Programs for Education in Immigrant, Heritage, or International Languages in Canada

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Over 200 languages other than English, French, or indigenous languages are taught in schools and higher education and by private businesses and community groups in Canada. A conventional distinction in status is between foreign or international languages—taught usually to adolescents or adults for purposes of academic, literary, or religious study, personal development, travel, or business—and heritage languages, taught usually to children to maintain and extend their own ancestral, family, cultural, or religious affiliations, identities, and literacies. The Multiculturalism Acts of 1971 and 1988 encourage the maintenance of all languages arising from indigenous or immigrant ancestry, but in the absence of legislation or funding, most relevant educational programs are defined by, and depend on, local community and institutional interests.

Programs for heritage languages have existed in many areas of Canada for over a hundred years, reflecting concentrations and histories of immigrant settlement, most prevalently in the western half of Canada and most prominently Arabic, Cantonese, German, Hebrew, Italian, Mandarin, Polish, Punjabi, Spanish, Tamil, Ukrainian, and Urdu (Statistics Canada, 2012). Some involve immersion programs, but most are offered after school or on weekends (as in Ontario’s provisions to teach a heritage language for 2.5 hours per week where at least 25 students participate locally) (Cummins, 2014; Cummins & Danesi, 1990; Early, 2008; Genesse & Lindholm-Leary, 2008; Guardado & Becker, 2013; Harper & Pelletier, 2010; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). Most universities, colleges, and private language schools offer a range of courses in international languages, often either for reading or conversational proficiency. Cultural linkages, resources, and exchanges are fostered by such international agencies as the Cervantes, Confucius, and Goethe Institutes. Observing the conflicting purposes and often limited success of foreign and heritage language programs, along with the marked rates of language loss among immigrant families (both within individuals and across generations over time) in Canada, some educators have recently proposed combining and reconceptualising the two types of international language programs—to promote students developing plurilingual abilities in multiple languages, identities that value cultural diversity and differences, and preparedness for global mobility—through the creation and uses of dual-language books, projects involving sister classes internationally through electronic media, planning and monitoring long-term personal goals for language learning, and facilitating cross-language transfer and intercultural awareness (Cummins, 2005, 2014; Cummins & Early, 2011; Naqvi, McKeough, Thorne & Pfitscher, 2013; Piccardo, 2013).

References


