There are at least five "degrees of immersion" which can be identified in categorizing the various monolingual situations in which a person may acquire a language. The first degree is the most favorable. It corresponds to the situation in which a child learns a language within the context of his or her family. Virtually everyone experiences the first degree of immersion, since this is the environment in which one's first language is learned.

The second degree of immersion would be that corresponding to the situation in which preschool and kindergarten children are cared for and instructed by people who speak to them always and only in a particular language (referred to here as "L") during the period when the children are in the school environment. Where L is not the child's first language, this is indeed a lesser degree of immersion. The exposure to L in this second degree of immersion is extremely valuable and often leads to native-like mastery of the language, but it is not as full and consistent as the first-degree immersion situation characteristic of the acquisition of one's first language. Nonetheless, it is in many communities the most promising environment for language revitalization.

The third degree of immersion can be realized in a number of different formats. An important one is that in which two people, one a native speaker of L, the other a learner of L, spend their days together speaking only L. Where the speaker and the learner are able to spend a great amount of time together, even an adult lifetime together, this can also bring a learner to a level of competence functionally equivalent to that of a native speaker. Typically, however, such associations are more short-lived, resulting in a level of mastery which, though significant, is generally much less than that of a native speaker. This is essentially the situation involved in the master-apprentice immersion program (see Chapter 28). We place this at the third degree because that amount of exposure is typically less here than in the second degree, and certainly less than in the first degree. There are exceptions, of course, of couples (a speaker and a learner) who spend their lives speaking the language together, the learner becoming almost as competent as the native speaker, functionally at least. This learning environment is also found in a relationship which might not occur to one as at all relevant to a discussion of immersion. This is the relationship between a linguist or anthropologist and his or her informants, or language consultants, the former being the apprentices, the latter the masters. Typically, of course, this relationship begins with the use of two languages, the apprentice's language being used to elicit forms in the language of the master, but in many cases, the work shifts to the master's language entirely. In these cases, the master-apprentice model is operating, to all intents and purposes.

Our suggested fourth degree of immersion is the "content course," in which L is used as the language of instruction in a series of lessons whose content is something other than the language itself—for example, biology, math, geography, philosophy, and so on. This is similar to the second-degree
immersion situation, but the amount of contact is less. While the subject matter of the course is not L itself, the purpose of the course is both to teach the subject matter and to teach the language as well, through the example of its use in explaining the course content. To say that this is the fourth degree of immersion is not to say that it is less important or less valuable than higher degrees, because in many present-day communities, the fourth-degree immersion situation is the only realistic possibility within the general immersion class of language-learning situations. Furthermore, the fourth degree is a good language-learning environment, fully worthy of the immersion label.

The fifth and final degree in our classification of immersion environments is the monolingual language class. In some variants, this is virtually indistinguishable from the fourth-degree learning situation. In the monolingual class, L is used exclusively, generally in a conversational setting and often around a particular topic—a movie, a telenovela or soap opera, food, the news, and so on. This model is common in contemporary conversational language classes.

The degree of immersion has interesting implications for training. I will consider here the training required to ensure that the learner acquires the structural features of L—that is, its sound system, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In general, the higher the degree of immersion, the less attention needs to be paid to the structure of L. That is to say, less attention has to be given specifically to teaching structure in the first and second degrees. In fact, little if any attention has to be given specifically to grammar in the first and second degrees, since these are full and rich immersion environments. In the best of circumstances, the learner is exposed to all the data needed to acquire L in the manner of a first-language learner, and where the learner is an infant or young child, he or she has the great advantage of being able to make use of the special language-learning capacity of children. The first degree, and to some extent the second degree, are “natural” language learning environments and are normally not specially constructed for the teaching of structure, although, as is well known, in many societies mothers and other close kin will present children with carefully edited models of a standard form of L, often adjusted in accordance with their perception of what is appropriate to their age.

The situation is very different for the lower degrees of immersion, where the contact with the language is less. This is especially true of the fourth and fifth degrees, where the teacher must have training not only in teaching methods, but also specifically in the structural features of L. The reason for this is obvious: since the exposure to the language is limited, special measures must be taken to ensure that the structural features of L are adequately covered, especially those features which are in some sense “characteristic” of L—those features which one must acquire in order to be able to say that one is actually speaking L and not some dilute or modified version of it.

By way of illustrating the point just made, I present part of a fourth-degree immersion lesson in Miskitu, the indigenous lingua franca of eastern Nicaragua. The content of the lesson deals with certain aspects of the geography of Nicaragua. Although the written version of the text does not show this very well, the oral classroom version, aided by various props, such as a map of the country, and pictures, makes it clear to the students what is being said in the lesson, even if their command of the Miskitu is still incipient. Embedded in the text are a number of Miskitu constructions, of course, but this lesson is constructed in such a way as to give special attention to a particular construction which figures prominently in the grammar of the language. The lesson is of course monolingual in Miskitu, but for present purposes the lecture will be given in translation as well, in parentheses; stage directions are also given in English, in square brackets.

**WAN TASBAYA ‘Our Land’**

[pointing to map]

* Naha kuntrika sika Nicaragua.
  ‘This country is Nicaragua’.  

* Bara naha kuntrika sika Honduras.
  ‘And this country is Honduras’.  

* Nicaragua kuntri sirpi sa.
  ‘Nicaragua is a small country’.  

[pointing and signaling “two” with the fingers]

* Nicaragua pls wal brisa.
  ‘Nicaragua has two parts’.  

[pointing to the western part]

* Naha plska sika Pasipik Kus.
  ‘This part is the Pacific Coast’.  

* Bara naha plska sika Atlantik Kus.
  ‘And this part is the Atlantic Coast’.  

[pointing and indicating sizes]

* Atlantik Kus tara sa, kuna Pasipik Kus sirpi sa.
  ‘The Atlantic Coast is big, but the Pacific Coast is small’.  

[pointing at the Coco River]

* Nicaragua wihki Honduras wal lilapas ra ñwala kum bára sa.
  ‘Between Nicaragua and Honduras there is a river’.  

* ñawalaka ba ñwa Wangki mákisa.
  ‘The river is called the Wangki (Coco)’.  

[indicating large size]

* Wangki ba ñwala tara sa.
  ‘The Coco is a large river’.  

[pointing at houses and villages on the Atlantic Coast]

* Miskitu uplika nani ba Atlantik Kus ra ñwisa.
  ‘The Miskitu people live on the Atlantic Coast’.  

* Upla ñaal Wangki ñawalaka ra ñwisa.
  ‘Many people live on the Coco River’.  

[pointing to Waspam on the Coco River and indicating large size]

* Naha təwanka sika Waspam. Tawan tara sa.
  ‘This town is Waspam. It is a large town’.  

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