

Débat / Discussion

In Defence of French Immersion Evaluation Studies

Adel Safty

university of british columbia

Because of their success and continued rapid growth, French immersion programs in Canada have been the subject of numerous studies, research projects, and evaluations (Safty, 1988). I should like to consider a technical aspect of immersion evaluation studies, and in particular, Carey's criticism (1984) of the value of French immersion evaluation studies. According to Carey, such studies compare students in the French immersion programs with their counterparts in regular English programs. This presents "serious problems" of interpretation, since these studies suffer from inadequate controls even when intelligence and socio-economic status have been matched. He argues that students in French immersion programs were "chosen" and that evaluators "must study the progress rates of these students after they have been chosen beyond our control" (pp. 250–251). He also argues that this element of deliberate choice is by and large absent for students in regular English programs. "Students, parents and teachers have determined which program a student follows [in choosing French immersion]," he claims, "thus the most fundamental assumption of doing experimental research is obviated since subject selection factors are given free rein" (p. 250). To support this contention he cites Trites and Price's (1977) claim that French immersion might cause "maturational lag" for some students. Their study assessed the ability, motivation, and social motivation of four-year-old children enrolled in a regular English program. They reported that "the English regular program received more children who were rated as below average in ability, fewer children who were rated as above average in ability, and more children who were likely to encounter learning difficulties" (p. 251).

Carey's criticism of the value of French immersion evaluation studies has a number of shortcomings. First, the rigour with which he judges French immersion evaluation studies and his assertion that "the most fundamental assumption of doing experimental research is obviated" are not warranted, considering the stated nature and goals of most of these evaluation studies.

As Carey recognized, these studies sought to encourage “improvements in programs” and to deal with parents’ and administrators’ preoccupations with the question of “whether or not students would lose English skills and/or academic content as a result of gaining French skills” (p. 250). There are, for the sake of argument, four types of evaluation: summative, formative, contextualized summative, and contextualized formative. Only contextualized (especially *socially* contextualized) types of evaluation may help us with questions of control. The stated goal of most French immersion studies is formative but not contextualized, and therefore ought not to lead to the conclusion Carey draws about lack of control. These studies and evaluations did not pretend to offer a theoretical basis for bilingual education; rather, they treated immediate practical educational questions. To criticize their failure to account for an exhaustive array of cultural, political, economic, social, cognitive, psychological and environmental (in the sense of teaching and learning environment) factors, is to misapprehend them.

Second, ability, motivation and social maturation are important factors in second-language acquisition, says Carey, and I agree. But I disagree with his assumption that these factors play an equally important role in French immersion programs, particularly since he himself writes that “it is . . . largely unknown just what are the series of stages the young child moves through in an immersion program while he is acquiring a second language since *the mediating factors . . . are largely unknown*” (p. 249; emphasis added). Evaluation studies can hardly account for factors “largely unknown.”

Third, the premise that “students, parents and teachers have determined which program a student follows” is erroneous. The decision to enroll a child in French immersion is made almost exclusively by parents acting on a belief in the educational value of the program and in the professional and cultural opportunities attendant to bilinguality. Parents’ choice is generally not based on an assessment of the child’s linguistic abilities but rather on the conviction that the child can “cope” with the program. In short, the French immersion parents do not “choose” their children for the immersion program, rather they choose the program for their children. Frequently, the only decision reached in concert with teachers and administrators is not whether or not a child will enter the French immersion program, but rather whether or not he or she will remain in it if learning difficulties become an issue, and especially when those difficulties are rashly ascribed to linguistic incapacity.

The research Carey cites weakens his argument. His main criticism was of inadequate controls in French immersion studies and, given that inadequacy, of the inappropriateness of making comparisons between French immersion students and regular English program students. The Trites and Price report is described as an “in-depth description” of early immersion students as compared with regular program students. Although it was subject to few if any

controls, Carey used the report's "findings" to do what he strongly cautioned against: to compare two not readily comparable groups.

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of Trites and Price's research was that it encouraged a sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the authors of the report, like Carey, assigned importance to the question of choice and selection of French immersion students, they constructed their study in a way that encouraged such "findings." Thus teachers who participated in that research were asked to "rate" four-year-old kindergarten pupils in terms of ability, motivation and social maturation. This ranking has dubious educational value, and simply does not occur in the real world of most French immersion programs. Deconstructing and reconstructing the world to fit a theoretical framework has not always helped make theory more relevant to practice.

In asking teachers to rate kindergarten children's "appropriateness for French immersion enrollment" (p. 251), Trites and Price further assumed French immersion to be appropriate for certain students and inappropriate for others, and encouraged teachers to think along these lines. This undermined the principle of universal admission in French immersion programs.

The argument that the parents of the two groups of students differed markedly in terms of IQ and SES and that these differences "make comparisons in their respective performances particularly difficult" (p. 252) shows that researchers and evaluators underestimate the role of socio-economic factors in students' academic achievements. Jones' 1950s work on bilingualism and intelligence drew attention to "the influence of socio-economic factors in comparisons between groups of monolingual and bilingual children and emphasized the importance of such factors in the correct interpretation of test results" (Peal & Lambert, 1967, p. 146). Although Carey's cautionary remarks are welcome, they add little to what researchers and evaluators already know about evaluation studies that rely on comparison. They are an inadequate basis on which to dismiss French immersion research. The crucial question is not whether or not there are differences between some French immersion students and some regular English program students, for there obviously are (Olson & Burns, 1983), but rather how to deal with these differences.

Carey also criticizes studies reporting that bilingualism positively influences cognitive and intellectual development. He claims, but cites no evidence to support his contention, that it would be "gratuitous to attribute cognitive advantages" (p. 253) to bilingualism. In fact, he argues, the causal link runs in the opposite direction. That cognitive skills facilitate language skills is hardly controversial. Still, his first assertion is difficult to analyze since he mentions the study of the relationship between thought and language only to inform us that it enjoyed "a long and notorious history" (p. 253). He is

either unaware of or silent about the growing body of research suggesting that bilingualism may positively affect cognitive skills.

Certainly, a clearer picture of the social impact of French immersion cannot emerge without reference to immersion's stratified social context; the politics of implementation, and active and passive interventions by school boards to limit, or at least to control, the growth of French immersion; the suspicious, and sometimes hostile, attitude of teachers' federations concerned about the impact of the growth of the program on regular English program teachers; and the misapprehensions many non-French-immersion parents have about the program.

Although research indicates that French immersion programs are successfully achieving what they set out to do—namely, to create a generation of functionally bilingual students—more research will be needed to assuage the doubts and apprehensions of parents and teachers worried about content or first-language skills loss.

REFERENCES

- Carey, S. (1984). Reflections on a decade of French immersion. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 41, 246–259.
- Olson, P., & Burns, G. (1983). Politics, class, and happenstance: French immersion in a Canadian context. *Interchange*, 14 (1), 1–16.
- Peal, E., & Lambert, W. (1967). The relationship of bilingualism to intelligence. In J. Michel (Ed.), *Foreign language teaching: An anthology* (pp. 143–191). New York: Macmillan.
- Safty, A. (1988). French immersion and the making of a bilingual society: A critical review and discussion. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 13, 243–262.
- Trites, R.L., & Price, M.A. (1977). *Assessment of readiness for primary French immersion*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.