IMMERSION SCHOOLS: WALLACE LAMBERT'S LEGACY

A well-known and respected journalist and author with close to 40 years of journalistic experience, **Graham Fraser** was educated at the University of Toronto, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in History. Prior to his appointment as Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Fraser worked as a national affairs writer with *The Toronto Star.* Over the years, he has held positions of increasing responsibility with various newspapers and periodicals, including Montreal Bureau Chief with *Maclean's*; Quebec City Bureau Chief with the *Montreal Gazette* and then *The Globe and Mail*; and Parliamentary Correspondent, Ottawa Bureau Chief and later Washington Bureau Chief with *The Globe and Mail*. He was a weekly columnist for *Le Devoir* from 1995 to 2000 and for *The Toronto Star* from 2000 to 2005 and was a regular commentator on the TFO public affairs program *Panorama*.

During a long and distinguished career that has straddled the language divide, Mr. Fraser has reported in both official languages on issues affecting Canada and Canadians, including cultural and foreign policy; constitutional debates and negotiations; and provincial, national and international politics. He has been invited to speak on official languages issues to the minority-language organizations of Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario, as well as minority-language organizations working at the national level, and has given lectures on language policy as an adjunct professor at Carleton University as well as at other universities.

Mr. Fraser has written five books, including *Fighting Back: Urban Renewal in Trefann Court* (1972), *Playing for Keeps: The Making of a Prime Minister* (1988) and *Vous m'intéressez: chroniques* (2001). His latest book, *Sorry, I Don't Speak French*, was published in March 2006 and helped stimulate renewed public discussion of language policy in Canada. Mr. Fraser is also the author of *PQ: René Lévesque and the Parti Québecois in Power*, which dealt with Quebec language policy and which was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award for non-fiction in 1984. In 1979, he helped found the Centre for Investigative Journalism, the bilingual precursor of the Canadian Association of Journalists, and served on the Centre's board for two terms. He was the first recipient of the Public Policy Forum's Hyman Solomon Award for Excellence in Public Policy Journalism. In recognition of his achievements, he was awarded honourary doctorates by the Université Sainte-Anne (Political Science) and the University of Ottawa (Doctorate of the University) in 2008.

ABSTRACT

In the early 1960s, a dozen parents in the South Shore Montreal suburb of St. Lambert sought out academic specialists in cognition and language learning at McGill, psychologist Wallace Lambert and neurologist Wilder Penfield. The result was an experiment that began at Margaret Pendlebury Elementary School in St. Lambert in 1965. The highly successful experiment led to the widespread introduction of French Immersion in Canada, and around the world, but its success was based on a number of key elements: parental support, the political environment, and the fact that French was easily accessible as a public language outside the school. Despite the success of the program, myths have persisted to the effect that immersion makes it harder for students to learn English. New myths have emerged, suggesting wrongly that immersion is inappropriate for immigrants to Canada, and that immersion programs are exclusively for elite students, and that immersion is the only way to master French as a second language. Second language learning has also become a priority in Quebec, with the introduction of a semester of intensive English for Grade 6 students in French-language schools. This has proven to be controversial for some, but has strong majority support from parents, who think their children have a much better chance at succeeding in life if they are bilingual.

Ginette Munson looks back on her time at Margaret Pendlebury Elementary School with warmth and pride. It began in 1967, when she joined an experimental program that had begun in 1965, teaching Grade 4 to the very first class of French immersion students.

Originally from New Brunswick, Ms. Munson was living in Saint-Lambert, a suburb on the south shore of Montreal. Her husband, Jim Munson, was then a radio reporter, and her father-in-law was a minister in Saint-Lambert.

She was the first Canadian teacher hired to teach at the Saint-Lambert experiment; for the first two years, the teachers had been European. Even though she came late to the experiment, she knew right away that the project was succeeding.

"I had a great feeling of working for a successful project," she told me, recalling the parents' enthusiasm, the teachers' pride and the researchers' commitment. "The collaboration with McGill was extraordinary."

All of this was happening in a very particular context.

"It was a remarkable period in Montreal: Expo 67 was just across the river from Saint-Lambert, and optimism was in the air. The economy was good and parents had a sense of innovation – those were very positive conditions."[1]

Forty-five years later, one of her former pupils, Doug Mitchell, is a prominent lawyer in Montreal who practises in both languages.

He spent two and a half years in the experimental program, and then his parents moved.

"It's a testament to the program that when we moved to Chambly, I was able to attend a French school and make a go of it without missing much of a beat," he told me. Two and a half years in immersion and two years in French school were the sum of his education in French, but despite the fact that the rest of his schooling was in English, he found that his knowledge of French always returned.

"Whatever they did, they did right," he said.[2]

As further proof of the impact of the experiment, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, James Moore, is a product of immersion in British Columbia.

Minister Moore's family is an example of what it takes to keep an immersion system in operation. His mother fought to bring immersion to the British Columbia town where she was teaching. His sister is a French immersion teacher. And just over a year ago, I met his father, who proudly told me that he had participated in the exercise of staying up all night, with different members of the family taking shifts, so that his granddaughter could be enrolled in a French Immersion program.

I had conflicting emotions when I heard that story. On the one hand, the level of commitment – that a family would organize itself in shifts around the clock, waiting in line outside the school board office – was inspiring. On the other hand, the fact that this is still necessary, four decades after Wallace Lambert's wildly successful experiment, is cause for concern.

But let's go back to the beginning of the Saint-Lambert experiment.

As Fred Genesee has reminded us, the development of an immersion program occurred not because of some elitist theory that was tested on unsuspecting children. It happened because parents wanted it to happen. They knew that the traditional way of learning French had not worked for them, and they wanted something better for their children.

Twelve parents from the South Shore suburb began to meet, and formed the St. Lambert Bilingual School Study Group. They sought out Wallace Lambert, already an eminent psychologist and researcher at McGill University, and renowned neurologist Dr. Wilder Penfield of the Montreal Neurological Institute.

"The parents felt their children were being short-changed and should have the opportunity to become 'bilingual' within the school system, since it was so difficult to achieve this skill outside of school," recalled one of the parents, almost a decade later.[3]

As Dr. Genesee put it, "These parents felt that their lack of competence in French contributed to, and indeed was attributable in part to, the two solitudes which effectively prevented them from learning French informally from their French-speaking neighbours. Their inability to communicate in French, they felt, was also attributable to inadequate methods of second-language instruction in the English schools." [4]

Let's think back to what the mood was in Quebec in 1965. The Quiet Revolution was well underway. The FLQ had set off bombs three years earlier. Pierre Bourgault was attracting large crowds to meetings of the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale. The English community was feeling uneasy and confused; the unwritten rules that had been in place for over a century – which meant that, to succeed in life, Anglophones did not have to learn French but Francophones had to learn English – were breaking down. Members of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism had been shouted down at heated meetings in Quebec City and Sherbrooke in 1964, and had produced a preliminary report in 1965 saying that Canada was passing through the greatest crisis in its history.

For a dozen parents in a South Shore suburb to seek out academic experts like Wallace Lambert and Wilder Penfield to figure out a way to make sure that their children would learn to speak French better than they could was an act of citizenship of the highest order. In its own way, it was a statement of their commitment to living in Quebec as a minority. It was their echo of what Frank Scott expressed at a public meeting of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Sherbrooke in 1964 when he was told that the English community should pack up and leave, the sooner the better: "J'y suis, j'y reste."[5] These parents were

not going anywhere – this was their home and they were determined to make it a better place for their children.

It is well known how successful the experiment was and how widely it has been adopted elsewhere. But there are some key elements in the Saint-Lambert experiment that need to be highlighted. To begin with, it was a project driven by parents, rather than by academics, teachers or administrators.

Parental support has been critical to the success of immersion. In fact, without parental support – indeed, insistence – immersion programs would gradually erode. It is said that necessity is the mother of invention, and in this case, parents showed great inventivenessand perseverance. Parents have lobbied for immersion, sat up all night for it, recruited teachers for it and demonstrated for it. School boards and governments have resented it and resisted it. It took massive demonstrations by parents in New Brunswick to force the New Brunswick government to back down from its plan to undermine immersion.

Another aspect that must be remembered is that the students in Saint-Lambert were part of a minority, embarking on an experiment to learn the language of the majority. But while French was the language of Quebec, Doug Mitchell remembers that it was not the language of Saint-Lambert. "I don't remember ever, ever, ever speaking French in Saint-Lambert or hearing French," he told me. "The Mayor was our neighbour, and I don't think he spoke any French. Quebec hadn't changed by then. Quebec only began to change after the Parti Québécois was elected [in 1976], which makes the success [of the immersion experiment] even more dramatic."

Now, of course, it is much easier for students in French immersion schools in Quebec: hiring teachers whose mother tongue is French is easy; practising French by stopping in a store on the way home from school is natural; subscribing to a French daily newspaper is not a problem.

For immersion is much more than academic courses; it goes beyond school walls. It is a holistic experience, and the degree of immersion of the learner has an impact on its success; in other words, a student's success depends on his or her experience as a whole, in terms of both academic curriculum and cultural exposure. The parents of the students in Saint-Lambert knew that life in Quebec was lived in French, and they wanted their children to be able to understand that life and participate in it.

I say this because those conditions are not easily accessible in the rest of Canada. In the rest of Canada, it is difficult for students to hear French spoken outside the classroom. It is difficult to find teachers whose mother tongue is French. To many Canadians, French is *still* an obscure concept, and its value in their daily lives and activities has yet to be demonstrated – out of sight, out of mind. Efforts to justify the relevance of and explain the motivation behind any initiative to introduce second-language French programs to unilingual Anglophone parents who are not touched – in any way, shape or form – by French Canadian realities result in a debate that unfolds again and again.

For a moment, I will now speak as a parent rather than as Commissioner. All of my older son's elementary education took place in French schools in Quebec City, and when we moved to Ottawa, he entered Grade 7 in an immersion program. After having spent six years in French schools, he was appalled at the quality of French spoken by his immersion classmates.

I could understand this: most of the French his classmates had heard was being spoken by their English-speaking friends. But I can't help noticing how many of those former classmates are now, two decades later, living in Montreal or Paris, or rising in the federal public service in bilingual-imperative positions.

It has now been 46 years since Wallace Lambert's experiment and, unfortunately, there are still myths regarding immersion that must be dispelled. It is clear – as demonstrated by study after study by the people at this conference – that immersion students do not lose their English. My own experience, and my personal observation as a parent and grandparent of immersion students, is that learning a second language makes you more attuned to the nuances in your own language.

New myths have emerged that also need to be challenged. Newcomers to this country should be encouraged to send their children to immersion, rather than discouraged from doing so. Dissuasion often comes from misinformed educators who perpetuate the myth that French immersion is too hard for allophones and will lead to linguistic confusion. Many allophone parents who enquired about French immersion programs were advised by teachers and principals to reconsider and choose the core English program.[6] The main reason given was to prevent the potential mixing up of languages. But allophone parents who have registered their children in immersion programs – despite educators' concerns – have said that not only do their children not mix up the languages, they end up being more proficient in their own language, and now speak two or even three languages without confusing them. Most parents who chose immersion for their children are satisfied with their decision and with the programs offered.

I recently met a law student from Toronto who told me that she is now studying in English for the first time. Her parents had come from Bosnia 20 years ago and, even though they spoke little English, placed her in French immersion. She proudly told me that she had gone all through elementary and high school in immersion, had majored in Spanish at Glendon College – York University's bilingual college – had taken some common law courses in French at the University of Ottawa, and is now at the University of Toronto's law

school. She speaks Serbo-Croat, English, French and Spanish and is learning the language of the law.

Another myth that needs to be dispelled is the belief that immersion programs are exclusively for the elite, the straight-A students or native English speakers. Children who have any kind of learning disorder are often excluded from immersion programs for fear of compounding the problem. Learning disabilities are not more easily overcome if a child is removed from an immersion program. For example, children with executive functioning disorder have difficulty expressing what they know, communicating details in an organized fashion, and telling a story in the right sequence. This has nothing to do with language in and of itself; yet, when a child is diagnosed with this disorder, the immediate response of the school is to remove him or her from immersion, as if second-language learning were the cause of the difficulties. The result has been that children with any kind of problem have been systematically weeded out of the immersion stream and placed in the English stream. Then the school or the school board or the Ministry of Education – or even the local newspaper – complains that immersion is elitist.

As Dr. Genesee points out in his review of research evidence,[7] students having trouble in immersion should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis – if a child is unhappy in immersion and experiencing difficulties in learning, then the potential success of that learning path may be uncertain. However, if a child is happy in immersion and making progress according to his or her own abilities, despite difficulty, immersion should not be blamed for learning difficulties that would have been there regardless of the immersion program. The well-being of the child should come first, and parents all agree – every child is different, learning in his or her own way, and at his or her own pace. Immersion or not, children who are happy and challenged make much better learners than those who are overwhelmed and unhappy.

Ensuring that immersion students have contact with French-language culture remains a significant challenge. I have been told that immersion teachers sometimes lack confidence in their own mastery of the language and are reluctant to reach out to French-language minority schools to propose joint activities. As well, some French-language minority schools are worried that any contact with immersion classes will result in everyone speaking English.

Immersion's success has also generated some unintended consequences.

In the eyes of some parents, teachers, and schools, immersion has undermined the value of core French. It has attracted many of the best teachers and it has created another myth: that it is impossible to learn French without being in an immersion program. This is simply not the case.

There is good news, however. The best immersion system in the country, outside Quebec, is in Edmonton. This is not just happenstance.

After seeing a decline in immersion enrolment about 10 years ago, the Edmonton Public School Board conducted an analysis of what was needed to provide quality second-language education. It identified 14 criteria, including support from parents, the principal and the school board; financial investment in the program; and competent, enthusiastic teachers who were given professional development support. The Board then took measures to ensure those criteria were met. The effect on teachers, the quality of the teaching, and the retention of students was almost immediate. It is a model for the country.

Today's English-speaking communities in Quebec find themselves in a position where uncertainty and insecurity are less present in their social fabric. Through the creation of French immersion programs, and through their support of and commitment to them, Quebec's English-speaking communities have shown not only their willingness but their determination to be an important and integral part of Quebec society, ready to participate in the language of the majority, while retaining pride in their own language, heritage and institutions.

Quebec has the highest proportion of bilingual people in Canada: in the 2006 census, more than one third of Francophones (36%) and two thirds of Anglophones (69%) in the province reported that they speak English and French. Among English-speaking Quebecers aged 18 to 34, this percentage reached nearly 80%. In the past 40 years, no other Canadian community has increased its ability to speak a second official language as much as Quebec's English-speaking communities.[8] Without a doubt, this is partially the result of Wallace Lambert's legacy.

As a consequence, young English-speaking Quebecers have become bilingual and biliterate. They want and are able to stay in Quebec and contribute to the development of Quebec society, while preserving their cultural heritage and identity.

But second-language learning should not be exclusive to English-speaking Canadians wanting to learn French. Just as Anglophones outside of Quebec often lack a French socio-cultural context to support their school immersion programs, Francophones in Quebec wanting to learn English as a second language lack the same level of classroom opportunity. English is taught as a normal part of the formal program, recently from Grade 1. Some schools offer English intensive programs. It has been argued that Quebec's geographical situation – bordered by English-speaking provinces and the United States, with exposure to predominantly English culture, television and music – gives French-speaking Canadians a degree of Anglophone contact equivalent to "English immersion." As more and more Francophones become bilingual without threatening their "full mastery of French," and more Anglophones become bilingual without denying their identity and cultural

heritage, we approach the ideal model of well-integrated linguistic duality in Canada.

Francophones value bilingualism and are well aware of its importance to be able to function successfully in this day and age. According to a recent *La Presse*-Angus Reid study, 84% of Quebecers believe it is important to master English. Quebec Premier Jean Charest has announced that his government will focus on improving French-speaking Quebecers' skills in Canada's other official language by proposing a semester of intensive English for Grade 6 students in French-language schools. Mr. Charest dismissed the myth before his detractors could even mention it, by stating that "full mastery of French does not preclude knowledge of a second or a third language."[9]

The proposed change is set to be phased in over five years, and would enlist the help of the province's English school system. This announcement from the Quebec government was welcomed by the majority, and I see this as a symbolic gesture of openness to second-language learning. Of course, it cannot be said that there is consensus on this sensitive issue. On one side, there are a few people, like researcher Christian Dufour, who think that this government measure is a threat to Quebecers' identity and "excessive and dangerous."[10] On the other side is sociologist and historian Gérard Bouchard, who claims that turning our backs on English would be "criminal."[11] The word is provocative, of course, but he certainly managed to get attention.

What Mr. Bouchard is saying is that Quebec is facing two unavoidable responsibilities: to promote French language AND encourage learning English as a second language. One does not preclude the other. In my view, his message is one of balance. But who is left in the middle? The parents – a large majority of them, according to polls – who think that their children have a much better chance at succeeding in life if they are bilingual.[12] Of course, success can be determined by many factors. Being able to earn a decent living is certainly one of them. According to a 2005 Université de Montréal study based on 2001 statistics, bilingual Francophones make up to 50% more money than their unilingual neighbours, depending on age and education.[13]

Having a better understanding of and openness to the world around us also plays a major role in what can be defined as success in life. No wonder Quebec parents want their children to be bilingual – it provides better opportunities, better understanding, and better quality of life, without challenging their linguistic identity. Canadians of both linguistic backgrounds are well aware that knowledge of the other official language is a tool, not a threat. Knowledge should never be seen as a threat. *Scientia potentia est*. Knowledge is power. This Latin maxim definitely applies to the knowledge of languages. Saint-Lambert parents knew that; James Moore's family knows that; immigrant allophone parents know that; and Canadians across the country know that. Wallace Lambert's legacy is certainly one of thirst for knowledge, interwoven in the fabric of our Canadian linguistic duality.

Obviously, immersion is not perfect. It is not a magic wand. But it has been extraordinarily successful. In a few years we will be discussing issues and successes with regard to the intensive English program in Quebec French-language schools, and I suspect that it will be praised by immersion's biggest supporters: parents who are at the front lines when it comes to fighting for what is best for their children's futures.

Four decades after Wallace Lambert's experiment, immersion is still going strong, and continues to challenge how Canadian families define their linguistic identities.

Without Wallace Lambert's pioneering work, we would not be where we are today. But we still have lessons to learn from his critical experiment. And we still have a lot of work to do.

Graham Fraser is Commissioner of Official Languages.

NOTES

[1] Conversation with Ginette Munson on March 11, 2011.

[2] Conversation with Doug Mitchell on March 11, 2011.

[3] O. Melikoff, "Parents as change agents in education. The St. Lambert experiment," in E.E. Lambert and G.R. Tucker, eds., *Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1972): 220.

[4] Fred Genesee, *Learning Through Two Languages: Studies of Immersion and Bilingual Education* (Cambridge, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1987): 9.

[5] Quoted in Graham Fraser, *Sorry, I Don't Speak French: Confronting the Canadian Crisis That Won't Go Away* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006): 56.

[6] Canadian Parents for French, *The State of French-Second-Language Education in Canada 2010 – Executive Summary* (Ottawa, 2010): 6.

[7] Fred Genesee, "French Immersion and At-Risk Students: A Review of Research Findings," *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63: 655-688.

[8] Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Annual Report 2008–2009: 59–61.

[9] Government of Quebec, *Un plan pour le Québec – L'éducation et l'emploi au cœur du développement économique du Québec*, press release issued February 23, 2011.

[10] Christian Dufour, « Langue – une mesure excessive et dangereuse », *Le Devoir*, March 5, 2011.

[11] Lisa-Marie Gervais, "Gérard Bouchard au Devoir – Tourner le dos à l'anglais serait « criminel »", *Le Devoir*, March 2, 2011.

[12] Claude Picher « Une nation de futurs petits salariés », *La Presse*, March 1, 2011.

[13] Ibid.