

HOW TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR AN IMMIGRANT
CHILD WITH A NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND?

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PROBLEM

In 1970, an analysis of Statistics Canada figures shows that about ⁴⁵45% of immigrants who came to Canada were from countries where English or French are not used as the mother-tongue. Yet the educational systems in British Columbia and in other provinces are patterned on the assumption that all children know English or French as a mother tongue. It is seldom realized that there is a very significant minority of children who come from a non-English background.

The purpose of this article is to present an Integrated Learning Approach model which makes a distinction between the language concepts and the subject concepts of the language of instruction in the schools. An understanding of the model should promote practical research in this field and help educators to become sensitive to the needs of the immigrant child who comes from a non-English background. It is argued that, through a planned approach, educational systems across Canada can maximize educational opportunity for such children.

In every school subject the language used has two components: the language concept and the subject concept. Take a simple example. An instruction is given: "Add 2 and

2 and put the result in a given box". The language concept implies that the performer carry out a certain task. The mathematical concept requires the performer to know the concept of addition. The performer can carry out the task of addition only if he knows both the language concept and the subject concept of the instruction.

Another important observation needs to be made. The school texts use sentence patterns and vocabulary suitable to the reading level of children. Thus, a Grade II English Text has more difficult words than a Grade I Text. Consider a social studies text book, "Canada and Her Neighbours" used in Grade V. It has a vocabulary suitable for that grade level. Now assume there is a child of non-English background in a Grade V class who came to this country two years ago. Does one think that even an average ability child would have acquired the language concepts of English required to understand the social studies concepts presented in that textbook?

The following excerpts are taken from school books. Does the immigrant child of the normal age in relation to the grade level of the text books quoted below, know the language concept of the underlined words in order to understand the subject concept of the word?

(A) "You boys and girls probably wonder why there are packing plants here in Calgary. The chief reason is that not far from the city there are many cattle - cattle grazing on the dry grasslands and cattle fattening on the irrigated farms around the city. Of course, there are sheep too, and hogs, but most

of the meat we produce is beef. The next most important reason for our industry is that here in Calgary there are many people needing meat. What they cannot eat, we can ship easily to other places, since Calgary is an important railway centre. Railways, with their refrigerator cars, carry the meat west, north, east in Canada, and south in the U.S. But come and see our plant.

"The animals come here from the killing pens. These men you see are dressing the meat. This includes everything that is done to an animal after it has been killed, in order to prepare it for sale. Here, for example, the hide is removed."¹

- (B) "Consider how the golf ball situation shown in Figure 9-8 will change when the station wagon is driven over a bumpy road. Now the golf balls are shaken and jostled about; they roll around and collide with each other. Every now and then one of the golf balls even accumulates enough energy (through collisions) to return to the upper level of the station wagon floor. Of course, any golf ball that is bounced up tends to roll back down to the lower level a little later. As this bumpy ride continues a state is reached in which golf balls are being jostled up to the higher level at

¹ Seiveright, D and Lloyd, T.: Canada and Her Neighbours, Ginn and Co. Toronto, 1966, Second Edition. (A Grade V Text Book, Page 145.)

the same rate they are rolling back down to the lower level. Then "equilibrium" exists. Some of the golf balls are on the lower level and some on the upper level. Since the rate of rolling up equals the rate of rolling down, a dynamic balance exists."²

- (C) "In Figs. 22-8 a moving billiard ball collides with a billiard ball at rest. The incident ball stops and the ball it hits goes off with the same velocity with which the incident ball came in. The two billiard balls have the same mass. Therefore, the momentum of the second ball after the collision is the same as that of the incident ball before collision. The incident ball has lost all its momentum, and the ball it struck has gained exactly the momentum which the incident ball lost. The changes in momentum are again equal and opposite."³

The degree of his handicap in the understanding of language concepts is likely to be directly correlated with the amount of time spent on concentrated language instruction. If the concentrated language instruction is based entirely on the learning and use of "formal" English, as is often the case, his handicap is not likely to be significantly reduced

² Chemistry: An Experimental Science: Edited by Pirnental, G.C., W.H. Freeman & Co., 1963. (A Grade XI Text Book.) Page 157.

³ Physics: Physical Science Study Committee. The Copp Clark Publishing Company, Vancouver, 1965. (A Physics Textbook for Grade XI and XII.) Page 383.

in terms of his intellectual capacity. In his attempt to understand the language aspect of the oral or written instruction the child may tend to miss the important elements of the subject concept.

In British Columbia some school districts have classes for New Canadians who are nine years or older where an effort is made to teach formal English. The Provincial Department of Education allows a grant for such classes for one year. Does it mean that, irrespective of the age of the child, he has one year to learn all the language that is appropriate to his age level, and then continues the regular programme in ordinary classes? Obviously, the rationale behind the New Canadian classes has to be given more thought in terms of time for which the grant is available, and the highly specialized curriculum that should be developed. The reason for not having these classes for younger children does not appear to be clear.

As far as the education of the children who come from non-English background is concerned, the basic questions, therefore, are: For how long will the education system continue to neglect the educational opportunity that these children should have? Is it not true that the older the child, the more difficult it is for him to receive proper schooling? Is it not likely that the learning assistance (slow learners) classes have a significant proportion of such children? Is it not a fact that a significant number of these children finally end up in the terminal courses or they simply drop out from school? Is it not a fact that so long

as a child in a regular class is quiet, respectful, and plodding along (C- or D level of achievement), the educators hardly need to think of language as being a communication barrier for this child? What would be his performance if the child were helped to overcome the language difficulty? Finally, how can educators be helped to become more sensitive to the needs of the immigrant children?

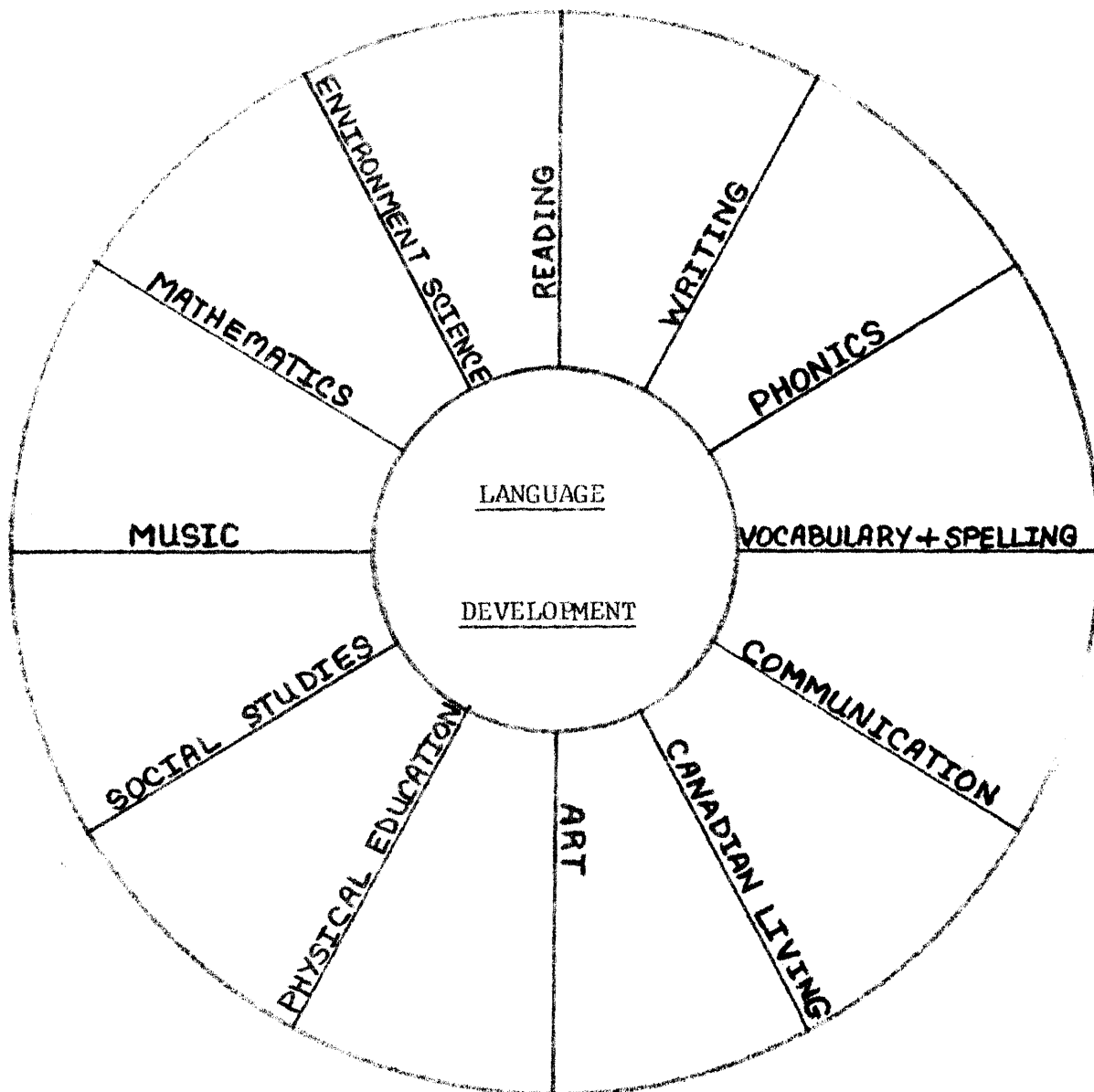
The identification of the problem clearly supports the argument that the normal educational strategies of the educational system need to be examined from the perspective of immigrant children.

A systematic approach requires an outline of objectives, planned activities that may achieve those objectives, and evaluative procedures to determine the possible outcomes.

INTEGRATED LEARNING APPROACH

In the Integrated Learning Approach the basic objective is to help the child to develop the knowledge of language concepts up to his level, so that he can profit from regular class instruction. Diagram #1 shows the concept of the Integrated Learning Approach:

Diagram No. 1:
CONCEPT
of
INTEGRATED LEARNING APPROACH



NOTE:

The diagram shows the interplay between the subjects and the language development. The learner is taught both the language concept and the subject concept in each school course.

The diagram does not purport to be an all-embracing concept of knowledge. It is an attempt to indicate that the language development is the product of interrelationships among the various subjects of a school curriculum. In making a clear distinction between the language concept and subject concept of each course and by strengthening the language concept where it is weak, the educator not only helps a child to gain a superior understanding of the subject concept, but also contributes to his knowledge of total language development.

This concept views language as a vehicle for communication. It is not envisaged as a programme, though it may contribute, to improve "formal" or "academic" English. There are many well-known difficulties and problems associated with the teaching of English, and consequently of all other subjects, with English as the medium, to people with a different mother-tongue and background. The problem with many of the approaches has been that they are centred on teaching English as a "formal" language rather than as a vehicle for communication. Therefore, these procedures have not been altogether successful.

It is also important to deal with such questions: Isn't every teacher a teacher of English? Is this not what a teacher does when presenting a subject concept? And, what about the normal English-speaking child who has poor knowledge of language concepts?

Although it is well known that some children have more ability than others, it would indeed be presumptuous to

imagine that a significant proportion of immigrant children from non-English background suffer from some inherent lack of intellectual apparatus. The underachievement on their part may be due to the lack of understanding of the language of instruction.⁴ In an ordinary heterogeneous classroom, for example in a Grade VIII mathematics class, a mathematics teacher must assume a basic level of understanding of language in order to present the mathematical concepts of that level. Of course, he will explain the language concepts of difficult words or paragraphs in appropriate contextual sense. Assuming that he has immigrant children, 15 or 16 years old, with only a Grade IV or V level of language understanding, it might be difficult for this teacher to educate them in the mathematical concepts of Grade VIII level. In this sense, the Integrated Learning Programme model rejects the dictum that every teacher is a teacher of English. As far as the question of an under-achieving English-speaking child is concerned, it is suggested that as a by-product of the programmes developed, the model may prove helpful to him also.

Strategies in Developing an Integrated Learning Approach

The Integrated Learning Approach, thus, concentrates on the individual needs of immigrant children. It is based on the assumption that irrespective of age and knowledge of

⁴ It is for this reason that standardised tests to measure their potential, both verbal and non-verbal, should not be administered to them until the language deficiencies have been corrected.

English, a child does not know the language as a mother-tongue.⁵ Therefore, the first step is to ensure that he has the knowledge of language concepts which an average English-speaking child acquires at home, and in interaction with his environment. This would be accomplished by preparing carefully sequenced packages of learning, concentrating on language concepts, for each of the pre-school years.

Individualized instruction is visualized. Therefore, modern technology has an important part to play. The use of video-tapes, cassette-recorders, listening centres, slides, transparencies, movies and, of course, the traditional use of flash cards and pictures, can increase the pace of the learning process. The utilization of para-professionals and community resources may help in keeping the costs of the programme comparable with traditional instructional costs.

At this level, the objective of the programme would be to help the child to identify and interact with his immediate environment in English language. Thus, such common objects as chair, table, closet, drawer and dinnerware become known to him in English in addition to his own mother-tongue. Now, it could be observed that the older the child, depending on his socio-cultural background, the faster would be his progress. Presumably, a ten-year old child with no English may possibly take only a few months to get these basic language concepts. Thus, he would not only have learned the

⁵ The present importance of correct pronunciation and enunciation would be de-emphasized in order to maximize the communicative aspect of language learning in the shortest possible time.

concept of "chair" but also to use it as a communication tool. Strengthening of the communicative aspect should later on prove helpful in teaching 'formal' content of the language.

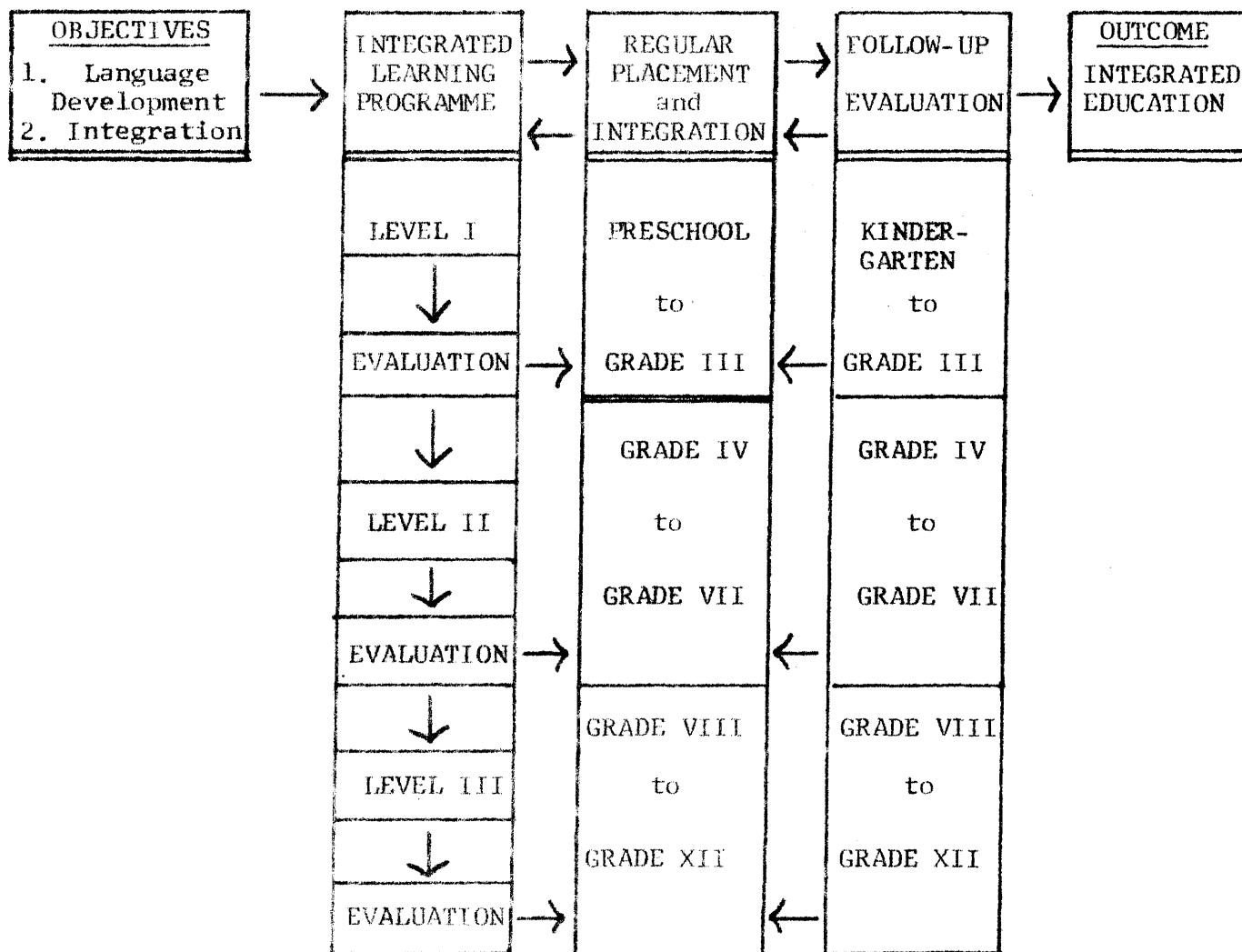
Similarly, for each of the formal years of schooling, Grade I to XII, the integrated learning programme would be developed for all school courses. One complete unit could be conceived of as having several sub-units of the language concepts envisioned in the Concept of Integrated Learning Approach.

One of the strategies that could be employed in developing the programmes would be to involve some of the teachers in preparing the language concepts in the field of their expertise.

Implementation of the Integrated Learning Approach

Diagram #2 is a model for implementing the programme. The objectives are to promote the language development and planned integration of immigrant children in regular classes:

Diagram No. 2: MODEL SHOWING A STRATEGY TO
IMPLEMENT AN INTEGRATED LEARNING APPROACH



To achieve the outcome of 'integrated' education, the basis of the Programme is flexibility - a free flow of instruction regardless of grade level. The three Levels are merely a convenient method of indicating achievement. Level I approximates the knowledge of language concepts from pre-school years to Grade III, Level II corresponds with Grade IV to Grade VII, and Level III takes in the five years of high school from Grade VIII to Grade XII. Each level has several learning units and sub-units. The evaluation is conceived to be an ongoing and continuous process that should allow for a planned regular class placement and integration of an immigrant child.

Under this approach, the problem of integration of an immigrant child with other children is considered to be an important one. Some people believe that children should not be segregated. In other words, immigrant children should be 'integrated' with other children in regular classes on the assumption that it would speed up the process of developing their motivation and confidence. This might be valid for non-immigrant children. However, for immigrant children, this assumption is questionable. Haphazard and unplanned integration may achieve opposite results in terms of physical and socio-emotional maturity, and thus may adversely retard **their** intellectual progress. Gradual integration might begin from day one, but it would be properly planned in order to achieve the stated objectives.

Using the Integrated Learning Approach, an immigrant child entering the school system, or already in the system,

but not achieving according to his age level, would be interviewed and tested to determine roughly his knowledge of English language concepts and also his level of understanding in other subjects. He would then be put on the programme at an appropriate level. However, all the children, irrespective of age, would be given selective flexible experiences in their language concepts from the pre-school years to their age level. Since evaluation would be continuous, the initial placement as determined by the first evaluation would by no means be considered sacrosanct. The evaluative techniques are intended only to facilitate his placement and integration in regular classes, and thus equip the child to start his educational programme with confidence.

The ethnic committees, where possible, would prove very helpful in pre-assessment, with the programme itself, and in the subsequent integration process because of their knowledge of their own educational systems, and also of the system in this country.

The theoretical model of the Integrated Learning Approach needs to be experimented with, tested and evaluated to determine its effectiveness. Since the approach requires extensive use of technology, the educational system could look to industry and the Government for funds to establish Integrated Learning Centres.

A Centre could have the services of a coordinator for the programme, audio-visual equipment, integrated learning packages, and a resource library. It is not necessary to conceive of a Centre as a separate school for immigrant

children. The concept of having a Centre is flexible and its nature could be determined by the local environment of the educational system.

A legitimate question can be asked: "What can the concerned educators do with immigrant children now in their regular classes?"

It is a known principle that to provide motivation and thrust, an educator needs to build on a child's strengths. Immigrants leave their home for a number of reasons. However, the most important are probably ambition and the drive to do well. Consequently, the children are likely to be hardworking and conscientious. The educators should channel these attitudes into developing trust and confidence in themselves, and in their relationships with other children.

In regular classes, the educators who see the logical validity in the argument presented in the model, could analyze the child's performance, and where applicable, help to build language concepts which would enhance his knowledge of subject concepts.

In conclusion, the educational system has to provide suitable opportunities for all immigrant children. The Integrated Learning Approach might help to solve some of their problems and give them a solid start towards becoming wholly integrated citizens.

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