

Language Matters:
A Policy-Research Seminar on Language Acquisition and Newcomer Integration
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Summary

Acquisition of the host country language(s) is important for various aspects of newcomer integration in Canada. Host country language proficiency is strongly related to not only labour market outcomes, but also to indicators of social integration, such as voting. At the same time, the use of Canada's non-official languages – and the existence of linguistic enclaves - does not necessarily undermine official language acquisition or newcomer integration. The Government of Canada will continue to make innovations to its robust official language training programs for newcomers. That said, at a time when population mobility and intercultural contact is at an all-time high in human history, formal acknowledgement of multilingualism – and of non-official languages - is also something that integration and language policy should take into account. These were the key messages from a panel of experts – national and international – who spoke at this event, organized by the Metropolis Project in partnership with a number of federal funding partners.

The Government of Canada allocates half of its newcomer settlement funding to official language training. Currently, efforts are underway to introduce two innovations to the assessment system: language portfolios as a means to assess learners' increasing grasp of both the language and settlement information components, and a standardized test to assess the proficiency of learners who have undergone language training. The importance of learning an official language is strongly acknowledged by immigrant women learning English; this is especially so for Mandarin and Punjabi speakers, most of whom arrive as the spouses of skilled workers. Such learners have called for better outreach and public education targeted at their communities about the advantages of official language acquisition. At the same time, some newcomers have low literacy in their mother tongue. Therefore, official language training needs to be coordinated or perhaps enmeshed with literacy and essential skills programs, as these three capacities are interconnected – and crucial for newcomers to succeed in the integration process.

Findings from the 2006 census provide updates to earlier research, confirming again that low levels of language proficiency in host country languages are strongly associated with unfavourable labour market outcomes. Despite current policy levers aimed at increasing Canada's intake of highly educated and skilled workers, a sizable number of newcomers today have low levels of language proficiency which in turn are associated with poorer indicators of labour market integration. Further, according to the 2006 census, close to 831,000 people in Canada's labour force used a language other than English or French on a regular basis in their job, of which 75 percent were immigrants. Immigrants who use non-official languages at work are more often found in less skilled occupations. Recent surveys indicate that many newcomers, particularly skilled workers, are misguided about their official language proficiency, and many are still facing challenges related to language and accent in finding suitable employment. Pragmatics and other cultural aspects of communication are posing challenges to some newcomers who have learnt English or French outside Canada. At the same time, native speakers of English and French need to equally share their half of the "communicative burden" while listening to

“audible minorities”, especially in the workplace. Analysis of the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) reveals the existence of “linguicism” - discrimination based on language or accent – most of which occurs in the workplace. Emerging research shows that accent discrimination is practiced by some employers during the hiring process, indicating the need to educate employers about accent and provide them with proper tools for language evaluation. Employer-based language training programs are an innovation that also needs to be considered.

Contrary to popular perception, the maintenance of heritage languages by newcomers and minorities does not pose an obstacle to their integration in Canadian life. In fact, research from OECD countries shows that speaking another language at home is beneficial to host country language proficiency and overall academic development among children. At the same time, the majority of second-generation immigrants born to allophone parents know their ancestral language but seldom use it in daily life. Transmission of heritage languages to successive generations varies greatly among linguistic communities and depends on a number of factors. Despite having a multiculturalism policy, the Government of Canada’s “benign neglect” of languages other than English and French over the past 20 years represents a “squandering of national resources” according to one expert. A realignment of its cultural policies – including national recognition of heritage languages through language-in-education policies – will help Canada move forward in international trade and diplomacy in a rapidly changing era of globalization.

There is a place for both official and non-official languages in facilitating the social integration of newcomers. According to an analysis of the EDS, overall, low levels of official language proficiency are associated with a reduction in diverse measures of civic participation, including having membership or participating in a group or organization, and voting in recent federal, provincial and municipal elections. However, the data show that such reductions are not equated with negative feelings about belonging to Canada. The ethnic media are an important tool for newcomers to learn about their adopted country. The ethnic media are at once, a means for newcomers and minorities to maintain and tighten links with their own culture while mediating their integration and recognition within the host country - two roles that are often perceived to be at cross purposes but in reality, are not so. In fact, as recent experiments such as the Punjabi language broadcast of *Hockey Night In Canada* have successfully shown, non-official languages can play an important role in not only introducing mainstream social institutions to newcomers, but can also connect generations within allophone families, while making them feel truly Canadian.

Overall, official language proficiency seems to be posing a barrier to the successful integration of some newcomers in the mainstream labour market. With time, most newcomers acquire proficiency in at least one official language, which helps in the social aspects of integration. At the same time, maintenance of heritage languages is no hindrance in this process and has tangible benefits on many counts. Recognizing adult newcomers’ need for acquiring or improving official language skills, the Government of Canada is innovating and improving its existing language training programs to adapt to the changing profiles of recent arrivals. Given the current and future influx of allophone newcomers, small linguistic enclaves are likely to continue to exist, but as the experts at this seminar concluded, such enclaves pose no threat to integration.