

# Getting into the Picture<sup>1</sup>

Mary Ashworth

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On June 8, 1984, one hundred of the world's foremost photojournalists spread out across Canada and photographed a day in the life of Canada; their photos became a large bestselling coffee table book. Now, seven years later, it is interesting to see who got into the pictures-into the hundreds of pictures which make up the book. They are beautiful pictures—and, without doubt, they tell the story of some of the events that went on on June 8, 1984. I hope they don't tell the whole story, for if they do then they tell the story of a Canada fragmented into caucasians, who do many different things in play and work, and Chinese, who till the fields under big straw hats, and Inuit, who haul fish from fishing holes. Rarely, very rarely, do a caucasian and a member of a visible minority group appear in the same photo.

The theme for this year's TESL Canada Conference, "Part of the Picture," is well chosen, the metaphor apt, because it raises so many questions about the Canada of today, of 1991, seven years after the one hundred photographers roamed Canada trying to capture "a typical Canadian day" on film. Let us suppose that tomorrow we asked a hundred photographers to photograph not a typical Canadian day but a typical Canadian group, would their results be identical? I doubt it. But I think, after looking at the photographs, we would be stimulated to ask the following questions of each picture:

1. Who stands at the centre of the picture?
2. Who stands at the periphery?
3. How did some people ensure that they got into the picture?
4. Who declined to be in the picture?
5. Who was deliberately left out of the picture?
6. Who told people where to stand?

Answers to those questions might tell us a lot about how different people view, not the great natural beauty of this land, but its human mix.

TESL Canada is launching an awareness campaign to broaden the public view of the importance of ESL education. It is acting as a sort of pressure group. Now, pressure groups serve three functions, and TESL Canada's campaign can focus on one or all of these three functions:

- they bring together people with similar concerns and convictions,

- they delineate the issues and provide information to the authorities and the public,
- they bring pressure to bear on decision-making bodies using a variety of strategies.

Before I get into specifics of my theme "Getting into the Picture," let me remind you that the term "in the picture" has two meanings: one literal, one idiomatic. Literally it means being in a picture, standing close to others—or keeping your distance—putting on a smile which perhaps you don't feel. But as an idiom 'being in the picture' means knowing something, 'being in the know'. We need a Canada in which people stand close together and are knowledgeable about each others' needs, each others' weaknesses and strengths.

The fact that I have entitled my speech "Getting into the Picture" must suggest to you that I do not feel that all Canadians are, as yet, fully in the picture. It depends, of course, which picture you are looking at as to who appears to be left out. In the past and still today, there are certain groups, usually visible minority groups, that are pushed to the periphery, particularly if they are women. But who else has not been 'in the picture', in the sense of not being 'in the know'?

I remember years ago a public school classroom teacher asking me what went on behind those closed doors of the ESL classroom; she felt she wasn't 'in the picture'—'in the know'. But with the increased emphasis on integration, more and more teachers and administrators must be in the picture. And so must parents, both ESL and non-ESL. Both groups need reassurance that what is going on in public schools in ESL will help all and hinder none, which places a burden on regular and ESL teachers to be sure that what they do is in the best interests of all children.

In an article in a recent edition of ATESL's *Newsletter*, the author, Leni Deisman, wrote: "When we invite a guest speaker into the ESL classroom, typically we plan carefully for information *our students* will carry away from the experience. How about in the other direction? . . . Planning for information *the guest* will carry away from the experience deserves attention too." Then the author poses some questions to the reader: "Which people in your community have influence, but likely do not personally encounter many ESL students? Which people don't have firsthand knowledge of your program? Can we expect government support for programs for our students if people don't know *firsthand* about programs? How many of our own friends or relatives *still* don't know what ESL is?"

In March I went to the TESOL convention in New York where I heard two different stories about the business community and ESL. One person told me about an excellent ESL program one company

mounts for its non-English speaking employees; another spoke, not just of the ignorance of business people in her region regarding ESL, but of their lack of desire to find out more. Why the difference? Is the first group prompted by love and knowledge and the second by fear and ignorance? Does one group have faith in education and the second despise it? Is one group 'in the picture' and the other standing outside? If the skills immigrants bring with them are to be used to advantage, surely business people should be 'in the picture' with regard to the value of ESL education for some of their employees. Improved language skills may well be the key not just for jobs for the unemployed but for better jobs for the underemployed. As vocational skills can be learned along with language skills, it is possible to design programs with both objectives in mind. But is the business world aware of this? For these programs to be effective, long-term planning decisions must be based on the kind and amount of job creation envisaged by industry and government.

And what of government? It is customary to berate government and government officials, a sort of national pastime, but my interactions with various government people have been far more positive than negative. A year ago I was part of a small panel in Vancouver trying to give advice to an official on the needs of certain groups of immigrants—I was speaking for children. The official listened, and as he summed up I thought not only has he heard what we said, he brought a wide and deep body of knowledge to the day's proceedings; he was a caring and informed individual. I do not think he was an exception, but in government people move from job to job, changing ministries, and the process of educating some of them in what ESL is and what it does for newcomers has to be repeated time and time again. We must find ways of assisting those who hold office, whether elected or appointed, to understand the processes by which newcomers can be helped to integrate into Canadian life.

Then there is the general public, the man and woman on the street who, 20 years ago, had no idea what the letters ESL stood for. (Perhaps it would mean more to them if we said they stood for English for Successful Living rather than English as a Second Language.) In times of recession, the man or woman on the street live in fear—fear that their economic situations may worsen, hence the accusation thrown at new immigrants that 'they take our jobs.' Some fear that taxes will rise to provide welfare payments for refugees who seem to be flooding the country. Others deplore change, and, while enjoying ethnic restaurants, say they are afraid that in time we and our children will be just like them! There is a lot of fear in the man and woman on the street, and fear keeps people apart, but there is a lot of ignorance

too. To sum up in the words of a report by the Canadian Employment and Immigration Advisory Council (August, 1988): "The Canadian population, on the whole, is ill-informed about all questions relating to immigration." (p.6)

What are some things the public should know? A report issued by Employment and Immigration Canada in 1989 makes the following points:

1. Under "Capital Imported"—In total, immigrants accepted in all classes in 1988 intended to bring over \$6 billion dollars to Canada.
2. Under "Job Creation"—Immigrants create jobs both through consumption and through investment and business formation.
3. Under "Consumption and Savings"—Immigrants stimulate the economy.
4. Under "Labour Force Activity and Incomes"—The foreign born on the whole have unemployment rates below those of the Canadian born.
5. Under "Fiscal Effects"—Because they have higher incomes, immigrants pay more in taxes than do the native born. Foreign born persons of working age are less likely to receive social assistance than Canadians.

An Angus Reid poll taken over a 15-month period and published in October, 1989, showed the following:

- Public opinion on immigration is dynamic, that is, it responds to significant events such as a sudden influx of refugees, media coverage, or major policy changes of the government.
- Public attitudes towards immigration levels are affected by shifts in public concern over Canadian cultural identity, the environment, and the economic future of the country.
- There is a growing awareness that immigration levels are increasing and a growing sense that too many immigrants are coming to Canada. In July, 1989, 54 percent of Canadians would like to have seen less immigration in the future. [But it's going to increase.]
- In August, 1989, nearly 30 percent of the people interviewed believed immigrants take jobs away from Canadians.

Let me be more specific why I applaud TESL Canada's awareness campaign:

1. According to the federal government, immigration will rise from the low figure of 85,000 in 1984 to 220,000 in this year with more to come. It is anticipated that 1.37 million immigrants will enter Canada the next 5 years. But the effect on services to immigrants, especially ESL classes, is cumulative. Immigrants arriving this year may not decide to attend ESL classes until 1993. Family and friends may shelter them for some time. In addition, it can take from 5 to 7 years to master English. So we will need not only to increase the number of classes

to cope with the influx, but to maintain that increase for some years to come. That point needs to be hammered home.

2. While Canadian society is becoming increasingly culturally and racially diverse, and while Canadians tend to see themselves as a kind, tolerant people, nonetheless prejudice and discrimination do rise to the surface in acts of discrimination and violence, and it is this kind of negative behaviour we must do all in our power to prevent.

3. Too few people recognize the contributions that immigrants make to the Canadian economy and culture or the great benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism to the individual and to the nation.

Non-English speaking students have been the target of ESL teachers' daily work for many years. It is to others that TESL Canada and its affiliates must turn their efforts, to communities which, in various ways, impinge upon new immigrants. In my book *Beyond Methodology*, I identified three types of communities that affect in some way the teaching of English as a second language in Canada. The first I described as geo-political communities which include neighbourhoods and boards of elected educational authorities. Next came common interest communities which include the family, speech communities, minority groups, religious groups and pressure groups. The third I called professional communities, people who work in schools, colleges, universities or teacher-training institutions and those who belong to teachers', parents' or ethnic organizations. It is more economical to target a community of people than 26 million individuals when one wants to impart knowledge or encourage understanding. It is important to remember that the community plays three roles in relation to second language teaching: it acts as a resource for classroom teachers; it is the beneficiary of what goes on in the classroom; and it can exercise some control over second language teaching.

The first sub-theme of this conference is second language teaching. Today we are aware of the many benefits that accrue to children and adults who speak more than one language. Yet why is it that an organization like APEC, the Association for the Preservation of English in Canada, succeeds in capturing the hearts and minds of some Canadians? English is in no danger of being lost in Canada. Indeed, as *Megatrends 2000* points out it is rapidly becoming the world's first truly international language. People 'out there' need to know not only *how* English is taught as a second language but *why*, and one of the best ways of getting that information to them is to let them see a class in action. Let them witness the frustrations and successes of a group of children or adults struggling to master English. Let them hear

these newcomers express their hopes for a new life in Canada, their need for English, and their willingness to work hard to acquire it.

The second sub-theme deals with advocacy and action for change. Peter Strevens, in 1984, suggested that a profession possesses six attributes not shared by all occupations. The last one was 'social responsibility', and it is precisely that sense of social responsibility that lies behind TESL Canada's decision to begin a public awareness campaign. I listed in *Beyond Methodology* what I think are 20 axioms for making educational change, which is not an easy process—it takes time, and individuals can be hurt, but if ESL wants to call itself a profession then it must engage in advocacy and action for change. It must know what it wants to change and consider the various strategies by which change can be brought about.

The third sub-theme is accreditation and professionalism. How can we expect government or business or the general public to take seriously what we say if we cannot prove that we are professionals? Both B.C. TEAL and ATESL are wrestling now with the matter of accreditation of their members. It is not an easy matter to decide what should constitute the lowest allowable level of training for ESL teachers and what upper level of training teachers should be encouraged to attain, but it is a very worthwhile exercise which I would encourage every association to engage in. For not only does it raise questions regarding pre-service training, it raises more questions regarding inservice training and the responsibilities of ESL organizations in both areas of training if ESL teachers are to say with pride, "We are professionals."

The fourth sub-theme, multicultural/cross cultural and native education, is wide, deep and far-reaching for it deals with the very foundations on which this country will build its future. These post-war years have not been easy either here in Canada or around the world as people have sought political, religious and economic freedom. The authors of *Megatrends 2000* remind us that "The trend toward a global lifestyle and the countertrend toward cultural assertion represent the classic dilemma: how to preserve individuality within the unity of the family or community." (p.153) Elsewhere they say, "The more homogeneous our lifestyles become, the more steadfastly we shall cling to deeper values—religion, language, art, and literature. As our outer worlds grow more similar, we will increasingly treasure the traditions that spring from within." (p.120) Respect and affection for one's own culture is an important part of knowing who one is in a world which, at times, seems to be breaking up around us, but respect and affection for the cultures of others is an important part of knowing who others are and beginning the process of joining together.

The fifth and final sub-theme is concerned with social issues. At a time of recession social issues could be a long list, but those that affect immigrants particularly are employment, housing, education, counselling, and medical, the same issues that affect many Canadians. But non-English speakers often face the barrier of communication. Some social issues will be national, some provincial and some regional. Conferences provide wonderful opportunities for networking by people who are concerned about the same issue but who live in different parts of Canada.

TESL Canada's awareness campaign is timely and it needs the support not just of its ten provincial associations, but of the individuals who form those associations. The campaign also needs the support of various groups within the larger community, and here again individual members of TESL Canada can help, for a TESL Canada member is also a member of one or more of the communities listed earlier and therefore has an influence on those outside the profession. One way in which ESL teachers can help is by being able to articulate the value of the work they are doing. It is not difficult to justify to the tax-paying public the value of teaching basic literacy or numeracy skills. It is more difficult to justify language teaching programs: first, because some issues surrounding language teaching involve people's deep emotions rather than their reason; and, second, because the perceived past failure of programs to produce fluent users of the language causes people to question the wisdom of throwing good money after bad. Few people outside the profession realise that it can take from 5 to 7 years for a newcomer to become a fluent speaker of English and hence they are ready to criticize a program which does not produce mastery in a year. In order that the benefits of ESL programs become apparent, justification for ESL programs must include some statements about the linguistic needs of the individual, the community and the nation to which the program is responding. One might say, for example, that the individual needs ESL in order to get a job, the community needs people who can communicate in English in the workplace, and the nation needs people who can participate in the political life of the country.

A major task in the awareness campaign will be persuading government, the business world, the public and some members of the teaching profession that a financial investment in ESL education at all levels from preschool to senior citizens is a long term investment that will pay large dividends. By investing in human capital through sound ESL training along with vocational and retraining programs, governments help to build an informed workforce of skilled technicians and managers. The net effect can be greater efficiency resulting in an

increased productivity and a rise in the gross national product. In addition, the earning power of individuals is affected by their levels of education and productivity, which in turn affects their spending power. Money spent on education is money well spent. The report of 1988 previously referred to suggests that there *is* support out there for ESL programs, but probably it needs mobilizing. The report says: "Canadian opinion leaders support the principle of government-sponsored aid, especially in language training for landed immigrants. They also strongly support language training (French or English) for non-working immigrants to help them integrate into society." (p.4) The report gave as its Recommendation #11: "That the federal government ensure that access to language training programs is available to all immigrants." (p.14)

TESL Canada's Six Principles on Adult ESL, published some years ago, was an excellent contribution to the field of policy-making in immigrant education. Unfortunately, what is said one day is soon forgotten, and must be repeated time and time again. So TESL Canada's awareness campaign is needed now and will be needed again in the future. But who is TESL Canada? It's so easy to speak of TESL Canada as *them*—but in fact TESL Canada is *us*, all of us who belong to a provincial ESL organization and those who don't but who are concerned about the well-being of non-English speaking immigrants. *We* are TESL Canada—this is *our* campaign.

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## NOTE

1. An abridged version of the keynote address at the SCENES/TESL Canada Conference, Saskatoon, May 3, 1991.

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