



AT ISSUE

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Multilingualism: The Canadian Way

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Immigration is the major source of population growth in Canada and is expected to remain so in the future. Historical sources of immigration from the U.K. and Europe have been replaced so that recent estimates place 48.6 percent from Asia, 19.7 percent from Africa and the Middle East, 17.8 percent from the UK and Europe, 9.2 percent from South and Central America and the Caribbean and 2.7 percent from the United States.¹ In Canada, 18 percent of the population is foreign born. Only Australia, at 22 percent, has a higher proportion of the population born outside the country. It is projected that by 2017, between 19 and 23 percent of Canadians will be self-described as visible minorities.

As a result of its high immigration rate, Canada is also a multilingual country, reporting over 100 spoken languages. In the 2001 Census, 18 percent of the population reported a first language other than English or French, and 10.5 percent spoke a non-official language most often at home.²

Few would argue about the social, cultural and economic benefits of multilingualism to individuals and to society, yet educational policy infrequently responds to the language diversity of students except in relation to the importance of official language acquisition. Ruiz described three main orientations to language – language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource.³ The first, language-as-problem, is apparent when children who do not speak an official language are thought to have a disadvantage in relation to their majority language peers. It gives rise to the assumption that children only know what they know in English or French. The third orientation, language-as-resource is behind newer economic ideas of multilingualism as human capital and educational ideas of multiliteracy.

Ideally all students in Canada will achieve literacy in at least one official language at a level adequate to modern life. Research studies have shown that it takes only one to two years for students to become reasonably fluent in conversational English, about two years to catch up to their English speaking classmates in basic decoding skills, and up to five years to catch up to native English speakers in academic English.⁴ Wosnick found that children of immigrant parents whose first language was not English or French had less developed skills in reading, writing and mathematics on school entry than classmates whose parents were born in Canada. This skills gap disappeared by the end of elementary school.⁵

Although development of basic literacy skills in the early years is profoundly important to academic development in school, limited spoken English is not necessarily an impediment to early reading. Recent evidence suggests that once bilingual/English language learners acquire minimum oral language proficiency, their ability to learn how to read words and simple texts in English quickly reaches the level of their first-language classmates.⁶ However the shift from learning to read to reading to learn is critically important to academic success, and reading comprehension is highly dependent on oral language. Frempong and Ma, using the Canadian sample from the Programme for International Assess-

ment/Youth in Transition Survey to examine non-school and family factors affecting reading achievement, confirmed previous findings that there are large equity gaps in reading, favouring female, non-immigrant and high SES students. These authors found that the reading achievement differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students are larger than those attributable to socio-economic status.⁷ Cummins argues that serious policy consideration of linguistic diversity is required before these gaps will be closed. He challenges three prevailing assumptions: that instructional support to English Language learners (ELL) is the job of the ESL teacher; that “literacy” refers only to English literacy; and that cultural knowledge and home language proficiency have little instructional relevance.⁸

Examples of classrooms where English language learners’ identities, cultural knowledge and language abilities are engaged in their academic work are available through the Multiliteracy Project funded by SSHRC under its research program, Initiatives for the New Economy. The project may point the way to preparing Canadian children for the literacy challenges of a globalized, networked, and culturally diverse world. |

Resources

The Multiliteracy Project

<http://www.multiliteracies.ca/index.php>

The Dual Language Showcase

<http://thornwood.peelschools.org/dual/index.htm>

Focus on Literacy

<http://www.cea-ace.ca/foo.cfm?subsection=lit&page=int>

Focus on Educating Citizens

<http://www.cea-ace.ca/foo.cfm?subsection=edu&page=sto>

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Notes

- 1 B. Ray, *Canada: Policy Changes and Integration Challenges in an Increasingly Diverse Society* (University of Ottawa: Migration Policy Institute, 2005). <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/analytic/companion/lang/canada.cfm>
- 2 Statistics Canada at http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/analytic/companion/etoimm/canada.cfm#proportion_foreign_born_highest
- 3 R. Ruiz (1984) cited by M.P. Goldberg and D. Corson, *Immigrant and Aboriginal First Languages as prior Learning Qualifications for Formal Employment in the Business, Government and Education Sectors* (NALL Working Paper 03-1999, 1999). <http://oise.utoronto.ca/depts/csew/nall/res/03goldberg.htm>
- 4 J. Cummins, V. Bismilla, S. Cohen, F. Giampapa, and L. Leoni, “Timelines and Lifelines: Rethinking Literacy Instruction in Multilingual Classrooms,” *Orbit* 36, no.1 (2005): 22-26.
- 5 C. Wosnick, “Adaptation and Inequality: Children of Immigrants in Canadian Schools,” *Canadian Journal of Economics* 37, no.1 (2004): 53-77.
- 6 Canadian Council on Learning. “First Language Not Necessarily Linked to Reading Proficiency,” *Lessons in Learning* (May 12, 2006).
- 7 G. Freepong and X. Ma (with assistance of E. Archampong), *Improving Reading Skills: Policy Sensitive Non-School and Family Factors* (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2006).
- 8 J. Cummins, “Multiliteracies and Equity: How Do Canadian schools Measure Up?” *Education Canada* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2006).