

Heritage Language Learning in Canadian Public Schools: Language Rights Challenges

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Abstract

Research supports that linguistic minority students' mother tongues, or heritage languages, should be maintained for personal (Babae, 2010b), social (Wong Fillmore, 2000), and cognitive (Toukoma & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977) reasons. In Canada, however, many linguistic minority students face challenges in learning/using their heritage languages at public schools, which might indicate that their language rights are violated. This paper aims to explore language rights challenges of linguistic minority students, focusing on immigrant students at K-12 provincial schools in Canada. First, minority language rights within the educational context in Canada are discussed in detail, followed by a discussion of the challenges immigrant students might face in learning their heritage languages. Conclusion and discussion follow in the end.

Key words: Language rights, linguistic minority

Communication among people in the world has increased as the international trade, tourism and political relations are increasing. Because people from various countries might not share the same first language, they need to use a lingua franca, that is, a mutually intelligible language (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992), to communicate with each other. The most common lingua franca these days is English, which has been used so widely that it is sometimes called English as a World Language (EWL). In addition to around 400 million people that speak English as a first language, about 400 million speak it as a second language, and 600 million use it as a foreign language. No other language is spoken so widely in the world (Crystal, 2004). A second language is learned after the first one, or learned and used in the environment, often in addition

to school” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 8). A foreign language is “learned mainly in classroom, for reading texts and/or communication with its speakers” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 3). However, the reason for the dominance of a language lies not in the number of its speakers, but in their political, economical, cultural, and technological power. Colonialism since the 16th century, the economic growth of the United States in the 19th century, the influence of the American culture in the 20th century and the industrial revolution of the 17th and 18th century all led to the spread of EWL (Crystal, 2004).

The widespread use of English across the globe has been a matter of concern to some scholars. Phillipson (2009), for instance, states, “When English supplants another language, what happens is that users of English (whether as a first or second language) accumulate linguistic capital and others are dispossessed of their languages, their territory, and their functioning” (p. 337-338). This results in “linguistic imperialism” (p. 336), a situation where “one community or collectivity dominates another, as in colonialism, imperialism, and corporate globalisation, and ... the language of the dominant group is privileged structurally in the allocation of resources and ideologically in beliefs and attitudes towards languages” (Phillipson, cited in Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 6).

Linguistic imperialism can also exist within a country where more than one language is spoken. An example is Canada where two official languages (French and English), many heritage languages and some Aboriginal languages are spoken. Heritage languages include immigrants’ first languages and in this paper, refer to all languages spoken in Canada except English, French and Aboriginal languages. Heritage language speakers, or immigrants, in Canada are also referred to as linguistic minority in this paper, that is, “[a] group which is smaller in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members have ... linguistic

features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided, if only implicitly, by the will to safeguard their ... language” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 489-490). Aboriginal languages refer to Indigenous languages spoken by First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples or their ancestors.

The dominance of official language(s) might violate minority language rights, “rules that public institutions adopt with respect to language use in a variety of different domains” (Arzoz, 2007, p. 4). At an individual level, language rights imply

... the right to learn the mother tongue, including at least basic education through the medium of the mother tongue, and the right to use it in many of the (official) contexts It means the right to learn at least one of the official languages in one’s country of residence. It should therefore be normal that teachers are bilingual. (Phillipson, Ranuut & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, p. 2)

At a collective level, language rights imply

the right to enjoy and develop their language and the right for minorities to establish and maintain schools and other training and educational institutions, with control of curricula and teaching in their own languages. (Phillipson et al., 1995, p. 2)

Two different dimensions to language rights include “the regime of linguistic tolerance [...] and the regime of linguistic promotion” (Arzoz, 2007, p.5). The former is related to the protection of minority language speakers “from discrimination and assimilation” (p. 5) and the latter includes granting members of linguistic minority groups the linguistic rights in public situations, for

example minority language medium instruction. These two dimensions can also be regarded as negative and positive language rights.

Minority language rights are violated by, for instance, depriving linguistic minority students from receiving “at least basic education” in their mother tongue (Phillipson et al., 1995, p. 2). Language right violation, in turn, can bring about language loss, subtractive bilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009) and linguicide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001). Language loss occurs when individuals lose “their ability to speak [and] write [in their first languages] or understand” it (Richards et al., 1992, p. 202). Subtractive bilingualism refers to a situation where the second language replaces or displaces the first one instead of adding to one’s linguistic repertoire (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008). Linguicide refers to “the deliberate elimination of a language, without killing its speakers” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 6)

Language loss might lead to devastating familial (Kouritzin, 1999; Wong Fillmore, 2000), personal (Babae, 2010b), and cognitive (Toukomma & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977) consequences. One of the immediate consequences of language loss is observed in children’s relationship with their parents that cannot speak the dominant language (Kouritzin, 1999; Wong Fillmore, 2000), the language spoken by most people in a host society and is the most prestigious. Since they are not equally competent in the same language, it might be hard for parents and children to communicate and share cultural and familial values. In addition, the family structure might start to change as children and parents talk less and less (Rodriguez, 1982), and a greater generation gap is created (Wong Fillmore, 2000). Finally, since language is related to identity, if people lose their first languages, it is as if part of their identity is missing (Babae, 2010b). Some people that had lost their languages were reported feeling shameful and guilty because of it (Kouritzin, 2006; Kouritzin, 1999).

From a cognitive view, if minority children receive education only in a second language, they might be cognitively impeded. As Toukomma and Skutnabb-Kangas' (1977) research shows,

If in an early stage of its development a minority child finds itself in a foreign language learning environment without contemporaneously receiving the requisite support in its mother tongue, the development of its skill in the mother tongue will slow down or even ceased leaving the child without a basis for learning the additional [or second] language well enough to attain the threshold level in it. (p. 28)

Toukomma and Skutnabb-Kangas (1977) also mention that first language development is particularly crucial in subject areas that need abstract thinking. Linguistic minority students whose first language stopped developing prior to reaching the abstract thinking stage “remain on a lower level of educational capacity than they would originally have been able to achieve” (p. 70). Such cognitive and mental damages represent cultural and linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001) based on Articles II (e), (b), and III (1) of the 1948 UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: “Article II (e), ‘forcibly transferring children of the group to another group’; and Article II (b), ‘causing serious bodily or *mental* harm to members of the group’; (emphasis added)” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001, p. 205). Second language medium instruction might also be considered “linguistic genocide according to the 1948 special definition

Article III(1) ‘Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group’” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001, p. 205).

Therefore, to prevent negative consequences of language loss, it is important to investigate minority language rights in a bilingual/multilingual context.

Although many studies have been conducted on linguistic minority students' language related challenges in Canada (for example, Cummins, 1997; Cummins, 1995), a few of them addressed minority language rights. While previous studies might have implications for improving linguistic minority students' educational achievements, further research on language rights is called for to address these students' challenges from a deeper perspective. To bridge this gap in literature, this paper is organized in the following way. First, the educational context where immigrant students study in Canadian provinces is analyzed in detail. Second, their language rights are discussed, followed by difficulties they might face in learning their heritage languages at public schools. Conclusion and discussion follow in the end.

The Educational Context

Immigrant students in Canada in provincial schools are usually mainstreamed in regular classes where they study subject areas in English (or French in Quebec) together with their English/French-speaking peers. Depending on provincial language policies and the number of linguistic minority children seeking mother tongue medium instruction (the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, 1982), transitional, dual track, or heritage language programs might be available at public schools (Cummins, 2005; Cummins, 1998). In transitional bilingual programs, minority language speaking students learn subject areas in their mother tongues for certain years. Then, they will receive dominant language medium instruction. In early-exit programs, students switch to the dominant language medium instruction usually "after one to three years". In late-

exit programs, students continue receiving mother tongue medium instruction “up to the fifth or sixth grade; sometimes the mother tongue is taught as a subject thereafter.” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 11). In dual track bilingual programs, French in Quebec/English in other provinces and a heritage language are both used as the medium of instruction at school. Daily time exposure to each language depends on the type of program. Transitional and dual language programs exist in provinces where by law, a heritage language can also be used as the medium of instruction, that is, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. These programs include English/Mandarin (Vancouver School Board, 2010) and English/Russian (School District No. 20 Kootenay-Columbia, n.d.) bilingual programs in British Columbia, English/Arabic, English/American Sign Language, English/Mandarin, English/German, English/Hebrew, English/Spanish and English/Ukrainian bilingual programs in Alberta (Edmonton Public Schools, 2011), English/Ukrainian programs in Saskatchewan (Government of Saskatchewan Education, 2007) and English/Ukrainian, English/Hebrew and English/German dual track bilingual programs in Manitoba (Canadian Education Association, 1991).

Some heritage language programs are available in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and provinces where an official language, English or French, must be the only medium of instruction at public schools (such as Ontario and Quebec). According to Canadian Education Association (1991), heritage language programs exist in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Examples include Portuguese, Italian, Cantonese heritage language programs in Ontario, Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese in Quebec (Canadian Education Association, 1991), and Filipino, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Japanese, Hebrew and German heritage language programs in Manitoba (Manitoba Education, 2011).

Linguistic Minority Language Rights in Canada

Based on individual and collective implications of language rights (Phillipson et al., 1995), linguistic minority students must receive at least basic education in their heritage languages and study culturally relevant materials. In light of these implications and based on the reviewed literature, immigrant language rights in Canada are discussed below.

Immigrant language rights in Canada tend to depend on the province where they reside (Cummins, 1983) and the number of immigrant students seeking heritage language medium instruction (the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, 1982). They might learn their heritage languages in dual track, transitional bilingual or heritage language programs. However, dual track and transitional programs exist only in some provinces, that is, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, in a limited range of languages such as Ukrainian, Spanish, Mandarin, Hebrew, Russian and German. Therefore, it might be argued that language rights of the majority of heritage language learners in Canada are unprotected.

Minority language rights are violated most in provinces where heritage language medium instruction is outlawed, and no heritage language program exists. Examples are Prince Edward Island (Canadian Education Association, 1991) and Newfoundland and Labrador (Department of Education Newfoundland and Labrador, 2011). In these provinces, linguistic minority students receive second language medium instruction at public schools, where no heritage language or bilingual programs exist.

Heritage Language Learning Challenges

Although some heritage language programs exist in Canada, linguistic minority students might face challenges in learning their heritage languages, which are discussed below.

First, receiving minority language medium instruction at public schools depends on the presence of a minority-language community with a sufficient number of children seeking mother tongue medium instruction (the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, 1982). This policy tends to be vague in that factors determining a sufficient number of minority language speakers are not clearly stated. Therefore, minority language rights could easily be violated by provincial governments because of insufficient number of those speakers.

In provincial schools where heritage language programs are offered, hours dedicated to learning heritage languages might be insufficient, for instance, up to two and a half hour per week in Ontario (Feuerverger, 1997). Therefore, heritage language learners, especially those whose home language is English/French, might receive insufficient language input to develop communicative skills in their heritage languages, which is a goal of many heritage language programs (for example, The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 and 10 Classical and International Languages, 1999).

Finally, Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) mentions that effective heritage language medium instruction must exist at least in the first eight years of education. However, in many bilingual programs in Canadian public schools, transition to the second language medium instruction occurs before grade eight (for example, Winnipeg School Division, n.d.). Although some of these programs might be successful at enhancing learners' heritage language proficiency, an early transition to the dominant language medium instruction could hinder successful heritage language development because students might receive inadequate linguistic input. This is especially crucial in cases where the dominant language, that is, English or French, is extensively spoken at home and in the community and society and heritage language learners have few chances of using their heritage languages outside the classroom.

Conclusion and Discussion

The widespread use of a language in a country or all over the world can lead to linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2009). In Canada, the dominance of English over heritage or Aboriginal languages might lead to linguistic imperialism and the violation of minority language rights. It occurs by, for instance, depriving linguistic minority students of studying in or learning their heritage languages at school. Although bilingual or heritage language programs exist in some provinces in Canada, many immigrant students face challenges in learning their heritage languages at public schools perhaps because of the limited range of heritage languages taught in heritage language and bilingual programs, potentially insufficient instructional time and early transition to the dominant language medium instruction.

In addition to the number of minority language speakers seeking heritage language medium instruction, what determines the medium of instruction at public schools is the provincial language policy. Provincial language policies impact positive language rights, which refer to using a heritage language in the public domain, for instance, as a medium of instruction at public schools. Therefore, minority positive language rights tend to be protected in provinces where heritage languages may be the medium of instruction. The reason is that linguistic minority students might participate in transitional or dual track programs. Positive language rights tend to be violated in provinces where heritage language medium instruction is outlawed and no heritage language program exists. Therefore, many minority language students have to attend mainstream provincial schools and study culturally-irrelevant materials all in English/French.

With regard to individual versus collective implications of language rights, it seems that the individual rights of linguistic minorities are observed more than the collective ones.

According to Phillipson et al. (1995), at the individual level, linguistic minority students should benefit from mother tongue medium instruction, and at the collective level, they should be able to study in their own schools. Through transitional bilingual programs, linguistic minority students might receive at least basic education in their heritage languages; however, they are not allowed to have their own schools where all subject areas and culturally relevant materials are taught in a heritage language in K-12 educational contexts.

Finally, protecting minority language right implies that linguistic minority children should learn at least one of the official languages of their country as an additional, or second, language (Phillipson et al., 1995). In Canada, the medium of instruction in all schools is an official language, English or French, from the beginning or middle of education. Therefore, linguistic minority children will eventually learn English or French at school. However, these languages might not be fully learned unless first, or heritage, languages are simultaneously developed. The reason is an existing common underlying proficiency regarding all languages according to which the second language proficiency depends on the first language proficiency (Cummins, 2001, p. 75). The more one knows his or her first language, the better she or he would be able to learn a second language. In cases where immigrant children receive insufficient heritage language instruction, their competence might not fully develop. It, in turn, can influence learning the official language negatively. In cases where the official language is fully learned, it might soon replace the first language (see, for example, Guardado, 2010) if the latter is rarely used. In other words, although a new language is learned, the heritage language would be lost, which would violate language rights.

To facilitate heritage language learning for immigrant students, a wider range of heritage languages need to be taught in bilingual or heritage language programs. Moreover, heritage

language instructional time must be increased. Finally, schools could offer heritage language programs in partnership with immigrant communities. That is, immigrant students would take heritage language courses at community-based heritage language schools and take credits from them.

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