

Making the Invisible Visible: Exploring Immersion Teacher Perceptions of Online Content and Language Integrated Learning Professional Development Experiences

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Abstract : Subject matter driven programs such as immersion programs are increasingly popular across the world. These programs have allowed for extensive experimentation in the realm of second language teaching and learning and have been at the centre of many research agendas since their inception. Even though immersion programs are successful, especially in terms of second language development, they remain complex to implement and not always as successful as what we would hope them to be. Among all the challenges these varied programs face, research indicates that the primary issue lies in the difficulty to create well-balanced programs where both content instruction and language/literacy instruction can be targeted simultaneously. Initial teacher education and professional development experiences are key drivers of successful language immersion education globally. They are critical to the supply of teachers with the mandatory linguistic and cultural competencies as well as associated pedagogical practices required to ensure learners' success. However, there is a significant dearth of research on professional development experiences of immersion teachers. We lack an understanding of the nature of their expertise and their needs in terms of professional development as well as their perceptions of the primary challenges they face as they attempt to formulate a coherent pedagogy of integrated language and content instruction. Such an understanding is essential if their specific needs are to be addressed appropriately and thus improve the overall quality of immersion programs. This paper reports on immersion teacher perceptions of online professional development experiences that have a positive impact on their ability to facilitate language and content connections in instruction. Twenty Irish-medium immersion teachers engaged in the instructional integration of language and content in a systematic and developmental way during a year-long online professional development program. Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g., an extensive online questionnaire, individual interviews, reflections, assignments and focus groups. This study provides compelling evidence of the potential of online professional development experiences as a pedagogical framework for understanding the complex and interconnected knowledge demands that arise in content and language integration in immersion. Findings illustrate several points of access to classroom research and pedagogy and uncover core aspects of high impact online experiences. Teachers identified aspects such as experimentation and risk-taking, authenticity and relevance, collegiality and collaboration, motivation and challenge and teacher empowerment. The potential of the online experiences to foster teacher language awareness was also identified as a contributory factor to success. The paper will conclude with implications for designing meaningful and effective online CLIL professional development experiences.

Keywords : content and language integrated learning , immersion pedagogy, professional development, teacher language awareness

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