

Exploring Language Immersion Programs at the University Level

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Abstract

Language immersion programs, initially developed in Canada, have produced students with decent second language skills without having to sacrifice content courses. Their popularity grew in Canada, but not in Japan where only a handful of pioneers and international schools have embraced this approach despite its documented success (Cummins, 2000). Even at the university level, few programs are offered entirely in English. Between 2009 and 2014, the MEXT-funded ‘Global-30’ project aimed to develop degree programs in English and increase the number of international students (MEXT, n.d.). In 2014, the MEXT shifted its focus towards developing global Japanese students instead (Rose & McKinley, 2018), but the project is coming to an end this year. Language immersion programs may be seen as exclusively for children; however, if attending university entirely in a second language is common practice in Quebec, Canada, then why is it not the case in Japan despite the considerable amount of money and effort dedicated to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL)? This paper aims to explore immersion programs and their possibilities in a Japanese university in a context where content-based EFL classes already play a similar role.

Background

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn English as a second language in my life. It was only possible thanks to a combination of helpful policies and an education system established by pioneers of the previous generation. If students are usually surprised to hear that I attended university entirely in my second language, it is not uncommon where I come from. Would it not be beneficial to have a similar system here, then?

Born in rural Quebec, Canada, I spent the entirety of my compulsory schooling (up to the end of high school) in the French-language school system. Due to the scarcity of qualified second-language teachers and the Quebec independence movement, few students and parents prioritized learning English, when they were not openly against it. Regardless of the outcome of the movement, the province of Quebec is blessed with both French and English-speaking universities, and Quebec students can choose to attend either, as explained on the McGill University admissions website: “Have you completed a DEC at a French CEGEP¹ in Quebec and the Quebec Secondary V diploma? [...] you do not need to provide proof of English proficiency”.²

That being said, it may not be realistic for students with insufficient English abilities to take subject classes designed for native English speakers, but this is an incredible opportunity for Quebec students nonetheless. I was determined to enter the best music program, which took place at McGill University, an English-speaking university in Montreal. My *sempai* assured me that if it was difficult at first, I would quickly improve my English through learning music, since the musical cues would provide support when language would fail me. I took the plunge, and never regretted it. It changed my life.

As I branched into second language (L2) education later, I remembered my experience acquiring a second language through learning music and multiple elective classes. There were all regular classes, not ESL classes, and I was tested on my knowledge of the content and skills, not language abilities. Was that an

immersion? Could a similar opportunity be recreated for my current students? As second language education stands at a crossroads during these shifting times, with the potential advancements of AI and other changes looming in the near future, it is to our advantage to question ourselves as an institution, refuse to be complacent, and enhance the quality of education and human development that we provide.

This paper, the result of a presentation given at the Teacher Development Symposium at NUFS, will aim to answer the following questions:

- What are language immersion programs?
- What are the similarities/differences between Content-Based Language Teaching and immersion language education?
- Are immersion programs in Japan at the university level a realistic possibility?

Content-Based Language Teaching

It is important to define, if briefly, what is understood here by Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), as it is the current model for numerous EFL classes in university and will be used here as a point of comparison. Many nuances and variations such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language-Integrated Learning (CLIL), etc. have been coined for equally varied contexts and can be confusing. Moreover, they are sometimes misused outside of their original context, blurring the line even more. If agreeing on a term for our specific context is beyond the scope of this paper, the definition proposed by Roy Lyster seems appropriate here: “CBLT is an instructional approach in which non-linguistic content such as history, science, is taught to students through the medium of a language that they are learning as an additional language” (Lyster, 2018, p.1).

It is essential to understand that CBLT is not static and operates on a spectrum, from a **language-driven approach** that uses topics to provide a context

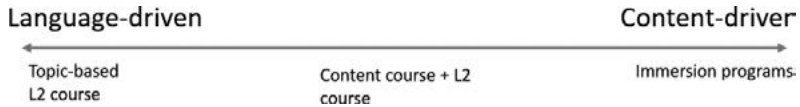


Figure 1. The range of CBLT settings.

in which language (grammar, vocabulary, skills, etc.) can be taught at one end, to a **content-driven approach** such as English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and immersion programs where content is taught and assessed at the other end (see figure 1). The amount of language instruction required will be determined by students' needs, their L2 abilities, curriculum requirements, etc.

Language Immersion Programs

While there might have been earlier attempts at teaching a content class in a second language, the first immersion program is often cited as the experimental project at St. Lambert High School in Quebec, Canada. A suburb of Montreal with an Anglophone majority population at that time (Pratt, n.d.), St. Lambert's English-speaking parents demanded better bilingual outcomes so that their children could thrive in the French-speaking province of Quebec (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). The first immersion program was therefore a French immersion, which later grew in popularity and spread elsewhere in Canada.

One of the first to focus on the outcomes of bilingual education and language immersion programs was Fred Genesee. In his 1987 book *Learning Through Two Languages: Studies of Immersion and Bilingual Education*, Genesee establishes key principles of immersion after closely following the St. Lambert experiment: 1) the L2 is not taught explicitly as a language subject, but used as a medium to teach curricular content (later coined as EMI); 2) the L2 content instruction must consist of a minimum of 50% of the total curriculum in any given academic year (if less than 50% is taught in the L2, then it is most likely a Content-Based approach); 3) the input taught in the L2 must be linguistically graded to the learn-

ers' level (in other words, *comprehensible input*); and 4) the material taught in the immersion language is never re-taught in the students' L1 (Genesee, 1987).

Later, Swain and Johnson (1997) set out additional principles, addressing the ideal environment for immersion programs in the school system, namely with children and teenagers: 1) the L1 and L2 curricula should be parallel, working towards additive bilingualism (when students' L1 continues to be developed as they are learning the L2). Teaching the entire curriculum in the L2 is neither the goal nor the desire here; 2) The L1 exists in a supportive environment, and instructors should ideally be bilingual. This does not mean however that students are encouraged to use their L1 during classes taught in the L2. Students, especially children, should not be punished for using their L1; 3) The L2 contact is primarily within the program; 4) The classroom culture reflects L1 customs and practices; students will not pretend or act as if in a different culture (Swain and Johnson, 1997, pp.6–8).

It would be important to make a clear distinction between types of immersion. If most of the literature has been written about immersion programs in the primary or secondary school systems, this paper aims to transpose this approach to the university context. Baker (1993) divides such programs according to the amount of content taught in the L2: 1) full immersion, where the entire program is taught in the L2 (which seems to go against some of the principles of Genesee and Swain & Johnson explained earlier), and; 2) partial immersion, where between 50% and 99% is taught in the L2. Another important distinction to be made is the start time: “early” immersion can start in kindergarten or the first grade, “delayed” or “middle” immersion starts later in primary school, and “late” immersion takes place in secondary school (junior high or high school).

In our case, an immersion program starting at the university level requires a category that surpasses a “late” immersion. If “very late immersion” may seem odd (even the “late immersion” of secondary school seems to carry a negative connotation), the benefits of a late immersion remain, and creating optimal con-

ditions for L2 learning deserves to be considered (Burger, Wesche, & Migneron, 1997). Perhaps “adult immersion” would be the appropriate expression for our university context.

Global-30 and The Top Global University Project

In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan started a government-funded project called the Global-30 (or G-30), in which 13 universities were chosen to offer English-only undergraduate programs. The project aimed “to promote internationalization of academic environment of Japanese universities and acceptance of excellent international students studying in Japan” (MEXT, n.d.) by increasing the number of international students, with an objective of 300,000 students; increasing the number of foreign teachers; increasing the number of subjects taught in foreign languages; and increasing the number of Japanese students who meet the standards of proficiency in foreign languages (MEXT, n.d.). The program ended in 2014 and was replaced by the Top Global University Project.

The Top Global University Project (in Japanese スーパーグローバル大学創成支援) has for goal “to enhance the international competitiveness of higher education in Japan. It provides support for world-class and innovative universities that lead the internationalization of Japanese universities” (MEXT, n.d.). If the G-30 aimed at attracting foreign students and teachers, the Top Global Project shifted towards increasing international students *and study abroad exchanges*, generating graduates who can “walk into positions of global leadership” (Maruko, 2014). Rather than hiring foreign staff, the project preferred investing in “full-time faculty who have received their degrees at a foreign university” (MEXT, n.d.). In terms of language objectives, the Top Global Project prescribed increasing courses taught in a foreign language (with a focus on English), increasing students’ proficiency in foreign languages, and making university information available (such as syllabi) in English (Rose & McKinley,

2018). The program is scheduled to end this year, in 2023.

Both programs, as well as any program aiming at the internationalization of Japanese universities, face similar challenges. If the goal is to draw in international students, English-only programs are imperative, as not many possess the language proficiency needed to attend content classes taught in Japanese. Conversely, programs entirely taught in English might fail to attract large numbers of Japanese students, particularly for non-language majors such as STEM disciplines. Japanese students may not perceive the additional linguistic challenge as an advantage, as it might not be valued by potential employers beyond a high TOEIC score noted at the bottom of a curriculum vitae. Furthermore, implementing English-only programs might require reforming entire faculties and frameworks in Japanese universities, including recruiting not only English-speaking instructors but also non-teaching staff, much needed to welcome the sizeable influx of international students and provide support with housing, healthcare, and other necessities.

These two projects have received their fair share of criticism, starting with the cost: an annual budget of ¥7.7 billion for ten years (MEXT, 2014) for the internationalization of Japanese universities, perhaps not a top priority for a country that ranks 31st out of 38 OECD countries for the “proportion of its GDP [spent] on primary to tertiary educational institutions, [...] 0.9% lower than the OECD average” (OECD, n.d.). Looking further into the future, what would happen to international students who have completed English-only programs in Japan? The majority of them would most likely return to their home countries as the job market in Japan does not offer many interesting career opportunities without adequate Japanese language skills. For Japanese society, this represents a poor return on investment after spending taxpayers’ funds.

Another point to consider is faculty development, the origin of this paper. It is noteworthy that both government-funded initiatives mentioned earlier were more inclined towards the recruitment of faculty with international experience rather than the development of existing faculty. Without a serious commitment to pro-

fessional development, coupled with adequate time and resources to implement these transformations, it may be simply unattainable for universities to carry out such significant changes. Ultimately, the objective seemed to be enhancing the status of Japanese universities on the global stage rather than improving education for Japanese students. The G-30 Project policy “placed ownership and use of English with the international student body and foreign faculty”, (Rose & McKinley, 2018, p.126) meaning not with Japanese students and professors. This approach reflects the native speaker fallacy, which fails to empower the local community of teachers and students. The foreign community speaks English among itself, the Japanese faculty and students continue their regular programs on their side of the campus, and in the end, the only internationalization may be a Christmas or *Tanabata* party where games and activities had to be organized to ensure interaction between the Japanese and foreign students. Ultimately, any “program” or “project” that remains a temporary experiment will not translate into any long-term improvement of the educational system in Japan. What is needed is change, with educational principles leading.

Implementation

Having a language immersion program would be advantageous for a university of foreign studies in these changing times. It would benefit students by allowing them to acquire knowledge in a specific field while simultaneously developing their L2 proficiency. Learning meaningful content can be motivating for students and represents a more natural approach that bridges the gap between the classroom and real life, spanning beyond graduation. How many Japanese students are proficient in English tests, yet struggle to follow everyday conversations or newspaper articles outside of the classroom? Too often, Japanese students end up in ESL programs while studying overseas due to a lack of proficiency to handle regular classes taught in English. Additionally, an immersion-type program may offer interesting alternatives when studying

abroad is not possible due to financial constraints, during the process of job hunting (which starts in the third year for many), or because of other reasons such as the coronavirus pandemic that seriously impacted our activities.

Traditionally, second language classes assess students' proficiency in the language and skills, granting an advantage to those who have had opportunities to improve through international experiences such as living or studying abroad. This situation reflects, in many instances, the socioeconomic status of the parents, particularly for first-year students who have yet to have a solid chance to develop their language skills. Assessing content (or assessing both content and L2 skills, or any combination) would reward students who study diligently and pay attention in class. Another notable advantage would be that a focus on content would suit groups of students with mixed language abilities. A challenging aspect of language classes is that advanced students might not feel stimulated and become demotivated, while less proficient students may feel overwhelmed. While grading the language might be essential for first-year students, they are most likely to attain a higher level of fluency by the end of their degree.

From there, we need to be realistic about immersion programs in the context of Japanese universities and understand the challenges that such changes may pose. Following Genesee's definition, immersion is not teaching the L2 as a subject matter but using the L2 as a medium of instruction for curricular content (Genesee, 1987). Consequently, instructors must possess significant expertise in multiple subjects, possibly unrelated to their field of study, in addition to being knowledgeable of L2 acquisition principles (Brown, 2004; Messerklinger, 2008). While teachers who are used to teaching content-based L2 classes may already be familiar with this, some may be at a loss when tasked with teaching a content class in a field outside of their expertise, or adapting a class for an L2 audience, as Genesee (1987) recommends "comprehensible input". Additionally, exams will likely need to be adjusted to assess students' understanding of the content in their L2.

Next, reviewing Swain and Johnson's (1997) additions to Genesee's ideology, it is apparent that a revised curriculum requires changes at higher levels as well. If both English and Japanese classes operate concurrently, the curriculum must be integrated and coordinated, necessitating leadership and cooperation, which may consequently diminish teacher agency over course content and teaching methodology. Some teachers may not support an immersion-style program, as they have been accustomed to teaching in a different style for many years. This could also create difficulties with recruitment, as outstanding subject teachers may not be bilingual or may speak another language than English. Lastly, if Swain and Johnson (1997) recommend that the classroom culture reflects students' L1 customs and practices, this recommendation was made in a Canadian context where all teachers are from the local community. It would be illogical to disallow foreign teachers from introducing foreign cultures into their classrooms. Foreign instructors are a fundamental aspect of our university, valued by students, and offer a cultural dimension to language instruction as well as crucial expertise and experience, which are essential for fulfilling the objectives of foreign language education. A successful immersion program would enable non-native English teachers to be empowered without detracting from the benefits of native foreign teachers.

In the end, any English university program in Japan, language immersion or not, will inevitably pose logistical difficulties. On the one hand, offering degrees entirely in English may prove to be excessively challenging or discouraging for some Japanese students who lack an interest in participating in the country's great globalization goals. On the other hand, programs that are not entirely taught in English would fail to attract international students, as it is unrealistic to expect them to learn the Japanese language within a few months to be able to attend content classes. Another important factor in logistics would be the school calendar; each country has its own, and the academic year might not align with the Japanese one. Although it might be unavoidable, commencing classes

in April in Japan, whilst North American students are revising for their final exams, would not be a successful recruitment strategy. Universities should also consider conducting online interviews for foreign students and teachers; in these financially difficult times of post-pandemic inflation, few can afford to travel to Japan solely for an interview or entrance exam. Failure to offer appealing conditions may result in Japan seeing its opportunity to globalize evaporate.

All things considered, immersion programs present undeniable benefits and are only one step further than the current Content-Based approach already used by many instructors. According to Krashen, “Canadian immersion is not simply just another successful language teaching program - it may be the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature” (Berthold, 1995, p.3). The current absence of a system that accommodates both domestic and overseas students prevents the latter from being interested in studying in Japan, which then hinders the development of Japanese students’ bilingualism and global mindset.

Conclusion

This paper, originally presented at the Faculty Development Symposium at NUFS, aimed to define language immersion, its similarities and differences with CBLT, and raise colleagues’ awareness and interest in immersion programs. Immersions can be considered as an advanced form of CBLT, which involves the development of a coordinated curriculum with bilingual objectives. Such an approach undoubtedly places greater demands on curriculum coordinators but has the potential to produce graduates who can use their L2 as a tool and who possess real-life knowledge and skills in a field. Implementing this distinct approach in Japan could be an enticing prospect for recruiting future students, particularly in times when the development of AI and global pandemics can pose a threat to the number of students interested in learning foreign languages and cultures.

As for CBLT, it should be considered the second-best option (with its derivations such as EMI and CLIL) when immersion programs are not feasible, as it shares many of the same benefits without the need for department or university-wide coordination. This would also lay the groundwork for teachers to work towards an immersion-like program in the future.

Unlike some initiatives where ownership of English and internationalization was attained by recruiting foreign students and paying foreign teachers, with little to no long-term benefits for Japan, language immersion programs are empowering for all teachers, native speakers or not. We part with the fallacy that only native speakers possess a correct language model, as the focus is on learning content, with support for L2 whenever necessary. Foreign teachers continue to be relevant by providing their expertise from various backgrounds and international experiences, offering a unique and stimulating perspective on education and human relationships shaped by their own culture. Their contributions are valuable in promoting cultural diversity and international understanding.

In the end, globalization encompasses more than just English language acquisition, both as a subject and a goal. It is about embracing a deep understanding of the world, not solely through the memorization of facts, but through inquiry, problem-solving, and critical analysis. For this to successfully happen, both local and foreign educators need to step up as “globalized” role models and share their experiences. If offering university programs entirely in English to attract international students seems too risky in a context where the Japanese population is rapidly decreasing, bilingual programs can be tailored to varying levels of proficiency and needs, a degree of flexibility that is crucial in the rapidly changing 21st century.

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Notes

¹ The “DEC” is a two-year program, and a CEGEP is a kind of junior college unique to Quebec.

² <https://www.mcgill.ca/undergraduate-admissions/apply/english-proficiency>