

# 15 Should the French-Canadian minorities open their schools to the children of the Anglophone majority?

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**Abstract.** When the status of the minority language of an officially bilingual country undergoes positive changes, it is not unusual to observe members of the majority language group showing an interest in the institutions of the minority, such as its schools. Just such a development is currently taking place between Canada's two official language groups. The instrumental value of French has increased significantly since the late 1960s as a result of important political decisions by both the federal and provincial governments. Due to the relative failure of French immersion education to turn out native-like bilinguals, the English-speaking majority is coming to regard the schools of the French-speaking minority as a better alternative. The present paper focusses specifically on the province of Ontario and argues that the long-term survival of French in this province is still too uncertain for the Franco-Ontarian minority to be taking the gamble of an open-door educational policy toward the English-speaking majority. Indeed, an objective assessment of the potential positive *versus* negative effects of such a policy suggests that the disadvantages would outweigh the advantages.

## Introduction

In officially bilingual or multilingual countries where one language clearly outranks the other(s) in prestige and instrumental value, members of the

dominant linguistic community, as a rule, do not show any real interest in learning the subordinate language(s). In contrast, in countries whose official languages do not have a sharply differentiated status or whose status is undergoing significant changes, it is possible to observe a crossover phenomenon between the school systems of the different language groups, i.e. one community seeking access to the schools of the other, each community believing it is to its advantage to learn the other's language.

Thus in the province of Québec, as the instrumental value of French started to rise significantly (late 1960s), it was possible to observe a trend among the once socio-economically dominant Anglophone community to take steps to improve the teaching of French in its schools (e.g. the development of French language immersion) or alternatively to seek access to the schools of the Francophone majority, just as certain French Québeckers had been and were still sending their children to English language schools (Frasure-Smith, Lambert & Taylor, 1975).<sup>1</sup> Similarly in bilingual Brussels, the schools of the once downtrodden Flemish-speaking minority are now attracting not only assimilated Flemish who in the past would have been sent to French language schools but also French-speaking children of Walloon extraction, a sure sign that Flemish is no longer the low status language that it once was.

In Canada, one can now also observe outside the province of Québec and notably in Ontario, both a rise in the popularity of French language immersion among the Anglophone community and a trend for some members of this community to seek access to the schools of the Francophone minority. This dual phenomenon can be linked to a series of significant political measures taken over the last twenty years or so by the Canadian and Ontarian governments to provide services in both English and French in the agencies and ministries under their jurisdiction. These measures brought about the creation of an increasing number of more lucrative bilingual positions (i.e. requiring a knowledge of both official languages) which has had the effect of boosting the instrumental value of French both in Ontario and Canada as a whole.

The purpose of this paper is to try to show that if Anglo-Ontarians can feel justified in seeking access to the schools of the Francophone minority, it is also possible, if one is concerned about the long-term survival of French in Ontario, to make a case for limiting (if not barring) such access. Indeed, the Franco-Ontarian community is still undergoing erosion through assimilation, hence the necessity of preserving and developing autonomous French medium institutions to turn the assimilation clock back.

Let us first provide some background information on the Franco-Ontarian community and its school system, as well as explanations for why and how the Anglophone community of Ontario would like to have access to the schools of the Francophone minority.

## Ontario's Francophone Community

There are about 475,000 individuals of French mother tongue in Ontario. As such they constitute in absolute numbers the largest French-speaking community outside Québec. However since Ontario is the most populated of the ten Canadian provinces (over 8,500,000), Franco-Ontarians only make up a small minority (less than 6%). Statistics from the last two national censuses (1971 and 1981) revealed that a non-negligible proportion of French mother tongue Ontarians have given up the use of French at home (27% in 1971 and 34% in 1981).<sup>2</sup> The somewhat lower socio-economic status of Franco-Ontarians (Ontario's Francophone community is primarily the result of emigration from poor rural regions of Québec), their demographic weakness and up until recently, the lack of institutional support for French, each explains in part the processes of shift to English revealed by the national censuses. From the late 1960s to the present, however, the Ontario government has taken a series of political measures which amount to a recognition of the special status of French in Ontario and which may contribute to its maintenance.

The most significant of these measures was the legalisation in 1968 of French medium instruction in Ontario's public schools. This measure brought about a dramatic expansion of the system of French language elementary and secondary schools already in place then. As a result most Franco-Ontarians can now, if they so wish, enrol their offspring in elementary or secondary schools which function entirely through the medium of French. At the post-secondary level, though, Franco-Ontarian students can only enrol in bilingual universities (e.g. the University of Ottawa) which do not offer French medium courses in all subject matters. Not all of the children who are sent to Ontario's French medium schools, however, come from homes where French only is used. In fact, in the French language schools located in predominantly Anglophone localities, children from bilingual homes or mainly English-speaking homes are in the majority. Most of these children are the offspring of linguistically mixed couples, a phenomenon which underscores the fact that in English Canada exogamy plays a major role in the shift to English at home among Francophone minorities (Castonguay, 1979). Among the other measures which were taken and which may favour the maintenance of French in Ontario, one can mention the establishment of French language media (e.g. expansion of the French CBC Radio and Television network, creation of a French medium educational TV channel and the provision of services in French by several institutions under provincial jurisdiction, e.g. courts of justice, hospitals, etc.). It is probably too early to attempt to determine what impact these measures are having on the linguistic assimilation of Franco-Ontarians.<sup>3</sup> One can say, however, that Ontario's Francophone minority is at a crucial stage in its efforts to have the provincial government take steps favourable to the

maintenance of French. Should the Ontario government continue to expand its policy of providing services in French in its agencies and ministries as well as allow the creation of autonomous French language institutions (e.g. French language universities, French language school boards), it is not inconceivable that one may see in the future a slowing down and even perhaps a cessation of the processes of English language shift which have been eroding Ontario's French language community. (For more information regarding the French-speaking population of Ontario, see Mougeon & Heller, 1986).

### **Anglo-Ontarian Reactions to Changes in the Status of French**

As we have already pointed out, in the late 1960s and early 1970s Canada's English majority took major steps to improve the teaching of French in its schools. The best known of these steps is French language immersion, a form of bilingual education which was originally started in Québec and which later spread to the rest of Canada and became most popular in Ontario. French immersion is a form of schooling which involves the use of French as a medium of instruction in varying proportions at the elementary and/or secondary levels.

It was initially believed that French immersion could 'produce' students with native-like proficiency in French. Over the years, however, it has become gradually clear that immersion cannot achieve this ideal goal. Students who graduate from immersion programmes reach an advanced (rather than native-like) level of proficiency in French (Harley, 1984). This no doubt is due to the fact that immersion students are not entirely schooled in French and have few opportunities to hear and use French outside the classroom.

This relative failure of French immersion has prompted education specialists to try to improve the teaching of French in immersion programmes and/or to identify supplementary or alternative forms of French medium instruction. Many of these solutions involve in one way or another the schools of Ontario's Francophone minority. We shall examine them in this section.

One solution recently adopted by immersion specialists consists in the placement of English-speaking students in immersion *schools*, i.e. schools which in addition to using French as a medium of instruction promote the use of French outside the classroom. Indeed, students enrolled in immersion schools have been found to be more proficient in French than students placed in 'regular' immersion *programmes* housed in English-language schools. On the basis of this finding, Lapkin & Cummins (1983) recently expressed the opinion that the placement of immersion programmes in Ontario's minority French language schools would be an even better and cost effective alternative. At the same time, however, they also recognised that such a measure could prove to be sensitive, since Franco-Ontarian parents could legitimately fear that it might

have an accelerating effect on the anglicisation of Franco-Ontarian students (see further). Yet certain French language schools have already opened their doors to immersion programmes. They have done so for at least two reasons. One is that many of Ontario's French language schools are administered by school boards where Francophones are largely outnumbered by Anglophones and hence lack decision power (see note 3). The other is that French language schools are more affected by the consequences of declining enrolment than English-language schools. By allowing an immersion programme in, some French language schools may be in a better position to offer special programmes or, more crucially, may have a better chance for survival.

An alternative to French immersion which is actively pursued by certain English-speaking parents in Ontario consists in enrolling their children in a French language school. Initially English-speaking parents may have considered this solution due to a shortage of immersion programmes. Since immersion programmes have now become much more widely available it is reasonable to assume that it is the search for a better alternative to French immersion which motivates these parents. A recent study by Heller (to appear) indicates that several of these Anglo-Ontarian parents consider that they have an unquestionable right of access to the French language schools and thus find it hard to understand why some Franco-Ontarian parents may want to limit such access.

Another improvement which has been proposed is that immersion students be enrolled in French language schools after they graduate from immersion programmes. Thus early immersion students could enrol in the French language secondary schools and late immersion students could enrol in the French language programmes of Ontario post-secondary bilingual establishments. This latter approach has been recently endorsed by Ontario's Minister of Colleges and Universities, who has committed himself to expanding French language post-secondary education not only because this is highly desirable for Franco-Ontarians but also because it will be profitable for bilingual Anglo-Ontarian students (Sorbara, 1987). The other alternative consists in the provision of French language courses in Ontario's English language universities.

Finally, since both immersion programmes and French language schools as a whole still lack pedagogical materials, it is not uncommon to hear educators advocating that immersion and French language school specialists join forces in the production of teaching materials.

### **Are These Solutions in the Best Interest of Ontario's French Language Schools?**

As we pointed out earlier, Ontario's French language schools not only include students from French-speaking homes but also students from bilingual homes and even students whose home language is English. Given this, it is

logical to fear that allowing Anglo-Ontarian parents who seek a superior form of immersion to enrol their offspring in French language schools or, even, allowing whole immersion programmes into French language schools, will add to the problems associated with the students from English-speaking homes who are already present in those schools and are weaker in French than in English.

For instance, it may appear that such measures will increase the preference for communication in English which is already observable among Franco-Ontarian students and which many a Franco-Ontarian educator attributes to the presence of English-dominant students in the schools. Furthermore, if such measures are taken in French language schools where there are already high proportions of English-dominant students, French-dominant students are likely to feel that they are the odd ones out and consequently feel under pressure to lose their French-dominant ethnolinguistic identity (Heller, 1986).

Such measures are also likely to have negative repercussions on the mastery of French by Franco-Ontarian students, since, on the one hand, as we have just pointed out, they will bring about an increased preference for communication in English among these students and, on the other hand, they will mean an increased exposure to non-native models of French at school.<sup>4</sup>

Negative repercussions can also be feared as regards achievement in other subjects than French. A recent survey (Desjarlais *et al.*, 1980) revealed that in those French language schools where English-dominant students are in the majority, Franco-Ontarian teachers have to slow down and simplify their French as well as some of their pedagogical activities so as not to leave these students behind. Franco-Ontarian educators believe that as a result, the other students do not learn as much or as fast as they could. Such belief, however, has yet to be substantiated by experimental research. Be that as it may, allowing immersion programmes or Anglophone students into such schools is likely to be perceived as making matters even worse.

A negative impact on the transmission of French-Canadian cultural values can also be feared. Once again, the survey by Desjarlais *et al.* (1980) revealed that the presence of too large a proportion of English-dominant students in a French language school makes it more difficult to transmit the Franco-Ontarian cultural heritage. Again, it makes sense to surmise that letting Anglophone students or immersion programmes into Ontario's French language schools will further hamper the latter's role as cultural transmitters.

Finally, allowing immersion programmes into French language schools could very well mean that the school staff would no longer be able to communicate exclusively in French with the parents. Not many of the immersion students' parents are fluent in French. It would be unreasonable to impose communication in French on them. Some immersion students who are not very strong in French may also expect to be spoken to in English by the school staff. In any

case, all of this may mean a further erosion of the principle of French language schooling.<sup>5</sup>

Can any positive effects be expected if French language schools allow immersion programmes or individual Anglophone students in? It is quite possible that such measures would have a beneficial effect on the English language proficiency of Franco-Ontarian students. French-dominant Franco-Ontarian students already learn much English from their English-dominant peers. Allowing more English-dominant peers into the French language schools could therefore further improve the English language competence of Franco-Ontarian students. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent Franco-Ontarian students need to upgrade their English language skills. Only a few studies have been devoted to this issue (Desjarlais & Carrier, 1975; Mougeon & Hébrard, 1975). They show that in predominantly English-speaking localities, Franco-Ontarian students do not have such a need, since toward the end of secondary school they reach levels of English language proficiency which are similar to those attained by same-age Anglophone students. This suggests that in such milieux providing Franco-Ontarian students with more opportunities to use English with members of their peer group may be at the expense of their French language proficiency. In contrast, in milieux where Francophones make up a more sizeable proportion of the local population (especially where they are in the majority), Franco-Ontarian students do not always reach advanced levels of English proficiency and therefore could profitably improve their knowledge of this language.

There may also be positive effects on the viability of French language schools. For instance, French language schools which have an insufficient enrolment to be entitled to a full range of services (e.g. library, transportation, consultants) or which are administered by predominantly Anglophone school boards who do not give them full share of such services, may expect to be better treated if they allow an immersion programme in. Finally, in the most extreme cases certain French language schools with markedly low enrolment may only escape closure if they let an immersion programme in.

It should be pointed out, however, that Ontario's Education Act now not only guarantees Francophones a right to be educated in French but also to have equal access to a full range of educational services. Therefore, it can be expected or hoped that in the future Franco-Ontarians will use this right to pressure the local school authorities to ensure the viability of French language schools, rather than count on French immersion.

At the post-secondary level, the enrolment of immersion students in French language programmes appears to us to be much less of a cause for concern than at the elementary and secondary levels. As a rule Franco-Ontarian students who opt for a French-medium university education have reached a high level of competence in French and have developed a strong

sense of identity. This does not mean, though, that Anglo-Ontarian students should not be screened before enrolling in French-medium programmes, for if no such steps are taken, it may be feared that the very same problems associated with the presence of English-dominant students in Ontario's French language elementary or secondary schools will also occur at the post-secondary level.

Allowing immersion students into Ontario's bilingual universities may also have positive repercussions, in that it is likely to increase the demand for French-medium courses and hence reinforce the existing programmes of French-medium courses, or better still, contribute to the development of new programmes notably in those areas where French language courses are still not widely available (e.g. engineering, business).

The arrival of immersion students in Ontario's English-language universities is also likely to have a positive consequence for Franco-Ontarians in that it may generate a demand for French language courses (if not French language programmes), which Franco-Ontarian students enrolled in English language universities (due to the lack of French language universities) could take advantage of. Although the English language universities are preparing themselves to meet such a demand, the availability of French language courses in Ontario's English-language universities is likely to remain at a relatively modest level in the near future since a sufficient demand has yet to materialise (Wesche *et al.*, 1985). This brings up the issue of who will be given the duty of delivering French-medium courses. Understandably, English language universities may be tempted (for human and financial reasons) to opt for a minimal linguistic retraining of their existing staff, in which case Franco-Ontarian students and probably immersion students, too, may feel that they are offered lower quality courses and hence may lose interest in French-medium courses. This would further limit the demand for such courses.

Let us now briefly consider the idea of producing a common pool of pedagogical materials for immersion and Franco-Ontarian students. While it certainly makes sense to write pedagogical materials for immersion students at a level of complexity somewhat below that presented by the kind of French which same-age monolingual Francophone students have to decode, such an adaptive strategy would be counterproductive in the case of Franco-Ontarian students who come from Francophone homes, since the latter have a higher level of French language mastery than immersion students. However, such adapted materials could be of use to Franco-Ontarian students who come from homes where French has been given up, since they experience many of the same difficulties in mastering French as do the immersion students (Mougeon & Beniak, 1988). Similarly, immersion students could profit from materials specifically designed for Franco-

Ontarian students from assimilated homes. The idea of pooling pedagogical materials must be considered with caution, however. Franco-Ontarian educators have recently attempted to develop pedagogical materials which reflect Franco-Ontarian or French-Canadian culture, on the grounds that they would be more motivating for Franco-Ontarian students and hence more likely to have a positive influence on learning. Such cultural content would probably be lacking in pedagogical materials developed for immersion students. In this regard, then, a better alternative would probably be cooperation between pedagogical materials developers across French-Canadian minority settings (e.g. Ontario, Manitoba, the Maritimes).

## Conclusion

The increased popularity of French immersion in Canada's Anglophone community and its recent desire to have access to the educational institutions of French Canadians (e.g. in Québec or in Ontario) bear witness to the fact that the status of French has improved significantly in Canada over the last 20 years or so and that English Canadians increasingly believe that an excellent knowledge of French is an important asset for socio-economic betterment.<sup>6</sup> In Québec, Canada's only majority Francophone province, such a desire has not met with much objection or opposition—at least on linguistic grounds—since it is consonant with the government's official policy of Frenchification of 'allophones' (i.e. non-French-speaking immigrants) via obligatory schooling in French. Outside Québec, however, French Canadians are in the minority and engaged in a battle against linguistic and cultural assimilation. In a province like Ontario, Francophones are at a crucial stage in their efforts to develop a set of autonomous French language institutions which could play a decisive role in their continued existence as a distinctive community. Having examined the likely effects of the placement of immersion programmes or individual English-speaking students in the schools of Ontario's French-speaking minority, we must conclude that by and large (with the exception of post-secondary schools) such a measure could seriously hamper these schools' role as a transmitter of the French-Canadian language and culture, and hence could negatively affect the survival of a francophone community in Ontario. In his address to the *Association canadienne d'éducation de langue française*, Bordeleau (1987) arrived at essentially the same conclusion, arguing strongly in favour of preserving the autonomy and integrity of Ontario's French language schools. Should the process of English language shift among Franco-Ontarians diminish significantly as a result of the protection and further expansion of French-medium institutions, it is not inconceivable that the French language

schools could then open their doors without fear to the children of the Anglo-Ontarian majority. At the moment, however, it is to be hoped that Anglo-Ontarians will respect the Francophone minority's wish to preserve as much as possible the French-Canadian identity of their schools. Though such ethnocentrism may be seen as discriminatory, it seems to us to be a necessary stage in the maintenance of a viable Francophone community in Ontario.

Those who are actively involved in the promotion of threatened minority languages outside Canada may learn from Ontario's Francophone minority's current struggle for an autonomous cultural and linguistic existence. Improvement in the status of a minority language as a result of political intervention can bring with it a new and probably unforeseen challenge for the minority group, that of facing the prospect of having to share its institutions with the majority who has 'suddenly' become interested in learning the minority language. It will be interesting to see how this particular challenge is resolved in Canada. In any case it is quite clear that the outcome of such struggle will affect Canada's future existence as a bilingual state/country.

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### **Notes to Chapter 15**

1. This practice came to an end when the Québec government passed a major piece of linguistic legislation (The French Language Charter) which aimed at bolstering the vitality of French in the province.
2. Before 1971, censuses did not provide information on home language use.
3. Ontario's French language schools are administered by local school boards which also administer the English language schools. Franco-Ontarian educators have been fighting for a re-organisation of school boards along linguistic lines, which would give them full control over their schools.
4. It is somewhat ironical to note that French immersion specialists are sensitive to this aspect of the learning situation of immersion students and hold the view that the fossilisation of non-native features in the French of these students is due in part to the fact that they reinforce each other's errors.
5. Similar consequences have been observed in connection with the admission of French-speaking students by Flemish-medium schools in Brussels.
6. In a survey of Anglo-Ontarian parents who had opted for French immersion for their children, Olson & Burns (1983) discovered that their primary motivation was the desire to improve their children's chances of obtaining well-paying jobs.

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