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**LANGUAGE IMMERSION FOR LOW PROFICIENCY ESL LEARNERS:
THE ALEMAC PROJECT**

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Abstract

This paper describes a program that was developed based on some of the principles of language immersion. The aim of the program was to provide a group of low proficiency ESL learners exposure to “fun” language activities in order to motivate them to learn and use the English language. The activities as well as the two phases of the program are described. Results of a survey, interviews as well as the pre and post tests show the gains made in terms of student interest and motivation to improve their English language learning and use. Implications for pedagogy are drawn.

Background to the Study

Among the most interesting innovations in second language education in the last two decades have been the second language immersion programs developed in Canada (Genesee, 1987; Lambert and Tucker, 1992; Swain and Lapkin, 1982). At the time that immersion programs were first introduced in 1965, they were a radical educational experiment. In order to monitor their effectiveness and consequences for the participating learners, researchers in Canada and the United States carried out extensive evaluations on them. The results of these evaluations provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of immersion and its outcomes.

Due to the success of immersion programs, foreign language teaching has shifted away from teaching the language in isolation and moved toward integrating language and content. This is based on a number of principles:

1. Language is acquired most effectively when it is learned in a meaningful social context, offering students the opportunity to communicate about what they know as well as about their feelings and attitudes.
2. Interesting content taught in authentic, meaningful context provides motivation for learning the communicative functions of the language.
3. Formal and functional characteristics of language change from one context to another. An integrated language and content model in provides a wide variety of contexts in which to use the foreign language.

Generally, immersion-related goals include:

1. to achieve competency in the foreign language (listening, speaking, reading, writing)
2. to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

This report is not about an immersion program the way it was conceptualized in Canada or elsewhere, rather it focuses on a program that takes on some of the principles of immersion. It is a “language camp” organized for a group of limited English proficient learners with the long term goal of improving the English language proficiency of these learners. Some of the principles of immersion that have been adopted in this program include:

- Flexible length from three days to two weeks
- Highly intensive "English-only immersion" schedule of 15-hour days
- Small group instruction
- Pre- and post-program assessment
- Program components customized to meet specific needs

This language camp was conducted as the second phase of the Alternative Education for Marginalised Children (ALEMAC) Project. The first phase was a language camp conducted in a secondary school for 118 learners. Report of the research (Kaur, 1997), indicate that the camp did not make a significant impact as far as language proficiency and reading improvement were concerned. One reason was the same amount of exposure and training was not maintained after the learners returned to the original environment. One of the recommendations put forth was that future projects should include training in strategies for reading and writing in addition to increased exposure to language. It is, however, interesting to note an important perspective that is emerging in language curriculum, instruction and teaching. Educators are now concerned with strategies learners use or could use to learn effectively (Oxford, 1990; Lydia, 2003). It is no longer considered adequate to present facts, explanations and descriptions. Teachers are being encouraged to help learners identify skills that can help facilitate their learning. In addition, many second language writers have defined and advocated varied types of approaches for improving language proficiency. However, most agree that limited proficiency second language learners lack confidence and are in need of confidence-boosting activities.

Therefore, the aims of the second phase of the camp, besides focusing on the receptive language skills of reading and writing, are to:

- i) increase the learners’ self-esteem
show how the learning of the language can be enjoyable
- ii) create an awareness of
 - availability of interesting and manageable reading materials
 - strategies learners can use to improve/enjoy English
 - how learners can take responsibility for their own learning
- iii) develop the reading habit among learners

The research question that the program seeks to answer is - what is the impact of the program on the learners and teachers?

Methodology

Selection of Learners and Facilitators

One hundred students were selected based on their Year 6 results. At the time of the study, the students were in Form One (aged 12 to 13 years. They had just completed their 6 year Elementary education. Those selected had obtained grades C and below. On the first day, two students dropped out, so there were altogether 98 participants for the five-day camp.

There are about 1645 students in the school. About 30% of the students come from vernacular feeder schools. These students have a very weak foundation in English. According to the teachers, they tend to isolate themselves from English speaking students. The students chosen for the camp are mostly from this group.

Six teachers were involved. Out of the six, one was a college trained English teacher and the other 5 were either locally trained or had been trained overseas, majoring in BEd TESL. The total number of teachers in the school is 104, 80 graduate teachers and 24 non-graduate teachers. 20% of them are overseas trained.

Pre-test

A short test was given to gauge the learners' level of proficiency in the receptive skills of reading and writing. The test comprises comprehension questions based on a short story and a writing section. The main aim of this test was to determine the learners' reading levels so the teachers can sort out and recommend books which are of levels suitable for learners of different abilities. This test was not meant to measure specific skills or linguistic abilities. The test was administered to the 98 students who participated in the camp. The table below shows the results of the pre-test;

Marks obtained	% age of learners
1) 80 - 90	5.1
2) 70 – 80	16.3
3) 60 – 70	16.3
4) 50 – 60	11.2
5) 40 – 50	20.4
6) 30 – 40	16.3
7) 20 – 30	10.2
8) below 20	4.4

Table 1: Results of Pre-Test

About 50% of the learners obtained marks below 50 while only 27.5% managed to get between 50-70 marks. The fact that the level of language in the test is very much below the syllabus and curriculum level of Year 7 the learners' poor performance is indicative of their low proficiency level and probably lack of interest and exposure to reading and other English language materials.

Survey of Learners' Attitudes Towards Reading in English

L2 proficiency and ability to read

A number of researchers (Clarke, 1979/1980; Cziko, 1980; Wong-Fillmore & Valadez, 1986) note that second language reading ability is heavily dependent on proficiency. This means

that a student who is not proficient in speaking the second language would have difficulty reading in that language. Weber (1991), however, sees this position to be based on the traditional belief that progress in reading is dependent on spoken language. Weber observes that research on second language programs has overemphasized spoken English proficiency at the expense of understanding written language. This observation is confirmed by studies which show that second language learners seem to be able to learn oral and written language at the same time (Elley, 1981).

Elley's finding is supported by Barrera (1983) who reported that children can learn to read in their second language before oral fluency develops. In another study, Elley, (1984) suggests that learners' weaknesses in the second language could be due to their lack of exposure to written material at the early stage of L2 development. Elley then goes on to argue that written material is an important source that promotes the growth of language competence. He posits that when competence is increased, reading ability is enhanced. This perspective on reading for low proficiency L2 learners is taken up by other researchers (Cooper, 1984; Stoller, 1986; Devine, 1987; Barton, 2000; Day, 1993) who urge low proficiency learners to be exposed to a large supply of reading materials. In this way, they argue, a rich linguistic environment is created whereby the readers are introduced to situationally appropriate language samples. The language would therefore be learned through reading, not as a prerequisite to reading. As such the second phase of the project needs to be more strategic to have greater impact on the learners/participants.

The current interest in reading motivation is an outgrowth of the research of the 1980s which emphasized cognitive aspects of reading such as prior knowledge and strategic behaviours (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Garner, 1987; Presley, Borkowsky and Schneider, 2005). However, according to some of these scholars, in order for learners to develop into mature, effective readers, they must possess both the "skill" and the "will" to read (Anderson, Hierbert, Rellinger and Presley, 1990; Paris and Oka, 1986; Winograd and Greelee, 1986; Rasinski, 2000). Thus research of the 1990s has begun to focus on the cognitive and affective aspects of reading development. The sequence in learning to read includes exposure to written words in the environment and in written materials and developing a love for books through being read to and seeing others read. White (1959) introduced the notion that human motivation was driven towards competence that was reinforced by feelings of efficacy following success. According to Bandura (1977) motivation is fueled by each successful experience, thereby increasing self-efficacy. In the context of reading development, motivation can be elevated when learners strive for competence by certain amount of effort and persistence, achieve success and believe in their ability to handle related tasks. Gardner and Lambert (1959) were pioneers in establishing significant and independent relationships between motivation, attitude and second language acquisition. However, Ellis (1985) notes that motivation and attitude are often indistinct in the literature. Based on Lambert's (1976) claim of a linear relationship such that attitudes affect motivation which in turn affect second language acquisition (SLA), attitudes were said to have an important but indirect effect on SLA. This was further supported by Brown's (1983) research which found that learners' attitude toward learning situations affected their degree of success. Schumann and Schumann's (1977) review of diary studies contend that learners can have negative attitudes towards a learning situation if the teacher's agenda differ from the learners. This is later confirmed by other studies (Medgyes, 1994). In order to ascertain and glean the views, attitudes and motivation of these learners towards reading in English, a short survey was carried out.

Results

All 98 of the participants responded to the questionnaire that seeks information on their attitudes and interests toward reading. Questions given included interest of students to read, why they like/dislike reading, reading habits and people who encourage them to read. The results of the survey were quite revealing in terms of their family reading interests, their reasons for reading and for not reading, stories they enjoy, strategies they employ, etc.

To the question, who in the family reads, 80% of the respondents said their parents and 60% noted their brothers and sisters as ones who read in the family. Seventy five percent admitted they read English books. The question that follows tried to glean their reasons for reading. The reasons they chose were, stories were interesting (75%), stories can be understood (50%) and 30% said they read because the pictures were colorful. It is interesting to note that those who do not read, (25%), found reading to be difficult and there were no suitable books for them.

The learners prefer either story books and comics (60%) or picture books and others (40%). Half the respondents borrow books from the library while the other half do not because they do not find much to choose from. When asked how often they read, 70% responded they do sometimes, only 25% say they read everyday while a small number, 10% admit they do very little reading. Only 40% of the respondents report that they have read more than 10 storybooks while 30% say they have only read between 1 to 5 books.

Table 2 shows the strategies the learners use while reading and when they have difficulty reading.

1) Read every word	60%
2) Use the dictionary	60%
3) Skip difficult words	40%
4) Ask for help	50%
5) Get another book (give up on difficult book)	30%
6) Give up (stop reading)	20%

Table 2: Strategies used in reading

Eighty percent of the learners noted that teachers are their motivating influence while 70% name parents as those who encourage them to read. Finally the following are the learners' views on reading.

1) Enjoyable	60%
2) Interesting and fun	50%
3) Boring	20%
4 Can improve their English	90%

Table 3: Views on reading

The outcome of the survey shows that more than half of the participants possess a positive attitude towards reading. If it is a true picture of their attitude, then it makes good sense to assume that many of them would be motivated to read more after the camp.

Interviews and post-test

Besides the initial collection of data through the pre-test and survey, informal interviews were carried out after the camp to glean the teacher's perceptions of the impact of the camp on their students and on themselves as mentors and facilitators.

A post-test was conducted after the camp using the same questions as in the pre-test.

The Training Module

The training module, while based on the aims listed on page 2, focuses on reading the graded text series. The texts were specifically chosen to provide maximum benefit to the students involved. In order to aid students in their reading, text series were a combination of text and pictures. The pictures clearly explained what the texts read. These series provided students ample opportunities to understand the story as they read the text. These were the type of text series provided specifically for the participants of the camp. In addition, the activities developed for the program are towards achieving the following:

- Energise the learners
- Inspire real motivation to learn the language
- Enable learners to come to grips with English
- Offer alternative methodology
- Fill the gap between passive classroom learning and live language
- Enable learners to overcome shyness and manage in viable English
- Allow the learners to extend their contact with English
- Provide learners with new experiences to generate new ideas

Implementation Procedures

Preparation

The materials/handouts for the camp were prepared jointly by the facilitators before the camp started. Extra materials were prepared to cater for changes. As the camp progressed, some groups used more materials than others because they were working at different paces.

Meetings Held

Meetings were held regularly before the camp. The first meeting was held to decide on the kind of activities to be included and for the facilitators to be oriented to the goals of the camp. Subsequent meetings were held to finalize the text series for reading and the execution of activities.

After the camp, a post-mortem meeting was held.

Sessions in progress

The 98 learners were divided into 4 groups, each held the session in their own classroom. The participants sat in a circle most of the time though the seating arrangement changed according to the activities. Each of the groups was handled by a facilitator.

The schedule of activities is as shown below.

Schedule of Activities				
Day/ Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednes day	Thursday
8.00- 9.00a m	Pre-test	Songs and nursery rhymes	Board games- preparati on	TV Reports
9.00- 10.00a m	Pre-test	Reading graded picture books	Board games	Reading graded picture books
10.00- 10.30a m	TEA TIME			
10.30- 12.30p m	Warm-up games	Choral speaking	Story telling/Dra ma activities Preparatio n	Writing and illustrating books
12.30- 2.00p m	L U N C H			
2.00- 4.00p m	Mini field trip	Board games	Story telling/Dra ma activities Preparatio n	Funfare (Input and preparatio n)
4.00- 4.30p m	TEA	Night Homework/W atch an English TV program	TEA	

**On going activities

Graffiti, Word tree, Daily Quotations, "I like you slips"

Description and Explanation of each of the Activities.

The activities were carefully planned and selected to allow them to be used and practiced even after the camp is over. Some of the activities were planned to be done at home to extend the learners' exposure to the language after school hours.

Warm-up games

These games were played at the start of the camp for participants to get to know each other and the facilitators. Also, it is a way of making them use English in an informal, fun and exciting environment.

Mini field trip

This outdoor activity was organized to provide a different learning environment and to allow the participants the opportunity of conducting a mini-survey.

Songs and Nursery Rhymes

This activity provides exposure to popular rhymes and songs and helps them to learn in a non-threatening, fun environment. The repetitive nature of the nursery rhymes facilitates their practice with the language.

Reading Graded Picture Books

The graded picture books provide manageable reading materials and simple stories that can be easily understood. The facilitators checked comprehension of the stories before the students were allowed to pick another book. Being able to read and understand story books raise their self-esteem.

Choral Reading

This activity provides alternative methodology to learning language. Participants get exposure to different ways of reading together.

Board Games

The participants were taught to make their own language board games. They then played the games they themselves prepared as well as the games prepared by the other groups.

Storytelling/Drama Activities

These activities are extensions of the reading activity. The participants tell stories from books they had read during the camp or they acted scenes from the stories.

TV Reports

This activity facilitates the participants' understanding of television programs in English by giving them a focus as they watch these programs with specific aims - to answer certain questions. It is also a useful activity for the family to play an active and supporting role in the learners' attempts at learning the language.

Writing and illustrating books

The participants get to write their own picture books. This is a useful activity to boost their confidence and raise their self-esteem. The books were then exchanged among the class members.

On-going activities

Several activities were held throughout the camp. They serve as spring-boards for active language use that could easily be continued after the camp.

- My Secret Buddy

At the beginning of the camp, each student was given the name of a participant who was to be his/her secret buddy. He/She had to do nice things for this person without letting him/her know why. At the end of the camp, the secret buddies were revealed.

- Graffiti

Everyday the facilitator puts up mahjong paper with a phrase for participants to complete. Some of the phrases used were “ Happiness is...”, “ A friend is...”, “ I enjoy...”

- Daily Quotations

Inspiring quotations were put up daily and learners’ attention was drawn to their meanings and how they could be used.

- Word Tree

Participants took turns to add new words to a “word tree”. They were only allowed to put up new words once the facilitators were satisfied that they were able to use the words on the tree.

- I Like You Slips

Each participant, including the facilitator, had his/her name written on an envelope. All the envelopes were pasted on the class bulletin board. Each member of the class had to write something positive to put in each of the envelopes. At the end of the camp, students were asked to read out the positive statements written about them and express how they felt. Students were thrilled because the positive statements made them feel good and confident.

Impact of the Program

The program left a deep impact on all parties involved, especially on the learners and the teachers who became their facilitators.

Impact on the Learners

a) Post test scores showed improvement in the marks obtained by the students. Ninety three participants sat for the post test as 7 of them were absent or did not complete the whole immersion program.

Table 5 shows the results of the post-test which was held on the last day of the language camp.

Marks obtained	% age of learners
1) 90-100	1
2) 80-90	7.8
3) 70-80	17.6
4) 60-70	15.6
5) 50-60	9.8
6) 40-50	13.7
7) 30-40	15.6
8) 20-30	5.8
9) below 20	1.9

Table 5: Post test results

Pre and Post-test Compared

Marks obtained	% age of learners (Pre-test)	% age of learners (Post-test)
1) 90-100	0	1
2) 80-90	5.1	7.8
3) 70-80	16.3	17.6
4) 60-70	6.3	15.6
5) 50-60	11.2	9.8
6) 40-50	20.4	13.7
7) 30-40	16.3	15.6
8) 20-30	10.2	5.8
9) below 20	4.4	1.9

Table 6: Pre and post test compared

The increase in scores is for the mark range 70-100. It is, however, important to note that these results are inconclusive as the main aim of the test was to find out the learners' entry level.

b) Learners' Comments after Three Months

After three months, during one of the follow-up sessions, the participants of the camp filled out a brief questionnaire. It was called 'Post English Language Camp Evaluation'. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section one was made up of 5 Yes/No questions. Section two included two short open ended-questions. The responses from students are presented in the table below.

<u>Comments</u>	<u>No. of learners</u>
1) My English has improved	60
2) My English has not improved	5
3) If there's another camp, I'd like to attend	62
4) I try to keep to my "Learner Contract" deal	53
5) The activity that I enjoyed most and still remember	
c) Field trip	17
d) Board Games	15
e) NIE	8
f) Collage	6
g) Choral speaking	6
h) Reading	6

Table 7: Learners' Comments After the Camp

It is clear that the camp had a positive impact on the students in terms of their perception of their improvement and the fact that more than 50% are motivated to join a similar camp. Field trip ranks highest as the activity they enjoyed, followed by board games. This suggests the need for a different learning environment from the normal classroom routine.

Impact on the teachers

During the informal interview with the teachers after the camp, the following comments were extracted,

"I'm relieved that the camp is over!!" Ms A

"The learners were always asking questions...I'm tired of talking" Ms Z

“I notice that the learners are more willing to speak to me and respond in their own English, not classroom English: Ms H

“The writing activity needs most help and guidance” Ms W

“I think they really enjoyed the field trips but we were all so tired!!!!” Ms A

“It was touching to see them struggling to speak to the American visitors” Ms ZA

“It’d be nice to share this with other teachers so that they can use similar activities in their normal classes” Ms H

The voices of these teachers say a lot about their growing understanding of their learners and their needs. It was a hectic and tiring experience but they were unanimous in saying it was a useful learning experience in terms of pedagogy for limited proficiency learners. During the post-mortem meeting, the teachers were the ones who came up with the suggestions for the follow-up sessions. The statement by Ms H reflects their confidence in the worth of the activities for even the normal English classes.

Monitoring/Follow-Up Activities

The teachers in the school, with support and encouragement from the school Principal, continued meeting the “campers” to have English language activities with them. Here are descriptions of some of the sessions.

1st Follow-up Session

During this follow-up session, attendance was about 97% (only five learners did not turn up). Those who did not were those who were actually absent from school on that particular day. The attendance was very good for this first follow-up session because learners were taken out of their respective classes during school hours (after permission was granted by the Principal) and then the activities were carried out.

The agenda for the day included two major events. First, learners were asked to go to their respective groups (the group they were in during the language camp). Here, their teachers/facilitators spoke to them about their contract (which they signed on the last day of the camp). Learners discussed the items in the contract. Most of them (more than 50%) could not keep their promises in the contract and wanted some changes made. They were allowed to renegotiate the contract with their teachers and come up with a list that is practical and more detailed. For example, Emry wrote in his contract “I shall read 5 English storybooks everyday” but after meeting his teacher he changed it to 3 books per week.

The second activity was a newspaper exploration game. Learners were divided into groups of 4-5. Each learner was given a newspaper. Each group was given a world map. Learners were then asked to read through the articles in the newspaper and relocate articles according to countries, region etc, and place them on the world map. At the end of the given time, the group with the most articles stuck on the map was announced the winner.

After the game, some learners were asked how they felt and some of their responses were:

Student A: “I didn’t know there are so many countries in the world”

Student B: “The game was too difficult. I had a hard time understanding the instructions.”

Student C: “I enjoyed the game very much because I could find a lot of articles on football and I know where the countries are even on the world map.”

2nd Follow-up Session

This time attendance was only about 75% and more than 18 learners were absent. Learners were called to the hall after recess. Most of the learners who did not turn up told their friends that they wanted to study for the exams, which was just around the corner. During this session, learners were given a “Post English Language Camp Evaluation”. They were asked to read the questions and answer in short sentences. Learners were not assisted by their facilitators. Instead, they had to ask their friends how to fill out the evaluation form. The results are as discussed earlier.

8 learners did not send back the evaluation forms. They might have either forgotten or just did not take the initiative to complete it. This shows that they are not keen to participate in the future follow-up session. And true enough – these were the same learners who refused to take part in the next activity or help with the technical team.

3rd Follow-up Session

For this particular session, attendance was more than 90%. It was actually a ‘Choral Speaking/Reading Competition’. Those who did not take part in the competition helped to put up the backdrop, organized those who were taking part etc.

The one very memorable event that took place was when 7 learners from the weakest Form 1 class recited a poem together. It was not an easy task for them as they were not very good in English. They could hardly read or write English. But they were promised a reward even though they did not win in the competition. They were proud to represent their class. Everyone cheered and clapped after their presentation-even though it was not very good.

When asked about their feelings one of the learners said (in Malay) “I never ever thought I will be daring enough to go up the stage and present the poem.” Another said “All of us were so scared. But we were together and that gave us moral support.” Even though not all the learners came for the follow-up sessions, most of them were still very keen when they came. Individuals have become more confident and more willing to speak up. In their groups they tend to brag about all the nice things they had during the camp and made others who did not attend the camp curious.

Lessons from the Camp Experience.

The following lessons were learnt and some conclusions made from the experience of the camp:

Lesson 1

Reading as a Bridge to Proficiency

Reading the text series did raise the learners’ confidence and self-esteem. This was partly due to the simple language aided by pictures in the books. The sense of accomplishment at finishing a book and increasing competence after completing several books is very important for their self-worth.

Lesson 2

Learning Environment

The learning environment created during the camp was unconventional and provided a variety of experiences. The sense of fun and play and spirit of comradeship did help to motivate them to use the language without being too conscious about their lack of it.

Lesson 3

Teachers' Expectations/Roles

After the camp the teachers realize the learners' real potential, they understood individuals better. This was partly because they began to loosen their usual control of the learning environment and they were facilitating the learning more than trying to "teach" facts.

Lesson 4

Sustaining Activities

It is important that the exposure given during the camp be maintained to sustain the learners' interest and motivation. Also the sense of belonging helps them to take responsibility for their own improvement. In addition, keeping in touch with the learners can have a ripple effect on others as sometimes during the follow-up sessions, they brought along interested friends.

Implications for Pedagogy

The hallmark of the immersion approach is the integration of language instruction with content instruction. In this camp, although there was no integration with content instruction, learners were exposed to language in different situations. Thus second language teaching is embedded in a rich and meaningful communicative context. In addition, the goal of learning language here is not grammatical perfection, but meaningful communication among learners and teachers.

Errors in language use are not seen as bad but rather as indications of learners' active efforts to try to use the linguistic system. Because the student is seen as progressing through a series of stages, it was not deemed important to document his/her progress at the end of the short 5 day program. Rather, the long term impact and the follow-up plans and sessions play an important role in documenting and suggesting the student's level of interest in the language and motivation to use the language, hence improving their proficiency. It is thus important to note that such programs to succeed, proficiency should be seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. The learners should only be expected to acquire the language skills for communication and comprehension.

In this camp, emphasis is on learners' receptive skills. This is line with researchers' (eg. Krashen, 1985) call for comprehensible input for second language acquisition. When monitored for its long term impact, programs such as this provide extensive comprehensible input. There needs to be a paradigm shift in teachers' and students' conception of foreign language learning, the program calls for a relaxed, non-threatening, fun and meaningful learning environment. They also need to learn a new culture, a new language and new instructional contexts, After years of English language education in rigid bilingual classroom environments, students are immersed in English-only sessions by teachers using very informal teaching approaches. This means that colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs would do well to consider adopting this informal, friendly, authentic and fun approach to foreign or second language learning. These teacher training colleges and universities need to develop short and long term comprehensive plans which include professional development for the faculty and program redesign of existing programs.

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