French Immersion in Canada

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History of French Immersion in Canada

The French immersion program in Canada began in the 1960s in Quebec. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s in Quebec had brought about an awareness of the disparity between the use of French and English and standards of language instruction in the educational system (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007). A group of anglophone parents in St. Lambert, just outside of Montreal took it upon themselves to push for change in the way that their children learned French, in hopes that a better grasp of the language would lead to better attitudes towards the Quebecois culture and better English-French relations (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007; Safty, 1988). These parents reached out to Dr. Wallace Lambert of McGill University and Dr. Wilder Penfield of Montreal, and they petitioned the school district to allow a French immersion class trial (Fraser, 2011). In 1965 the first class of students began in a trial program the Lambert Experiment, where the students attended school 100% in French. The concern of the school was that the students’ English learning would suffer but the parents, Lambert, and Penfield believed that the children would achieve as well as their English-only peers. The goals of the Lambert Experiment were that

1. Students would achieve competence in both written and spoken French and that their

English skills would be on par with their non-immersion peers

2. Students would gain an appreciation for the Quebecois culture without losing their sense of identity to their anglophone culture

(Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007; Safty, 1988).

Researchers found that there was a transfer of skills between the languages, and that the children attained the same skill and knowledge level as if they had learned in English. The program was a success and French immersion became a reality in Canada. The group of concerned parents turned into a national support group entitled Canadian Parents for French (Fraser, 2011). The Official Languages in Education Program was created in 1970 (Hudon,., & Ménard 2007). This program provided funding for French immersion programs to start up across the country (Manitoba Education, 2007). In 1991 there were 261 447 students enrolled in French immersion nationwide, and in 2015 there were 409 893 students (Statscan, 2015). This represents a growth from 12% to 21% of the total student population.

Immersion in British Columbia

 French immersion began in British Columbia in 1968 at Alderson Elementary in Coquitlam. There were 32 students in the first class. The program was motivated by the francophone population in Maillardville, a part of Coquitlam (Cleugh, 2014). The rationale of the ministry of education is that “French Immersion programming benefits the cognitive and social development of students, as well as their opportunities for career advancement” (British Columbia, 2017, p. 1). In the French immersion program young students learn their basic skills and content entirely in French, thereby learning the language implicitly. In grades K – 3, 100% of the instruction is in French. In grades 4 – 7, 80% is in French, and English is introduced in the other 20%. In grades 8 – 10, students receive between 50 -75% instruction in French. In grades 11 and 12, students must study no less than 25% of the time in French. Students who complete this program of study receive a bilingual dogwood graduation certificate (British Columbia, 2017). In British Columbia, French Immersion enrollment went from 35 636 in 2004/2-005 to 52 545 in 2015/2016, a growth of 5.88% of total students to 9.5% (*CPF*, 2016).

French immersion programs vary according to entry age. Early immersion begins in Kindergarten/grade 1, middle immersion in grade 4/5, or late immersion in grade 7. In full immersion, 100% instruction is in French, but some districts offer partial immersion with some courses in English (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007).

 **French Immersion in School District 6**

Of the three zones in SD6, Golden is the only zone offering French Immersion. We offer middle immersion beginning at grade 4, and one itinerant core French teacher that visits English classes twice per week up until grade 7. Golden Secondary carries grade 8 through 12. Currently, grade 8 and 9 students study Français Langue, Mathématiques, and one option block in French. In Grade 10, 11, and 12, students are offered Français Langue 10, 11, 12, Planification 10, and Cuisine. Courses are either linear at 3 hours per week, or semestered at 6 hours per week. Due to program attrition and general population decline our grade 8 class in the fall will have only 12 students (27% of the grade 8 class). Administration has cited staffing difficulties and funding problems for the decision to stop Mathématiques 8 and 9 in order to run two English math classes per grade. With only one immersion teacher it is yet to be decided as to how the program will be configured. All immersion classes are and will continue to be multi grade.

 **Theoretical underpinnings of French Immersion in Canada**

French immersion in Canada is based on three theories: the Theory of Additive and Subtractive Bilingualism (Lambert, 1964), the Threshold Hypothesis (Cummins, 1978) and the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1978) (Manitoba Education, 2007). The Theory of Additive and Subtractive Bilingualism shows that systems where the children are in a minority and lose their first language and culture while learning L2 do not develop competent skills, whereas if they are in a majority and live in their L1 merely attending school in the L2, they gain competence in both (Manitoba Education, 2007). Cummins’ theories add on to this philosophy by showing that the stronger the skills in L1, the stronger will be the skills in L2. There is a necessary level of competence in L1 needed before there can be success in L2. Skills and knowledge transfer from one language to another (so when an immersion student learns math skills in French, they are able to transfer these skills when they work in English) (Manitoba Education, 2007; Safty, 1988)

French immersion is based on a content driven communicative approach rather than language driven. Rather than learning about the language explicitly, students learn the language implicitly as it is used while they are learning content. The language is learned through meaningful authentic communication with a language expert (the teacher). The approach is communicative, using authentic texts and relevant conversations. Students are expressing their own feelings and experiences. This follows Krashen’s acquisition-learning hypothesis which states that children acquire language subconsciously through interacting with the language. This differs with traditional language models where students learn about the language (Krashen, 1983; Krashen, 1984).

Swain’s Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output Theory supports this model as well, as he states that Comprehensible Input a necessary but not sufficient to language learners; they must also use the language as they learn and self-correct as they struggle to speak themselves Swain, 1985).

Concerns about French Immersion

Children who struggle with language skills in their L1 will display the same struggles in L2 (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007). Often parents blame their child’s struggles on the fact that they are in French, but Cummins’ Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Manitoba Education, 2007) shows that the struggles in L2 mirror difficulties that exist in L1 also. Another concern about the program in that it creates a sense of elitism which gives the impression that students in the English program receive an inferior education (Hutchins, 2015). Enrolment caps add to the stress of parents desperate to enroll their child in the perceived better program. Small communities experience the division between French and English program families (Hutchins, 2015). Fortunately much has been done over the past few decades to mediate these arguments, allowing parents to consider the program that best suits the child.

Conclusion

The French immersion program in Canada has grown tremendously since its beginning with the Lambert Experiment in 1965. Despite controversy and the struggles of maintaining different programs in small schools, the program has flourished. The methodology of teaching content IN the target language resulting in implicit language learning has proven an effective was to create a functional level of bilingualism in Canadian students. This success is due to the Canadian method of adding to the first language and culture without trying to diminish the L1. Children gain competence and appreciation of both language and both cultures.

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