IMMERSION EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: EXPANSION AND EXTENSION

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ABSTRACT

The work of Wallace Lambert and his colleagues on bilingualism and biculturalism had a significant impact on education and society in the United States and around the world. This paper reviews the spread of immersion education to the U.S. and the ways in which it expanded and was extended (heritage language immersion and two-way immersion) to fit the diverse contexts and purposes that existed there.

INTRODUCTION

As it both reflected and stimulated the quiet evolution of language and cultural relations in Canada, Wallace Lambert's work on bilingualism and biculturalism also had a significant impact on education and society in the United States, both directly (through his activities in the U.S.) and indirectly (through the influence of his research and writing around the world). My colleagues on this panel have given an insightful overview of his contributions to the rise of French immersion in Canada, from community involvement to careful research documentation (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). In this paper, I will review the advance of immersion approaches to language education as they expanded to the U.S. and then were extended to fit the diverse contexts and purposes that existed there.

EXPANSION OF IMMERSION EDUCATION

At the time the St. Lambert immersion program got underway in 1965, some policy makers and educators in the U.S. were concerned about the lack of capacity in languages other than English in the country and were looking for new ideas. These concerns had emerged after experiences in World War II and the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union underscored the security, diplomatic, and economic disadvantages of not having sufficient language resources to call on. In particular, elementary and secondary schools were not producing individuals with language competency for the pipeline into postsecondary education and careers that involved using languages other than English.

Dr. Russell Campbell (1927-2003), a professor of applied linguistics at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), was one of those individuals who felt that the investment of time and energy in language education, especially in elementary and secondary education, was not yielding results that met the societal need. He paid a visit to Professor Lambert and the St. Lambert program to find out more about this novel approach, and

> *... on returning from a visit to the St. Lambert French immersion program and after extended consultation with students, parents, teachers, school officials, and McGill University participants in that program, [I] approached Culver City, CA Unified School District authorities to suggest the possible replication, with only minor modifications, of the St. Lambert program in an American setting. (Campbell, 1984, p. 115-116)*

Campbell's argument, based on the evidence he brought back from St. Lambert, was very persuasive, and the school district agreed to implement the model, with the help of researchers from UCLA (Culver City is located in Los Angeles County, CA).

In Culver City, the language of the immersion program was Spanish rather than French, reflecting the geographical

and demographic characteristics of Southern California. At the start, one elementary school was involved, and the program was implemented as a strand within the school, with one classroom at each grade level. Most of the students were monolingual speakers of English, and the goals of immersion bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic proficiency were set for them. The St. Lambert model for language distribution was adopted, with kindergarten and first grade classrooms using Spanish 100% of the time, English language arts introduced in grade 2, and an increase in the use of English so that in grades 4 through 6, instruction was 50% in Spanish and 50% in English.

A close collaboration between the school and a university was another area of similarity with the St. Lambert program. UCLA faculty and graduate students collaborated with district teachers and administrators to document, monitor, and evaluate the experimental program. As immersion gained attention in other districts, research results also began to appear that demonstrated the effectiveness of the approach in the U.S. as well as in Canada. For example, an early comparison of immersion with traditional elementary school foreign language programs (with 20-30 minutes per day of language instruction), showed that "immersion students scored significantly higher across the board in all the skill areas tested" (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes, & Snow, 1985). Further, after 11 years of implementation, academic results for students in Culver City immersion were also very positive, including English vocabulary (Campbell, 1984). The expanding research base reassured schools considering the innovative language education model, and the number of programs grew. The Center for Applied Linguistics compiled a directory of immersion programs (through voluntary participation and therefore not comprehensive), which was later accessible and searchable on their website. The number of programs in the directory by year illustrates the growth trajectory (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2011):

1971 – 3 programs
1979 – 13 programs
1989 – 92 programs
1999 – 278 programs
2006 – 263 programs

With the expansion of immersion came offerings in languages other than Spanish, including French, Japanese, Mandarin, German, and a variety of others, and variations on the basic model were developed in the U.S. as well as in Canada. In particular, a variation that became popular in the U.S. is a version where the immersion language and English are both used about 50% of the instructional time from the beginning grades, often called the "50/50" model. A recent national survey showed an overall decline in U.S. schools offering foreign language study at the elementary school level (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009), but it is not yet known how immersion programs will be affected. As will be discussed shortly, the increase in other forms of immersion may account for some of the decline in the classical form of foreign language immersion.

The Culver City schools recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of immersion. This intensive form of language education is now featured at two elementary schools in the district, with continuation courses at the secondary level, and is offered in both Spanish and Japanese. As in many districts, there are more applicants than spaces in the immersion programs, a sign of their popularity with families. These schools join several hundred others in the United States in the immersion enterprise, benefiting from the work of Wallace Lambert as they educate their children bilingually.

EXTENSIONS OF IMMERSION EDUCATION

Wallace Lambert also saw the potential for immersion to address the loss of languages and wrote about "counteracting language neglect" (Lambert, 1984, p. 21) as he studied attitudes toward home language maintenance in immigrant populations, including Polish-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Albanian-Americans in Detroit, Michigan. For language minorities, he noted that "the best way I can see to release the linguistic and cultural potential of ethnolinguistic minority groups is by transforming their subtractive experiences with bilingualism and biculturalism into additive ones" (Lambert, 1984, p. 22). Following this line of thought, the immersion model has been extended to heritage language contexts, where an ethnolinguistic minority community language has been, or is being, lost among the younger generation, and an immersion language program seeks to reestablish the language among school-aged children.

One of the oldest heritage language immersion programs is found in Hawaii, the only U.S. state to designate an indigenous native language as one of the official languages. The language was dying out, however, and in response to parents and community leaders, the Hawaiian Language Immersion Program, *Ka Papahana Kaiapuni Hawai'i*, was established in 1987, at two sites. Since then, it has grown to 19 sites and 1,500 students on five islands. Through grade 5, instruction is through Hawaiian only; at that point, English is introduced and continues through grade 12. The first class educated solely through the immersion program graduated from high school in 1999. This program is seen as a major component of Hawaiian language maintenance, and "the students understand that they will be responsible for the perpetuation of the native Hawaiian language and be the stewards of the cultural heritage of the indigenous people of Hawaii" (Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2011).

Other indigenous communities have adopted immersion to revitalize or maintain the heritage language. Reyhner (2010) mentions programs for Apache, Ojibwe, Diné (Navajo), and Blackfeet, emphasizing the importance of culture-based education along with language immersion for these groups. The Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma established an immersion program in 2001, which now serves children in preschool through grade 5, hoping to change a trend reflected in the finding of a 2002 survey that "no one under 40 years of age was conversational in the language" (Cherokee Nation, 2011).

Another extension of the immersion model in the U.S. brought together students from two different language backgrounds, and Wallace Lambert's imprint was again in evidence. A U.S.-government-sponsored research center based at UCLA (the Center for Language Education and Research) was funded to examine, among other things, the ways in which bilingual education for language minority students could be integrated with foreign language education for language majorities. The Center's leaders included Amado Padilla, Russell Campbell and G. Richard Tucker, and the advisory board counted Wallace Lambert and Merrill Swain among its members. In the innovative model that was developed with collaborating schools, students from two language backgrounds are taught together in the same classroom (in balanced numbers), being immersed part of the time in each of those languages for instruction. As in heritage immersion programs, the model supports the language of the heritage community from which the ethnolinguistic minority students come, and, like foreign language immersion programs, it offers majority language students an opportunity to learn an additional language. The goals are bilingualism and biliteracy for all students. In Lambert's terminology, it provides an additive bilingual experience for all students. The approach was called "two-way" because of the reciprocal nature of the language learning, with two groups learning each other's language, to distinguish it from "one-way" immersion where all students were learning the same new language. With the support of the Center's researchers, several new two-way programs were established and studied (Christian, Montone, Lindholm-Leary, and Carranza, 1997).

One of the early adopters of the approach was the Amigos School in Cambridge, MA. By the mid-1990s, the two-way program at Amigos extended from kindergarten through 8th grade, drawing students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Instruction was 50% in Spanish and 50% in English for a student body made up of native speakers of both languages. Working with Mary Cazabon of the Cambridge Public Schools, Lambert carried out studies of student attitudes, addressing his ongoing interest in attitudinal factors at play in bilingual development. They documented students' growing confidence in their bilingualism, as well as their attitudes toward the language and culture of their fellow students (Lambert & Cazabon, 1994; Cazabon, Nicoladis, & Lambert, 1998). His contributions helped to build the research base about the effects of the model as well as expanding our understanding of bilingualism in general.

Like other immersion programs, the number of two-way immersion programs grew, especially during the 1990s when the U.S. government provided funding for some programs. As experience was gained with the model and research pointed to its promise, it became more widely known as a high quality educational alternative (with long waiting lists for entry). A particular focus of interest was the possibility of improving academic performance of Hispanic students who had a proportionately higher dropout rate and incidence of academic difficulty. The beneficial effects of learning through the native language for minority students, while also developing high levels of proficiency in English, made two-way immersion schools well-suited to meet their needs. Thus, support for two-way immersion has come from those who seek more language education for all students as well as those who are concerned about the success of language minority students. While most programs continued to involve Spanish and English, the languages of instruction diversified somewhat (limited by demographic factors, since native speakers of the language are needed in sufficient numbers to populate half of the classrooms), to include Mandarin, Korean, French, Japanese, and others.

CONCLUSION

The teaching and leadership of Wallace Lambert played a very important role in the spread of immersion education to the U.S. His direct involvement in advising educators and policy makers, as well as his research in the U.S. and elsewhere, helped to shape the directions that immersion education took, including its extensions to heritage language communities and two-way immersion contexts. As Reynolds (1991) observed, Wallace Lambert's vision was of "a just world where people are not restricted by barriers of culture and language" (p. xix). His work on immersion as a means to that end has spread his vision beyond his home country to the U.S. and around the world, to the great benefit of us all.

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