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Jim Cummins

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Rossell and Baker: Their Case for the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education

Jim Cummins, University of Toronto

In 1996, Christine Rossell and Keith Baker published a review of research studies which they claimed addressed the effectiveness of bilingual education. (Rossell & Baker, 1996). Their findings looked impressive and are frequently cited by opponents of bilingual education. For example, they claimed that in ten studies comparing transitional bilingual education (TBE) with Structured Immersion in reading performance, no difference was found in 17% and Structured Immersion was superior in 83%. However, when we look at these research studies more closely, it turns out that 90% actually demonstrate the effectiveness of bilingual and even trilingual education.

Seven of the ten studies which Rossell and Baker claim support structured immersion over TBE were studies of French immersion programs in Canada. Typically, in these programs English-speaking students are "immersed" in French (their second language [L2]) in kindergarten and grade 1 and English (L1) language arts are introduced in grade 2. The proportion of English instruction increases to about 50% by grade 5. The closest equivalent to the program in the United States is dual language immersion which has repeatedly demonstrated its effectiveness for both majority and minority language students (e.g. Christian et al., 1997; Dolson & Lindholm, 1995). Note that, as in the U.S. dual language programs, Canadian French immersion programs are bilingual programs, taught by bilingual teachers, and their goal is the development of bilingualism and biliteracy.

In evaluations of these programs, immersion students' performance in French and English was usually compared to that of native French-speaking students (in French) and native-English-speaking students (in English) who were attending monolingual French or English programs. In some cases, comparisons were made with students in less intensive forms of "partial immersion." These programs involved 50% instruction in each language. Rossell and Baker label these programs as "transitional bilingual education" despite the fact that they involve no transition from one language to another and are intended for majority language students rather than minority language students.

In addition to these seven French immersion program evaluations, one of the ten studies (Malherbe, 1946) was an extremely large-scale study of Afrikaans-English bilingual education in South Africa involving 19,000 students. The other two were carried out in the United States (Gersten, 1985; Pena-Hughes & Solis, 1980).

The Pena-Hughes and Solis program (labelled "structured immersion" by Rossell and Baker) involved an hour of Spanish language arts per day and was viewed as a form of bilingual education by the director of the program (Willig, 1981/82). I would see the genuine promotion of L1 literacy in this program as indicating a much more adequate model of bilingual education than the quick-exit transitional bilingual program to which it was being compared. Gersten's study involved an extremely small number of Asian-origin students (12 immersion students in the first cohort and nine bilingual program students, and 16 and seven in the second cohort) and hardly constitutes an adequate sample upon which to base national policy.

Malherbe's study concluded that students instructed bilingually did at least as well in each language as students instructed monolingually despite much less time through each language. He argues strongly for the benefits of bilingual education.

So we come to the seven Canadian French immersion programs. It seems incongruous that Rossell and Baker use the success of such bilingual programs to argue for monolingual immersion programs taught largely by monolingual teachers with the goal of developing monolingualism. This is particularly the case since two of the seven programs they cite as evidence for monolingual structured immersion were actually trilingual programs involving instruction in French, English, and Hebrew! The logic here is that we should implement monolingual programs on the basis of research demonstrating the effectiveness of trilingual programs.

More bizarre, however, is the fact that their account of the outcomes of French immersion programs is erroneous in the extreme. Consider the following quotation:

"Both the middle class and working class English-speaking students who were immersed in French in kindergarten and grade one were almost the equal of native French-speaking students until the curriculum became bilingual in grade two, at which point their French ability declined and continued to decline as English was increased." (p. 22)

Rossell and Baker seem oblivious to the fact that at the end of grade one French immersion students are still at very early stages in their acquisition of French. Despite good progress in learning French (particularly receptive skills) during the initial two years of the program, they are still far from native-like in virtually all aspects of proficiency -- speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Most grade 1 and 2 French immersion students are still incapable of carrying on even an elementary conversation in French without major errors and insertions of English.

Similarly, it is ludicrous to claim, as Baker and Rossell do, that the French proficiency of grade 6 immersion students is more poorly developed than that of grade 1 students, and to attribute this to the fact that L1 instruction has been incorporated in the program. Significantly, Rossell and Baker cite no specific study to back up these claims.

The validity of the claims can be assessed from Swain and Lapkin's (1982) overview of the French immersion research conducted in Ontario which reported that students at the grade 1 and 2 level "were scoring as well as about one-third of native French-speaking students in Montreal, and by grade 6 as well as one-half of the Montreal comparison group." (pp. 41-42). These data refer to performance on a standardized achievement measure; Swain and Lapkin point out that there are major differences at all grade levels in the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Lambert and Tucker (1972) similarly report highly significant differences between grade 1 immersion and native French-speaking students on a variety of vocabulary, grammatical and expressive skills in French, despite the fact that no differences were found in some of the sub- skills of reading such as word discrimination. By the end of grade four, however, (after 3 years of English [L1] language arts instruction), the immersion students had caught up with the French controls in vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension, although major differences still remained in speaking ability.

To claim that two years of immersion in French in kindergarten and grade 1 results in almost native-like proficiency in French in a context where there is virtually no French exposure in the environment or in school outside the classroom flies in the face of a massive amount of research data. This can be verified by anyone who cares to step into any of the thousands of grade 1 French immersion classrooms across Canada.

In short, the French immersion data are the opposite of what Rossell and Baker claim. There are very significant differences between the immersion students and native French-speaking controls at the end of grade 1 (after two years of monolingual total immersion) but the immersion students catch up in French listening and reading in the later grades of elementary school after the program becomes bilingual (and obviously after they have had several more years of learning French!).

Rossell and Baker's discussion of the French immersion data is presumably meant to imply that two years of "structured immersion" in English should be sufficient for limited English proficient students to come close to grade norms in English. The fact that the one large-scale "methodologically acceptable" study that investigated this issue (Ramirez, 1992) found that

early-grade students in "structured immersion" were very far from grade norms in English even after four years of immersion does not seem to disturb them. Recently released large-scale data from the Los Angeles Unified School District also show grade 5 Latino students who had spent their elementary school years in monolingual structured immersion performing well below similar students who participated consistently in bilingual programs in Reading, Language, and Math (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1998).

The significance of these points is that the empirical basis of Rossell and Baker's entire argument rests, according to their own admission, on the performance in French of English-background students in the first two years of Canadian French immersion programs. Not only are a large majority of the programs they cite as evidence for "structured immersion" Canadian French immersion programs, but Rossell (1996) (in response to critiques from Kathy Escamilla and Susan Dicker) suggests that:

"In the first two years, the program is one of total immersion, and evaluations conducted at that point are considered to be evaluations of 'structured immersion.' It is really not important that, in later years, the program becomes bilingual if the evaluation is being conducted while it is still and always has been a structured immersion program" (1996, p. 383)

Rossell and Baker's argument thus rests on their claim that students in monolingual "structured immersion" programs (Canadian French immersion programs in kindergarten and grade 1) come close to grade norms while the program is monolingual in L2 but lose ground in comparison to native speakers when the program becomes bilingual in later grades. As we have seen, the data show exactly the opposite: there are major gaps between immersion students and native French speakers after the initial two years of monolingual L2 instruction but students catch up with native speakers in receptive skills after instruction in their L1 (English) is introduced and the program has become fully bilingual. Based on their own premises and interpretation of the data, it is clear that Rossell and Baker should be arguing for bilingual instruction rather than against it. This is particularly the case in view of the fact that among their list of "methodologically acceptable" studies are several that demonstrate the superiority of programs that provide strong sustained L1 literacy instruction in addition to literacy instruction in English (El Paso Unified School District, 1987, 1992; Legaretta, 1979; Pena-Hughes & Solis, 1980). Here is what Keith Baker said about the El Paso program evaluation (in a strong critique of Rosalie Pedalino Porter's book *Forked Tongue*):

"She summarizes a report from El Paso (1987) as finding that an all-English immersion program was superior to bilingual education programs. The El Paso report has no such finding. What Porter describes as an all-English immersion program in El Paso is, in fact, a Spanish-English dual immersion program. The El Paso study supports the claims of bilingual education advocates that most bilingual education programs do not use enough of the native language. It does not support Porter's claims that they should use less." (1992, p. 6).

In summary, drawing on "methodologically acceptable" research studies carried out in Canada, the United States, and South Africa, Rossell and Baker demonstrate that bilingual (and trilingual) programs succeed extremely well in developing strong literacy skills in both languages. They show a 90% effectiveness rate for programs that aim to develop strong bilingual and biliteracy skills in comparison to monolingual programs or

bilingual programs that aim to eradicate students' first language.

Note:

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