

From Direct Method to Immersion in Adult L2 Learning. Hidden Aspects.

Natalia Dankova

Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada

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Abstract

The *direct method* is a method that refrains from using the learner's first language and excludes written materials. It emphasizes the learner receiving large amounts of [comprehensible input](#), from which he must deduce grammatical rules.

The benefits of the immersion method are well known, but immersion is not suitable for everybody. Few studies have examined the subjective and emotional aspects of adult immersion. Our study was led in experimental L2 classes and deals with the perceptions, attitudes and feelings of adult learners. It aims to understand the emotional aspects of learners involved in L2 immersion classes for adults where L1 is not used. The lessons were based on question-answer sessions, which began with greetings, introductions, and naming objects, and then on accomplishing communicative language tasks. All the participants were volunteers. They were asked to keep a diary in order to record their perceptions, feelings, frustrations, attitudes and other subjective information. The target language was Esperanto that has a very clear grammar without exceptions.

The results show deep differences in feelings and attitudes. Our findings deal also with aspects such as learners' attention, metalinguistic awareness, compensatory strategies, self-esteem and perception of proficiency in L2 that affect L2 learning.

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Direct method

The direct method is an approach in second language teaching that advocates the exclusive use of the language being taught in the classroom. This method gained popularity at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th (cf. Puren, 1991, Germain, 1993, Martinez, 1996). It prioritizes oral expression and comprehension and, in its most radical version, dismisses the written form, at least at the beginning of the learning process. The learner must listen to statements and reproduce them in context, and then decipher the rules of the language. The method is meant to be imitative and intuitive: the learner imitates the teacher and guesses in order to deduce meaning and rules. The repetition of the structures given by the teacher must lead to assimilation and use in context. Rather than stockpiling knowledge about the language, the learner acquires the language by using it. The direct method forces learners to speak from the very beginning so as not to train “scholarly” learners who master the rules of a language and its vocabulary but are incapable of communicating with it.

The selection of learning materials must be done very carefully in order to allow the learner to isolate words and expressions, and deduce grammatical rules. The teacher must therefore avoid producing statements that combine several new elements to be managed at once. The direct method relies on context, gestures, and mime. The teacher uses different objects to facilitate comprehension. Learners are asked to manipulate objects as they repeat statements, for example: *I give the pen to Mark* – as the learner makes the gesture accompanying the statement. Of course, priority is given to concrete subjects. Highly contextualized exchanges and intensive repetition bring the learners to think in the target language.

Methodology of the experiment

Immersion as a means of teaching L2 drew upon certain elements of the direct method. Immersion is considered to be a quick and effective way to learn a language, although some learners aren't able to learn in these conditions. To understand the reasons behind the successes and failures resulting from the method, we focussed on the ways in which learners experience immersion. This was a qualitative study.

The experiment took place in Canada. We offered an immersion experience to 55 students divided into 5 groups. The author of this article took on the role of the teacher. The students were registered in a university program that trains second language teachers for adults. The teaching language of this program is French. Of the 55 participants, 22 are second language teachers. The immersion setting was offered in order for them to have a similar experience to that of learners in immersion classes, and to make them aware of the emotional and affective aspects at play, that teachers often don't know about. Three sessions of 20 minutes were spaced out over 3 weeks (once a week, during class time). All the students were enthusiastic about participating in the experiment. Performances in the L2 were not being evaluated, and the participants knew this. However, the students had to use a diary to record the feelings, emotions, attitudes and thoughts that arose during the experiment. No grids were provided and participants were free to choose what they wrote in their diary. Participants took notes at the end of each session, and completed them at home. They were not allowed to record the sessions or take notes during the sessions.

The language being taught was Esperanto, which has a distinct pronunciation and a grammar that does not include any exceptions to rules. Participants didn't know what language was being taught. They were asked to refrain from trying to guess the language, looking for information outside the classroom or discussing the experiment with each other. The majority of the students kept their promise, while others either guessed what the language was, or sought to identify it, mainly by looking up easily accessible information about the teacher such as her teaching and research subjects. At the end of the experiment, each participant turned in his or her diary. For learning purposes, each group decided to compile the diary entries so that they might have an exchange about the experience.

The teachings in Esperanto included introductions (name, profession, children), the identification of objects in the room (*table, bag, pen, cat, etc.*), adjectives of colour, numbers, personal pronouns (*I, you, she, he, you (plur.)*), basic verbs (*to be, to have, to give, to put*) in the present form (*-as*) and the infinitive (*-i*), prepositions (*to, in, into, on, under, between*), and the markings of parts of discourse that are added onto nouns and adjectives: *-o* for nouns, *-a* for adjectives, *-e* for adverbs, *-j* for the plural and *-n* for the accusative. On a lexical level, 80% of the vocabulary of Esperanto is of Latin origin, which makes the language quite transparent for French speakers. *Annex 1* contains examples of sentences and words used during the immersion experiment. The immersion began with the teacher presenting and describing a Pinocchio puppet, immediately followed by the following statements: *My name is Claire. I am a student. His name is Pierre. He is a student. What's your name?* etc. A bag full of objects was used to introduce new words. From time to time, the teacher let the learners guess the word in Esperanto, namely in cases where there were similarities between the word in Esperanto and in French, for example: *tablo /table "table", krokodilo /crocodile "crocodile", doni / donner "to give"*. Gestures, miming, or objects supported all of the teacher's statements. The learners were invited to follow suit.

Table 1 presents the composition of the groups that participated in the experiment: the number of participants per group, the gender of the participants and the number of L2 teachers in the group.

Table 1 *Composition of the groups*

Group	Number of participants	Gender		L2 teachers
		M	F	
1	15	7	8	6
2	14	1	13	5
3	9	3	6	3
4	11	3	8	5
5	6	0	6	3
Total	55	14	41	22

It is of note that most of the participants speak at least 3 languages and have lived or spent time abroad.

The analyses of the participants' immersion experiences are based on the freely recorded writings in each diary. We understand that while this data is not exhaustive, the information contained in the diaries was sufficiently important to be shared.

Analyses and discussion

The choice to use Esperanto for the immersion experiment made it easier for the learners to decipher the language being taught, as it gave them the opportunity to draw on words of Latin origin. As one participant put it: "The language wasn't totally opaque; it was a choice that was reassuring, that didn't cause linguistic electroshock."

Since it was forbidden to take notes during the sessions, the experiment called for the learners to use their listening skills and their auditory memory. While writing is certainly the most reliable way of recording things, auditory memory is relegated to the background when we take notes on everything. Most of the participants mentioned that not being allowed to take notes was a difficult, almost painful element of the experiment. The metaphors used by the learners to describe the onslaught of words in an unknown language are quite strong: "it's like having a train go by under your nose" or "it's an avalanche of words over which we have no control."

The scenario in which appeared the Pinocchio puppet, and the element of surprise of the bag from which the teacher took out objects, drew the learners in, allowing them to forget, from time to time, the necessity of performing in the new language:

"I'm talking about the magic bag from which the teacher takes things out in an attempt to imprint them on our memory through a kind of funny dynamic. The use of this technique is clearly effective, since it both captures the attention and neutralises the students' nervousness and apprehension."

Being part of a group had a variable effect on participants. Some would have liked to be alone with the teacher: in the presence of their classmates, they felt uncomfortable and overwhelmed, and doubted their own abilities. By the same token, it pushed them to seek out strategies to stay on track and participate fully in the experience:

"You could see the fear of the unknown in the participants, crossed arms revealing the usual stress of the first day of a class. [...] Once again, self-perception appeared and this time, I had the impression that I wasn't able to remember as many things as my classmates, nor as quickly. This didn't discourage me, but I asked myself: why can't I memorize as much information as quickly as the others? Am I a little slow as well as deaf? [...] As opposed to the feeling of helplessness, it was also really satisfying when, for the first time, I took some chances and was able to produce a phrase that I made up myself. The teacher noticed and really appreciated it."

On the contrary, other learners relied on the group: "Some quickly tried to express themselves in this language. Their involvement encouraged me... When the level of difficulty (comprehension and speaking) was too much, I felt overwhelmed by the effort. Otherwise, it was the opposite: it made me want to continue."

“Distress”, however, stimulates reflection about method and makes one take stock of one’s positive attributes:

“(Session 1:) On top of not understanding anything, I was under the impression that my classmates understood, which made me feel even more inadequate. I had a headache, was hungry and tired and kept drifting back to my mental list of things to do, a negative experience that would normally have been enough to make me want to give up. The task of decoding this new language seemed impossible. (Session 2:) This made me realize the crucial importance of the role of the teacher and the impact of interpersonal skills on the effectiveness of the direct method. I wasn’t bothered by my hunger or my preoccupations, but rather by being in a group. I would have liked to be alone with my teacher. The lack of theoretical support weighed on me, as well as social pressure. (Session 3:) The last session was a turning point. I was flabbergasted at the extent to which I understood. I had to face the facts: this method – although I found it very aggressive – works. I worked through my initial psychological blockage and wanted to know more. Even on an oral level, I was less shy and able to say a few words. One therefore needs a high tolerance for effort and frustrations before achieving success.”

“I realized that total immersion could also prevent a person from thinking in his mother tongue. However, it could be a big challenge if the L1 of the person is too far removed typologically from the target language.”

“I noticed that even though we would like to not have an ego and not take standards into account, shyness and apprehension can surface. I was impressed by several aspects of this method, such as the ability to deduce grammar rules without grammar lessons and without taking or constantly rereading notes.”

De Courcy (2002), who analyses L2 immersion experiences, observes the different strategies learners employ to compensate for stress and frustration. Her data indicated that the learners of Chinese “tended to blame the teacher, the exercises, the program or some other external feature for their feelings of frustration and stupidity (p. 80) [...] For the French class, one way of coping with stress was to escape mentally – to think of something totally unconnected with the lesson (p. 81).”

For some participants, sudden and unconscious changes to their state of mind affected their perception of things. These disruptions translated into alternating moments of frustration and satisfaction:

“All of my senses were on alert to detect, to decode these waves of words. I am participating well and am enjoying it a lot. I had underestimated the capacity of my memory, which I always qualify as being declining. [...] But this statement, somewhat hastily made, will give way to confusion during the next session: I suddenly feel like a stranger, lost. I don’t

understand the blockage. Why, all of a sudden, do I not want to make an effort; is it because I don't understand? No, I think it's the fact that I'm not memorising well that frustrates me so much."

The participants manage stress and frustration differently. While some let themselves get overwhelmed by negative feelings, others quickly seek out ways of getting through it:

"I changed the way in which I participate: instead of looking for landmarks in relation to things I know, I started to listen more carefully, without calling upon my knowledge. My brain can't be working in the background while the teacher speaks. [...] Afterward, frustration, or even an emotion close to panic, in relation to memory [...] Finally, I stop worrying if I don't manage to remember the words immediately."

"The first session is enjoyable, frustrating and exhausting. I am still curious to learn more. The second session goes much better, even though it's more intense. When it's over, I don't feel exhausted like I did the week before."

The experiment demonstrated the existence of "happy" learners who do not feel shy, frustrated or stressed at any moment during the three immersion sessions. In reading their summaries, we notice that their curiosity is so great that it does not leave room for any negative feeling:

"I enjoyed experiencing this immersion activity in a mysterious language, in a classroom. I actually found the activity to be really fun, and the sessions somewhat short. It didn't bother me that I couldn't take notes in this type of situation. I really like taking the time required to hear and understand what is being said."

The fact that participants were not allowed to take notes during the sessions provoked strong reactions and was a hot topic of discussion. However, it did not seem to bother the "happy" learners, who interpreted it as a simple change in the way of doing things that, as a bonus, improved oral comprehension. When learners compared themselves to others, they were generally more negative towards themselves, though this did not seem to be an issue for the "happy" learners, as explained by one of the participants:

"I noticed that I was not used to not seeing the written version of the words, but that we still learn well despite this, if the teacher takes the time to repeat the words until everyone understands them. In fact, I had the impression that this fostered a better understanding. During the second session, I didn't feel like we had to perform or that we were comparing ourselves to each other. I mostly approached this session like a game. [...]"

If the literature on L2 teaching puts a lot of emphasis on the approaches used in teaching, on the attitude of benevolent, positive teachers, and on a stress-free environment, it has little to say about the self-regulation of learners' emotions. In trying to make L2 learning enjoyable, we are making a mistake in taking away the learners' sense of responsibility. Take for example the titles of these bestselling

methods: *13 Secrets for Speaking Fluent Japanese*, *Rush Hour German*, *Learn Russian the Fast and Fun Way*, *Talk Now Breton* – people are buying into a dream, but there is no guarantee that they will actually learn anything. A new wave of methods, whatever the subject to be studied, opens up another dimension: *Arabic for Dummies*, *Programming for Dummies*, etc. Success does not depend on the teacher, but rather on the learner. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* puts a lot of emphasis on the skills of discovery and the abilities to develop in order to learn how to learn. By placing the learner at the centre of the learning, in accordance with the action-oriented approach, the learner is not seen as a client, but as a co-author of his or her success or failure. In practice, however, this vision of things is quite rare among learners.

The anxiety of learners has been the subject of several studies in second language acquisition (cf. Lozanov, 1979, MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, MacIntyre, 2002, Dewaele, 2011, Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1996). Spielmann & Radnofsky (2001) consider that, contrary to the negative aspects of stress, the potentially beneficial effects of tension have not been sufficiently studied. Lack of knowledge about the process of the appropriation of an L2 and about the immersion method puts learners, who are often familiar with a traditional approach focussing on grammar, in a situation in which they lose their bearings and find themselves unprepared to follow a different kind of teaching. Spielmann & Radnofsky (2001) note:

“The tension we discuss in this report appeared as a very individual phenomenon which occurs uniquely in the reality of each student and is closely linked to personal expectations and a priori beliefs, especially about learning. As a result, its causes and effects defy systematization, especially when it comes to achievement. Yet, we discovered that students reacted most positively when they thought that whatever tension they experienced — dysphoric or euphoric, affective or cognitive — was somehow productive because its apparent causes were motivated by a pedagogical and didactical strategy they recognized as valid, regardless of the intrinsic value we SLA specialists might want to ascribe to any particular method” (p. 274).

Adult learners have to exercise a certain amount of control over their learning and understand the reasons behind a choice of methodology, the purpose of the exercises given by the teacher, as well as the results they can expect to achieve at the end of the course. L2 teachers are not always conscious of the upheaval that immersion provokes in learners and consequently cannot prepare the learners to experience immersion serenely. Rare is the L2 teacher who has had a personal experience of immersion as a learner. We consider that as part of their training, L2 teachers should experiment with different teaching methods, not only as teachers but also as learners.

The experiment that lasted for a total of one hour proved to be very rich in emotions. However, the participants were not L2 novices: they already had a significant background in language learning as well as field experience. At times, some participants used very strong words to describe their feelings throughout the experiment: *training torture*, *frustration at not being able to take notes*, *a state resembling panic*, *great confusion*, *feeling of powerlessness*. The act of sharing the feelings that arose during the classes helped to overcome the fear of being *worse than*

the others. In real life, exchanges about the feelings that come up during language classes are rather rare. It seems to us to be extremely important to devote some class time to this aspect to allow learners to become aware that immersion is not always easy and that they are not alone in thinking so, instead of letting their self-esteem dwindle in the face of difficulties.

The learners' general state of mind at the time of the sessions greatly affected their performances and attitudes: end-of-the-day fatigue translated into poor concentration, a desire to mentally escape, and weak performances. Even though almost all of the learners worked during the day before coming to the course at night, some were able to make a greater effort at concentrating than others. Immersion requires permanent alertness. We must admit that not all learners are ready to make this effort.

Even though the learners' performances were not to be evaluated in this experiment, we noticed that most of the learners were very critical of themselves and of their L2 production, including those who were doing extremely well. The learners were very harsh in their judgement of their performances that, from the perspective of the teacher, did not necessarily deserve it.

Getting back to our "happy" learners, our analyses show a correlation on the one hand between a great sense of curiosity and the ability to "play the part", and on the other, between stress, frustration and fear of not performing as well as the others. Out of 55 participants, 21 didn't experience any negative feelings, or worry about their ego, nor about their performance in the way of production. Their curiosity for new things and new experiences, their ability to live with uncertainty, to let go and accept the game proved to be decisive. Their interest and curiosity were sufficiently strong to quell any performance anxiety: *"I have to admit that only curiosity and the joy of learning accompany me, along with a touch of insecurity"*. What's more, the immersion experience became an *"intense stimulation of this curiosity"* for the learners. The fact of having had similar experiences (immersion classes, the necessity of having to communicate in a language they have not mastered) is another element that played in their favour. The challenge for the teacher in such a situation would then be to help the learners survive their "first time" and allow them to openly share their thoughts and feelings with the group.

Conclusion

We analyzed the way in which a group of learners experienced experimental immersion. Despite eliminating any evaluation of the performances and the necessity of remembering the materials being taught for future use, and despite emphasizing the experimental nature of the teaching, we notice that an important emotional charge accompanies the immersion experience for learners of an adult age. In this paper, we have voluntarily given a lot of space to the writings of the learners' diaries in order to give them a voice.

The North-American context is often criticized for focussing too much on subjective elements that could even be qualified as sentimental (*I'm upset because the teacher asked me to answer in front of the group*) to the detriment of the learners' responsibility to make an effort and succeed in their course. The teacher is often held responsible for the failures and frustrations of students. Our participants hail from 24

different countries, which allows us to say that our observations are not marked by culture. Through the diaries, each participant was able to see the complexity of the subjective factors that affect the learning of an L2, even in a purely experimental situation.

Our analyses lead us to conclude that a great deal of subjectivity interferes with learning in an immersion setting, and that good management of subjective factors (stress, social shyness, self-perception, etc.) is crucial, especially at the beginning of the L2 learning process. Our analyses show a great variability when it comes to the attitudes adopted by the learners. We consider that further research is required to highlight the strategies, aptitudes and attitudes of effective learners and polyglots, since even the most effective method, regardless of the efforts of the teacher, is not sufficient to learn a second language – or to teach one.

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ANNEX 1

Examples of sentences and words used during the immersion experiment

Bonan tagon! – *Good afternoon!*
Saluton! – *Hello!*
Kiel vi fartas? – *How are you?*
Dankon! – *Thanks.*
Bonvolu! – *Please.*
Ripetu! – *Repeat!*
Tre bone. – *Very well.*
Mi nomiĝas Anne. – *My name is Anne.*
Kiel vi nomiĝas ? – *What is your name?*
Mi parolas la francan kaj la anglan. – *I speak French and English.*
Mi estas studento/instruisto. – *I am a student/teacher (m).*
Mi estas studentino/instruistino. – *I am a student/teacher (f).*
Kion vi instruas ? – *What do you teach?*
Mi instruas la francan/hispanan lingvon. – *I teach French/Spanish.*
Mi havas du infanojn. – *I have two children.*
Li havas hundon. – *He has a dog.*
La kato estas nigra. – *The cat is black.*
La sako estas granda. – *The bag is big.*
Mi havas librojn, skribilojn, ŝlosilojn kaj krokodilon en mia sako. – *I have books, pens, keys and a crocodile in my bag.*
Mi metas la vortaron en la sakon. – *I put the dictionary in the bag.*
Mi donas la floron al Leila. – *I give the flower to Leila.*
Kie estas Maria ? – ŝi estas apud Marco – *Where is Maria? – she is next to Marco.*
Kiom da librojn vi havas ? – *How many books do you have?*

Koloroj – Colours

Nigra – *black*
Blanka – *white*
Ruĝa – *red*
Flava – *yellow*
Verda – *green*
Blua – *blue*
Bruna – *brown*
Oranĝa – *orange*

Numeroj – Numbers

1 – unu
2 – du
3 – tri
4 – kvar
5 – kvin
6 – ses

7 – sep
8 – ok
9 – naũ
10 – dek



