Comparing three French bilingual immersion programs in Australian schools

Abstract

Australian language policy over several decades has recognized the value of a multilingual community. This has resulted in the emergence of a diverse range of bilingual immersion programs in schools, in which a proportion of the curriculum is delivered in a language other than English. This paper considers three French bilingual immersion programs and how they negotiate the issues arising from current research into the advantages and challenges of bilingual immersion education.

Introduction

Over the last century, the cognitive benefits of bilingualism revealed in academic research have entered the collective conscious. Beyond being the marker of someone exotic or well travelled, speaking a second language is now understood to offer a suite of advantages beyond the purely linguistic.

During the same period, diverse immigrant communities within the Australian population have influenced Australian language policy at a state and federal level, foregrounding language as an important educational pursuit, a valuable tool for cross-cultural engagement and key to global connection and employability.

One visible outcome of this evolving language policy is the emergence of bilingual immersion programs within Australian schools. While the programs vary in their target language, scope and mode of delivery, they all deliver some proportion of the curriculum in a language other than English.

French has long been a popular choice for language programs in Australian schools — up until 1990, it was the most popular second language in Australian schools (Lo Bianco, 2009, p. 16) and, in 2015, almost four thousand VCE students undertook French as part of their studies (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016). It is not surprising, then, that a number of French language immersion programs have been established within Australian schools.

This paper compares three of these French–English bilingual immersion programs — the early partial immersion program at Camberwell Primary School, in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne; a tripartite immersion program at Glen Eira College, in Melbourne's south-east; and the almost full immersion program at Maroubra's Lycée Condorcet, the International French School of Sydney.

Literature review

Language education in Australia

Waves of immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth century have seen Australia conceptualise itself as a multicultural society. Despite this, as Gibbons (1997, p. 209) notes, no single migrant community has influenced Australian language policy in the way that the French have in Canada or the Spanish in the United States: "This gives English overwhelming political, economic, cultural and social dominance in spite of Australia's ethnic and linguistic diversity, and means that decision makers may not prioritise languages other than English (known in Australia as LOTEs), particularly with regard to resources."

In the absence of a necessarily bilingual context, Australian language policy has long supported the idea of multilingualism (Clyne, 1983, p. 55). During the 70s and 80s, strong government support for the study of languages other than English encouraged teachers to seek innovative and more effective ways to teach languages in schools (Gibbons, 1997, p. 211; Read, 1996, p. 471). What emerged was the first wave of bilingual immersion programs in primary and secondary schools.

Bilingual immersion programs

In Australia, bilingual immersion programs are a relatively new concept. Early examples include the German–English bilingual program at Bayswater Primary School, established in 1981 (Gibbons, 1997, p. 211; Clyne, 1983, p. 24); an Italian–English immersion program for South Australian primary schools, piloted in 1976 (Rubichi, 1983); and the French immersion program at Queensland's Benowa State High School, established in 1985. Other examples include concurrent Vietnamese–English and Mandarin–English programs running at Abbotsford Primary School (Molyneux, 2009); and Khmer language programs in Western Australia (Gibbons, 1997, p. 212).

Australian bilingual immersion programs vary in their structure, purpose and approach. Figure 1 outlines some of the key characteristics that define these programs.

Figure 1—Key characteristics of bilingual immersion programs

Age of commencement	Degree of immersion	Purpose	Curriculum
Early Late	Partial Full	Enrichment Educative Maintenance	CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning LOTE curriculum International curriculum

Advantages of bilingual immersion programs

The focus of immersion programs, along with the increased exposure to the target language, appears to offer a range of advantages for participants. Rado (1976, p. 46) summarises it succinctly: "The school takes the learner from where he stands, builds on and develops what he already knows, and certainly does not waste it. The bilingual's knowledge enables him to use two independent codes."

In terms of overall performance, students in immersion programs have better skills in the target language than those undertaking traditional language classes. At Bayswater Primary School, Clyne (1983, p. 23) observed the effectiveness of immersion in contrast to traditional modes of language learning: "Evaluations have shown repeatedly that children in immersion programs perform better in all skills in L2 than do children in traditional primary school second language programs."

While their productive competence may vary, students in bilingual immersion programs demonstrate stronger aural comprehension skills compared to students in traditional second-language streams. In studying French immersion programs at secondary school, Cryle et al. (1993, p. 96) note: "The students' ability to speak at length in the target language varies considerably … but there can be no doubt that, on average, their aural-oral skills are being carried far beyond what was ever attained in the past, with positive gains being made at the same time in cognitive development and student motivation." At Bayswater Primary School, Clyne (1983, p. 29) observed that "the listening skills of both classes have improved substantially more than those of monolingual control groups. The Bayswater South children function in German in their content subjects just as they do in English."

Concepts acquired in the target languages are reinforced in the first language. De Courcy and Burston's study of Camberwell Primary School students learning maths in French (2000, p. 77) drew upon Cummins' interdependence theory: "Knowledge acquired at school relies on a cognitive pool which can be accessed in L1 or L2, provided that each language is sufficiently mastered." Rado (1976, p. 52) continues this thread: "It seems, therefore, desirable to maximize the bilingual's

knowledge in both languages. In cases of parallel linguistic development, concepts will be reinforced by interlinguistic rather than intralinguistic forms."

Perhaps most importantly, participation in a bilingual immersion program does not appear to have any enduring negative impact on students' English competence (Lo Bianco, 2009). Molyneux's (2009, p. 103) observations of students in the Vietnamese–English and Chinese–English immersion program at Abbotsford Primary School support this idea: "Even the most cautious interpretation of these results would reveal that, in terms of English-language acquisition and proficiency, these students, as a group, experience no academic disadvantage in being taught bilingually for two to three years in the early years of their primary schooling." Clyne (1983, p. 29) had similar findings amongst the students at Bayswater Primary School, despite some retardation in the reading skills of Year 4 students. Rubichi's (1983, p. 44) observations of the Italian–English immersion program in South Australia are consistent: "Since the bilingual approach has been implemented, the children's language development in English does not appear to be jeopardized in any way. In fact, it would appear that their language ability has been enhanced in English as well as in Italian."

Finally, there the cultural aspect of bilingual immersion — students in such programs have an opportunity to build their cultural competency in a way that monolingual or second-language programs may not readily facilitate. For German-background families at Bayswater Primary School, the immersion program encouraged some students to reconnect with their family background (Clyne, 1983). Cross and Gearon (2013, p. 6) found that students in the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) program demonstrated "higher levels of intercultural competence and sensitivity, including more positive attitudes towards other cultures." Further, Hickey and Mejía (2014, p. 134) note the value of immersion programs as a locus for teaching cultural diversity, in the context of Arabic–Hebrew bilingual programs in Israel: "As well as aiming to produce proficiency in both languages among the pupils, this programme also attempts to increase tolerance for cultural diversity before children become strongly affected by negative views in their society."

Lo Bianco (2009, p. 32) is unequivocal in his conclusion: "We can say with confidence that, properly implemented and sustained for a significant period of time, immersion education is a very effective method for achieving its three main goals: (i) learning a second language, (ii) learning subject matter effectively through the second language, and (iii) developing literacy and academic skills in the first language."

Challenges of bilingual immersion programs

While immersion programs undoubtedly offer advantages for students, research has identified a number of challenges to their implementation and success. Alanís, I. and Rodríguez, M. (2008, p. 307) delineate five criteria that determine the success of bilingual immersion programs: (a) administrative and home support; (b) school environment; (c) high-quality instructional personnel; (d) professional development; and (e) instructional design and features.

Perhaps most prominent is the reliance of immersion program upon appropriately qualified staff. "Experience shows that successful programs usually require teaching teams in which native speakers well versed in Australian educational culture work beside Australian teachers who have very high levels of proficiency in the target language," notes Cryle (1993, p. 93). Clyne (1983, p. 31) makes a similar observation in reference to Bayswater Primary School — that immersion programs demand teachers with skills in both the target language and relevant content. "This is a rare competence for Australian-educated bilinguals to have without special training," he concludes.

In particular, immersion programs often emerge from — and thrive thanks to — the passion and commitment of individual teachers. This particular scenario applies to the Camberwell Primary School French immersion program, Cryle (1993, p. 95) note: "Although there has been support for the program, this needs to be more sustained. A serious LOTE policy cannot ride on the backs of its heroines, and while this is one of the rare examples of primary immersion work at this stage, it is unlikely to remain so."

In a similar vein, the intensive nature of bilingual immersion programs means that they can be expensive to operate. As Cryle (1993, p. 93) observes, "Partial immersion requires close, not to say intensive teaching, and is therefore likely to cost above-average amounts of teacher time. It may also entail reduced class sizes, or reduced availability of teachers for other work within the school. Teaching materials, too, can be a problem, because they must be suited to the requirements of local curricula."

There is also the administrative burden — timetabling an immersion program, particularly if it operates alongside a monolingual program, can put extra demands on staff, facilities and limited class time. "Some restructuring is necessary unless children in the bilingual program are permanently kept together as separate classes, something that may have social drawbacks," Clyne (1993, p. 32) notes.

Language choice

"English has widespread lingua franca status, has become the global language of business and is often constructed as 'enough' from a monolingual perspective," Smala, Bergas and Lingard (2013, p. 374) observe. In this light, it is worth noting the range of factors that influence how schools choose languages for their immersion programs and how parents choose languages for their children's enrolment.

Today, a diverse range of languages are taught in Australian schools. The Victorian curriculum offers VCE study designs for 46 languages, a number of which are offered in first and second language variants (VCAA, 2015).

The languages chosen as objects of study are not necessarily those with a strong community in Australia. The decisions are often driven by political/historical tradition and perceived status. According to Cryle (1993, p. 99), "There are many documented cases of parent groups voting for the introduction of French into their schools, over their own language, because of their perception of it as useful currency, as the language of education, or as a language of political neutrality able to be used in situations where cultural and ethnic tensions might arise."

Parents elect immersion programs based on the perceived cultural capital their children may gain from participation. "Immersion programmes seem to attract parents who prioritise access to a global society through language and intercultural skills over prestigious private schools as catalysts for their aspirations," conclude Smala, Bergas and Lingard (2013, p. 381). They go on to note that 88 percent of Canadian Anglophone parents who enrolled their children in French immersion programs did so because of the increased job opportunities a second language would bring, rather than the cultural harmony promoted by the Canadian Government.

Methodology

This study emerges from a research exercise (Task C6.2) proposed by Chin and Wigglesworth (2007, p. 303). It draws upon the existing literature to identify the key themes shaping bilingual immersion programs. This research was primarily conducted via journal articles and Australian language policy documents.

An in-depth comparison of three bilingual immersion programs in Australia schools was also undertaken. The three programs were selected for their varied approaches to bilingual immersion.

To better understand these immersion programs, the author reviewed the relevant school websites, focusing on both descriptive marketing content (external facing) and administrative information for students and parents (inward facing). Analysis of the three programs was guided by the questions proposed for Task C6.2).

Discussion

Three models for bilingual immersion education

This paper considers three very different French bilingual immersion programs within Australian schools.

The first is a long-running early partial immersion program at Camberwell Primary School, in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Established in 1991, the program caters to students from Prep to Year 6. Around half of each day's tuition is delivered in French. The program is mandatory for all students attending the school.

The second program is that offered by Glen Eira Secondary College. Students in this program can elect one of three streams: French first language, French immersion or French LOTE. The extent of French tuition and curriculum varies by stream. The program is elective.

The final program is that offered by the Lycée Condorcet, the International French School of Sydney. This program runs from *Petite Section* (equivalent to three-year-old kindergarten) through to *Terminale* (Year 12). Students at the school undertake the French school curriculum. The program is mandatory from commencement through to *Seconde* (Year 10), at which points students choose which school certificate they will pursue (French or international).

Curriculum

Curriculum in bilingual immersion programs is one of the key issues discussed in the literature. Each of the programs considered here takes a different approach.

Though both Victorian schools cater to different age groups, their programs deliver similar subjects in French — French, maths and science. In addition, students at Glen Eira College undertake history and geography classes delivered in French during Years 7 and 8. As noted by Clyne (1993, p. 24), these subjects are "all 'doing' subjects with a strong non-verbal component," in which concepts can be readily demonstrated. Clyne (1993, p. 24) and Read (1996, p. 473) observed that the same subjects were part of the immersion programs at Bayswater Primary School and Benowa State High School.

While all students at Camberwell Primary School follow the local curriculum, students at Glen Eira College can choose between the Australian curriculum (for the immersion and LOTE streams) and the French distance curriculum endorsed by the *Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance* (National Centre for Long-Distance Teaching) for the first-language stream. One limitation is that the CNED curriculum only takes students through to the end of Year 9 — they are still required to complete the VCE. However, the school's immersion and French language streams accelerate students' VCE studies – students undertake these

subjects across Years 10 and 11 and then begin university-level French during Year 12.

Lycée Condorcet is accredited by the French Ministry of Education, allowing the school to offer the French curriculum. At kindergarten students begin with classes split evenly between French and English. During primary levels, this reduces to 25 percent English, comprising approximately four hours of English language, one hour of history and geography, one hour of music and one hour of visual arts. In *collège* (middle school), students complete around seven hours of English tuition per week. For senior secondary, students choose between the International Baccalaureate (delivered in English) or the General Baccalaureate (delivered in French).

Demographics

In considering the objective of the programs — whether enrichment, education or maintenance (Gibbons, 1997, p. 209) – it becomes clear that each program is different.

The Camberwell Primary School program is clearly structured for enrichment rather than maintenance. The school website explains that just 10% of students are from French-speaking families. Instead, the program seeks to introduce all students to a basic level of French.

In contrast, the streamed approach of Glen Eira College accommodates students of varying abilities. Enrolment documentation on the school website notes that students undertaking the immersion and first-language streams require an advanced level of French.

Of the three, the Lycée Condorcet most actively targets children from French backgrounds, though it is by no means universal. The proportion of French students rises from 33 percent in the primary levels to 62 percent by senior secondary. In contrast, the number of Australian students drops from 25 per cent in primary school to just 8 percent during senior secondary.

Marketing bilingualism

Despite the depth of research into the advantages of bilingual education, the schools make few concrete assertions on their website about the benefits of their immersion programs. Glen Eira College makes a vague reference to the "significant cognitive benefits" of immersion, but provides no further detail.

In marketing its immersion program, Camberwell Primary School draws upon the available research to deliver a list of the benefits of immersion education, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2—Advantages of bilingual education proposed by Camberwell Primary School

Language awareness	Social psychology	Mental flexibility
Linguistic development	Communicative sensitivity	Divergent thinking
Cognitive development	Categorisation skills	Creative thinking
Educational development	Concept formation	Convergent thinking

Source: http://camberwellps.vic.edu.au/bilingual-education/

In contrast, the Lycée Condorcet makes few specific claims about the value of bilingualism. But this may not be so surprising given its context and mission. The school is bilingual by virtue of its Australian context, and what it offers is closer to a monolingual French program. In this light, the school appears to place more emphasis on the rigour of its French academic program than on the advantages of bilingual immersion.

Parent involvement

As noted by Rubichi (1983, p. 43), "a very important aspect of the bilingual program is the involvement and active participation of parents," and that appears to hold true for these schools. The websites of all three schools makes reference to active parent associations and all three programs offer advice for parents to help support their child's bilingualism.

The Lycée Condorcet Parent Association is particularly visible — it has its own website with extensive FAQs for parents and acts as a repository for school documents and notices.

Conclusion

Studies over the last few decades have identified the many advantages of bilingual immersion programs. Besides their ability to offer a fertile environment for language acquisition, they appear to be more effective than traditional language learning models and can thus act as a catalyst for the other cognitive benefits of bilingualism.

The three bilingual immersion programs considered in this paper appear to navigate some of the pitfalls of bilingual programs —lack of structural support to maintain the program, parental concern about students' learning in subjects delivered in the target language, lack of continuity — and exemplify many of the conclusions emerging from the research. While the immediate benefits for language acquisition are clear, a longitudinal study looking at the long-term language skills of immersion students would be a worthwhile way to gauge the long-term impacts of immersion education.

Perhaps their biggest success is their ability to provide an authentic communicative need to master the target language — an impetus that rarely develops from

traditional language learning methods in an largely monolinguistic culture, as noted by Read (1996, p. 472).

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