

Language Immersion Education: Concepts, Practices, and Reflections—Summary of the 8th Annual Conference on Language Immersion Education

Li Danling¹, Li Linhong^{2,*}

¹Aberdeen Institute of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

²English Teaching and Research Department, Guangdong Construction Polytechnic, Guangzhou, China

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This paper delves into the concepts and practices of language immersion education in basic education of China especially after the issues of new English Curriculum Standards (2022 edition) and reflects on the future development trends by analyzing the research results of the 8th Annual Conference on Language Immersion Education. Language immersion model was initiated and introduced from Canada and proved to be an effective way of language education. The article first discusses the China's practices of English immersion education in China, developing a localized theoretical framework that encompasses curriculum models, teaching methodologies, teacher development, and research methods over 26 years. Secondly, the article explores the dynamics of Chinese immersion education around the world and highlights the practice of "National Common Language"(Mandarin) immersion education in China's ethnic minority regions. Future directions in language immersion education should focus on integrating with new curriculum reforms, professional development for teachers, technological integration, and international Chinese education.

Keywords: language Immersion Education, Chinese Education, Localized practices

1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, language immersion education stands as a dynamic approach that transcends traditional language learning methodologies, offering profound cognitive, cultural, and academic benefits. Initiated in Canada in 1960s, the French immersion model was simple but revolutionary: to provide English-speaking students with instruction in French from kindergarten or first grade, initially focusing on basic communication skills before progressively including more complex academic content as language proficiency increased. As the success of the initial program led to the rapid expansion of language immersion programs across Canada, U.S. and even around the world, it also diversified gradually. Variations such as partial or dual-immersion programs were developed, with many countries adopting and adapting its principles to suit their linguistic and educational contexts. The introduction of English immersion model in China began in 1997 via the "China-Canada-U.S. Educational Cooperation on English Immersion Teaching and Curriculum Research (CCUEI) Project", starting with pilot programs in cities like Xi'an, followed by other major cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and the Macau SAR all over the country.

The 8th Annual Conference on Language Immersion Education, which convened in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province from November 20th to 21th, 2023, provided a comprehensive platform for over 300 educators, scholars, and policymakers to explore the multifaceted aspects of language immersion. The theme "Crossing Boundaries and Integrating Subjects" encapsulated the conference's broad ambition—to integrate innovative learning strategies with traditional educational frameworks to enhance holistic educational experiences. This article provides an extensive reflection on the concepts, practices, and innovations discussed during the conference, aiming to outline current trends, successes, and challenges in the field.

2. Expanding Horizons: The Chinese Model of English Immersion

2.1 *The Practical Implementations of English Immersion Education in China*

English immersion education in China has gone through the process of transnational attraction, decision-making, implementation, and localization^[1]. According to statistics, as of 2022, over 40 elementary and secondary schools have implemented immersion programs, involving more than 800 teachers and benefiting over 100,000 children^[1]. While the English immersion model has been implemented at the elementary level in China for 27 years so far, the localization of the model has always been a critical focus for experts and frontline principals and teachers at experimental schools. Professor Gu Mingyuan, a senior professor at Beijing Normal University and Professor Ruth Hayhoe from University of Toronto highlighted the project's effectiveness, sustainability and vitality.

While the initial programs closely followed the Canadian model, over time, Chinese educators and researchers have adapted the methodology to better align with China's unique educational, cultural, and linguistic context. This has involved integrating Chinese national education standards, cultural elements, and the specific needs of Chinese students into the immersion curriculum. For example, when first introduced into China, the Canadian model's partial immersion, i.e. an even split of time between the languages, were found to be unsuitable for Chinese schools. In response, in 2001, the CCUEI project team reduced the immersion hours to eight periods per week, accounting for 27% of the total weekly hours. This adjustment provided significant relief to experimental schools, which compensated for the reduced immersion hours by enhancing the overall English environment within the school. Another key adaptation involved integrating the immersion curriculum. Five courses originally taught in English were consolidated into a comprehensive curriculum for the lower grades of primary school. This integration helped streamline the curriculum and made it more manageable for both teachers and students.

Structural dynamics also played a critical role in facilitating the implementation of English immersion education. Four years after the commencement of the immersion program, the national basic education curriculum reform was officially launched, making English a compulsory subject from the third grade onwards in primary schools. Since 2021, new structural dynamics such as the "Double Reduction" policy (i.e. the reduction of excessive homework and written assignments for students, the reduction of off-campus tutoring), educational equity, and reforms in basic education curriculum have emerged as significant drivers for further development of English immersion education. In 2022, the issues of Curriculum Standards have again provided a renewed impetus for English immersion in China. In fact, many of the concepts of English immersion are in line with the newly-issued curriculum standards, including: interdisciplinary learning of content, holistic development of students, cognitive and academic growth of learners, and the active learning of student agency.

The practical outcomes of the immersion program have been significant. The CCUEI project team conducted multiple assessments of students' performance. The results consistently showed that immersion students had a clear advantage in English language skills compared to non-immersion students. By the sixth grade, immersion students also outperformed their non-immersion peers in Chinese language and mathematics. Notably, English proficiency emerged as a strong predictor of mathematics achievement among immersion students.^[2]

2.2 *Theoretical Construction of English Immersion Education in China*

Generally speaking, language immersion education operates on the principle that language is not solely a subject to be studied but a medium through which all subjects can be taught. This approach, rooted in rich theoretical underpinnings from cognitive neuroscience, such as the critical period for language learning and cognitive load theory, alongside linguistics theories like Krashen's Input Hypothesis, affective filter hypothesis, and Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device, provide a framework for understanding how immersion maximizes language acquisition in an authentic context.

Based on the continuous experimental practices in China, researchers have proposed English immersion theories from an educational perspective and gradually constructed a localized theoretical system, including:

Firstly, curriculum Development and Pedagogical Strategies. As for curriculum development, a "comprehensive + disciplinary" approach has been developed, integrating English language learning with various academic disciplines, promoting not only English proficiency but also comprehensive

academic growth. The curriculum often includes innovative teaching methods and the integration of subjects such as moral education, science, music, and physical education, providing a holistic educational experience. In terms of pedagogical strategies, six principles have been developed as "listening and speaking first"^[3], "designed activities integrating language and content"^[4], and "dual focal objectives + interactive activities"^[5], and so on. In addition, at the 8th Annual Conference on Language Immersion Education, professor Liu Lianghua from East China Normal University shared the practice of "interest-driven teaching" reforms centered on student agency in experimental schools, which is in line with the emphasis of immersion on student participation^[6]. Dr. Somin Park from the University of Hong Kong shared her research on using multisensory instruction to promote the development of early reading skills in young children, providing useful insights for language acquisition in immersion teaching^[7]. Professor Mary Barbara Trube from the University of Wharton discussed teaching methods of integrating life and cultural resources into teaching materials and curriculum, offering valuable reference for English immersion practices.

Secondly, teacher development. A four-in-one comprehensive system of "demonstration, reflection, group discussion, expert guidance" was formed^[3], along with a mutual transformation model between English teacher and subject teacher^[5]. In addition, the concept of building up "teaching, administration, research community" have been introduced^[8]. Professor Mary Barbara Trube, a core member of the project team, pointed out in her keynote that the "model of collaboration and reciprocal mentorship" was a crucial factor in the success of the China-U.S.-Canada project team, with members sharing visions, knowledge, and cultural experiences, jointly developing teaching materials and assessment tools, facilitating transnational and cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer, and achieving organizational goals^[9]. Professor Jiao Jianli from South China Normal University proposed five paths for empowering English teachers with generative AI: as learning consultants, intelligent assistants, co-teachers, providers of adaptive learning, and automators of routine tasks^[10].

Thirdly, research methods. Researchers have adopted a variety of methods such as action research, experimental research, field research, and video image analysis to explore the localization of immersion teaching^[6]. The conference also invited Professor Chen Xiangming from Peking University to elaborate on the qualitative discourse analysis method, which are broadly applicable to micro-level studies of English immersion education.

3. Global Perspectives: The Chinese Language Immersion

3.1 The Chinese Language Immersion across the world

The development and effectiveness of the French immersion model in Canada has also provided valuable reference for language teaching in other countries, including Chinese education. By the end of 2022, Chinese education has been carried out in more than 180 countries and regions around the world, and 81 countries have incorporated Chinese into their national education systems.

Professor Li Shengbing from South China Normal University analyzed the implementation of Chinese immersion education in five countries - the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France and Germany, from a comparative education perspective. He found that in these five countries, both basic education and higher education offer Chinese education courses and programs, although the specific models of Chinese immersion instruction vary, they can be generally classified into full immersion, partial immersion, and two-way immersion. Through immersion teaching, students not only improve their Chinese proficiency, but also enhance their cross-cultural understanding and subject knowledge. However, Chinese immersion education currently faces challenges such as teacher shortage, lack of standards, and insufficient policy support, and needs to be further promoted through theoretical propaganda, teacher training, and policy support^[11].

The U.S. has seen a significant increase in Chinese immersion programs over the past two decades. Initiatives such as the Chinese Immersion Program in Utah and California's Chinese dual language immersion programs reflect a broader trend towards early language education. These programs typically begin in kindergarten or first grade and continue through middle school, integrating Chinese language instruction with core academic subjects. Professor Xu Jieying, an expert from the People's Education Press and former Consul at the Consulate General of China in New York, noted that Chinese education in the US is closely related to the country's national security strategy. The number of Chinese learners accounts for the highest proportion (80%) among all flagship languages (including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Turkish) in the US school

system. California, Utah, New York, and Minnesota have particularly prominent Chinese immersion courses. Chinese courses in high schools are usually offered as academic courses, or in the form of Chinese AP (Advanced Placement) and Chinese IB (International Baccalaureate) courses^[12]. He De, a Chinese immersion education official from the Utah State Board of Education, systematically introduced the complete K12 Chinese immersion education system established in Utah, and focused on the "Utah Bridge Program", sharing specific teaching examples on designing teaching objectives and applying the CAPA model: first learning content and language in context (contextualization), then strengthening language awareness and sensitivity (awareness), followed by intensive practice (practice), and finally achieving autonomous use and independent production of the language (autonomy)^[13].

Professor Li Manli's team from Tsinghua University introduced the latest research progress of Tsinghua "Chinese Language Proficiency Test" (CLPT). The test aims to accurately assess learners' ability to use Chinese in academic contexts, providing a scientific assessment basis for Chinese education of international students, thereby helping to improve the quality assurance system for international Chinese education and strengthen the "Study in China" brand.^[14]

3.2 "National Common Language"(mandarin) Immersion Education in Ethnic Minority Regions in China

The relationship between Chinese education and Mandarin education is fundamental to understanding China's educational landscape. China is a multi-ethnic country with 56 ethnic minorities, each with its own distinct language. Therefore, the state has designated Mandarin as the "National Common Language", providing a common platform for communication and cultural transmission. Through comprehensive and inclusive educational policies, Mandarin education aims to enhance educational equity, promote national identity, and prepare students for global engagement.

To improve the effectiveness of national common language (mandarin) education in ethnic minority regions and simultaneously enhance the language and cognitive development of ethnic minority students, Professor Qiang Haiyuan from South China Normal University, Professor Pei Miao and Professor Zheng Xinrong from Beijing Normal University have introduced language immersion projects to mandarin education in ethnic minority regions and achieved a series of results. Professor Zheng Xinrong emphasized the importance of constructing linguistically and culturally appropriate education, stressing the need to appropriately attend to children's native language and cultural experiences, which can help teachers understand and promote the transformation of children's cognitive structures.^[15] Professor Pei Miao systematically introduced the concept, value significance, and achievement paths of the embodied learning theory in immersion teaching. This theory believes that language acquisition is an "embodied" process, requiring physical activities and mind-body engagement to promote language internalization. The "Total Physical Response (TPR)" teaching method is a typical application case of embodied learning theory in teaching practice^[16]. The teacher team of Jiang Qi from Tengchong City, Yunnan Province, introduced the method of applying TPR teaching method in classroom practice^[17]. In addition, Wang Xuenan, an assistant researcher at the Chinese Academy of Educational Sciences, shared his practical findings and theoretical reflections on cultivating the consciousness of the Chinese national community in ethnic minority schools based on investigations in southern Xinjiang and Aba, Sichuan.

4. Conclusion

Today, language immersion education continues to evolve, incorporating modern educational technologies and pedagogies that enhance interactive learning and cultural exchange. It remains at the forefront of educational strategies that recognize and utilize linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a challenge. Regarding challenges and prospects for future development of language immersion education, this article offers the following perspectives and directions.

First, in the context of the English new curriculum standards reform in China, how to better integrate immersion teaching with the new curriculum standards has become a focus of research and practice. The concepts of the new curriculum standards, emphasizing interdisciplinary integration, theme-driven, and text-based, are highly consistent with the core concepts of immersion teaching. Therefore, in future practice, how to design and implement immersion teaching more effectively within the framework of the new curriculum standards will be an issue that researchers and practitioners need to jointly consider. The "English Learning Activity Approach" theory proposed by Professor Wang Qiang in the keynote speech provides important guidance for understanding the role of immersion

teaching in the implementation of the new curriculum standards. Interdisciplinary integration will be a key focus in future immersion teaching.

Secondly, the future development of English immersion education needs to place more emphasis on teacher professional development. Teachers are one of the key factors for the success of immersion teaching, and the practical experience of immersion teachers can make them a new force in the next round of curriculum reform. In the future, teacher training should be strengthened, establishing cross-school, cross-regional, cross-national, and cross-disciplinary teacher learning communities to promote the sharing and innovation of teacher knowledge; using artificial intelligence to empower teacher development, optimizing personalized learning, intelligent evaluation and other teaching links, and providing more intelligent auxiliary tools for teachers.

Thirdly, English immersion education will show a more diverse and in-depth development. With the continuous progress of technology, virtual reality, artificial intelligence and other technologies will provide richer learning environments for immersion teaching, supporting personalized learning and assessment, enabling students to immerse themselves in the English context more deeply and comprehensively.

Fourthly, Chinese immersion education emerged as an effective way of Chinese education, aiming to foster bilingualism and biculturalism as China plays a pivotal role on the world stage. However, Chinese immersion education faces several challenges in practice, such as resource availability (developing high-quality instructional materials and resources in non-Chinese-speaking countries is challenging), teacher shortage, community support, and standardization and assessment. In the future, ongoing research and innovation shall be key to addressing the above challenges. Meanwhile in China, Chinese immersion education also holds extensive theoretical and practical value as it can be applied to Chinese mandarin education among ethnic minority, as well as international students in China.

In conclusion, the development of language immersion education is a testament to the potential of innovative educational practices to foster not only language proficiency but also cultural empathy and cognitive flexibility. As such, it continues to inspire educational reforms and language learning initiatives worldwide, adapting to changing demographics and the globalized context of the 21st century.

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