have to take time to develop the courage to go against prescriptive norms of the classrooms and adopt what they have now learnt to be native speaker norms. The only student who did not increase her rate of deletion after a stay in France reported that she had difficulty in making contact with natives. In addition, she was one of the highest deletors initially and had had short stays in France before the study began. In general, the least proficient speakers made the greatest gains in the acquisition of native patterns of deletion. This concurs with other Year Abroad Studies (Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey, 2004).

So in relation to *ne* deletion, experience of living in France seems to accomplish something that does not happen in the classroom. Contact with native speakers results in a much more native-like use of vernacular speech patterns. In addition, these gains seem to be maintained despite a year of input from prescriptive classes in written French as well as classes in relatively formal register spoken French. These young people seem to have realised that it is somehow important for them to use the non- prestige variants used by young people in France in the same age cohort as themselves. They have probably gathered that these are an index of youth, counter prescriptive norms, and are using them for constructing and maintaining their status as young, competent

French speakers who know that using high rates of prestige variants is not part of youth speech norms.

We carried out similar studies in relation to other such variables. Results were similar. In the case of all of these variables we studied; /l/ deletion, variable use of future tense and *nous/on* alternation, after a stay in the native speech community, native speaker casual variants were used more and the rates of usage became much more like those of native speakers.

## L deletion

L deletion is widespread in native speaker French both in the *Hexagone* and in Canada especially in casual speech. In relation to /l/ deletion, Irish L2 Year Abroad speakers delete considerably more after a year in France (though considerably less than native speakers). We investigated /l/ usage in third person subject pronoun (*il* in personal and impersonal contexts: *elle*, *ils* and *elles*). We found variability in the deletion of /l/ in the speech of Irish L2 speakers even in pre-consonantal position where native speaker deletion is virtually categorical. Although the rates of /l/ deletion are considerably less than those of native speakers, the same factors were found to be significant as those in native speaker speech and the constraint hierarchies observed were also similar. Where the Ontario Canadian Immersion learners deleted /l/ at 2% (Uritescu et al., 2001), results for the Irish learners (Howard et al., 2006) were 4% deletion before their stay in France and, after the Year Abroad, 33% deletion.

## Variable use of future tense

We also studied the variable use of future tense forms by the Irish Year Abroad speakers. According to prescriptive grammars, there are three major variants to express future temporal reference in French (Table 2).

### TABLE 2

Native speaker variation in future tense usage

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Inflected future (IF) | *Pendant l'été, je rendrai visite à ma sœur.* (M–531) |
| 2. Periphrastic future (PF) (*aller* + infinitive verb) | *Je conseillerais à quelqu'un qui va aller en France de le faire.* (J–92) |
| 3. Present tense with a future value (P) | *Ils viennent cet été avec leur fille.* (N–104) |

These forms are considered as variants of the same socio-grammatical variable, with the same referential value of future time reference. Prescriptive grammars have always maintained that the inflected future refers to a distant

future, while the periphrastic future is used in order to present an event in a near future. However, variationist studies of native speaker speech find that, in fact, most native speakers use the periphrastic future most of the time (Poplack and Dion, 2004).

After a year abroad, all three possible variants are used by L2 speakers to express the temporal future. But, like native speakers, Irish L2 speakers who have spent a year in France have a strong tendency to use the inflected future in formal style and the periphrastic future or the present in informal style. In fact, this study has shown that in the case of future temporal reference, Irish learners of French L2 seem to be sensitive to the possible change in progress in relation to the use of periphrastic future and inflected future.

### *Nous/on* **alternation**

As in the case of the other variables studied, in relation to *nous/on* alternation, after the Year Abroad, the L2 speakers generally follow the same patterns of native speech for gender, style and some linguistic factors such as specificity and restriction (although rates are considerably below those of native speakers). So even though there is stylistic variation in the use of the mildly marked pronoun *on* compared to the more formal *nous*, as in native speaker speech, it does not reach the near-categorical use of *on* that French native speakers display. These findings relating to a relatively 'new' variable in spoken French as opposed to the more stable *ne* deletion, are interesting. It could be that the generally all pervasive, productive and stable nature of the older variable *ne* is more available on many levels to the L2 speaker. A frequency of input argument could be made for the near native rates of *ne* deletion in the L2 speech, whereas the slightly less frequent and less stable *nous/on* alternation may be less salient for the L2 speaker. L1 influence has also been seen to play a role in *nous/on* alternation in the L2 French of Anglophone speakers, whereas this is much less the case in *ne* deletion. L2 speakers seem to react differently to older and newer variables.

In general we can conclude in relation to all of the above variables, that the experience of the year spent in France seems to cause a significant change in the rates of use of non-prestige variants on the part of the L2 speakers. After a year in France, the speakers seem to approach native speaker rates and, in addition, they seem to follow similar constraint ordering in relation to the factors affecting the variants as native speakers.

### *Three contexts of acquisition and sociolinguistic competence*

We compared variation pattern usage in the speech of L2 speakers in language immersion learners in Canada, in that of Year Abroad Irish learners in France, and finally in Anglophone L2 speakers in Montreal. The comparison showed a cline in the rates according to the context, ranging from least native-like rates

and variation patterns in the immersion speech to most native-like in the speakers who live in the community, with the Year Abroad speakers between the two but closer to the native speaker rates. In relation to *ne* deletion, Mougeon and his colleagues (2004) found that the Immersion students had a rate of 72% 'ne' retention. Sankoff, Thibault, Nagy, Blondeau, Fonollosa and Gagnon (1997) found that Canadian Anglophone speakers in a naturalistic setting in Montreal had rates of 89% 'ne' deletion, and Regan (1996) found that Irish Year Abroad speakers had rates of 32% deletion rate in pre year abroad speech and 67% deletion rate post year abroad speech.

As indicated the Year Abroad experience significantly affects the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence and especially in the fine tuning of variation patterns as the L2 speakers perceive them in native speech. It seems likely that contact with native speakers is crucial for this aspect of acquisition. Results in Regan (1995) seem to indicate that it was in fact the degree of contact with native speakers of their own age which made the difference in relation to the acquisition of vernacular speech. Ni Chasaide and Regan (2010) furthermore found that Irish secondary school students in Irish immersion schools with even a very little contact with native speakers during short visits to France, also seem to be sensitive to the usage patterns of native speakers.

Mougeon and his colleagues (2004) conclude, in relation to the Canadian immersion classroom speakers, that the discrepancy between sociolinguistic variation in the speech of native speakers and of immersion speakers is due to lack of prolonged contact with native speakers. The students are rarely exposed to informal or vernacular variants. This is confirmed by the work of Nagy, Blondeau and Auger (2003) who found that those Anglophone speakers who lived in the native speech community (for instance, Montreal), used native speech variation patterns and rates much more than immersion speakers whose learning is confined to the immersion classroom with an external Anglophone context.

## *Conclusion*

We may conclude from this research that immersion learners, already at an extremely high proficiency level from their prolonged immersion experience, could benefit even further from home stays in francophone families. In Quebec, for instance, home stays have been found to have positive effects in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence (Lapkin et al., 1995). Likewise, Freed et al. (2004) found, in relation to American students of French L2, that fluency increased significantly in an intensive domestic immersion context of acquisition where the classroom immersion experience was complemented by "daily opportunities to use French through participation on a soccer team, in a French School choir, and in painting classes, weekly musical performances, films and a cabaret offered on a regular basis." Enhancing these activities were frequent

trips (for example, to Montreal), parties, and cultural events to promote aware-ness of a diverse Francophone culture and the development of French language skills.

However, it seems that it is not sufficient to conclude that simply being in the native speech community is enough to necessarily enhance proficiency in sociolinguistic competence. Stays in the target language community can vary considerably according to the degree of contact with native speakers which is possible for the learners and equally which is sought by the learner (see, for in-stance, Regan, 1995 and Wilkinson, 1998). However, research has shown that, on the whole, such stays in the speech community (provided there is reasonable contact with native speakers) significantly enhance sociolinguistic competence (Regan, 1996, 1997). In relation to the acquisition of colloquial vocabulary, for instance, Dewaele and Regan (2001), in a study of colloquial words in L2 French by Dutch and Irish learners, found that

1. the Irish learners used significantly more colloquial words after a Year in France, and

2. the amount of classroom instruction was found to have no predictive value on the use of colloquial vocabulary in advanced French L2.

Only active authentic communication in the target language seems to stimulate the use of colloquial vocabulary.

The many quantitative studies carried out within the variationist paradigm all seem to indicate that being in the native speaker community is signifi-cantly beneficial to the acquisition of native speaker variation. The findings emerge from variationist studies of Canadian L2 French; Blondeau, Fonollosa, Gagnon, Lefebvre, Poirier and Thibault (1995), Sankoff et al. (1997), Blon-deau, Nagy, Sankoff and Thibault (2002), Mougeon et al. (2004) all find the same effect for contact with native speakers. It seems from the research on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in Canada's immersion programmes as well as on Irish learners of French during a Year Abroad, that accommo-dation to native speaker norms is more successful with contact with native speakers in the native speech community. The Irish learners' experience of liv-ing in France for a year is relatively close to the Anglophone speakers in a French speaking community studied by Sankoff (2002). This is not to say that sociolinguistic competence cannot be acquired in the immersion classroom. To some extent, it does take place. In addition, Lyster (1992, 1994) has shown that specially tailored pedagogical materials can greatly help the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence (he demonstrates this in relation to *tu/vous* usage, for instance). Clearly the immersion classroom can be a positive environment for the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, but it looks like the expe-rience of being in the native speech community for a Year Abroad seems to

develop, even more, the acquisition of vernacular grammar. Future research may well suggest ways of tailoring the input of the immersion classroom to the needs of speakers in relation to sociolinguistic competence, an aspect of L2 acquisition which is currently lagging behind other areas. A combination of modified input and the addition of stays abroad/home stays/ or alternates of these may well provide the means of addressing this area of the learning process.

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