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French Immersion Studies: From Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) to Social Issues

French immersion in Canada was instituted by parents in Québec who wished their children to learn French in order to have social, political, and economic advantages. Several learning theories and research methods, especially those related to second-language acquisition (SLA), have been used in the field of French immersion. More recently, sociocultural, critical, and sociolinguistic theories are informing the field of French immersion. Suggestions for future research include examining how to apply theory to practice, providing new pedagogical approaches, reexamining the relevance of programs to the current clientele, and rethinking bilingualism and multiculturalism in Canada.

Au Canada, l'immersion française est née au Québec, du désir de parents qui tenaient à ce que leurs enfants apprennent le français pour profiter des bienfaits sociaux, politiques et économiques qui en découlent. Le champ d'études portant sur l'immersion française a puisé dans de nombreuses théories sur l'apprentissage et dans plusieurs méthodes de recherche, notamment celles liées à l'acquisition d'une langue seconde. Plus récemment, des théories critiques socioculturelles et sociolinguistiques sont venues enrichir ce domaine. Nous proposons d'autres thèmes pour la recherche à l'avenir, y compris l'application de la théorie à la pratique, les nouvelles approches pédagogiques, un nouveau regard sur la pertinence des programmes pour la clientèle actuelle et un réexamen du bilinguisme et du multiculturalisme au Canada.

French immersion is a content-based approach to learning French that integrates language-teaching into the rest of the curriculum. In general, English-speaking students are taught subjects such as social studies, language arts, math, and sciences in the target language, French. The immersion approach to teaching a second language was first implemented and studied in the Canadian context; it rapidly became popular in Canada and was later implemented in other countries as well (e.g., Australia, Sweden, and the US state of Louisiana).

Although French immersion is sometimes assessed critically (Hammerly, 1989; Mannavarayan, 2002), it is still popular in Canada, where 296,428 students were enrolled in French immersion schools in 2005. Although numbers are growing in some Canadian provinces, other provinces face more challenges in sustaining the program (Canadian Parents for French [CPF], 2005). CPF is a national network of volunteers, most of whom are parents of children in French immersion; they promote and support French-as-a-second-language learning opportunities for young Canadians. Since 2000, CPF has provided

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annual reports titled *The State of French-Second-Language Education in Canada*. Regarding the issue of enrollment and retention, the 2005 report states,

Factors that affect enrollment decline or growth vary from province to province and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Some of the factors that have been identified are transportation availability, school jurisdictions' commitment to second-language programs, and political influences. (p. 25)

Enrollment in French immersion also depends on the parents' involvement, as well as on the parents' understanding of the programs and the value of bilingualism (and multilingualism) for their children. Most parents who continue to send their children to French immersion programs do so because French is one of the official languages in Canada and because it provides their children with future opportunities: cognitive, social, and economical.

The focus of this article is to examine the future of French immersion in a world of increasing mobility: a world in which knowing others who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is of primary importance. In the first part of the article I focus on French immersion in its historical and political contexts, so that the reader may understand where French immersion started and why. I then briefly explain what French immersion is and should be. In the next part I briefly present learning theories and teaching methods that influence the French immersion field. Then I explain how sociocultural, critical, and sociolinguistic theories are now enlightening the current research in the field of French immersion. To conclude, I offer some directions for future research in French immersion in Canada in the light of these new domains.

A Sociopolitical View of Official Languages in Canada

In the 1960s, many of the people of Québec (*les Québécois*) decided that only French should be spoken in the province. Before 1960, most business, workplace, and government matters were conducted in English. French was used only in social and familial relations. Leaders in Québec wished to modify the situation, and they succeeded in making significant changes in schools and in the workplace. Using French as the only language permitted Québec to combat English domination and Anglicization. During the *Révolution tranquille* (quiet revolution, 1960-1966), significant reforms were implemented in the social, economic, and education sectors in Québec. Heller (2003), who conducted sociolinguistic and empirical studies in workplaces, schools, and community organization in French Canada, wrote,

beginning in the 1960s, [Québec's French-speaking elite] laid the groundwork for the development of Francophone institutions, notably in education, which formed a new basis for social and cultural reproduction as well as a labor market for francophones. It also provided for some upward mobility, at least for some members of the population, for increasing integration into national and international networks and institutions. Indeed, this process can be seen as sowing seeds of the commodification of French, as middle-class Francophones and Anglophones began to compete for access to the resources of French-English bilingualism. (p. 476)

The 1969 *Official Languages Act* made English and French the official languages of Canada, and the federal government quickly institutionalized bilingualism with the 1970 *Official Languages in Education Program*, which provided finan-

cial support for second-language educational programs such as immersion programs (Canadian Heritage, 2003). The 1974 *Loi sur la langue officielle* (Official Language Law) made French the only official language in the province of Québec, resulting in a shift in who would access resources in what languages in Québec.

A movement of the population in Québec and elsewhere began during the *Revolution tranquille* and afterward. Francophone Québécois were finally given opportunities to access higher positions in various sectors of the Québec economy. At the same time, some of the Anglophone population moved out of the province to Toronto or other English-speaking areas. Others who stayed had to adapt to the new political, economic, and social face of a Francophone Québec (Rebuffot & Lyster, 1996). Anglophone parents in Québec had to adapt to the new reality. Other political and economic factors that were present at that time also contributed to the inception of French immersion.

Historical Overview of French Immersion in Canada

Amid these political and economical changes in Québec in the mid-1960s, a group of English-speaking parents in St. Lambert, Québec—a predominantly English-speaking suburb of Montreal—took the initiative in creating a program in which children enrolled in kindergarten would learn French. These parents were disillusioned with traditional methods of language-teaching such as drills and repetitions and were eager for their children to have a bilingual advantage in Québec. They felt that the traditional pedagogical approach of teaching French as a second language for 30 minutes a day was ineffective, as even after years of schooling children were not able to speak French (Rebuffot & Lyster, 1996). These parents became aware of alternatives that they could offer their children. In consultation with scholars in bilingualism at McGill University, these parents proposed to the school board that their children receive French instruction from the first day of kindergarten and have English integrated later. French immersion spread rapidly throughout Québec, and by 1969, as a result of favorable views toward bilingualism and the social, political, and economical value of knowing French, people in other parts of Canada became interested in French-language education as well (Johnson & Swain, 1997). According to Johnson and Swain,

Much of this growing awareness was stimulated by actions taken by Canada's federal government, which, for example, appointed a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, passed the Official Languages Act, appointed a Commissioner of Official Languages, and provided funds for the evaluation of immersion programs and the dissemination of information about their outcomes. (p. 2)

In the 1985-1986 school year, 180,345 students were enrolled in French immersion programs; there were 295,350 in 1992 and 296,428 in 2005 (CPF, 2005; Rebuffot & Lyster, 1996). The Canadian immersion model spread around the world, and more studies were conducted in various parts of the world on immersion programs (de Courcy, 2002; Marsh, 2000).

For Baker (2001), one of the reasons for the rapid growth of French immersion in Canada was the fact that it aims at additive bilingualism in two prestigious majority languages, French and English. *Additive bilingualism* occurs

when both languages are well developed and sustained in the learner. According to Baker, French immersion provides additive bilingualism because it permits first-language speakers of English to learn French while learning school subjects. The popularity of French immersion was also largely aided by the positive findings in Lambert and Tucker's (1972) report, which stressed that the children suffered no negative consequences in their first language (L1) or their cognitive development.

Of course, there were also some less optimistic findings, for example, that early French immersion provides better results than late and middle French immersion because of the time spent in the target language (Harley, 1989; Wesche, 1996). Comprehension and receptive skills of French immersion students tend to exceed oral production and written skills (Genesee, 1987; Lambert & Tucker, 1972). Research by Bibeau (1991), and Lyster (1987) indicated also that students in immersion understood the language in school, but struggled when they were outside the classroom setting. Several researchers (Genesee; Lambert & Tucker) reported that immersion students did not acquire oral and written production abilities equal to those of francophones, especially in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Harley (1984) concluded that French immersion students had serious limitations in grammar—especially in terms of subject-verb agreement, gender, and verb formation—as well as in the sociolinguistic aspects (e.g., politeness). Current research continues to demonstrate that immersion students' sociolinguistic competence is lacking in that they rarely or never use vernacular and informal variants and overuse formal or hyperformal forms (Mougeon, Rehner, & Nadasdi, 2005).

It is time to look closely again at French immersion, especially at the fact that French immersion students cannot be compared to francophone speakers, as the former are not native speakers of French. In Alberta these children are living in an English-speaking environment and are far from francophone settings in which to practice the language.

What is French Immersion? Then and Now

Varying kinds of immersion programs exist in Canada and elsewhere, such as total immersion in which 100% of the subjects are taught in French, and partial immersion in which 50% of the subjects are taught in French. The various types of French immersion programs include (a) continuing or early immersion (*immersion précoce*) starting in kindergarten or grade 1; (b) middle immersion (*immersion moyenne*) after grade 1 and up to grade 6; and (c) late immersion (*immersion tardive*), which starts in grade 7 when the students are 12 years old. There are other ways to learn French in Canada such as core French or FSL (French as a second language), which is usually about 30 minutes per day, and intensive French whereby students receive three or four times the number of hours regularly scheduled for FSL in a five-month period at the end of elementary level (Netten & Germain, 2004). Johnson and Swain's (1997) book summarizes a set of eight core features shared by most of the immersion programs in Canada and the rest of the world:

1. The L2 is a medium of instruction.
2. The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum.
3. Overt support exists for the L1.

4. The program aims for additive bilingualism.
5. Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom.
6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency.
7. The teachers are bilingual.
8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community. (pp. 6-7)

Recently Swain and Lapkin (2005) noted that as a result of the rapid growth of highly diverse populations in large Canadian urban centers, more students with a first language other than English are entering French immersion programs. Swain and Lapkin suggest that the core features of immersion education stated by Johnson and Swain (1997) be revised in the light of a student population that has become linguistically and ethnically more diverse. For example, the first criterion (“The L2 is a medium of instruction”) is not accurate in the case of new immigrants for whom French is their third language. Swain and Lapkin suggest that we change the wording to “The immersion language is the medium of instruction.” Regarding the third criterion (“Overt support exists for the L1”), they argue that because of the influx of immigrants in immersion, schools should continue to provide support for L1s other than English. The final criterion (“The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community”) is also changing, because teachers need to recognize the cultures of multiple immigrant communities to which the students belong, especially in urban areas. These features demonstrate how French immersion in Canada needs to be revised and studied from new perspectives.

Overview of Learning Theories and Research Methods

At the beginning of the 1960s the behaviorist language learning theory (Skinner, 1957) stipulated that teachers should have tight control of the input and use an audiolingual method focused on structural drills and the acquisition of a set of speech habits. The idea of learning a language from patterns and habits was criticized by Chomsky (1972), who suggested that human beings have an built-in cognitive readiness for language. According to Chomsky, input activates the internal language acquisition device, and learners should receive input that suits the stage of development of their second language (L2). In the 1970s language was regarded more as a means for communication (Hymes, 1972). The communicative approach was emphasized as a teaching method whereby “effective language does not mean grammatical accuracy nor articulate fluency, but the competence to communicate meaning effectively” (Baker, 2001, p. 119). Krashen (1985) emphasized that language acquisition is the result of comprehensible language input and not of language production; if students receive the appropriate language input, language structures will be acquired naturally. Krashen maintained that teachers should deliver the language at an understandable level for the L2 speaker and slightly beyond the students’ current competence. Teachers should also provide real-life communication situations. It is with these theories and methodologies in mind that French immersion as a content-based approach came about.

French immersion has been well documented by researchers, especially during the late 1970s and the 1980s. At first these studies focused on (a) the effects of immersion on learning French as a second language; (b) the effects on English, the L1; (c) the effects of learning a second language on other school subjects; and (d) the cognitive and social influence of learning a second lan-

guage on immersion students, including special needs students (Rebuffot, 1993). As mentioned above, the field of SLA was influenced by the natural approach, which is based on the belief that linguistic forms emerge in L2 in much the same order as they do in L1 (Krashen, 1984). Krashen maintained that French immersion is the best way to learn French, because the only way to learn a language naturally is through comprehensible input (understanding messages in the target language). For years teaching practices in French immersion consisted mainly in using the target language as naturally as possible when teaching school subjects.

The interdependence hypothesis, which also became an important theory for French immersion and bilingual education (Cummins & Swain, 1986), has been revisited and confirmed by recent researchers (Bournot-Trites & Reeder, 2001). According to the interdependence hypothesis, if students have rich experiences in the first and target languages in school or in the social environment, their skills in both languages will benefit. Studies of French immersion have also contributed to the field of SLA and pedagogy in the areas of output hypothesis (Swain, 2005), focus on form (Day & Shapson, 1991, 1996; Harley, 1989) and corrective feedback (Lyster, 1998). These researches continue today to inform the field of second-language teaching and learning.

Current Theoretical Views and Empirical Research on French immersion

According to Lantolf (1994), "In recent years, learning as a social process is increasingly emphasized, and sociocultural theories are beginning to be drawn on in addition to (or even in preference to) cognitive theories" (as cited in Nunan, 2004). Block (2003) also provided some insights into the social aspects of the SLA field. In this section I examine the recent research and theories that use sociocultural, critical, and sociolinguistics approaches to understanding the field of French immersion in Canada.

Sociocultural Studies

Lantolf (1994) illustrated the application of the varied facets of Vygotskian thinking in SLA. A range of empirical sociocultural studies derives from this perspective, including studies on French immersion (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). From this point of view, language is seen as a tool for thought. It is through language that learners can direct their attention to significant features in the environment, rehearse information to be learned, formulate a plan, or articulate steps to be taken in solving a problem. Speaking and writing are then cognitive tools that mediate learning. When the L2 or L3 proficiency of students is low, they turn to their L1 to talk about complex concepts. Swain et al. have shown that collaborative dialogue in L1 or L2, or a combination of the two, mediates L2 learning. The most active strands of sociocultural research involve the study of peer interaction in the language classroom. For example, Swain and Lapkin (1998) studied pairs of immersion students undertaking a jigsaw task in an L2 classroom. They found that this cognitive activity led to microgenesis (local contextualized learning) for both vocabulary and grammar when students co-constructed their story, corrected each other's L2 production, and used the L1 to regulate their behavior. Pellerin (2005) looked at the role of dialogic interaction between two students in front of a computer. She had varied pairs of students working at the computers and concluded that re-

searchers and teachers should give greater attention to the role of dialogical (talk) interaction in the negotiation-of-meaning process in the target language.

Critical Approaches

Researchers are using a critical approach in the field of second languages not only to study language-learning and teaching, but also to investigate the construction of learners' identities. Learners' identities are constructed in both micro (classroom) and macro (societal) contexts. The critical approach looks at the relationship between learners, language, and the social, economic, cultural, political, and physical contexts in which language is learned. Critical researchers aim to uncover concealed and taken-for-granted assumptions in order to expose the multiple relationships of unequal power in which language learners and teachers participate. Being critical also means asking questions about cultural and social categories (race, sex, ethnicity) and how they are related to language learning and teaching (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Cummins (2000) proposed a framework based on current research in French immersion. He maintained that students in immersion do not have opportunities to interact with native Francophone students and have few opportunities to use French in the classroom. These problems could be related to pedagogical approaches, as many classrooms tend to be highly teacher-centered. Teachers transmit the curriculum, and students have minimal opportunities to use oral or written French for creative or problem-solving activities. Cummins proposed that teachers focus on (a) message (making input comprehensible, developing critical literacy); (b) language (awareness of language forms and uses, critical analysis of language forms and uses); and (c) use, that is, using language to generate new knowledge and to create literature and art.

For Cummins (2000), the focus on message should be more than the interpretation of comprehensible input; it must extend to critical literacy, in which

students relate textual and instructional meanings to their own experience and prior knowledge (i.e., activate their cognitive schemata), critically analyze the information in the text (e.g., evaluate the validity of various arguments or propositions), and use the results of their discussions and analyses in some concrete, intrinsically-motivating activity or project (e.g., making a video or writing a poem or essay on a particular topic). (A Framework for Pedagogy section)

Critical literacy is understood as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). Thus Cummins' (2000) focus on language should develop language awareness, which not only stresses formal aspects of the language, but also deepens students' knowledge of language and multilingual phenomena such as cultural and linguistic differences, sociolinguistics, and language convention. The focus on use means allowing students to have authentic audiences that motivate oral and written communication.

Critical Sociolinguistics

The sociolinguistics field, which is the study of language in use, is itself a diverse field with multiple theoretical perspectives. The main research focused on variability in language use in varied fields of study immersion (Rehner,

Mougeon, & Nadasdi, 2003), L2 socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), communities of practice and situated L2 learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and L2 learning and the (re)construction of identity (Norton, 2000).

Dalley and Roy (2008) argue that researchers, teachers, and students would benefit from critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic research; such research would also help them understand the reasons for and the main consequences of teaching and learning a second language. Critical sociolinguistics examines linguistic practices in the local context in relation to a more global analysis of social practices situated historically and socially. It is by looking at linguistic practices and also at discourses that we better understand social practices (Heller, 2002). Discourse analysis of local practices helps researchers identify more global issues in society. Thus it has become more important to study power elements and macro elements of identity negotiation than achievement of language tasks.

In an ongoing ethnographic study (Roy, 2006-2007), I examine social factors such as sex, language practices, language use, socioeconomics, ethnicity, and pedagogical issues from a critical sociolinguistics point of view in order to see who succeeds and who does not succeed in French immersion, and why. The clientele is changing; students have more diverse characteristics such as special needs and learning disabilities. Also, in Alberta as in other provinces, more students come from diverse backgrounds. These new contexts bring challenges to teachers and administrators. Some do not know how to deal with this new reality, and others continue to work as before. For example, the students' diverse backgrounds are often invisible to the teachers and students. Few teachers see the diversity in their classroom unless most of the school population is from a specific ethnic or racial group. One teacher told me (2006), "For me, they are all the same. When I help them, I look at the person." Another teacher said, "Kids adapt easily to the Canadian context, we don't have anything really to do." In my opinion, some teachers are not aware of learners' identities, which are socially constructed in temporal and spatial contexts, whether the students are Canadian or not. Teachers who treat all students the same do not really understand issues related to identity and language-learning (Norton, 2000), and consequently their pedagogical approaches do not take into account the multiple backgrounds or special needs of their students.

Furthermore, in my observations of teachers over the years, I have seen how teaching practices vary from one teacher to another. Most teachers use their own knowledge or understanding of what it is to learn content in French immersion. Some teachers still use a traditional approach to teaching grammar; others will not talk about the language at all (no focus on form). Few try to apply new theories in practice. My observations support Cummins' recommendations for new pedagogical practices in French immersion that take into account the diverse aspects of students' learning abilities and backgrounds. I also support more focus on form in the classrooms (counterbalanced approach by Lyster, 2007). Junior high schools are teacher-oriented, and teachers should be more aware of new teaching practices in which learning occurs with co-construction of the language through problem-based or collaborative activities.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

In the past 30 years, French immersion in Canada has undergone many changes. The context of teaching and learning a second language is different. Not only are there increasing numbers of ESL students in French immersion, but the students entering the school system have diverse backgrounds and needs and have varied reasons for learning French as a second language (Dagenais & Day, 1998). The teachers are also different. Their language competence has changed. More French immersion teachers speak French as a second language, and they may have come through the immersion system themselves. Furthermore, the theoretical field is changing. The sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and critical theories are bringing additional information about how and why students are learning French and with what consequences. Here I offer some suggestions for researchers in the light of my ethnographic research and sociocultural and critical theories.

1. *Examine how theories can be linked to practice.* It will be worthwhile to examine how teachers should better understand cognitive (SLA), sociocultural (constructing knowledge), and sociolinguistic (language and power) theories when teaching in French immersion.
2. *Provide new pedagogical approaches related to French immersion.* Researchers can contribute by studying how a more student-centered approach (a dialogic and collaborative way) and a counterbalanced approach (Lyster, 2007) could help students to increase their language learning.
3. *Rethink bilingualism and multilingualism in Canada.* Much research has focused on evaluating the competences of French immersion students against those of francophones. How can we evaluate French immersion students on the basis of who they are and what they can bring to our Canadian society as bilinguals and multilinguals?

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