

Immersion Bilingual Education in Canada and Implications for China's Higher Education

JIANG Yong^{[a],*}

^[a]Graduate School of Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangdong, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Research Funding from Center for Canadian Studies of GDUFS (No.B2013CCS14), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation and Education Research Project for Young Scholars in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (No.GWJYQN11001).

Received 5 August 2013; accepted 18 October 2013

Abstract

As a new model of second language education, Immersion Bilingual Education originates from a type of bilingual education in Canada, especially in the province of Quebec. After many years of teaching practice in Canada, this successful bilingual education mode is proved to be fruitful and has been more widely recognized by the world's bilingual community. Students learn science knowledge with a second language and also gain comprehensive development in the learning process. This paper presents the formation of bilingual education in Canada and the classification of immersion bilingual teaching. It also lists the achievements of bilingual education in Canada. The focus is a comparison of bilingual education in Canada and in China, and it provides suggestions and implications for the further development of bilingual education in colleges and universities in China.

Key words: Immersion bilingual education; Implication; Canada; Higher education; China

JIANG Yong (2013). Immersion Bilingual Education in Canada and Implications for China's Higher Education. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 5(3), 19-25. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020130503.2781> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130503.2781>

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education is a very complex concept, which is described as "a simple label affixed to a complex phenomenon" (Cazden & Snow, 1990). Statistics show that there are over 90 various types of bilingual education in different countries (Mackey, 1978). However, in essence, a variety of bilingual education can be divided into two types: the first type encourages students to promote the utilization of two languages in bilingual education, which is called "maintained bilingual education"; the second type of bilingual education refers to language service for minority children, but the syllabus does not aim to promote the development of bilingualism, which is called transitional bilingual education (Fishman, 1976; Hornberger, 1991). Maintained bilingual education targets at preventing the disappearance of minority languages, enhancing students' awareness of cultural identity and improving their bilingual skills. Transitional bilingual education is designed to gradually introduce the mainstream language to the teaching process for students who speak minority languages, so that students can be integrated into the mainstream society and mainstream culture, the aim of which is language and cultural assimilation.

Colin Baker (1993) points out that bilingual education that truly aims at promoting bilingualism is "strong-form bilingual education", while bilingual education with the intention of assimilation of minority language is called as "weak-form bilingual education". Above mentioned maintained bilingual education is a case of a strong-form bilingual education, and transitional bilingual education belongs to weak-form bilingual education. In the implementation of a strong-form bilingual education in schools, two languages are equally emphasized, the purpose of which is to retain minority language and to create a multicultural atmosphere. For example, the real purpose of French immersion bilingual education in Canada is to develop and prosper French

as a minority language in the country. The weak-form bilingual education tries to promote mainstream language in the classroom, so that students can learn to use both languages as soon as possible. The purpose of teaching is not to reserve minority language for students, but to help students involve in mainstream language and mainstream culture. For example, foreign immigrants in the United States launched their “melting pot policy”, which aimed at assimilation. The purpose of this policy is to turn the schools into the “melting pot”, where students are forged into citizens who are fluent in English, hold American values, regardless of their ancestral culture and language.

Canada is one of the countries that first introduce bilingual teaching and have the best, most effective and complete bilingual education system in the world, and it is also the first country to implement multicultural policy in the world. Though implementation of bilingual education in Canada has its specific social context and historical background, its successful experience, such as bilingual education legislation, comprehensive scientific investigation, and substantial investment in bilingual education from the government, can provide strong reference and research value for other countries. Bilingual education in universities and colleges in China are in the process of rapid development. Therefore, to explore characteristics of Canada's bilingual education system has great significance to the bilingual education reform of higher education institutions in China.

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BASES OF IMMERSION BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CANADA

1.1 Introduction

“Immersion bilingual education” is originated from experimental class for early childhood hold by St. Lambert in 1965 in Montreal, Canada. The class was held on the request of the parents of 26 children who expect their children can master two languages. The purpose of the experimental class is to strengthen the learning and understanding of the French language and culture, not at the expenses of English language and cultural learning, so that children become bilingual and cultural talent in both languages. Immersion bilingual education in Canada is to maintain the impact of the first language (referred to as L1, English) and to strengthen second language (referred to as L2, French) from early childhood. According to the interpretation of the Longman Dictionary of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, immersion bilingual education refers to children, who have mastered a language, enter the school with the instruction of the second language. Canada is the first country that implement immersion bilingual teaching mode, known as “the deepest, most extensive and detailed research project in education

history of Canada”. In immersion education classroom, teachers not only teach a second language as a language, but second language is used in subject content teaching. The second language is not only learning content or tool, so it can nurture expert have proficiency in both the mother tongue and second language. Canada has a lot of successful experience to carry out immersion bilingual education in a variety of forms.

Considering the timing of implementation, the whole bilingual education can be divided into four stages: early immersion bilingual education stage (kindergarten), medium-term immersion bilingual education stage (from 9 or 10-year-old to primary school graduation), late immersion bilingual education stage (from the beginning of secondary school), after the late immersion bilingual education stage (stage). The penetration ratios (utilization rate) of second language (L2) are also different in each stage. Based on the different immersion degree in French education, St. Lambert-style immersion bilingual teaching mode can be divided into three types: one is “completely immersion” from early time. It usually starts from kindergarten or first grade to third grade. In the stage, children are entirely educated in the target language, and education also includes conventional French language courses. English class is introduced in the end of second year or third year, and courses in English gradually increase in quantity thereafter. English courses accounted for 50% to 60% to sixth grade. The second type is “partially immersed education” from early time. It usually refers to the part of the courses instructed in French, and also in English. Students enter bilingual schools in eighth grade. The third type is “late-period immersion”, mainly for those students who have a 40-minute daily French class students in grades six or seven and almost all immersed in French. This course is generally last at least for one year, and then they enter a bilingual school for education. The common feature of these three types of immersion is that the education uses the second language as means of teaching, and the teachers’ mother tongue is generally French. The various types of immersion experiment successfully promoted the development of Canadian immersion teaching model.

Immersion bilingual education has two main features. First, French, as a language of instruction, is widely used in the teaching of history, geography, psychology, physics, music, sports. Students master the knowledge of a particular discipline and also basic knowledge of discipline in French language. Second, students can not only learn French through normal channels, but learn French as a second language by learning the subject content, which is regarded as content-based language instruction. This immersion education is “teaching subject content by French, learning French in the subject content”, which immerse the students in a certain language environment.

1.2 Theoretical Bases for Immersion Education

The basic theoretical principles of immersion education derived from language learning and acquisition theory which is introduced in the 1960s', such as language acquisition theory of Krashen. The theory states that children and adults can only obtain the ability of target language by natural acquisition process, and this natural acquisition ability can make language learning born with receptive skills, and also productive skills. Conscious learning may not contribute to the acquisition of language skills, or even impede the generation of language acquisition. The most fundamental purpose of immersion education is to create conditions for an unconscious language acquisition.

The main principles of immersion education is to use second language as a learning tool for other disciplines, so language acquisition is concomitant in the process of understanding the information and content of disciplines, that is an implicit way in a non-linguistic (non-intentional) form. Therefore, this pedagogy emphasis on that second language learning must pay full attention to the use of implicit cognitive mechanisms, which helping learners to master the target language by a large number of comprehensible input and output contents. This intention develops a variety of second language learning programs that seeks to improve the quality of the individual second language learning. This mode of language teaching is different from the traditional model of core skills language training in the following two aspects: first, the target is no longer a separate discipline, and language is utilized as the tools of teaching in these subjects; second, language capabilities and content of subject are learned simultaneously.

Evaluation results are consistent with the research: by obtaining a second language in immersion education, students have significantly higher level in curriculum learning than those students who learn language in traditional foreign language teaching mode. Children under immersion education have stronger cultural sensitivity, more positive attitude and better understanding of culture, and they are conducive to strengthening exchanges between English and French Canadians, with mutual understanding and respect. In addition, students not only have to establish symbol system for the second language, but also make frequent and rapid conversion between two language symbol systems in the learning process. Students with immersion education have significantly better ability of thinking, understanding and judgment than monolingual children. A large number of experiments show that immersion teaching can achieve the purpose of the traditional teaching, together with students' more interest in the target language. The success of this bilingual teaching mode suggests that language teaching with the subject as the core content is an

effective way for the development of second language proficiency, so it is worth learning from this successful bilingual education mode.

2. CHARACTERS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CANADA

2.1 Legislation Confers Legal Rights for Bilingual Education

Canada's bilingual education began in the late 1960s. In 1969, Canadian federal government enacted Official Languages Law, expressly provides that English and French are both official languages, both of which enjoy the same legal status. Canada is a multicultural country, with significant differences in language and culture of various ethnic groups, but English culture dominates. With the promulgation and implementation of Official Languages Law, English and French are entitled with the same legal status, which contributes greatly to the development of French language. Schools at all levels implement bilingual education as an important task, which improve the teaching quality of French language, to meet the needs of society and nation.

In 1971, Canadian federal government issued *The Policy of Multiculturalism* within the Bilingual Framework. This policy is not only conducive to English and French bilingual education, but also inspired other ethnic groups to inherit and spread their own history and culture. In 1982, the federal government enacted Canadian Rights & Freedom Charter, the provisions of which states if the parents of children suggest the children's education conducted in French and the students' number permits, French classes or schools must be established in the region.

2.2 Sufficient Pre-Experimental Scientific Investigation and Demonstration

Bilingual education in Canada has its specific historical background and social urgency, but the specific implementation of the bilingual education is not a blind or random policy. Before implementation, adequate, rational, comprehensive research is conducted. In the process, tracking assessment and feasibility studies are used as a foundation to adjust and improve inadequacies on continuous bases in the implementation of bilingual education. For example, in the implementation of the immersion bilingual education, Montreal's famous neurologist and psychologist from universities conduct the feasibility research for early bilingual education. In specific implementation process, a series of large-scale research projects and evaluation studies were launched in 1970s, such as "Ontario Research Institute of Education Bilingual Education Program". A special seminar was hosted, which published a positive research report on immersion bilingual education. In 1974, Canada held a national conference on "immersion bilingual education",

the aim of which is to promote immersion bilingual education in the whole nation.

Because implementation of immersion education is based on scientific experimental results, it is an inevitable trend of development in education science. Immersion bilingual education can satisfy the needs of society and individuals, so that the learners have high motivation to learn, which leads to the complete involvement of the language study. In immersion education, language learning proceeds in a certain context. From a cognitive point of view, it is conducive to learn the language knowledge from short-term memory into long-term memory, and thus acquire language.

2.3 Equipped With Excellent Teaching Faculties

Good bilingual education effect goes hand-in-hand with the excellent teachers. Teachers are the participants and implementers of bilingual education. Teachers' attitude towards bilingual education, the quality and ability of teachers determines the effect of the implementation of bilingual education, or even directly related to the success or failure of bilingual education. Canadian federal government attaches great importance to the training of bilingual teachers, and establishes high standard for bilingual teachers. Bilingual teacher candidates must have high level of bilingual culture, with a high education degrees and excellent level of teaching in subjects. They should love bilingual education as "language missionaries", so they can fully engage themselves into bilingual education. They actively involved in the establishment of bilingual system and society. Currently, 80% of Canada's bilingual teachers come from Quebec, New Brunswick, as well as other French-speaking areas in the country, and a small portion of them come from France, Belgium, Switzerland and other countries where French is the official language. Excellent teaching faculties ensure the efficient implementation of Canada's bilingual education.

2.4 Complied With Characters and Principles of Language Teaching

Learning ability of language begins to form in the 2-3 year-old, and this capability will be substantially reduced afterwards. Early childhood is a critical period of language development in life, and also is an important period in the development of language and ability of coordination. Environment language, life language and language activities in early childhood language shape the language skills for children, so the acquisition process is most unconscious, natural and efficient. Canada immersion bilingual education follows this natural law of human language skills. Bilingual education starts in the child stage, and second language (L2) penetration decreased as their age increase. A number of studies show that Canada's immersion bilingual education experiment is a great success and it is a strong impetus to bilingual education in other countries.

Canada has excellent bilingual environment, with a large proportion of French-speaking and English-speaking population in the same country. In the process of immersion bilingual teaching, a good bilingual education environment is created from the layout of classrooms to the text description of posters, making bilingual students immerse in the content plus language education environment. In the teaching process, authentic language materials are commonly used, so that students can contact with non-adapted language and feel the true usage of language.

2.5 Support From the Children's Parents

Immersion bilingual education in Canada has been actively supported by the parents of Children. In 1965, immersion bilingual education experiment of St. Lambert was proposed by the students' parents. The voice of the parents and their direct participation in this activity play an important role in bilingual education that achieve good teaching results and have significant social benefits. Therefore, it laid a solid foundation for the training of qualified bilingual personnel in the country.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Immersion bilingual education in China mainly target at undergraduate students, so bilingual teaching mode cannot directly copy the Canadian mode. There are major differences between college students and young children in terms of cognitive ability, memory ability and thinking ability. College students are adults, with the mechanical memory capacity weakening, but the thinking ability of adults is getting stronger. Primary school students better choose mathematics, physics and science disciplines for bilingual teaching. By perceptual knowledge accumulation and gradually-formed second language reflexion, it is easy for them to acquire the second language. College students have learned foreign language for many years, which result to the lack of breakthrough in language ability improvement. Bilingual teaching for college students should focus on the role of rational thinking, to provide a "thought-provoking language environment". The most important difference between "Canadian immersion bilingual teaching" and "Immersion bilingual teaching in college students" is that, Canadian immersion bilingual teaching enables students to learn the first language in the same way of learning a second language; immersion bilingual teaching for college students should be focused on efficient use the second language to think about the subject study.

Teachers should strive to explore teaching methods that adapt to students' physical and mental development. In the bilingual classroom, teachers should utilize a variety of ways to communicate with students, to encourage students to think independently, and often give

some practical issues to guide them to express their views in English. On the other hand, teachers should develop students' thinking skills in English. It is very necessary to cultivate a "No Chinese" teaching environment, encourage both teachers and students to communicate in English. Teachers are also advocated to develop various forms of multimedia courseware, which are applicable to "bilingual teaching". Using a large number of audio-visual aids helps to save time for classroom blackboard, and also stimulate the students' thinking in many forms. Teachers should actively make the appropriate adjustments for teaching materials. Teachers should organize classroom activities to create of an environment of mutual exchange. Teachers can create a relaxed classroom atmosphere, enabling students to exchange and cooperate through different forms of activities, so as to increase opportunities to learn and master the language structure by listening, speaking, and thinking in English.

How to evaluate students' degree of learning the subject knowledge is another difficult issue for "immersion bilingual education". According to the characteristics of bilingual teaching, assessment of students in courses can use a combination of objective exams and narrative tests. Exams refer to traditional closed-book exams in English. Evaluation also includes comprehensive assessment, such as performance of assignments. It requires students to complete the task in English independently, to certain extent of which, students' English writing skills are trained. Assessments should focus on the actual operational tasks of students, that is, students use of classroom knowledge as bases, together with social surveys, data query, practical method to obtain the information required. Upon completion of homework, students consolidate their knowledge with practice, and also improve their ability of communication, cooperation and access to information. Students' ability of communicate and interact in English are also improved. Open and interactive teaching methods of teachers and main participation role of students are important prerequisite and fundamental guarantee for bilingual education.

Bilingual education mainly begins from college in China, therefore, late immersion bilingual education practice in Canada have a great revelation on China's higher education. China's higher education can learn from Canadian system from the following aspects.

3.1 Lack of Excellent Bilingual Teachers Is the Key Issue for Immersion Bilingual Education

Bilingual education in China is mainly carried out in colleges and universities, and four-year undergraduate students are required to master L2, without affecting the professional knowledge proficiency in L1 in 2 to 3 years, which determines the university bilingual education can only be a speed-up educational program. This crash requirements related courses must be completely taught

and teachers are skilled in use of L2 (monolingual teaching), or use L2 in a large proportion (bilingual teaching), to enable students grasp related knowledge and expertise with L2 quickly. This is a really big challenge for bilingual teachers of colleges and universities in China, which bring the enormous pressure on the teaching staff. Because of the lack of high level of bilingual teachers, bilingual teaching in China is not effective. Normal Universities in China never set up special professional training program for bilingual teachers, and have never established bilingual teaching theory and skills-related courses. Bilingual teachers basically do not receive any specialized and systematic bilingual training. Only an effective solution to this bottleneck can bilingual education in China achieve further development.

Bilingual teachers in China are sourced in three ways: the majority are the course instructors with English proficiency, part of them are teachers who have study abroad experience, a very small fraction is directly hire from abroad as foreign teachers. There are some problems in all three sources of bilingual teachers. English level of course teachers needs to be improved, so regular training at home and abroad need to be provided in order to achieve the desired effect of bilingual teaching. Study abroad returnees have good proficiency in foreign language, but they may be lack of expertise that may not be fully qualified for specialized courses teaching tasks. Costs are much higher to hire foreign teachers from abroad. The solution is to provide strong financial support and funding for bilingual education by national and local governments. Training and teaching seminars at home and abroad in bilingual education are provided on a regular basis, and special funds are established to hire foreign teachers.

Canadian experience can help China shape its own system for bilingual education. Firstly, specialized domestic and international bilingual education seminars can be organized regularly by education authorities at all levels to improve the teaching level for bilingual teachers. Secondly, bilingual teacher training courses can be organized by universities and various types of education institutions. Thirdly, universities should hire foreign teachers that have formal teacher qualifications, proficient expertise with high level of foreign language. Only in this way can students be "immersed" into the L2 environment, making knowledge of the second language quickly improved and form the habit of thinking in the second language.

3.2 Bilingual Teaching Classes Should Have Specialized Target Students

Implementation of bilingual education in Canada is not applicable to all students, but only to some students on the premise of students' free choice. This flexible approach is very worthwhile to China's colleges and universities. The current situation of bilingual teaching in Chinese

Universities is that most courses are applied to all the students. They only divide the students into different groups according to their English scores and only for English language learning classes, not for bilingual teaching of specialized courses and teaching at different levels, which does not meet the actual college students' "individualized" requests for education. Distinctive foreign language proficiency of university students is an unavoidable problem for bilingual education and it brings a considerable number of academic stress and psychological burden to students involved in bilingual teaching. Learning motivation and interest of second language for students are uneven, uniform requirements for all students with the same bilingual teaching bring a great deal of difficulty to the teachers. Therefore, bilingual education can design subject courses with both monolingual education (L1) and bilingual education (L2) as parallel classes, and classes can be carried out synchronically, which offered voluntary choice for students to participate in the monolingual classes or bilingual classes, according to their own ability to receive English and academic level. This is the only way to fully mobilize students' enthusiasm to learn and achieve good teaching results in order to truly cultivate high-level bilingual talent in line with economic globalization and social needs. Teaching practice has proved that individualized stages for bilingual teaching mode are complied with the reality of bilingual education for China's colleges and universities with strong effectiveness. In addition, universities better have intensive foreign language courses for students who select bilingual programs. The intensive course has taken into account both the regular foreign language and professional subjects, which allows students to be able to quickly improve level of L2 in the short term, so the intensive course become the learning bridge of second language and link to expertise.

3.3 Research Support and Legislation Improvement Is Necessary to Ensure the Establishment of Bilingual Teaching System

Canada's bilingual education system is strictly protected by law. Over the past years, Canadian federal government made a great effort on the bilingual policy. Issued in 1969, *Official Languages Law*, which declares that English and French are both official languages of Canada. Both languages have equal status, rights and privileges in all institutions of the Congress and the Government of Canada. At the same time, the bill granted the power to anyone who can use English or French in parliamentary debates and other programs. *The Policy of Multiculturalism within the Bilingual Framework* and *Canadian Rights & Freedom Charter* were enacted in 1971, and 1982 respectively. In addition, Canadian federal government set up special investigation committee of bilingual and bicultural language problems and makes timely feedback in Canada. Government creates lots

of French job positions at all levels in administrative services, which aimed at increasing the employment of French population. At the same time, Government of Canada applies financial resources to promote social services for bilingual policy. Data shows that the Canadian government's budget for bilingual education increased by 110 billion each year, which occupies 7% to 8% of GDP.

Without any national legislation guarantees and financial support, bilingual education in China is lack of planning and continuity. The bilingual policy of the Federal Government of Canada has its own unique features, which Chinese government can not totally copy from. However, many characters are worthy of our attention and many experience that China can learn from. To a certain extent, a good mastery of a foreign language in a country, especially the internationally accepted language, represents a country's comprehensive national strength and competitive potential. English, for example, a useful tool and media to achieve international standards, to learn advanced technology and experience from foreign countries, to improve labor productivity and to change the economic growth mode. In order to ensure continuous bilingual education system in China, Chinese government should pay more attention to bilingual education, introduce relevant laws and regulations to protect bilingual education, organize experts and scholars to conduct feasibility studies, and create professional of bilingual teaching with a legally binding. The government should also determine the basic conditions for bilingual teaching staff, implement qualification system of bilingual teaching staff, establish special funds to support bilingual teaching on a regular basis, in order effectively to change arbitrary and inefficient situation in bilingual education.

In summary, immersion bilingual education in Canada has lots of advantages, but the situation in Canada differs in colleges and universities in China with respect to bilingual education. When colleges and universities in China design bilingual teaching mode, they can not directly copy the Canadian model. Based on the research and analysis, China's higher education should make modification on the Canadian model, combined with the actual situation in China, and create the bilingual education model that make a positive contribution to cultivate senior bilingual talents for China.

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