



Why they didn't learn in school: The L2 French of young adults in Montreal

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In 1993, Pierrette Thibault and I undertook a research project that sought to understand the role of immersion schooling in creating a generation of Anglophones who could function in French in the increasingly Francophone milieu that is modern Montreal. To this end, we recruited a sample of young adults from the first cohort of Anglophones who had had the opportunity of participating in French immersion from the time they entered school, i.e., speakers born between 1960 and 1973. We compared speakers with three degrees of educational exposure to French: those with only the basic French taught as a subject; those who had been in French immersion programs in otherwise English-speaking schools; and those who had attended all-French schools. Those with only “school French” (a) complained that their education had not adequately prepared them for life outside the classroom; and (b) nevertheless exhibited many features of colloquial Québécois French that were not taught in school, and had to have been acquired outside the classroom. Graduates of immersion programs clearly had a better foundation to anchor community-based learning. Typically shared by L2 speakers from all educational backgrounds were phonological features like the deletion of [l] in determiners and pronouns and the affrication of [t,d] before high front vowels; morphosyntactic features like subject doubling and adverb placement; and pragmatic features like the use of discourse markers. This paper will present an overview of both the educational and speech community-based influences that differentially affect L2 speakers in their development as bilinguals. These processes can be characterized as inevitable, since as members of a bilingual speech community, all speakers acquire local norms to some degree. However, their ability to do so is constrained by social as well as psychological factors.