



# DIFFERENT ANGLES ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND ITS PLACE IN OUR SCHOOLS

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Like most of the world's metropolises, Montreal is a place of great cultural and linguistic diversity. A major proportion of Montrealers (many of whom are bilingual, even trilingual) live in a plurilingual environment where multiple languages are heard on the bus, metro and radio, and visible on signs, in newspapers, and elsewhere. It is no surprise, then, that many elementary and high school students on the Island of Montreal (36.3%) are educated in a language other than their mother tongue.<sup>1</sup>

In this context of plurilingualism, influenced by Quebec's language debate, mastering one or several languages at some level, or having a more or less pronounced accent are "visible" markers of difference that can help or hinder social mobility.

### Language and power

Language is not a "neutral" communication tool. Speakers embody a set of positive or negative representations, attitudes and feelings about languages, varieties of languages and those who speak them. In the context of globalization, a "language market" has emerged more than ever,

within which languages can be depreciated, devalued or, to the contrary, gain currency. Thus, the language we speak is an external sign of wealth and authority, the value of which is measured in comparison to the dominant language and usages.<sup>2</sup>

This can even take the form of prejudice, as reflected in a number of stereotypes about language, such as: "French is the language of love. Italian is the language of passion. German is the language of anger. English is the language of money."

Stereotypes extend beyond different languages to geographical or social variants that are often ranked according to a scale of value. Based on a very purist standard, some feel authorized to make a distinction between noble or sophisticated languages as opposed to common or ordinary, even crude and vulgar, languages or, more bluntly, gibberish, jargon or pidgin.<sup>3</sup>

Classification of these different variations in language is based on the balance of social forces, where one group—usually the economic and culturally dominant group—imposes its own usage of the language so that it becomes the recognized language. The dominant language then enjoys the support of a set of mechanisms and institutions, including schools, to maintain this status and facilitate the emergence of a common language, to the detriment of other languages and the communities that speak them.

Some authors, including Skutnabb-Kangas,<sup>4</sup> go as far as to denounce "linguicism" (based on the model of racism), defined as: "Ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of

Universal accessibility and equal chances of success still aren't a reality in Montreal public schools, despite the attempts of current and past reforms. Individuals and groups who confront inequalities daily know too well the harsh consequences. The *Different Angles on Education and Social Justice* series was launched to make academic research useful to advocate for school policies and practices that help create equality. (*Disponible aussi en français*)

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language.”

Among certain children, the non-recognition by school and the host society of the existence of the family tongue can lead to “linguistic insecurity,” a feeling of discrimination, diminished self-esteem, and difficulties in transferring cognitive and linguistic knowledge from one language to another. In some cases, this can lead to a rejection and abandonment of the family tongue, viewed by the child as less prestigious, in favour of the school language. This is referred to as “subtractive bilingualism” as opposed to “additive bilingualism” in which there is a harmonious and complementary development of co-existing languages.<sup>5</sup>

### Linguistic diversity in the schools

In the context of Quebec schools, the Ministère de l'Éducation's Educational Integration and Intercultural Education policy (1998)<sup>6</sup> focuses attention on the importance of children “learning how to live together in a Francophone, democratic and pluralistic society.” Globally, this policy means that all teaching staff must develop attitudes of openness to ethnocultural, linguistic and religious diversity and skills to include pluralism in the curriculum.

That said, of all of the pedagogical interventions surveyed, linguistic diversity thus far has not, to our knowledge, been the focus of any interventions in the area of intercultural education or citizenship education. In Europe, such approaches have been developed through the implementation of Language Awareness programs.

These programs fall squarely within recent recommendations by UNESCO (2003) that stress the importance of supporting “language as an essential component of inter-cultural education in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.”<sup>7</sup>

### Taking action in the schools: Implementing Language Awareness programs

Many researchers promote the Language Awareness approach in order to encourage, in the context of intercultural education and building positive

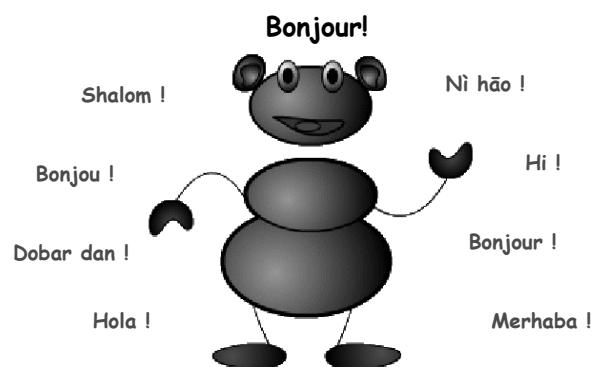
identities, acceptance and legitimization of the languages of all students as well as greater openness to linguistic diversity. British researcher Eric Hawkins<sup>8</sup> developed this approach in the early '80s. It has since been picked up in Europe by Candelier<sup>9</sup> and Perregaux,<sup>10</sup> and very recently in Canada by Armand and Dagenais<sup>11</sup> with the ÉLODiL project (language awareness and openness to linguistic diversity – see [www.elodil.com](http://www.elodil.com)). A research project in Montreal and Vancouver is currently testing and evaluating this intervention program in Grade 3 and, more recently, preschool.<sup>11</sup>

The Language Awareness program provides participants with an opportunity to explore languages that they may or may not be familiar with through activities involving the discovery and use of various linguistic expressions and realities. The primary goal of these activities is to enable students to systematically explore linguistic diversity in order to give them the tools to live in linguistically and culturally diverse societies.

### Example of language awareness activities

In the first module entitled “Hello,” students watch a video in which children say “hello” in 17 different languages. They must try to identify the language and the country(ies) where it is spoken.

The concepts of official languages, national languages, etc. are addressed and discussed. In preparing for the activity, students discover the diversity of languages around the world, and they are provided with key statistics (number of languages spoken around the world, on the Island of Montreal, in their school, etc.).



Students can continue their learning, on their own, through multimedia activities that are designed on the basis of the same principle, but are more comprehensive in terms of the number of languages and countries included.

In one of the activities in the “Language flower” module, students employ the concepts of mother tongue, second language and foreign language. To do so, they analyze a video clip in which two children recount their linguistic realities (what languages do they speak? with whom? what is (are) their mother tongue(s), second language(s), etc.?). Then each student tells their “linguistic story” using the terms “monolingual,” “bilingual,” and “plurilingual,” and illustrates it on a petal. These individual petals are put together to create the class’s “language flower.”

## Conclusion

Language Awareness programs fall squarely within intercultural education practices and also help to develop civic skills. Indeed, training future citizens who are able to take their place in a democratic society requires analytical skills and the ability to understand current social realities as they relate to the question of languages and representations of languages and their speakers. Consequently, an approach that pairs language awareness activities with critical pedagogy<sup>12</sup> could help students to (1) become aware of the unequal values attributed to various languages and their speakers, (2) question their own linguistic representations (3) take charge of their learning process in order to (4) take action and question social inequalities.

In this way, tomorrow’s citizens will be capable of recognizing the “inequality” of languages and define conditions that will make it possible to move, in a world of migration and plurilingualism, toward the equality of men and women in terms of language and communication.

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- Direction des services aux communautés culturelles, Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec
- Heritage Canada – Canadian Studies Program
- Supporting Montréal Schools Program, Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec
- Programme Opération solidarité

## Notes

- 1 Comité de gestion de la taxe scolaire de l’île de Montréal. *Portrait socioculturel des élèves inscrits dans les écoles publiques de l’île de Montréal*. Quebec City: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2005.
- 2 Calvet, L.-J. *Le marché aux langues*. Paris: Plon, 2002.
- 3 Bourdieu, P. *Ce que parler veut dire*. Paris: Fayard, 1982 (p. 50-51).
- 4 Skutnabb-Kangas, T. *Linguistic Genocide in Education or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

- 5 Cummins, J. *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. New York: Multilingual Matters, 2001.
- 6 Ministère de l'Éducation and Ministère des Relations avec les Citoyens et de l'Immigration. *A School for the Future. Educational Integration and Intercultural Education*. Quebec City: Gouvernement du Québec, 1998.
- 7 UNESCO. *Education in a Multilingual World*. UNESCO Position Paper. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2003 (p. 30).
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### Viewing the series

The series is available in English and in French on the Third Avenue Resource Centre web site: [www.crta.ca](http://www.crta.ca).

### Already published:

"Antiracist Education in Quebec: Diagnosis and Prognosis", September 2005

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