Chapter 10

Recontextualizing Immersion in the Chinese Context: A Sino–Canadian Collaborative Educational Program

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ABSTRACT

Immersion and bilingual education have been key concepts in English language education policies and practices. Though discussions have been made on the theoretical and practical issues of bilingual education in China, there has been much disagreement between which model of bilingual education is suitable for the Chinese context, as well as which terminology to use. Drawing on interview, observation, and documentary data gathered during a three-year study of a public-funded foreign language school in Shenzhen, one of the most economically developed cities in China, this chapter is focused on the impact of a Sino-Canadian collaborative educational program on the teachers, students, and school leadership, and reports some preliminary findings and thoughts on related issues. The conclusion is that immersion and bilingual education in the Chinese educational context needs to be reconceptualized and reinterpreted.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education and immersion bilingual education are topics of much debate in Chinese education. This chapter defines both approaches and then presents a study focusing on a Sino-Canadian collaborative immersion bilingualism program in a publicly funded foreign language school that illustrates how immersion needs to be reconceptualized with greater sensitivity to the local school context.

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Bilingual Education and Immersion in China

Bilingual education refers to language-in-education policy and related practice with a foreign or second language being used as the medium of instruction in schools (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014; Lapkin, Swain, & Shapson, 1990). As an important type of bilingual education, immersion is both a kind of language education policy and a specific strategy to implement bilingual education. The most influential immersion bilingual education was the Canadian French immersion program originated in the 1960s (Baker, 2001). Based on different contexts, immersion has evolved into a diversity of forms including partial immersion, full immersion, two-way immersion, early immersion, late immersion, and more. These typologies of bilingual education are mostly derived from the North American and European contexts and are not adequate to account for the characteristics of language education in East Asian English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, such as Korea and China (Jeon, 2012). What these different types of immersion programs have in common is the rationale that a second or foreign language can be effectively acquired when it is used as the medium of instruction for content subjects. In addition, immersion bilingual education insists on additive bilingualism, which means both the native and second or foreign language develop as a result of bilingual education. In other words, the learner’s mother tongue is given a central and prioritized status in the whole process of bilingual education.

Two concepts are closely related to immersion bilingual education. One is CLIL (content and language integrated learning). CLIL was conceived in Europe in the 1990s as a crucial element in the process of European integration. Representative of an innovative approach to foreign language education, CLIL is circulated and promoted by many European language educators and academics for its dual focus on both language and curricular content. The other concept is CBI (content-based instruction), which took shape in North America. CLIL and CBI share some commonalities, but have some differences as well (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014). Some argue that more differences than similarities exist between immersion and CLIL (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009). This chapter takes the position that immersion, CLIL, and CBI have more similarities than differences because they share the underlying principle of promoting foreign or second language education, by using it as the medium of instruction, and both language teaching and content teaching goals. The differences among immersion, CLIL, and CBI are mainly due to the different social, cultural, and political backgrounds of the scenarios in which they are situated.

Immersion Bilingual Education in China

In China, bilingual education is traditionally associated with a context where ethnic minority students are educated in both native language and Mandarin (Feng, 2007). However, through the development of English language education, bilingual education can also mean English and Chinese bilingual education, which is the case in this chapter. Immersion bilingual education has become an important pattern of English language education in China. Compared with CLIL and CBI, immersion seems to be a better “brand name” and enjoys more publicity in China for its association with language pedagogical innovation and effectiveness. For language learners, being involved in an immersion program stands for a better chance to master a foreign language, and for language institutions, it means better market opportunities. As with the status of CLIL in Europe, immersion in China has become almost synonymous with quality and innovation in foreign language teaching (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014). According to Hu (2007), the bilingual education experiments, which were conducted in China in the 1990s and early 2000s, were characterized by a number of features. First, most experiments were carried out in schools in economi-
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