

## Bilingualism enhanced through French-immersion classes



English-speaking students in early French-immersion classes in Canada, study all subjects in the school curriculum in French.

Convinced of the advantages of becoming bilingual at an early age, parents across Canada, are increasingly enrolling their children in French-immersion classes at the elementary levels in schools.

A recent poll carried out for the Canadian Parents for French Association and financed by the Department of the Secretary of State indicates the strong support by English-speaking parents for the French-immersion program. At least 40 per cent of those surveyed were in favour of immersion courses beginning in kindergarten (when a child is about five years old) and 60 per cent said that they would enrol their children in immersion courses if they were available in their community.

The first experimental French-immersion program for English-speaking students was set up in St. Lambert, Quebec in 1969 by the province's Ministry of Education and the local school board.

### Continued growth

The success of the initiative led to the introduction of more classes and enrolments have since grown continuously. In 1976-77 there were approximately 17 700 pupils in French-immersion courses in 233 schools; by 1982-83 there were some 115 000 in 633 schools; in 1983-84 there were about 134 000 students, taking French-immersion courses offered in 837 schools.

French-immersion courses are not French-language courses, but courses where all the subjects of the curriculum

are taught in French. The curriculum which is established by each province, is the same as in the English-language schools.

The French-immersion program is available for all children who speak English or another language in the home, regardless of academic ability. It is taught in community English-language schools or in schools set up solely to teach immersion.

### Different programs

There are several types of immersion and the organization of each program varies in every province and school board. Early immersion begins in kindergarten or in grade one or two; middle immersion begins in grade four or five; and later immersion begins in grade six or seven.

Immersion can also be 'full', with all teaching given in French for one, two or three complete years, or 'partial', with greater balance between courses in French and courses in English from the beginning of schooling.

When immersion begins in kindergarten, the students are initially allowed to communicate partly in English, but the teacher speaks only in French, using gestures if necessary to make the meaning clear. Within a short time only French is permitted until grade two or three when some instruction in English is introduced. By grade four or five until the end of high school (grade 12), courses in French and English are given almost equally.

Since the introduction of French-immersion programs, many studies have

been undertaken to assess the results.

One intensive study of immersion teaching in Ontario conducted over the past ten years by Merrill Swain, head of the Modern Language Centre of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and Sharon Lapkin, an assistant professor at the OISE Modern Language Centre at the request of the province's Ministry of Education, deals with the three main types of immersion teaching: total early immersion, partial early immersion and partial late immersion.

### Results of studies

The report, *Bilingual Education in Ontario: A Decade of Research*, indicates many positive results for immersion programs. By grade six, the students enrolled in total early immersion understood spoken and written French as well as native French speakers, and the results for students in late immersion courses were consistently lower than for the Francophone control groups.

Concerning learning of the mother tongue (generally English), the authors of the study stated that in all three courses, the immersion students were temporarily slower than those in the regular courses, given in English. Students in the full and partial early immersion courses obtained lower results up to the end of grade three, whereas in the late immersion courses the discrepancy did not last as long, and in some cases did not occur at all. Over the following years the immersion course students tended to obtain results as good as the others and even, for those in total early immersion, better than those not enrolled in immersion courses.

Another aspect of the study showed that in mathematics, the sciences and humanities, the total early immersion students generally achieved results as good as those of students taking those subjects in English.

### No negative effects

In an article entitled *Research Update*, Mrs. Swain and Mrs. Lapkin conclude: "The research and evaluation studies associated with French-immersion programs have established that students from a majority-language group can be taught in a second language with no long-term negative effects on first-language development or on content learning, while at the same time becoming highly proficient in the target language."

Such positive results have contributed in part to the introduction of immersion classes in the languages of Canada's other cultures. The Edmonton Public Schools District in Alberta, for example, has set up partial immersion teaching or bilingual courses in Ukrainian, Hebrew, German, Chinese and Arabic in addition to French immersion classes.