

THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL
Summer/Fall 1995, Vol. 19, Nos. 3 & 4, pp. 525-536

THE SECOND LANGUAGE COMPONENT
OF PRIMARY FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS
IN MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

Holli Schauber
University of Cincinnati

&

Pierrette L. Morissette & Lorraine R. Langlois
Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal

Abstract

This article provides a critical description of a long-standing Canadian bilingual program that completely immerses Anglophone students in a French academic context. Support from the target language culture, along with environmental reinforcements, contribute to the academic success of the students and the steady program enrollment. For Anglophone Montrealers, the immersion programs have been a staple of the public school system since the early 1970s. Owing in part to a law that has made French the official language in Quebec, Anglophones have flocked to bilingual education programs with aspirations of becoming functionally bilingual. With minor adjustments according to parental demands, curricular objectives are designed first to meet Anglophone students' needs, and second to match those of the French mother tongue students. While the successes of immersion programs are well documented in the literature, Anglophone students rarely develop a linguistic competence in French indistinguishable from their Francophone counterparts.

In the Province of Quebec

In 1968 the PSBGM (Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal) started its primary (elementary) French Immersion program. For a

quarter of a century the immersion model has remained the program of choice for many in Montreal's Anglophone community. The city is divided into Protestant and Catholic School boards and further categorized as linguistic communities of Anglophones, Francophones, and Allophones. The term Allophone refers to those in Quebec society whose mother tongue is neither French nor English. According to law Allophones must attend French mother tongue schooling. The program under the PSBGM now includes 15 schools and serves approximately 6200 Anglophone students in the Montreal area. The growth of English students enrolled in Immersion programs in Quebec has been outstanding. From the handful of classes in 1967 to nearly 18,000 in 1977 to over 32,000 in 1992, this accounts for 32% of the enrollment of the English sector of Quebec for all school boards (Annual Report from the Commissioner of Official Languages 1979-1991).

In Other Parts of Canada

Catholic school boards opened their first French immersion classes in Ottawa in 1969, and in other Ontario school boards in 1970. British Columbia began offering French immersion in 1973 and by 1975 Newfoundland and Labrador were offering their first primary level French immersion programs. According to the Annual Report of the Official Languages Commissioner for 1991-92, there were 295,350 students attending French immersion programs throughout the ten Canadian provinces. The population of Canada is 29,000,000, approximately one tenth that of the United States. (For a more detailed look at Canadian immersion and bilingual programs see Genesee, 1987.)

The Royal Vale Immersion Program

The Royal Vale immersion program has been characterized by parents of children attending the program and objective observers as one of the best bilingual education programs offered in the city of Montreal. As one of the most celebrated immersion programs offered under the PSBGM, parents are eager to register their kindergarten age children in the program. Later enrollment is almost impossible because the waiting list for higher level grades is very long. Because of its success, parents perform an annual ritual of lining up for several days (in the Canadian

cold and have been known to camp out in rented school buses) in order to register their children for a place in the next year's roster of kindergarten students. Since not all schools attended by Anglophone students under the PSBGM offer a full French immersion program, there is often limited space in the schools that do provide these services. Another attractive quality of the program is that class size is limited to 20 or fewer. By comparison, non-immersion schools have classrooms with 25 students and more. The Royal Vale program comprises 17 classes, as shown below:

<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Number of Classes</i>
K	three
1	two
2	two
3	three
4	three
5	two
6	two

There are a total of twenty teachers including specialists in the program and all are native French speakers and bilingual.

Program Goals

At the PSBGM, the objective of the French Immersion program is to provide Anglophone students with an educational program that will allow them to function adequately in French by the end of secondary school (grade XI). In Quebec high school is completed in grade eleven. Students then move on to two years of college followed by three years of university should they choose to pursue higher education.

A second goal of the program is to develop an understanding of the French Canadian culture and provide opportunities for exchanges with native French speakers. It is hoped that this will lead students toward an appreciation and use of the French language as a means of communicating one's ideas, feelings, and opinions. Since Quebec's official language is French, it is essential to develop a high level of proficiency.

To foster growth and development in the use of French, every attempt is made to immerse students in situations characteristic of the environment in which their first language was learned. This is accomplished by exposing the students to a wide range of experiences in all subject areas. Much of a child's learning occurs through using language to internalize new concepts as s/he responds and interacts with peers and others. Therefore, the program emphasizes active participation in listening, speaking, reading and writing activities which are above all else, functional and meaningful to the students.

The French Immersion Curriculum

Although French Immersion generally begins in kindergarten and extends through the sixth grade, it can also start at grade one. The immersion program at Royal Vale is designed for students of non-French speaking families, that is Anglophones, and on the rare occasion, Allophones who possess a certificate of eligibility to attend a school in the English language sector. The curriculum has been developed according to the objectives of the Education Minister for English elementary schools in the province of Quebec. In French Immersion, the language arts objectives are the same as the French mother tongue language arts objectives, the only difference being the level of competence to which the objectives are adapted. Expectations about a student's ability to use French will naturally vary among students and between French mother tongue students and those in the English sector French immersion programs.

Activities

A whole language and cooperative learning approach guides the activities in a learner-centered curriculum. Students are given a considerable amount of responsibility to pursue all phases of the projects, tasks and assignments they undertake. In collaboration with the teacher, students may determine the different facets of a project and decide what tasks should be accomplished toward its completion. Students are encouraged to learn French through all kinds of projects that respond to their own needs, interests and questions. Recent projects include: publishing a book, presenting a play, planning a science fair, conducting the research for a presentation at the fair, circulating the

results of one's investigation, preparing a map for a visit to old Montreal, and making the necessary phone calls to arrange for the trip. A particularly meaningful project involved meeting the author of one of the books the students had read. Several students composed a letter to Quebec author Cecile Gagnon inviting her to visit their class. She accepted their invitation and met with them.

From Kindergarten to grade six, the PSBGM establishes which curriculum subjects are taught in French or in English. The time allocated for these subjects is determined according to general guidelines which schools can adapt to suit their needs.

1. At the Kindergarten level, all activities are in French. It is a global approach.
2. In grades one and two, all subjects are taught in French: reading, writing, French, mathematics, social studies, natural science and fine arts.
3. The grade three program is 60% French, reading and writing, mathematics, social studies, natural science, fine arts and 40% English (language arts).
4. At the fourth through sixth grades, French, reading, writing and social studies account for 40% of the curriculum while English increases to 60% and includes mathematics, natural science, language arts and fine arts.

The percentages given are only indicative of the suggested distribution of the curriculum and not strict prescriptions for it. They can vary slightly according to circumstances such as parental demands and competence in the language.

A typical school day begins at 8:20 am and ends at 3:30 p.m. Lunch is taken between 12:05 and 1:00 p.m. Classes are generally 45 minutes and students remain in the same class for most of the day with the exception of gym or music.

In addition to compulsory French as a second language classes at the high school level, the primary immersion students have the opportunity to register in the post-immersion programs that offer content area courses. Some students however, will choose to enroll in the regular English stream or join the French mother tongue program.

French Immersion Students, Their Native Counterparts and the Teachers

The French Immersion programs are accessible to all English speaking students, that is those having a certificate of eligibility to receive English language instruction. If a student was educated in English in another province or of parents who attended English language schools in Quebec s/he is entitled to continue receiving his/her education in the language of his or her choice. For those non-French or non-English-speaking students newly immigrated to Quebec (Allophones), or of parents not educated in the English language sector of Quebec schools, the law requires that they attend French schools. There they are placed into classes with native French speakers often without attention to their first language needs. An American, Brazilian, or Russian, for example, would fall into this category. ESL in the French language school sector is only offered beginning in the fourth grade. Rooted partly in political ideals, this is done to promote the use of French language and culture over English and to prevent development of native language competence in English. What is particularly interesting is that school boards catering to native French speakers offer very few bilingual programs of any kind. Anglophones are the only language group in Quebec that enjoy bilingual programs in the public schools.

The French immersion teachers working for the PSBGM are from very different backgrounds. They are French Canadian, European, North African, and bilingual English Canadians fluent in French. The more recently hired teachers are from English and French universities in Quebec (McGill University and l'Université de Montréal, for example). They generally possess a bachelors degree in the Teaching of French Mother Tongue and other subjects or French as a Second Language. For the most part they are native French speakers or have developed an equivalent competency. Some have also had training in Immersion teaching elsewhere in Canada.

When and How Students are Evaluated

The Royal Vale immersion program is guided by a learner-centered approach and employs a non-traditional system of assessment. Since

students are encouraged to use French for all academic and social situations including peer conversations and requests for clarification from the teacher, these become opportunities for evaluation. Teachers are urged to pay more attention to the message conveyed in the students' work than its surface level accuracy. This ensures continued student participation and helps keep the motivation high in the use of the language. More traditional concerns for and evaluation of correct language use are introduced in the formal French as a second language classes.

The principal goals of academic evaluation are to assist the student in daily learning and to assess the student's progress at regular intervals by means of formative (ongoing) systems of evaluation. There are no measures used specifically for program placement purposes. Students enter the grade appropriate for their age level and academic background. Stakeholders rely on portfolios, learning profiles, and self-evaluation reports for performance information. Because there is the desire to assure successful learning for the student, teachers try to build on the strengths of the student, to recognize that each student has unique talents, that each student progresses at his or her own rate, and that each student has the ability to imagine, create, decide, plan, produce, communicate and evaluate. The criteria for evaluation then are determined to a large extent by the classroom teacher and the goals of the curriculum and the students own understanding of their needs and strengths.

Students and their teachers invite the parents to school for an interview. The students present samples of their work to the parents, report on their successes, and discuss their strengths and areas of need. In this way parents can take an active role in the learning of their children.

The notion held by educators under the PSBGM is that if students are to become independent learners and take responsibility for their actions, they must learn to assess what they have learned and how they learn best. Students reflection and instances of self-evaluation are vital aspects of the assessment approach used and critical to learning. The teacher's role in evaluation is to observe student's work in order to harness the patterns and progression of the student's abilities. Teacher's focus not only on the cognitive portions of the curriculum but

also on the affective and social domains, the acquisition of those habits, attitudes and values that will enable them to mature into independent, thoughtful and rational adults.

Conventional measures (standardized tests) are less frequently employed at the PSBGM (or across Canada) than in the U.S. to gauge academic progress or compare students of same grade, same age characteristics. Traditional measures are primarily used in the service of research. Tests conducted up to now (by researchers) indicate that the French immersion programs in the Montreal area under the PSBGM have worked well. The results indicate that English (first language) is not affected, on the contrary, the linguistic skills acquired through the learning and the practice of French as a second language consolidate and subsequently clarify the inherent latent tendencies of the mother tongue. There is no doubt that difficulties can and actually do arise, but these difficulties are often no different from and no greater than those arising in the course of ordinary mother tongue schooling. In the long run they are overcome and often fully compensated by the overall gains achieved.

How the French as a Second Language Component fits into the Program

At the kindergarten level, the decision to enroll one's student into a French immersion program is clearly the parents' whereas at later levels the student may have much more influence on the final program choice. Primary immersion takes advantage of the Penfield theory of efficient learning. Any child embarking on a language immersion course needs a healthy atmosphere and good support at home in order to thrive. In language learning particularly, the influence of the surrounding milieu is crucial. Given the French context in which these students live and attend school, the opportunities for them to make use of the language learned is both realistic and meaningful and nurtures that which the teacher undertakes to impart to the students in class.

One of the overarching goals of the immersion teachers is to foster a positive attitude toward French language use and its community of speakers. The teacher's role is to create a meaningful context for continuous growth, to encourage the students, provide them with a wide range of integrated experiences, support the natural process by which students learn, develop language, extend their knowledge, shape meaning and their world through language. The intention is to extend

rather than limit the scope of the language arts by building on the students' existing and tacit knowledge of language and the world.

Much of the students' learning occurs through using language to internalize new concepts and ideas. There is considerable cross subject linkage. What a student learns in language arts is often connected to ideas presented in other disciplines. Teachers design learning situations in which language-cognitive strategies and purposeful and meaningful language interactions are developed and reinforced across the curriculum.

The teacher's exploration and experimentation with instructional and learning strategies is crucial to the success of the primary immersion programs. The PSBGM builds on those experiences to develop guidelines for teaching materials and greater understanding of the learners. The belief at the PSBGM is that teachers working in unison with each other and their students can translate a program into a dynamic and effective program.

The primary French immersion teachers have the responsibility to teach all or only some of the subjects. First of all, the objectives and the projects are discussed and negotiated with their students according to their interest, perceived abilities and needs. Given that from grade three through grade six the students are working principally with both a French and English teacher, there is a great deal of opportunity for teachers to meet, discuss and review students' development.

The materials used in the Royal Vale French immersion program as in all of the other bilingual school programs in Quebec are developed solely for French immersion purposes. They are not borrowed from French mother tongue programs and instead are designed specifically with the needs of the Quebec Anglophone community in mind. Teachers and parents have a say in the creation of these materials.

Program Critique and Recommendations

One of the unique pedagogical features of the Canadian immersion program is that instruction occurs within a unilingual framework. This means that the teacher engages the students as if they were monolingual native French speakers and provides materials with a French Canadian content. Not only does this make French mandatory, but it establishes negative consequences for the unsanctioned use of English in the

designated French only school zones. In some cases, violators are charged a nominal fee by hall monitors and their names are recorded in a log. Given this regulatory thrust, it is common for immersion program students to experience an adjustment period to the teacher and the curriculum. Some don't survive the severity of the program.

While the successes of the French immersion programs in Quebec are well documented in the literature, there are also indications that the students' first language can suffer when compared to Anglophone students not attending immersion programs. Research evidence has emerged to suggest that students enrolled in bilingual programs experience an initial lag behind their native counterparts in reading and language arts (Genessee, 1987). This is attributable in part to the addition of the second language and the rigorous demands of a dual language program. Eventually, most students catch-up and perform at, or above, same-age, same-grade level norms. Students unable to cope with the combined language and academic demands form part of an internal rift existing within the Anglophone community centered on the elitism of immersion programs. Many Anglophone students cannot handle the rigors of the immersion program and are relegated to the more traditional French as a second language programs within English schools. Dismayed parents charge that this has created an inequitable system. Students who are academically unable to persevere in the immersion model may suffer linguistic and economic consequences because they are not acquiring French as intensively. This has led to the charge that only an elite group of students are being properly served and effectively prepared to contribute to the future of Quebec society.

Despite these initial setbacks, the Canadian immersion program appears to be the most effective model for developing high levels of proficiency in non-dominant language school-age children. Immersion programs for Anglophones will continue to grow because of the existing political climate. The rationale offered is that if these students want to thrive in a French dominant society they need to begin their acquisition of the language at an early age and be steeped in a French academic context.

While Anglophone Montrealers live in a non-dominant language community, they are part of the English majority language and culture that comprises North America, setting them apart from the linguistic

minority student populations served through the American dual language programs. In light of this sociolinguistic equation, Anglophone Montrealers have not felt compelled to integrate into the French Canadian community beyond learning the language.

While immersion education has produced high levels of proficiency, simply learning French does little to change the impoverished contact between immersion program graduates and their Francophone counterparts. Bilingual education has not furthered cross-cultural interaction and both language communities have remained on their respective sides of the political/linguistic divide. The potential for greater bilingual and intercultural proficiency lies perhaps in a competing program model that has not been and is not likely to be implemented in Quebec any time soon.

One possible solution may require the unthinkable for a Canadian, looking Southward toward a bilingual program that can stimulate and augment the contact between the two language communities. The two-way bilingual education model, more visible in the American educational system, schools students from two distinct language backgrounds. Herein lies a program model that might prove more culturally, politically, and sociolinguistically beneficial to the Anglophone and Francophone students in Quebec. As of now, and for political reasons, few bilingual education programs serve the French community and certainly none with a bidirectional language learning focus such as the two-way model.

If we focus on the main objective of the French immersion program which is to get students to become "functionally bilingual" by the time they exit high school, then this goal is being achieved with success. While the students in the French immersion programs at the PSBGM are not perfectly bilingual or indistinguishable from their native French counterparts, they have a strong ability to communicate in the second language in the midst of the dominant French culture and language, undeterred by errors.

Conclusions

While the Anglophone students in Montreal live and attend school in a politically charged climate, they unlike their French language

counterparts are deliberately developing as bilingual and biliterate individuals. Since the larger society is predominantly French-speaking, the language learning activity occurring in school is reinforced through ongoing and meaningful experiences outside of school. Students are thus motivated by integrative and instrumental needs to acquire the language. Teachers use this bidirectional orientation to guide their syllabus design, creation of materials and learner-centered treatment of the students.

Bilingual programs in Montreal have gone from the early years of being alternative program choices to well established and necessary educational paths. In light of that necessity, parents and students in concert with the educational community have tailored the immersion programs to prepare Anglophone students to deal with the language and cultural demands of the broader French society.

References

- Genesee, F. (1987). *Learning through two languages: Studies of immersion and bilingual education*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Government of Quebec, Ministry of Education. (1973). The PSBGM: French Immersion programs (1972-1973). Internal document.
- Government of Quebec, Ministry of Education, PSBGM (1979). Les Programmes d'Immersion en Français de bureau des écoles de PSBGM. Internal document. #16-0122.