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Quality Input and Sustainability in Early Immersion Classrooms: A Case Study of an Experimental School in Macao

Abstract This paper looks into the case of a school in Macao nominated as the first (and so far the only) China-Canada-United States English Immersion (CCUEI) centre in the Macao Special Administrative Region (Macao SAR) China for the experimentation and application of English immersion instruction (EI) in the K1–3 and Primary 1–2 classes. Drawing on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1982) and Cummins’ (2000) framework of instruction for language learning and academic achievement in the formal school context, the authors report their observations by analyzing the data collected from school teachers and participation in classes and by reflecting on their experiences, and suggest improvement that can be made to teachers’ linguistic and communicative competence, in terms of quantity and quality of comprehensible input and expected output, and thus the sustainability of English immersion classrooms in a Chinese context.

Keywords English immersion instruction (EI), Input Hypothesis, teacher development and quality input, continuity and sustainability in school context

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed fast globalization, vigorous implementation of reforms & opening-up policies, and rapid economic growth, making China not
only one of the largest economic powers but also the most dynamic country with
the largest population of English learners and teachers in the world. It is thus
only natural that English Immersion instruction/education (EI) and Task-Based
Language Teaching/Learning (TBLT), possibly two of the most influential
international consortiums promoting language teaching and learning worldwide,
are catching on fast in terms of their provision in China.

The Macao Special Administrative Region (Macao SAR) of China, although
barely a dot on the world map, has become a focus of international attention,
thanks to its booming economy following the liberalization of gaming
concessionaires in 2003 and its opening-up to foreign investors. This has resulted
in Macao’s enhanced international status and enormous demands on its
population for better English proficiency and an improved competitive edge.
Indeed, schools in Macao have long opened their arms to various schools of
thoughts, English teaching/learning approaches and methods developed both at
home and abroad, including innovative efforts such as the China-Canada-United
States English Immersion (CCUEI) project that has been so energetically
promoted in Chinese mainland cities by a dedicated international team consisting
of researchers and frontline teachers from Canada, China, and USA.

CCUEI and Macao Tong Nam School

As a former Portuguese colony and an East-West cultural exchange hub for
centuries, Macao has benefited and drawn inspirations for its educational
development from two systems: the modern European system and the modern
Chinese system (Lau & Ieong, 2009). Indeed, school principals and teachers of
English have been paying close attention to education reforms and innovations in
major Chinese cities, learning from their experiences and taking advantage of
their resources. The explorations, experiments and success stories emerging from
the CCUEI projects are so impressive and encouraging (as summarized in Qiang,
Lau, Ieong, & Yu, 2009; Chi, 2006), and the desire to learn and make
improvement in English language teaching and learning (ELT/ELL) is so strong
that they participate in activities arranged and facilitated by the CCUEI team,
both as a source of inspiration and as a provider of teacher training, textbooks
and other supporting materials.

Owing to historical factors, the great majority of Macao’s non-tertiary
education institutions are private schools, some being church-owned while others
established and run by non-government organizations, such as those belonging to
the Macao Chinese Educators’ Association (MCEA). Most are Chinese-medium
schools developed from yixue (charity schools) while a few use English as the
language of instruction. Around 93% of the 80,000 plus school-age children in