

French Immersion and the Making of a Bilingual Society: A Critical Review and Discussion*

Adel Safty

university of british columbia

French immersion programs had from the start to contend with attitudinal and practical difficulties, and with fear of the programs' effects on children. Bilingual education in French and English, it now turns out, enhances learning. This paper discusses research on immersion, particularly some controversial evaluations of French immersion.

Les programmes d'immersion en français ont d'abord suscité des problèmes d'attitude, des difficultés d'ordre pratique et des craintes quant aux effets de ces programmes sur les enfants. Or il s'avère que l'éducation bilingue en anglais et en français favorise l'apprentissage. Dans cet article, l'auteur traite des recherches sur l'immersion et discute plus particulièrement de certaines évaluations controversées des programmes d'immersion en français.

Although English is a prime medium of communication in science and technology and is increasingly a lingua franca, there are many more bilingual than monolingual people in the world and linguistic diversity is the norm, not the exception.

Canada is one of the few countries where bilingualism is official policy.¹ From its very beginnings Canada gave English and French equal official recognition (the Royal Proclamation Act of 1763); and, when the Constitutional Act of 1791 divided the Canadian territories into Upper Canada and Lower Canada, both languages were granted equal status in the legislative assembly of Canada. The BNA Act of 1867 recognized, in creating the Canadian Federation, "the official character of both languages in the various territories" (Yalden, 1981, p. 72). Following the recommendation of the Royal

* On 1987 September 2, the Supreme Court of British Columbia ruled that French immersion in British Columbia enjoyed no constitutional protection. Ruling on a suit brought by parents against the Saanich school board, Madam Justice Proudfoot argued that only programs for the minority have constitutional protection—"The English majority in British Columbia has no such rights. . . . Optional programs, such as French immersion, carry no constitutional rights."

Commission on Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (1965), the Federal government of Canada gave bilingualism a statutory basis with the passage by Parliament of the Official Languages Act in 1969. This Act declares English and French "equal in status, rights, and privileges" (Yalden, 1981, p. 72). The Canadian Charter of Rights recognizes the right of Canadian citizens to receive education in either one of the two official languages.

The historic success of bilingual education has depended largely upon the socio-political environment in which it was been introduced. For instance, Switzerland introduced bilingualism in its various cantons and achieved remarkable harmony among people speaking different languages. The successful bilingual experience in Switzerland was aided by "long standing traditions of conflict management through mediation and good offices" (McRae, 1983, p. 229), and by the absence of language as a salient factor in federal politics. Potential for conflict is further diminished by "public policy principles that stress legal equality of the national languages" and by "the absence of the very concept of linguistic minority or majority in Swiss public law" (McRae, 1983, p. 233). In the United States, on the other hand, bilingualism was officially discouraged. The United States is regarded as "a melting pot in which former national characteristics are absorbed into a homogeneous American society" (McLaughlin, 1978, p. 3). Indeed, before the Bilingual Education Act (1967) opened the way to a number of bilingual education programs, the official school doctrine in the United States had been based on the premise that "language diversity is undesirable" (McLaughlin, 1978, p. 3).

In Canada, the force of nationalism, moving from East to West and caused partly by Quebec's assertion of political power, facilitated the recognition of the bilingual nature of the Canadian identity. The most significant consequence of this newly found Canadian nationalism has been the growing recognition by Canadians of "the desirability, the possibility, and the practicality of learning French—as a vital medium of communication" (Greenfield, 1976, p. 120).

This paper offers a review of research on French immersion and on bilingualism. It argues that French immersion is more effective than traditional second-language teaching approaches in imparting second-language skills, and perhaps more significantly, paves the way to a bilingual society. Bilingualism can positively affect the psycholinguistic, cognitive and intellectual development of the bilingual learner and, more broadly, can strengthen cultural self-awareness and national self-confidence.

Stern (1972) defines bilingual education as "schooling provided fully or partly in a second language with the object of making students proficient in the second language while at the same time maintaining and developing their proficiency in the first language and fully guaranteeing their educational development" (cited in Swain and Barik, 1978, p. 22).

Bilingual education in Canada was propelled to national prominence in the mid-1960s, when a group of Anglophone parents from the community of St. Lambert, a suburb of Montreal, convinced school administrators to start an experimental bilingual program for their children. The program began in September 1965 with two classes of children—all of whom came from English-speaking families.

The experiment proved very successful and was quickly emulated across the country, even before formal evaluation of the bilingual experiment was completed. It quickly became a landmark in second-language teaching methodology not only in Canada but around the world. Immersion programs modelled after the St. Lambert experiment “now exist in every major city in Canada outside Quebec and in a dozen cities from Plattsburg, New York to San Diego, California in the United States” (Carey, 1984, p. 247).

Immersion requires the “exclusive use of the target language as medium of instruction at the early grade level” (McEachern, 1982, p. 238). In French immersion methodology, the child is plunged into a French environment from the first school day, immersed in linguistic waters and expected to sink or swim. There is no attempt to teach children to read in English, and parents are “specifically urged not to do so at home” (Lambert, 1974, p. 104). Thus the major thrust of the immersion method is the recreation in school of an environment that approximates so far as possible the natural environment in which the first language was acquired.

This is a remarkable departure from traditional methods of second-language teaching. These methods, the success of which depends on a large number of variables, are unquestionably less effective than the natural learning environment in which the child acquires his first language. Attempting to replicate this natural environment in the school, the immersion method reflects the firm conviction, shared by psycholinguists and linguists, that the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic principles of naturalistic and imitative methods of first-language acquisition can aid in the acquisition of a second language.

The younger the learner, the more likely the acquisition of a second language will be facilitated by these principles. Research findings indicate that children demonstrate greater language-learning ability than adults (Penfield & Roberts, 1963, p. 258).² This may be because during the first decade of life the brain is plastic in large areas of uncommitted cortex—especially in the left hemisphere, where the structure of language are laid down—that diminishes as the child grows older and passes from the natural imitative language-learning stage to the conceptual learning stage. Moreover, metalinguistic abilities commonly “show their greatest development during middle childhood, the period between roughly 4 and 8 years” (Hakes, 1980, p. 2). Thus a child can acquire two languages simultaneously almost

"with the same ease [he] learns his first one because he is doing so at a stage of mental development which proceeds parallel to the mechanisms of language acquisition" (Wilton, 1978, p. 261). Wilhelm von Humboldt maintained that language is not really learned, "but rather develops 'from within' in an essentially predetermined way, when the appropriate environmental conditions exist" (cited in Chomsky, 1972, p. 76).

Review of a number of experimental studies (Larew, 1961; Masson, 1964; Asher & Garcia, 1969) led Edwards and Casserly (1976) to conclude that in general research findings provide "strong evidence supporting the teaching of a second language from the earliest possible age" (p. 8).

Traditional second-language teaching emphasized the conceptual (semantico-grammatical) over the functional (communicative), thus rewarding ability to manipulate language structures often to the detriment of mastery of language. The application of structural linguistics and transformational grammar brought to second-language teaching a "formalism" that was far removed from contextual relevancy (Mackay, 1972, p. 19). To teach kindergarten immersion children how to manipulate the new language would be to defeat the intent of the immersion method and its naturalistic, imitative approach. In the immersion methodology, the dominant function of language becomes communication and "language learning becomes learning to communicate" (Titone, 1977, p. 315). Thus, in the immersion method, traditional approaches to second-language teaching are replaced by a new one more consistent with naturalistic, imitative principles—the communicative approach.

The premise of the immersion method and its promise of bilingualism through schooling, and all that this implied socially and politically for the Canadian cultural identity, raised almost as much apprehension and fear among opponents of bilingualism as they did enthusiasm and excitement among supporters. The success of the St. Lambert experiment and the speed with which it was emulated across the country led some people, from both inside and outside the education community—for its socio-political implications could already be discerned—to express concern about what they feared to be the negative effects of bilingualism on the cognitive and psychological development of the child. Lambert and Tucker (1972) quote from a brief presented by English-speaking Catholic principals on the question of bilingual instruction in their schools: "We are of the opinion that the average child cannot cope with two languages of instruction and to do so leads to: insecurity, language interference, and academic retardation" (pp. 5–6). Other opponents, marshalling strong personal intuition and no evidence, claimed that the French immersion programs would be "disorienting, emotionally damaging and intellectually stultifying" (cited in Stern, Swain, McLean, Friedman, Harley, & Lapkin, 1976, p. 17) to the children. Yet other opponents, clearly perceiving socio-political implications

with which they felt ideologically uncomfortable, took the high road of patriotism to warn against the francization of Canada, the growing "French power" and its "authoritarian hypocrisy" (Allison, 1978, p. 62). Some who considered themselves talented political analysts concluded that Trudeau's "master plan" (Andrew, 1977) was to introduce bilingualism as a first step toward the taking over of Canada by the French.

In addition to attitudinal difficulties, bilingual education in Canada had to contend with the antiquated notion that monolingualism was more "natural" than bilingualism because "by nature man was basically monolingual ... [and being bilingual] was like trying to belong to two different religions at the same time" (cited in Saunders, 1983, p. 15).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The rapid expansion of bilingual education programs in almost all areas of the world is eloquent testimony to the fruitful efforts of investigators and researchers in defining issues of bilingualism in a more enlightened perspective.

In the St. Lambert experiment, investigators found that children in the experimental program understood certain concepts in English "that they would likely have learned about through French" (Lambert & Tucker, 1972, pp. 207-208). They also found that there were transfers of skills from one language to the other, particularly skills of reading and calculating, which were developed exclusively through instruction in French "and yet equally well and almost simultaneously developed in English" (p. 208). Lambert and Tucker pointed out that their findings about transfer of skills are supported by the theoretical and experimental work of Vygotsky, who concluded that "a foreign language facilitates mastering the higher forms of the native language" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 110).³

The relation between bilingualism and psycholinguistic skills may be explained by a common underlying linguistic pond in which first- and second-language structures meet. Kessler (1971) studied how bilingual children acquire syntax. She found that structures common to the two languages being learned develop in the same order and at the same rate, "finding their source in a common underlying base" (p. 4), and that bilingual children largely use "the same set of rules in acquiring a second language or two languages simultaneously" (p. 97).

Kessler's methodology was used by another researcher (Tremaine, 1975) who wanted to ascertain that "concrete operational thought and the comprehension of syntax in the bilingual child are based on the same abilities" (p. 10). The investigators concluded that "intensive exposure to French facilitated the comprehension of certain English syntactic structures" (p. 57).

Edwards and Casserly (1976) rejected the suggestion that bilinguals may have a weaker grasp of language than monolinguals because of the mental effort and the time required to master two languages. Their 1971 study showed that "Anglophone children enrolled in the French immersion program obtained higher scores on the grammatic closure subtests of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA) than other Anglophone children tested" (p. 14).

Dank and McEachern (1979) produced a psycholinguistic description comparing the native language oral reading behaviour of French immersion students with that of traditional English language students. At the beginning of their study the investigators predicted that the reading development of students enrolled in a French immersion program would not be qualitatively different from that of their counterparts in the regular English program. They also accepted the premise that the initial lag that some students may experience in their first-language reading program in the early years in French immersion is compensated for soon after instruction in English language arts begins. The investigators found that the French immersion group's use of graphic and sound cues "were slightly more effective than those used by their counterparts in the traditional English group" (p. 369). Moreover, the French immersion group "generated more semantically acceptable miscues, corrected their miscues more often and altered the meaning less frequently, thus illustrating that their reading comprehension was qualitatively better than [that of] the traditional English language group" (p. 370). The investigators concluded that the French immersion group was in "no way hampered in reading development as a result of being instructed in a second language" (p. 371).

Different French Immersion Programs

Research indicates that early French immersion programs are more efficient than other forms of French immersion in imparting comprehension and oral communication skills to the bilingual learner.

A team of investigators from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education compared traditional educational achievements over a 6-year period of students in three different French immersion programs—early, late and partial—to those of comparable groups of students from the regular English program. Students enrolled in the early French immersion program "performed better than at least 30% of native French students who served as norming population for the standardized tests employed" (Swain, 1978, p. 579). Immersion students who were taught mathematics in French performed as well as students who received their mathematics instruction in English. Similarly, the early immersion students were found to "perform equiv-

alently to their English educated counterparts in science" (Swain, 1978, p. 579).

Another study (Bruck, Lambert, & Tucker, 1976) compared two forms of French immersion, "early" and "late." The subjects were early French immersion students who had taken French from kindergarten until grade 7 and late French immersion students who had taken a one year French immersion program in grade 7. The investigators tested the two groups for creative proficiency using a number of French language and English language achievement tests. They found that the early French immersion students had achieved "a level of French proficiency which exceeds that reached by students who take the later, one year program" (p. 56), and that the early immersion group had a much broader range of scholastic and intellectual abilities (as measured by tests of intelligence) than the more homogeneous group of late French immersion students. At the time of testing the latter group had just finished a year of intensive exposure to French, whereas the early French immersion group was "down to a minimum of French input" (p. 57). Given these facts, "the generally higher level of French language skills of the early language group is all the more impressive" (p. 57).

The Suitability of French Immersion for All Children

The education rhetoric of French immersion supporters and detractors sometimes masks a number of underlying worries about the program's sociological effects. Two common questions about French immersion programs concern their suitability for working-class children, and whether French immersion students with learning difficulties should be withdrawn from them. Bruck, Jakinik and Tucker (cited in Swain & Barik, 1978) wanted to test the notion that, because of the linguistic challenge of having to deal with two languages, working-class children might not be able to cope successfully with the academic expectations of the French program and were likely to experience greater difficulty than if instructed in their native language. The investigators found that "the experimental working class groups are able to use their native language as effectively for oral communication as are their comparison groups; [and] that they [are] acquiring a sound passive knowledge in French, in terms of vocabulary, reading, grammar and comprehension." They concluded that "this educational program [the French immersion program] is as appropriate for working class children as it has been found to be for middle class children" (p. 36).

Bruck's study (1978) of children with language disabilities in French immersion kindergartens evaluated the children every year until the end of grade 3, and compared their performance on a number of academic, cognitive, and linguistic tests with those of (a) a similar group of language-disabled children in traditional English programs and (b) normal control

groups. The investigators found that children with language disabilities in the French immersion programs "acquire the basics of their native language, learn the fundamental aspects of reading, spelling and math, as well as acquire proficiency in their second language" (p. 884). The investigators pointed out that children withdrawn from the French program are not only likely to experience the same difficulties in the regular English program, but that they will also carry with them a stigma of failure that will likely prove detrimental to their self-esteem. In summary, the investigators concluded that the answer to the problem of children with learning difficulties in the French program is not to withdraw them from the program but to "provide [them] with help in the context of the French immersion program" (p. 887).

The suitability of French immersion for all children was reaffirmed by Genesee (1976) who, in analysing several studies of the relationship between intelligence and French immersion, found these common factors: (a) intellect is not the only basis for successful second-language learning—motivation, personality, and attitude play important roles; (b) students of below-average intelligence benefit from immersion since they acquire linguistic skills their peers in English classes will not; and (c) such students do not suffer "differential native language deficiencies" (pp. 500–501) as a result of French immersion.

Reviewing the findings of the St. Lambert evaluation—"the most thorough evaluation of a French program ever carried out in this country" (Lapkin, Swain, & Argue, 1983, p. 5)—a group of researchers from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education wrote that "the results of the evaluation studies show that students who have had early immersion up to the end of grade 6 ... can generally understand spoken and written French as well as an average class of French-speaking students in Montreal" (Lapkin et al., 1983, p. 11). My own experience shows that although early French immersion students may have achieved by grade 6 a level of comprehension comparable to that of native French speakers, their use of the language is still characterized by functional determinants and intrusions of English syntactic structures, by awkward attempts at translating English idioms, and by systematic borrowing from their growing English vocabulary. Sustained and increasing exposure to television, radio, magazines and social activities in English favours the linguistic development of one language to the detriment of the other. This is particularly so when exposure to French—i.e., at the school level—begins to decrease considerably in grade 5. It may be that pupils, as their exposure to French is reduced from 100% of instruction time in the early years to 50% in grade 6, are "under constant pressure to confuse meanings and to interpret signs in one language as the translational equivalent of signs in the other" (Wilton, 1987, p. 272).

Still, the bilingualism of French immersion students should not be compared to the natural bilingualism of children who acquire two languages simultaneously at a very early age—either because their parents speak two languages at home or because the language spoken at home is different from that in which they receive their schooling. Rather, the bilingualism of French immersion students should be defined in terms of “specific measures of understanding, speaking, reading and writing in two languages” (Swain, 1976, p. 182). In this context it would be difficult to question the formula “English-speaking child + early French immersion = bilingual child” (Swain, 1976, p. 182).

On the basis of the study and research findings reviewed thus far it may be possible to draw a first conclusion: the immersion method, particularly the early immersion model, provides fluency and comprehension levels associated with bilingual competency. Compared to other second-language teaching approaches, the immersion method is undoubtedly “the best formula” (MacKay, 1972, p. 20). Far from impairing linguistic competence in the first language, the acquisition of a second language reinforces and indeed enhances linguistic skills in the first language. The immersion method may be said to be preparing a generation of bilingual citizens and at the same time changing our socio-political perceptions of this country.

BILINGUALISM AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Early studies of the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive and intellectual development generally reported that bilingualism had negative effects on intelligence. Weisgerber (cited in McLaughlin, 1978, p. 169) believed that bilingualism could impair intelligence and cripple its creativity. In a review of 32 studies carried out in the United States, Arsenian (cited in McLaughlin, 1978, p. 170) noted in 1937 that 62% of these studies concluded that bilingualism was an intellectual handicap. In Canada to my knowledge only one study reported that bilingualism, and more specifically French immersion, might have some negative effects on the educational attainment of bilingual children. Trites (1976) reported that “some children of above average potential and normal ability for school progress in their native language, experience difficulty or fail in a primary immersion program in a second language as a result of mild specific maturational lag” (p. 201).

All of these studies have been criticized. Their findings are generally considered inaccurate and unreliable indicators of the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive and intellectual development. The tools and methodology used in these studies put the bilingual student at a disadvantage. For instance, McLaughlin (1978) reported that verbal intelligence

tests emphasizing speed of response were administered in order to measure bilingual students' ability to manipulate concepts in their second language (p. 170). Further, Cummins suggested that studies which reported that bilingualism had a negative influence on intelligence were carried out with "minority-language bilingual children" (1978, p. 855), and therefore had limited relevance to the Canadian experience of French immersion, where most bilingual children are majority language children.

The Canadian study (Trites, 1976) which suggested that French immersion might cause certain "maturation lag" in some students has been the object of an extensive critique by Cummins. Trites had concluded that children experiencing difficulties in the French immersion program should be switched to the regular English program. Cummins claims that "Trites' interpretation is not only invalid, but his data provide some support for the opposite conclusion to that which he draws" (1979, p. 139), and that Trites and Price made "inappropriate interpretations of non-significant differences" (p. 140) by reporting and analysing their data in terms of percentile scores, ignoring the expressly stated instruction in the Wide Range Achievement Test manual that percentiles "should not be used in research or in reporting comparisons between scores [because] they are not numbers in the usual meaning of the word" (p. 140). Cummins concluded that the data of Trites and Price seems to support "Bruck's findings that children who remain in immersion programs despite academic difficulties progress just as well in cognitive and academic skills as those who transfer to a regular English program" (p. 142).

Finally, it will be useful to keep in the mind the long-established relationship between epistemology and ideology. Knowledge, its packaging and its dissemination have long been understood to represent a significant component of political power, and no mode of inquiry, be it scientific or humanist, can claim to be autonomously self-contained and immune to that relationship and to the prevailing socio-political environment. For instance, the Weisgerber study was conducted in a Germany dominated by race-supremacist Nazi doctrines which, in their emphasis on the purity and superiority of the German culture and language, encouraged the finding of "scientific evidence" of the deleterious effects of learning a foreign language. Similarly, the American studies reviewed by Arsenian were conducted during the inter-War period, at the height of American isolationism, when official school doctrine in the United States discouraged bilingualism and saw language diversity as undesirable.

Correlation between Bilingualism and Cognitive Skills: Recent Findings

Numerous studies report that bilingualism contributes to cognitive and intellectual development, and their findings represent an increasingly impressive array of evidence.

In Montreal, Peal and Lambert (1967) studied the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive skills. They administered a battery of tests to groups of 10-year-old bilingual and monolingual students controlled for socio-economic class, sex and age. They found that "bilinguals performed significantly better than monolinguals on both verbal and non-verbal tests ... [and] that they have a language asset, are more facile at concept formation, and have a greater mental flexibility" (p. 188). This conclusion was confirmed in Anisfield's large-scale follow-up study in 1964 (cited in Saunders, 1983). The subjects were groups of immigrant children who, by necessity, had to be bilingual. The study found that the bilingual children "scored higher on intelligence tests than monolingual control groups" (p. 17).

Another study, carried out by Liedke and Nelson (cited in Edwards & Casserly, 1976), assumed that concept formation represents a major part of intellectual development and examined the relative performance of monolingual and bilingual grade 1 pupils on a specially constructed Concept of Linear Measurement Test based on Piaget's test items. The investigators found that "intelligence factors necessary for concept formation appeared to develop to a greater extent in bilingual subjects" (pp. 10-11). The authors concluded that the earlier bilingualism is introduced, the more likely it is to contribute to the development of "certain aspects of intelligence" (p. 11).

In addition to enhancing concept formation, bilingualism was also found to increase awareness of the arbitrariness of language and to facilitate separation of meaning from sound. Ianco-Worrall (cited in Saunders, 1983) studied English-Afrikaans 4- to 9-year-old bilingual and monolingual (in each language) children. Bilingual children were "better able to analyze language as an abstract system ... [and] capable of separating the word from its sound at a much earlier age" (p. 17).⁴

Balkan (cited in McLaughlin, 1978) found that bilingual students "demonstrated greater cognitive flexibility than their monolingual counterparts in a series of tests with socio-economic class and intelligence controlled" (p. 184). Landry (cited in McLaughlin, 1978) found that sixth-grade bilingual students "performed significantly better than monolingual children on a test of divergent thinking ability that measured such aspects of cognitive functioning as fluency, flexibility and originality" (p. 184). Scott (cited in Saunders, 1983) reported that his Canadian bilingual (English-French) subjects demonstrated "greater adeptness at divergent thinking" (p. 19) in

which cognitive flexibility was seen as an index of creativity and rich imagination.

There is thus an accumulating array of evidence suggesting that bilingualism can positively affect the cognitive and intellectual development of the young bilingual learner. Bilingualism provides the child with certain neurolinguistic skills that help to develop other cognitive domains.

Research findings on bilingualism's effects on children's personality and social development indicate that the maladjustment experienced by some bilingual children "usually originates from the social environment rather than from bilingualism as such" (Segalowitz, 1977, p. 16). They also indicate that early bilingualism "coincides with normal parameters of the social growth" of the child personality (Titone, 1983, p. 177).

DISCUSSION

Although the research findings indicate a positive correlation between bilingualism and linguistic skills in one's first language on the one hand and cognitive and intellectual development on the other, it is wise to remember that all educational research is fraught with logical pitfalls and methodological limitations. Some variables germane to the acquisition of a second language are difficult to control. It is difficult to match members of comparison groups for personality, attitudes, and motivation—all of which have been found to play important roles in acquiring a second language. Indeed, a study by Gardner, Smythe, Clement, and Glikzman (cited in Edwards, 1980) showed that attitudes and motivations were significant predictors of second-language learning "at times surpassing aptitude in predictive strength" (p. 481).

Fortunately, research tools and methodology are far more sophisticated today than they were a few decades ago, and will continue to grow in sophistication as futile avenues of inquiry are discarded and investigative tools sharpened. Progress in experimental and developmental psychology, as well as theoretical works and empirical findings on epistemology and its relationship to other disciplines, will improve experimental controls and increase the accuracy of research findings. Still, it would be contrary to the principles of open-minded inquiry to dismiss the validity of study and research findings on French immersion and on bilingualism simply because certain variables do not readily lend themselves to rigorous control.

The difficulties of the French immersion program in Canada, it seems to me, no longer have to do with its educational value or with the bilingualism it produces in the learner. Rather, they have to do with problems created by its unexpectedly phenomenal success and its political implications—particularly at the local level.

For instance, there are not enough qualified teachers to meet the increasing demand for French immersion teachers. Nor do there seem to be enough qualified university professors to train and prepare future immersion teachers. There is also a growing dissatisfaction with some student teachers' unacceptable levels of French linguistic skills, not to mention those of some employed French immersion teachers.

Canadian faculties of education were caught off guard by the unexpected rapid growth of French immersion and now find themselves unable to meet the growing demand for qualified French teachers. In 1986, teacher training programs at Canadian universities produced 1,300 French teachers: 700 teachers of French as a second language, 500 French immersion teachers, and 100 teachers of French as a first language (André Obadia, Simon Fraser University, personal communication, 1986 September). Although in 1988 this number is expected to exceed 1,600, it will still fall short of the projected need for at least 2,000 teachers in all three French programs (André Obadia, Simon Fraser University, personal communication, 1986 September). Over the next four years, French immersion programs across Canada are expected to require an average of 959 new teachers per year. Our universities now produce fewer than 500 French immersion teachers per year. Here again, administrative problems associated with the rapid growth of French immersion are hampering the generalization of bilingual education.

French immersion teacher training programs, offered in most universities, have been characterized as inadequate, improvised, and indistinguishable from traditional teacher training programs.

There is, finally, new worry about the impact of the explosive growth of French immersion programs on established traditional English programs. The need "to protect English culture" (cited in Fleming, 1986, p. 6), and concern about the growing number of French teachers required in the future and "the implications for unilingual Anglophone teachers" (Fleming, 1986, p. 6), may be behind the decision of two New Brunswick school boards to drop early immersion immediately and begin middle immersion in 1989 (Fleming, 1986, p. 6).

On 1986 April 14, trustees of school district 63 (Saanich) in British Columbia voted to limit enrolment in French immersion to "make it less likely that regular programs are adversely affected" (Saanich School Board, personal communication, 1986 September). One of the trustees defended the decision, arguing that "uncontrolled growth of immersion would be at the expense of the rural district's small neighborhood schools" (cited in Killian, p. 34).⁵

French immersion is not popular with all school administrators, the majority of whom are unilingual Anglophones. Some resent the unpredictable demands of French immersion schools (uneven distribution of enrolment

numbers, split grades in French, inadequate resources, supervision and assessment of staff teaching in French, which most administrators do not understand). Others find the active involvement of French immersion parents too demanding on their time and resources. These administrators are generally conservative in their reaction to French immersion. There is resistance to Ministry policy increasing instruction time allotted to subjects taught in French within the French immersion program. There is also a tendency to limit enrolment in the French immersion program for fear of upsetting the unwritten rule of 50:50 division between French immersion and English programs in a French immersion school.

Another problem, increasingly a source of concern for French immersion teachers, is the anomalous situation of unilingual Anglophone administrators evaluating and writing reports on teachers using French 100% of their instruction time. There is no doubt that a good administrator who views his/her role as facilitative leadership, and who provides formative evaluation of staff, can be extremely helpful without having the linguistic skill to understand the content of what is being evaluated. But it would be logically odd to say that summative evaluations, carried out by an individual incapable of understanding what is being taught, contain no potentially serious points of teacher-administrator friction and antagonism. Problems arising from this situation quickly take on the political character of French-versus-English confrontations.

Caught between their self-proclaimed role as the vanguard of reform in education and all its socio-politically related issues, and the job implications of an expanding program that favours one group of teachers over another, teachers' associations find themselves ill-prepared for the immersion challenge. Their usual responses are reflexive, conservative, and defensive in the face of what is believed to be a threat. A local professional association recently published a task force report on French immersion prepared by a committee on which French immersion administrators were well represented. The report recommended a series of measures to limit the growth of the French program in enrolment and in instructional time, even if it meant disregarding Ministry policy.

These reactions are prompted by instincts of self-preservation, by the wish to defend acquired privilege, and by fear of implications at the local level—where there might occur changes in the relative strengths of professional groups competing for self-advancement. In such a climate, the argument that French immersion programs are changing once-dominant socio-political perceptions of Canada may leave a good number of teachers and administrators unmoved. Still, the French immersion movement has had unexpected popularity among parents; that popularity has led to various reactions; and these reactions have broad implications for the education

system and for Canada's view of itself. All of this provides a fascinating area of research not only for scholars of matters educational, but also for sociologists and political scientists. In the French immersion program, Gramsci's distinctions between civil and political societies find themselves perfectly embodied.

Co-existence of two groups of teachers working together in a dual-track school (French immersion school housing a regular English program alongside a French immersion program) is a delicate matter, all the more since enrolment in a French immersion program is almost invariably higher than in the traditional English program. Recently one such school registered 63 children in French kindergarten and only 3 in the English kindergarten. The inevitable dislocation of English teachers and the uncertainty facing those unable to find employment contrast sharply with growing demand for French teachers and competition to secure their much-needed services.

There is also growing dissatisfaction with the quality of French spoken by French immersion students. Hammerly (1982) argues that after many thousands of hours of exposure to French, children "emerge with a very defective productive language, i.e., they speak and write in abominable Frenglish" (p. 2). He claims that the main problem with French immersion is that "it is not in any sense immersion in the language ... the children are [surrounded] by other children who butcher the language just as badly as they do" (Hammerly, 1983, p. A5). The immersion method is dismissed because "it is not the miraculous panacea that will lead to an almost perfect mastery of a second language" (Pellerin & Hammerly, 1986, p. 601). Hammerly concedes that the immersion method produces comprehension and fluency, but strongly criticizes children's mastery of grammatical structures. Thus he writes that "on a scale of one (quite inadequate) to five (native), it seems that immersion programs produce graduates with a four in comprehension and fluency but a terminal two (or even lower) in the essential control of structure" (Hammerly, 1983, p. A5).

This assessment of the linguistic results of the French immersion method is not gratuitous, but badly misses the mark. The thrust of the communicative approach, as we have seen, is precisely to emphasize communication, the essential pillars of which are comprehension and fluency in oral expression. Moreover, given the age at which the children are enrolled in the French program, grammar-based teaching—which still provides the basis for traditional second-language teaching methodology—no longer has pride of place.

The French immersion method seeks to recreate the natural imitative environment in which the first language is largely acquired, through emphasis on communication and not grammatical structures. Just as children make mistakes while learning their first language, they will make mistakes in

acquiring the second language. Only sustained exposure to the correct language eventually eliminates the errors. The same holds true for the school-based imitative environment: only sustained exposure to the language and its correct structures will eventually produce communicators with acceptable mastery of grammatical structures.

To argue that the immersion method has failed because it has not led to a perfect mastery of the language, or because it produces pupils speaking English-ridden French, is to commit two errors of logic. Such an argument introduces a measurement criterion—mastery of grammatical structure—that is far from being the basis of the French immersion method. Further, the argument fails to take into account the context in which the French immersion method is achieving what it promised—communication skills. That socio-cultural and linguistic context is overwhelmingly English-based. To concede that the French immersion method produces excellent communicators is to recognize its extraordinary success at achieving its objective.

CONCLUSION

The educational value of the French immersion program is no longer a subject of sharp dispute. Students enrolled in French immersion programs maintain and develop their proficiency in their first language. Their general educational achievements are at least equal to those of their counterparts in the traditional English program. Further, bilingualism can not be said to impair intelligence. On the contrary, a growing body of research findings suggests that bilingualism can augment certain cognitive skills and enhance intellectual development.

Judging by their prodigious growth, French immersion programs have carved a permanent place in our education system. They still have to contend with attitudinal and practical difficulties resulting from changes they cause in the educational system, and from the promise of change in socio-political perceptions of Canada. French immersion is contributing to what Laxer called “the growing acceptance” of English and French as the country’s two major cultural collectivities, and giving language what Renan called the role of “inviting re-union not forcing it.”

If bilingual education is a worthy objective in an officially bilingual country, then French immersion programs must be seen as a successful educational experience that is rapidly taking on the unexpected but welcome role of an agent of socio-political reform. In this context the phenomenal success of these programs is eloquent testimony not only to their educational value, but also, more significantly, to the tacit endorsement of their reformist role. Indeed, in preparing a generation of bilingual citizens, the French immersion programs successfully implement policy on the Canadian identity.

In 1975, examiners from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development made the following unflattering evaluation of Canadian education generally: "In distinction from other comparable industrialized countries, Canada has [not] produced a politically motivated educational reform" (cited in Greenfield, 1976, p. 112). This may no longer be the case. French immersion may be implementing the most important socio-political reform of the Canadian education system in a long time. A reform so rooted in a vision of bilingual society—"invaluably enriched ... [by its] multicultural character" (Trudeau, 1978, p. 10)—is the more remarkable for being the result, not of a bureaucratic decision, but of the commitment of ordinary citizens to education as a cultural catalyst.

NOTES

¹ Other officially bilingual societies include Switzerland, Finland, Belgium and Wales.

² "Le cerveau d'un enfant est plastique. Le cerveau d'un adulte, quelque efficace qu'il puisse être en d'autres domaines, est habituellement inférieur à celui de l'enfant en ce qui concerne le langage" (Penfield & Roberts, 1963, p. 259). For a complete discussion, see pp. 254–277.

³ Vygotsky, it will be recalled, distinguished between "spontaneous concepts" and "scientific or school-based concepts," and compared their interaction to that of native and foreign language. He concluded that "All our evidence supports the hypothesis that analogous systems develop in reverse directions at the higher and at the lower levels, each system influencing the other and benefiting from the stronger points of the other" (p. 110). For a complete discussion of the development of scientific concepts in childhood, see chapter 6, pp. 82–118.

⁴ "Choosing from cap, can and hat, monolinguals chose can as being more like cap, because of the similarity in sound, whilst the majority of the bilingual children (4–6 years of age) chose hat because of its similarity in meaning to cap" (Saunders, 1983, p. 17).

⁵ The Saanich school board has since reversed its earlier decision.

REFERENCES

- Allison, S. (1978). *French power, the francization of Canada*. Richmond Hill, ON: BMG.
- Andrew, J. V. (1977). *Bilingual today, French tomorrow: Trudeau's master plan and how it can be stopped*. Richmond Hill, ON: BMG.
- Bruck, M. (1978). The suitability of French immersion programs for language-disabled children. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34, 884–887.
- Bruck, M., Lambert, W., & Tucker, R. (1976). Alternative forms of immersion for second-language teaching. In *Working papers on bilingualism*, 10 (pp. 22–62). Toronto: OISE.
- Brumfit, C. J., & Johnson, K. (Eds.). (1979). *The communicative approach to language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Carey, S. (1984). Reflections on a decade of French immersion. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41, 246–259.
- Chomsky, N. (1972). *Language and mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Cummins, J. (1978). The cognitive development of children in immersion programs. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34, 855–879.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Should the child who is experiencing difficulties in the early French immersion program be switched to the regular English program? A reinterpretation of data. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 36, 139–142.
- Dank, M., & McEachern, W. (1979). A psycholinguistic description comparing the native language oral reading behaviour of French immersion students with traditional English language students. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 35, 366–371.
- Edwards, H. P. (1980). Psychological and socio-psychological factors influencing second-language acquisition. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 36, 481–484.
- Edwards, H. P., & Casserly, M. C. (1976). *Research and evaluation of second-language (French) programs*. Toronto: Ministry of Education.
- Fleming, B. (1986, June). Immersion is in jeopardy in N[ew] B[runswick]. *Canadian Parents for French Newsletter*, 34, 6–7.
- Genesee, F. (1976). The suitability of immersion programs for all children. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 32, 494–515.
- Greenfield, T. B. (1976). Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and the crisis of purpose in Canadian culture. In M. Swain (Ed.), *Bilingualism in Canadian education: Yearbook* (Vol. 3, p. 113). Toronto: OISE.
- Hakes, D. T. (1980). *The development of metalinguistic abilities in children*. New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin.
- Hammerly, H. (1982, October 14). Parlez-vous Frenglish? *Simon Fraser Week*, p. 2.
- Hammerly, H. (1983, May 21). Frenglish, once learned, impervious to correction [letter to the editor]. *The Vancouver Sun*, p. A5.
- Killian, C. (1986, April 17). French immersion victim of success. *The [Vancouver] Province*, p. 34.
- Kessler, C. (1971). *The acquisition of syntax in bilingual children*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Lambert, W. (1974). A Canadian experiment in the development of bilingual competence. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 31, 108–116.
- Lambert, W. (1978). Cognitive and socio-cultural consequences of bilingualism. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34, 537–547.
- Lambert, W., & Tucker, G. R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children: The St. Lambert experiment*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Lapkin, S., Swain, M., & Argue, V. (1983). *French immersion: The trial balloon that flew*. Toronto: OISE.
- Laxer, R. M. (Ed.). (1979). *Bilingual tension in Canada*. Toronto: OISE.
- Mackay, W. E. (1972). *The contextual revolt in language teaching: Its theoretical foundations*. Quebec: Centre International de Recherche sur le Bilinguisme.
- McEachern, W. (1982). Parental decision for French immersion: A look at some influencing factors. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 36, 239–249.
- McLaughlin, B. (1978). *Second Language acquisition in childhood*. Hillsdale, NJ: Wiley.
- McRae, K. D. (1983). *Conflict and compromise in multilingual societies: Switzerland*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Obadia, A. (1985). La formation du professeur d'immersion français au Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 10, 415–424.

- Peal, E., & Lambert, W. E. (1967). The relation of bilingualism to intelligence. In J. Michel (Ed.), *Foreign language teaching: An anthology*. New York: Macmillan.
- Pellerin, M., & Hammerly, A. (1986). L'expression orale après treize ans d'immersion française. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 42, 592-606.
- Penfield, W., & Roberts, L. (1963). *Langage et mécanismes cérébraux*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Pepin, J. L. (1979). *Report of the task force on Canadian unity: A future together*. Ottawa: Government Printing Office.
- Saunders, G. (1982). *Bilingual children: Guidance for the family*. Clevedon, Avon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Segalowitz, N. (1977). Psychological perspectives on bilingual education. In B. Spolsky & R. Cooper (Eds.), *Frontiers of bilingual education* (pp. 119-158). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Stern, H. H. (1971). The issues and directions of language learning. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 27, 47-50.
- Swain, M. (1976). English speaking child + early French immersion = bilingual child? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 33, 180-187.
- Swain, M. (1978). French immersion, early, late or partial? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34, 577-585.
- Swain, M., & Barik, H. (1978). Bilingual education in Canada. In B. Spolsky, B. & R. Cooper (Eds.), *Case studies in bilingual education* (pp. 22-71). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Titone, R. (1977). A humanistic approach to language behaviour and language learning. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 33, 309-317.
- Titone, R. (1983). Psycholinguistic variables of child bilingualism: Cognitive and personality development. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 39, 171-181.
- Tremaine, R. (1975). *Syntax and Piagian operational thought: A developmental study of bilingual children*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Trites, R. L. (1976). Children with learning difficulties in primary French immersion. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 33, 193-201.
- Trudeau, P. E. (1978). *A time for action: Toward the renewal of the Canadian federation*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Wilton, M. T. (1978). *Bilingual lexicography: Theoretical foundations and practical methodology, with special reference to Canadian French and English*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia.
- Woodworth, J. A. (1971). Why study foreign languages? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 27, 47-49.
- Yalden, M. F. (1981). The bilingual experience in Canada. In M. Ridge (Ed.), *The new bilingualism: An American dilemma* (pp. 71-87). California: University of Southern California Press.

Vertiefte Französisch-Programme hatten von Anfang an mit praktischen und Einstellungsschwierigkeiten zu kämpfen, wie auch mit der Angst vor der Auswirkung dieser Programme auf Kinder. Wie sich nunmehr herausstellt, fördert die zweisprachige Erziehung in französischer und englischer Sprache den Lernprozeß. Diese Arbeit beleuchtet den Forschungsstand zum vertieften Französisch-Unterricht, und untersucht dabei insbesondere einige kontroverse Meinungen dazu.

Las programas de inmersión en francés han lidiado desde un principio con dificultades de actitud y práctica, y con temor a los efectos que los programas pueden

tener sobre los niños. La educación bilingüe en francés y en inglés, ahora resulta en un aumento en el aprendizaje. Este trabajo examina las investigaciones sobre la inmersión, particularmente algunas controversias de evaluaciones de la inmersión en francés.

Adel Safty is assistant professor in the Department of Language Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z5.