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**Early English Immersion in Xi’an, China: An Experiment in English Language Teaching**

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This article will integrate the four articles in this issue, from the standpoint of understanding the principles and the realities of the Early English Immersion programs in Xi’an China. In addition to reviewing various aspects of the program, future directions will be discussed.

The early English immersion program began in 1997 in Xi’an China but the roots of it started more than 40 years ago in Canada. Canada has two official languages, English and French but most areas of this vast country are either predominantly French speaking or predominantly English speaking. French is the first language of a smaller percentage of the population than English but most Canadians want to be bilingual. More that 40 years ago, English speaking parents and teachers in Montreal decided that the students were not really learning to speak French in the traditional model of teaching so they pioneered an educational reform, called French Immersion, in which English speaking children were educated in French from the beginning of their school career. The results of this educational reform have been quite successful and children, who participate in French Immersion programs learn to speak, read and write French. Most never become truly bilingual but they acquire fluency and are quite comfortable speaking French.

**Early English Immersion in Xi’an**

The French Immersion educational model of language teaching became the basis for the reform of language teaching within China. The growing realization in China of the need for English for its citizens, fueled the development of the idea
of English immersion. The need for English immersion rose out of the demand for English language proficiency in China. English is considered necessary for dealing with international business and the advances in technology.

Qiang and Kang describe the circumstances that led to increasing demand for English in China, specifically, the opening of China to foreign trade in the early 1990s and the increases in tourism because of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The English language is the medium of communication in international business so it is considered important for the Chinese to have a working knowledge of English.

There was also, in the 1990s, a growing interest in reform of English language teaching. Before this time, English lessons stressed rote memory and written work, rather than conversation and learning to speak the type of English that would be useful in a daily context.

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**Early English Immersion as Educational Reform**

The Early English Immersion program is quite a departure from the usual means of teaching English in China. It is different from the traditional English instruction in a number of ways. One very important way is that only English is used in the classroom; the teachers do not speak any Chinese to the children. English and Chinese are kept separate and not taught by the same teacher. The rule is “one person, one language.” It appears that this type of teaching means that the children seem comfortable and unself-conscious when they are speaking English.

In addition, interactive conversation, rather than rote repetition of words and sentences is encouraged. As Huang, Trube, and Yu have noted, in the immersion program, English language learning is designed to be meaningful in terms of the daily life of the children. The Early English Immersion programs have resisted textbooks and have, instead, attempted to teach “real life” English; the type of language that children would use in everyday life is stressed. In the immersion method of teaching, conversation is encouraged, as is working in small groups.

In addition, the emphasis is on meaningful assessment and away from traditional examinations.

This program is a dual language program with the languages kept separate for purposes of instruction. Ieong and Peng have noted that it is not a bilingual education in which the languages are mixed in the classroom. Qiang and Kang note that the ultimate goal of immersion programs is additive bilingualism, whereby students become proficient in the target language without any