

Second Language Acquisition and Form-Focused Instruction in Immersion: Teaching for Learning

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Abstract

While research on language immersion education has highlighted a multitude of benefits such as cognitive skills, academic achievement and language and literacy development, some studies have also identified challenges to its effective implementation, particularly as they relate to language acquisition. It has been suggested that the less than optimal levels of students' immersion language "persist in part because immersion teachers lack systematic approaches for integrating language into their content instruction" (Tedick, Christian, & Fortune, 2011, p. 7). Students' interlanguage has aspects that are borrowed, transferred and generalised from the mother tongue and differs from both the immersion language and the mother tongue. After a period of sustained development, interlanguage appears to stabilise and certain non-target like features tend to fossilise. Research has long suggested that effective immersion pedagogy needs to counterbalance both form-oriented and meaning-oriented approaches. This paper reviews the literature in relation to the linguistic deficiencies in immersion students' L2 proficiency and form-focused instruction is examined as a viable solution to this pedagogic puzzle. Key instructional elements of form-focused instruction are unpacked and some pedagogical possibilities are considered in an attempt to identify and discuss strategies that will enable immersion learners to refine their grammatical and lexical systems as they proceed.

Keywords

immersion education, form-focused instruction, second language acquisition, instructional input, learner output, classroom interaction, corrective feedback

1. Language Immersion Education

International research literature consistently identifies immersion education as one form of bilingual education. We can see why this is the case if we take the following classic definition of bilingual education, posited by Andersson and Boyer (1970, p. 12):

Bilingual education is instruction in two languages and the use of those two languages as mediums of instruction for any part, or all, of the school curriculum.

Immersion education can be perceived as an enrichment bilingual education model that is most commonly associated with the language majority students who are learning through their L2 (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). An immersion programme is described as “a planned programme aimed at bilingual development” (Cummins, 2011, p. 162). Hamers and Blanc (2000) also suggest that immersion programmes aim to enable students to attain functional bilingualism and biliteracy in the particular languages concerned by the time they finish high school. Immersion programmes can therefore be seen as additive in their goals. Lyster (2007, p. 8) defines immersion as: A form of bilingual education that aims for additive bilingualism by providing students with a sheltered classroom environment in which they receive at least half of their subject-matter instruction through the medium of a language that they are learning as a second, foreign, heritage or indigenous language. In addition they receive some instruction through the medium of ... [the majority language] in the community.

2. Second Language Learning in Immersion

Immersion students achieve much higher levels of second language L2 proficiency than do non-immersion students studying the L2 as a subject area (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes, & Snow, 1985; Genesee, 1987; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987, 1988; Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile, & O’ Gorman, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008; Lyster, 2007; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Even though immersion students display fluency and confidence in their L2 use, the level of L2 accuracy and the range of L2 competencies achieved are less than native-like (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Swain & Johnson, 1997). Immersion students use a restricted vocabulary and simplified grammar limited to domains experienced in school, they often transfer from English syntax and lexicon, they do not acquire native-like syntactic competence and lack distinctive idiomatic conversational features, i.e., lack lexical and pragmatic expressions natural to a native speaker (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Harley, 1992). Lyster (2007, p. 16) notes that immersion students tend to learn “an academic register of the target language, without acquiring colloquial lexical variants that might otherwise facilitate more authentic communication among peers”.

Harley and Swain (1984) have hypothesised that the immersion approach can be improved by increasing students’ exposure to language that is specifically designed to focus their attention on problematic grammatical forms (e.g., intonational stress and gestures in focused oral input) while at the same time, providing students with more opportunities to use the relevant forms in meaningful situations (e.g., activities manipulated by the teacher which will naturally elicit relevant forms in productive student output).

Harley (1993) identified the following classes of target language features as challenging areas which

require specific and explicit instructional attention:

- Features that differ in non-obvious or unexpected ways from the majority language;
- Features that are irregular, infrequent or lack prominence in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) input or discourse;
- Features that are redundant in communicative interaction.

It has been suggested that the less than optimal levels of students' immersion language "persist in part because immersion teachers lack systematic approaches for integrating language form into their content instruction" (Tedick, Christian, & Fortune, 2011, p. 7). Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989, p. 204) argue that it is unlikely that the desired levels of language proficiency will emerge simply from the teaching of content through the immersion language unless language-learning objectives are undertaken with "deliberate, systematic planning and coordination of the language and content curricula". Cammarata and Tedick (2012) also claim that immersion students need to engage with language form in the context of meaning-driven immersion classrooms if they are to overcome the weaknesses in their grammatical skills despite the fluent, functional proficiency they achieve in their second language.

3. Form-Focused Instruction: A Possible Solution

Research has long suggested that effective immersion pedagogy needs to *counterbalance* both form-oriented and meaning-oriented approaches (Ellis & Shinati, 2014; Lyster, 2007; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Ó Duibhir, 2009; Swain, 1998). The ability to integrate Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) and content-based instruction in immersion pedagogy is perceived as an essential and critical component of immersion teacher knowledge (Tedick & Fortune, 2012). In reviewing the relevant research on FFI in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), one is immediately faced with the challenge of defining it. The term "form" includes grammatical, phonological, lexical and pragmalinguistic elements of language. However, an exact definition of FFI is not as clear and as consistent in the literature. Spada (1997, p. 73) defines FFI as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly. This can include the direct teaching of language (e.g., through grammatical rules) and/or reactions to learners' errors (e.g., corrective feedback). Ellis (2001a, p. 1) defines FFI as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form".

Lyster and Mori (2008) suggest that immersion teachers instructional approaches need to be counterbalanced in order to effectively target language features that have reached a developmental plateau (fossilisation), a construct they call—*instructional counterbalance*. Lyster and Mori (2008, p. 134) state that:

..... by selectively shifting learners' attention away from the predominant communicative orientation of the instructional setting, counterbalanced instruction has promising potential as a catalyst for interlanguage restructuring and continued second language growth.

4. Pedagogical Possibilities

The critical question, of course, is how can language form be developed in immersion classrooms in ways that do not compromise interactive and meaning-driven classroom practice? Some key pedagogical elements will now be considered.

4.1 Instructional Input

The role of input is undoubtedly crucial in the process of immersion language learning. Leow (2007, p. 21) defines input as “the L2 data (form-based and/or meaning-based) that learners receive either in the formal classroom or in a naturalistic setting”. Immersion education was initially based on the premise that students learn a great deal of language through rich exposure to massive amounts of “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985) via subject matter instruction. There is clearly a need to increase our understanding of the input processes involved in immersion language learning and become aware of the variables that contribute to language learning and development. The opportunities presented to learners to enable them to process language through input will now be explored.

Immersion teachers need to employ complementary instructional strategies which are designed to make content-based input more comprehensible while simultaneously making target features more salient. Pedagogical possibilities in relation to instructional input will now be discussed. Instructional input techniques with particular reference to comprehension and awareness will be presented. Even though discussed separately below, the view is taken that teachers provide and integrate instructional input in relation to comprehension and awareness in overlapping, interconnecting and complementary ways.

4.1.1 Comprehensible Input

Instructional techniques that ensure the comprehension of subject matter taught through the immersion language are at the core of immersion pedagogy and are a requisite for students’ academic achievement. Immersion teachers make adjustments to both language form and language function in order to facilitate effective communication and comprehension for their students. They are however expected to model accurate use of the target language. In his examination of the literature, Chaudron (1988, p. 85) summarises the research on this adjusted speech style, also referred to as teacher talk, in language classrooms which shows that the following modifications occur:

- rates of speech appear to be slower;
- pauses, which may be evidence of the speaker planning more, are possibly more frequent and longer;
- pronunciation tends to be exaggerated and simplified;
- vocabulary use is more basic;
- degree of subordination is lower;
- more declaratives and statements are used than questions;
- teachers may self-repeat more frequently.

Teacher talk usually exceeds student talk in quantity but still plays a pivotal role in determining the overall quality of classroom discourse (Lyster, 2011). A number of studies have shown that teachers

adjust their speech formally so that the input that learners receive is both clearer and linguistically simpler. Tardif (1994) claims that L2 teachers build redundancy into their speech by using discourse modifications such as self-repetition, modeling and paraphrase as well as many definitions, examples and synonyms to enable students to understand the target language. Teachers also vary intonation to mirror messages and use a variety of question types, e.g., comprehension checks, clarification requests, recall questions, confirmation checks. Cloud, Genesee and Hamayan (2000, p. 125) propose the following techniques to enhance comprehensibility in immersion:

- use cognates (Note 1), controlled vocabulary and shorter phrases;
- limit idiomatic speech (Note 2) during instruction for students at beginning stages;
- use natural redundancy (Note 3) in phrasing;
- repeat key vocabulary;
- reinforce key ideas;
- pace instruction appropriately;
- provide natural pauses between phrases to give students time to process language;
- give students the “wait time” they need to interpret questions and formulate a response;
- check frequently on student understanding.

As well as their verbal input, immersion teachers also use body language, including gestures and facial expressions and a wide range of paralinguistic elements (Note 4). To further facilitate comprehension, teachers use Total Physical Response (TPR), a method of teaching language using physical movement to react to verbal input. Visual aids, realia, i.e., objects from real life used in classroom instruction, graphic aids, film, media, multimedia presentations, information and technology supports and manipulatives (Note 5) are also used to communicate meaning. Routines are established to build familiarity and ensure predictability and repetition.

Lyster (2007, p. 62) however suggests, that strategies for transforming subject matter into comprehensible input represent only the “tip of the iceberg” in immersion instruction. He argues that “the continued use of strategies that rely too much on gestures and other visual and non-linguistic support may, over time, have negative effects on the development of students’ communicative ability in the second language (Lyster, 2007, p. 61). Swain (1985) claims that exposure to extensive input through immersion engages comprehension strategies which enable students to process language semantically but not necessarily syntactically, i.e., to process for meaning but not necessarily grammatical accuracy. Swain (1985) maintains that this in turn allows them to bypass structural information, i.e., linguistic form, and to rely instead on situational and pragmatic cues, e.g., contextual prompts and how speakers use and understand language in context embedded communication. Harley (1993, p. 62) claims that “less salient morphosyntactic features (Note 6) of the target system, in congruent with the first language and/or not crucial for comprehension or for getting meaning across may fail to become intake”. This would suggest that exposure to comprehensible input alone is insufficient for continued language growth in immersion.

4.1.2 Form-Focused Input

The need for immersion students to notice and become aware of target features in the input, in order to process them as intake (i.e., noticing forms in the input and storing them in short-term memory), is a crucial first step in language learning (Schmidt, 1990). Schmidt (1990) argues that some degree of noticing must occur to enable input to become intake. He also claims that specific mediating factors such as prior knowledge and skill, frequency, task demands and salience may influence what gets noticed in the input. *Enriched input* is frequently used in instruction involving a planned focus on form. It consists of input that has been “specially contrived or modified to present learners with plentiful exemplars of the target structure” (Ellis, 2001a, p. 20). The aim of *enriched input* is to induce noticing of the target form in the context of meaning-focused activity. Learners are invited to focus primarily on meaning and engage in communicative tasks which require them to respond to the content of the input. Sharwood Smith (1993) has proposed various methods of making target forms more salient in the input, and therefore more readily noticed by learners under the rubric of input enhancement. *Input enhancement* consists of input in which an attempt has been made to highlight the problematic target feature and to draw students’ attention to it. Typographical enhancement may be used to complement and contrive the problematic target feature and to make it appear more salient in written input, e.g., colour coding, italics, boldfacing. Intonational stress and gestures are used in the case of oral input. *Input flood* consists of input in which the targeted problematic feature is increased in frequency without any particular device to draw attention to the feature.

By virtue of learning two languages, immersion students are already developing metalinguistic awareness that teachers can draw on. Students need to do more than just notice forms in the input, they need to engage in some degree of language elaboration, analysis or reflection. Lyster (2011) proposes that immersion students may be enabled to analyse and reflect on the target language through the following instructional techniques:

- rule discovery (inductive) tasks, e.g., engaging students in pair/group work to work out a grammatical rule or pattern from a given text;
- opportunities to compare language patterns, including L1-L2 contrasts, e.g., bilingual read-aloud projects;
- metalinguistic information, e.g., corrective feedback.

Inductive tasks involve exposure to instances of language use in which students take an active role in hypothesis testing and formulate for themselves the underlying pattern. Herron and Tomasello (1992) suggest that students learn best when they produce a hypothesis and receive immediate feedback because this creates maximal conditions under which they may cognitively compare their own developing system to that of native speakers.

Lyster (2007) claims that at least two phases are necessary for learners to notice target features in the input and to enable learners to make the forms available as intake: a noticing phase and an awareness phase. During noticing activities, learners engage primarily in receptive processing which moves the

learner towards more target-like language while during awareness activities, students may engage either receptively or productively, or both. Awareness activities “serve to consolidate the cognitive restructuring of rule-based declarative representations” (Lyster, 2007, p. 66). Noticing and awareness activities together comprise what Leow (2007, p. 21) refers to as *receptive practice*, a concept which he defines as “any exposure to manipulated L2 input that provides not only various exemplars of targeted L2 forms or structures upon which learners’ attention to (and/or awareness of) is directly or indirectly premised but also some form of opportunity to perform a limited productive or nonproductive task or activity during the exposure”. The ultimate aim of *receptive practice* is “to promote robust input processing leading to subsequent internalisation of the linguistic data” (Leow, 2007, p. 22).

As stated earlier, these techniques in relation to comprehension and awareness may act and interact in unique and influential ways to make instructional input in immersion more or less effective. Together they weave a large and complex tapestry. Please refer to Table 1, for an overview of the instructional input techniques discussed above.

Table 1. Overview of Instructional Input Techniques in Immersion

Comprehension Techniques	Awareness Techniques
• self-repetition • modeling • paraphrasing • use of many definitions, examples and synonyms • adjusted intonation • variety of question types • use of cognates, controlled vocabulary and shorter phrases • natural redundancy in phrasing • repetition of key vocabulary • reinforcement of key ideas • appropriate pacing • natural pauses • giving students “wait time” • frequent comprehension checks • use body language • gestures • facial expression • wide range of paralinguistic elements	• typographical enhancement, e.g., colour coding, italics, boldfacing • gestures • facial expression • pausing • intonational stress • input flood • metalinguistic awareness activities • noticing and awareness activities (<i>receptive practice/structured input</i>) • rule discovery (inductive) tasks • opportunities to compare language patterns, including L1-L2 contrasts • language analysis and reflection tasks • metacognitive tasks

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- Total Physical Response (TPR)
 - visual aids, realia, graphic aids
 - film, media, multimedia presentations
 - information and technology supports
 - manipulatives
 - routines
 - clarification requests
 - confirmation checks
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Resource: Tardif (1994); Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000); Ellis (2001); Sharwood Smith (1993); Lyster (2007); Ellis (2003); Leow (2007); VanPatten (1996); Schmidt (1990).

Tedick (2010) suggests that immersion teachers need strategies for becoming more “language aware” and “language informed”, strategies for “finding” the language to teach as instructional input, focusing on it in instruction as well as pedagogical strategies for designing tasks that require students to produce and use new language forms. Cloud, Genesee and Hamayan (2000, p. 125) too suggest that in addition to rich and meaningful instructional input in immersion, the provision of “opportunities for students to try out new language” is a vital ingredient in effective immersion pedagogy.

4.2 Learner Output

To complement input-driven instructional approaches, immersion teachers also need to ensure that their students’ opportunities to use the immersion language continue to expand both in quantity and quality. Lyster (2011) suggests that contextualised practice and feedback are needed to trigger noticing of immersion language features. Allen, Swain, Harley and Cummins (1990) found that opportunities for sustained talk by students were infrequent in immersion classrooms. Swain (1988) too claimed that typical content teaching does not provide opportunities for student production. The output hypothesis (Swain, 1993, p. 159) proposes that “through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur”. It suggests that when students experience communicative failure, they are pushed into making their output more precise and accurate in ways which test hypotheses about new language forms and structures. The output hypothesis also suggests that immersion students are pushed to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing, and as a result, to notice what they do not know or know only partially. Kowal and Swain (1997, p. 293) claim that when immersion students discover what they do not know through target language production, they partake in “an analysis of incoming data (syntactic analysis of input) or of existing internal linguistic resources, in order to fill the knowledge gap”. This gives rise to a gradual change in knowledge from declarative to procedural mental representations. Lyster (2007, p. 19) states that declarative knowledge “refers to knowledge of language items and subsystems, such as word definitions and rules, whereas procedural knowledge involves language processing, including online comprehension and production through access to representations stored in memory”.

Skehan (1998) proposed a dual-coding system which reconciles both memory-based and rule-based systems as equally important for language learners. As learners produce the immersion language, they engage in retrieval from the dual-coding system, which is composed of two interrelated representational systems: an analytic rule-based system and a memory-driven exemplar-based performance. The dual-coding system implies two different types of production practice, both of which are useful but for different purposes: *controlled practice* and *communicative practice*. *Communicative practice* engages the memory-driven exemplar-based system due to need for fast access during online communication while *controlled practice* activates the analytic rule-based system and learner's awareness so that interlanguage change is more likely (Lyster, 2011). *Communicative* and *controlled practice* activities also constitute what Ellis (2003) calls focused production tasks and unfocused production tasks. Focused production tasks elicit specific language features while unfocused production tasks are engineered to elicit general samples of learner language. *Controlled practice* tasks involves what Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) term *task-essentialness*, which prevents the successful completion of a task unless the elicited structure is used while *communicative practice* tasks involve *task-naturalness* (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), whereby the task can easily be completed without the elicited structure. Controlled practice tasks tend to be context-reduced while communicative practice tasks tend to be context-embedded.

Allen et al. (1990, p. 76) too propose types of practice activities which:

- engage learners in activities manipulated by the teacher to draw attention to potential problematic forms of the target language, which will naturally elicit particular uses of language (*controlled practice activities*);
- to craft activities that make use of functions which would otherwise be infrequently met in the classroom context (*communicative practice activities*).

Segalowitz (1997, p. 105) proposed in the theory of transfer-appropriate learning that "the expression of previous learning will be successful to the extent that the learners' psychological state existing at the time of learning matches that required at the time of expression. Language processing which occurs during *controlled practice activities* should resemble processing which may occur when learning is to be put into use. *Communicative practice activities* alone, on the other hand, while enhancing confidence and motivation in immersion language learning, may not be explicit enough to enable immersion learners to attend to form and to develop metalinguistic awareness. This in turn, may cause learners to revert to their more easily accessible, simplified interlanguage forms in oral activities. The nature of the form-meaning relationships may affect initial design options and therefore it is essential that the immersion teacher has a rule-based competence consisting of the knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which caters to the proficiency and complexity of the immersion language itself. Designing practice activities therefore, that are both controlled and communicative in purpose, is no small task for the immersion teacher. Controlled and practice activities share a common phenomenon: they need to involve the processing of linguistic form for communicative purposes. The distinctive

features of both communicative and controlled practice activities are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Distinctive Features of Controlled and Communicative Practice Activities

Controlled Practice Activities	Communicative Practice Activities
- engages an analytic rule-based system - declarative knowledge gained - elicit the use of specific forms (<i>task-essentialness</i>) - context-reduced - develop meta-linguistic awareness - focus on accuracy - slow performance - demand on working memory - avoid students' over-reliance on communication strategies - risk not being transfer-appropriate - activates learner's awareness so that interlanguage change is more likely - intensive and explicit - repetitive and may be irrelevant - learners become <i>language aware</i> and <i>language informed</i> - facilitates learners' metacognitive thinking i.e., reflecting, representing, reporting - focused production tasks	- engages a memory-driven exemplar-based system - procedural knowledge gained - open-ended and meaning-focused tasks (<i>task-naturalness</i>) - context-embedded - develops confidence and motivation in immersion language learning - focus on communication - automatic performance - little demand on working memory - provide a safe playing field for students to try out communication strategies - transfer-appropriate - need for fast access during online communication - extensive and implicit - meaningful and relevant - learners become <i>meaning aware</i> and <i>communicatively informed</i> - facilitates students to employ, practice and refine language - unfocused production tasks

Source: Lyster (2011); Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993); Anderson (1983); Gibbons (2002).

Immersion language learning therefore involves a gradual transition from conscious use to more automatic use of the immersion language brought about by practice and feedback. The concept of automaticity refers to performance which has become faster, more reliable and effortless through extensive practice. According to Segalowitz (1997, 2003) immersion language fluency involves the ability to rapidly retrieve from memory appropriate linguistic knowledge and to perform without disruption when faced with the unexpected. The development of automaticity therefore requires repetition "with constant associations between stimuli and the learner's cognitive responses" (Ranta &

Lyster, 2007, p. 148).

However, in the total early immersion model of education, as practised in the Republic of Ireland, learners are pushed to use Irish in a procedural way before they have acquired declarative knowledge. Johnson (1996) claims that encodings which come to the system become automatic and are extremely challenging to change once automatised (fossilisation). Learning in immersion may not proceed from explicit representations of declarative knowledge but rather from increasingly explicit representations of implicitly acquired and unanalysed knowledge. The immersion teacher therefore must help learners to analyse and reflect on this procedural knowledge and develop declarative knowledge and in so doing, push learners to develop new target-like representations that compete with more easily accessible interlanguage forms (Ranta & Lyster, 2007). A combination of both controlled and communicative practice tasks or activities, as discussed above, may enable learners to “proceduralise their newly analysed knowledge of emerging forms” in order to maximise language learning (Lyster, 2007, p. 86). Immersion language learners need unlimited opportunities to interact so as to enable them to use language accurately, appropriately and competently in a range of open-ended contexts which require free and spontaneous expression. Through interaction, learners may refine, consolidate and extend their language use and learn more about how language works. This area will now be explored.

4.3 Classroom Interaction

The research considered above (Lyster, 2011; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Anderson, 1983) has indicated that actually producing language enables learners to process the language “more deeply than is required when they simply listen, and tends to stretch or push learner language in a way that listening alone does not” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 15). Immersion teachers therefore need to provide frequent opportunities for interaction among students and between teacher and student. Lyster and Mori (2008) however reported that 57% of class time in Japanese immersion classrooms and 70% of class time in French immersion classrooms was devoted to teacher-fronted whole-class activities while only 14% of class time was devoted to group work in both French and Japanese immersion classrooms. Salomone (1992) provides the following reasons for the type of classroom interaction outlined above:

- the teacher’s need and desire for classroom control;
- lack of learners’ L2 ability;
- the need for L2 input from a native speaker.

Lyster (2007, p. 88) argues however that “it is the quality of the interaction and the extent to which it contributes to educational objectives” is more important than whether the lesson is a whole-class or a small group activity. Gibbons (2002, p. 38) suggests that “productive talk does not just happen” but needs to be “deliberately and systematically planned”.

Long (1989, p. 14) points out, that “planned tasks stretch interlanguage further and promote destabilisation more than unplanned tasks”. Destabilisation refers to the restructuring of fossilised interlanguage items. A task, Candlin (1987, p. 19) wrote, is “one of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers”. Kowal and Swain (1997) note that

collaborative tasks can be used to encourage groups of students to think and talk about the function and application of grammar in specific writing activities. By engaging with such tasks students have time to collaboratively plan their output (offline language production) and therefore produce more complex and more target-like language. Kowal and Swain (1997) claim that with the inclusion of final corrective feedback as a component of the process, existing knowledge of form and function can be consolidated or modified and new knowledge generated. It is important to caution however that the value of the task depends on the instructional goal of the teacher (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Robinson (2011, p. 2), in a review of task-based research, highlights other pedagogical arguments in favour of task-based learning in L2 classrooms. These arguments are outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Pedagogical Arguments in Favour of Task-Based Learning in L2 Classrooms

Pedagogical arguments in favour of task-based learning in L2 classrooms

- A context for negotiating and comprehending the meaning of language is provided in task input
 - Opportunities are provided for intake and corrective feedback
 - A learner may notice the gap between their production and input provided
 - Metalinguistic reflection on output can take place
 - Task demands can promote access to and automatization of the currently emerged interlanguage means for meeting these demands, which, in turn, may improve fluency and accuracy
 - After attempts to perform simpler tasks, complex tasks can enable learners to use more ambitious, complex language and as a consequence, stretching interlanguage and promoting syntacticisation
 - Tasks motivate learners
 - Form-function-meaning mappings are fostered
 - Task demands can draw attention to specific concepts required for L2 expression and prompt learners to grammaticise them in ways that the L2 formally encodes them, and in doing so, improving accuracy of production
 - Sequencing of tasks can consolidate memories for previous attempts at successful problem-solving during online communication, thereby strengthening memory for them
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Source: Lyster (2011); Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993); Anderson (1983); Gibbons (2002).

From a Vygotskian perspective, learning is a social collaborative endeavor in which both “expert” and “apprentice” engage in a shared, goal orientated activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Task-based work, which involves group, or pair work, provides an appropriate context for such activity and for “interactional scaffolding” (Gibbons, 2009) of individual learner’s attempts to use the immersion language, by a co-participant or by the teacher. Long (1989) argues that interaction through task-based learning not only provides a way in which input can be made comprehensible but it also serves as a context for

attending to problematic forms in the input and output through interaction with participants. Collaborating with others, i.e., group work, therefore, provides the kinds of input and scaffolding as well as opportunities for modified output and metalinguistic reflection which promote immersion language acquisition. Long and Porter (1985) state that a positive affective climate and student motivation are promoted through group work, which leads to increased language practice opportunities and a heightened quality of student talk. It is important to note however, how tasks are designed, how group work is set up and how immersion teachers interact, react and exchange language with learners will influence how effective classroom talk is in drawing attention to form in immersion.

It is worth noting that while the teacher may be the most likely assessor and provider of feedback in immersion, learners can also take these important roles in supporting each other develop both content and language. Research on learners' collaborative attention to form in interaction has claimed that learner-learner interactions provide a context for learners to receive feedback on the target likeness of their output (Adams, 2007; Williams, 1999). Williams (1999) found that immersion learners engaged in task-based, dyadic interactions tended to discuss form. However, this study also indicated that the occurrence of language related episodes was influenced by both the learners' proficiency level and the nature of the activity. Adams (2007) research also demonstrates that learner-learner interactions can promote L2 learning. The study also lends support for the effectiveness of learner feedback and the importance of group and pair work in attending to form. Adams (2007, p. 51) claims that "methodologies such as task-based language teaching that can promote focus on form in the context of meaningful communicative practice provide opportunities for learners to provide feedback to their interlocutors". Feedback given by learners in interaction seems to differ from feedback provided by native speakers. Pica (1992) found that learners may not be able to give certain types of feedback, which could influence the way language learning occurs. This area of interactional feedback (i.e., feedback generated through a variety of negotiation and modification strategies during communication, also referred to as corrective feedback) merits further exploration and will be considered below.

4.4 Corrective Feedback

Feedback is provided in immersion classes; good immersion teachers know how to exploit student-teacher interactions to encourage students to be more precise in their output (Lapkin & Swain, 1996; Lyster, 1994; cited in Johnson & Swain, 1997, p. 294).

A number of SLA researchers have argued that corrective feedback facilitates SLA (Gass, 2003; Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Gass & Veronis, 1994; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994, 1996). As a result, a growing body of research has investigated the usefulness of such feedback for L2 development. Teacher feedback in immersion is a demonstrably complex phenomenon. It is not surprising then that many research studies conducted in immersion classrooms have indicated that teachers provision of feedback is ambiguous, infrequent and unsystematic (Allen et al., 1990; Day & Shapson, 1996). Lyster (2007, p. 92) notes that "it seems highly probable that a correlation exists between immersion teachers' tendency to use random, implicit feedback and immersion students' tendency to reach a developmental plateau in

their communicative ability.

If students in an immersion setting are truly to discover what they can and cannot do, they may need feedback which alerts them to forms that are incorrect or opportunities to reflect on their output. Lyster and Ranta (2002, p. 248) argue that when immersion learners are pushed to produce output, they engage in a retrieval process which stimulates them “to re-analyse what they have already internalised at some level and may thus contribute to a destabilisation of interlanguage forms”.

Corrective feedback therefore helps learners to notice linguistic forms that they might otherwise ignore and to identify how their deviant utterances differ from the linguistic norms of the language. The effectiveness of corrective feedback, also referred to in the literature as interactional feedback, has been confirmed by three recent meta-analyses (Lyster & Saito, 2010; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006). Lyster and Saito (2010, p. 265) reveal that corrective feedback has “significant and durable effects on target language development” while results from other meta-analyses (Mackey & Goo, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006) support the consensus that focus on form through corrective feedback is advantageous. Feedback is not only hypothesised to play a significant role in developing accuracy in the L2; it also has a pivotal role in the kind of scaffolding immersion teachers need to provide to individual learners to enhance L2 development (Lyster, 2011).

Lyster and Ranta (1997) classify corrective feedback in two distinct categories: reformulations and prompts. Reformulations reformulate the learner’s non-targetlike utterance into a targetlike one, while prompts, on the other hand, refer to feedback that does not correctly reformulate the learner’s error but instead pushes the learner to reformulate. Lyster and Saito (2010, p. 268) suggest that “by prompting, a teacher provides cues for learners to draw on their own resources to self-repair, whereas by providing explicit correction or recasting, a teacher both initiates and completes a repair within a single move”. Both feedback types have been suggested to contribute to L2 development in various ways. Reformulations include explicit correction and recasts. Elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests and repetition are considered prompts. These feedback types will now be defined in Table 4.

Table 4. Types of Corrective Feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, pp. 46-48)

Types of Corrective Feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, pp. 46-48)		
Reformulations	Explicit correction	Explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form. As the teacher provides the correct form, he or she clearly indicates that what the student has said was incorrect.
	Recasts	Recasts refer to a more competent interlocutor rephrasing an incorrect or incomplete learner utterance by changing one or more sentence components.

Prompts	Clarification requests	Clarification requests indicate to learners either that the utterance has been misunderstood by the teacher or that the utterance is ill-formed in some way and that a repetition or reformulation of the utterance is required.
	Elicitation	Elicitation refers to at least three methods that teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from their students: First, teachers elicit completion of their own utterance; Second, teachers use questions to elicit correct forms; Third, teachers occasionally ask students to reformulate their utterance.
	Metalinguistic feedback	Metalinguistic feedback contains information, comments or questions related to the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
	Repetition	Repetition refers to the teacher's repetition, in isolation, of the student's erroneous utterance, occasionally highlighted by intonation.

The pedagogical significance of these feedback types is based on the assumption that such feedback promotes “meaning-negotiation and provides opportunities for form-meaning integration” (Nassaji, 2009, p. 414). While there is agreement that the various feedback types are useful in promoting L2 acquisition and development but in different ways, there is a considerable debate on which of them is more effective and how.

While exploring the effectiveness of corrective feedback in French immersion classrooms, Lyster and Ranta (2007) found that among the feedback types used, recasts were the most frequent type used but led to the least amount of learner uptake and repair. Prompts, on the other hand, resulted in higher rates of repair. Recasts also provide helpful scaffolding functions in meaning-orientated discourse and ensure student participation and content appropriation. The dual function of recasts make it difficult for immersion learners to notice their corrective purpose and, hence, they may be perceived ambiguously simply as a reaction to the content knowledge rather than linguistic accuracy. Recasts may however be similar to immersion teachers' frequent repetitions of well-formed utterances that acknowledge or rebroadcast the student's utterance. Lyster (2011) suggests that recasts are especially useful in the following instances:

- unpacking of a new topic to students;
- when the form is beyond a student's current abilities;

- when the error is phonological.

Prompts allow opportunities for self-repair; they promote and automatise the retrieval of forms learners already know; they provide learners with opportunities to test and revise their hypotheses about the immersion language; they provide contexts of contextualised practice; and they enable learners to orient their attention toward language form in meaning-orientated immersion classrooms (Lyster, 2002, 2004, 2011; Lyster & Ranta, 2007). Lyster (2011) suggests that prompts are especially useful in the following instances:

- when students are familiar with the topic;
- when students are familiar with the form;
- when the error appears frequently and appears to have fossilised.

Continued prompting to immersion learners to draw on what they have not yet acquired is not an effective strategy for ensuring continued L2 growth whereas continued recasting of what students already know is equally ineffective. Lyster and Ranta (1997) propose that immersion teachers consider the whole range of complementary feedback types to engage students and to create awareness of form. Issues involving the quantity, quality, timing, nature of feedback, complexity of content and student immersion language development may influence the instructional choices immersion teachers make in relation to corrective feedback. Lyster (2004, p. 428) recommends that immersion teachers vary their feedback techniques but must do so in “more systematically planned ways, taking into account the cognitive dimensions of processing and representation associated with specific target features in L2 learners’ developing interlanguage system”.

5. Concluding Comments

In this paper, linguistic deficiencies in immersion students’ L2 proficiency were highlighted and key instructional elements of FFI were unpacked in an attempt to solve the immersion pedagogic puzzle. I hope that this review offers readers some new venues for thinking critically about FFI in the context of teaching for learning in immersion. Immersion teachers are faced with the challenge of finding ways to assist their students move beyond their current interlanguage, yet are offered few research-based solutions. This review may help narrow the divide between theoretical and pedagogical concerns and enable readers to gain a sense of both the complexities and the excitement of implementing innovative FFI in experiential immersion pedagogy.

There is clearly scope for continuing research into all aspects of FFI in immersion. This may shed light on the gap that exists between what immersion teachers think and do in relation to FFI and what SLA (second language acquisition) theory suggests. Research is critically needed to guide and stimulate a more comprehensive and systematic approach to FFI in experiential IMI pedagogy. Moving forward, then, requires informed consideration of a number of inter-related questions:

- How can FFI transfer-appropriate learning be best promoted in the immersion context?

- How can FFI activities be designed which are repetitive in practice but meaningful in nature in the context of content instruction in immersion?
- In what ways can the L1 be used to facilitate FFI and immersion language learning and bilingual development in immersion?
- How best can recasts draw learners' attention to language while simultaneously serving scaffolding functions that facilitate learners' participation in content-based instruction in immersion?

Research suggests that it is beneficial to integrate FFI with immersion pedagogy (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Harley & Swain, 1984; Lyster, 2007; Ó Ceallaigh, 2007; Ó Duibhir, 2009; Swain, 1985). This suggestion may be of little use if teachers do not know how to do so. Evidence from research about effective practice is not always sufficiently accessible for immersion teachers to use as a basis for action. Findings need to be mediated and transformed into practical and concrete strategies that they can try out. In order to integrate FFI in a communicative and meaningful way with content-based instruction, the immersion teacher needs to: provide enhanced input through noticing and awareness tasks, design controlled and communicative practice activities for production and provide cognitively engaging feedback (Lyster, 2007). These suggestions offer immersion teachers not only a chance to explore these strategies further but also an impetus to think of other techniques and to generate FFI knowledge and understanding to facilitate an integration of FFI in their immersion practices, and hence to provide opportunities for both communicative fluency and grammatical accuracy for immersion students. It is essential that the immersion teacher has a rule-based competence consisting of the knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which caters to the proficiency and complexity of the immersion language itself to enable him/her to plan for, design, implement and review such FFI tasks. It is only then that reflective, critical and research-based teaching for learning in immersion may be truly successful.

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