

BOOK REVIEWS

BILINGUAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN
The St. Lambert Experiment

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248 pp.

More than seven years have passed since the publication of Bilingual Education of Children, and yet this book still merits a close reading by all those who are interested in the development of bilingualism in children. The St. Lambert Experiment reports on the progress of children (5 to 11 years old) over a five-year period as they develop second language skills. A comprehensive battery of tests measured intelligence as well as achievement in a non-language subject, mathematics. The children's perceptions of themselves as well as their attitudes towards others were studied. Once the data was collected it was analyzed in terms of the experimental group, the children who were taught through the medium of a second language; and the control groups, the children who were taught through their native language.

This research study was conceived as a result of the dissatisfaction expressed by a group of English speaking parents towards the existing French as a Second Language (FSL) program. The parents considered the FSL program to be deficient for the need to speak French in Montreal. They realized that neither they nor their children were bilingual even though they had "studied" French in FSL classes.

In order to compensate for this failing a small group of English speaking parents pressured the public school system to investigate and implement an effective course of study which enables their children to become bilingual.

Although the school board and the administrators were reluctant, one experimental kindergarten class was created. From the first day of school the English-speaking five-year-olds were "immersed" in a total French learning environment. The kindergarten program resembled other kinder programs designed for native French speakers and included such activities as cutting, painting, music and play. The teacher was a native French

speaker who conducted the class as if she were a French monolingual. She introduced the children to French in the most natural manner possible. The children listened to and absorbed the language through the variety of activities. The teacher did not teach French as a separate and independent subject but rather taught through the medium of French. Even so, the goal of the year was the preparation of the children so that they would be successful in learning through French the basic skills and concepts which form the Grade I curriculum for French speaking children.

Four questions guided the measurements, the comparisons and the evaluation of the children's progress at the end of each consecutive school year from 1966 to 1971. Presented here with each question are the findings by the end of Grade IV.

1. What effect does an educational program conducted primarily in the second language have on the development of children's native language skills?

Although the experimental group of English speaking children received their instruction through the medium of a second language, French, this did not seem to retard or negatively affect the children's development in their native language. These children's reading, comprehension, and knowledge in English was comparable to that of the English-speaking children who received their instruction in their native language.

2. How well do children progress in second language competency when that language (French) is used as the medium of instruction or when they are "immersed" in the second language?

The experimental group of English-speaking children were comparable to the French-speaking children in comprehension skills, knowledge of concepts in French and vocabulary. The English-speaking children demonstrated native-like competency in French reading. However, they were not comparable to the French speakers in terms of expression, enunciation, rhythm and intonation.

3. How well do English-speaking children trained through a second language function in a non-language subject such as mathematics?

The experimental group of children received their mathematical instruction exclusively in French. Yet their achievement was comparable to the children who received their mathematical instruction in their first language. It is interesting to note that the experimental group of children transferred their mathematical understanding to solving similar problems in English.

4. Does the home-school language switch affect favorably or unfavorably the measured intelligence of children?

Previous studies have suggested that bilingualism can enhance cognitive functioning. However, the preliminary results of this study indicate that there are neither intellectual deficits nor intellectual advantages attributable to bilingualism.

In view of these findings, educators throughout the world and in Mexico ought to examine and evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of their second language programs for young children. The implications of this study suggests that young children may successfully learn a second language through content and practical experiences rather than through formal language sessions devoted to pattern practice drills and exercises.

Our attention needs to focus on further examination of how young children become bilingual within a satisfying learning environment.

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