THE WORK OF WALLACE LAMBERT: A PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Canadian Parents for French is the national network of volunteers which values French as an integral part of Canada and which is dedicated to the promotion and creation of French-second-language learning opportunities for young Canadians.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of Wallace Lambert's seminal research on second-language acquisition from a parent–led community stakeholder perspective. It explores Wallace's contributions to successful collaboration between parents, researchers and educational decision-makers, to more effective second-language pedagogy, and to inclusion and diversity in second-language classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The work of Wallace Lambert provided an early example of the role and influence of parents and the wider stakeholder community in defining and meeting the educational needs of their children. It is also an example of successful collaboration between scientific researchers and the wider community to meet the community's information needs.

Wallace Lambert's work also spoke to equitable access to, and inclusion in, the second-language classroom, by demonstrating that academically challenged students are not differentially handicapped in immersion programs; by respecting the language and culture of aboriginal and new Canadians; and by recognizing the positive role of prior language experience when learning second and subsequent languages. The influence of these studies is reflected in current research and practice to encourage and accommodate diversity in second-language education.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SECOND LANGUAGE RESEARCHERS AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS.

When parents in St. Lambert began to advocate for more effective French-second-language education, Wallace Lambert and researchers from McGill University responded by developing a model for immersion education. Researchers also assessed the first- and second-language proficiency outcomes when the model was implemented in the classroom. This commitment to evaluating outcomes was an important aspect of the French immersion initiative and one that has made the Canadian French immersion model one of the most extensively-studied educational programs in existence. These evaluations were particularly welcomed by parents and other French-second-language advocates, since first- and second-language proficiency outcomes are counter-intuitive, especially for a non-expert audience.

Indeed, advocates for effective French-second-language programs still need strong, credible research findings to promote the programs and to counter concerns about negative effects of second language instruction on first-language acquisition – often addressed one parent or one educator at a time.

This early collaboration between researchers, parents, and community continues to be reflected in the field of second- and subsequent- language acquisition. Canadian Parents for French, formed in March 1977 with the support of the Commissioner for Official Languages, Keith Spicer, continues to voice the views of parents who support linguistic duality and to advocate on behalf of parents who want their children to have access to publicly-funded opportunities to learn both of Canada's official languages.

The Government of Canada recognizes the need for collaboration. In 2004, the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council recognized the need for a two-way flow of information between university research and the community. *The Official Languages Research and Dissemination Program (2004-2005 to 2006-2007)*, a joint project of SSHRC and Canadian Heritage, was designed to "promote research in areas of critical importance to official language policy and practice; and to provide support to ensure that relevant research results are effectively communicated and appropriately applied" (Canadian Heritage, 2004).

In January 2008, the Department of Canadian Heritage organized a Symposium on Official Languages Research that attracted 150 participants from the research, government, and stakeholder communities, at which researchers informed stakeholders of relevant research conducted or contemplated, while stakeholders communicated the second-language research information

required for effective advocacy. The benefits of maintaining this early relationship between the research community and the wider community (in particular, with the parent community), cannot be over-estimated. Parental engagement is crucial to maintaining effective, accessible French-second-language opportunities for young people in Canada, and to respond to emerging issues in second-language education. As Joseph Dicks noted: researchers have an important but limited role in political decision-making. To maximize the influence of research, it is essential that it be… accessible to parents. In this way, parents concerned about bilingual education programs will be able to exert considerable political pressure, armed with sound research to support their arguments. (Dicks, 2009)

Over the years, Canadian Parents for French has maintained productive working relationships with the second-language research community – disseminating research findings and conducting or commissioning research to inform advocacy positions on issues such as the following: capping enrolment in French immersion, French-second-language teacher supply and qualifications, alternate core French models, and accountability for the use of Official Languages in Education funds.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The influence of Lambert's inclusionary vision is apparent today, as government, educators, and community stakeholders struggle to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Lambert's work with immigrant populations and academically-challenged students is particularly relevant. For example, researchers like Genesee, Wise, and Arnett continue to address misconceptions about the suitability of immersion programs for academically-challenged students and to develop pedagogical strategies for diverse learner needs (Genesee, 2007; Wise & Chen, 2009; Arnett, 2007). Canadian Parents for French and other stakeholders use these findings to advocate for equitable access to second-language education and for the provision of appropriate academic support for these students. Similarly, Cummins, Mady, and Dagenais have studied the experiences, attitudes and performance of Allophone students in core French and French immersion, as well as the importance of students' first and subsequent languages in acquiring additional languages (Cummins, 2001; Mady, 2010; Dagenais, 2007). Their findings are used by parent and other community stakeholders to advocate for the implementation of ministerial policies to ensure the inclusion of Allophone students in French immersion and other French-second-language programs. Findings are also used to promote the benefits of knowing both of Canada's official languages to new Canadian parents and students.

CONCLUSION

Lambert's seminal work with Anglophone and Allophone parents led to the development of effective French immersion pedagogy, to recognition of the positive role of every language learned prior to the target language, and lastly, to an increasingly inclusionary model of second language education.

These developments have contributed, as well, to Canada's national unity. In 1977, the creation of Canadian Parents for French and its support for effective, accessible French immersion education supported national unity by presenting "an English-speaking organization able to speak sensibly, perhaps even generously, about the French language" (Spicer, 2004). Today we continue to support national unity by encouraging educators to ensure that Allophone students have opportunities to learn both of Canada's official languages in order to qualify for employment with the Government of Canada and to play a real part in Canada's social and political development.

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