THE LAMBERT IMMERSION LEGACY: RESEARCH AND MENTORSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The St. Lambert immersion program and Professor Wallace Lambert have been connected more closely than in name alone. Those involved in the initiation of the St. Lambert immersion program in the 1960s asked Dr. Lambert to evaluate its outcomes. The research questions guiding the evaluation and the research design Dr. Lambert devised became a blueprint for others researching immersion programs in later years. Furthermore, Dr. Lambert provided support and encouragement to those involved in research concerning the acquisition of bilingualism and its social and cognitive impact.

THE LAMBERT 'BLUEPRINT'

At the request of parents in the St. Lambert school district of Montreal (Melikoff, 1972), Wally Lambert and his colleagues (John McNamara and Dick Tucker) designed a systematic series of program evaluations that established a blueprint for assessing immersion programs throughout Canada and beyond. In this brief essay we discuss ways in which the original research questions were addressed, and describe several ways in which researchers refined them to probe more deeply into the effects of the immersion program on academic outcomes.

At the time when the first French immersion program was initiated in St Lambert, parents, administrators and educators expressed serious reservations. The initial fears are captured in this quote from the Association of Catholic Principals of Montreal: "While we favour bilingualism and the effective teaching of the French language from kindergarten to grade XI, we reject the so-called bilingual school which attempts to give equal or nearly equal importance to two languages as media of instruction. We are of the opinion that the average child cannot cope with two languages of instruction and to try to do so leads to insecurity, language interference, and academic retardation..." (cited in Lambert & Tucker, 1972, p. 5).

In the face of such attitudes, the Lambert team developed a model for program evaluation designed to address key issues of concern: first and second language development, academic achievement and cognitive development. For the first pilot Kindergarten class, comparison classes of the regular English program and Francophones (first language) were selected based on the similarity of parental backgrounds and therefore socioeconomic status. In addition, an intelligence measure (non-verbal IQ) was administered to check on comparability of the groups and to establish a baseline for future comparisons. The regular English program class was used to check on the progress of the immersion children in their first language, English, and the Francophone comparison class to check on their progress in learning the second language, French. By the time *Bilingual education of children* was published in 1972, Lambert and Tucker had followed two cohorts of students, the first for 5 years until they were in grade 4, and the second for 4 years, until they were in grade 3.

The positive findings from the Lambert team's carefully designed research were responsible for calls from other provinces and territories for immersion programs of their own. For example, by 1969, only four years after the St. Lambert experiment began, immersion had come to the National Capital Region. Each of the four school boards there established their own programs. With federal funding, different research teams undertook their own evaluations, based on the Lambert evaluation blueprint.

Of the five main research questions addressed by Lambert and Tucker and subsequent immersion program evaluations across Canada, we explore three, related to the academic outcomes of immersion education:

1. What effect does French immersion have on the students' first language (English) skills?
2. How well do French immersion students perform in school subjects such as mathematics?
3. How well do French immersion students develop second language (French) skills?

Over time it became clear that the pattern of results that characterized the St. Lambert findings generalized to other Canadian settings. These positive results went a long way to allaying the initial fears of parents, administrators and educators. We briefly consider answers to these questions, noting where they have been adapted as Canadian researchers uncovered more evidence about the academic outcomes of French immersion education. We end with a brief story as evidence of Wally Lambert's wonderful characteristics as a human being.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

Overall the Lambert program evaluation found that at the end of grade 4, having been exposed to instruction in English from grades 2 to 4 for one hour a day, the French immersion students were performing as well as the regular English program students on tests of English word knowledge, word discrimination and language usage. Both classes were well above average (above the 80th percentile) in terms of national norms. They performed similarly on tests of reading ability, listening comprehension and knowledge of concepts in English (p. 203). Their expressive skills were also comparable on tasks like story retelling where the stories were equally complex and rich in vocabulary.

Subsequent program evaluations in other jurisdictions also relied on standardized English achievement tests such as the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills to establish the fact that, aside from a temporary lag in achievement recorded before French immersion students had had any exposure to English language arts in the curriculum, immersion students were holding their own and even outperforming regular English program students in areas such as vocabulary, spelling and usage (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1982). There was notable consistency in these findings, regardless of where the immersion program was located.

Variation was introduced when the design of the early total French immersion program differed from that of the St. Lambert program: thus, for example, students in programs where only half the instructional day was devoted to French performed as well as but not better than comparison students in the regular English program on English achievement tests. It became clear that a certain level of second language proficiency was necessary for bilingualism to exert a positive influence on English language achievement.

Few large-scale studies of the English language skills of French immersion students have been conducted since the program evaluations of the 70s and 80s. One notable exception is a study sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Education a decade ago. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) is an independent provincial agency funded by the Government of Ontario. EQAO conducts province-wide testing in English and mathematics at grades 3, 6 and 9. Unlike the standardized measures that have already been described, EQAO tests are tied to the Ontario curriculum in English language arts and math, and include a wider variety of test types than typical standardized achievement tests. Researchers at OISE were asked to conduct a re-analysis of data collected in the late 90s, examining results of French immersion students in English in relation to those of the population as a whole (Turnbull, Hart, & Lapkin, 2000). About 60,000 students were involved at grade 3, and over 113,000 at grade 6; of these six to eight percent were immersion students.

The English language tests in the EQAO battery involve literacy skills, reading and writing; there are four levels of achievement with Level 3 representing a high level of achievement and constituting the provincial standard, that is, the level the province would like all students to attain; at Level 4 students exceed the provincial standard. Here is what the grade 6 data show: seventy-one percent of immersion students achieve Levels 3 or 4 on the provincial tests of reading, while 51 percent of regular English program students do so (this excludes gifted students, who perform somewhat better than the immersion students). In writing, two-thirds of immersion students achieve Levels 3 or 4, compared to about half of the regular program students.

Let us revisit the original research question, "What effect does French immersion have on students' first language skills?" In light of the consistent positive findings, the question evolved to: What is the nature of the benefits that accrue to immersion students in the area of first language (English) skills? It is assumed that early immersion students reach a "threshold" level of proficiency in French (Cummins, 1979) that triggers a positive impact on their first language skills. This is consistent with Lambert's

(1975) notion of 'additive' bilingualism and the "linguistic detective capacity" that Lambert and Tucker (1972, p. 43) postulated in the 70s.

ACHIEVEMENT IN SCHOOL SUBJECTS SUCH AS MATH

In the original St. Lambert project, aside from English and French skills, achievement in mathematics was monitored every year. Testing of the lead cohorts in grades 3 and 4 showed that immersion students were performing as well as their respective comparison groups in math. This held true for tests administered in the language of instruction, that is French, and in the home language, that is English. The latter finding confirms that transfer of knowledge was taking place for early immersion students from the target language to the dominant language (English).

Once again, these findings were replicated in the large-scale program evaluations conducted outside the province of Quebec (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Bournot-Trites & Reeder, 2001). In the face of repeated positive results, researchers began to attribute the strong performance of immersion students to their advanced second language proficiency. As Cummins (1979) explained: "as [immersion students] develop high levels of L2 skills, their fluent access to two languages can give rise to enhancement both of L2 skills and other aspects of cognitive functioning" (p. 31).

Enhanced cognitive skills may account for the math results from the EQAO testing in Ontario mentioned earlier. At grade 3, immersion and non-immersion students performed similarly on these curriculum-based tests; at grade 6, French immersion students achieved better overall results than the regular English program comparison group.

FRENCH LANGUAGE SKILLS

The main measure of French language skills used by the Lambert team was a French achievement test standardized on a population from the Catholic School Commission of Montreal. Speaking ability was assessed by means of a story retelling task evaluated for overall expressive ability, and aspects of grammar and pronunciation. There was also a French listening comprehension test. We focus on the lead cohort (at grade 4). The French immersion students' performance in listening comprehension was comparable to that of Francophone peers; their achievement scores placed them at or above the scores of half of the Francophone comparison class, and their French vocabulary knowledge was somewhat below (but not significantly below) that of their Francophone peers. Immersion students' French speaking ability were not as advanced as that of the Francophone comparison students, as evidenced for example, in the immersion students' avoidance of complex grammatical structures in speaking French.

It was difficult to find appropriate tests for secondary school students that were standardized on Canadian French populations for French achievement, but one Ontario-based study (Lawrence, 1996) involved a grade 9 class of French immersion students taking the grade 9 test designed by the Ontario Ministry of Education for Franco-Ontarian French-speaking students. Unexpectedly, French immersion students outperformed French first-language students in Ontario on reading. However they did not perform as well as Francophone peers in writing. Still, about 73 percent of the immersion students performed at or above grade level expectations in writing (for the Francophones, this percentage was 87).

Because exposure to French is limited to the school context, researchers have used benchmarks to measure the French proficiency of immersion students, and in particular, immersion graduates. Thus, for example, with funding from the Public Service Commission of Canada, Lazaruk (2007) conducted a study in 2004-05, in which the Commission's proficiency tests were administered to a sample of grade 12 French immersion students in Alberta. The test places candidates at levels A, B or C (with C being the most advanced) in reading, writing and oral interaction. The researchers found that three quarters of the immersion students tested achieved level B, a level required for bilingual positions in the federal public service (Lazaruk, 2007, p. 608). One-fifth of the students reached the highest level (level C). This is an impressive finding!

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Wally Lambert's contribution to French immersion education is inestimable. The program would not have continued to exist and expanded globally, if it were not for the research he initiated with his evaluation blueprint. The questions his team identified in 1965 endured and were refined as subsequent teams of researchers tackled evaluations in their own jurisdictions. Wally's legacy consists in part of the hundreds of research projects focusing on immersion education over the last 40 or so years.

Wally's legacy also consists in part of the people he inspired. The first author of this essay, Merrill Swain, was one of those people, and was unable to close this essay without providing a brief testimony to Wally Lambert's mentoring, support and inspiration.

Wally provided me (Merrill) with so many opportunities to become part of the community interested in bilingualism and bilingual education. This anecdote will indicate what an extraordinary man he was, and how he engaged me completely. The story is set in the late 1960s when I was a graduate student at the University of California (at Irvine). In those days (and even now), Canada was a distant foreign country and Toronto and Montreal were undifferentiated cities. Knowing that my interests were focused on the acquisition of 'bilingualism as a first

language' and that Professor Lambert was *the* person who was studying bilingualism in Canada, my thesis supervisor suggested that when I went home for the Christmas holidays, I should give Dr. Lambert a call and tell him about my interests.

Even in 1968, it seemed inappropriate for me to call an unknown professor, out of the blue, at his home, during the holidays. But my supervisor had insisted, and so I called him, long distance, from Toronto. Wally himself answered the phone. Timidly, I explained my Ph.D. research interests and from that moment on, he became my hero. He supported my research in so many ways. Wally had just become a member of the Board of Directors of the newly formed International Research Centre on Bilingualism (CIRB), and told me he would use that position to make sure I was well greeted and treated should I decide to do my research in Quebec City. True to his word, Wally made sure I was, as a grad student, offered office space in the CIRB, plus two – imagine that as a graduate student, I was offered two research assistants to help me collect and transcribe data. Wally told me that he believed that I was "heaven sent to the CIRB because the Centre, although doing research on bilingualism, was not doing anything related to Canada!" Until then, I had never met Wally personally. Then, one day, he was at my desk in the Centre, chuckling his famous chuckle, asking me how I was doing, and would I come to visit with the team at McGill, talk to his classes, meet Dick Tucker and John McNamara. Later, as immersion researchers, Wally and I attended many of the same conferences, where we often laughed till tears fell, over Wally's mischievous behaviour and stories. He mentored me into and through a career associated with bilingualism. Wally was the sort of person whom every academic should have as a guide, a supporter and friend. Wally was all of that for me, and I miss him dearly.

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