

# Response From Heritage Language Constitutency to John Landon's "Teacher Education and Professional Development"

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Normally, when asked to respond to another person's paper, I hope to find myself in considerable disagreement with the ideas expressed. That way it is easy to set out what I see as its shortcomings and to outline how I would have framed the issues. My heart sank when I read John Landon's paper. I agreed with every major point he made and, indeed, wished I had written it!

I particularly liked three of his clusters of ideas. First of all, his vision of broad language education for all children. I certainly share that vision. Clearly, we both want nothing to do with the deficit model of minority education which has dominated the English-speaking world for the past several decades. Instead, for students who come to school monolingual either in a Heritage Language or English/French, we want them to be able to acquire another language in school. For students who come to school already bilingual, we want the school to protect and develop that resource. In addition, for all students, we think exposure to a language awareness program is helpful.

Second, I agree that if this vision of language education is ever to reach a central position within the mainstream classroom, then teacher education is required in massive doses. Important aspects of that teacher education include:

- language *training* itself, to ensure high levels of competence in the various languages to be taught
- language *teaching* education, to ensure that the teachers can help children develop similar levels of competence
- language *awareness* education, to ensure that all teachers recognize the value of bilingualism to the individual, the country and the world, as well as the importance of the role which language plays in academic achievement and social interaction.

Third, I also accept his view that what we should be aiming for is coordination and collaboration in the teacher education programs for teachers of mother tongue, English as a second and foreign language

(ESL/EFL), French as a second language (FSL), Heritage and foreign languages, both at pre- and in-service stages. Perhaps what is required is a combination of joint courses and some separate language-specific ones. But what is indisputable is that if we create totally individual empires, we will end up maintaining unnecessary distinctions in order to justify our separateness. At the same time, we will have missed the opportunity to borrow each other's good ideas. I see a strong "language across the curriculum" alliance as being immensely powerful in educational terms *and* an astute move in the political arena.

There were just a couple of statements in his paper which appeared to me to need some further exploration. His suggestion that fluency in the language and elementary literacy might be all that is required to teach very young children is one that I doubt our colleagues in Early Childhood Education would subscribe to!<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, their experience has shown them how intellectually and linguistically challenging it is to reach young children and sustain their interest. These teachers find themselves constantly being stretched to discover ways of communicating with 3-6 year olds that connect with the children's conceptual schemata and the language forms and functions which they control. Not only are young children difficult to teach well, it is also most important that we do not shy away from the challenge which they present. If we want minority children to be successful, we need to put our very best, highly-trained, most flexible teachers into the classes which these children attend on first entering school. I would suspect that, in this society at least, such teachers will require more than fluency in the language and elementary literacy skills.

The second area which I think merits additional comment refers to the distinction made, and maintained throughout the paper, between language taught as a subject and language used as a medium. I recognize the distinction, and indeed accept it as a valid one. Yet I think we should beware of taking for granted that a particular program maintains a consistent practice as one or the other. For example, French Immersion programs which are generally labelled as medium courses often contain quite long stretches of instruction which most of us would consider teaching the language-as-subject. A course in Ojibwa which I took some years ago, billed as a language-as-subject course, in fact did not teach many of the participants much Ojibwa. We did, however, learn a great deal about the culture and way of thinking that was expressed through that language from the instructor. In English as a second language — clearly even the title tells us that this is language-as-subject - nowadays we have come to realize that a more effective means of teaching language may well be to employ that language-as-medium. Even in teaching subject matter through the mother tongue to mother tongue users, the best of the work

from the United Kingdom would add a language-as-subject component (See , for example, Torbe and Medway 1981). In short, we may *think* we know what program does what but I suspect that most do a bit of both. That combination may be an even more effective approach than maintaining a consistent orientation as either language-as-subject or language-as-medium.

With specific reference to Heritage Languages, as Landon points out, there is a wide gap between public policy announcements of support for multiculturalism and antiracist education and the action required to translate that support into strong, mainstream programs. Heritage Language teacher education programs in Canada are no exception to this general neglect. Despite provincial legislation in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec which allows for the teaching of Heritage Languages within, or in addition to, the regular school day, there is no parallel provision of mandatory courses to prepare teachers for their assignments. The fact that any courses at all have been developed is due to the efforts and interest of a few teacher educators at Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, University of Western Ontario, University of Toronto, University of Ottawa, University of Montreal and Concordia University. Most courses are non-credit (National Heritage Language Resource Unit 1985).

A symposium on Heritage Language Education held in Saskatoon in 1981 which, among other issues, did examine teacher education, came up largely with statements of what might be. Sandra Venables, for example, from British Columbia made some useful suggestions about the leaves which Heritage Languages might take from the ESL book. As an ESL specialist, she recognized that ESL teacher education in the early 1970's was in about the same foetal state that Heritage Language teacher education is today (Cummins 1983).

Along with the recent establishment of a number of provincial Heritage Language associations and a National Heritage Language Resource Unit at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, I think a number of steps need to be taken to move toward the provision of better Heritage Language teacher education.

First of all, we need to bring together the parties who are most interested in seeing such provision become a reality. They need to share what has been done to date, but more importantly, they need to establish a national structure within which courses leading to formally recognized Heritage Language qualifications can be offered. One possible way of doing this would be to establish a national committee to set minimal standards for such items as content, number of contact hours and evaluation procedures and then for that same committee to review proposed

courses in terms of these standards.

Such a meeting has been planned for January 1988 — a national symposium to be held in Toronto and bringing together invitees from post-secondary institutions, school boards, leaders of ethnocultural communities and provincial Heritage Language Associations as well as federal and provincial policy makers. The aim is to discuss what kind of structure is required and to begin to put it in place (Cummins personal communication, July, 1987). In preparation for that meeting a draft, sample course based on the needs of Ontario Heritage Language teachers of Italian, Greek, Portuguese and Chinese has been prepared by the National Heritage Languages Resource Unit, in collaboration with local school boards, ethnocultural communities and the Ontario government. The course owes much to the Royal Society of Arts course which John Landon was primarily responsible for developing. The Ontario course consists of 100 hours of class time, half of which is envisaged as taking place in large group setting with the instruction and discussion conducted in English, and the other half in small groups conducted in the Heritage Language which the individual participant is preparing to teach. A practicum of about 30 hours is also proposed (National Heritage Language Resource Unit 1985).

Second, in terms of what is required to improve teacher education for Heritage Languages, though much care has been taken to involve ethnocultural representatives, a continuing need will be the *negotiation* of course content and method of delivery between the providers and consumers of this kind of course. Many Heritage Language teachers are firmly convinced that a teacher-directed class is not just the best, but is the only acceptable way to teach a language. New-fangled ideas about child-centred, discovery approach learning are often met with derision by teachers interested, say, in teaching children how to write Chinese characters. On the other hand, many Heritage Languages teachers appear to their Canadian-trained colleagues to use out-moded teaching techniques and there is considerable concern on the part of non-Heritage teachers that such methods will cause interference or confusion within the mind of a child. Though their concern is probably unjustified, I cannot deny the effect which the prejudice has on the status of Heritage Languages, and thus on their long-term contribution to the overall education of the children involved. I do think that Heritage Language teachers have much to gain from experimenting with experience-based, interactive language teaching methods. I also suspect that the way many of them teach at the present time transmits a cultural message which, in itself, is an important goal for that community. I would not want to force them to change their methods (even if I could); nor do I believe that giving teachers informa-

tion that “proves” certain practices are more effective than others is likely to result in them changing in the direction which I am suggesting. Long-term, far-reaching curriculum/methodological change has to come from deep within an individual (Kennedy 1987). Everything has to “feel” right. These kinds of changes — or even the willingness to consider and experiment with alternatives — can only come from teachers who have confidence in themselves and who work with teacher educators whose intent is to build on that confidence, not destroy it.

Third, I think the very term “Heritage” is part of the overall problem though I do not have a neat substitute which I think would be generally acceptable. “Heritage” is exclusionary even though that might not be intended. If you think of “Heritage” as being “Canada’s heritage” then everyone can be involved. Often, however, it is the individual’s heritage that is referred to and thus many feel left out. Heritage Language teacher education has a major role to play in encouraging Heritage Language teachers to seek every opportunity to mix native/non-native speakers of the language in the one class. There is no point in legislating that these classes should be open to all children, regardless of background or proficiency in the language, then failing to ensure that the teachers have the skills and resources to manage the mixed-level classes which will result.

“Heritage” is also — again not inevitably or always, but often — backward looking. The Heritage Language teacher, for example, who has emigrated from his/her native country in the 1960’s or early 1970’s, may be passing on a language which is already 20 years out of date. That same teacher may also have negative views regarding the different dialects which some children in the classes may speak and may approve even less of the way in which the language has developed within its new Canadian setting. Heritage Language teacher education has a tough job ahead in countering such attitudes. Yet, if Heritage Languages are to reach into the 21st century as a dynamic, forward-looking force, contributing to increased communication now and in the future, these are some of the difficult issues which have to be tackled.

Following on from this need for careful examination of what message Heritage Languages is going to give both its students and the wider Canadian community, in terms of curriculum and methods generally, I see a pressing, on-going need for need for negotiation both of *ends* — what do you want you child to be able to do in Arabic eventually? — and *means* — given the age, conceptual development, level of literacy development in any language and the present linguistic environments of the child, what are the best strategies we might use to obtain these ends? Heritage Language teacher education needs to help Heritage Language teachers ask and answer these kinds of means/ends questions.

As for how these teacher education programs should be delivered,

though I do agree that ultimately we want to see teachers of mother tongue, ESL/EFL, FSL/foreign languages and Heritage Languages engage in joint teacher education programs, I think in the short term, a priority for Heritage Languages (perhaps having changed its name!) is to find its own voice, work through some of its present problems, develop more exemplary programs and advertise them. Then the collaboration will start from a more equal footing.

Concurrent with this development, I see a crucial role for ESL teachers as mediators between Heritage Language and mother tongue/foreign language teaching. Increasingly, ESL teachers are becoming convinced that their job is more than that of teaching English to non-English speakers. They are beginning to see themselves as advocates for the whole child, viewing that child as language learner, as academic achiever and as social being. Gradually, they are accepting the need to attend to issues of stratification of achievement by ethnic group and to the damaging effects of institutional and personal racism on children's lives (Brumfit, Ellis and Levine 1985; Cummins in press). Heritage Language teachers hold an important key to ESL teacher effectiveness in this extended role. Interesting partnerships could be developed, with the Heritage teachers offering their insights into how well children use the Heritage Language and what cultural factors are important determiners of behaviour or goals within that language community. The Heritage teachers could play a crucial role in the initial educational assessment of children when they first enter a Canadian school. They could also be the first line of contact for many parents with the school system, and thus contribute to the much-needed involvement of parents in the total education of their children. In turn, ESL teachers could provide Heritage teachers with information about the curriculum areas considered important in Canadian education and the research on children's learning that has influenced the type and sequence of the learning activities designed for them. ESL teachers could also take the lead to ensure that Heritage teachers and the work which they and their students do are brought to the attention of all regular staff and the entire school community. During the next decade, when teaching jobs will not be quite so scarce in the urban areas worst hit in the 1970's by declining enrolment, perhaps ESL teachers will feel a little less threatened by Heritage Language teachers and a little more ready to move over and share with them the task of educating for Canada's future.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Landon made this suggestion in the first draft of his paper presented at the Seminars. When he revised his paper for publication, he revised this idea!

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Jean Handscombe is presently coordinator of ESL/D for the North York Board of Education. She has also held a supervisory role in North York's Heritage Languages program. Both of these positions indicate her interest in the provision of programs which further the education of minority students. She is a past president of both Ontario MESL and MESOL. In addition to her work in ESL/D teacher education within Toronto, she has enjoyed lecturing on language teaching and learning across Canada and the U.S. and in other parts of the world such as U.K., Mexico, Colombia, Hong Kong and Australia.