
Second Language Education in Canada

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Abstract

Second language education in Canada is experienced by diverse populations in different ways across the country. English language learners (ELLs) comprise a significant number of those enrolled in second official language programs, and they are supported to varying degrees according to province or territory. Canada is renowned for its pedagogical approaches to integrated language and content learning, and recent research continues to explore this tradition, tracking both

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successes, such as the development of twenty-first-century literacies and multilingual pedagogies, and challenges, such as the exclusion of ELLs from mainstream official language classrooms.

The majority of Canadian students learn French as a second language in Core French classes. Several studies underscore the challenges faced by teachers who lack sufficient linguistic or methodological background or, in some cases, support, leading to less than satisfactory student performance and high attrition rates. The introduction of the *Common European Framework of Reference* and language portfolios has created a shift in some regions to adopt an action-oriented pedagogical approach with greater learner autonomy.

Work in progress includes research on identity and investment, innovative and inclusive pedagogical approaches, and resistance to monolingual teaching norms. The problem of ELLs' low success rates in high school is being addressed by efforts to support teacher professional learning at preservice and in-service levels. The integration of transformative multilingual and multimodal practices that draw on the full range of students' repertoires (in school, at home, and in the community) is seen as key for the future.

Keywords

Multilingual • Official language • Multiliteracies • French as a second language • Core French • English language learners • Integrated language and content • CEFR

Introduction

Canada is an increasingly multilingual country comprised of ten provinces and three territories, with two official languages, English and French. According to the 2011 Census of Population (Statistics Canada 2011), approximately 58% of the population reported English as their mother tongue, 22% French, and 20% a mother tongue other than English or French. According to the same census, nearly 213,400 people reported speaking an Aboriginal language most often or regularly at home.

The provinces and territories are responsible for education, and each has distinct policies and curricula, providing funding for education solely or jointly with local tax revenues. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, facilitates key activity areas of common interest, and the federal government provides partial funding to support programs for official minority languages (i.e., English or French where the other dominates). In view of such diverse geopolitical and economic factors, second language education has developed variously across regions and language program types. The following sections identify some of the more significant contributions, issues and initiatives that have been undertaken.

Early Developments

To contextualize early developments in second language (L2) education¹ in Canada: in response to growing domestic tensions, the federal government explicitly addressed issues of linguistic and cultural diversity, during the 1960s. In 1969, the Official Languages Act was enacted to give French and English equal status as Canada's official languages. Shortly thereafter, an Official Languages in Education (OLE) program, cost-shared by the federal government was established to encourage learning of both official languages. In 1982, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, entrenched in the constitution, reinforced official language rights, and in 1988 the Multiculturalism Act acknowledged Canada's ethnocultural diversity. Following the Official Languages Act, provisions were made for school students to learn the official language that is non-dominant in their province. Provisions were also made for instruction in other languages. The choice of other languages offered was, and remains, generally determined by school districts. Provinces/territories vary regarding when L2 courses begin and the mandatory grade level for completion, as a required course for graduation.

Yet, Canada's linguistic and cultural diversity has long been more complex than official policies at all levels of governance might suggest. The 2011 Census of Population (Statistics Canada 2011) reported that approximately 20.6% of the total population is foreign born, the highest proportion of foreign born population among G8 countries. Additionally, there are substantial numbers of Canadian born students who speak a language other than English or French at home and require support in the official language that is the medium of instruction in their school/province.

Provincial funding and resources have been available, from their earliest provision, for English language learning (ELL) programs in English medium schools, *francisation* classes in Francophone minority schools outside Quebec, and *classes d'accueil* (welcoming classes) in the French schools of Quebec. However, there exists no pan-Canadian, coherent, federal profile of policies, programs, and provisions concerning these services. Thus, it is difficult to present a single, unified account of early developments in L2 education across the country. Information and policy documents on provincial Ministry of Education websites reveal some similarities but significant variation for programs regarding such matters as service delivery models, instructional approaches, curriculum and assessment instruments, teacher certification requirements, resources for teachers, funding amounts per pupil per year, definition of qualifying students, time caps in programs, and credits toward graduation. Moreover, Mady and Turnbull's (2010) review revealed that federal policy documents have not acknowledged that nonofficial languages users might seek to learn both official languages. This oversight has been subsequently replicated

¹In Canada, second language education refers to instruction provided to students in a language other than their first language. Second language programs are offered in a range of languages including both official languages.

in provincial/territorial educational policies. Thus, speakers of nonofficial languages, instructed in one official language, cannot ensure that they will receive L2 education in the other. Exclusion of ELLs from Core French classes often occurs because it is assumed that they cannot learn the two official languages simultaneously. Findings from subsequent studies (e.g., Mady 2008) have shown that ELLs perform as well as their non-ELL peers.

Provinces/territories also vary in the extent to which they have historically supported heritage language (HL) education in schools and which ones. As well, as Duff (2008) notes, designation of language courses as heritage or non-heritage (e.g., “international” L2s, in federal documents and provincial curricula) can be politically motivated. She provides an historical perspective on HL in Canada, together with a comprehensive review of Canadian research on HL education, plus a discussion of current and future issues (see also Duff and Li 2009).

Within this complex landscape, Canada remains renowned for its early development and innovative use of various language and content approaches to L2 pedagogy, immersion education being the most prominent. French immersion, which began in Quebec in the 1960s, teaches students through the medium of the L2, across the curriculum subject areas. These immersion programs served as a model for programs across Canada and internationally (see also Fred Genesee and Joseph Dicks, “► [Bilingual Education in Canada](#)” for an extensive review of bilingual education in Canada). One distinct but related area of early development addressed here is integrated language and content (ILC) teaching for ELLs.

ILC teaching has been influenced by several factors, arguably including immersion programs, Cummins’ (1981) theory of social and academic language proficiency, and Mohan’s (1986) theoretical contributions relating language and content teaching. It has been variously, albeit inconsistently, implemented in elementary and secondary classrooms across Canada since the 1970s/1980s. In some jurisdictions, for example, the Vancouver School District in British Columbia, English mother tongue, school-wide language across the curriculum policies/projects was also influential. Work in ILC teaching is one area of major contribution, along with contributions concerning teaching Core French as a second language that will be discussed in the following section (for related reviews, see Dagenais (2013) regarding multilingualism in Canada, policies, and education, Duff (2008) on heritage languages, and Lapkin et al. (2009) for a comprehensive literature review on Core French).

Major Contributions

As stated above, integrated language and content (ILC) instruction has been a major contribution to second language education in Canada. While, as previously noted, some ELL teachers had already been using this approach; it came to the fore in a more coordinated effort in the 1980s. Mohan published his seminal book *Language and Content* (1986). Working within a systemic functional linguistics perspective and based on a view of language as discourse in the context of social practice, Mohan’s heuristic “A Knowledge Framework” looks explicitly at the role of

language and discourse within social practice to design tasks that intentionally address both the language and content area learning objectives. This work and related projects are reported in the 2001 special issue of *The Canadian Modern Language Review* on immersion and content-based instruction. Without providing an exhaustive review, other noteworthy contributions include a two-year ethnographic study by Duff (2004) in a Vancouver secondary school with a high concentration of students from Asian backgrounds. Her work revealed the discursive and cultural challenges faced by ELL students in mainstream social studies classes. In addition, Toohey, Waterstone, and Julé (2000) examined how more or less proficient speakers of English engaged in classroom activities, illuminating how their interpersonal relationships are implicated in their speech practices. Their findings indicated how adult participation practices may hinder or enhance opportunities for young ELL students' participation in learning. Roessingh and colleagues (see Roessingh 2004, for a review) have conducted a number of studies to report on their experiences of building an effective ELL program.

Several studies (e.g., Garnett 2010; Gunderson et al. 2014; Watt and Roessingh 2001) have also researched ELLs' dropout and graduation success rates in content/subject-area mainstream programs. Collectively, these studies highlight the challenges in tracking dropout (and "disappearance") rates, as well as variations in findings across studies. However, ethnocultural differences regarding academic and graduation success rates and issues related to socioeconomic status have emerged consistently. Some of these findings are discussed further in the "Problems and Difficulties" section below.

One of the most significant contributions to research is recent work exploring how L2 education might incorporate twenty-first-century literacies and multilingual pedagogies to take into account and build on the wide variety of languages, communication practices, and digital competencies that students bring to learning across the curriculum. A range of projects, many of them teacher-researcher collaborations, has been undertaken in different regions of the country, and most are situated in schools that enroll students from diverse language backgrounds (see Dagenais 2013, for a more detailed review). Various approaches have been adopted, including language awareness activities, dual language books, and child-produced videos, to name just a few that are described below.

In a Canada-wide *Multiliteracies (ML) Project* (www.multiliteracies.ca) that begun in 2002, teams of researchers and teachers, primarily in the Vancouver and Greater Toronto school boards, collaboratively implemented various approaches to supporting ELL multiliteracies development (see also Per Urlaub: "► [Second Language Literacy Research and Curriculum Transformation in US Postsecondary Foreign Language Education](#)" in this volume). These included the creation of multimodal dual language texts; digital sister-class projects, the use of the students' home languages in cross-language transfer to facilitate subject-area and academic literacy learning, both L1 and L2; and the design of multimodal pedagogical activities and spaces that afforded ELL students' opportunities and capacities to access knowledge from multiple perspectives and to forge links between the discourses of school, family, and community lives. Teachers in this project reported that issues around assessment

and accountability constrained their innovative efforts. A complementary study was conducted in three Vancouver schools to investigate the viability of Internet-based, teacher-authored accounts as an alternative accountability procedure in conveying to stakeholders students' multiliterate accomplishments and achievements (Potts forthcoming).

Moreover, drawing on Norton's (2000/2013) theoretical perspectives, research related to identity, investment, and language learning has also made a major contribution (see Bonny Norton: "► [Language and Social Identity](#)"). For instance, the term "identity texts" was first used in the context of the ML project, in an attempt to capture characteristics of the work produced by ELLs that drew on diversity, affirmed students' identities, encouraged them to use their multilingual abilities to understand and communicate knowledge, and to employ a wide range of modalities to make meaning. A number of case studies from the ML and other projects are reported in Cummins and Early (2011). A special issue of *Writing & Pedagogy* (Taylor and Cummins 2011) also reports Canadian researchers-teachers' contributions in this area, as do contributions to two special issues of *TESOL Quarterly*, both edited by Canadian scholars – Plurilingualism in TESOL: Promising controversies (Taylor and Snoddon 2013) and Multimodality in TESOL (Early et al. 2015).

In Vancouver, Darvin and Norton (2014) report on a project in a secondary school wherein students created their own personal digital stories that afforded them opportunities to draw on their transnational literacies. Learners' bilingual identities were affirmed as they were given choice concerning the language of narration and use of subtitles. Their findings also demonstrate how social class is implicated in the different social and learning trajectories of learners.

In another Vancouver-based project, a teacher-researcher team (Denos et al. 2009) worked in English language elementary schools and drew on children's knowledge of cultural practices as the basis for developing various print and visual literacy activities. For example, students of Punjabi-Sikh origin helped document the cultural resources and out-of-school language practices in their community. In another activity, students participated in intergenerational bilingual storytelling sessions that were recorded on digital devices, which formed the basis of child-produced drawings and bilingual narratives (Marshall and Toohey 2010).

In Toronto, Lotherington (2011) led a multiyear teacher-researcher collaboration in one elementary school and developed several novel teaching approaches, including multilingual storytelling using digital technologies to explore ways of bridging the gap between home and school literacies. The students also learned to become performers, narrators, and programmers, of mini-games and hypertext stories, in these 21st literacy projects (see more at <http://multiliteracies4kidz.blog.yorku.ca>).

Similarly, teacher-researcher groups working in Vancouver investigated how video production at school helped children represent their out-of-school practices in ways not possible in print literacy. In one project, Toohey et al. (2012) described how elementary and secondary age ELLs in India, Mexico, and Canada benefit from the production and exchange of videos about their lives because they were able to display competencies in different languages as they narrated their films and showcased their talents. In a second project, reported in a 2015 special issue of *TESOL*

Quarterly on multimodality, a team of researchers and teachers led by Toohey and Dagenais explored how the production of videos on sustainability and social justice by ELLs in a Vancouver elementary school enabled them to draw on their own experiences and make choices about the semiotic resources and materials needed to communicate their messages powerfully.

Shifting the focus from English language learning to French, the most common program option in Canada for approximately 85% of children who learn French is Core French. However, as Carr (2007) notes, lack of sufficient contact time and intensity together with limited teacher expertise has contributed to results that are less than satisfactory. Widespread complaints about the programs, along with negative attitudes toward L2s, and the dissatisfaction of teachers with their assignments are described by Lapkin et al. (2009) in their comprehensive review of the literature on Core French. They report that only 3% of Grade 9 Core French students continue in the program to high school completion. Their review, organized around three main topics (student diversity, delivery models, and instructional approaches), provides an extensive overview of major contributions and issues related to Core French.

Lapkin et al.'s (2009) findings concerning instructional approaches include the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM), characterized by an exclusive use of the target language in the classroom; contextualized language experiences through stories, fables, and songs; the selection of high-frequency words used by native speakers; and the use of gestures associated with vocabulary words. Lapkin, Mady, and Arnott report that this approach has spread rapidly in Canada, and it is now estimated that a third of Core French students are exposed to it. Bourdages and Vignola (2014) conducted a case study of the application of AIM in a Grade 3 Core French classroom in Ontario and found that students exposed to AIM used French much more frequently in class than those who were not exposed to it and were more involved in oral expression in class, even though instruction was teacher-centered and students participated frequently in vocabulary repetition activities as a group. Conversely, Mady et al. (2009) studied students in 12 Core French classes (six that used AIM and six that did not) within one Ontario school board, testing them in listening, speaking, reading, and writing French, followed by an attitudinal questionnaire. They found no significant differences in performance or attitude between the two groups.

In their editorial to a special issue on trends in second language teaching and teacher education, Carr et al. (2011) identified the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) as a theme that interests French and English second language educators. While still far from widespread in classrooms across Canada, the authors see the engagement with the CEFR in Canadian schools as marking a paradigm shift in learning, teaching, and assessment of languages toward a greater emphasis on learner autonomy and action-oriented approaches in second language education. A subsequent special issue edited by Little and Taylor (2013) focused on pedagogical innovations based on the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio, including teacher reflection, goal-based instruction, student learning using a portfolio, and implications for teacher education and development.

Work in Progress

Many of the scholars whose works are cited in the “Major Contributions” section are continuing their lines of research with work in progress. For example, Darwin and Norton are further contributing to theory and research on language, identity, and investment through research on digital literacies with Filipino students, from diverse backgrounds, in secondary school contexts, in Vancouver. Early and Kendrick are conducting an exploratory study examining the affordances and challenges of an inquiry-based approach for enhancing multilingual and monolingual students’ literacy learning for the new economic and social realities of the twenty-first century. Gunderson and colleagues (e.g., Gunderson et al. 2014) are researching and developing L2 assessment measures and issues regarding “kinetic diversity.” Naqvi and colleagues (e.g., Naqvi et al. 2012) are currently conducting research in elementary classrooms in Calgary that extends Naqvi’s previous work using dual language books, together with other empowering multilingual approaches, to enhance learners’ metalinguistic awareness and demonstrate how transculturalism can be employed to reimagine pedagogy. Also in Calgary, Roessingh continues her research on the role of vocabulary and reading on the long-term academic success of ELLs. In Toronto, Cummins et al. (2015) continue to work with educators in the greater Toronto region to research the effect of teaching through a multilingual lens on students’ identity affirmation and achievement. Lotherington, Jensen, and colleagues’ teacher-researcher collaborations around new literacies in multicultural classrooms are ongoing. Toohey and Dagenais are currently examining how teachers in French and English schools in Vancouver are taking up *ScribJab* (www.scribjab.com), a website and iPad application that enables authors to produce, illustrate, record, and publish online dual language books. Thus far, authors of different ages, from preschool children to adults, have produced over 300 books in over 20 languages at their level of development. Armand and teams of teachers (www.elodil.umontreal.ca) are developing language awareness pedagogies and have produced a series of videos that offer concrete illustrations of multilingual teaching practices in Quebec schools. Their website provides a wealth of resources for teachers, including lesson plans and assessment tools.

These projects suggest that a grassroots transformation in language teaching is taking place in several locations where Canadian educators are negotiating space for the inclusion of more languages in classrooms, despite policy measures that do not support such inclusion. Educators are pushing back at monolingual policies that have marginalized learners who speak nonofficial languages and resisting the pressure to conform to a monolingual teaching norm.

With respect to assessing French second language student proficiency, there has been some interest in Canada in implementing the European *Diplôme d’études de langue française* (DEL F) in a number of jurisdictions. Based on a study in one Ontario school district, Vandergrift (2012) found that students, teachers, and parents thought this assessment tool to be a fair and appropriate measure of French proficiency. His analysis highlights how little empirical research there has been on this

test both in Canada and Europe and signaled some problems with the listening tasks, unfamiliar cultural references, and the cost.

Problems and Difficulties

Despite the innovations and collective efforts of researchers, teachers, and other stakeholders, problems and difficulties remain in L2 education in Canada. Derwing and Munro (2007) reviewed the policies that gave rise to English as a second language (ESL) instruction offered to children and youth in English language schools and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), an ESL program available to adults outside Quebec. Important challenges and difficulties that emerged from their review still need to be addressed in both contexts. These include a lack of ELL-focused teacher education and administrative oversight in schools and the fact that federally funded LINC programs for adults are plagued by problems such as regional inequities in the amount of language training available, the quality of instruction, and the preparation of teachers.

Other problems in L2 education in schools for English language learning continue to be, as noted above, that high school completion/graduation is not attained by an unacceptably high percentage of migrant learners. Studies indicated variation across ethnocultural background, and while some studies reported a high correlation with socioeconomic status, Garnett (2010) revealed that, “an indicator of socioeconomic status only partially attenuates its [ethno-cultural background] effects” (p. 677). So, disaggregating data from large-scale studies and undertaking follow-up studies to better understand which particular populations are most “at risk,” with respect to academic success and secondary school completion, and why, is overdue. Addressing the educational needs of all migrant students to achieve their full potential is a continuing challenge across jurisdictions. Cummins and Early (2015) argue for the importance of developing school-based language policies to address administrative oversights and lack of ELL-focused preservice teacher training and in-service professional development, such as reported by Derwing and Munro (2007). Cummins and Early provide a template to assist schools to engage in a collaborative language and instructional planning process that engages all educators and invites parental involvement.

Similarly, issues around inadequate teacher preparation remain a problem in Core French, together with the challenges of how to improve the language proficiency of classroom teachers who are required to teach Core French (Carr 2007; Lapkin et al. 2006).

In 2010, the *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* published a special issue on second language teacher education that focused on challenges and opportunities experienced by teachers and teacher educators. Articles in this issue examined innovative practices, such as study abroad for FSL teachers, peer feedback among native and nonnative English speaking student teachers, preservice teachers’ participation in a WebCT discussion forum, use of language portfolios, and teacher preparation for Core French generalists. Contributors from across Canada had

participated in a national symposium involving researchers and teacher educators from the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics, Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, and the Society for the Promotion of the Teaching of English as a Second Language in Quebec. Another theme explored in the issue was inclusion of diverse learners in French second language classrooms. The challenge for second language educators and policy-makers at all levels is to recognize, and innovatively capitalize on, the rich linguistic diversity that exists in Canadian classrooms. Too commonly, de facto “English Only” and “French Only” policies prevail resulting in missed opportunities for students’ development of heritage (academic) language competence over the course of their schooling in an official language medium. Concurrently, “international” language teaching, such as Spanish and Mandarin, too commonly results in high dropout rates and unsatisfactory results despite the presence of large numbers of speakers of these languages who could be called upon as resources in Canadian schools. There remains much to be done to break down the boundaries restricting fluid use of diverse languages in classrooms and in developing corresponding language programs and policies. There are, therefore, a number of current problems in second language education in Canada that demand redress, some of which are considered in the next section.

Future Directions

As pointed out above, with respect to English language learning in schools, the literature regarding multilingual learners reveals that they adopt a variety of multilingual and multimodal practices at home and in the community that are not commonly drawn on as resources in schools. Yet, research such as the multilingual/multimodal projects reported in this review provides sound evidence that these pedagogies are engaging for learners since they enable them to produce richly layered texts in different languages and multiple modalities. Moreover, they are more inclusive of the students’ families and communities and affirm and impact identity constructions. So, one direction for future studies is to expand these pedagogies into a larger variety of educational contexts, including content-based classrooms, particularly in secondary school contexts, which to date have been under researched. Attention to how language and other modes work to construct knowledge across disciplines and transculturally also deserves more systematic focus in future research studies. It would be interesting and important to address the effect of L2 education in these multilingual and transcultural learning environments on monolingual students from an official language background. Additionally, it will be vital to research the relative benefits of transformative multiliteracies pedagogies for diverse student groups across linguistic, ethnocultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recent studies in this area are generally case studies or ethnographies conducted over months or years, but there are, to our knowledge, no research studies on the

long-term effects of such transformative pedagogies that draw on the full range of students' semiotic and communicative repertoires. There is a clear need for long-term tracking studies of students who have been participants in classrooms where rich multilingual/multimodal pedagogies are employed. Such studies have the potential to heighten understanding with respect to (a) how these changes in pedagogy will shape language practices and constructions of multilinguals and multilingualism in the future and (b) importantly the long-term impact of such pedagogies on student achievement. The role and affordances of digital tools would constitute an important component of these studies.

With respect to teaching Core French, we draw from the Lapkin et al. (2009) review to suggest that future directions for research should include researching and documenting effective, inclusive teaching practices and varied approaches or teaching models, e.g., intensive or compacted formats, so that these might be clearly articulated and the information widely distributed. Like the ELL pedagogies described above, here too the affordances of digital tools warrant further research. Issues regarding ELLs and other minority populations in French second language programs are another area for future inquiry. Moreover, as has been mentioned above, there is considerable interest in establishing realistic, research-based objectives for Core French, supporting students as autonomous language learners (see Kristmanson et al. 2013) and making second language classrooms more inclusive (Arnett and Mady 2013).

Enduring challenges exist in the field of second language education in a country with two official languages (English and French) and diverse populations learning these and other languages. ELLs, with notable exceptions, still do not enjoy the same potential for school success because they are often not exposed to appropriate pedagogical approaches to delivering content and language, which speaks to inadequate teacher education or professional development. Further, many ELLs continue to face policy-driven exclusion from second (or, in many cases, additional) language classrooms where their English learning could be enhanced as they acquire an additional language. Another ongoing challenge relates to the lack of linguistic and methodological expertise among many of the country's Core French teachers, contributing to low proficiency and high attrition among secondary school students (more pronounced in western provinces). All of these are areas that require attention in the future with respect to theory and praxis, including research and policy, programs, and provisions, in teacher education programs and education systems across the country.

At the same time, innovative practices and rich research agendas show promise in multilingual, multimodal, and inclusive second language education as well as in pedagogies informed by the *Common European Framework of Reference*, including the valuing of student autonomy, an action-oriented approach to teaching and learning, and use of portfolio-based assessment. These developments, together with strong interest among researchers and educators alike, bode well for the future of Canadian second language education.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Second Language Literacy Research and Curriculum Transformation in US Postsecondary Foreign Language Education](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Donna Patrick: [Language Policy and Education in Canada](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
- Bonny Norton: [Language and Social Identity](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
- Joseph Dicks: [Bilingual Education in Canada](#). In Volume: Bilingual and Multilingual Education
- Bonny Norton: [Identity, Language Learning and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times](#). In Volume: Language Awareness and Multilingualism
- Dr. Diane Pesco: [Language Socialization in Canadian Indigenous Communities](#). In Volume: Language Socialization

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