Programs for English and French Language Education in Schools in Canada

Alister Cumming, CERLL, OISE

Canada’s constitution in 1867 recognized, and then the Official Languages Acts of 1969 and 1988 designated, English and French as the country’s two official languages. The constitution also gave each province, rather than the federal government, unique responsibilities for education. Accordingly, Canada’s 10 provinces and 3 territories each have unique curricula and educational policies, though each receives financial support to teach all children in public schools either French as a Second Language (FSL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). The Ministry of Education for each province provides a website detailing the most recent policies and curricula for ESL and/or FSL, which Vaillancourt, Coche, Cadieux and Ronson (2012) have analyzed comparatively. Education within each province is administered by school districts, governed by school boards that have considerable discretion in stipulating programs, resources, and hours and modes of instruction. As with all schooling in Canada, education in ESL or FSL is highly decentralized and therefore variable from place to place. ESL is taught as a school subject in French-dominant schools in the province of Québec. FSL is taught in schools in all of the other English-dominant provinces except for separate French school systems operating in designated bilingual regions of New Brunswick and Ontario. Bilingual regions of Ontario, Québec, and New Brunswick have school systems in minority-status languages (either English or French) adhering to the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees education in their mother tongue to all Canadians of English or French heritage. Heller (1999) observed a shift over prior decades in the conceptual orientation for language education among francophone schools in Ontario from proclaiming a unique cultural identity and disparaging minority status to promoting French as an international language and the value of bilingualism.

Students in most Canadian schools study either ESL or FSL as a compulsory subject in core (i.e., regular) programs, for 20 to 50 minutes per day, from fourth to ninth or tenth grade, and students in academic streams may continue to do so until the end of secondary school at 12th grade. Two alternative curriculum models are also popular: immersion (constituting about 10% of FSL programs in Canada) or intensive (particularly for ESL in a small number of schools in Québec) (Cummins, 2014; Genesse & Lindholm-Leary, 2008; Lapkin, 1998; Netton, 2000). In immersion programs, students study school subjects in their second language for most of the school day, often supplemented by some study in the majority language. Early immersion programs begin in kindergarten or first grade, middle immersion begins in fourth or fifth grade, and late immersion begins in the sixth or seventh grade. In intensive programs, students study school subjects in the second language for half a year in grades 5 or 6, offering concentrated, communicative experiences akin to immersion programs. Other innovative curriculum models include bilingual or dual-language programs, which provide 50% of school subjects in English and in French; extended programs, in which one or two school subjects are taught in the second language, usually in senior secondary schools; and the accelerative integrated method (AIM) in which core French instruction is integrated kinaesthetically through interactive drama, reading, and writing activities (Arnott, 2011; Cummins, 2014).
Students relocating to (or possibly within) Canada from places where English or French is not the medium of instruction may need to participate in programs for English language learners (ELLs) or, in Québec, “classes d’accueil” (welcoming classes). Educational policies and conditions for these students vary greatly, reflecting the extent of immigrant settlement patterns locally: They may include reception centers (which provide initial assessments and cultural orientation upon entering a school district), ESL or FSL courses (without or for academic credit), withdrawal classes (on an individual or group basis), sheltered, content-based instruction in school subjects, or “whole school” policies that include culturally diverse learners (Cumming, 1997; Cumming et al., 1993; Cummins & Early, 2011; Early, 2008). Generally, educational policies and practices promote minority students’ socialization into academic discourse practices in the medium of English or French and, consequently or implicitly, the long-term assimilation of linguistic minorities into Canadian society (Ashworth, 1988; Cummins, 2000; Duff, 2010). Most immigrant students in Canadian cities fare well academically, compared to Canadian-born populations, with the exception of subpopulations in which poverty, parental education, and limited educational services impact negatively on graduation and participation rates; educators are advised to attend uniquely to these subpopulations rather than implementing uniform policies for all language learners (Cumming, 2012; Cummins, 2014; Gunderson, 2007; Ledent et al., 2013; McAndrew, 2009; Schugurensky, Mantilla & Serrano, 2009; Toohey & Derwing, 2008).

References


