

Wanted: A Language Policy for Canada in an Era of Globalization

Jim Cummins

The University of Toronto

Language-in-Education Policies

Systematic articulation of principles, goals, and implementation mandates, incentives, and strategies

focused on the development of linguistic proficiencies among particular groups or populations.

Canadian Realities

- Unlike Australia which articulated a widely-acclaimed *National Policy on Languages* in 1987 (LoBianco, 1987), Canada has no national language policy;
- Canada does have a national policy focused on bilingualism involving the two official languages (the *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework* policy articulated in 1971);
- Canada also has coherent policies and a well-developed national infrastructure for teaching official languages to adults (e.g., the LINC program);
- However, despite sporadic positive rhetoric, there is a national policy vacuum with respect to heritage languages, the languages of the Deaf community, and to a lesser extent Aboriginal languages.

Provincial Initiatives

- Various provinces support the teaching of heritage/international languages but only Alberta has made efforts to articulate a coherent policy framework for the promotion of languages other than English or French:

“The government of Alberta ...recognizes and supports a variety of languages other than English and French. These languages are used to fulfill a wide range of social, cultural, economic and educational purposes. They are vehicles of communication for many Albertans and the first language of many children in Alberta. The linguistic pluralism of Alberta is a valuable resource that enriches our cultural and intellectual lives and has potential for use in the international context.”

(Language Education Policy for Alberta, 1988, p. 17)

What's Problematic about a Policy Vacuum?

- The ambivalence about promoting heritage languages during the 1970s and 1980s has been totally discredited by research:
(e.g. there is not basis to claims that a. knowledge of other languages will inhibit learning of English and French, and b. knowledge of other languages will encourage ethnic ghettos and promote disunity);
- Heritage/international languages represent important *national* resources in an era of globalization where cross-cultural contact is at an all-time high in human history;
- In the absence of institutional support, rapid language loss is the norm during the pre-school and elementary school years;
- National interest in linguistic resources can be justified from multiple perspectives:
 1. The economics of international trade and commerce;
 2. Diplomacy and peace-keeping
 3. Social justice
 4. Cultural enrichment

One Realistic Low-Cost Initiative En Route to a National Policy

- *Establish a national accreditation infrastructure that would enable individuals to take tests in different heritage languages and attain a formal qualification that recognizes their level of proficiency in that language.*

Rationale: Currently, there is little external incentive for most students to study their heritage language either in schools or in community classes; also, most of these classes don't have a coherent curriculum or set of language goals to aim for. A nationally-recognized qualification would provide both incentive for students and a set of curricular goals for teachers.

Feasibility: A similar system already exists in the UK (albeit with fewer languages);

The system could be web-administered focusing (at least initially) on machine-scorable listening comprehension and reading competencies;

The language level assessed could be calibrated to be roughly equivalent to the level of the International Baccalaureate Language “B” (already administered in multiple international languages)

The system could be administered by a national organization such as the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASALT).