

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IMMERSION ACTIVITIES IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH SPEAKING AND WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to explore the effectiveness of immersion activities in improving students' English speaking and writing skills. Employing an experimental research design of one group of research participants, the study specifically determined whether a significant pre-post difference and mean gain exist in the students' English speaking and writing proficiency levels after they were exposed to two different instructional phases – the conventional phase and the immersion phase. Results and implications of the experiment were discussed and appropriate recommendations were proposed.

Keywords: immersion activities, speaking skills, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

The most wanted result of every second language instruction is L2 proficiency [1]. To realize this, however, what goes on inside the classroom is not enough. It has to be supplemented with the outside environment which offers a wide range of language learning opportunities. As such, when learners immerse themselves into this contextualized language environment, achievement of second language proficiency would be optimized.

Before the English language became the *lingua franca* of the world, one historic event catapulted it to become the most in-demand language of the world; that is, the Second World War. The war transformed the United States into a superpower not only in terms of military force, but above all as the global economic epicenter. This in effect created a mass of people from countries around the globe wanting to learn English as it became the international language of education, research, and communication and technology. Consequently, this development exerted more pressure on the second language teaching profession to deliver the much needed goods – that is, people who possess English language proficiency. Since then, this has become the most wanted goal of every second language instruction [1].

In the Philippines, classroom teachers have been utilizing different kinds of communicative teaching methodologies making use of various materials and resources to achieve English speaking and writing proficiency [2]. With this, however, empirical evidence shows that college graduates in the Philippines are not equipped with the appropriate speaking and writing skills for them to function effectively at work [3]. Several studies and surveys have also been conducted to find out the graduates English proficiency level. Still, the results show poor student performance in English language skills especially in speaking and writing [4] [5] [6].

Taking this into consideration, this study is conducted with the purpose of checking whether immersing the students in actual communication contexts would improve their oral and written communication skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “immersion” is used in two different ways in educational discourse [7]. First, immersion programs are planned and organized forms of bilingual education in which students are “immersed” in a second language environment with the goal of developing proficiency in the target language. Second, “immersion” refers to the immersion of immigrant or minority language children in a classroom environment where instruction is conducted exclusively through the target language which is frequently the dominant language of the society or a global language of wider communication [8]. Other writers defined “immersion” somewhat very related to these, but the second definition reflects popular usage as it is well adopted in schools in the United States and Canada.

Meanwhile, in the present study, the term “immersion” is used to describe the first sense of the term – a planned program or activity in which students are “immersed” in a second language context with the goal of developing their English speaking and writing proficiency.

Traditionally, second language instruction is well-confined in the classroom. But in the search of more effective ways of developing L2 proficiency, ideas go beyond the classroom walls. This is what Richards [9] found when he investigated the changing face of language learning. He concluded that real world contexts could provide greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use that may not be readily available in the classroom. This is an affirmation or support of the findings of the earlier studies of

Barlow, Wisessuwan, and Tubsree [10], Sultana [11], Guo [12], Chusanachoti [13] and Pill [14].

Hence, it becomes apparent now that out-of-class immersion activities should supplement and complement with that of the in-class, citing their advantages and benefits [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24].

Thus, this current study is a test and realization of all of these conceived advantages and benefits of immersing students in the out-of-class second language contexts.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research aims to explore the effectiveness of immersion activities in improving students' English writing and speaking skills.

Specifically, it aims to determine: (a) the pretest and the posttest second language proficiency level of students in conventional and immersion phases in each of the skills; (b) if there is a significant mean difference between the pretest and posttest; (c) the students' feedback on the learning engagements experienced by the students; and (d) the appropriate recommendations which can be proposed based on the findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed quantitative approach utilizing experimental research design of one group of research participants or one-shot experimental design. It was conducted at Cebu Normal University (CNU) – Balamban Campus located at Immaculada, Nangka, Balamban, Cebu, Philippines.

Research Participants. The 26 fourth year students, (intact group) taking up Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English at CNU – Balamban Campus, are the participants of this study. The class is composed of 6 males and 20 females.

Ethical Considerations. To establish ethical standards in the study, all the participants had their informed consent and that everything will be done all for their own benefit.

Data Gathering. In this study, the participants underwent two instructional phases: the conventional phase – where students had their usual L2 class in the classroom, and the immersion phase (experimental phase) – where students immerse themselves in the out-of-class L2 speaking and writing activities. And to determine the effectiveness of the immersion activities done during the experimental phase, pretests and the posttests were administered before and after each of the instructional phases.

Research Instrument. A little modification of the “EILTS speaking and writing tests” [25] and the IELTS speaking and writing rubrics [26] was done to fit to the context and demands of the study. Evaluators of the outputs of the study were certified IELTS examiners, so they were the ones who helped tailored the tests for the study and validated them. The modified version of both the tests and the rubrics is contextualized to fit to the journalistic speaking and writing tasks used in this study. These tests are used in the pretest and posttest in both instructional phases:

conventional and immersion. As such, the second language proficiency level of the students will also be based on the result of the said tests. The L2 proficiency levels will also be described following the IELTS 9-band scoring descriptions, as show below.

Table 1: IELTS Band Scores and Ranges

Band Scores	RANGES	Band Scores	RANGES
1	Non User 0.00 – 0.50 – (Lower) Non-User 0.51 – 1.00 – (Upper) Non-User	6	Competent User 5.01 – 5.50 – (Lower) Competent User 5.51 – 6.00 – (Upper) Competent User
2	Intermittant User 1.01 – 1.50 – (Lower) Intermittent User 1.51 – 2.00 – (Upper) Intermittent User	7	Good User 6.01 – 6.50 – (Lower) Good User 6.51 – 7.00 – (Upper) Good User
3	Extremely Limited User 2.01 – 2.50 – (Lower) Extreme Limited User 2.51 – 3.00 – (Upper) Extreme Limited User	8	Very Good User 7.01 – 7.50 – (Lower) Very Good User 7.51 – 8.00 – (Upper) Very Good User
4	Limited User 3.01 – 3.50 – (Lower) Limited User 3.51 – 4.00 – (Upper) Limited User	9	Expert User 8.01 – 8.50 – (Lower) Expert User 8.51 – 9.00 – (Upper) Expert User
5	Modest User 4.51 – 5.00 – (Upper) Modest User 4.01 – 4.50 – (Lower) Modest User		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the students' L2 proficiency level in speaking and writing skills before and after each of the learning phases – the conventional phase and the immersion phase.

Table 2: The Pre-Post test L2 Proficiency Level of Students in Conventional and Immersion Phases in Speaking and Writing Skills

PRETEST	CONVENTIONAL PHASE			IMMERSION PHASE		
	Mean	SD	Description	Mean	SD	Description
Speaking	6.45	0.55	(Lower) Good user	6.70	0.51	(Upper) Good User
Writing	5.33	0.43	(Lower) Competent User	5.99	0.60	(Upper) Competent User
POSTEST						
Speaking	6.57	0.52	(Upper) Good user	6.92	0.51	(Upper) Good user
Writing	5.71	0.47	(Upper) Competent User	6.41	0.54	(Lower) Good user

In the conventional phase, in speaking, the students are in the *good user* level which means that they already have an operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations, but generally they can handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning. On the other hand, in writing, still in the conventional phase, the students are in the *competent user* level which means that the students have a generally effective command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. [27]

Meanwhile, students L2 writing proficiency (Conventional-Pretest) is two ranges lower compared to their speaking level. In other words, at this stage they are better in speaking than in writing. This could be attributed to the fact that according to the principle of second language acquisition, second language learners acquired their L2 the way they acquired their L1, that is, in sequence: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Hence, it can be said that students become more proficient first in speaking before writing.

Meanwhile, in the immersion phase (speaking), the students' pretest proficiency is at the *good user* level. In writing, their immersion pretest proficiency is at the *competent user* level. Each of these proficiency levels is a range higher compared to that of their conventional phase counterparts. In other words, students' proficiency levels in both skills are higher in the immersion phase than the conventional phase. Analyzing thoroughly the result, this achievement could be best attributed to the likelihood that the students find the immersion instrument materials more relevant and appealing. In the conventional phase, students were asked to talk about the drug war issues in the country. On the other hand, in the immersion phase, they were asked to talk about their favorite games or sports. Hence, teenagers as they are, they are likely to

be less interested to read news involving vehicular accidents and war victims over reading sports news and feature stories involving their favorite players and artists.

Meanwhile, in the posttest in the conventional phase, the students are at the *good user* level in speaking. This level is a range higher than that of their speaking entry level improving from *lower* to the *upper good user* level. On the other hand, in writing, still in the conventional phase, the students reached the *competent user* level, which means that their L2 writing proficiency improved to a range higher compared to their entry proficiency which was at the *lower competent user* level. On the other hand, in the immersion phase, from being at the upper *good user* level (6.70) as their entry proficiency, they improved to 6.92 but still on the same range; however, in writing, they improved to a range higher from the *upper competent user* to the *good user* level.

From these, it can be said that in both learning phases, both the students' speaking and writing skills improved, and this improvement could be primarily due to the learning experiences they experienced both in the conventional phase and in the immersion phase. However, among the posttest results, it is apparent that between the two phases, students' second language proficiency levels are higher in the immersion phase compared to the conventional phase. In other words, if the conventional phase is effective, more so with the immersion phase.

In the immersion phase students utilize the out-of-class second language environment as an extension of the classroom, thereby exposing themselves to contextualized language inputs and engaging in actual second language discourse. Unlike in the classroom wherein second language use is more formal and structured, in the outside environment students are less-restricted or less pressured to explore L2 usage. They have the freedom and wide opportunities to use and practice the language themselves, making second language learning a responsibility of their own.

The aforesaid situation is not so much prevalent in the classroom wherein second language norm is high and there is always an underlying pressure not to commit mistakes both from their peers and teachers. When students' language anxiety is high and their motivation and self-confidence low, their affective filter is up making second language proficiency difficult to attain. This explains why students' posttest proficiency level in the immersion phase is higher than that of the conventional phase.

Table 3 presents whether a significant difference exists between the pre-post mean of the two learning phases in both speaking and writing skills.

Table 3: The Significant Difference Between Pretest & Posttest L2 Proficiency in Both Phases (N=26)

Phases	SPEAKING				WRITIN			
	Mean	SD	T-value	P-value	Mean	SD	T-value	P_value
Pre Test								
Conventional	6.45	0.55			5.33	0.43		
Immersion	6.70	0.51	1.70ns	0.96	5.99	0.60	-4.56**	0.000
Post Test								
Conventional	6.57	0.52			5.71	0.47		
Immersion	6.92	0.51	-2.45*	0.018	6.41	0.54	-4.99**	0.000

ns – not significant

* - Significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

** - Significant at $\alpha = 0.01$

In speaking, there is *no significant* difference between the pretests in both phases, but between the posttests a *significant difference* exists. On the other hand, in writing, a *significant difference* exists both in the pretests and posttests in both phases.

Based on the aforesaid results, it can be said that students' second language *writing* proficiency can be improved by utilizing the different learning engagements the students experienced in either phase. Unlike in speaking, *significant difference* exists in writing in the pretests and posttests in both phases. This could be due to the fact that speaking is always done almost in impromptu, while in writing, at least students have a little time to think and to prepare what to write. This is aside from the fact that in writing students will also have time to correct mistakes and revise their outputs, whereas in speaking these are almost non-existent. However, in writing, since the posttests difference is higher than that of the pretests, it can be said that the immersion activities are more effective than that of the conventional phase.

In speaking, the learning engagements the students experienced in the class during the conventional phase may not be enough to significantly improve their speaking proficiency level. A higher mean difference might be attained should the length of students' speaking engagements be lengthen, or by utilizing other learning interventions. It could also be said that the utilized learning intervention is already enough and appropriate, yet as to how the teacher implemented it is another story, not to also mention other intervening factors such as students' motivation, classroom learning atmosphere, and the like.

On the other hand, in the posttests, a *significant difference* exists between the two learning phases. One is that since students' second language exposure and experiences in the classroom (conventional) are not enough, the out-of-class second language environment (immersion) must be utilized as an extension of the class. In this way second language learning is optimized [28].

Secondly, since students are just in the classroom, the opportunities for them to be able to use the second language in the real context communication is limited compared to the outside environment (immersion) wherein they experience themselves real-life contextualized speaking engagements. Moreover, the outside environment should also be utilized as it offers abundant and authentic opportunities for students to practice and improve their second language speaking skills.

Aside from this, between the two learning phases, it can be said that in the immersion phase, where students are not in the classroom, they feel more relaxed and have more freedom. In the classroom, on the other hand, they may always feel the pressure of their classmates and teachers hindering them to explore more of the language. Hence, language anxiety is prevalent in the classroom preventing the students to fully explore and get proficient with the target language[29] [30].

These reasons among others are cited why students' second language proficiency is higher in the immersion phase compared to the conventional phase.

Table 4 presents whether a significant mean gain exists between the pre-post mean of the two learning phases in both speaking and writing skills.

Table 4: The Significant Mean Gain in the Students' L2 Proficiency Level of Both Phases

Learning Phases	CONVENTIONAL PHASE				IMMERSION PHASE			
L2 Skills	Mean	SD	T-Value	P-Value	Mean	SD	T – Value	P – Value
SPEAKING:								
Pretest	6.45	0.55	4.12**	0.00	6.70	0.51	10.37**	0.00
Posttest	6.57	0.52			6.92	0.51		
WRITING:								
Pretest	5.33	0.43	6.13**	0.00	5.99	0.60	8.31**	0.00
Posttest	5.71	0.47			6.41	0.54		

** - Significant at $\alpha = 0.01$

The table shows that in each of the learning phases, conventional and immersion, both the pre-post means of speaking and writing attained a *significant mean gain*. However, the extent of their mean gain varies between the two learning phases and between the two skills.

Based on this result, it could be said that the learning engagements the students experienced in each of the learning phases contribute to the mean improvement of their second language proficiency level. However, between the two learning phases – conventional and immersion, one

is better the other because in this phase the students achieved a *more significant mean gain* – it is in the immersion phase.

There could be reasons why the students attained a *more significant mean gain* in the immersion phase over the conventional phase. First, second language experiences in the immersion phase are more *context-embedded*. This means that the language inputs the students encounter in the immersion phase are more relevant and comprehensible.

Cummins [7] who developed the BICS-CALP quadrant argued that learners acquire the language best and becomes more proficient if the language they are exposed to are authentic and contextualized – that is, context embedded. This is in contrast to the *context-reduced* language which is more prevalent in classroom. This is the kind of language input that according to Cummins students will be having difficulty with because it is not on the context of students' experiences. Thus, he suggested that for students to enhance their second language proficiency, they must be immersed in the context-embedded second language environment.

In addition, in the immersion phase, second language learning is more fun. Second language proficiency is best achieved if the learners have low affective filter, high motivation, and low anxiety [31] [32]. On the other hand, if students have high affective filter which means that students are not motivated, they are anxious, they have low self-confidence, timid, and not open-minded, attaining second language proficiency may be a distant reality.

Between the two learning phases, it can be said that in the immersion phase, where students are not in the classroom, they feel more relaxed and have more freedom. In the classroom, on the other hand, they may always feel the pressure of their classmates and teachers hindering them to explore more of the language. In the out-of-class environment, the students are less-pressured or less-restricted, putting their affective filter down and opening themselves wide for the language inputs to sink in. It is through this way, that second language proficiency can be attained [32].

Lastly, the immersion phase or the off-class second language learning experiences afforded the students with optimal second language learning practice and opportunities. This is so since second language instruction in the classroom is not enough [1]. Second language proficiency would be best achieved by utilizing the outside environment which offers a wide range of language learning opportunities. Moreover, there is a positive correlation between out-of-class English use and English language proficiency [17] [10]. Considering all these advantages and benefits, teachers must deliberately find ways and become path-finders for the students to be immersed in the out-of-class second language learning environment where they expose themselves in authentic language use [18]. Hence, this is what this study is all about. An out-of-

class second language immersion activities were carefully planned and executed, affording students with optimal second language learning practice and opportunities.

Thus, this study has proven that second language immersion activities can significantly improve students' second language proficiency.

Students' Feedback on their Learning Engagements

To find out the students' feedback on their experiences as they engaged themselves in the different learning activities under the two learning phases – the conventional and immersion, they were asked to write an essay expressing their comments, feelings, and their learning on the said experience. This was also supplemented with an informal interview with some of them.

The following are the themes that surfaced and captured the students' feedback on the different learning engagements they underwent.

Theme #1: Challenging yet Interesting

When asked which of the writing-speaking tasks they find most interesting, surprisingly, the one they find most challenging or difficult is the one they find most interesting – sports writing.

“Having the experience of interviewing a basketball coach is novel for a student like me, and as a novice in this field, it is a momentous experience,”

“Witnessing a game played between the two great high school teams in Central Visayas is a great privilege. And my English was really used because the coaches and the players are English-speaking,”

“I never thought sports writing is that hard, but somehow it's really nice and fun..”

“I just realized that interviewing players and coaches is not easy, but it's really fun and exciting.”

“The experience was incomparable because I realized a lot of things especially when it comes to appreciating both the winning team and the losing team. There is a need to appreciate both because without the defeated team there will be no victors. And by keenly observing them I can manage to understand and analyze what brought such results. Sports writing was indeed challenging but very interesting.”

Theme #2: Seizing Opportunities amidst the Challenges

Meanwhile, when asked *In which of the tasks you think your speaking and writing skills have been greatly improved? Why do you say so?* – students are certain that the immersion activities – the feature writing and the sports writing, have made more impact on their speaking and writing skills.

“It’s when we interviewed Sir X about his experience of being a call center agent. We really prepared a lot, reviewing and practising the questions many times,”

“As we rewind and rewind the recorded interview, we seem like being contaminated with the English of Sir X. This is indeed the principle of second language acquisition, unconscious L2 learning.”

“The impromptu interview with the players and coaches, they are English-speaking, it’s a nice experience.”

“You also have to listen many times to the recorded interview, transcribe it, write it into a sports news, revise, and rewrite it until you’re convinced it’s the one.”

“I just really realized that while sports is both a science and art, moreso with writing about it. I believe in the long run, I could also become both a scientist and an artist.

Theme #3: The Greater the Challenge, the More Glorious the Triumph!

Meanwhile, when asked with the question – *How do you think should the different journalistic writing skills be better learned or acquired? Why do you say so?* – the students have a common idea that it is through constant, painstaking practice and immersing themselves in the actual context of speaking and writing discourse.

“In the actual situation, you always feel your nerves because you know you’re not in school, it’s the real thing, you either make it or break it. Inside the classroom, sometimes tasks are taken for granted knowing that who are with you are your classmates and teachers whom you already have established rapport. In the real world these things are yet to be established. This is the element that pushed you to your limits.”

“The difference if you will be engaged in the actual field when you are writing is that you will become more motivated since you saw the actual game whereas in the classroom, you will just have the raw scores and details but you cannot relate with.”

“Another thing you could get from actual observation is the inspiration and enjoyment as you watch handsome and good players from different teams playing and doing exhibitions inside

the court. While writing a sports news just inside the classroom will make you less interested in writing."

"If the learners are in the actual environment, they are more involved and interest is automatic, and application of theories and ideas will be emphasized."

"I know, Sir, these things may seem really hard, but it's worth it.. It may not be more of the results, but I learned a lot by going through the process. Thanks a lot for all of these..."

Theme #4: I Came, I Immersed, I Learned...

Finally when asked about their learning and insights from the activities they experienced, their answers are remarkably profound.

"It may be true that the more you know, the more you realized that there are still so much that you do not know. I realized that I can write, but I also realized I need to know more how to write.."

"I realized that a writer can write better and effectively if it comes from his/her personal experience. To write is not just to imagine things but to experience reality and put it in the paper as if telling it personally to the ones who read."

"I think the whole experience gives me the chance to improve my inner self and helps me realize the way life learning should be..."

"This only proves that experience is the best teacher..."

"Given the chance to be a Campus Paper Adviser in the future, I would do the same. I will let my students be immersed in the actual environment where they can experience the actual thing. I think this is what learning should be – learning by doing,"

"Through the activities, students will not just be learning how to write, they will be inspired to write even more."

Summary of Students' Feedback

From the students' feedback on their learning engagements, it can be said that while it is true that both the conventional and the immersion learning phases have contributed to the improvement of their second language proficiency, it is obvious that the immersion activities are what they like the most. It is also true that they encountered some challenges, but they find ways to conquer them making the process of second language learning satisfying and fulfilling.

Whether or not the learning activities have truly equipped them to become more second language proficient, the fact that this batch of students went on to make history – that is, they are the first batch to achieve a 100% passing percentage in the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) could be a testament that indeed, they are.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the findings of the study, it is concluded that immersion activities are effective in enhancing students' English writing and speaking skills. In developing these skills, input in the classroom alone is not enough; it has to be supplemented with the outside environment that affords students with contextualized and real-life second language learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

Second language immersion activities should always be integrated into the L2 curriculum. Activities in every second language course must be thoroughly planned in advance to include opportunities for students to immerse in the out-of-class environment where they could indulge themselves in the real context of second language communication. These activities may be an enrichment of an in-class discussion or an actual application of the principles learned. This might entail a lot of work at first, but once it has been established, everything can just be smoothly done.

In addition, students may be exposed to authentic L2 inputs in the classroom if out-of-class immersion activities are quite impossible to achieve. This means that in-class L2 activities simulate that of the out-of-class second language context. Contextualizing second language use makes L2 learning and acquisition more effective.

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