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INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH IMMERSION IN CHINA: A TRANSPLANT WITH MODIFICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of replicating the French immersion model used in Canada to English immersion programs in China. It provides the Chinese context of this program highlighting the importance of English education and the defect of traditional English teaching and learning. The paper explains the borrowable features of the French immersion model which account for the attraction to the Chinese reformers. With a focused discussion on the differences between the traditional and immersion English teaching approaches, the paper argues that, to sustain an effective transplanted English immersion program, necessary modifications must be made to respond to the social and educational contextual restrictions in the “borrower” country.

CONTEXT

Several important factors have contributed to the adoption and use of an English immersion program in China. Beginning in the late 1970s, China has worked towards its goals of modernization and of strengthening ties to the international community. In 1992, Chairman Deng Xiaoping delivered his well-known “South Tour Speeches” that outlined China’s economic reform. The English language became an important vehicle for international exchange and cooperation and for China to join the global technology revolution. This became especially obvious after China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO). English was widely valued as an indispensable communication tool to bridge China and its people to

the outside world. The English competency of the nation's citizenry was recognized as a prime condition for the country to secure a foothold in the global marketplace, a prerequisite for China's plan of modernization and economic growth. The ability to understand and speak English was also recognized as giving citizens an advantage in employment opportunities and career advancement. The specific circumstances that have led to an increasing demand for English in China are the opening of China to foreign trade in the early 1990s and the increases in tourism as a result of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Strengthening English language education thus became not only an integral part of the education reform but also part of the national strategic plan for economic development. With the importance of English in international communication, the existing English language education in China came under critical scrutiny in the 1980s. During 1985-1986, the State Education Commission conducted an investigation of English education in middle schools with the conclusion that the English education system had serious defects (Liu, 1987; Qun, 1990). English lessons stressed grammar drills, rote memory and written work, rather than practice in conversational English that would be useful in a daily context.

In the 1990s there was a growing interest in reform of English language teaching. In 1992, the State Education Commission adopted a new English syllabus, which made English a core subject in middle schools (Knell, Siegel, Qiang, Zhao, & Pei, 2007). However, no fundamental changes took place in the classroom, and oral communication was not a priority (Knell et al., 2007). Poor communicative skills, argued by many, may be a fair reflection of the fundamental flaws of traditional teaching methods that had been dominating English education in Chinese schools for so long (Li, 1996). In the new economic order, improving students' English communicative skills was seen as a critical challenge facing the education professionals.

This urgency was made clear by Li Lanqing, then Vice Premier in charge of education, "[The failure of] foreign language education is directly impacting on the nation's open economic policies ... Researchers must be urged to test out the most scientific and efficient ways to popularize English, to create and improve ELT (English Language Teaching) methods that are most suitable for the Chinese education system" (Li, 1996). In the mid 1990s, the national Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a series of documents to encourage and support reform ideas in ELT. With the slogans of "Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" and "Apply theory to practice," the MOE emphasized an outcome-based reform approach, and encouraged free exploration of effective practices in English education (Qiang & Zhao, 2001, p.7). During this time, more primary schools began to offer English courses, with the number of pupils increasing at the speed of one million per year since 1994 (Liu & Gong, 2001). Reform proposals were also solicited for improving English instruction and learning in the school settings.

At the turn of this century, the central Ministry of Education initiated "School

Curriculum Reform.” Among a series of education policies pertinent to the reform, one policy of 2001, titled “English Curriculum Standards for the Public School System” mandated that all elementary schools nationwide must offer English as a “core” subject beginning in the third grade (Han & Liu, 2008).

THE FRENCH IMMERSION MODEL OF CANADA

In the midst of this search for reform in the teaching of English, a workshop conducted in Xi’an in 1996 introduced the Canadian French immersion program. The audience of university researchers and school based professionals saw its potential as responsive to the nation’s economic and political agenda of China’s modernization. The idea was perceived as fresh and innovative, a “right idea at the right time.”

The French immersion system was developed in Canada in the 1950s. Canada has two official languages, English and French, but most areas of Canada are either predominantly French speaking or predominantly English speaking. More than 40 years ago, English speaking parents and teachers in Montreal decided that the students were not really learning to speak French as a result of the traditional model of teaching so they pioneered an educational reform, called French Immersion, in which English-speaking children were educated in French from the beginning of their school careers. The results of this educational reform have been quite successful, and children who participate in French Immersion programs learn to speak, read and write French. They acquire fluency and are quite comfortable speaking French, though they do not typically have the fluency of native speakers. (Siegel, 2011)

Ideas from French immersion stimulated the Chinese scholars to pursue the possibilities of transferring this model to China (Qiang & Kang, 2011). First, the French immersion program had been a well-known innovation of second language education, and the teaching pedagogies had made an enormous impact on research and practice in the field of foreign language/ bilingual education. Second, the effectiveness was evident. Evaluation studies had shown that immersion students performed much better than non-immersion peers in a second language, in the native language and in academic achievement (Qiang & Zhao, 2001). The theoretical principles of French immersion were also very attractive to Chinese scholars. Children would learn English language in a manner similar to their mother-tongue acquisition. They could also acquire the second language easily and naturally in a meaningful context through integration of language learning with subject knowledge (Qiang & Zhao, 2001).

With the successful Canadian French immersion program as a model, the Xi’an- based team decided to pilot the model with the Chinese belief that “the stone from another mountain can be used to polish one’s own jade.” They introduced the Canadian-French immersion model in Xi’an schools in 1997, and thus began the journey of experimenting with the North American immersion model

in Chinese schools.

IMPLEMENTATION IN CHINA THROUGH CCUEI

The English immersion project in China was organized by the China-Canada-United States English Immersion Collaborative Program (CCUEI). This title represents the scholarly collaboration among research teams from three countries. The Chinese team includes faculty members from more than ten Chinese universities. The teams from Canada and United States have played key roles in offering technical support to the program and working together with Chinese team members to design training plans, organize workshops, observe classroom instruction and provide mentoring support to the teachers. The three-country international team also collaborates in developing textbooks, organizing annual conferences, editing research papers and promoting international exchanges for the immersion program.

Another level of communication and collaboration is between the university team and the local educational bureau administrators and school principals. The success of CCUEI depends on the administrative management and school administrators' comprehensive understanding and implementation of the program. They re-arrange course schedules to guarantee the immersion curriculum and teaching hours, select potential immersion teachers and organize school-based training, and communicate with parents about the program. In the process, they create an environment where language teachers and subject teachers can cooperate with each other (Gao, 2009). Senior administrative leaders play a significant leadership role in the process of implementation. For example, the then Vice-Director of Shaanxi Provincial Education Commission served as one of the team leaders for the program, and the Vice-Director in charge of basic education in Shaanxi Provincial Education Department offered a strong support for the program.

A third level of collaboration is between the researchers and teacher practitioners. The original staff of English immersion teachers took an active part in the professional workshops organized by researchers to improve their oral English, subject knowledge, and principles of immersion. Teachers learned how to design and organize activities in English without using any Chinese. They were observed and encouraged to shift their teaching philosophy and instructional behaviors to adopt the immersion teaching principles and strategies (Gao, 2009). Many of the teachers participating in regular training and in-class practices, supported by the university-based research team, have become skilled professionals in the English immersion system.

TRADITIONAL VS. IMMERSION TEACHING

As a result of the significant differences between traditional English instruction and immersion instruction, the implementation of immersion teaching in

China has led to a language teaching revolution. In traditional English teaching, Chinese as the mother-language is a necessary tool to facilitate English teaching and learning. As a result of this concept, English teachers use a great deal of Chinese during instruction. The English Immersion program is quite a departure from this traditional approach because it is not a bilingual education in which the languages are mixed in the classroom. Immersion teachers are required to use only English to communicate with their students in the classroom and do not use Chinese in instruction. English and Chinese are kept separate and are not taught by the same teacher. By immersing students in a monolingual English environment, immersion teachers help reduce the mother-tongue interference, offer more opportunities in English language acquisition, and force students to form habits of thinking and speaking in English. Thus, immersion teachers structure an environment for the learners, enabling them to communicate with each other in English.

In the traditional English-teaching classrooms, teachers usually introduce some new words and one or more sentence patterns and require students to recite and remember them immediately. If students cannot perform accordingly, the teaching is considered to be a failure. On the contrary, in an English immersion classroom, children are allowed to have a “silent period.” They are not expected to have new language output until they have had a high frequency of language input provided for them through a variety of engaging activities pertinent to the language elements in question.

With the recognition that listening skills are vital both for comprehension and for introducing new materials, the focus of immersion teaching begins with listening skill development, moves on to speaking, and then incorporates reading, and later writing. Immersion teaching in kindergarten and the early grades focuses primarily on improving children’s listening comprehension and some speaking, chanting, and singing of the target language. Adhering to the principle of “listening first,” the curriculum for the primary grades uses a wide variety of multimedia-supported resources that provide visual and auditory cues and activities for enhancing children’s English listening sensitivities. Instructional activities described in the curriculum begin with those that are most often based on listening and move on to speaking with a high level of interaction and engagement in the use of the English language during activities. Curriculum for the primary grades gradually introduces reading activities designed to enhance children’s listening and speaking skill development and their competencies in critical thinking in the target language. The writing-related activities become more common when students reach the intermediate levels of grades three or four.

English teaching in China was historically dominated by a teacher-centered approach with the teacher using intensive drill as a delivery method and encouraging mechanical drills. On the other hand, English immersion teachers encourage interactive conversation rather than rote repetition of words and sentences. As Huang, Trube, and Yu (2011) have noted—in the immersion program, English language learning is designed to be meaningful in terms of the daily lives of the

children, attempts to teach “real life” English; the type of language that children would use in everyday life is emphasized.

In the immersion method of teaching, instructors encourage conversation and work in small groups. The activity-oriented English immersion instruction has been developed based on modern social cognitive theories (Vygotsky, 1986) and the applications in the second-language learning environment, as described, for example, in “task-based” pedagogy theories (Ellis, 2003). Accordingly, significant learning occurs through frequent and systematic interactions between learners and focused learning tasks, mostly listening and speaking tasks. The immersion teacher can contribute to this learning most significantly by providing needed scaffolding appropriate to the student’s language ability and by keeping the task focused on the knowledge elements in question. In the curriculum, the tasks are described by various labels: whole group, individual, pair, or small group; and as various activity types: dictation, simulation, demonstration, and role-play.

In the traditional English language classroom, English is the target language to be taught and children are aware of the language learning process, which is never connected with subject contents. In English immersion, English is the instructional language. Students use English to express new concepts and facts of the subject taught, such as art, music, science, and social studies. Immersion teaching aims at learning outcomes in two areas—foreign language acquisition and subject content learning. This dual learning principle distinguishes immersion from other foreign language learning approaches. In the immersion system, learning the target language is achieved by using the target language as the sole instructional medium for learning the subject content. The immersion teachers are trained to be aware of the dual purpose of immersion lessons and are required to adopt suitable strategies to reflect this integrated purpose.

In traditional English classroom teaching, teachers customarily pay attention only to language teaching in areas such as grammar, word memory, and sentence pattern drills. The English immersion approach focuses on overall development in English language cognition, subject area knowledge, and socio-cultural competencies. The teaching seeks to engage students through strategies that address physical, cognitive, aesthetic, and socio-cultural skills that are age-appropriate. Students participate in a range of communication modes that provide multiple means of expression including the kinesthetic and aesthetic. Engagement is designed to incorporate moral education principles, which enhance students’ capacities for empathy, respect, and tolerance for multiple perspectives, involving retaining respect for the Chinese culture and the diverse cultures of English-speaking societies. Engagement serves to motivate curiosity, creativity, perseverance and responsibility in order that they become confident, self-directed, self-disciplined, and goal-oriented learners (Huang & Trube, 2006). Teachers encourage students to engage actively in learning activities that traditional teaching seldom offers. Students have opportunities to express what they know and what they do, collaborate with partners on projects, and negotiate in a small group for the roles in

a group performance.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CCUEI PROGRAM

In 1997, the English immersion experiment was conducted in eight kindergartens (Zhao, Pei, Liu, & Siegel, 2006), in which each kindergarten organized a special experimental class with 30 five-year old children selected from the existing classes. The partial immersion model was used at all eight sites; the children were immersed in an English environment fifty-percent of each school day. The teachers, who were selected based on their English competency, received intensive training prior to the school year to learn how to use the integrated approach, which incorporates language acquisition with subject learning. The very early phase of the program enjoyed success. Although no formal evaluation was conducted for the first year, the program received many positive anecdotal comments from the parents and teachers. Observations made by teachers and researchers suggested that the children obviously enjoyed the activity-centered and integrated teaching strategies. Most children appeared to have little problem following directions in English, and, in comparison with children in regular classes, appeared more comfortable speaking in English with a noticeably larger vocabulary in their communication with teachers and peers.

Inspired by the success of the first year, the program was extended to five elementary schools in Xi'an in 1998. The selection of schools in the second year was designed to ensure fair representation of all elementary schools in the area. Of the five schools chosen for the program, two schools enrolled students predominantly from the families of factory workers; two other schools enrolled students whose parents typically worked in universities or for the provincial or local governments; in the fifth school, students represented a mix of all socio-economic classes. First-graders were selected (with parental permission) at random to form one or two experimental classes in each school to implement the immersion program. The partial immersion model was used so that students were involved in an all-English learning environment for about half of their school day during "elective" classes. Integrated teaching materials were used during the immersion hours to cover the content in the subjects of science, moral education and social studies, physical education, music, and visual arts. Students in the immersion experiment stayed together as a cohort throughout their six-year elementary education.

Responding to parents' appeals to continue their children's immersion education to a higher level, the Education Bureau of Shaanxi Province officially approved continuation of the English immersion program in three "key" junior secondary schools in Xi'an in 2004, where school-based courses, such as science and life, social studies, were taught in English.

The successful experience of the Xi'an immersion program gradually spread to some major metropolitan schools in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Macau, etc., from four-year-old children to seventeen-year-old senior high school stu-

dents, with more than fifty kindergartens, elementary, and secondary schools being involved in the program. A fourteen-year endeavor, the English immersion program in China has grown from kindergarten to secondary education levels, from the city of Xi'an to many municipal school districts in different provinces and regions. The program has become well known and is being recognized as an influential reform experiment in the large educational community of the country.

PROGRAM IMPACT

The English immersion program has made an impact on many fronts in the experimental schools. At the school-based management level, the arrangements and procedures for enrollment have shifted to double-track systems: a program in English and a program in Chinese. The management of teaching personnel of the two tracks is different as far as teaching load, teacher training, and teaching evaluation and rewards. Principals and vice-principals have been assigned specific responsibilities to lead and manage the immersion program in their schools.

School life has changed in many immersion schools. For instance, in a typical immersion school, immersion teachers and non-immersion English teachers interact with each other through discussion and classroom observation. The communication enables the non-immersion teachers to learn and use some immersion activities in their own English instruction, thus expanding the immersion influence. In addition, English immersion permeated the school culture with creation of an English language environment. Changes on the immersion school campuses include the addition of the English corner, bilingual exhibits of local culture, an English party for Children's Day, and immersion summer camp. English songs and bilingual morning exercises are daily occurrences, and students make online pen pals with their counterparts in foreign elementary schools.

To measure the effectiveness of the CCUEI program, a number of studies have been conducted (Fang, 2001; Chi & Zhao, 2004; Huang & Trube, 2006; Yan & Zhao, 2007; Zhao, et al., 2007; Knell, et al., 2007; Cheng, 2010). The major findings assert that immersion students perform significantly better in the areas of language awareness, cognitive competence, English pragmatics, and academic performance.

The first formal research was conducted three years after the program began in a kindergarten. The evaluation included tests on naming pictures, on word lists, and on English phonological awareness, word recognition, and pragmatics (use of English words in scenario as presented in pictures). The results revealed positive growth in the experimental group in all measures when compared to the control group. The immersion children responded more quickly to English language cues, answered with a higher level of correct responses, and demonstrated a better understanding of English vocabulary (Fang, 2001; Zhang & Yan, 2007).

When the program reached its sixth year, a similar study was conducted at the elementary school level. Chi and Zhao (2004) reported data collected from

a partial immersion elementary group and a control group. As a whole, the immersion class performed significantly better in English phonological awareness, listening, speaking, and vocabulary development. In a separate study (Huang & Trube, 2006) immersion teachers reported that in general, immersion students show more active learning behaviors in the classroom. Furthermore, students in the immersion class ranked higher in the end-of-year test results in the other subjects of Chinese and mathematics than students in the non-immersion class.

Siegel, et al, (2009) and Knell, et al, (2007) also reported a study in an immersion elementary school in the Xi'an area. One hundred and eighty-three students of early grades (1-3) participated, with about half of the number being from the immersion classes. The students were tested for their proficiency levels in English and Chinese measures. They found that the immersion children performed significantly better in measures of English oral proficiency, vocabulary and literacy than their non-immersion peers; furthermore, their participation in the immersion program did not have a detrimental effect on their acquisition of Chinese character identification skills. The immersion children were better able to understand and speak English.

Cheng et al. (2010) studied the possible advantages of the immersion students over non-immersion students in the second language (English) acquisition, and the possible negative impact of the program on students' learning in Chinese and mathematics. Of the nearly one thousand students who participated in the study, 68 percent were immersion students in grades two, four, and six. Data analysis of the test scores showed that English immersion students scored higher in English achievement than non-immersion students at each grade, and more noticeably so after grade four. Similarly, the immersion students performed at a higher level than non-immersion students in the Chinese and mathematics tests in all three grade groups. Cheng et al. (2010) concluded that the immersion methodology could be seen as effectively facilitating student language proficiency, literacy, and numeracy without detrimental effects on their first language learning and mathematics.

ADOPTING THE CANADIAN FRENCH IMMERSION SYSTEM IN CHINA

Transplanting the Canadian French immersion to China's schools has been a deliberate research-based endeavor. The CCUEI collaborative members examined the essential characteristics of foreign language immersion, as summarized by Johnson and Swain (1997) based on their case studies of immersion education in a wide variety of countries around the world. The team agreed to adopt these characteristics in designing and developing the program with an awareness that such a borrowing must take into consideration the educational policies and practices in the borrower's culture. In the course of borrowing the French immersion model, necessary changes had to be made to adapt the program to the Chinese

school context (Qiang & Kang, 2011).

The idea of “educational borrowing” has led to the study of “foreign influences” in different contexts and countries and the ways in which educational policies and practices are resisted, modified and indigenized. A recent study (Qiang & Kang, 2011) examines the way the French language immersion program in Canada was adapted to China, using the Four Stages framework developed by David Phillips and Ochs: cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, internalization and indigenization. The four stages are chronological and constitute the fundamental process of educational transfer. The study, by a narrative step-by-step method, systematically explores the process of transplanting French immersion from Canada to China.

English immersion programs occurred through contextual factors, which was the focus of the first stage, a cross-national attraction. The impulses (“some kind of stimulus or catalyst that sparks interest elsewhere” [Phillips, 2004, p.54]) originated from political imperatives, the need of economic growth, the demand of information technology and internal dissatisfaction with English language education. Therefore, a successful language teaching mode in foreign countries was sought to solve the problem. The transplantation has clear aims.

The second stage, the “decision” of adapting the English immersion program, was found to interact with the third one, the “implementation” stage (Qiang & Kang, 2011). The structural impulses and obstacles, the reform actors and resistance actors influenced the decision made “before” the implementation stage, thus driving the decision-making to occur. The key question at the implementation stage was: “How and to what degree would the French immersion model be adapted to suit the new context?” Therefore, the process of implementation was also the process where new decisions were made.

In the English immersion program, one of the decisions made in the implementation stage concerned immersion teaching hours. The early partial immersion in Canada required pupils to immerse in the target language for fifteen teaching hours per week, which accounted for 50% of the total. It was found, however, during implementation, that the time allotment was not suitable to the Chinese context. Then new choices had to be made to reduce the teaching hours. In 2001, the teaching hours were reduced to at least eight hours per week, or no less than 25%, even though some private immersion schools were able to reach 40% of the total teaching hours. This adaptation has mainly occurred in elementary schools.

Several environmental restrictions account for the modification of immersion teaching hours. First, Chinese students’ learning of English is mostly confined to the school. They have little chance to practice the newly-learned language and few opportunities for authentic use of it beyond their classrooms. Given the history of drill and grammar-focused foreign language teaching, English immersion teaching and learning is clearly a greater challenge for Chinese students and teachers. Second, almost all English immersion teachers are Chinese natives. They have had little chance to study abroad in English-speaking countries, and

their English education consisted of traditional methods of teaching. Although they possess college level credentials of English education, teachers reported that fluency and flexibility in using English to manage the immersion instruction was particularly challenging (Huang & Trube, 2006). Furthermore, the English immersion teachers often lack the subject knowledge expected to teach. The gap between their knowledge in the subject matter and English language is common. Huang et al. have noted that the integration of language instruction and content learning is a critical feature of the immersion program. In addition, the number of English teachers in the immersion schools is not sufficient to teach more subjects in English. The third restriction is the large class size. There are typically between fifty and sixty children in a classroom in China, limiting the type of activities that can be used. Large class sizes not only make interactions and small group learning difficult (Huang et al., 2011) but also make classroom management very challenging. Therefore, the immersion teachers are burdened with a heavy pressure in organizing and managing teaching.

Stringent examinations challenge the use of English immersion. For centuries, standardized examinations in China have had a critical influence on the behavior of schools and teachers. The prevailing examination system in China seriously curbs teachers' enthusiasm for immersion, since their students' test scores are high stakes for both students' future and teachers' own career advancement. The examinations focus on written English and grammar without authentic use of English, the communicative skills promoted by immersion. The concern with the test scores explains school principals' reluctance to increase immersion teaching hours, especially at junior secondary schools where students are required to pass provincial standardized tests for graduation and entrance to senior secondary schools.

The fourth transplanting stage of English immersion program in China is the stage to ensure the survival and sustainability of the transferred French immersion program. Given the contextual restrictions as mentioned above, the CCUEI program cannot simply mirror the French immersion in Canada. The efforts to imitate and copy the foreign model without modification would no doubt fail in the implementation stage. An educational transplantation would only succeed with thorough internalization of the borrowed model and proper adaptations in the new context. The CCUEI program has to address the unique Chinese contextual restrictions. As a transplanted French program in China, it has to adjust itself to the cultural, social and educational reality of China with modifications for its survival and growth.

With a strong emphasis of immersion pedagogy in the experimental classrooms, the CCUEI program has shown effective outcomes and unique values. One such value is equal access to the program for students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, which is a promising indicator of wide application of the immersion approach in China's school system. Another value is the integrative curriculum textbooks developed in accordance with the national curriculum

standard. The curriculum features the Chinese culture as part of its learning content, including stories of cultural festivals, historical figures and folk literature. Another unique aspect of the CCUEI is reflected in the support it has received from all those concerned: parents, teachers, principals, provincial education officers, national level research projects, as well as international scholars from three countries.

For the past fourteen years, English language teaching in China has been undergoing a great transformation. We are certain that the immersion experiment, as initiated by CCUEI, has made a noticeable contribution to this reform movement.

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