

Intercultural Initiatives and Canadian Bilingualism

Authors : Muna Shafiq

Abstract : Growth in international immigration is a reflection of increased migration patterns in Canada and in other parts of the world. Canada continues to promote itself as a bilingual country, yet the bilingual French and English population numbers do not reflect this platform. Each province's integration policies focus only on second language learning of either English or French. Moreover, since English Canadians outnumber French Canadians, maintaining, much less increasing, English-French bilingualism appears unrealistic. One solution to increasing Canadian bilingualism requires creating intercultural communication initiatives between youth in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Specifically, the focus is on active, experiential learning, where intercultural competencies develop outside traditional classroom settings. The target groups are Generation Y Millennials and Generation Z Linksters, the next generations in the career and parenthood lines. Today, Canada's education system, like many others, must continually renegotiate lines between programs it offers its immigrant and native communities. While some purists or right-wing nationalists would disagree, the survival of bilingualism in Canada has little to do with reducing immigration. Children and youth immigrants play a valuable role in increasing Canada's French and English speaking communities. For instance, a focus on more immersion, over core French education programs for immigrant children and youth would not only increase bilingual rates; it would develop meaningful intercultural attachments between Canadians. Moreover, a vigilant increase of funding in French immersion programs is critical, as are new initiatives that focus on experiential language learning for students in French and English language programs. A favorable argument supports the premise that other than French-speaking students in Québec and elsewhere in Canada, second and third generation immigrant students are excellent ambassadors to promote bilingualism in Canada. Most already speak another language at home and understand the value of speaking more than one language in their adopted communities. Their dialogue and participation in experiential language exchange workshops are necessary. If the proposed exchanges take place inter-provincially, the momentum to increase collective regional voices increases. This regional collectivity can unite Canadians differently than nation-targeted initiatives. The results from an experiential youth exchange organized in 2017 between students at the crossroads of Generation Y and Generation Z in Vancouver and Quebec City respectively offer a promising starting point in assessing the strength of bringing together different regional voices to promote bilingualism. Code-switching between standard, international French Vancouver students, learn in the classroom versus more regional forms of Quebec French spoken locally created regional connectivity between students. The exchange was equally rewarding for both groups. Increasing their appreciation for each other's regional differences allowed them to contribute actively to their social and emotional development. Within a sociolinguistic frame, this proposed model of experiential learning does not focus on hands-on work experience. However, the benefits of such exchanges are as valuable as work experience initiatives developed in experiential education. Students who actively code switch between French and English in real, not simulated contexts appreciate bilingualism more meaningfully and experience its value in concrete terms.

Keywords : experiential learning, intercultural communication, social and emotional learning, sociolinguistic code-switching

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