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## **Early English Immersion in Xi'an, China: An Experiment in English Language Teaching**

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This article will integrate the four articles in this issue, from the standpoint of understanding the principles and the realities of the Early English Immersion programs in Xi'an China. In addition to reviewing various aspects of the program, future directions will be discussed.

The early English immersion program began in 1997 in Xi'an China but the roots of it started more than 40 years ago in Canada. Canada has two official languages, English and French but most areas of this vast country are either predominantly French speaking or predominantly English speaking. French is the first language of a smaller percentage of the population than English but most Canadians want to be bilingual. More than 40 years ago, English speaking parents and teachers in Montreal decided that the students were not really learning to speak French in 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 career. 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. Most never become truly bilingual but they acquire fluency and are quite comfortable speaking French.

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### **Early English Immersion in Xi'an**

The French Immersion educational model of language teaching became the basis for the reform of language teaching within China. The growing realization in China of the need for English for its citizens, fueled the development of the idea

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of English immersion. The need for English immersion rose out of the demand for English language proficiency in China. English is considered necessary for dealing with international business and the advances in technology.

Qiang and Kang describe the circumstances that led to increasing demand for English in China, specifically, the opening of China to foreign trade in the early 1990s and the increases in tourism because of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The English language is the medium of communication in international business so it is considered important for the Chinese to have a working knowledge of English.

There was also, in the 1990s, a growing interest in reform of English language teaching. Before this time, English lessons stressed rote memory and written work, rather than conversation and learning to speak the type of English that would be useful in a daily context.

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## **Early English Immersion as Educational Reform**

The Early English Immersion program is quite a departure from the usual means of teaching English in China. It is different from the traditional English instruction in a number of ways. One very important way is that only English is used in the classroom; the teachers do not speak any Chinese to the children. English and Chinese are kept separate and not taught by the same teacher. The rule is “one person, one language.” It appears that this type of teaching means that the children seem comfortable and unself-conscious when they are speaking English.

In addition, interactive conversation, rather than rote repetition of words and sentences is encouraged. As Huang, Trube, and Yu have noted, in the immersion program, English language learning is designed to be meaningful in terms of the daily life of the children. The Early English Immersion programs have resisted textbooks and have, instead, attempted to teach “real life” English; the type of language that children would use in everyday life is stressed. In the immersion method of teaching, conversation is encouraged, as is working in small groups.

In addition, the emphasis is on meaningful assessment and away from traditional examinations.

This program is a dual language program with the languages kept separate for purposes of instruction. Jeong and Peng have noted that it is not a bilingual education in which the languages are mixed in the classroom. Qiang and Kang note that the ultimate goal of immersion programs is additive bilingualism, whereby students become proficient in the target language without any

detrimental effects to their mother tongue. The available research has indicated that the Chinese of the children does not suffer and is as good, or even better, than the Chinese of children who are in non-immersion traditional programs.

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## **The Innovation of Curricular Integration**

The Early English Immersion Program has introduced some innovations into Chinese education. Huang et al. have noted the significance of curricular integration in the English immersion program. In curricular integration, subjects are not taught as separate entities but integrated. For example, it might be that social studies and art are taught together and the children might draw pictures or build models of historical events. This was a new concept for Chinese education when it was introduced in the English Immersion program in the middle 1990s.

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## **Transforming English Education to Fit the Chinese Context**

The concept of immersion was borrowed from the Canadian educational context. Qiang and Kang discuss the process of borrowing educational practices. In the course of borrowing, the policies and practices may change considerably and become adapted to the local context. Several examples exist in the case of English immersion. Materials were created in English about Chinese festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Spring Festival. In addition, classes in China are much larger than classes in North America. There are typically 50–60 children in a classroom in China, limiting the type of activities that can be used. The North American model stresses small group learning but this type of learning is not feasible in such small classes. As Huang et al. have noted, large class sizes make interaction and small group learning difficult.

Qiang and Kang describe some of the values of Chinese society and how immersion has been designed to be consistent with these values. From the very beginning and in keeping with the values of contemporary China, the immersion program was implemented in schools in which the children came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The issue is an important one because in many countries in which English is not the first language of its citizens, children have access to education in English only if their parents are relatively affluent. The use of local teachers, rather than foreign native speakers has resulted in government supported, in contrast to expensive private schools, using the immersion program. The Chinese model of immersion has made a very important contribution

because of its democratic values.

The borrowing took place because of the recognition of the significance of the educational policy and practice in a different place. As noted earlier, the Canadian French immersion model served as the basis for the immersion program in China.

Huang et al. have noted that the parents and teachers have provided a great deal of support for the program. The administrative staff, that is the principals and vice principals, have provided leadership, encouragement and support. Teachers were critical obviously and many became experts with excellent pedagogy and greatly improved English. In my experience they embraced the new methods with creativity and enthusiasm. Leadership from the principals of the schools has been critical to the success of the program. Parents have been supportive, often writing letters to the teachers thanking them. Senior administrative officials in the provincial education bureaus were supportive.

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## **Aspects of Teaching**

Ieong and Peng have noted that the teachers describe the confidence of the children in speaking English. In addition, the attitude of the teachers toward English and their confidence improved. I have also noted that the English of the teachers improves when they teach in the Early English Immersion program for several years, even without direct instruction on English or without visiting an English speaking country. The program requires that they use English and this seems to help develop their English.

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## **The Challenges of Early English Immersion**

The program was innovative in many ways but it also met many challenges. Although immersion has resulted in significant progress in English language learning there are difficulties that it has met and continues to meet.

One of the challenges of the English immersion is developing appropriate curriculum. Materials with appropriate content exist in English but the vocabulary is too difficult for non-native speakers.

Another challenge is the conflict between subject matter teaching and English language teaching. Huang et al. have noted that the integration of language instruction and content learning is a critical feature of the immersion program and distinguishes from other English language programs in China. To solve the

problem of the proper materials, they have written their own curriculum. However, it was a challenge and they have systematically studied how well it matches the national curriculum. Their findings indicated that it did match the national curriculum quite well, perhaps not perfectly and this mismatch, when it occurred, is one of the challenges for the future.

Ieong and Peng note that the sustainability of program in later grades, when the curriculum becomes more complex and demanding, may be a problem.

Professional development for the teachers is difficult. Ieong and Peng note the difficulty of training teachers in the immersion methods. Teachers have typically been trained previously in a more directive method. Teacher training should, instead, focus on practical strategies for eliciting interaction and conversation among the children.

Ieong and Peng note that one of the challenges is the professional development of teachers who are not trained in the approach used in English immersion. Huang et al. note that recruiting qualified teachers is a challenge. Unlike some Asian countries, China does not have a great deal of funding to spend on high salaries for qualified native English speaking teachers. The immersion program is unique in that it uses local teachers.

Ieong and Peng note that ensuring support from the parents is another challenge. It is critical that parents have an understanding of the program, which stresses oral language development. Reading and writing are not stressed in the beginning in English instruction so that there are no “products” for the parents to view.

There is conflict between the national curriculum and examinations and what might be a good curriculum. Unfortunately, there has been a cut in the hours of immersion teaching from kindergarten to grade 1 and even larger cuts in the later grades a result of the need to conform to the national curriculum. Therefore, the time spent in immersion is considerably less than was originally planned and is less than optimal. Although there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the program, the concern with the national examinations has restricted the adoption of the program.

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## **Xi'an and Hong Kong: A Comparison of Programs**

Kong, Hoare and Chi's paper illustrated the challenges with a comparison of programs in Xi'an and Hong Kong. They reported the results of a survey of teachers of English teachers in Hong Kong and Xi'an. English language teaching in Hong Kong is really not immersion; there exist what are called English

medium classes in Hong Kong in which the subject matter is taught in English. This comparison provides us with lessons about how a program may not necessarily transfer from one situation to another. Middle school presents great challenges and secondary school even more so.

The conflict between subject matter teaching and language instruction is an especially important problem in Hong Kong. A significant proportion of the Hong Kong teachers did not see teaching of English as very important. Hong Kong teachers stress the content more and use Cantonese sometimes report stress because of the curriculum which seems much more intense than in the immersion classes in Xi'an and Macao schools. Hong Kong teachers reported being less confident of their ability to improve the English of their students. In contrast, Xi'an teachers attach a larger significance to it more as English teaching than content teaching (although they do not neglect the latter).

There is some confusion about the content teaching vs. English teaching and sometimes a failure to understand in middle and secondary school they are teaching content in English, not teaching English.

Xi'an teachers felt much more prepared than Hong Kong teachers. Hong Kong teachers consider immersion teaching a tremendous challenge. The Xi'an teachers also realized it was a challenge, but they seemed more willing to take on the challenge and the magnitude did not seem as great as with the Hong Kong teachers.

Many teachers in Hong Kong seemed to feel that they were not getting the support from the school management but the situation was different in Xi'an, where the teachers perceived the school management as quite supportive.

All teachers felt that they needed more resources and more training. This perceived need exists in both Xi'an and Hong Kong. It is, perhaps, a universal sentiment of teachers everywhere.

More teachers in Xi'an than in Hong Kong thought that immersion should continue but most wanted it to continue. In general, there was much more enthusiasm in Xi'an than Hong Kong, possibly because of the greater support for the Xi'an program and also because of the ubiquitous nature of examinations in Hong Kong.

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## **Conclusion**

English language teaching in China has taken a giant leap forward, thanks to the pioneers of Early English Immersion. They have transformed English education

in China. The authors of these articles have captured the success and the challenges of early English immersion.

What will the future bring? More comprehensive materials need to be developed. The teaching of the subject matter in English needs to be reconciled with the national examinations. More intensive training of teachers is needed. These challenges are substantial.

However, we should not overlook the tremendous gains in English teaching as a result of the Early English Immersion Programs. I salute the pioneering educators whose vision has created a quiet revolution.

The Early English Immersion Program is the result of the cooperation of three countries, Canada, China and the United States. This program stands as a reminder that international cooperation can be a reality. In times of international conflict, it is critical to have a working model of cooperation among countries. We can view this model as a small step towards a more peaceful and harmonious world.