

Summary of Proposed Research

English is spoken as a first language by around 375 million people and is an official language for 75 countries with a total population of over two billion. In addition, speakers of English as a second language outnumber those who speak it as a first language and around 750 million people are believed to speak English as a foreign language (Crystal, 1995). English has thus become a compulsory school subject in many countries around the world. This is particularly true for countries like the People Republic of China (China) where success in learning English has become the key to academic success.

Research has demonstrated that bilingual education as a program of instruction has resulted in observed advantages in students' literacy development and contributes to students' academic success (Bialystok et al, 2004; Krashen, 1996). Research in second language immersion in many countries around the world has demonstrated that immersion is an effective means of facilitating preschool and primary school students' language proficiency, literacy, and cognitive development, without undermining competence in their first language (Cummins & Carson, 1997; Cummins, 1999; Swain, 1996). The success of French Immersion programs in Canada for the past 30 years has provided some of the best evidence to support immersion education. Such a second language immersion has been adopted as a model of successful second language learning in China and elsewhere (see de Courcy, 2002). In China, second language immersion in English, modeled after the French Immersion in Canada, is increasingly adopted in its school system as one way to improve its existing English language education, where millions of Chinese learners tend to lack the ability in English communication after years of learning English in schools (Hu, 2002). In addition, English is one of the three key school subjects in its education system (the other two being Chinese and mathematics). Despite the importance of the English subject and the fast growth of English Immersion in China, only very limited research has been conducted so far to evaluate the success of the second language immersion program (Qiang, 2001; Qiang & Siegel, 2004).

The objectives of this proposed project are, therefore, to evaluate the overall success of the English Immersion Program in China by 1) exploring the language development (both L1 Chinese and L2 English) and mathematics, and 2) exploring the factors contributing to or impeding students' academic success in English Immersion program in comparison with the students in the non-immersion program. This research project will collect data from 600 students and 6 teachers in one school in Xian and two schools in Guangzhou, China. The findings of the project will provide information on whether students in the English Immersion program in China enjoy the same or similar academic success as students in the French Immersion program in Canada. For example, students in French Immersion manifest superior competence in French relative to students in regular English program. They also demonstrate academic success in reading, writing, speaking and listening comprehension in English (Holobow et al, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). The findings from the current study will also provide information on the kind of predictors of students' academic success with the Chinese English Immersion context. Furthermore, the findings of the project will provide value lessons for other second language immersion in countries like Europe and Asia. This will lead to further research collaboration where Canadian researchers can take a lead in more in-depth and longitudinal studies in the role of second language immersion in relation to students' academic success.