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## Theory and practice in language immersion camps: common challenges and how to solve them

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**Abstract.** The popularity of immersion programs as one of the most effective means to learn foreign languages and cultures is constantly growing. More and more children are getting involved in immersion programs in schools, language courses and summer camps. During the last fifty years both Russian and foreign scholars have been trying to establish a theoretical basis for developing communicative and intercultural competence which would inform program design and ultimately the results of such programs. We describe various aspects of creating immersion programs and to analyze their key ideas. The article draws from both authors' lengthy experience as language immersion summer camp organizers to describe the experience of applying immersion principles in practice. We summarize more than ten years of experience and exchange visits of representatives of the two immersion camps "Forest Camp", Russia, and "Lesnoye Ozero", the USA. We describe common challenges arising in the working process and suggest ways of dealing with them.

**Keywords:** language and culture studies, communicative and intercultural competence, immersion program, summer language camp

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## Теория и практика языковых лагерей с программой погружения: типичные проблемы и способы решения

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**Аннотация.** Популярность программ погружения, как одного из самых эффективных способов изучения иностранного языка и культуры, постоянно растет. Все больше и больше детей участвуют в таких программах в школах, языковых центрах и летних лагерях. За последние пятьдесят лет русскими и зарубежными учеными были предприняты попытки разработать теоретические основы формирования коммуникативной и межкультурной компетенции, которые бы позволили получить наилучшие результаты при таком способе обучения. Рассмотрены различные подходы к созданию программ погружения и анализ их ключевых положений. Так как мы имеем большой опыт организации работы летних языковых лагерей с программами погружения, нами уделено большое внимание описанию результатов применения принципов погружения на практике. Подведен итог более чем десяти лет работы и обмена опытом двух летних лагерей: «Forest Camp» в России и «Лесное Озеро» в США. Описаны основные трудности, возникающие в процессе работы, и предложены способы их устранения.

**Ключевые слова:** изучение языка и культуры, коммуникативная и межкультурная компетенции, программа погружения, летний языковой лагерь

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### INTRODUCTION

In the pedagogical community there has always been a lot of debate about the most effective means of teaching foreign languages and cultures. During the last decades many Russian and foreign scholars have focused their attention on immersion programs. Among the aspects highlighted in various research works there were: characteristics and principles of immersion programs, conditions, methods and contents

which showed the best results, their effectiveness in developing communicative and intercultural competence, their influence on a child's cognitive and social development. The aim of this article is to analyze different visions of immersion programs and to describe the experience of applying the results of theoretical investigation in practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Until the second half of the 20th century, the process of teaching foreign languages emphasized learning vocabulary, which was given in the form of lists of isolated words, and grammar, which provided the rules for putting these words together. Students studied and practiced language patterns and translated disconnected sentences from the target language into their native tongue. Little attention was paid to the content of texts, which were used as a basis to do vocabulary and grammar exercises. Classes were taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.

In the 1960s the American linguist and cognitive scientist Noam Chomsky noted that language varied greatly depending on the social and cultural context [1]. Therefore, structural theories of language teaching did not show the linguistic creativity and variety evident in real communication. Scientists saw a need for students to develop communicative skill and functional competence in addition to mastering language structures. It resulted in a shift from teaching language as such to integrating language and content.

These ideas were further developed by another American linguist, Dell Hymes, who introduced the concept of communicative competence [2]. Communicative competence redefined what it meant to “know” a language, suggesting that speakers must be able not only to master the structural elements of language but to use them appropriately in different social situations.

In comparison with traditional teaching methods, content-based foreign language instruction had a number of advantages:

- The process of language acquisition is more effective as it is learnt in a meaningful context.
- As forms and functions of the language change depending on the context, the child learns to apply the language in a variety of spheres.
- Interesting and important contents motivate students to study.

- The process of learning becomes a part of a child’s cognitive and social development.

Donna M. Brinton et al. explained that “content-based language teaching is distinguished first of all by the concurrent learning of a specific content and related language use skills in a “content driven” curriculum, i. e., with the selection and sequence of language elements determined by the content...” [3]. She also described ten principles of content-based instruction.

1. The content-based curriculum removes the arbitrary distinction between language and content.

2. It reflects the interests and needs of the learners, taking into account the eventual uses the learners will make of the second or foreign language.

3. It offers optimal conditions for second language acquisition by exposing learners to meaningful, cognitively demanding language in the form of authentic materials and tasks.

4. It provides pedagogical accommodation to learner proficiency levels and skills.

5. It views language as learned within a larger framework of communication.

6. It holds sustained content as necessary for providing an authentic, meaningful context for students to acquire language.

7. It views rich, comprehensible input as necessary but not sufficient for the development of high-level academic language proficiency.

8. It places a high value on feedback on accuracy to help students develop target-like output.

9. Instead, it supplements exposure to input through language-enhanced instruction (e. g., skill-based instruction and consciousness raising about issues of grammar, lexis, style, and register).

10. Finally, it aims for a balanced focus on fluency and accuracy [3].

Fred Genesee et al. focused his research on studying bilingualism and second language acquisition [4]. His idea was that language should be taught in conditions similar to those in which a child learns to speak a native tongue. Teachers should create an environment in which a person is motivated to learn a target language to communicate on other important topics. This ap-

proach is known as language immersion. According to its principles, when students come to school, they hear only the target language, in which all instructions and conversations are given and all school subjects are taught. In this way students learn language in a natural environment and a new language functions both as a means and an object of studying.

The first immersion program was created at Margaret Pendlebury Elementary School in Quebec, Canada, in 1965 [5]. Parents wanted their children to acquire excellent skills both in English and in French and created an experimental kindergarten for them. The French immersion concept was designed to:

- capitalize on children's ability to learn language naturally and effortlessly;
- take advantage of their social ability and open attitudes to language and culture;
- reflect on the building blocks of language by emphasizing the use of languages for communication;
- help children in native language development, academic achievement or general cognitive development.

Later on there appeared similar programs for studying other languages. Now more than 320 000 Canadian students study in immersion programs. They have also become popular in the United States, Australia, South Korea, Finland, Hungary, Spain, South Africa, Hong Kong and Japan.

The research on immersion education and language acquisition has been very positive. Students gain near native fluency in the second language, they master the regular subject matter, and they match or out-perform their peers on tests in all spheres of knowledge. Deborah W. Robinson in her article "The cognitive, academic, and attitudinal benefits of early language learning" wrote: "There is accumulating evidence that learning additional languages – particularly from an early age – has cognitive and academic benefits. Mental flexibility, the ability to shift easily between symbol systems (such as math and literacy), improved abilities in divergent thinking, meta-linguistic awareness, and occasionally,

higher scores on measures of verbal intelligence are correlated with early language learning" [6].

Robert K. Johnson and Merrill Swain described the implementation of immersion education in North America, Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and Africa and its effectiveness in programs ranging from preprimary to tertiary level [7]. They also attributed to immersion schools the following core characteristics.

1. The L2 is a medium of instruction.
2. The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum.
3. Overt support exists for the L1.
4. The program aims for additive bilingualism.
5. Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom.
6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency.
7. The teachers are bilingual.
8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.

Another aspect of language acquisition was studied by Michael Byram and his colleagues [8]. They developed the ethnographic approach as a means to learn language and culture. Byram suggests that students should act as ethnographers: being in a country they should describe it, its people, traditions and customs, and pay attention to linguistic constructions used in different situations. In this way students get the information about the language and culture in different contexts and immediately use this knowledge in their personal experience to understand and solve problems which arise in the process of intercultural communication.

In the Russian school, the notion of "communicative competence" was thoroughly examined by V.V. Safonova [9]. She views it as a complex structure which comprises language/linguistic, verbal, sociocultural, compensatory, self-educational, informational-communicative competences. Special attention is paid to sociocultural competence which the scientist considers essential to every intercultural interaction. It gives a person an opportunity:

- to be able to differentiate between various sociocultural markers of the authentic lin-

guistic environment and sociocultural characteristics of the communication participants;

- to predict probable sociocultural obstacles in conditions of intercultural communication and the ways of their elimination;
- to assimilate into the foreign environment, following the rules of courtesy of the other culture and showing respect to the traditions, rituals and lifestyle of this culture;
- to perform a role of a cultural mediator as minimum and of a party of a dialogue of cultures as maximum during the interaction of his / her compatriots with the representatives of other cultural and linguistic communities;
- to use sociocultural knowledge, skills and abilities in the process of collaboration with the representatives of other cultural and linguistic communities.

Another Russian scholar who investigated communicative ethnographic approach to teaching a foreign language and culture is P.V. Sysoyev [10]. He considers that immersion into the cultural and linguistic environment of the country of the target language has a significant didactic potential to enrich the modern sociocultural education. In his work he describes theoretical basics of communicative ethnographic approach: defines its methods, characteristics, positions and identifies its main directions. According to P.V. Sysoyev nowadays communicative-ethnographic approach in the didactic terms should continue communicative and cognitive, socio-cultural and multicultural approaches, creating a unique environment for teaching a foreign language and culture. It can solve a number of educational tasks that were previously assigned to the above-mentioned approaches.

Research in the 80s and 90s indicated that children in immersion schools could become highly proficient, especially in listening and reading. However, they did not always become as proficient in speaking [11]. The main reason for this is that students spent most of their immersion time listening to their teacher or reading their textbook, whereas the time they spent speaking on the playground with their peers was in English. Thus, as Gardner and Lambert, in their seminal work on L2 motivation might suggest, they lacked “integrative motivation” [12].

That is, there was no group they wanted to join for which learning the language was a requirement. Dörnyei reconceives motivation in the absence of the possibility for such integrative motivation as the ideal self (successfully using the target language), ought-to self (responding to external demands, such as passing an exam) and environment [13]. Dörnyei and Muir identify specific motivational characteristics of learning environments, such as cohesive learner groups, a productive norm and role system, democratic leadership, and a situated approach to facilitative teaching that takes into accounts the changing needs of groups as they develop [14].

These characteristics are uniquely represented in the summer camp environment. Indeed, this has been recognized both by the market and by world governments, as both governments and private citizens have drastically increased the language camp offerings in China, South Korea, and Russia.

#### IMPLEMENTING IMMERSION IN A SUMMER CAMP

As the popularity of summer camps specializing in foreign language and culture learning has continued to increase around the world, it has become apparent that there is a need for educators and camp professionals to share experiences. Though the idea of using summer holidays as another opportunity to acquaint children with foreign languages and cultures in a fun and entertaining way is not new, there still exist many obstacles and debatable issues.

The article summarize several years of the experiences of two language immersion camps: “Forest Camp”, in Russia, specializing on the English language and culture and “Lesnoe Ozero”, in the USA, the purpose of which is to make acquaint American children with the Russian language and culture.

“Forest Camp” is located in central Russia, 450 km south from Moscow. Since 2012 it has been inviting Russian kids aged 7–16 to learn English in natural surroundings through sport and fun activities. Two primary goals of a two-week session are creating a strong motivation to study and breaking the language barrier. A spe-



cial emphasis is made to ensure that language is not through boring lessons with textbooks and grammar exercises. For this purpose a full range of English language and culture activities as well as other typical camp activities are offered to Russian children.

“Lesnoe Ozero” is one of 15 “language villages” that form the Concordia Language Villages, a network of language immersion camps affiliated with Concordia College, a small higher education institution in northern Minnesota, in the midwestern United States. The Language Villages began in 1961, with Russian being added in 1966. Its mission is to inspire courageous global citizens, and lived language and culture is the medium through which this mission is accomplished.

Two years of collaboration after a collective 60 years of work in immersion language camps is a significant period of time to reflect on the work which has been carried out, analyze its results and draw some conclusions. It should be said that as an endeavor overall, the camps have been successful which is proved by their consistent popularity with children and families. Indeed, Forest Camp’s enrollment is constantly increasing and the number of children wishing to spend their holidays there is growing. At the same time, it’s necessary to admit that not everything has been going the way it was planned and some original ideas have undergone changes on the way.

Here there are 6 main challenges we have faced.

### **1. Counselors have trouble staying in the target language**

For Forest Camp, the original idea was to create surroundings similar to those which kids would face if they travelled to a typical American camp. For Lesnoe Ozero, the goal was to create a sort of hybrid between a visit to a summer camp and a town. In both camps, all staff members speak the target language fluently and some members of the team are native speakers. Campers are encouraged to use the target language in all situations and camp counselors try to integrate language-specific tasks into all activities. Children learn the language communi-

cating with camp counselors and with each other, participating in all camp activities. They learn vocabulary words doing routine things such as tidying their rooms, having meals and doing sports. At Forest Camp, language learning revolves around adventure activities such as rafting, doing high-rope courses or playing paintball rather than focusing on a theme. At Lesnoe Ozero, there are also outdoor activities, such as canoeing and archery, but most activities focus on Russian culture, such as learning traditional crafts like *khokhlomskaya rospis’* or exploring Russian fairy tales and then making a video of one. Communicating in the native language is supposed to be minimal.

However, our experience showed that this dream can’t come true yet and there are some justified reasons for it.

- For camp counselors who are not native speakers, it is a challenge to speak the target language 24/7 and never switch to their native tongue. Even though the staff have strong language abilities, they get tired, or they confront new and challenging situations that are hard to navigate in the target language.

- Even native speakers of the target language, if they also speak the campers’ native language, can find it unnatural to communicate using their native language when the majority of the people are non-native speakers. From a certain perspective, artificially-created nature of the context can be uncomfortable, whether it is 150 Russian people gather in the forest in the middle of Russia to speak English or the same situation with Americans speaking Russian in the woods of Minnesota. Naturally the temptation to speak the native language of the majority is great. You will be better understood and there are more chances that your request will be fulfilled. In the situation where the need to speak the target language is artificial, even fluent speakers of the target language often choose easier ways to explain their thoughts and ideas.

- People who work as camp counselors typically care about children and want to build strong emotional relationships with them, which is much easier to do in the child’s native language. Children are very sensitive. Camp life is

full of events, there are some happy moments when kids want you to share their joy and there are also quarrels and conflicts when they need your sympathy. If something goes wrong psychological support and help are more important than studies. Children should know that they can trust adults that they are heard and understood. It's very difficult to do this in a language that they don't understand – and it's not always easy for counselors to judge when it is absolutely necessary to help a camper in their native language and when they should continue trying to use the target language and push through the frustration.

- Disciplining kids is another problem area where switching to the native language is unavoidable. Wrongdoing and misbehaving do happen. Using a foreign language to discuss behavior challenges and their consequences won't work. If you want the child to understand and change their behavior, you have to use their native language.

- Teaching about complex or dangerous activities is also difficult to do in the target language. At Forest Camp, with its program of extreme sports, it is important that campers follow the safety precautions and do not get hurt. It's necessary that a child clearly understands what he/she is doing. Safety rules have to be explained in Russian. At Lesnoe Ozero, with its focus on Russian culture, it is important to give all the campers a chance to learn about Russian history and literature, even if they are only at the novice level – but such complex topics cannot be taught in the target language to novices.

- There is also another consideration – the risk of impeding an activity by interrupting it with commentary in the target language. Quite often you have to prioritize what is more important: enjoying an activity or spoiling the pleasure but learning a couple of new words and expressions. Children may get bored if they are made to learn new vocabulary and rules in a foreign language before they are allowed to play.

Because there are many reasons for staff to have difficulty staying in the target language, there must be a number of solutions. Some suggestions are as follows:

- **Training in non-verbal communication and other strategies for communicating**

**with novices.** In order for staff to effectively communicate with novice learners, they must become experts at using gestures, pictures, cognates, and physical objects to communicate with learners. At Lesnoe Ozero, the staff undergo a two-hour training in this type of communication, and leadership staff model the use of gestures in large-group presentations. All announcements and large group activities are accompanied by gestures and visuals to support comprehension. Because this approach is consistent, counselors learn to be comfortable communicating in this way, even though it may initially seem unnatural.

- **Building a culture that values target-language use.** Staff training should help staff understand that switching to the native language deprives campers of an opportunity to learn and sends a message that they are incapable. This messaging can make staff try harder to use a variety of communication strategies. Staff need to understand that if they hear another staff member speaking the native language to a camper, that colleague is making it more difficult for other staff to establish a relationship with campers in the target language. By understanding that using the target language supports kids and other counselors, staff can be encouraged to try harder.

- **Clarifying expectations for activities.** When staff plan activities, they should justify any use of the native language. If there are portions of the activity where it must be used for safety reasons or to explain an abstract concept, those should be articulated. At the same time, opportunities to maximize and infuse target language should be explored. It is important to make these activities fun and engaging, ideally integrating the enjoyable aspects of the activity. For example, in an archery activity, the teacher could place pictures of archery-related vocabulary on the target, and instruct campers to hit a specific one. In a literature activity, campers may make a storyboard of the plot and label it with the relevant vocabulary. After activities have been planned to maximize target language use while still being safe and conveying complex language, staff supervisors should observe the activities and ensure that the expectations for language use have been met and should prob-

lem-solve with any staff who are finding this difficult.

- **Clarifying expectations for emotional contact.** Camp administration should clearly articulate when native language use for emotional contact is acceptable and should also build counselors' skills in establishing relationships with children in the target language. At Lesnoe Ozero, counselors are expected to speak the native language for emotional purposes in only three situations:

- 1) a child is crying or seems about to lose control of their emotions;

- 2) during cabin counsel in the evenings, when all of the campers share their feelings about the day;

- 3) during individual check-ins with the specific campers that they support. (Each group of 10–12 kids has 2–3 counselors, so each counselor is individually responsible for checking in with 4–5 kids each day. These check-ins happen informally, whenever the counselor can find the camper, and should ideally start out in the target language and then move into the native language if the camper expresses that they are not doing well.)

During staff training, staff can be taught how to build relationships with kids and support them emotionally without having a mutually intelligible language. This can be done through humor, songs, games, gestures, and shared group rituals.

- **Developing camp rituals for managing behavior.** While it may not be possible to discipline children in the target language, it is possible to establish routines that minimize the necessity of discipline. For example, camps can have key phrases, chants, call-and-response routines, and even songs or musical cues when they expect a certain behavior. Campers quickly become attuned to these rituals and sit, stand, or stop talking when engaged with a familiar routine.

- **Prioritizing language use in supervision.** When leadership staff see counselors speaking the native language, they can jump into the activity and model target language use in a positive and enthusiastic manner. Even a brief

reminder, like “count in the target language!” can be helpful for a dance teacher who has forgotten to think about language while teaching new steps. Staff should also receive feedback about their language use during regular meetings with supervisors. When staff receive early and frequent feedback, combined with skill-building support, they can learn to use the target language more consistently.

## **2. Children and parents have different goals for language use**

It is often parents who decide for a child that they should learn a foreign language. The primary goal of all parents is to provide their child with the best opportunities to develop their skills, to get good education and, later on, to build a successful career. In the modern world knowledge of a foreign language is an indispensable part of good education. Parents resort to all possible means to make sure that their kids get everything necessary: modern textbooks, specialized classes, experienced teachers, private tutors. Taking into account Russian past when people couldn't travel a lot and parents of modern teenagers didn't realize the necessity of learning foreign languages it seems evident that parents try to compensate their own lack of knowledge by providing their children with everything necessary for successful learning. Sending a child to a foreign language school or to a specialized summer camp is another opportunity to supply a child with knowledge. Most parents insist on their children attending all classes, learning vocabulary and grammar, taking assessment tests and seeing noticeable progress at the end of the session.

Children have their own opinion on this issue. 7–10-year-old children see learning a foreign language as a game. They have fun learning new strange-looking and weird-sounding words, get a lot of pleasure taking part in little skits and performances, but, as a rule, do not use the language in every-day communication. Children this age try to please their parents and willingly participate in lessons and other activities but they do not necessarily see any point in speaking English with their friends and camp-counselors.



Needless to say, lessons for this age group should be more like a game or a role play.

Teenagers' attitude is different. On the one hand, they are more mature and many of them realize the importance of foreign language learning for their future. But on the other hand, they are more independent and insist on making their own decisions. For them summer is time for rest and fun with their peers. If the topic of the lesson does not seem interesting it will be quite hard to encourage them to work. Though quite a few of older campers speak good English, it's a real challenge to make them use it outside classrooms and special activities.

One trick that turned out to be quite successful was introducing a so-called "bracelet system" of evaluating the English level. Kids with no or little knowledge wear red plastic bracelets which are a sign that staff members should speak simple language and often translate. Kids who can speak but whose vocabulary and grammar are rather limited have yellow bracelets. A green bracelet demonstrates that its owner has a good knowledge of English and can freely communicate in it. A child who shows considerable progress and, which is perhaps more important, a great desire to learn can get a new bracelet of a higher level at the end of the first or second week. As children are very competitive and bracelets proved to be such a desirable possession this created quite a strong motivation for kids to speak more English.

### **3. Children's demographics and learning needs change over time**

Throughout the years, interest in Russian has increased and decreased, and the types of campers who come to Lesnoe Ozero change accordingly. When the camp began, in the 1970s, the campers didn't expect that they would ever be able to travel to the Soviet Union, so their interest in the language was more general. In the 80s and 90s, campers were excited about the possibility of actually visiting Russia and meeting Russian-speaking people. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the children who enrolled at Lesnoe Ozero were primarily monolingual English-speaking American children with strong academic performance and an interest in challenging themselves to learn a language that is much

more difficult for English speakers than the typical languages taught in schools. These students generally came to camp in the A1-B1 range, depending on whether they took Russian in school. The emphasis at Lesnoe Ozero was on building basic conversational proficiency and cultural understanding. Counselors used frequent repetition, gestures, and concrete topics and objects to build learners' understanding and help activate language.

In the late 1990s, camp staff began to see a change, as the children of Russians who had immigrated in the 1980s began to join the camp. They spoke Russian at home and were not necessarily highly motivated to improve their ability to use their parents' language. Unlike the children of previous eras, they did not need to learn basic conversational skills; they needed literacy and an approach to grammar instruction appropriate for heritage learners. They had little need or tolerance for repetition of simple gestures, and short utterances about concrete topics. The camp was also joined at that time by children who were adopted from Russia. Those children had needs similar to the children of immigrants, except that their exposure to Russian had been abruptly cut off when they moved. For some, they were able to regain their previous knowledge, while others had to relearn the language from zero. To some extent, this was correlated with age, since those adopted as infants had never been fluent in the language to begin with, but those adopted as late as 10 or 11, found that they were sometimes unable to access their language after several years of no exposure to their birth language. In response to the increase in adoptees with retained language proficiency and children of immigrants who learned Russian as a home language, parallel programming was created, often with several levels of a curriculum for heritage learners alongside language courses for non-native speakers. In recent years, demographics have shifted again, with more monolingual Americans again joining the camp. However, there are now very few Russian programs in American schools, which means that almost all second language learners come to as absolute beginners. The curve of language proficiency is now bi-modal, with a large num-

ber of learners in the A1 range and a large number in the B2-C1 range, and almost no one in the middle.

When Forest Camp started 10 years ago it presented itself as the first English-speaking camp in Russia. And though there had already been some occasional attempts to organize camp sessions with the emphasis on the English language and culture in some camps in Moscow region in the 1990s, they were inconsistent and did not bring any significant result. 2012 was a good year to start such a camp as it really filled the need: many summer camps built in Soviet times were closed or barely survived, and parents did not want their children to go there. At the same time Russian kids had long summer holidays and caring parents wanted to provide their kids with best opportunities to spend this time with pleasure and some useful outcome. 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union borders were open, travelling abroad became an ordinary thing and the knowledge of foreign languages became a necessity. So, most parents in 2012 saw Forest Camp as a good opportunity to satisfy their requirements. That year there was only one two-week session with about 40 campers, which turned out to be fortunate because it created that special family-like spirit which has been characteristic of Forest Camp ever since. A lot of camp traditions also started at that time. However, then learning English in camp surroundings was seen as something exotic by most campers, a kind of a game to be enjoyed for some time but not bringing any practical results. During the first two years there were no lessons and kids were supposed to practise the language while doing various camp activities. Needless to say, children were more interested in the activities than in memorizing English words and grammar constructions. Parents, however, wanted to see some improvement in the language knowledge even within such a short period of time.

Comparing current situation with those times, it can be said that children's attitude to learning a foreign language during summer vacation has changed. Modern kids are more pragmatic, more competitive and more ambi-

tious. The idea that they should be the best to succeed in this world is firmly fixed in their minds. 7- and 10-year-olds want to learn English because they want to be the best in their class, to get excellent marks and to show off. Teenagers see the practical value of this knowledge, many of them often travel abroad with their parents, dream about studying in a foreign university or working in a big international company. Both groups accept the fact that without hard work and perseverance they will get nowhere. There is no longer a necessity to explain why they should go to classes or to specially motivate them, they just take it for granted. So, traditional lessons have become part of the camp schedule, perhaps with more variety of classroom activities, more relaxed atmosphere and without homework. It is worth mentioning that it has presented a new challenge for camp-counsellors and teachers: they never know what kind of students they'll have to teach, what goals will be set by parents and what questions they may be asked by their pupils.

#### **4. Novice learners can be overwhelmed by immersion**

Some children who come to the camp don't speak the target language at all. It is important to mention that many such children can be very successful and have a strong tolerance for ambiguity and strategic competence that allows them to thrive in the immersion environment despite their lack of language proficiency.

With other children who are starting from the very beginning, though, it can be difficult to explain to them camp rules and other things. When they hear only target language speech without much understanding they feel confused and frustrated. They can't actively participate in all activities, so they get bored. Shy kids get upset and feel miserable and those who are more active can become naughty and misbehave.

The situation is even more complicated because many campers come to a camp for the first time. They have no experience of living in a camp or being away from their parents. Everything is new for them and little ones miss their parents. In this case using an unknown language

creates additional difficulties and doesn't help establish good friendly relations.

There are several ways to approach this challenge and allow a child to move into immersion slowly, step by step, first adapting to camp life and then being immersed in the foreign language. One approach is to have a returning camper or more proficient learner be the guide for this child. The peer can translate for them and be a resource if they have questions. Another strategy is to pull the child aside at the start of the day and explain to them in their native language what they will experience so that they are primed to recognize it. A third strategy is to provide them with information written in their native language that they can consult throughout the day. Finally, there can be a location, such as the nurse's office or assistant director's front porch where kids who are feeling overwhelmed by immersion can come for a safe environment.

It should be noted, though, that when children speak to native speakers, they use the target language more willingly and with greater enthusiasm understanding that it is the only way of communication. It is also perceived as a funny game where the language is a secret code which they are trying to get. It works especially well if the native speaker is a child, in which case communication becomes most natural and spontaneous. However, when non-native camp-counselors urge campers to speak the target language, they demonstrate all signs of resistance being aware that it is not necessary. These attempts are seen as work rather than play.

#### **5. It is difficult to find activity instructors and staff with specific expertise who also speak the target language**

Sport and other activities like dancing, high-rope courses, and arts and crafts classes occupy a significant place in Forest Camp schedule. A team of professional instructors do their best to involve children in them, to make them motivated and to instill love for what they are doing. The list of qualities necessary for this job includes professionalism, enthusiasm, love to children, friendly and outgoing personality. It would be ideal if candidates could also speak fluent English, but experience shows it is not easy to find staff with these qualifications.

Lesnoe Ozero, according to American Camp Association regulations, must employ several lifeguards. There must also be a specific ratio of male and female counselors to campers. Because singing is an important part of the learning approach at the Language Villages, guitar players are also necessary. The place of outdoor learning in the learning approach requires experts in nature activities and Russian ecology, while traditional Russian art, and folk dance are among the most popular activities. It can be difficult to find staff with all these skills who have strong Russian skills. Indeed, even office staff and cooks in the kitchen are expected to interact with campers in Russian. While it would be possible to staff the camp entirely with native speakers, non-native speakers are important model learners for the campers and provide a valuable cultural bridge. This means that there are times when a cook or a lifeguard has Russian at the intermediate level or below.

This problem can most easily be solved by pairing less proficient staff with more proficient staff, both for activity planning and delivery. The content expert can explain the information to the advanced speaker as they plan, and they can deliver it together, with the content expert pausing for assistance from the language expert.

#### **6. Difference in mentality of the English- and Russian-speaking staff can cause misunderstanding**

As staff members come from different cultural backgrounds they sometimes do not see eye to eye and arguments do happen. At Concordia Language Villages, the kids and the staff eat family style, so everyone eats from a serving bowl on the table. And in order not to waste food (because the health requirement is to throw out any unused food that has been put on the tables), only a small amount is put, and the children are supposed to go to other tables to ask for food if their table runs out, and then if there is no food on any table, they can go into the kitchen to ask for food.

The Russian staff have always been very uncomfortable with this. Every year, they express concerns with making the children "beg for food," and they worry that the children won't get enough to eat. This sometimes caused con-

flict between the American staff, who said it was good language practice with authentic context and strong intrinsic motivation, and the Russian staff, who thought it was inhumane.

It was necessary to think of a way to give the kids an opportunity for language practice around food that was more authentic to Russian culture and would be less offensive to Russian staff. Now, someone at the table takes turns being the “host” (the first few days it is the counselors), and they ask all the people at the table if they want more food. They ask everyone three times, and once everyone has refused it three times, they take any food that is left to the other tables and offer it to each table three times. If a bowl is empty at the table, the host goes to the other tables (or to the kitchen) to get more. The kids still get language practice, mostly around politely refusing food but when it is their turn to “host,” they also get practice asking for food.

A simpler example of intercultural communication is the grade reports that the teachers write for the students. Russian teachers often want to be very specific and straightforward about the students’ shortcomings. However, American parents expect that the focus will be how the student can improve, rather than criticism of the student’s current abilities, or that euphemisms like “challenge” will be used. This problem can be solved by having American staff edit the grade reports, but sometimes it is diffi-

cult for Russian staff to accept that they can’t directly say that a student has poor performance in a certain area. They may feel that it is dishonest. However, the administration can explain that when Americans hear “you can improve in area X by doing Y,” or “X has been challenging for this student” they understand from that kind of statement that their current work is bad, but when it is said very directly, it is considered rude. Staff who work for Lesnoe Ozero for a long time get used to having their reports changed in this way, and some of them learn how to write them in the American style, but it is often difficult for new staff to get used to.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back on these years we can surely say that language immersion camps have found success on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They give children a chance not only to enlarge their vocabulary and learn grammar rules but also to feel the spirit of the country, to understand its culture, to try their hands in traditional crafts, to really immerse themselves in the atmosphere, to do all those things which teachers in traditional classrooms never have time for. However, challenges that appear highlight some problem spots and show the direction for future improvements.

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