

Keynote Address to the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers and the Canadian Association
of Second Language Teachers Joint Conference in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, November 7, 2002

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"A new challenge for second language education in Canada"

Keynote Address to the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers and the Canadian
Association of Second Language Teachers Joint Conference:

"A Meeting Place for Languages: Celebrating Our Ties"

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to address this joint meeting of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers and the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers. In a sense, we are here to celebrate the results of a revolutionary ideal.

That ideal is to build a country where most citizens can receive essential services in English or French and where most children can learn and master their second official language. As Commissioner of Official Languages, it is an ideal that I am deeply committed to. I want to be an agent for change. I want to build alliances to foster a new, more positive dialogue about our official languages.

There has been a great deal of progress since the first *Official Languages Act* was enacted in 1969. Today, there is broad acceptance of our language duality. An Environics survey conducted early this year revealed that 76% percent of Canadians believe that English and French should be our official languages. Another survey shows that 91% of young people 18 to 24 years old favour Canada's official languages policy and support bilingualism [CRIC paper # 4].

As people involved in second language education, you deserve high praise for the role you have played in this transformation of public opinion. You have been the artisans of consensus. You are on the front lines of a major shift in Canadian values.

To my way of thinking, you deserve a medal. What you do every day helps strengthen understanding among our citizens by creating a critical mass of bilingual and bicultural young Canadians.

Unfortunately, I can't give out medals. However, I can at least offer each of you this pin developed by our Office. I have brought one for each of you. This gold and silver emblem shows how a fabric is made of many threads. It symbolizes how those of us who speak English and those of us who speak French - ourselves of many different heritages - have joined together to weave a social fabric called Canada. I hope you will wear it with pride.

Today, I want to talk to you about a new challenge for second-language education in Canada - a daring plan to improve the second-language skills of Canadian children. I also want to discuss the key issues, such as leadership, financing and accountability, teacher training and program development, that our governments must resolve in order to meet this challenge.

I. A ten-year goal

At the beginning of my mandate, I held a series of consultations with Canadians, both English-speaking and French-speaking, in twenty cities across the country. During these consultations, I was told time and again of the need to reinforce second-language instruction, to address the issue of teacher shortages and to increase the number of exchanges so that students can improve their knowledge of the second official language. As you know, these issues are now on the government's front burner. In fact, in the most recent Speech from the Throne, the Governor General declared:

"The government will implement an action plan on official languages that will focus on minority-language and second-language education, including the goal of doubling *within ten years* the number of highschool graduates with a working knowledge of both English and French."

The Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Mr Stéphane Dion , who is responsible for coordinating federal official languages programs, is currently putting the final touches on this action plan.

Few will argue, I think, that the objective of doubling the number of bilingual high school graduates within ten years is ambitious. I can hear some of you already muttering "Get real!", while others are saying "Go for it!".

The skepticism is no doubt due to the fact that there has been little growth in second-language programs over the last decade. The reason for optimism is that with strong leadership things can change. We would not be where we are today if, as the song goes, we had not been bold enough "to dream the impossible dream".

In fact the dream is far from impossible. When we examine the provincial statistics closely, some provinces, especially those in Atlantic Canada, have more than doubled the number of bilingual youth in the space of fifteen years. In PEI, for example, the number of bilingual youth shot up from 9% to a whopping 24% between 1981 and 1996. There were also very significant increases in the number of bilingual youth in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Manitoba during this same period.

In 1971, 13% of high school graduates were bilingual. Today, one in four teenagers (24%) between the ages of 15 and 19 speaks both official languages. These young Canadians value bilingualism not only because it has improved their economic opportunities, but because it has enhanced their ability to participate fully in Canadian society. They cherish our nation's status as a meeting place for languages.

Indeed, it should no longer be necessary to repeat all the familiar arguments about the cognitive, communicative, cultural, social and economic advantages of developing such skills. Many Canadians wonder why we have waited so long to give our children this competitive edge.

As the first children of globalization, today's young people understand that there is a close correlation between the protection and recognition that Canada affords to English and French and our country's growing ability to respect cultural and linguistic diversity. They know that language duality is all about inclusion.

As these young Canadians begin themselves to have school-age children, they will demand that school systems expand and improve their capacity to deliver second-language education of high quality. It is only safe to assume that a second wave of the youth option is in the making.

II. What do we need?

Therefore, the real questions are: What should we do? What do we need?

We need leadership and planning, better financing and accountability, more teachers, additional programs and improved research and development. Let me put before you a few basic observations about each of these broad topics.

1. Leadership and planning

Education is a partnership. Improvements in FSL and ESL can only be achieved if all the players-the federal, provincial and territorial governments, universities and colleges, school boards, teachers, parents, students and associations like Canadian Parents for French-are all on side. This implies not only careful negotiations and coordination, but also a concerted effort to inform and explain.

A great deal of discussion will be necessary in many regions to find the right balance between improved core, extended and immersion programs. Teachers and school boards will no doubt also have to experiment with new types of program delivery. Greater cooperation between school boards and between jurisdictions will be necessary, both in regard to the development of curriculums and the sharing of resources. It will also be important to develop tailor-made programs for small and rural communities.

Our universities will also have to show rather more leadership and responsibility than in the recent past in providing opportunities for students to develop and consolidate their second-language skills. If targeted funding is required to achieve this, it should be considered.

Second language education will have to be viewed increasingly as a continuum which extends from preschool to include college and university, as well as exchanges, work opportunities and other skill maintenance activities. New ways will have to be found to ensure that FSL and ESL students can enjoy productive contacts with local minority-language communities and their culture.

Finally, in planning the development of FSL, great care will be required to avoid robbing Peter to pay Paul. We must protect the integrity of our minority-language school systems and their scarce linguistic resources.

2. Better financing and accountability

It is unrealistic to think that improvements in second-language education can be achieved without a major overhaul of the federal government's Official Languages in Education Program, which is up for renewal next year. This overhaul is not merely about money, but also about the most effective use of the funds that must be made available. In short, there must be more bang for each new buck.

To ensure this, there should be more transparent and more focussed accountability. The money must go where it is intended. There should be a clear paper trail.

I am not suggesting that provincial governments or school boards are currently siphoning off second language funds for other purposes, but the current accountability framework is such that it allows suspicion to fester. It should not be beyond the skills of federal and provincial bureaucrats to show clearly how funds trickle down to the school and the classroom.

The necessary corollary of effective financing is effective program evaluation and performance measurement. It is important to detect potential problems early in order to correct them. Better still, good evaluations will help identify successes and models that should be pursued.

3. More teachers

Finding the teachers required to expand second-language programs may prove to be the toughest challenge. As you well know, during the next decade there will be a massive turnover in the teaching population, as baby-boomers approach retirement age.

A recent study by Canadian Parents for French examined the complex causes of shortages in FSL teachers. In general, school districts and ministries of Education agree that they will find it hard to meet future demands for teachers in both core and immersion programs. They note that it is difficult to attract FSL teachers to rural areas. They cite the failure of faculties of education to produce FSL graduates in sufficient numbers. However, paradoxically, places in faculty FSL programs remain unfilled while school boards clamour for core French teachers with appropriate language skills.

The CPF study makes a number of simple and effective recommendations to improve matters, including:

- * much better collaboration between ministries and school districts;
- * improved working conditions for FSL teachers; and
- * greater efforts to recruit applicants for FSL programs.

While there is no quick fix, a renewed emphasis on second-language proficiency at all levels may be part of the solution. This includes, of course, our universities which have been cutting back on their French programs. Certainly the planned expansion of second-language programs should encourage more young Canadians to become teachers. *Teachers* should encourage their students to follow their footsteps.

4. Additional programs and improved research and development

The improvements brought about in second-language teaching in Canada over the last quarter century have been dramatic. This progress was due in no small part to significant breakthroughs in research and in program development. This spirit of innovation must be rekindled and expanded.

One way of doing this is to invest more in new technological tools for teachers in the classroom. As you know, projects of this nature are already underway in several jurisdictions. More can be done. Also, planners should not forget the invaluable contribution that teaching

assistants and volunteers can bring to the classroom. Indeed, their help, in combination with new technological developments, may make a significant difference.

I am sure you will agree that what I have just outlined amounts to a heaping plateful of problems and promises. The good news, however, is that not everything has to be done at once. Moreover, in many jurisdictions, much of the basic infrastructure is in place. It is always easier to finish building a house when it has a solid foundation and a strong framework.

Conclusion

As I suggested earlier, there has been over the last two decades a revolution in the way English and French are taught as second languages. This transformation is too important not to be pursued and improved.

The language skills and sensitivity to cultural values that are being instilled in our young people will shape and direct the way future generations of Canadians learn a second or indeed a third language. I am optimistic enough to believe that a healthy attitude toward language learning can be contagious. Why not in fact set as a goal the knowledge of *three* languages by the end of university?

I see no reason why many young Canadians should not aspire to speak two second languages by the time they are twenty. This, after all, is what the European Community is putting into practice. Fifty-three percent of Europeans say that they can speak one other European language in addition to their mother tongue. Twenty-six percent say that they can speak two European foreign languages. [1]

But most Canadian children will not become polyglots unless they first acquire a functional command of both English and French. These are the languages that are in demand in government, business, communications, education and most other spheres of Canadian life. These are the languages of opportunity, the languages that open doors at home and across the world.

To me what is important is to get the job done as soon as possible. If this means training more teachers, increasing instruction time or developing a wider range of courses and exchange programs, then so be it. I have every confidence that we can achieve this goal. And I know that Canadians can count on you to rise to the challenge. You have already done so much that I know you can do more.

Thank you.

NOTES

[1] **Special Eurobarometer Survey 54 "Europeans and Languages"**.

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/languages/lang/eurobarometer54_en.html]