The evolving sociopolitical context of immersion education in Canada: some implications for program development

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In 1997 Swain and Johnson defined immersion as one category within bilingual education, providing examples and discussion from multiple international perspectives. In this article, we review the core features of immersion program design identified by Swain and Johnson and discuss how current sociopolitical realities and new research on second language learning serve to update and refresh the discussion of these features. One feature identified by Swain and Johnson is that “the classroom culture is that of the local L1 community”. The dramatic increase in ethnic diversity in Canada’s urban centres calls into question the notion of a monolithic culture in the school community. A second example concerns the use of the L1 in the classroom: while a central feature of immersion education is the use of the L2 as medium of instruction, new research suggests that allowing a judicious use of the L1 on the part of learners may be warranted. The article concludes with suggestions for building on multiple L1s in the immersion classroom.

Keywords: immersion programs, bilingual education, multilingualism, sociocultural theory

En 1997, Swain et Johnson ont défini l’immersion comme une catégorie de l’éducation bilingue, fournissant des exemples et une discussion à partir de multiples perspectives internationales. Dans cet article, nous passons en revue les éléments de base du programme d’immersion tels qu’identifiés par Swain et Johnson, et portons la discussion sur la façon dont les réalités socio-politiques actuelles et les nouvelles recherches sur l’apprentissage de la langue seconde permettent de mettre à jour et de reprendre la discussion de ces éléments. Un de ceux-ci, identifié par Swain et Johnson signale que «la culture de la salle de classe est celle de la langue première de la communauté locale.» La remarquable augmentation de la diversité ethnique dans les centres urbains du Canada remet en question la notion d’une culture monolithique dans la communauté scolaire. Un deuxième exemple concerne l’utilisation de la langue première en salle de classe. Bien que l’utilisation de la langue seconde comme moyen d’enseignement reste un élément central de l’immersion, de nouvelles recherches suggèrent que de permettre une utilisation judicieuse de la langue première chez les apprenants peut se justifier. En conclusion, l’article présente des suggestions pour tirer parti des multiples langues premières dans la classe d’immersion.
Introduction

Some years after its inception in 1965, the immersion model developed in Canada began to be exported (Lambert and Tucker 1972). Immersion programs emphasize developing fluency in an initially unknown language through content-based teaching in the second/foreign language, at no expense to the home/first language of the students. In 1965 in Canada, the home language in question was English and the second language French; the central premise of immersion education was additive bilingualism, adding the second language without detriment to the development of the first. The first programs were early immersion, beginning in kindergarten or grade 1 with 100% of the day devoted to instruction in French. Other models followed, with starting points at age 10, 12 or even 14.

In an attempt to sort out what differentiated immersion education from other forms of bilingual education, Swain and Johnson (1997) developed a set of criteria to define a prototypical immersion program. One of the purposes of this article is to review the core features they identified in order to explore their applicability in 2005. Changes in Canadian demographics do not necessarily herald changes elsewhere, but they encourage us to re-examine the immersion ‘scene’, searching for insights that might benefit the design of immersion programs both in Canada and elsewhere.

The central claim of this article is that if the core features of immersion are to retain their integrity, changes in pedagogy need to be made to reflect the evolving sociopolitical context of immersion education in Canada and possibly elsewhere.

That evolving context is characterized by the rapid growth of highly diverse populations in large Canadian urban centres. Immigrant parents who speak languages other than English or French at home are sending their children to French immersion classes. If, for example, overt support for the home language is to continue to be a defining characteristic of immersion education, then immersion programming needs to change to recognize home languages other than English.

In the first part of this article, we review the eight core features of immersion identified by Swain and Johnson, indicating if and how each needs to be changed to remain faithful to the goal of additive bilingualism. The second part considers the issue of the increasing diversity of the immersion student population in Canada and discusses several studies that provide evidence that immersion programs are compatible with multilingualism. In the third part, we take an excursion into sociocultural theory, using it to argue for supporting students’ first languages in school. In the final part of this article we discuss exemplary activities which have taken
place in regular classrooms in which the students are highly ethnolinguistically diverse. We believe that such activities can be equally effective in immersion programs.

### Core features of immersion programs

What features define immersion as a category within bilingual education? Have these features changed since Swain and Johnson identified them in 1997? These core features are listed in Table 1. On the left, the first core feature specifies that, in immersion programs, the second language (L2) is a medium of instruction. In the Canadian context, historically the L2 has been French, and the original participants in immersion were anglophones. As specified in the middle column, however, today many students who enrol in immersion, especially in Canada’s urban centres, speak home languages other than English. French, for them, is a third or fourth language; therefore, French is better characterized as the immersion language (as shown in column 3 of the table). However, as we will see, relabelling the L2 as the ‘immersion language’ has important consequences for most of the other core features.

The second feature of prototypical immersion programs refers to the principle that the immersion curriculum parallels that of the local curriculum. This principle still holds. A question that arises in the face of the more ethnically diverse student body in immersion today is whether these immigrant children have difficulty mastering the regular school curriculum. One study of French immersion students that separated out results of ‘mainstream’ from immigrant students was a curriculum-based, province-wide testing program in Ontario. It found that immigrant students in grades 3 and 6 enrolled in immersion did, in fact, perform at levels in mathematics and English literacy comparable to those of mainstream students (e.g. Turnbull, Lapkin and Hart 2003). Thus, as indicated in the middle and left-hand columns of Table 1, this principle remains applicable.

The third feature invokes overt support for the L1. Swain and Johnson (1997: 7) explained: “At a minimum, the students’ L1 is taught as a subject in the curriculum at some stage and to advanced levels.” Today, with a more linguistically diverse student body in many urban areas, the need to support a variety of home languages has asserted itself. However, according to Cummins (personal communication, August 2004), although there are exceptions,

in most immersion programs diverse students’ first languages are invisible and inaudible in the classroom. Unfortunately, teachers are typically not at all proactive in searching for ways to use students’ first languages as a resource, either in immersion or English programs.
Table 1. Revisiting core features of immersion as identified by Swain and Johnson (1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core features of prototypical immersion programs (Swain and Johnson 1997)</th>
<th>Observations made in 2005</th>
<th>Core features restated to reflect new realities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The L2 is a medium of instruction.</td>
<td>The L2 is not always the L2 any more; for many young immigrants, if they choose immersion, it’s L3 learning.</td>
<td>1. The immersion language is the medium of instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum.</td>
<td>This is still true in principle.</td>
<td>2. No change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Overt support exists for the L1.</td>
<td>This has changed dramatically with the influx of immigrants, some of whom enrol in immersion. This is a point of focus for us in this article.</td>
<td>3. Overt support needs to be given to all home languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The program aims for additive bilingualism.</td>
<td>In subtractive bilingualism, L2 proficiency develops at the expense of the L1. We need to avoid this in the face of the influx of immigrants into immersion.</td>
<td>4. No change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Exposure to L2 is largely confined to the classroom.</td>
<td>Still true.</td>
<td>5. Exposure to the immersion language is largely confined to the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency.</td>
<td>Usually the immersion language, French in this case, is new to all students.</td>
<td>6. Students enter with similar levels of proficiency in the immersion language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The teachers are bilingual.</td>
<td>Teachers are not inevitably multilingual and cannot speak all the minority languages represented in the classroom.</td>
<td>7. No change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.</td>
<td>In urban centres we are dealing with multiple and diverse communities.</td>
<td>8. The classroom culture needs to recognize the cultures of the multiple immigrant communities to which the students belong.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In order to maintain the integrity of the core features of immersion in column 1, finding ways to support the diverse first languages in immersion is essential, as indicated under point 3 in column 3.

Using the L1 as a resource for academic learning occurs explicitly in two-way immersion programs in the United States where half the students are anglophones and half are minority language speakers. In such programs, the minority language speakers are the language experts, for example in Spanish, as are the American anglophones in English. For both language groups the objective of the two-way program is to acquire the other classroom language while maintaining and developing literacy in the home language. Such programs are not yet found in Canada. A key feature of successful two-way immersion programs is that they provide overt, sustained first language (L1) support for the minority language and culture. In this case, students as well as teachers provide models of the target language.

The fourth feature is perhaps the most defining feature of immersion: it speaks to the additive nature of the program. Unlike subtractive bilingualism where L2 proficiency develops at the expense of the L1 or home language, immersion education is intended to teach the target language while providing for the full development of the home language. Where the home language is English, full support is ensured in the school setting as well. Where the home language is an immigrant language, that support has not been built in so far. We will look at some of the relevant research on this aspect below.

The fifth feature involves the principle that exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom. This is still the case, but we must now refer to the target language as the immersion language.

The sixth core feature of immersion programs specifies that students enter the program with similar (and limited) levels of target-language proficiency. This feature still characterizes immersion education in Canada today and again makes it different from two-way immersion programs in the US. In Canadian classrooms, there may be multiple immigrant languages represented, but none of them is used as a medium of instruction. All students are seeking to acquire a high level of proficiency in the immersion language, French.

The seventh core feature refers to the languages spoken by the teachers. Teachers are characteristically bilingual in English and French but are rarely multilingual.

The eighth core feature is of particular interest. Swain and Johnson articulated it as follows: “The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.” In Canada’s large urban centres today, however, the local community may often be a highly heterogeneous multilingual group. The challenge in Canada is to celebrate this rich diversity while teaching through the medium of the second official language.
Increasing diversity in the Canadian immersion population

In major cities in Canada (Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal) approximately 20–40% of the population speaks a language other than French or English at home. Across Canada nearly 20% of census respondents in 2001 were recent immigrants. A recent UN report finds that Toronto has the second largest proportion of foreign-born residents of any city in the world (Federation for American Immigration Reform 2004), with almost half its residents born outside of Canada. In the last decade we have had to let go of the assumption that early immersion classes would be full of homogeneous young anglophones and begin to think about how we can apply the principles of multilingual education not only to regular classrooms but also in the immersion setting: “Multicultural education provides an alternative vision for organizing teaching and learning in contemporary schools, one that contrasts with the largely ethnocentric models that exist at present in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere” (Genesee and Gándara 1999: 670). Genesee and Gándara construe multilingual education as a philosophy of education, emphasizing the value of what children bring to school with them in terms of language, cultural and community resources.

What does the Canadian research on immigrant children enrolled in immersion tell us about their relative success? Three key studies speak to this issue. The first is a large-scale study focusing on the achievement in French of students enrolled in immersion who spoke an immigrant language at home. The second is a case study of three immigrant children enrolled in early French immersion in Vancouver. The third study is also situated in Vancouver and focuses on Asian parents who enrol their children in early immersion. We discuss each of these studies before turning to a US-based study of a two-way immersion program.

In 1990, immigrant children in Toronto tended to enrol in immersion programs with a later start. Parents reasoned that it was important for their children to establish skills in the dominant language of the community, English, before tackling French (their third language). Swain et al. (1990) studied close to 200 such students at the grade 8 level (approximately 13 years old) who had begun immersion in grade 5. The language backgrounds represented included both Romance (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) and non-Romance (German, Polish, Hebrew, Tagalog, Chinese, Greek and Korean) languages. When the researchers compared the achievement of these students in French writing, reading, speaking and listening to that of mainstream anglophone students enrolled in French immersion, they found that the immigrant students performed as well as or better than anglophones in French. The subset who performed even better were those immigrant students who had developed literacy skills in their home languages. From this study it was concluded that literacy in the immigrant language “contributed to a generalized higher level of proficiency in the third (immersion) language” (Swain et al. 1990: 120).
At the time Swain et al. were conducting the above study, they were also evaluating the French skills of early immersion students. But they could not identify a sufficiently large number of immigrant children in the program with the early start to conduct similar analyses. Since that time, other Canadian researchers have conducted small-scale studies that have yielded rich descriptive information on the progress of immigrant students in early French immersion.

In a qualitative case study of three immigrant children in grades 3, 4 and 6, Dagenais and Day (1998) studied three school communities. Two of the schools had populations in excess of 500, representing 21–23 language groups. The other school was more suburban, serving primarily children of English- and Asian-speaking families.

The three children in question came from upper middle-class families that chose to maintain the home language and foster trilingualism through French immersion at school. The families were tied to their cultural communities and intent on preserving their cultural identity. They also had had some experience of bilingualism themselves and believed that trilingualism for their children would confer social and economic advantages. Cathryn’s mother reported:

> The benefit is when we go back to Vietnam, people say that she has no problem communicating and I told them that she can’t read [in Vietnamese]. I also told them that she also studies in English and French. They were very impressed. My cousin was unable to speak Vietnamese to my grandma but she [my daughter] could. So to me it was a compliment. (Dagenais and Day 1998: 113)

Immersion teachers generally echoed the positive attitudes of parents and children. One of them commented:

> And all those pupils who speak a language other than English at home, they aren’t afraid . . . to make attempts; to make predictions, to take risks . . . They seem more comfortable with uncertainty. (Dagenais and Day 1998: 389; our translation)

In sum, for the most part, immersion and regular English teachers interviewed in this study viewed trilingualism as a resource, not “a handicap” (Dagenais and Day 1998: 388).

In another related ethnographic study, Dagenais and Berron documented “language practices, educational strategies and representations of self in South Asian families of diverse language backgrounds” (2001: 145) living in the greater Vancouver area. These parents were well educated and moved between their family languages (including Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, and English) with ease. The researchers noted that, based on the parents’ “own multilingual practices in their country of origin . . . and their continuing
multilingual interactions in their country of adoption” (Dagenais and Berron 2001: 149), they supported and encouraged multilingualism in their children. Here are two of the reasons provided in the parental interviews:

1. . . . They learn [English] from their friends. French is more difficult and to get the accent and those sort of things, we could not be helpful to them. So, that was our priority.
2. And we chose French, okay, English, we knew she would be able to pick up easily, right. And we chose French. We did that because it is Canada’s second official language. (Dagenais and Berron 2001: 150)

Other reasons included the importance of French as a world language, the association of a command of several languages with tolerance, and the fact that enrolment in immersion presents a challenging school experience. According to the researchers, for these immigrants’ children “the coexistence of languages is a reality not only at home, but at school as well, where French is added to their daily linguistic repertoire” (Dagenais and Berron 2001: 152). The researchers undertook to follow these families and document how such children construct their multilingual identities.

The last study we will discuss is a two-way Korean/English immersion program in Los Angeles. Rolstad (1997) focused on several speakers of Tagalog and Spanish enrolled in the program and its impact on their academic achievement, language development and ethnic identity. The study is unique in investigating how minority language children fare in an immersion program involving a second minority language. In contextualizing her study, Rolstad (1997: 48) states:

while in the U.S. bilingualism among ethnic minorities is often viewed as threatening to political and cultural unity, in the European context, multilingualism is frequently seen as a solution to the problem of easing ethnic conflict and increasing solidarity among various groups.

Rolstad explained that in some highly diverse areas of large cities, there may be too few majority (English) language speakers to achieve the optimal balance of students for a two-way immersion program, where half the students should be from one language group and the other half from the second. Such was the case in the Korean/English two-way program in Los Angeles, where half the children spoke Korean at home and developed both Korean and English at school. The other half were Spanish or Tagalog speakers, who learned Korean and English at school; thus for them, Korean was a third language.

The researcher followed nine students, five from kindergarten through grade 5 and four from kindergarten through grade 4. The comparison students were matched for ethnicity and came either from a Spanish bilingual class or the English mainstream class in the same school. The comparison students
from the Spanish program all spoke Spanish as an L1, and those from the English class also spoke Spanish, Korean or Tagalog. The findings of the study indicated that the third-language minority students (Spanish and Tagalog speakers) in the Korean/English bilingual program experienced no detrimental effects in terms of their ethnic identification, academic achievement or linguistic development [in English and Korean] in comparison with language minority children in other programs, with the exception that they have not developed, or in some cases may have lost, their first language proficiency. (Rolstad 1997: 59)

The importance of the study lies in its finding that such children flourished in the two-way immersion program, with no apparent loss of ethnic identification. Indeed, it is possible that the two-way program constitutes a better alternative for them than mainstream schooling. In the immersion classroom, they gained another language and developed their English in a climate where each language was valued. This stands in contrast to what might otherwise happen to the language minority students in mainstream English classes; there they might have a submersion experience. In both settings they could be in danger of losing their home language, but in the two-way immersion setting, they gained another minority language, and they studied in an atmosphere that was supportive of minority languages and cultures.

In summary, we have shown that a number of the core features of immersion education as stated by Swain and Johnson in 1997 need to be revised in order to maintain the main goal of additive bilingualism. This is because the population of immersion students – in large urban cities in Canada, at least – has diversified, linguistically and ethnically. This has meant that for many immersion students the immersion language is really an L3 or L4; and the L1 is not just English but could be one of many other languages.

The role of the L1

This “new” type of immersion classroom opens up a new set of questions: How is it possible to support and develop the use of the L1 when there are so many L1s in a classroom? How essential is it to acknowledge and allow for the use of these many L1s in immersion classes? The target language is, after all, the immersion language and not the L1s of the students. However, if the L1 is not supported, then potentially, though not necessarily, as we have seen, subtractive bilingualism rather than additive bilingualism may result.

Researchers such as Cummins (e.g. 1986) have argued strongly for the development and maintenance of the L1 on the grounds that, in the case of minority students, the L1 provides a solid and necessary foundation on
which the majority language can be acquired. Here we focus on another argument that has not received much attention in the research literature but for which there is strong theoretical support. The argument, based in a sociocultural theory of mind, appears highly relevant in contexts in which students are dealing with cognitively complex concepts in their second or third language, as in immersion education. A central claim of sociocultural theory is that speaking and writing are cognitive tools that mediate learning.

This means that speaking and writing – whether in the L1, L2 or L3 – are tools that we use to learn; we use them to learn subjects such as science, math, or history, and we use them to learn language. The conversations we have about science, for example, play a significant role in creating the basis of our scientific knowledge. We solve scientific problems using language. And when our L2 or L3 proficiency is low, or when the concepts are particularly complex, we turn to our L1 because it is the best resource many of us have for working through complex problems. Similarly, the conversations we have about language play a significant role in creating the basis of our linguistic knowledge. And furthermore, we solve language problems using language, and often we do that in the L1 even though the topic of discussion is the L2 or L3.

What this means is that the dialogue that learners engage in, no matter in what language, takes on new significance. In that dialogue, we can observe learners operating on linguistic (or scientific, etc.) data – operations that move inward to become part of the participants’ own mental activity. In dialogue with others, we see learning taking place – we see learning in progress. Below, we review several research studies that exemplify this claim that speaking and writing are cognitive tools.

Vygotsky (e.g. [1934] 1987, 1978) and neo-Vygotskians such as Wertsch (e.g. 1985, 1991, 1998) have theorized that language is a mediating tool in mental processes such as attending or planning. Language is also socially derived: as Stetsenko and Arievitch (1997: 161) stated, “psychological processes emerge first in collective behaviour, in co-operation with other people, and only subsequently become internalized as the individual’s own ‘possessions’”.

Building on these ideas, Swain (1995, 2000) and Swain and Lapkin (1998, in press) have shown how collaborative dialogue, in the L1 or L2, mediates L2 learning. Collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building (Swain 2000: 102). The data presented in these studies show that through collaborative dialogue students engage, often in the L1, in co-constructing their L2 and in building knowledge about it. From their collective behaviour, individual mental resources develop: that is, “the knowledge building that learners have collectively accomplished becomes a tool for the further individual use of their second language” (Swain and Lapkin 2000: 254).

Behan and Turnbull (1997) conducted a classroom-based study to explore L1 use with grade 7 students enrolled in a late French immersion program.
The students had begun the program in the fall, and the study took place in the winter term. In preparing to do an oral presentation, the students worked in groups of four and combined individually-held information about the lifestyle and environment of Native peoples. During this cognitively demanding task, the groups were told to speak in French. The researchers monitored two of the four groups to remind the students to use French when they slipped into using English (their L1). They tape-recorded the talk of all the students as they collaborated on this task as well as their subsequent oral presentations. The groups of students who were not monitored for their use of French used more English than the monitored groups as they prepared for their oral presentation. The findings appeared counter-intuitive: the presentations of the non-monitored groups were judged to be better than those of the monitored groups. It turned out that instances of task management, information sharing and vocabulary searches where English was used were carried forward into the final oral presentation in French. The researchers concluded that “L1 use can both support and enhance L2 development, functioning simultaneously as an effective tool for dealing with cognitively demanding content” (Behan and Turnbull 1997: 41).

Swain and Lapkin (2000) examined the use of English by French immersion grade 7 students as they were writing a story in French. They found that about 25% of all turns in the dialogue of the students were in English. Of the turns in English, a majority were used to “move the task along” (e.g. task management); approximately another third were used to help themselves to focus attention (e.g. vocabulary search, focus on form); and the remainder of the turns in English were used for interpersonal functions. The results also showed that, in general and as expected, the higher the level of the students’ proficiency in French, the immersion language, the less English they used. This suggests that as proficiency in the L2 increases, it comes to serve cognitive functions as well.

Antón and DiCamilla (1998) focused on the use of L1 in the discourse of L2 learners while they engaged in L2 writing tasks. Five pairs of university students of Spanish in a beginners’ course did L2 writing tasks. The students’ first language was English. The researchers documented the importance of the L1 as a psychological tool serving three key functions: to provide each other with scaffolded help, to establish and maintain intersubjectivity, and to externalize inner speech during cognitively difficult activities.

Villamil and de Guerrero’s (1996) findings from their study of the discourse of Spanish-speaking university students engaged in peer revision of their L2 (English) writing are in accord with those of Antón and DiCamilla. Villamil and de Guerrero identified five mediating strategies used by the collaborating students. One of these was labelled “using the L1”; yet two other strategies also made extensive use of the L1: scaffolding and the use of private speech. In the words of the researchers, “the L1 was an essential tool for making meaning of text, retrieving language from memory, exploring
and expanding content, guiding their action through the task, and maintaining dialogue” (Villamil and de Guerrero 1996: 60).

In summary, speaking and writing serve to mediate cognition. Vygotsky, Barnes (1992), Wells (1999), and others have argued that they can serve as a means of development by reshaping experience. As Smagorinsky (1998: 172–3) said, “[t]he process of rendering thinking into speech [or writing] is not simply a matter of memory retrieval, but a process through which thinking reaches a new level of articulation.” Ideas are crystallized and sharpened, and inconsistencies become more obvious.

This notion of “talking it through” – of rendering thinking into speech – is well illustrated in Example 1: here we see Sue, a grade 7 French immersion student, who (as she talked with the researcher during a stimulated recall session) verbalized her understanding of the meaning of the reflexive pronoun *se*. She thought that the reflexive pronoun was in fact a tense marker – a rather remarkable and interesting interpretation of a reflexive pronoun. What is key in this example is that through her own verbalization in English, her first and strongest language, Sue talked herself into understanding that she did not understand – a step that was crucial in her learning process.

**Example 1.** Excerpt from stimulated recall protocol of Sue

Sue, turn 48: . . . because I thought it meant like he was going to. So he was *se lever* ['to get up'], which means like in a moment, not exactly right away.

Sue, turn 58: He’s doing it and then he is doing it again. Instead of just kind of uh he did this and that and that, so it’s a better form of saying it by adding the *se*. It’s more French.

Res., turn 73: Do you see a difference between the two? [ *se brosse les dents* and *brosse les dents* 'brush one’s teeth' / 'brush the teeth']

Sue, turn 74: Uh . . . yeah, because when you say *se brosse les dents*, it’s kind of like um he is brushing his teeth and then he’s gonna comb his hair. But when you take off the *se*, it’s like so he brushed his teeth, combed his hair and then kind of left.

Res., turn 77: Why would you need *se*?

Sue, turn 78: Um, I think . . . I don’t know. I don’t really get why you do need *se*.

In turn 48, Sue was responding to a question from the researcher about the verb *se lever*. At that point Sue and the researcher were watching the video of Sue where she was noticing the differences between her short story and the reformulation of it. We can see in Sue’s response to the researcher’s question about *se lever* that Sue thought that *se* marked the notion of the progressive aspect as well as the ‘near future’ – *futur proche*. The interpretation that *se* marks the progressive aspect is also supported by the utterance in turn 58: “He’s doing it . . .”. 

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When asked about the difference between *se brosse les dents* and *brosse les dents* in turn 73, Sue suggested that removing the *se* resulted in situating the event in the past (turn 74).

Across these excerpts, we see Sue generating different explanations of the role of the pronoun *se* and becoming increasingly confused. Finally, in turn 78, she acknowledges that she simply does not understand. Sue has talked herself, using her most formidable cognitive resource – her L1 – into understanding that she does not understand the use of *se* in French. Sue’s verbalization represents a two-fold accomplishment: she has externalized her thinking, and her externalized thinking has provided her with an “object” on which to reflect. In other words, her speaking was a tool through which her thinking was articulated and transformed into an artifactual form and as such became available as a source of further reflection. Sue recognized through the inconsistencies in her explanations that she did not understand what *se* was all about – an important step for her L2 development to proceed. Sue engaged in a complex process of hypothesis formation, which, had she been provided with help at the time, might have led to even further progress in her language development.

Sociocultural theory, then, puts language production in a “star role”, so to speak (Swain 2005). Speaking – and writing – are conceived of as cognitive tools – tools that mediate internalization; that externalize internal psychological activity, resocializing and re-cognizing it for the individual; that construct and deconstruct knowledge; and that regulate and are regulated by human agency. The L1 is certainly a significant resource in serving this function, and losing it is a significant loss.

**Summary and implications for program development**

This article began with a review of the core features of immersion programs identified in 1997 by Swain and Johnson. We have seen that some of the eight core features have remained the same while others need to change to reflect the changing demographic of large cities in North America and the multilingual, multiethnic nature of many immersion programs.

We discussed several studies focusing on the participation of immigrant children in immersion programs in Canada. One showed that immigrant children with literacy in their home language outperformed mainstream anglophone immersion students in French, the L2 of the anglophone students and the L3 of the immigrant students. Two qualitative studies suggested that where families choose to maintain the home language and culture and value multilingualism, their children thrive in immersion; they transfer reading skills across languages, tolerate ambiguity well, and succeed academically.

In a US-based study of two-way immersion, the researchers had little information about language practices in the minority language homes. But
those minority language students filling the places of anglophone students in a Korean/English two-way program also fared well in terms of academic achievement, linguistic development and ethnic identification. Even though their own home languages (Tagalog and Spanish in this case) received no support in the immersion program, the climate was supportive of minority languages and affirming of the children’s ethnic identity.

How does one establish such a climate? It is important to allow for the use of multiple L1s in the classroom and celebrate the diverse cultures represented. In this way additive bilingualism/multilingualism is made possible. In the previous section, we discussed a perspective on the first language provided by a sociocultural theory of mind. Regardless of what language is used, speaking and writing are cognitive tools that mediate learning. Learning the immersion language is mainly done through the immersion language, of course; but some of that learning, specifically solving language problems or building new knowledge, can occur in language production in the L1 or the immersion language.6

We reviewed several studies that identified functions of the L1, including:

• developing strategies to manage the task
• helping learners to scaffold each other
• maintaining intersubjectivity/negotiating one’s way through the task
• externalizing inner speech during cognitively demanding activities
• releasing tension/socializing.

These functions act to support immersion language learning and learning during the ‘mainstream’ (in the Canadian case, English) portion of the school day. How can multiple L1s be brought into classrooms that allocate half the day or more to teaching and learning in the immersion language? Here we turn to insights from regular classes with high concentrations of immigrant students. These insights are garnered from the work of researchers like Cummins. In a chapter written by Cummins and Chow, a grade 1 teacher from a progressive, innovative school in the greater Toronto area, the authors explain how students’ home languages and cultures can been seen as “potential resources for learning” (Chow and Cummins 2003: 33). In a school where English was the only language of instruction for a student body representing over 40 languages, the staff engaged in brainstorming about how to make those languages central to the learning process, based on a view of literacy as “multidimensional and integrated with all aspects of students’ lives inside and outside the school” (ibid.). They drew on Edwards’ (1998) book, The Power of Babel, citing the following excerpt:

While it is clearly very difficult for language learners to write in English in the early stages, there is no reason why they cannot draft, revise and edit in their first language. This approach allows them to develop their skills while joining in the same activity as their peers. It can also enhance

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their status in the class. Instead of emphasizing what they cannot do, the focus shifts to their achievements. 7 (Edwards 1998: 67)

One way Chow and her colleagues decided to implement this approach was through dual-language books which the children carried between home and school. These books were accompanied by audio-cassettes for recording the stories both in English and the home language. They exposed students and their parents to English texts while permitting students to access prior knowledge through their L1. They enabled the school to let parents and students know that minority languages and cultures were valued and were seen as resources for the classroom and school. The dual-language book project affirmed the value of the L1 in both oral and written communication and helped to minimize the frustration that comes with an inability to express one’s ideas or feelings adequately in the mainstream language.

In order to be better informed about the students’ homes, the teachers developed a questionnaire focusing on home literacy practices and recruited parents to help out in classrooms by telling some of their favorite stories in the home language or English in the class. Some families had L1 books that they were willing to share. These supplemented the multilingual books the school could acquire from publishers, books which were selected because of their repetitive language, colorful illustrations, and embedded academic concepts (related to science or math). The grade 1 students also wrote their own stories that were translated by older students in the school or by parents. The books were displayed outside the school office, helping to show new families registering their children for the next academic year that the school valued immigrant languages and cultures.

The dual-language book project (and the story-telling events related to it) prompted students to transfer literacy skills from their home language to the school language, connect meanings across languages, create their own literature and art in two languages and publish their stories. Can the philosophy and values that underlie such a project prove applicable to the immersion context? We think that they can. Immersion education encourages concept development across two languages and literacy/language development across the curriculum; adding other home languages to the mix is consistent with these principles. Projects such as the one described above (see also Skourtou, Kourtis-Kazoullis and Cummins in press) have affective as well as academic value and point the way to effective immersion practices in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. We wish to thank Sarah Cohen, Jim Cummins, Frances Giampapa, Callie Mady, Kimberly MacDonald and Agustina Tocalli-Beller for their feedback on an earlier version of this article. The contents have been presented in several versions and
forums: Merrill Swain presented a version at the German Applied Linguistics Conference held at the University of Wuppertal, Germany, September 2004, and at the conference on Pathways to Bilingualism held at the University of Minnesota, October 2004. Sharon Lapkin presented a version at the conference on CLIL and Immersion Education held in Kokkola, Finland in November 2004.

2. Current urban demographics in Canada suggest that two-way programs could usefully be implemented in big cities. School language policies would need to emphasize the importance of diverse languages and cultures.


4. This did happen to the minority children in the Rolstad study.

5. An important caveat is that minority language children born in the host country with minimal L1 support in school may not develop the L1 sufficiently to be used as a cognitive or academic tool.

6. We are referring specifically to the learners’ use of their L1; the issue of whether teachers should have recourse to L1 use is controversial (see e.g. Turnbull and Arnett 2002).

7. We are aware that some students may not be writing in any language when they begin the program. Other ideas to enhance the prestige of minority languages in the school include offering heritage language programs during the day, hiring teachers who speak minority languages, and including in teacher preparation programs a component on multilingualism and multiculturalism.

References


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The sociopolitical context of immersion education


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[Received 21/1/05]