Interest in home–school communication has paid little attention, to date, to the experiences of English as a second language (ESL) parents. This article examines recent Chinese immigrant parents’ and Canadian teachers’ perspectives of ESL learning presented at Parents’ Night. On the basis of observations of three annual Parents’ Nights, interviews of teachers and bilingual assistants who served as interpreters for parents and focus groups, the study reveals a deep division between the two on both what and how students should learn. Teachers believed that the ESL classes help socialize students into Canadian school and social cultures and develop language and study skills and appropriate attitudes to help prepare them for entry into mainstream classes. In contrast, in the parents’ views, the current ESL program has many problems, such as the lengthy time students stayed in the program, the lack of exams, mixed grades, the low level of content, and the lack of grammar instruction.

Interest in home–school communication has paid little attention, to date, to the experiences of English as a second language (ESL) parents. The limited communication between ESL parents and teachers is a serious problem (Gougeon, 1993; Salzberg, 1998). Although there are some notable exceptions, the limited discussion of interaction between Canadian teachers and ESL parents is often based on anecdotal accounts or is framed in terms of the perceptions of teachers rather than parents. Within this relatively neglected research area, this article explores both the more general educational philosophy and the concerns of parents and teachers in the context of ESL Parents’ Night.
ESL parent voices are not always heard or solicited, yet parents may be very concerned about the appropriateness of ESL instruction. For example, the Calderdale decision was formulated in England in the 1980s after a group of ESL parents successfully sued a school authority because they felt that their children were being ghettoized in an ESL program (Leung & Franson, 2001). On the basis of this decision, the Ministry of Education prohibited ESL programs throughout England, and ESL teachers now work as support teachers within content classes. In North America, California Proposition 227, known as the Unz Initiative, passed with a 61% approval in 1998 and eliminated all forms of ESL instruction and bilingual programs except immersion in that state (Crawford, 1997). The dissatisfaction of some of the people closely associated with these programs was a factor too, with large numbers of Hispanic parents voting against ESL and bilingual education. Parents believed that their children were not learning English quickly enough. Thus, the message is clear: Even if the majority of parents are satisfied with ESL programs, it is important to reach all parents, to listen attentively, and to initiate and sustain open dialogue between educators and parents. Informed parental voice is important to achieving quality education for ESL students.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To deal with the complexities, a three-part theoretical framework was developed to weave in issues of home–school relations, two views of language learning, and the culturally contested nature of ESL pedagogy. I take up each one in turn.

Home–School Relations

The issue of communication between schools and ESL parents has recently moved to the foreground. In British Columbia, the Vancouver and Richmond school boards have both been approached with proposals for traditional schools, with claims of support from ESL parents. Most of the parents involved are recent Chinese immigrants who are unhappy with the work their children are doing in Vancouver and Richmond public schools. These parents asked for “teacher-led instruction, a homework policy, dress code or uniform, regular study and conduct reports, frequent meetings between parents and teachers, and additional extra-curricular activities” (Sullivan, 1998, p. 15A). It is worth noting that this debate is presented as being between two familiar sides, the “traditional” and the “progressive,” a contrast that does not always fit local conditions. There is a danger that the ready-made rhetoric of the public debate may turn attention away from classroom realities and that calls for simplistic solutions may bury valuable educational approaches to very real needs. In the Richmond school district, difficulties of communication with Chinese immigrant parents have become a major political question (Gaskell, 2001).
Teacher–parent communication is fraught with complexity for a variety of reasons. Communicating with parents whose first language is not English and whose children are struggling academically adds another dimension to the interaction between home and school because of linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, many other barriers work against effective home–school communication, such as teacher attitudes and institutional racism and different views of education. Many teachers often do not have sufficiently high expectations for ESL students and parents (Jones, 2003). Class and race may also play a role in parent–school interaction. As Cline and Necochea (2001) suggested,

the quest for parental involvement comes with a caveat—only parental involvement that is supportive of school policies and instructional practices are welcome here … parents whose culture, ethnicity, [socioeconomic status], and language background differ drastically from the white middle-class norms are usually kept at a distance, for their views, values, and behaviors seem “foreign” and strange to traditional school personnel. (p. 23)

Probing further, Lareau (2003) found that White and Black parents of middle-class students were more strategic in intervening in school than parents of Black working-class students. Parents of both Black middle-class and working-class students were constantly concerned with schools’ racial discrimination. It is worth noting that parent involvement in North America has focused on values and concerns that are more middle class than working class and on experiences that are more relevant to parents of Anglo-Celtic descent than those from non-English-speaking backgrounds or those of Aboriginal descent. As a result, the significance of non-dominant forms of parent involvement of different races and social classes has been overlooked.

Two Views of Language Learning

That there are two competing views of language learning also needs to be considered. These views, formal and functional theories of language, may inform parents and teachers’ views of ESL education. Formal theorists, such as Chomsky (1965), regard language as a set of rules governing the use of words, phrases, sentences, and syntax. The focus is on language structure and grammatical competence while ignoring the social context of language. In contrast, functionalists, such as Halliday (1994), emphasize the social dimensions of language, used primarily as a resource to make meaning, which posits that meanings are socially and culturally constructed. The formalist view of language is associated with the language acquisition approach to language learning, whereas the functionalist view of language is associated with the language socialization approach to language learning. Whereas researchers of language acquisition focus on the acquisition of the lan-
guage code, researchers of language socialization see knowledge of language and knowledge of culture developing simultaneously (Ochs, 1991).

Within the educational culture of Canadian schools, ESL programs typically involve socialization processes. Immigrant students are simultaneously trying to cope with three phenomena, namely: (a) to learn to speak, listen, read, and write in a second language; (b) to master an academic discourse; and (c) to complete school in a society where the social and cultural norms are very different from those at home and within their own culture (Mohan, Leung & Davison, 2001).

Culturally Contested Pedagogy on ESL Learning

At issue is whether a language is best learned before or within mainstream classrooms. Many teachers regard learning English as a second language as crucial for ESL students before they move to mainstream classes. Liang and Mohan’s (2003) study of an ESL program in a Canadian school showed that teachers took a language socialization view and believed that ESL programs helped ESL students acquire proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers also believed that ESL classes helped students to acquire basic study skills and to be socialized into North American school culture, two things they believed are fundamental to their continuing education in Canada. Weighing in on this side of the issue, numerous texts of authority and research on ESL teaching and learning provide educationally sound teaching methodologies that promote critical thinking, reflective teaching, communicative teaching methods, the integration of language and content and cooperative learning (Brown, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, ESL teachers are encouraged to use interactive techniques and group or individual self-evaluations and to conduct learner-centered activities in their classrooms.

Nonetheless, studies of ESL parents and teachers reveal very different, negative views of each other. A study of eight Taiwanese ESL families in Vancouver, British Columbia, revealed that parents were anxious to mainstream their children, as they believed such English learning was delayed through separate ESL classes (Salzberg, 1998). They tended to prefer more intensive written homework and more exams indicative of measurable improvement. Another study, of 27 teachers in Calgary, Alberta, suggested that Chinese immigrant parents were distrustful of the Canadian school system and confused about the significance of credentials and the Canadian style of teaching and learning (Gougeon, 1993). According to one teacher, “I think [ESL parents] may feel very disappointed with the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning” (Gougeon, 1993, p. 265). There being no study whatsoever that examined both parents’ and teachers’ beliefs about ESL learning at the high school level, such a study was undertaken and is reported on here.

This article focuses on recent Chinese immigrant parents’ and Canadian teachers’ perspectives on ESL learning as articulated at a key communication event: Par-
ents’ Night. During this event, both parties meet and discuss their views of the education of adolescent students. ESL Parents’ Night refers to a special annual parent–teacher conference organized by an ESL department of a secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. By contrast with routine parent–teacher conferences, which usually deal with the concerns of a particular parent about a specific student, Parents’ Night provides an opportunity to examine parents’ and teachers’ concerns. Two research questions guided my study: First, what are teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and education, and what are the differences between them? Second, would there be differences in these perspectives and, if so, what would be the nature of these differences?

METHOD

Research Site

A purposeful sampling procedure was adopted for the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This study was conducted at Milton Secondary School (a pseudonym), located on the west side of Vancouver. Milton was chosen for three important reasons: (a) school diversity, (b) programming, and (c) parent–teacher communication. First, it had a specifically designed ESL program for immigrant students. A relatively large secondary school with about 1,700 students from Grade 8 to Grade 12, it was situated in a quiet, middle- to upper-middle economic class neighborhood. Sixty-two percent of the students of the school spoke a language other than English at home. At the time of data collection, about 200, 160, and 120 of students in 1997, 1998, and 1999, respectively, were studying in the ESL program. Many of these students were recent immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, with a smaller number from mainland China.

Second, as illustrated in Table 1, the ESL program consisted of a number of noncredit content-based courses, such as ESL science and ESL social studies, that intertwined the instruction of the English language and subject matter simultaneously, except physical education and math, which were mainstream classes. Most of the ESL classes were randomly assigned heterogeneous classes, a technique referred to as multilevel grouping. As a result, any ESL class would have students of different ages and of varying levels of English language proficiency. This system was unique in the city where most secondary schools used a lock-step system, in which ESL students moved through various levels to reach mainstream classes. The students at Milton generally stayed in the ESL program for 2 years.

Third, the program had organized ESL Parents’ Night for more than 10 years. The teachers were aware of some of the concerns parents had, which I discuss further shortly. The purpose of the ESL Parents’ Night was for teachers to educate parents about the philosophy of the ESL program and convince parents that their
ESL program was the best for students. At Parents’ Night, the ESL teachers and mainstream teachers jointly explained to parents how ESL classes teach prerequisite skills for the academic tasks students face in mainstream classes. Former and current ESL students also explained the differences between ESL and mainstream classes and the difficulties they faced in mainstream classes in oral and poster presentations and role plays. The ESL Parents’ Night and the participants chosen could provide significant insights about the questions under investigation.

Participants

Nine ESL teachers and 6 bilingual assistants participated in the study. Three teachers were pursuing a master’s degree in teaching English as a second language, and 1 was pursuing a doctoral degree in education. One teacher had taught English in Japan and Taiwan, and another taught ESL in the United States. All the teachers participated in the planning, delivery, and feedback sessions of the event. In addition, they involved their students in the whole process.

The bilingual assistants were trained graduate research assistants who were also experienced teachers of English as a foreign language or ESL. Well before the Parents’ Night, the teachers sent home an invitation to the parents with a tear-off sheet at the bottom that they could return. The assistants followed up the invitations with the parents/guardians in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English. Unlike earlier immigrants in Ghuman and Wong’s (1989) study, many Chinese parents in this study were entrepreneurs, investors, or had independent immigrant status from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.¹ This group consisted primarily of middle- to upper-middle economic class, postsecondary-educated, achievement-oriented business people or professionals. For many parents, the

¹This is not to say that the Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group. In fact, there are significant differences in the political, economic, social, and educational systems among China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Thus, caution in generalizations about Chinese parents is needed.
major reason they had immigrated to Canada was for their children’s education. The lengths of these parents’ stay in Canada ranged from a few months to 4 years. The bilingual assistants served as interpreters at Parents’ Night, as requested by the teachers.

I was introduced to the teachers and parents as a researcher from a Canadian university who studied the processes of home–school communication. I played a role of a moderate participant–observer seeking to “maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). I participated in some activities in response to teachers’ requests. I explained Parents’ Night to the parents on the phone and presented information gathered from the parents at the teachers’ planning meetings before Parents’ Night. I also interpreted for Chinese parents at Parents’ Night and reported parents’ feedback to the teachers after Parents’ Night.

Data Collection

Three interconnected research techniques—interviews, naturalistic observations, and focus groups—were used for data collection over a 3-year period in the 1990s. Twelve ESL department planning meetings for Parents’ Night were observed, each of which lasted for about 50 min. At the meetings, the teachers discussed parents’ feedback based on a survey2 they had conducted the previous year. Building on the feedback, the teachers discussed their purposes, educational philosophies, and involvement of students for the next Parents’ Night. Observations of the planning meetings helped me examine how the teachers responded to parents’ feedback and better understand the teachers’ beliefs about the event.

Three annual ESL Parents’ Nights were observed. The focus of the observations was on the interactions between ESL teachers and parents, how the meetings were arranged, how teachers and students made their presentations, what topics were covered, how parents asked their questions and how teachers responded. All the 12 planning meetings and the three Parents’ Nights were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. After Parents’ Nights, nine ESL teachers were interviewed individually for 30 to 80 min. Three of them were interviewed twice because of their active involvement in Parents’ Night. These interviews allowed teachers to reflect on and recall their experiences of the event and articulate their beliefs about ESL learning.

Six bilingual assistants were also interviewed individually, for 30 to 50 min. Before Parents’ Night, the bilingual assistants telephoned 257 parents/guardians to

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2The survey questions included “What language would you like the presentation to be in?”, “What could we do to help you understand our program?”, “In what ways can we assist your child more?”, and “What should we do differently?”
explain the purpose of the event in the parents’ first languages. They also asked parents what kind of questions they would like to ask the teachers. I conducted follow-up calls with 105 parents/guardians to whom the assistants referred me, to clarify the nature of parents’ concerns. At Parents’ Night, parents asked a few questions through the assistants. The assistants also talked to the parents informally to get their feedback at the end of the event. After Parents’ Night, the bilingual assistants asked for parents’ feedback on the event, particularly about their reactions to the teachers’ and students’ presentations and whether their concerns were addressed. Parents’ feedback was recorded in the bilingual assistants’ and my field notes. The formal interviews with the assistants focused on the parents’ interpretations of the ESL program, the parents’ major concerns, and their strategies for working with these concerns.

A focus group with eight ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants was also conducted after the completion of the individual interviews. The summary data of the interviews were duly reported, and the group reviewed the data about the parents’ feedback conveyed by the six bilingual assistants. The focus group generated more information about teachers’ and parents’ perspectives of ESL learning and parents’ concerns, valuable data used for purposes of triangulation.

Data Analysis

As McMillan and Schumacher (2001) suggested, the process of qualitative data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic. Data analysis in this study was ongoing throughout the data collection period. The ongoing analysis helped to identify emerging patterns and themes (e.g., length of time in ESL). The inductive analysis strategy was applied to the interview data to understand how participants perceive the ESL program (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Observation data of the teachers’ planning meetings were also analyzed inductively to identify teachers’ goals for Parents’ Night. This was accomplished by searching for categories, patterns, or domains that emerged from the data rather than being imposed before data collection began (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Spradley, 1980). More systematic analysis was conducted after the data collection was completed and the interviews were transcribed.

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3The parents did not give consent to the audio recording, but they allowed me and the bilingual assistants to take notes while we telephoned them. I attempted to conduct formal face-to-face interviews with the parents, but they did not wish to be interviewed, something that was not unexpected. As part of a research team studying ESL students, teachers, and parents, I had realized that direct access to parents was difficult.
RESULTS

The ESL parents and teachers seemed to be concerned with three major issues: (a) length of time in ESL, (b) delivery and assessment of the ESL program, and (c) grammar versus language socialization.

Length of Time in ESL

Parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the length of time that their children spent in the ESL program. The parents’ main questions are:

- Why do they have to waste so much time studying in ESL?
- We understand the program, but it’s useless.
- My daughter was in ESL in elementary. Why is she still in ESL at high school? I don’t think she needs to be in the ESL program.

In the small-group discussion with the bilingual assistants, parents expressed similar concerns:

- What happens if my kid has two courses left before he graduates? He has to leave high school at 19. What happens then if you cannot graduate with the system?
- Did you go to school here? How long did you stay in ESL? What do you think of the ESL program? Do you think the ESL program slowed you down in the process of going to university?

Parents believed that 2 years spent in the ESL program was too long for their children. They complained about the length of time for two reasons. First, parents viewed the ESL program as useless because there was no credit value. In this respect, ESL was seen as a barrier to getting ahead. ESL secondary students face a serious time challenge: They need to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers in order to graduate before they reach the age limit for high school (Peyton & Adger, 1998), which was 19 years in Vancouver. Parents with older children were concerned about the time an ESL class took away from mainstream classes. Many of the parents wanted their children to go to university. Parents indicated that the length of time in the ESL program slowed down their children’s progress through school and that therefore they would not graduate at the correct age to be able to go to university. The parents were concerned that once their children reach the age limit, they could no longer receive free education and their children’s self-esteem was damaged compared with their peers who had gone to university.
Second, parents regarded the ESL program as holding back their children’s learning of content area material. They complained about the low level of content:

In Taiwan, my children were always chosen to be in advanced science and math classes. Some of these classes were taught by university professors. The math and science classes at Milton are way too easy for them. They tell me that they are really bored in those classes.

The ESL science teacher taught them study skills but the mainstream science teacher taught science concepts. The ESL science teacher was not teaching real science.

Avoid teaching Grade 12 students with Grade 8 stuff.

Because they perceived that the program was not academically challenging for their children, the parents expressed a concern that their children were bored. One parent who had a master’s degree in science compared his son’s ESL science with mainstream science. He found that the ESL science teacher focused on study skills, such as how to write a laboratory report, whereas the mainstream science teacher focused on developing science concepts. He complained to the administrator that the ESL science teacher was not teaching real science. He was concerned that the content his son received in ESL science did not sufficiently prepare him for mainstream science courses. As a result, parents were anxious to integrate their children to mainstream classes and regarded the ESL program as unnecessary.

However, not all parents felt the same way. One parent representative at Parents’ Night stated that ESL students did not need to rush to mainstream classes:

In ESL, [my daughter] had to read stories, and then to interpret them with her own ideas. In this way, she developed her thinking skills. I think Core class, ESL Writing, ESL Literature, and ESL Social Studies all helped her develop her thinking ability. ESL Drama also helped her develop confidence in speaking … Be patient! Don’t rush to get into mainstream. You have great opportunities to learn. My daughter would not be on the Honour Roll Standing without the *foundation* she got in ESL at Milton Secondary School. The skills she learned in ESL were necessary for her success. (Parent speech)

In contrast to parents’ temporal concern, teachers expressed that 2 years in ESL are a minimum for students to acquire academic English. For example, one ESL teacher used basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive aca-
It was more difficult to understand the textbook than just to talk to your friends on the phone about what you want to do on Saturday night. Conversation skills take about 1 to 2 years to master while academic language proficiency takes 5 to 7 years. So really 2 years in ESL is a minimum. Academic language proficiency refers to things like thinking processes, reading for information from textbooks, writing an essay, making a presentation whereas in conversation you get context. It is easier when your friend is talking to you, you can see their facial expressions and their body moving. So they are developing their thinking skill and trying to learn a new language at the same time. That’s the main reason why most people spend approximately two years in ESL. (Teacher presentation, Parents’ Night)

The teacher’s reason for the length of time immigrant students need to acquire conversational and academic English is based on Cummins’s (1991) hypothesis. Cummins maintained that it takes less than 2 years for immigrant students to acquire BICS, whereas it takes as long as 5 to 7 years to acquire CALP. Collier (1987) noted that “arrivals at ages of 12–15 experienced the greatest difficulty and were projected to require as much as 6–8 years to reach grade level norms in academic achievement when schooled in the second language” (p. 617). Thus, the teachers emphasized that learning academic language is a complex and lengthy process.

In response to parents’ concern about the low level of content in the ESL program, teachers explained that they needed to modify regular subject contents to meet the needs of the students. They also wanted to focus on prerequisite skills that ESL students were required to have when they moved to the mainstream classes, something I discuss further later in this article.

Multilevel Delivery and Assessment

Associated with the length of the periods their children stayed in the ESL program, parents expressed confusion with the multilevel, multi-age grouping of the ESL program and their desire to place their children in appropriate graded levels. This confusion is illustrated in the following comments:

My son has been in ESL for three years. Every time I talked to the teachers, they told me he was making progress. But he’s still in ESL. They can’t tell me which level he is in.
I know in Richmond they have Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3. Parents can see their children are improving from one level to another. At Milton they don’t have levels. That’s difficult to judge how well my child is doing at school.

It is not fair to my daughter. Her English is better than most of the students in the class. Her teacher asked her to help other students. That’s why it took her so long to exit from the ESL.

The parents did not appear to favor the multilevel, multi-age grouping of the ESL program, and they did not seem to see the benefits for their children. Instead, they wanted to place their children in appropriate graded levels because they viewed the leveling as an indication of their children’s achievement and progress in English.

The teachers, however, perceived that the multilevel grouping in the ESL program has at least two advantages. First, it allows students to move into mainstream classes any time of the year depending on the ability of the student and the availability of space in the mainstream classes. One teacher said the following at a Parents’ Night presentation:

The ESL Program is set up on a multilevel basis. Students in each class are of different levels of English proficiency and grade. This not only makes it more accessible for you coming into the program, but also makes it more flexible in linking you with the mainstream class as soon as you are ready pending available space. You don’t need to start from the bottom level and work through to the top level before you can move into the mainstream.

In addition, the multilevel system creates a cooperative learning environment. It provides support for less advanced students who do not feel intimidated to participate in class as well as support for more advanced students, who gain enrichment by helping beginning students.

Parents did not favor the multilevel grouping; neither did they like the assessment system in the ESL program. Parents wanted exit tests as benchmarks for their children to move out of the ESL program, illustrated in the following parent comments:

Make some tests in the ESL program to test what level they are at. If they can escape from ESL, the school must give them opportunities to escape it.

What I really wanted from the teachers was to ask them to give ESL students an exit test so that I would know when my child was ready to move to the mainstream classes.
Parents also wanted regulating tests so they could understand their children’s English progress. Scores and grades were viewed as indicators of their children’s academic achievement. It was disturbing for parents to find the familiar markers of progress missing. For example, one parent said, “My daughter has been in ESL for two years, but I still don’t know how well she is doing. Why don’t they have some tests in the ESL program to test what level the students are?” In contrast, all the teachers were against standardized tests. Instead, they argued for a holistic evaluation:

We not only look at marks students get on assignments, but also their ability to do assignments. We also look at how good a learner she is and that’s something can’t be assessed with exams. Really it is more than that. (Teacher interview)

The ESL department also adopted a team evaluation approach. The decision about a student’s readiness to leave the ESL program was made by the whole department. The teachers had a file for each student. For instance, if a teacher felt that one student in her class was ready to move, she would put her opinions in a student form. Teachers circulated this form among all the teachers who taught this student. Then they discussed whether the student was ready by identifying the student’s strengths and weaknesses. This team evaluation approach was illustrated by the following teacher’s explanation:

Sometimes the Writing teacher will say this student writes very well, but the Drama teacher will say, in terms of the oral language skill, she is quite reluctant to speak in front of the group, or they are not willing to take risk. You’ve got to hear from all perspectives, where the student’s strengths and weaknesses are. If that is the case, a couple of teachers say we don’t feel they are successful, we will wait and see. The homeroom teacher is communicating with the students about their strengths and weaknesses.

Students were also encouraged by their teachers to evaluate their own learning. One teacher said:

We also encourage students to evaluate their own learning. We help them analyze what they have achieved and what skills need to be improved. (Focus group discussion)

The dilemma that ESL teachers face is whether they should give tests in the ESL program. There was no specific test to determine a student’s readiness to exit the ESL program. Teachers questioned the validity of a test because they believed that test scores do not always reflect the true performance of the students. Instead, they
practiced a holistic team evaluation and student self-evaluation. Teachers’ judgments were based on their observations and ongoing assessments of the student performance in each class. The team evaluation recognizes the contribution made by both students and teachers in determining student placements. However, in parents’ eyes, the teachers’ holistic, performance assessment, and team evaluation appeared to be subjective and unaccountable.

Grammar Versus Language Socialization

Parents and teachers were deeply divided on whether the ESL instruction should emphasize grammar or language socialization.

*Explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary.* Parents expressed a desire for explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary:

Can the school give them extra grammar or writing class on the weekend?

Please teach our kids more English grammar and vocabulary.

I hired an English tutor to teach my daughter English grammar and writing in order to help her prepare for the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language].

Many parents at Milton experienced some form of traditional teaching of English in their home societies. They expressed dissatisfaction with the communicative language teaching approach because there was no formal instruction on English grammar and vocabulary. Parents were frustrated to find that the familiar processes and quality criteria of language teaching had changed. To solve the problem independently from the ESL department, parents hired tutors or sent their children to a private after-school tutoring school, specifically requesting grammar instruction. They wanted their children to learn vocabulary and grammar in order to pass the TOEFL, a university entrance examination required for immigrant students in the province.

Parents also said they wanted the teachers to correct students’ grammatical errors in their writings:

Sometimes I checked my son’s essay. I found many spelling and grammatical errors. I wonder why the teacher doesn’t correct his errors.

I asked my son’s tutor to correct his grammatical errors in his writing and explain why he did something wrong so that he wouldn’t repeat his errors. If you don’t correct the errors, he will get into a bad writing habit. My neigh-
bour’s kid is in mainstream Grade 11. I know his English teacher marked down his essay because of his grammatical mistakes.

Articulating a formalist view of language learning, focusing on language forms, the parents thought that there was a lack of grammar and vocabulary instruction in the program. It is easy to dismiss parents as formalists, but they also have a legitimate concern. Their children need to prepare for the TOEFL, which is required for admission to university. This test requires a large amount of vocabulary and excellent grammar skills. Parents may view the ESL program as not adequately preparing their children for these tests. Furthermore, the parents may also be aware that it is quite likely for Chinese students to make grammatical errors because of the interference from their first language. Yet many high school English teachers still believe three major grammatical errors on a high school English paper meant failure (O’Byrne, 2001). Parents may be aware of this assumption held by some mainstream teachers and want the ESL teachers to correct their children’s grammatical errors in order to prepare them for mainstream classes.

**Language socialization (teaching Canadian and school cultures).** The teachers, however, did not want to teach grammar, because they thought it was more important for ESL students to learn how to do schooling in Canada (see Table 2). They developed an ESL social studies and a core course to introduce students to Canadian culture, geography, history, and politics, evident in the following statements by teachers:

[The] core class helps students adapt to school situation. We explain how the school is organized, the Canadian culture and the school culture. We also teach study skills that students need to be successful in Canadian school. Sometimes we have guest speakers to come in and explain safety regulations, for example. We take them to youth theatre and cross-country skiing. (Parents’ Night presentation)

[ESL students] will also learn about Canadian history, laws, Canadians’ rights and responsibilities. (Teacher interview)

Teachers reported that it is important to introduce students to Canadian school culture as well as to teach Canadian social culture. Table 2, which is compiled from a handbook distributed at a Parents’ Night, shows what teachers reported on the projects, presentations, group work, research, and reports of the Canadian educational system. It is necessary for the ESL students to learn this new system in order to be successful in Canadian schools, because they came from a very different educational system.
Teaching prerequisite skills and fostering appropriate attitudes. Specifically, the teachers reported the ESL program is to assist students to develop prerequisite skills, such as communication, research, and cooperative learning to facilitate their success in school. One teacher commented:

My emphasis is more on skills than on the history itself. So for example, when students did their projects on regions of Canada, I wanted them to be able to look at maps, to get information, to look at news, to read stories and songs, and to interview people. (Teacher interview)

Another teacher reported she learned from her teaching experience in Asia that her students were not used to group work. She then deliberately taught her students cooperative learning skills:

One other thing I do want to mention is about group work. Having taught in Taiwan for a year and in Japan for three years at the high school level, I know group work doesn’t play an important part in education in Asia and working together in groups is a skill that we all teach in ESL classes. It is essential for success in all mainstream classes. (Teacher interview)

The teachers also attempted to create opportunities for students to build their confidence and accept responsibility for learning through language development. The following list of attitudes expected of students and parents in Canadian culture was taken from handouts distributed at a Parents’ Night for students:

- Accept responsibility (be responsible).
- Be flexible.
- Respect and tolerate other cultures.
- Be confident.
- Be optimistic.
- Be cooperative.

### TABLE 2
Skills and Attitudes Required for Canadian Schools

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Canadian Educational System</th>
<th>Skills Required</th>
<th>Attitudes Required</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Accept responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>Time management skills</td>
<td>Be confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>Organization skills</td>
<td>Be optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Group problem-solving skills</td>
<td>Be cooperative</td>
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<td>Reports</td>
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**Teaching prerequisite skills and fostering appropriate attitudes.**
One of the teachers highlighted the importance of ESL students being confident:

I think the most important thing we do is to give them confidence, confidence to speak to mainstream teachers and students and to communicate with the wider world. That’s probably number one thing we do. (Teacher interview)

**Integrating language and content.** Teachers reported that they were integrating language and content instruction so that as ESL students learn content, they acquire language as well. Specifically, they were teaching ESL students regular science, social studies content, language skills, and high orders of thinking skills simultaneously. The science teacher said:

[ESL students] don’t know how to write a lab report, how to do labs. I am trying to teach them how to write definitions and how to write a lab report step by step. I am trying to teach them all the skills at same time when I am teaching them the science content. (Teacher interview)

The teachers emphasized the importance of communication rather than teaching grammar. For example, one teacher reported that:

I think our purpose is to prepare our kids to communicate in English, not to learn English grammar. We also have to prepare them with academic English, which is much harder. I think every single course stresses the communicative aspect through themes and presentations. I don’t think a single teacher in this department gives grammar exercises. That’s not part of the philosophy of our department. (Teacher interview)

In sum, the teachers reported that the ESL program provided opportunities for students to learn Canadian social and school cultures, develop study skills and appropriate attitudes, and learn the four language skills in context and through mainstream content. They considered the program to be “reflective of current research in ESL development, as well as a creative adaptation of some of the most interactive methodology in current use” (teacher interview).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study illustrate how members of two different cultural groups can observe the same program but have different cultural interpretations based on different theories (Spradley, 1980). The major findings reveal a deep division between teachers and parents on both what and how students should learn. Teachers
believed that the ESL classes help to socialize students into Canadian school and social cultures, to develop language skills and appropriate attitudes, and to acquire skills such as how to do research and oral presentations in order to help them for entry into mainstream classes. In contrast, in the parents’ views, the current ESL program has many problems, such as the lengthy time students spent in the program, the lack of exams, mixed grades, the low level of content, and the lack of grammar instruction.

The parents’ views of the ESL program seem to be consistent with the immigrant parents’ perceptions in studies by Gougeon (1993) and Salzberg (1998) in that they reveal polarized views of each other. Along the same line, some local parent groups and members of the media present these parent–teacher differences as the familiar traditional versus progressive views of education (Sullivan, 1998). The Chinese immigrant parents in this study demanded more structured curriculum, grammar instruction, and exams. This seems to be consistent with the requests made by Asian immigrant parents in local districts who put forward a controversial proposal for a traditional school.

To understand parents’ attitudes, one must understand the Chinese educational system. In Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, the education system is exam driven and teacher oriented (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Learning is highly textbook based, and grammar is considered high knowledge. There is a strong emphasis on grammatical analysis, intensive reading, the use of translation, and the correction of errors (Harvey, 1985). As a result, Chinese immigrant parents in this study expressed discontent with communicative language teaching because they perceived that many of the activities common in communicative language teaching seemed like games rather than serious learning.

It is oversimplified and unhelpful, however, to treat the parent–teacher differences as the familiar traditional versus progressive views of education. This study shows a more complex picture. The ESL programming is consistent with much of the recent research and current practices in second-language education, but it also contains intercultural/educational dilemmas that are not fully understood by the teachers and the parents.

The central transversal concern of parents—that is, the length of time that students stay in the ESL program—has two aspects: (a) time in the program takes away from mainstream courses required for graduation, and (b) time in the program may not be well spent on essential learning.

Impact of Presupposition and Structure

Responding to the first temporal aspect, teachers presuppose that Cummins’s (1991) BICS and CALP hypotheses apply, and they emphasize that learning academic language is a lengthy process. This presupposition affects program structure, because ESL programming is designated as noncredit. This seriously ham-
ers ESL students’ possibility of high school graduation before reaching the age limit of 19. The issues of credit for ESL programs and age limit for ESL students are the responsibility of policymakers at the school board and ministerial levels.

**Assessment**

The nature of assessment is also related to the central concern of the amount of time spent in the program. Parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the teachers’ holistic way of evaluation, for they viewed scores and grades as indicators of academic achievement. Along the same line, parents were also concerned about the multilevel grouping and wanted to place their children in appropriate graded levels, because they viewed the leveling as an indication of their children’s progress in English. Moving well beyond the traditional versus progressive argument, parents are responding to the breakdown of their ability to carefully monitor and guide their children’s educational progress, which is of vital concern to them. According to Wu (1996), for many Chinese people a good parent is “one who is responsible about his or her child receiving a good education, [and] who is conscientious about his or her child’s schooling and achievement” (p. 151). The parents in this study are unable to play such a role of a good parent in Canada because of different linguistic and cultural understandings of what counts as knowledge. In this light, an integrated approach to assessment, one that includes holistic evaluation as well as benchmarks and standardized tests, might help parents and teachers stay better informed of student progress.

**Language Socialization Versus Form-Focused Language Instruction**

Regarding the second aspect of the temporal concern, teachers articulated their intentional language socialization view: The students learn the school culture as well as language. Teachers emphasized that ESL classes help students enter fully into the Canadian social and school systems; acquire proficiency in the four language skills; and develop appropriate attitudes, such as responsibility, cooperation, and respect. Teachers were also teaching ESL students some basic skills. For instance, they were teaching students how to do laboratory reports, library research, and oral presentations because they were aware that ESL students did not generally come with these skills from their home societies. These skills are necessary for students’ academic success beyond the ESL program. Teachers are practicing cooperative learning, integration of language and content, building student self-esteem, and student evaluation. The ESL science and social studies teachers modified regular science and social studies content with ESL methods to suit the needs of the immigrant students.
These second-language teaching approaches appear to be well supported by theoretical and empirical evidence (Brown, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The approach of integrating language and content derives from the functional view of language. In their review of ESL in the early days in England, Leung and Franson (2001) explained how the functional view of language dramatically changed ESL pedagogy from traditional grammar to the communicative approach in the mid-1970s and, more recently, to the integration of language and content. The purpose of language/content integration is to teach explicitly ESL students language through regular school subjects, such as science and social studies.

Parents, however, perceived that the curriculum in the ESL program was watered down and that, as a result, their children received inferior education. Comparing mainstream content to what their children learned in the ESL program in the same grade, parents found that the content level their children were learning was below their respective grade level. When students in Grades 8 through 12 were placed in the same class, it would be difficult to teach all levels of content. Parents therefore stated that teachers should “avoid teaching Grade 12 students with Grade 8 stuff.” In comparing the science and math content of the same grade with their home societies, parents said the content in the ESL program was too easy for their children. They may believe that their children were not learning high school content sufficient for success in university. The parents also questioned the ESL program, for learning was not taking place in the way in which they were familiar. Parents therefore ran their own “school” system: They either sent their children to private schools or hired tutors at home for grammar and vocabulary instruction.

The teachers’ language socialization view and the parents’ request for more grammar and vocabulary instruction are not incompatible. The teachers emphasized that their major goal was to help ESL students communicate in English, not to teach grammar. ESL learners actually need grammar and vocabulary knowledge to function well in the language. Instructions that draw attention to the forms and structures of the language within the context of communicative interaction will be beneficial for ESL students (Long & Robinson, 1998). ESL instructions can be improved with the use of integrating the formal aspects of the language (grammar, vocabulary) into content-based teaching in French immersion programs (Swain, 2001). Actually, every teacher should be a language teacher. It takes the whole school to provide support to ESL learners. Every teacher, including math and social studies teachers, needs to teach language intentionally and explicitly.

CONCLUSION

The discrepancies between the teachers’ and the parents’ perspectives of the ESL program and the education of immigrant students are real and profound. One way to deal with the differences is to make use of Taylor’s (1994) work on multicultur-
alism, which states that institutions should make room for recognizing the worth of distinctive cultural traditions. Schools should consider how they deal with multiculturalism and recognize the democratic rights of ESL parents. The Canadian teachers’ view reflected in the article implies the idea of cultural deprivation about immigrant children, which is much criticized in multicultural education literature because it tends to blame disadvantaged groups and serve the reproduction purpose (Cummins, 2003). Educators need to view differences as an asset, not a deficit. Taylor said that it is desirable and possible for different parties to negotiate their differences through dialogue. The results of this study suggest that the school examined does not provide sufficient room for dialogue between the school and the parents that leads to a change in the way things are done in the school. Unless responsive interaction occurs, there will continue to be a chasm between parents and teachers who are both convinced that their way is the best but unable to persuade the other. Further studies should explore how parents and teachers engage in dialogue and collaborate on the education of new Canadian students.

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