
Postface:
On blind men, elephants, and immersion programs:
Reflections on the 2017 university immersion symposium

Jérémie Séror

jseror@uottawa.ca

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Introduction

On the 11th and 12th of May 2017, the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute (OLBI) at the University of Ottawa hosted the symposium: “Immersion in higher education: Where do we stand today?”¹ This symposium was a wonderful opportunity to review the richness, complexity and plural dimensions associated to the concept of immersion. Indeed, the goal of the symposium was to not only mark the 10-year anniversary of the launch of the *Régime d’immersion en français* (RIF) at the University of Ottawa but also to bring together key stakeholders and specialists from various regions of Canada and the world to *faire le point* and review what has been accomplished in recent years when we refer to the application of content-based language teaching to the context of post-secondary education.

The conference succeeded in highlighting a wide range of perspectives and to share the unique contexts, features, and concerns associated with the application of this ever-popular approach in the field of applied linguistics. Experts, political representatives, program administrators, professors, and students were all represented, each talk adding new depth and insights into the topic of university-based immersion programs.

The symposium underscored how far things have evolved since the original immersion experiment completed in Saint Lambert a little more than fifty years ago (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) and how the key principles of immersion have been applied to tertiary programs. The symposium also confirmed the idea that the *immersion formula* which was made famous in the Canadian context continues to flourish in schools and universities around the world (Tedick, Christian, & Fortune, 2011). It remains an engaging approach which generates considerable interest and is seen as holding a great deal of potential for

¹ immersionconf.sciencesconf.org/resource/page?id=5.

institutions seeking to promote language learning and development (Knoerr, Weinberg, & Gohard-Radenkovic, 2016).

We saw as well that immersion is far from the only label that matters any more. Whether it be university-level immersion, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), content-based instruction (CBI), integrated content and language in higher education (ICLHE), or variations of French-, English-, or Catalan-medium instruction, content-based language learning programs abound in universities (Wilkinson, & Walsh, 2015).

Each has its own specificities, often the result of local forces and goals, but all stay true to the original intent of immersion—that is, to offer a curriculum which integrates disciplinary content development with literacy development in an additional language. These institutions share challenges linked to the implementation of policies to establish and support program structures that foster disciplinary content and language development (Smit & Dafouz, 2012).

In doing so, the symposium helped identify various challenges, accomplishments, and future research avenues associated to the continued application of this approach both in Canadian contexts and abroad.

The challenges of university-level immersion

A false dichotomy

First, a key struggle identified by presenters focused on universities' continued attachment to a representation of language and content as separate and independent (Airey, 2012; Fortune, Tedick, & Walker, 2008). The presentations underscored how problematic this false dichotomy is. This rejection of the integrated nature of language and content and thus the ability or need to teach both simultaneously is reflected in comments by content and language experts such as: "I am not a language teacher, I am a content teacher only. Language is not my responsibility" or "I am a language specialist and know nothing about the discipline. How can I do something other than focus on language and grammar?" These beliefs and the pedagogic stances they entail remain strong undercurrents in many educational contexts (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012), but especially in universities (Séror & Weinberg, 2016).

Historically, universities have moved from an integrated and holistic view of knowledge to one where knowledge is specialized and disciplinary-based. Even if there was a time when science and philosophy were once seen as a whole, they no longer are. Rather, expertise in specific fields of study is hard won, through a gradual process of focusing on increasingly limited topics, which, over time, result in the development of unique and often quite separate academic communities, discourses, and traditions. Despite the best efforts, these are not easily mixed or integrated with other areas, faculties, or

paradigms. No wonder, then, that professors may resist the notion that they should be more than simply experts in their fields of study.

The complexity of defining immersion: Blind men and elephants

Second, the conference highlighted the complexity of university immersion. We saw that immersion represented for many a force to be reckoned with, involving multiple networks and scales of impact. Here, I will return to an image suggested by Professor Pilke,² who compared the idea of studying immersion to the old parable surrounding the talk of asking various blind men to describe an elephant. Each individual in the ancient story sought to understand and get at the meaning of the beast by touching it. Yet, since each individual was touching a different part of the large beast, they each came away with a different conceptualization of the animal, based on their partial access to the animal's body. This image is an apt metaphor for university immersion as this powerful pedagogic device that can easily be misunderstood if one does not approach it with the right distance and bring together various perspectives with regard to the multiple elements that make it up. In other words, immersion may simply be too big of a concept to sum up in few short descriptions.

The symposium did allow us to explore and bring together some of the common traits and features which help define the concept of immersion and translate its complexity and power. University immersion studies presented at the symposium provided descriptions of pedagogic devices that can favour the acquisition of lexical and grammatical knowledge within their chosen target language academic community, motivate students, and help them navigate the affective and academic risks associated to the completion of post-secondary studies in a second language (Flynn, 2016). University immersion was also seen to be about seeking to develop the enhanced metalinguistic and cross-linguistic awareness which result from students' chances to study in more than one language. Finally, university immersion is also about the sociocultural transformation which results from students interacting with new communities, and the way in which all of these factors are mediated by the institutional forces which make university immersion possible.

²Professor Nina Pilke is a Professor of Swedish and Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) at the University of Vaasa, Finland. She is the leader of the research team Bilingualism and Communication in Organizations, which focuses on the ways bilingualism functions in Finnish organizations.

The benefits of university immersion programs

Putting the world into words, shaping the world with words

The complexity of the task involved and its consequences, both predictable and unpredictable for students and institutions, can be daunting. The symposium did show clearly, however, that the work is worth it. For the students who are fortunate enough to go through an integrated content and language learning curriculum, many of the cases presented addressed how well served students were within their university immersion programs. The round table of immersion students in particular displayed, in the student's own words, the linguistic gains they had been able to make in these programs as well as the perceived value of being able to complete academic programs from more than one cultural and linguistic vantage point. For these students, the immersion programs were clearly a path towards a greater sense of agency and possibility, both as individuals as well as members of social and political organizations. As noted by one student during the round table:

Being in law, I find it is very important to find an employment position where I am serving clients in both French and English. The reality is that in Ontario or any province where French is a minority language, people are not as comfortable proceeding with legal proceedings in French. They are much more comfortable, even if they speak French, they would often time choose proceedings in English. I think my future is to sit down with potential clients and say: "Listen, in Ontario you have the right to be heard in French. You have lawyers who can provide services in French and it won't take longer, won't cost more and you can express yourself in the language of your choice." So it will be kind of nice to find a place where I can practice both languages and in an environment where I can promote access to justice in French.

University immersion programs increase students' knowledge of how the world can be put into words and conversely, how they can use language to shape this world. In the case of the student cited above, his French abilities allow him to serve potential clients in French and thus help make real a vision of Ontario as a province where legal proceedings are more comfortable — just because of this powerful language choice.

Within the context of conversations about university-level immersion, such outcomes seem particularly relevant. They illustrate the power of sustained advanced language learning at a determining moment in students' lives, those crucial years after high school when the groundwork is laid for so much of what is to come for their future. Certainly there is a case to be made for investing in post-secondary programs that allow learners to discover and work with language as a concept that goes beyond a simple communicative function. Whether through debates, the analysis of complex texts, or when asked to produce their own texts, as citizens on the cusp of full participation in society,

university students can explore the full dimensions of languages, appropriating them and being critical of them. Moreover, at a time when it is no longer parents who are choosing for them to learn an additional language, students can independently commit to language learning as a lifelong endeavour. This choice goes beyond simply learning a new way to transmit ideas.

For students, it is about gaining the skills, strategies, and experiences that enable them, over the full course of their lifetime, to not only communicate with others more effectively, but to also transform society — contributing, through their bilingualism, to the maintenance and richness of their country's plurilingual linguistic heritage, whether it be in Canada, Catalonia, the US, Finland, or Switzerland, amongst many others.

New enhanced ways to understand the role of languages

Immersion university programs also entail encouraging students to question traditional barriers, including false dichotomies such as the separation of the concepts of language and content, as mentioned earlier in this article.

Indeed, by its very nature as an integrated approach, immersion in a university context challenges the disciplinary boundaries reinforced in academia. While this represents a source of tension for the implementation of these programs, this also becomes a key benefit of this approach. Not only does this approach foster advanced second-language development, it provides the groundwork for pedagogic activities that reframe the relationship between language and content for students and professors. Through closer attention to the discursive features that link the two, students can arrive at a greater understanding of how language and content are inseparably linked, each reflecting and constructing the other in conceptual networks embedded in the unique paradigms of disciplines and their discourses (Gajo & Berthoud, 2008; Grobet, & Vukšanović, 2017).

The symposium was full of examples of classes where literacy development was clearly embedded in the belief that language learning had to be linked to real world content. For instance, Professor Gajo³ stressed how content is mediated by language and the need to make students aware of the multiple ways we can put into words, organize, and discuss science material. For him, producing strong scientists involved ensuring that students understood the importance of “*languageing*” (Swain, 2006) in scientific activity.

Indeed, research has underscored the metalinguistic insights that students

³Professor Laurent Gajo is a Professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of Geneva, where he is the Director of the School of Languages and French Civilization. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the University Agency for Francophonie and he represents his university at the European Council for Languages.

can develop through an integrated content and language approach (Mohan, 1986; Ryan, 2011) as they gain expertise in how knowledge and social functions shape the grammatical systems which help “realize” their disciplines (Thompson, 2004). Focusing on the linguistic features of the field of history can illuminate both teachers’ and students’ understanding of the language choices that determine how we can “think about and conceptualize the past” (Coffin, 2009, p. xiii) through the use of nominalizations, to move from a focus on actors and actions to a more compact discussion of key events (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004). Such insights help students grasp the textual demands of their fields and develop an awareness and control of the linguistic resources used to present and interpret knowledge. Ultimately, by seeing language and content as two sides of the same coin, immersion produces students with a deeper understanding of the content being studied as well as the language forms used to communicate that knowledge. As suggested by Dueñas (2004), this approach is instrumental in fostering academic achievement.

This notion was echoed at the symposium in talks which illustrated that students were more likely to:

- close the achievement gap by the end of high school
- care about and fight for the value of official languages and fight for the rights of Francophones
- identify as bilingual and explore paths/experiences where bilingualism is a reality
- be problem solvers with a greater and deeper understanding of the nuances and power of language choices (grammar, lexical choices) and the metacognitive strategies that can enhance their ability to think outside the box
- benefit from cognitive advantages
- be ready to be employed by governments and international companies
- understand and be able to navigate back and forth and between cultures, disciplines, and languages

Finally, immersion programs and the positive attitude towards bilingualism help students resist notions of language learning as a zero sum game whereby acquisition of one language must necessarily entail a weakening of the other. These students learn that it is possible to learn two or more languages simultaneously, a crucial message in a context where language learners are too often made to feel like they have to choose between their home language and the dominant language of the classroom and society. Immersion studies, therefore,

offer solutions to real challenges and societal needs at a time when linguistic and cultural contacts remain frequent but also often conflict-laden. This is indeed an important reason behind the push for CLIL and plurilingual education in Europe. Effective lifelong language learning is seen as a powerful way to promote a world where multiple languages are valued and used. As such, they serve as key aspects of the messages they communicate and where, as a consequence, peace rather than conflict reigns (Aguilar, 2008).

Fostering the conditions for success

University-level immersion: Not an imaginary friend

So, the benefits of immersion are clear and well recognized. This explains why so many countries have taken inspiration from the successes of the original immersion schools in St. Lambert. Yet the symposium revealed that questions about this concept remain, raised by multiple actors in university contexts. Presenters reported on the frustration of having to convince administrators, students, and colleagues of the value of university immersion. Despite all the research and advances in the field, a key mission remains to convince the rest of the world of what applied linguists know all too well.

In this, we are perhaps not unlike the famous Sesame Street character Big Bird who, for many years, struggled to have his special friend “Mr. Snuffleupagus” perceived as something more than just an imaginary friend. For years, although it was clear for the kids who watched the show, that Mr. Snuffleupagus was real and did exist, due to a series of coincidences and near-miss encounters that continually kept Snuffleupaguses and humans apart, Big Bird was left unable to convince the humans who surrounded him that the character was real rather than a figment of his imagination.

The tragicomic nature of Big Bird’s situation echoes that of researchers who focus on university immersion and who too often are left trying to persuade their colleagues and institutions that university immersion can work if well implemented.

Strategies for implementing immersion

However, going from theory to practice requires a real and constant investment and effort on the part of all the players involved. The university administration, disciplines and language professors, students, financial services, and core strategic planning documents, all have a part to play.

In other words, the practices that make immersion possible must be integrated throughout the campus in a holistic manner. Presenters at the symposium underscored that immersion requires:

- a valuing of the importance of the relationship between both content and language instructors
- constant attention, work, and adjustment to maintain the balance between content and language
- the willingness to transform traditional pedagogy and curriculum
- the need to create an environment that will allow students to take the risks required to break down old and very strong barriers
- the recognition and reward of the work required by multiple stakeholders

Bringing these elements together can be fraught with challenges, but the symposium illustrated that models of university immersion to emulate do exist. Therein lies the key value of the various studies presented at this conference. These studies have helped document what university immersion actually looks like in various contexts around the world. This work has drawn on a range of research approaches including: large-scale studies, small-scale studies, discursive analysis of classroom discourse, video and audio records of students' and teachers' representations of immersion, and questionnaires. Seen together, this constellation of approaches helps clarify definitions and best practices by documenting the trends, discursive patterns, successes, and barriers linked to the efforts by students, professors, and institutions, as they attempt to stay motivated and invested in the work of keeping language learning at the heart of disciplinary development.

Looking towards the future: Questions and areas to explore

The variety of research projects presented has helped strengthen the theory of university immersion, an area which, in North America, remains under-studied. They also point to some of the relevant questions which remain for this field of research, which include:

- What minimal level of language proficiency should be required of students seeking entry into university immersion programs?
- What rights and obligations should students have within these programs? For example, should they be forced to write in the target language? Should students be allowed to request evaluation rubrics which clearly distinguish the percentage of a mark assigned to content versus language in a course?
- What role should be assigned to the students' L1 versus L2? How might one take advantage and skillfully deploy students' ability to explicitly draw on and move from one language to another?

- What institutional levers are best suited to respond to and adapt universities to the political and social needs of minority language communities?
- To what extent should the language work accomplished by students be recognized and credited in official transcripts?
- What labels can best capture the integrated content and language knowledge that students are acquiring?
- How can universities validate students' progress in immersion programs (with a diploma, a special mention, a seal of bilingualism, a test score)?
- How can we ensure that future employers recognize the official certification given to immersion students?
- How can the necessary culture of commitment to dialogue and collaboration be fostered between the various stakeholders?

While the answers to these questions necessarily need to be local and responsive to specific contexts, the symposium identified the following areas of focus as key levers that can help contribute to the success of a university immersion program:

- political and sociohistorical realities
- instructor professional development (discipline-specific workshops, resources, and materials produced to assist content and language professors)
- incentives (scholarships, awards, receptions to recognize and celebrate individuals who make significant contributions to immersion programs)
- development of assessment tools and best practices
- fine-tuning the balance between content and language in the classroom by offering models which suggest best practices regarding time allocation, pedagogic sequencing, and assessment
- support services and resources on campus for learners and instructors (mentors, E-lab, lunch time workshops)
- sources of funding
- reshaping the discourses that are used to frame bilingualism and language learners and teachers⁴

⁴The goal is to move towards a notion of advanced literacies which value students' linguistic repertoires (Stille & Cummins, 2013), recognize the link between language learning and identity construction (Sérór & Weinberg, 2015), and question and counter deficit models (Waterstone, 2008).

This sharing of questions and potential solutions are a key benefit of international events such as this symposium. By disseminating the core challenges, questions, and solutions linked to university immersion programs, we not only gain a better understanding of how to implement these programs, but also raise their visibility and status despite the fact that their existence and role often remain mysterious and questioned in higher education (Professor Pilke, for instance, talked about her concerns regarding the survival of the language program at the University of Vaasa in Finland).

The struggle to legitimize university immersion approaches thus remains, but the continued advocacy of researchers offers hope that the prospects of university immersion will continue to grow and be taken seriously, even if it may take some time for the message to be heard and implemented.

Encouraging wider belief and confidence in immersion

Interestingly, in 2015, the running joke that was the Big Bird's constant inability to have his friends meet and believe in Mr. Snuffleupagus came to an end. Worried that Sesame Street was sending out the wrong message about the need to believe children when they reported something, Mr. Snuffleupagus was finally recognized as a real cast member who could interact and play with the rest of the characters. Big Bird's long struggle had come to an end, and he was rewarded for never giving up on the idea of trying to convince the adults on the show, over and over, that what he was saying should be taken seriously.

University immersion researchers are not unlike Big Bird. They continue to have to convince, argue, cajole, and reassure as they seek to make sure that immersion and all of its variations are recognized, understood, and valued.

The goal is no longer to convince researchers in our field. In this, we have made great strides, and there is now an impressive body of evidence that immersion can and should be applied to the context of higher education. The challenge now is to ensure that these ideas move beyond applied linguists, to reach members of the general public including parents, students, content professors, and administrators. In so doing, we will give them the trust they need to not be afraid to demand, promote, and advocate for this approach.

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