

DEVELOPING THE CURRICULUM FOR INTENSIVE FRENCH

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Abstract

This article describes the way in which the curriculum for Intensive French was developed. Reference is made to its similarities to and differences from the multidimensional curriculum proposed by the National Core French Study (1990) and the communicative approach. The importance of learning outcomes stated in terms of communicative functions is discussed first. The content of the curriculum is then presented under five headings which are related to the five theoretical principles underlying the conception of Intensive French: authentic communication, literacy development, cognitive development, interaction and the development of accuracy and fluency. The role of compacting of the regular curriculum in the development of the curriculum for Intensive French is also explained. The article concludes with an example of how the curriculum may be adapted to the educational priorities in particular provinces, in this case New Brunswick.

Résumé

Le présent article décrit comment a été développé le programme d'études pour le français intensif, en prenant comme point de référence les ressemblances et les différences avec le curriculum multidimensionnel tel que développé par le National Core French Study (1990), ainsi que l'approche communicative. En premier lieu, nous discutons de l'importance des résultats d'apprentissage formulés en termes de fonctions de communication. Puis, nous présentons le contenu du programme d'études en cinq points, chacun faisant référence aux cinq principes de base sous-jacents à notre conception du français intensif: la communication authentique, le développement de la littératie, le développement cognitif, l'interaction et le développement de la précision linguistique et de l'aisance à communiquer. En dernier lieu, nous expliquons le rôle de la compression des matières dans le développement du programme d'études pour le français intensif. Enfin, nous donnons un exemple de l'adaptation des principes du programme d'études aux priorités du milieu scolaire par une province en particulier, le Nouveau Brunswick.

Intensive French is an innovative approach to teaching French as a second language which has been implemented in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador and is currently being piloted in several other Canadian Provinces. It consists of the insertion of a five month period of intensive use of French that is inserted into the regular core French program at the end of the elementary school cycle (grade 5 or grade 6, when students are about 11 years of age. The program began in the fall of 1998 on an experimental basis in two school districts, one rural and the other urban, in Newfoundland and Labrador as a three-year research project funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage. The research findings indicated that the program holds considerable potential for improving the communicative abilities of students in the core French program.¹

Once intensive French (IF) was conceptualized, it was necessary to create an appropriate curriculum in order to operationalize the program in the school system. This task was undertaken for two reasons. The experience with intensive English in Quebec indicated that the lack of a curriculum document contributed to the use by teachers of a variety of outcomes and teaching strategies according to their interests and preferences.² IF was conceptualized with strong research and theoretical foundations. It was, therefore, important that this aspect of the program be reflected in the curriculum and teaching strategies used if the anticipated results of the program were to be achieved.

In order to develop the program of studies in a systematic fashion, several considerations were crucial. First of all, the development of the curriculum was guided by the general principles of the multidimensional curriculum as developed by the National Core French Study (LeBlanc, 1990), but with some modifications in order to remain consistent with the theoretical

¹ See *Introduction* to this issue

² See article entitled *Intensive French and Intensive English: similarities and differences* in this issue.

conception of IF. As intensive French does not separate the linguistic (in the sense of grammatical) and communicative aspects of learning French, objectives for these two categories are not maintained as separate entities. Two other adjustments to the categories of the National Core French Study (NCFS) were also required by the conception of IF. The interpretation of ‘experiential learning’ and of ‘general language education’ is much broader in the IF program. While learning begins with the experiences of the students, topics are carried much beyond their experiences in order to contribute to their overall intellectual development and general education. Furthermore, the category of general language education was not limited to learning strategies as is the case in the NCFS. This category in IF refers to the entire educational experience of the students and reflects the contribution of the experience to their general education, an interpretation of this category that we feel is more in congruence with Stern’s original conception (Stern, 1982). The attainment of this objective is not a separate category but is integral to the program because of its transdisciplinary nature (Netten and Germain, 2000b). The IF program has three major categories of objectives: communication, culture and general education.

Secondly, the general principles of the communicative approach to second language learning were adopted, but carried further than has been the case up to now. While the communicative approach has placed an emphasis on authenticity of materials and language use, teaching materials and strategies used have tended to limit the authentic use of the second language in the classroom. In addition, an emphasis has been placed on the development of the four skills, but these areas have tended to remain as separate aspects of language use. In IF, the learning of the second language has been conceptualized as a literacy experience. The use of language in real situations, more like that of the immersion classroom, is essential and integration of the four language skills is required. The model for the curriculum and teaching

strategies recommended is based on those used in the first language classroom in the language arts program, particularly at the primary level (Netten, 1993). The goal is to provide a rich language learning environment for the students, much richer than is normally the case in the core French classroom.

Learning Outcomes

In the initial stages of the curriculum development, the ICF program was situated within the general context of the outcomes for education in Newfoundland and Labrador (Netten and Germain, 2000b). The document on *Essential Graduation Learnings*, which gives general direction to education in the schools for the Atlantic Provinces was reviewed to ensure that the program fitted within those guidelines. The general outcomes for the core French program were also consulted so that the outcomes of IF would be consistent with those of core French in the province. Then, in order to determine the specific outcomes for IF in grade 6, the number of hours of instruction in French received by the students was used as the basis on which specific outcomes were chosen. Given that the number of hours of instruction normally devoted to core French in the elementary and intermediate grades is 90 hours per year, and that most students participating in the IF program would receive approximately three times this amount in grade 6 (i.e. approximately 300 hours, equivalent to the number of hours normally received by students by the end of grade 9), the outcomes of the grade 9 curriculum provided the basis for the development of the IF program. However, it was generally accepted that, in some cases, where the number of hours would be greater, some outcomes at the grade 10 or 11 might be achieved. In other cases, where the number of hours might be less, it was thought that only those for grade

8 might be attained.³ Outcomes were chosen based primarily on the number of hours of instruction in French.⁴

It is important to note that adjustments in outcomes were made according to the age and consequent intellectual and social development of the students. Students at grade 6 do not have the same knowledge of the world or the same interests as students in grade 9 and 10, nor have they reached the same level of mother tongue development. They could not be expected to perform exactly the same types of tasks. Therefore, while outcomes were adopted from the point of view of linguistic complexity, they were adjusted with respect to the tasks which students were expected to perform.

It was particularly fortuitous for the development of the IF curriculum that outcomes for the core French program in Newfoundland and Labrador are stated in communicative terms. In many French second language documents, even when the approach is said to be communicative, outcomes are stated in terms of morphological and syntactic forms to be learned. Outcomes of this nature require that French be taught as the object of study, and not as a means of communication. Had this situation not existed, the development of the IF curriculum could not have proceeded from the outcomes for core French already established by the province.

Communicative outcomes are stated in terms of what functions the student will be able to perform in the second language. Outcomes include such functions as:

- to introduce a person
- to ask permission
- to describe
- to give directions
- to narrate a story

³ See article entitled *L'évaluation de la production orale : critères et résultats* in this issue.

⁴ Results of the intensive French program have shown, however, that the number of hours of instruction is not the most important factor in achieving the outcomes of the program.

Outcomes of this nature are developed for each unit of work. The activities of the unit contribute to developing in the student the ability to achieve the communicative outcome. The emphasis on communication means that there are no specified grammatical structures or vocabulary items that must be learned for a unit of work. These items may change from classroom to classroom, and are provided by the teacher on the basis of the topics explored. The unity of the curriculum is provided by the achievement of the communicative outcomes. All students will learn to describe, for example, but some may do so by describing their school; others, an extra-terrestrial school; and still others, an ideal school.

In developing the curriculum for IF, attention was given to the theoretical concepts that underlie the program. This discussion of the development of the curriculum, then, will be organized according to the five basic principles underlying the conception of IF.⁵

Authentic Communication

The content of the IF program was identified according to two general principles: topics that were familiar to the student about which they would be able to talk, and topics that would be of interest to them. In addition, some topics were developed which were related to units which would be studied later in the regular curriculum. Topics developed included such areas as: self, home, community, leisure, travel, fitness and nutrition (Netten et al., 2000). It was important to begin with topics that were familiar to the students and related to their experiences. In this way, students could be implicated in their learning by talking about topics of which they already have some knowledge. As may be inferred, topics begin with the students themselves, their families, friends and pets. Gradually topics expand beyond those limits to discussion of broader issues, environment, travel and other modes of life. Topics are also grouped together in units, and the units in themes; for example, the theme *Les passe-temps* includes units on sports, music, and

⁵ See article entitled *Theoretical and Research Foundations of Intensive French* in this issue.

even using the telephone. In general, five themes were developed, approximately one for each month of the program.

While these themes are provided to assist the teacher in planning activities for the program, it is not intended that they should be followed rigidly. Implicating the students in their learning by assuring that the topics they study are of interest to them is one of the major tenets of the program. Consequently, if there were a special topic which was of particular interest to the students because of its relevance, the teacher would be at liberty to develop this area of interest, giving attention to the attainment of appropriate communicative outcomes. It is to be noted that the major consideration in the choice of themes or topics is the interests of the students. It is extremely important to arouse and maintain the interest of the students in the topics under discussion. In order for second language learning to be effective, students must be motivated and implicated in their learning. Research has shown that there is a relationship between the degree of motivation to communicate and learning to communicate (Paradis, 2001). In the IF program it is essential that the motivation of the students to communicate remain high. Therefore, it is recommended to teachers that they discuss topics to be developed with their students, and that students exercise some degree of choice in the way in which a topic is explored. Thus, in the theme on animals, for example, one class may explore wild animals, another might focus on animals in the woods, and still another decide to look at marine life. Not only is choice in the topic explored by the class encouraged, but also in the particular aspects explored by different members or small groups in the class. This type of diversity is entirely in keeping with the principles of the IF program.

In choosing topics, attention was also given to the regular curriculum. Certain topics provided natural links to aspects of the regular curriculum. In studying likes and dislikes in the

theme entitled *Moi*, for example, it was possible to introduce discussion of foods that are good for health and those that are not. Exploring this topic creates links with Health Education. Discussing endangered species in the theme *Les animaux* creates a link with the Science Education program. In the theme, *Autour du monde*, students travel across Canada; this activity enables them to become aware of the provinces, their capital cities, and various other features. In the regular social studies curriculum later in the year, students are then already familiar with the provinces when they study their unit on Canada.⁶ Topics included in this way are not introduced for the purposes of achieving the subject related curriculum outcomes, as is the case in immersion, but rather in order to sensitize the student to links between subject areas and to develop some latent knowledge about the subject area so that it may be taught more efficiently in the regular curriculum. The previous introduction of the students to some of the concepts enables the teacher to advance more quickly in the regular curriculum. However, where links are made, the purpose is only to develop awareness and to achieve linguistic outcomes; subject matter outcomes are not tested in the IF program (See section in this article on the compacting of the curriculum).

It is to be noted that the content of the program is based upon themes, and not upon language as an object of study. There are no specific linguistic structures or forms specified for each unit. Linguistic forms and structures are introduced on an ‘as needed’ basis. The language outcomes of each unit are stated in terms of communication or language functions. Therefore, while in the unit on music there may be a great variety in the actual types of music discussed, all students will learn to, for example, describe an instrument, give reasons for their preference for a particular type of music, research a musician or musical group, present information in oral and written formats, and so forth.

⁶ These examples are taken from the Program of Studies, Department of Education, Newfoundland and Labrador.

2. Literacy development

In the IF environment the assumption is that while learners are learning a second language, they are developing capacities that could also be used in the first language learning setting (Netten and Germain, 2000b). Using this theoretical framework, many of the curriculum objectives for the English language arts curriculum are addressed through the IF program.

It is to be noted that many of the English language arts curriculum outcomes are communication oriented, and are, therefore, very relevant to the IF curriculum. The following are examples of curriculum outcomes for English language arts which can be achieved in the IF curriculum. Similar outcomes can be found in the language arts programs of other provinces.

Students will be expected to:

- *Contribute thoughts, ideas and experiences to discussions, and ask question to clarify their ideas and those of their peers*
- *Ask and respond to questions and seek clarification or explanation of ideas and concepts*
- *Engage in, respond to and evaluate oral presentations*
- *Expand appropriate note-making strategies for a growing repertoire of leaning strategies, (e.g., outlines, charts and diagrams)*
- *Create written and media texts, collaboratively and independently, in different modes (expressive, transactional and poetic) and in an increasing variety of forms*
- *Use a range of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading and presentation strategies⁷*

In addition to these outcomes, other outcomes of the English language arts program are integrated into the IF curriculum. Students read one or two novels in class together, and discuss aspects of character development, plot, climax and other features of this form of literary genre. Students also study various literary forms, such as poems and limericks, and create their own literary compositions, including composing songs.

Furthermore, in the themes, all four skills are developed in an integrated fashion related to authentic use of language. Generally, material is presented orally first, as explained in the section

⁷These examples are taken from the Program Guide, Department of Education, New Brunswick.

on accuracy and fluency. However, reading and writing are introduced from the beginning of the program. Each day attention is given to shared reading, generally of a story related to the theme being explored, as well as to individual and paired reading activities. Students also follow an individualized supplementary reading program in French. Writing skills are developed at the same time, with both journal writing, which tends to be free and individual after the first few weeks, and other writing activities related to the topic so that students are familiar with the vocabulary and structures they are using in their compositions. Journal writing is a part of the daily routine of the IF student.

3. Cognitive development

As may be implied from the preceding paragraph, the level of difficulty of the tasks in the units increases quite rapidly. While students are very limited in the amount of language which they can use at the beginning of the program, their communicative abilities increase quickly after the first few weeks. When students are using French for 50% or more of the school day, such growth is not surprising. Related to this augmentation in communicative abilities is the nature of the tasks in which students can engage. Tasks become more cognitively demanding as their communicative competence and confidence increase. While tasks early in the program ask students to describe a family member, later on in the program they are asked to compare different geographical regions of Canada. This aspect of the curriculum is also very important. The increase in the complexity of the tasks undertaken contributes to the general cognitive development of the students. Research suggests that the more complicated the cognitive tasks for which language is used, the more effective the implicit development of the ability to communicate in the second language (Paulson).

Not only do students engage in cognitively demanding tasks, but these tasks are modelled on the tasks that they would be performing in the other subject area. This aspect is discussed again in the section on compacting of the curriculum, and examples are given. Furthermore, skill-building tools such as T-charts, maps, charts, legends, graphs, and symbols are built into the program. For example, students, after studying various types of music, complete a survey on which types of music are most popular in their classroom; results are displayed in graph form. Activities that will expose children to art, drama, role-play, and music, all of which contribute to the development of cognitive processes related to imagination, creativity and simulation, are also built into the program.

In addition, the development of cognitive processes which takes place while students are learning the second language is the basis of the transdisciplinary nature of the IF. In the process of learning French for communicative purposes, students develop certain cognitive abilities. Intellectual capacities such as sequencing (*Je me lève, puis je me lave*), inferencing (*regarder – regardé; écouter, marcher, jouer – écouté, marché, joué*), problem solving (*La maison où le train arrive* instead of *La gare*), hypothesis testing (*Je suis 11 ans* instead of *J'ai 11 ans*), making logical relations (*Si j'arrive avant 6 heures, je te téléphone*), analysing (*j'ai regardé la télévision hier soir/je vais regarder la télévision ce soir*), making generalizations (*Un petit ballon – Une voiture rouge* compared to *Un gros cadeau – Un chandail jaune*), etc. These types of transdisciplinary capacities are developed in any second language classroom, such as core French or French immersion, where a communicative approach to learning is being used, but are enhanced in IF classrooms because of the increased time and the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy.

4. Interaction

The teaching strategies recommended for use with the program are primarily interactive in nature. Teachers are encouraged to engage in conversation with their students, and use student centred rather than teacher centred techniques. The strategies used for presenting new themes are similar to those used in the primary language arts class; much use of brain-storming, word webs, conferencing, and similar techniques is recommended. Various forms of group work are encouraged: small groups, larger groups, co-operative learning and so forth. In addition, the program relies on the concept of learning through projects. Research has shown that project-based learning facilitates interaction between students and between students and the teacher, thereby creating an environment rich in spontaneous and meaningful language use. Research has also demonstrated an increase in motivation and in cognitive engagement in project-based learning environments. In particular, Turnbull (1999a, 1999b) found that projects provide favourable contexts for the construction of knowledge, basic principles and concepts. The teacher organizes a variety of related and sequential tasks which will equip students with both content and language tools necessary to complete the project successfully. According to Katz and Chard (2000), project-based learning features discussion, fieldwork, investigation, representation and display.

Project-based learning is preferred as a teaching strategy in IF classrooms in order to avoid a narrow theme approach which can be too limiting, and because of the more complex type of language use it encourages. Students engaged in a project not only collect information, as is the case in theme-related learning activities, but also engage in a variety of other activities which favour the use of many different aspects of language use. In addition to informing, students formulate questions, resolve problems, ask permission, negotiate meaning, congratulate or praise

others, and so forth. The wide variety of skills used to develop a project effectively requires students to develop an equally wide range of language functions. Working co-operatively together to achieve a project also increases the interaction essential to effective social, intellectual and language development. Students use their French language skills to integrate simple knowledge to form more complex cognitive and language structures (scaffolding) and through negotiating meaning and form refine their second language skills. This cognitive and affective involvement on the part of the learners facilitates more effective second language learning.

In addition the use of projects contributes to the implication of the students in their learning. Not all students will complete the same final project, or complete it in the same form. The use of projects enables students to show their talents, undertake new experiences and contribute in different ways to the accomplishment of a final project. The project gives the students a sense of accomplishment, and they can see what they have learned. Furthermore, since all students have their particular role to play, tasks can be suited to the abilities of each individual. The group work and project activities, in particular, tend to give support to the lower performing students.

In the IF curriculum, each unit is planned around a final project and a series of mini-projects, each leading up to the final one. For example, a final project for the theme, *Communications*, can be a newspaper, composed of information developed in the mini-projects completed in the units on advertisement, weather forecasts, book and movie reviews. In this way students are able to see the results of their learning. The completion of a final project enables students to develop a sense of accomplishment, as well as allowing them to consolidate their learning.

At the beginning of the program the research-oriented projects deal with simple topics (e.g., projects involving giving and/or eliciting personal information, such as the creation of a family album) and as the students progress through the ICF program, the projects grow in complexity (e.g., projects such as creating a newspaper).

5. Accuracy and fluency

The IF curriculum also gives attention to developing optimum conditions for assisting learners to develop both accuracy and fluency in communicating. The primary focus of the program on learning to communicate, and the emphasis on learning outcomes that highlight language functions, orient the program towards the development of fluency. As in the immersion programs the language used by the teacher in the classroom is always French, and students thus learn to use French as a means of communication. This emphasis on French as the means of communication contributes directly to the development of fluency. Accuracy is encouraged in several ways. First of all, activities within units are sequenced in order to enable students to use and re-use in authentic communication a small number of vocabulary items and structures. Using a small number of vocabulary items and structures in different communicative tasks of increasing cognitive difficulty enables learners to internalize these structures. Secondly, time and attention can also be devoted to correction. Thus, students are able to proceduralize correct language forms. Thirdly, language is generally presented and used orally first. This practice allows the learners to learn grammar implicitly. As one teacher indicated, 'I don't have to teach them grammar; they learn it without knowing that they have!' When they use and re-use, for example, the expression *j'ai mal* with different parts of the body in songs, poems, games, and other activities, the use of *avoir mal* in a sentence is learned implicitly (for example, *J'ai mal au ventre; Tu as mal à la tête?*). Once a structure is internalized correctly with a small repertoire of

oral language, it can be used correctly with more variations in vocabulary. Also, once the structure is learned correctly in oral language, learning to use it in the written form is a much easier task; it is only the aspects of language specific to writing that need to be brought to the students' attention. In this way, accuracy is developed as a skill, and is present in the communications of the learners (Germain and Netten, 2003).

Compacting of the curriculum

One of the essential tasks in developing the curriculum for IF is the inclusion of appropriate tasks and content to ensure the transdisciplinary nature of the program. This task requires that a review of the learning outcomes for all the other subjects at the grade level of the IF program be examined; this process ensures that the integrity of the curriculum for the grade is maintained. There are two aspects to this review. First of all, learning outcomes are reviewed to determine what skills are developed in the other subject areas, and which of these skills can be appropriately integrated into the IF program. For example, if learning to display information in graph form is part of the mathematics or science curriculum, this skill can be integrated into the IF program when students are asked to conduct a survey of their classmates to determine which type of music is the most popular amongst the group. Results can be presented in a variety of graph forms. In the social studies curriculum, reading maps may be a learning outcome. This outcome can be integrated into the activities involved in planning a trip. In this way, a number of skill objectives in other subject areas may be developed in the IF curriculum.

In addition, the cognitive processes developed in other subjects may also be integrated into the program. Generally speaking, these types of processes are designated by learning outcomes such as 'describe', 'identify', 'compare', and so forth. These learning outcomes imply the development of cognitive processes. In order to identify, the student must be able to analyse

various components; to describe, the student must identify different components, and synthesize this information; to compare, the student must analyze the various components, recognize similarities and differences, and generalize from this information. This list is in no way exhaustive; there are many more processes involved. These examples are used only to show how an awareness of the cognitive development envisaged in other subject areas is applied to the development of the IF program. When developing the tasks in the IF program the same cognitive processes are replicated in the tasks prescribed. For example, tasks in the common IF document include:

- DESCRIBE the clothing worn in winter;
- IDENTIFY some endangered species;
- COMPARE the ingredient of foods that contribute to health with those of foods that do not.

Content learning outcomes for the other subjects are also examined in order to determine which areas might be touched upon in the topics covered in IF. Developing the curriculum for learning to communicate in a second language is different from developing the program for other subject areas in many ways. One of the most significant differences is that there are no set topics about which students must communicate. Students need to talk about something in order to learn to talk, but what they talk about is not necessarily predetermined. Therefore, links may be made with other curriculum areas when developing topics. If nutrition is an area of study in the regular curriculum, it is possible to discuss foods that contribute to health and those that do not in the IF curriculum. This integration of some topics covered in the regular curriculum gives children some awareness and latent knowledge of the topic so that it can be covered more quickly when it is explored in detail in the regular curriculum. Through these activities which are integrated into the IF curriculum, students are already prepared to undertake activities pertaining to the achievement of these outcomes in the regular curriculum. However, it is to be remembered that

the achievement of the outcomes for the subject areas are evaluated only in the non-intensive semester.

It is this type of examination of the regular curriculum that enables compacting to take place. This process is important in that it enables students to achieve all the outcomes of the regular curriculum in a shorter space of time, without burdening them with extra homework in the non-intensive semester of the program⁸.

Conclusion The development of IF is based on sound general educational theory and practices. It is also an attempt to replace learning French as an object of study with an approach that emphasizes using the language in real communication. While the program is conceived to be interesting to students, it is not just a 'fun' program. The development of knowledge about the world, language skills and cognitive processes are all encouraged in the program. It is indeed a different way of learning French. Because it is a different way of learning French that takes into account their experiences, students find it interesting and enjoyable. It develops in students a motivation for learning French that is not present in the regular core French program. The development of curriculum guidelines is to ensure that the major principles of the program remain intact, and the desired outcomes are attained in all the classrooms where IF is implemented.

⁸ See article entitled *Intensive French and Intensive English; similarities and differences* and also the article entitled *Le bain linguistique : un programme intensif du français langue seconde à Ottawa*.

⁹ A *Program Guide for Intensive French* is in preparation under the direction of Beverley Anderson, Core French Consultant, Saskatchewan Learning,

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