Editorial Comments

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EDITORIAL COMMENTS:

Unlike most of the past editions of International Education, this special issue is exclusively focused on one research project named China-Canada-United States English Immersion (CCUEI), an English education reform experiment that has been implemented in kindergartens, elementary, and middle schools in several parts of China since 1997. Also distinctive of this issue is the nature of empirical research reported in most of the articles. All of the authors were invited because of their direct involvement in the research and practical aspects of the CCUEI project over the years. With their contributions, this volume purports to introduce CCUEI to a wider audience beyond China. As the guest editor, and on behalf of the CCUEI researchers and teacher practitioners, I am greatly indebted to the journal for giving the project this invaluable opportunity to present its work.

The opening article by Qiang and Siegel, two founders of the CCUEI project, offers their argument on how the foreign language immersion approach, the model known from the French immersion in Canada, can be transplanted in the China context with necessary modifications. The article presents political, economic, social, and educational conditions in China that called for reform of English language education. With a brief description of the theoretical framework of the immersion approach and the development of the CCUEI experiment, the authors emphasize the need for contextualization in adapting the French immersion model in the Chinese schools.

Following the introduction Trube further explores the relationship between the theoretical foundations and practices of CCUEI. Using data from interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and teaching assessment results, she asserted that the immersion principles were understood by the teacher practitioners as they brought alive the content-language integrative curriculum into the classroom. Further, the article enlisted many examples of instructional activities that not only reflected the immersion philosophy but also emerged as the best practices in content-based foreign language instruction in general.

A group of empirical studies investigates various aspects of CCUEI practice organized by grade levels. Zhang and Yan reported their study of the impact of immersion teaching on kindergarten children’s development in social awareness and language expressions related to certain request tasks. With dissected language elements of “politeness,” they found the immersion children, compared with their non-immersion counterparts, showed a better sensitivity in social interactions with others, and demonstrated a higher level of competence in using both imperative and expressive English language.

The study by Li, Cheng, and Kirby was done at the elementary school level. Their focus was to uncover the relationship between data variables of English listening comprehension, English phonological awareness (PA), and Chinese PA based on a sample of second and fourth grade immersion students. The results revealed a positive relationship between English PA and English listening comprehension in both grades. Such a relationship was also found when the factor of the Chinese PA was taken into consideration, but only in the fourth grade students. In addition, the study found that the cross-linguistic effect between the English and Chinese systems was weak based on the analysis of the variables of
Chinese PA and English listening comprehension.

Also with a similar interest in the elementary population, Knell and Chi examined affective variables associated with language acquisition: motivation, attitudes towards learning English, willingness to communicate, perceived competence, language anxiety, and parental support. They reported that in comparison with non-immersion students, the immersion students showed significantly higher levels of willingness to communicate and perceived competence, and exhibited less language anxiety. Data also showed that the variables of willingness to communicate and perceived competence were strong predictors of English reading and oral proficiency for both immersion and non-immersion groups.

For the middle school level, Kong and Hoare wrote about the challenges faced by immersion students and teachers. One such prominent challenge is students’ cognizance of academic language in the subject areas. Using data collected from immersion programs in Hong Kong and Xi’an, the study demonstrated different instructional patterns and textbook materials in the two contexts and analyzed the causes and limits for each. Pointing out a common lack of support for students’ academic language with writing practices in both settings, the authors suggested several strategies of using writing assignment to help improve students’ learning of academic language at this level.

Turning to teachers’ communication patterns in the classroom, Pei investigated four immersion teachers’ discourse strategies to maximize students’ English language output. She identified five common strategies of accepting, encouraging, repeating, extending and prompting, and pointed out the effectiveness of recirculated use of initiating-response-follow up discourse patterns observed in the immersion classrooms. She reminded us that those discourse strategies and patterns signified a dramatic departure from the traditional English instruction in the Chinese system in a positive way because they provided more comprehensible input and required more English output from students.

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