

# Reply to John Landon's Position Paper

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John Landon has drawn attention to the assimilationist bias of teacher education which prevails in many countries despite the lip-service paid to multiculturalism. He has suggested a restructuring of the content of general teacher training programs so that all teachers are able to recognize the needs and maximize the learning potential of bilingual children. He has made a number of practical and sensible recommendations specifically regarding the training of teachers of heritage and Native languages and he suggests that, within a multilingual society, students and teachers alike would benefit from greater language awareness, from more knowledge about language, language learning and language use. Landon's paper raises some interesting points for reflection and I would like to elaborate upon a few of them.

Canada is no exception to the phenomenon of assimilationist bias. If anything, the situation here is intensified by the fact that two languages have official status. Reports of efforts to weaken one, presumably to the advantage of the other, are not infrequent.

As recently as June 9, 1987 the Federal Government was urged by a Commons-Senate committee to pressure the provinces to meet their constitutional obligations to provide education in both official languages. The committee added that "the financial assistance given to the provinces in support of official languages in education is not always used towards the aims for which it was intended." Through the office of the Secretary of State, the federal government makes some funds available to the provinces to support official languages programs. However, education comes under provincial jurisdiction and the federal government cannot enforce language policy in any direct way. It can do little more than deplore abuses and suggest recommendations.

In the Province of Quebec where ESL instruction from grade 4 on has been officially part of the curriculum since July, 1982, a recent (Jan.-April, 1987) Department of Education poll of 200 School Boards indicated that over 70% of the primary level students do not receive the recommended minimum ESL instruction of two hours per week. In one area, only sixty-seven minutes of ESL a week were being taught. A number of reasons have been advanced to explain the discrepancy — lack of facilities, scheduling problems, inadequate staff and, in some cases, a refusal on the part of the teachers to teach the allotted time. The end result is the same. When funds provided for second language instruction are

directed elsewhere or when a minimum period of instruction time is not respected but reduced by almost 50%, the students involved are deprived of an adequate opportunity to become competent in the other official language of the country.

There is a slightly more positive side. The same Quebec poll showed that 5% of pupils in grades 4, 5 and 6 receive more than the recommended two hours of ESL instruction per week and some School Boards offer intensive official second language programs where the second language is taught as subject matter for several hours per day or is used as the language of instruction for a part of the school curriculum.

Elsewhere in Canada, some School Boards have embarked upon ambitious immersion programs in official second language instruction, hiring native-speaking language teachers from other provinces where necessary and following the most up-to-date approaches to instruction. These programs encourage bilingualism and permit an increasing number of students to function successfully in both official languages of the country. The more ambitious official language programs are the exception rather than the rule, however, and invariably reflect the concerns of particular groups of parents or their representatives who have taken the initiative in trying to remedy a situation which they have found to be unacceptable.

In general, the situation with regard to the teaching of the other official language in Canada is far from satisfactory. Attitude, process and product vary enormously and the impetus for implementing effective and successful second language programs seems to come from outside the central authority. A change in perception is required. Bilingualism has to be seen as a positive and attainable goal within our education system rather than as a threat to ethnocentricity and a challenge to cultural biases. Bilingualism needs to be encouraged and supported to a far greater extent than is now the case.

In a discussion on language instruction in Canada one could thus take the position that the two official languages of the country must have priority and that they must have the first claim on the limited resources which are available. It follows from this that, *within the educational system*, heritage language instruction would be considered a special program with no special status and with only a limited priority. The responsibility for organizing and implementing a system for maintaining heritage language competence would devolve upon interested groups. They would have to take the initiative in obtaining support within and beyond the local community and in pressuring the local or provincial education authorities to sanction and legislate the appropriate change in the school curriculum.

Montreal provides several excellent examples of this community-based initiative. We might take as specific examples the steps taken by the Greek

and the Armenian communities to maintain their own language and culture. Each group has several of its own schools. These respect the provincial public school curriculum but provide, in addition, heritage language instruction for several hours each week. They select their own teachers and prepare their own heritage language syllabus which includes instruction in history, culture and civilization. Some ethnic organizations even arrange trips back to the country of origin for groups of students.

Within the Montreal Catholic School Board, some public primary schools located in areas where there is a concentration of speakers of a particular heritage language, for example, Italian, offer heritage language instruction as part of the curriculum. This is sanctioned by the provincial government under the Plan d'Action, a plan for heritage language maintenance. Such opportunities are limited and, once again, the initiative for proposing them came originally from within the particular ethnic community.

Among some ethnic communities there appears to be limited confidence in the ability of a centralized system of education to cater to non-central education issues. They are concerned enough to act and their approach is to be admired. But, to expect the various ethnic communities to assume the entire responsibility for the maintenance of heritage languages in Canada would be shortsighted indeed. Education is not the exclusive responsibility of government; it affects us all. It is to everyone's advantage when the education system is dynamic and flexible and in tune with societal change and aspirations. It is quite reasonable to expect provincial departments of education to encourage and support not only bilingualism but multilingualism where this is both a realistic and an attainable objective and one which corresponds to the wishes of large numbers of the general public. Education is one of the most costly components of any provincial budget and we would do well to insist on as large a return on our financial investment as possible. Let us not forget that the costs incurred by any government are underwritten by private citizens through taxation of one form or another.

We can thus consider heritage language instruction from another perspective, one quite different from the narrow point of view suggested above. Heritage and Native language maintenance can be considered a valuable and worthwhile investment and we should perhaps consider ways in which their instruction can be improved.

Heritage and Native language instruction has a very short history when compared with second language instruction. Rather than ignore the experience, knowledge and expertise that has developed from and around second language instruction, it would make much greater sense to consider how and what this knowledge, experience and expertise can contribute to the training of heritage and perhaps also Native language teachers.

John Landon mentions that ESL teacher training opportunities greatly exceed those which exist for teachers of the first language of minority groups. He points out that an effective and credible heritage and Native language teacher programme depends upon the establishment of a highly-qualified and well-trained cadre of teachers and he proposes several ways of simplifying access into teacher training programs for trainee-teachers interested in heritage or Native language instruction.

One practical way to help resolve this dilemma is to take advantage of organizations already in place, such as the TESL Centres at a number of Canadian universities. These organizations are established and credible; they have a number of ancillary services at their disposal within the university, for example, audio-visual services and equipment, as well as access to pedagogic support systems outside the university. Also, they have established and they maintain close contact with teachers and schools, public, private and commercial, at all levels.

Organizations such as the TESL Centre of Concordia University, for example, in collaboration with other departments of the university, could help to overcome this lack of trained teachers, perhaps offering a Diploma in (Heritage and/or Native) Language Instruction. Montreal is particularly favoured as a place to offer such a diploma because of the opportunity to complete practice teaching requirements in a variety of heritage language settings.

The question of minimum standards of teacher competence is a perennial and vexing problem. Should we be more flexible and more pragmatic in our attitude? A non-native teacher of ESL can compensate for a lack of fluency in English through knowledge of his students' own language, background and culture as well as through knowledge of the most likely errors the students will make and how to correct them. Some would argue, and I would be one of them, that there is no reason to lower entrance standards since mature students can already be admitted to teacher training programs at many universities with a High School certificate, or its equivalent, plus a few qualifying courses. Neither would I subscribe to the notion that "fluency in the language together with elementary literacy, might be all that is required in some nursery and primary schools." I would prefer all heritage and Native language teachers to be not only competent in the language, and literate, but knowledgeable also about the culture, civilization and, to some extent, the literature of the country or region whose language they intend to teach.

In conclusion, I am quite sympathetic to the need to strengthen and support heritage and Native language programs and find great favour with the idea that organizations like TESL Centres could play an important role in helping to train teachers for such programs. I would expect a certain resistance to the idea, however. Even official bilingualism has met

a lot of resistance on both sides of the political fence. Proposals aimed at improving heritage or Native language instruction may be less than favourably received. I reiterate my earlier remarks about the initiative having to come initially from those most interested in effecting change. This would be in line with the restructuring of North American society which is said to be underway and which is manifested by a desire for decentralization away from an ineffective central authority. A decentralization in certain areas of education to satisfy local or regional aspirations, particularly where these are reasonable and generally advantageous, will surely come about.

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