When Jacques Cartier arrived in Quebec three hundred years ago, probably never imagined that one day his mother tongue, French, would coexist with his everlasting enemy’s, English. The social and political development of Canada is very closely related to its neighbours. For many years, Canada was under the influence of the English, and later of the Americans. The effects of this political domination have directed the French community’s educational and cultural life. This paper’s main aim is to describe and analyse, explain and evaluate the Immersion Bilingual Education in French Canada. Firstly, this paper will show Quebec’s cultural identification trying to underline the deep roots of French culture in this Province. The deep roots of French justify the present differences between this province and the rest of the country. Secondly, there is description of the bilingual model currently used in Canada. Finally, there is an in depth evaluation of the most relevant social and personal factors that characterise the program. Cartier and Champlin were among the first colonists in arriving to Canada. They established the first settlements in Nova Scotia. In 1713 this province came under British domination. The British expansion continued Westwards. The French defeat in the Seven Years War allowed General James Wolfe to gain Quebec for his King. Politically this was the end of French hegemony in Canada. The French occupied the Southern part of the country while the North remained English. In 1774 the Quebec Act enlarged the province, and occurred important rights for the French residents. Canadian-French political and social autonomy is clear since those days only in the last years, there have been major changes. The Liberal party has to face a confronted situation between Quebecois Independentists and British Columbia separatists. Besides, on those days, Quebecois were going for an extensive home rule (if not independence), and the current situation was becoming increasingly difficult.

In relation to language, French is presently the official tongue in the province despite the rest of the country being officially bilingual. This has generated a diglosic situation. French was the main language in the province while English was kept for national affairs – such as national state politics, business, etc. Quebec City is almost bilingual, and French is
mostly used in politics and in all other aspects of social life. In Montreal, Heller (1982) observed that language choice is very important, and that when there is a possibility of choosing a language, negotiation became a capital question. As he observed Quebecois use one language or another depending on their “judgement of personal treatment” (1982: 118) Surprisingly, as seen by Lambert (1967), French Canadians have “a poor valuation about themselves, apparently viewing their linguistic and cultural group as somewhat inferior to the English Canadian [group]” (Wardhaugh, 1986: 110). As a result of this situation there has been an increasing social protection towards French, on the one hand, and a local stigmatization of English on the other. English is used for national business, in conversation with outsiders, foreign visitors, and within the English-speaking group. French, however, is widely used in the provincial government, in community relations, in everyday informal situations –such as jeux d’esprit and laughing. Bilingualism is more important in the large cities, especially in Montreal and among the educated classes, but French is used in almost all the other environment and situations.

What really makes the difference between this province and the rest of the country is their personal interest in being accepted by the generality of the nation’s population. Canadian French are more willing to learn English than their counterparts throughout the country. English speakers in Quebec, based on their own social status, showed little interest in learning French until the late 5O’s. It was in the early 60’s that a small number of parents were very much concerned about the social and cultural situation of their children in school. They were treated as having limited language proficiency, and subsequently they were segregated in their peer interaction. Parental situation was not much better as their relation were limited to their English group. This situation had existed for generations, and the Audiolingual language methodology for second language learning had not been any good. Up to this point French was the only language used in curriculum instruction. English speaking students attended classes that emphasised pronunciation, grammar, and learning a number of patterns, but lacked real communicative skills. Therefore, these students could not achieve the minimum degree of competence in understanding their subjects, and they were always behind in their classes, and very few of them actually graduated from secondary school. For some of them, members of higher classes, private schools offered the opportunity to follow regular studies, and, eventually graduate. Unfortunately, this did not help children’s social interaction. The need of a different approach to the problem was clear. In fact the fight for bilingual education had just began. The Quiet Revolution, as this period is called, was focussed on obtaining equal treatment and rights for the cultural and socially segregated. The situation mentioned
before of the limited possibility of access to public charges in the Francophone group and the clear needs of obtaining a fair education moved public opinion. The district of St. Lambert was a clear example of local community where the two main groups, English and French Canadians coexisted. In the early 1960’s parents were extremely unhappy with their children’s education. Anglophone students were using the old fashioned Audiolingual method that clearly did not help to improve their communicative French skills. Wallace Lambert and Wilder Penfield undertook the responsibility to run a new program. The new programme, French Immersion, had to cover the following goals: to provide the participating children with functional competence in both written and spoken French; to promote and maintain normal levels of English language development, to ensure achievement in academic subjects commensurate with students’ academic ability and grade level; and to insist on the students understanding and appreciation of French Canadians [...] without detracting [from] English Canadian culture. The program was taught in French “through subject matter instruction [...] with an emphasis on contextual clues and lessons geared to students’ level of competence” (Crawford, 1991: 176). The St. Lambert’s immersion programme should cover both second language learning and the curriculum students’ needs. Considering these main needs, the teaching approach changed considerably. In the Canadian Gradual Immersion Program students receive an important amount of language information that they can understand (comprehensible input). This information is used to teach language or any other subject. Students are not fostered to speak as soon as they can. They are allowed to use their native language to answer questions, especially in the first stages (early total immersion). Production is expected to emerge gradually. The central part in teaching is the acquisition activities in any of the four skills. Lambert and Tucker were clear that all the language skills should be considered. The process began by reading. By 2nd grade students can read French. Later, gradually, English takes the most important part in instruction.

This method is partially based on the Direct Method. The teacher provides comprehensible input (called teacher’s talk) that is intended to communicate a message. Input may be provided by any means (verbal, visual, etc.) Students are allowed to have a so called “silent period” –for up to six months– in which they are not expected to produce. First graders’ responses can be as mimicry, English, or any other communicative means. Error production is seen as a natural element in the language acquisition process. Implicit and excessive correction is likely to have a negative effect on the students, freedom and interest of expression. In reference to teachers, they should be bilingual but it is absolutely necessary that communication should be in French both in and out of the classroom. In this instruction
approach, vocabulary acquisition plays a major role for recognition and comprehension that later facilitates communicative competence. Cummins says that by the end of primary school, children’s receptive skills had evolved to almost a native-like proficiency. However, their productive skills were not as developed. Although there have been a number of theories trying to explain this fact, there is no question that more interaction with native speakers would have been highly desirable. Nevertheless, the programme was a great success, “as most students became fluent in French. However, the success went further beyond than learning the language, student achieved considerable learning in the other subjects, and did not interfere with their English competence. Now, gradual French immersion is widely accepted and spread throughout Canada. By 1986 enrolment reached about 200,000” (Crawford, 1991: 116).

Evaluation

The fact that English is the high prestige language in Canada has impeded the development of a different kind of immersion programmes. Actually, it would be quite a useless idea to have similar programmes because French is almost exclusively spoken in Quebec. In the rest of the country French is learned as a foreign language. For most students, the programme has only meant a linguistic, and cultural bilingual enrichment for use this program has mainly allowed for a mental growth in the students (“additional bilingualism”), and has facilitated learning in some other subjects. Lambert-Tucker (1976) studied the sociological results of the immersion programme. They found that there was an improvement of relationship and friendship between French-English speaking schoolers, and also a strong feeling of integration in the French Canadian community. At this point, we should state the strongest areas in which the success of this programme is based: nature of input, opportunities of learning, and children’s ability to learn. Stephen Krashen states that this language teaching approach is especially strong for curricular subjects. The Lambert program fits in second language acquisition theory perfectly as well as their opportunities to use the language in the appropriate context. He mentions the advantages of the comprehensible input, and the affective variables. A personal evaluation of these powerful variables can make quite clear their function in acquisition, and how they allow language comprehension. In the case of the immersion programme, the quality of input was provided by classroom instruction as well as outer communication. The fact that French is the most spoken language in the province assured a great amount of comprehensible input by any linguistic means (conversation, radio, television, etc.). In reference to motivation, the English Canadian students (and their families)
were mainly interested in using the acquired knowledge for communication with their peers. This communicative need had also important social implications for the children’s growth (such as playing, socialising, speaking, etc.). It also facilitated acceptance in more local and closed circles, and achieving the total integration in the province community. Lambert-Tucker also mention the improvement of the Anglophone students attitudes towards the French speaking community. Parents and children were very favourably disposed towards the French community. The integration aspects facilitated the rapid language acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Their studies “show that learners with higher integrative orientation are likely to achieve greater proficiency” (Littlewood, 1984: 57). In this sense, the interest in the receptive skills (although based on old acquisition theories) accomplished the objective of a living communication. The focus on reading was mainly due to the fact that school subjects were taught but more important is the fact that all the spoken communication was in the target language. From a social point of view, the program worked because students did not have to renounce to their cultural or social markers that identified them, and therefore, this addition bilingual programme was not a source of animosity. In reference to personality, although we should not generalise in reference to individual attitudes, the age factor is considerably relevant. The fact that children began the instruction when in first grade (five years old) meant that they had both acquired most of their mother tongue and also had quite a substantial knowledge of their environment. Apart from that, as we mentioned before, they had a greater exposure to French. They also received “caretaker or teacher’s input” (a simplified and modulated input for children or learners) (Krashen, 1983: 22-24), and, finally, they had very limited feelings towards the target culture.

**Conclusion**

This paper has studied the history, characteristics, and evaluation of the immersion bilingual program in Canada. In the final part, the evaluative factors were related to the kind of input, to opportunities of learning and to learner’s characteristics. The immersion program in Canada has been a great success. It has changed the Anglophone’s perspectives towards French culture in the province of Quebec and has been used as a model throughout the country. The fact that it has been introduced in the early schooling stages has facilitated language acquisition and has changed important attitudes in the English speaking community. Motivation, integration and communication are the most important factors on which its success relies. The programme has proved its validity and promoted valid communication. With this guarantee Canadians look forward to the future in a country without linguistic
borders where personal group identification is respected, a country where everyone is proud of being Canadian.

References


