

Development of English language skills in oral production by adult students in intensive and regular EFL courses

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Abstract

Time is undoubtedly an important factor in second language learning, not only in terms of the total amount of hours allotted for a particular program, but also in relation to how such hours are distributed. Research in Canada has shown that when primary school students receive concentrated second language (L2) instruction they reach higher levels of competence than through regular lessons. The purpose of this study is to shed some light on the effect of time distribution on instructed L2 learning by examining the development of oral production skills (in terms of oral fluency, complexity, and accuracy) in regular vs. intensive programs for adult EFL learners registered in intermediate and advanced EFL courses. The results of the analyses suggest that, although there are no statistically significant differences in oral gains between program types, there is a slight tendency for greater gains in the case of learners receiving intensive instruction.

Keywords: time distribution, English as a second language instruction, intensive language courses, adult learners, oral production.

Resumen

Las horas de instrucción en una lengua extranjera son sin duda un factor importante en el aprendizaje, pero igualmente lo es la forma en la que se distribuyen esas horas. Estudios en Canadá han demostrado que los alumnos de primaria progresan más en una segunda lengua (L2) cuando las clases son intensivas que cuando el período de instrucción es más largo y las horas menos concentradas. El objetivo de este estudio es examinar el efecto de la distribución de las horas de clase en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera a través del análisis de la producción oral (en relación a la fluidez, complejidad y corrección) de estudiantes adultos de nivel intermedio y avanzado en programas intensivos y no intensivos de inglés. A pesar de que no se encontraron diferencias significativas entre tipos de programa, los resultados de los análisis realizados sugieren una pequeña tendencia hacia un mayor progreso en el caso de los estudiantes en clases intensivas.

Palabras clave: distribución de las horas de instrucción, inglés como lengua extranjera, cursos intensivos, estudiantes adultos, producción oral.

1. Introduction

The importance of the time factor in second/foreign language instruction has been emphasized by a number of authors, such as Carroll (1963; 1967; 1989) or Stern (1985). The general claim has been that, all things being equal. The more time a student devotes to the learning of a second language, the higher his/her level of proficiency will be (Carroll, 1967; Stern, 1985). Nevertheless, little is known about the most appropriate distribution of the hours of L2 instruction and whether intensive or more distributed courses are more effective at promoting L2 skills. Most research on intensive L2 courses has been done in school contexts in which there is not only a concentration of the hours of instruction, but also a time increase (Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Netten and Germain, 2004; Spada and Lightbown, 1989). There is a dearth of empirical studies which compare language gains in second language programs that offer the same or similar amount of hours of instruction but distributed differently (Collins, Halter, Lightbown, and Spada, 1999; Lapkin, Hart, and Harley, 1998), and even fewer studies exist which include adult learners (McKee, 1983; Serrano and Muñoz, 2007). It is certainly surprising that not much research has been done on intensive instruction, considering the impact that the time factor can have on L2 learning, both for child and adult learners.

Despite the fact that empirical research on intensive L2 programs is quite recent (late 1980s) and has so far been almost restricted to the Canadian context (in terms of well-established research projects), intensive language courses have been offered for almost a century now. The first time that intensive language instruction was given considerable attention, as well as innumerable resources, was during World War II under the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) in the 1940s in the United States. Because of the immediate need the US Government felt to have a high number of soldiers proficient in foreign languages, several programs were designed so as to train these learners with the maximum efficiency, which usually implies the minimum time (Pargment, 1945; Springer, 1944). The main focus of the intensive programs under the ASTP was the acquisition of aural-oral competence. These language courses were highly successful in promoting L2 proficiency (especially oral production skills) in a limited period of time, and due to their success, similar programs began to be developed for civilians in colleges. Most of the literature which examines the intensive programs up to the 1980s, despite not providing rigorous details about their methodology in data collection and analyses, tend to show higher results in tests for students following intensive courses than for those following regular L2 classes in a variety of measures (Frank,

1972; Keilstrup, 1981; McKee, 1983; Moore, 1950; Oswald, Vail, Goedsche, and Ulmer, 1950).

Nowadays, however, studies investigating the effects of time distribution on foreign language learning by adults are scarce. Serrano and Muñoz (2007) examined the performance of adult students in three EFL program types (extensive, semi-intensive, and intensive) offered in a language school at the intermediate proficiency level. The results of their analyses suggest that the students who made the most language gains in listening, grammar, vocabulary and reading were those enrolled in the intensive program, while the students who demonstrated the least progress were the ones registered in the regular (or extensive) EFL course. Hinger (2006) discovered, in her examination of an intensive Spanish class for German-speaking students, that concentrated instruction enhanced group cohesion, and as a consequence, students' motivation.

In the case of younger children in primary or secondary school, some research has been done in the Canadian context, both in the case of French and English as L2. Several researchers have highlighted the fact that traditional second/foreign language programs which provide limited hours of instruction a week in a non-concentrated time distribution have been shown not to be effective in promoting the acquisition of a second language (Netten and Germain, 2004; Spada and Lightbown, 1989). Different models have been designed in order to enhance L2 learning of both French and English, all of them increasing and/or concentrating the hours of instruction. Some of these alternative programs include intensive French, French block scheduling, and intensive English. Intensive French provides students in grade 6 with approximately 350 hours of French in five months (usually the first five months of the school year), as opposed to core French classes, which normally provide a total of approximately 100 hours in grade 6, distributed in periods of approximately 40 minutes (clearly different from the blocks of 3-4 hours a day in intensive French). Learners receiving intensive French instruction have been reported to attain more developed written (Germain, Netten, and Séguin, 2004) and oral production skills (Germain, Netten, and Movassat, 2004) than those enrolled in core French classes.

French block scheduling is a model which concentrates the hours of French instruction, but does not increase them. Lapkin et al. (1998) analyzed the L2 performance of students in block scheduling as well as in traditional core French classes. Two different types of block scheduling were examined: one in which the learners had half days of instruction in French over a 10-week period (the half-day model), and another one which offered 80 minutes of French a day over 5 months. According to the results presented by these researchers, the students in half-day classes attained significantly higher scores than the students attending traditional core French classes in reading and writing. Those students in the 80-minute

program also outperformed their peers in the 40-minute program; however, the differences in performance between the two groups were statistically significant only in the case of reading. These results are similar to those obtained by Serrano and Muñoz (2007) in that they show that the more concentrated the exposure to the second language is the more linguistic gains are attained by the students.

There are several models of intensive English instruction in Canada, all of them providing approximately 300-400 hours of instruction in a school year. In the most popular model, English is taught in grade 5 or grade 6 during all school hours (except for art, physical education, music and religion) for five months, either at the beginning or at the end of the school year (Spada and Lightbown, 1989). Apart from the increase in instruction time, some schools promote the use of English outside the class (Lightbown and Spada, 1997). Research on intensive English in Canadian schools has attributed advantages in most language skills to learners following intensive instruction. The benefits of intensive instruction are obvious not only when comparing grade 5 or 6 students in intensive classes with their peers in the same grade in regular classes, but also when comparing these students in intensive classes with students in grade 9, who have received a similar amount of hours of instruction distributed in several years (Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Spada and Lightbown, 1989).

The positive effects of concentrating the hours of L2 instruction are reported also by Collins et al. (1999), who analyze the different models of intensive English: “distributed” (300-350 hours in 10 months), “massed” (350-400 hours in 5 months), and “massed plus”, in which the students are in addition encouraged to use English outside the class (in the hallways, cafeteria, etc.). Collins et al. (1999) report that students who received massed instruction outperformed those who were enrolled in a distributed program in a vocabulary recognition test, a listening comprehension test, and an oral narrative. This finding seems to suggest that not only time increase but also time concentration enhance EFL learning, since the students in concentrated intensive programs seemed to outperform their peers in less concentrated courses. The authors caution, however, that the findings are inconclusive because the massed groups ended up having more hours than the distributed group, and the differences are relative since the three groups made considerable progress.

In terms of oral production, White and Turner (2005) report that grade 6 students in intensive ESL made significantly more gains in oral production than their peers in regular English classes. This outcome could be the result of both, time concentration or the increase in instruction hours in the case of the intensive program. The authors speculate that both have an effect in intensive ESL programs, and present as evidence the fact that, at the time of the pretest, the students in

intensive classes attained significantly higher scores than those in regular classes. Both groups had received the same amount of hours in grade 6 prior to testing, yet such hours had been concentrated for the intensive group, and distributed for the regular ESL class.

The majority of the studies investigating time distribution have examined the performance of students at the beginning or intermediate proficiency levels; studies comparing the progress in oral production skills of advanced learners (the equivalent to B2.2 or C in the Common Reference Levels from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001)) in intensive and regular foreign language classes are practically nonexistent.

The present study explores how time distribution affects the development of oral production skills (more specifically, oral fluency, complexity, and accuracy) in the case of adult students with different initial proficiency levels in English as L2. Such research will certainly contribute to previous empirical research being done on intensive English instruction, especially in the Canadian context (Collins et al., 1999; Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005) by including a different population (adult learners) and a different type of concentrated EFL program (one-month intensive course vs. a seven-month ‘regular’ course).

2. Research questions and hypotheses

This study aims to examine whether time distribution has an effect on the students’ oral production in English, considering these students’ initial proficiency level. The first research question is the following: for students enrolled in an *intermediate* EFL course, does the distribution of instruction hours have any effect on the students’ oral production? We should expect to find differences in favor of the intensive program with respect to the regular program when the students’ proficiency level is intermediate, if we take into account previous research on the effects of concentrating the hours of instruction of a second language on the development of oral skills in the case of school students at initial stages of L2 acquisition (Collins et al., 1999; Germain, Netten, and Movassat, 2004; Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005).

The second research question which guides this study is the following: for students enrolled in an *advanced* EFL course, does the distribution of instruction hours have any effect on the students’ oral production? The author does not know of any previous research comparing the oral skills of advanced students receiving intensive and regular instruction. Consequently, the same hypothesis is proposed for the advanced and the intermediate learners.

3. Method

3.1. Program and participants

Two different programs have been chosen for this study: regular and intensive, which were offered for adult learners at the same institution (the language school of the University of Barcelona, Spain). This study focuses on intermediate and advanced EFL learners. The intermediate level corresponds to the Common European Reference Level B1. The learners at this level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (p. 24), can do the following in the L2:

Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

The advanced level corresponds to level B2.2 of the Common Reference Levels, which would be between levels B2 and C1 (p. 24). The learners at these levels can do the following in the L2:

B2: Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

C1: Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

The students in both the regular and the intensive programs receive a total of 110 hours of instruction; however, those hours are distributed in a different way. Regular programs start in October and they offer four hours a week of English instruction distributed over two days, Mondays-Wednesdays or Tuesdays-Thursdays, in which the students receive two hours of instruction a day (there are usually 10-minute breaks in each session). These classes continue until the end of the school year in May, over a total of approximately seven months.

Intensive courses provide five hours a day of English instruction from Monday through Friday during a period of nearly five weeks from the end of June until the end of July. There are usually two breaks of 10-15 minutes in each session; however, the time allotted varies depending on the instructor or the day (although it is less typical, some teachers decide to have only one longer break).

Apart from time distribution, the regular and the intensive programs are quite similar in terms of methodology and design; the same textbooks are used for both types of programs and the students have the same type of exam at the end of the course. All these courses aim to develop the four language skills through a mixed approach, which includes communicative activities, as well as some more grammatically-oriented tasks. In general, all the different skills receive the same attention in intensive and regular programs. However, due to the long sessions in the intensive summer program, in order to keep the students' attention, the teacher sometimes uses more audiovisual materials than in regular programs.

Most of the participants included in this research were university students falling within the 18-23 year-old range, who were taking English classes in order to obtain elective credits. All the students are comparable in terms of motivation and previous experience with English (as the data from a background questionnaire showed).

Data were gathered and analyzed from a total of 89 EFL students, 44 of them attending intermediate-level classes (22 in the regular program, and 22 in the intensive) and 45 of them being at the advanced level (23 in the regular program, and 22 in the intensive program). Since it was not possible to find regular and intensive groups taught by the same teacher, a great variety of teachers was chosen (13 teachers participated in the study). Such variation may neutralize the influence a specific instructor might have, which could be an intervening factor when analyzing time distribution.

3.2. Procedure

The same data collection procedure was followed for the two different types of programs and for the two proficiency levels under research. As was mentioned in the previous section, all the programs under analysis included 110 hours of instruction. Data were collected at two times: at the beginning of the course (roughly 20 hours after the classes had started) and the second after more or less 100 hours of instruction (around 80 hours after the pretest).

There were a total of 14 groups involved in this study (7 at the intermediate and 7 at the advanced level). The students who participated in the study represent approximately a random 30% of the students registered in each group (except for

the intensive groups, in which virtually all the students did the oral task). The researcher called the students one by one and asked them to leave the class (where the instructor continued teaching), and follow her into a separate area, where they performed the activity. The students were recorded while they told a narrative on the basis of a series of pictures called “The Dog Story”. This test was used in the BAF project (see Muñoz, 2006), and it has been used in a variety of studies including learners with different L1’s and L2’s (Tavakoli and Foster, 2008). The story shows how two children are preparing some food with their mom in order to go out for a picnic. While the mom is explaining to the children how to get to the picnic area with the help of a map, their puppy hides into a basket, where they have put their sandwiches, and eats all their food. Consequently, when the children are in the country and want to eat their sandwiches, they are surprised because their dog appears suddenly and they realize that there is no food left. This story is always motivating since all the students, no matter what their proficiency level is, can say something about it: the students with a lower proficiency level can simply describe the pictures, whereas those learners with a more advanced command of the L2 can narrate the story. See Appendix A for an example of an oral narrative produced by an intermediate and an advanced learner at the posttest.

3.3. Measures

The students’ speech production was analyzed in terms of fluency, complexity (grammatical and lexical), and accuracy. Analytic measures were preferred to holistic rating or qualitative scales due to the fact that such measures tend to be more objective and inter-rater reliability is more easily reached. Several ratios were chosen, which are among the most popular ones for analyzing both written and oral production (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim, 1998).

In order to examine **oral fluency**, the fluency ratio *syllables per minute (Syll/min)* was chosen. When considering this ratio the researcher needs to take decisions concerning the syllables which should be included in the count, and whether false starts, repetitions, self-corrections, or words in the student’s L1 should be considered for the total number of syllables or not. Two speech rates have been proposed: Rate A, which includes all the syllables uttered by the student; or Rate B, which does not consider false starts, repetitions, self-corrections, or words in the L1 (Gilbert, 2005; Yuan and Ellis, 2003). Both of these measures were initially considered in this study. Nevertheless, as the differences between groups or across time using the two measures were similar, only Rate B will be reported, first for the sake of simplicity, and second, because it was assumed that such rate gives a more accurate portrait of the students’ L2 fluency, since it eliminates non-meaningful syllables.

Previous studies of oral production have investigated **syntactic complexity** by analyzing the number of clauses (or sentence nodes, which is usually considered synonymous) according to the production unit. For example, Foster and Skehan (1996) counted the clauses per C-unit, whereas Mehnert (1998) or Gilabert (2005) used the sentence-nodes per T-unit measure. In this study, the T-unit was adopted as the production unit. The T-unit is defined in Hunt (1965: 20) as “one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it”. This definition is quite general and does not specify whether coordinated clauses within subordinate clauses should be included in the same T-unit (e.g. *When they looked at the basket and saw the dog they were very surprised or They realized that the dog had come with them and had eaten all the sandwiches*). In the present study, coordinated subordinate clauses will be counted within the same T-unit; therefore, the two examples previously presented would be considered as one T-unit each. The reason for such decision is that the coordinated subordinate sentences are part of the same syntactic unit (complement in the first case and direct object in the second), which is dependent of the main clause, hence it was considered more appropriate to analyze the two clauses within the same unit. In order to measure syntactic complexity, the *clauses per Tunit* (C/T) measure (which considers both finite and non-finite clauses) was adopted. For example, *they said goodbye to their mother and left for the place where they wanted to go* was analyzed as two T-units, the first one having one clause, and the second one having three different clauses.

For **lexical complexity**, the *Guiraud's Index of Lexical Richness* ($WTypes / \sqrt{WTokens}$) was considered the most appropriate measure. Some studies have shown this measure to be one of the most adequate to analyze lexical richness in L2 learners' productions (Van Hout and Vermeer, 2007; Vermeer, 2000). In her review of the most commonly used measures of lexical richness in spontaneous speech data, Vermeer (2000) concludes that the Guiraud's Index is highly reliable, while the traditionally used Type/Token ratio was claimed to lack validity and reliability, since text length affects the results of this measure (the longer the participant's production is the more chances there are that some word tokens will be repeated, such as *a, the, personal pronouns, etc.*)

The *errors per Tunit* (Err/T) ratio was used to examine **accuracy**. This measure has been used in other studies exploring accuracy in oral production (Gilabert, 2005).

This researcher was in charge of the collection of the oral data for approximately 75% of all the students, the remaining 25% was completed by four research assistants, who followed the same procedure for the data collection. A research assistant coded a random 10% of the sample, with whom the inter-rater agreement reached 94%. Intra-rater reliability reached 95%.

4. Findings

4.1. Intermediate learners

In order to examine whether there were differences in the four measures of oral production between the students in the regular and in the intensive group in the pretest and in the posttest several *t*-tests were executed. Even if there were 22 students in each group, parametric tests were performed because the data were normally distributed (according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov scores) and such tests are more powerful than non-parametric ones. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Intermediate Learners

		REGULAR		INTENSIVE	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
PRETEST	Fluency (Syll/min)	62.17	12.71	74.69	23.20
	Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.47	.407	1.66	.353
	Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	4.97	.563	4.93	.558
	Accuracy (Err/T)	1.07	.453	1.30	.606
POSTTEST	Fluency (Syll/min)	73.67	16.00	83.20	18.33
	Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.68	.363	1.65	.394
	Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	4.91	.609	5.21	.500
	Accuracy (Err/T)	1.23	.550	1.04	.593

The results of the *t*-test revealed that, in the *pretest*, there were no significant differences in the oral performance of the intermediate learners in the regular and in the intensive group in any of the measures considered (C/T: $t(42) = -1.66$, $p = .103$; Guiraud's Index: $t(42) = .236$, $p = .814$; Err/T: $t(42) = -1.43$, $p = .160$), except for fluency, in which the learners in the intensive group attained significantly higher scores than their peers attending the regular program ($t(35.56) = -2.22$, $p = .034$). In the *posttest*, there were no statistically significant differences in any of the measures (Syll/min: $t(42) = -1.84$, $p = .073$; C/T: $t(42) = .223$, $p = .825$; Guiraud's Index: $t(42) = -1.78$, $p = .083$; Err/T: $t(42) = 1.10$, $p = .277$).

In order to find out whether there were differences in oral *gains* (controlling for differences in the pretest) between learners in the two programs under study, it was decided to collapse data across regular and intensive programs and regress posttest on pretest measures. Then, *t*-tests were performed on the residuals from such regression in order to compare the two groups. The results of these *t*-tests suggest that there are no significant differences in the gains experienced by the learners in the two program types, even though the *p* value for the lexical complexity and

accuracy measures is relatively close to statistical significance in favor of the learners in the intensive group (Syll/min: $t(42) = -.493$, $p = .624$; C/T: $t(42) = .923$, $p = .361$; Guiraud's Index: $t(42) = -1.97$, $p = .055$; Err/T: $t(42) = 1.84$, $p = .073$).

Summarizing, although there were no clear significant differences in the oral production skills of the intermediate learners in regular and intensive programs, there is a statistical trend towards greater gains in oral lexical complexity and accuracy for the learners in the intensive group.

4.2. Advanced learners

The same tests were performed for the advanced learners in order to examine the oral production of students receiving regular and intensive instruction. As was the case for the intermediate learners, the number of students included in each group was lower than 30 (23 in the regular group and 22 in the intensive). Nevertheless, parametric tests were performed because, according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the data were normally distributed. The following table presents the descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Advanced Learners

		REGULAR		INTENSIVE	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
PRETEST	Fluency (Syll/min)	108.8	22.42	118.1	21.91
	Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	2.01	.550	1.83	.365
	Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	5.63	.506	5.80	.674
	Accuracy (Err/T)	.666	.297	.802	.434
POSTTEST	Fluency (Syll/min)	117.2	27.03	131.7	28.73
	Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.90	.334	1.89	.484
	Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	5.54	.552	5.90	.666
	Accuracy (Err/T)	.552	.270	.657	.411

The results of the t -test revealed no significant differences in the *pretest* between the regular and the intensive program at the advanced level (Syll/min: $t(43) = -1.41$, $p = .165$; C/T: $t(43) = 1.32$, $p = .194$; Guiraud's Index: $t(43) = -.945$, $p = .350$; Err/T: $t(43) = -1.23$, $p = .225$). In the *posttest*, there were still no significant differences between the two groups, although the results are relatively close to statistical significance in favor of the intensive group in the case of fluency and lexical complexity (Syll/min: $t(43) = -1.75$, $p = .087$; C/T: $t(43) = .074$, $p = .941$; Guiraud's Index: $t(43) = -1.99$, $p = .053$; Err/T: $t(43) = -1.02$, $p = .314$).

Concerning oral *gains*, the results of the *t*-test performed with the residuals of regressing posttest on pretest measures at the advanced level show no differences between the two groups in any of the measures (Syll/min: $t(43) = -1.02$, $p = .313$; C/T: $t(43) = -.526$, $p = .602$; Guiraud's Index: $t(43) = -1.71$, $p = .094$; Err/T: $t(43) = -.539$, $p = .593$), even if there were slightly greater gains in the case of the intensive group.

In sum, not much difference was found in the oral production skills of the advanced learners in regular and intensive programs. Nevertheless, as was the case for the intermediate learners, there is a slight statistical trend in favor of the students in the intensive program, especially in terms of lexical complexity.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The progress in oral production skills observed for the EFL learners under analysis was only slightly different according to how the hours of instruction were distributed in the program they attended. Although there were no statistically significant differences between the students in the regular and intensive groups, there is a statistical *trend* in favor of intensive instruction, which is observed at the intermediate and advanced level especially in lexical complexity.

Comparing the findings reported by previous researchers examining intensive instruction or the effect of time distribution on EFL oral production skills (Collins et al., 1999; Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005) with the results reported in this paper, it can be said that all the studies suggest a tendency in the same direction, namely that concentrated EFL instruction has positive effects on L2 learning in general, or on the acquisition of L2 oral production skills in particular. However, it has to be emphasized that the benefits suggested for the intensive EFL program under study are only limited and not as clear as the benefits reported in previous studies, especially for intensive English in Canadian schools.

The Canadian context differs from the context analyzed in this study in different variables. First of all, this study includes adult EFL learners in a language school and not children attending primary school. Additionally, researchers analyzing gains in intensive vs. regular courses in Canada are considering the effect of at least 300 hours of instruction in the case of the intensive program, whereas only 80 hours could be considered in the adult EFL courses under research (both in the intensive and the regular program). Another important difference to take into account is the fact that the intensive and regular programs considered for this study included the same amount of hours of instruction but distributed differently. Many studies on intensive instruction in Canada include courses that not only concentrate but also

increase the hours of instruction with respect to regular instruction (Lightbown and Spada, 1994; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005).

Even if the age factor (first variable mentioned) could be an important issue that explains why the benefits reported for intensive English are significantly clearer in the Canadian context than in the context examined in this particular study, the other variables (which are related to the time factor), could be key for explaining the difference in the strength of the benefits of intensive instruction. More research should be done with children following the type of instruction analyzed in this study or with adults attending longer intensive courses in order to examine whether it is the age, or rather the time factor, which affects the results. Nevertheless, the similarity in the results reported in this research and those described by Lapkin et al. (1998) (who include school learners in programs which are comparable in terms of the time factor to the programs analyzed in this study) seems to suggest that it is most likely the time factor which accounts for the clearer greater benefits of intensive English in Canada as opposed to the EFL course under analysis.

Indeed, the results obtained by Lapkin et al. (1998) in the case of school learners in programs which offered the same hours of instruction but concentrated differently (block scheduling vs. traditional core French) are also more modest than those reported for intensive English or intensive French. Additionally, the study by Lapkin et al. (1998), the same as this particular study, can only analyze the effect of a few hours of instruction (the Canadian French L2 program lasted around 120 hours and the EFL reported here 110 hours). Therefore, it seems that both child and adult learners in short L2 programs which only concentrate the hours of instruction attain modestly higher L2 gains than their peers in programs which spread the same hours of instruction in longer periods of time. It could be the case, then, that for learners in intensive L2 programs to attain significantly higher gains than their peers in non-concentrated courses, such intensive programs should consist of a minimum amount of hours of instruction (the exact amount is not clear; however, considering the evidence, the courses should be longer than 100 hours).

Despite the limitations of this study (low number of participants, few hours of instruction between pre and posttest, great variety of teachers), it can be said that the research design which was used is quite innovative, since it includes adult learners of different proficiency levels following typical one-month intensive courses. Moreover, this study compares two programs which offer the same amount hours of instruction but with a different time distribution, which eliminates the variable of time increase which existed in some other studies examining intensive vs. regular L2 courses. The findings from this study, as well as from other research studies on intensive instruction, can be relevant for the design of L2 classes; nevertheless,

more research needs to be done, especially for adult learners of different proficiency levels. When more information is obtained on the effect of time distribution on L2 learning, such information can then be considered by program designers in order to make the teaching and learning of an L2 a more efficient process.

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Appendix A: Examples of oral narratives

Intermediate learner (posttest)

We can see a, a couple of child...there are one boy and one girl. They may be brothers and...they are in, in a house with, with a woman that she can be her mother, and they are preparing a picnic with...uh sandwiches of butter and jam, and...they uh...go to the, are going to the mountain with her dog, and her mother uh give them a map...and then, they arrive on the mountain, there is a sunny day, and...um, we can, we can see two cows, and when they...are looking for the, the food, it isn't there, and it's because uh the, the dog have uh eaten, have eaten during the, the travel.

Advanced learner (posttest)

Ok, we have these children who are going to, to the mountain, and...whose mother had prepared them the breakfast, or, what they're going to eat in the mountain, and as they are talking with their, with their mother, the dog enters, goes to the basket, and seems to eat the breakfast, or at least takes it, and hides himself in the, in the basket. Then, the children leave, and when they arrive to the mountain and they open their basket, they found, they find the dog instead of the food they were expecting. It's a surprise.

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