

# Language

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## Background

Every year, the Toronto region welcomes half of all immigrants who arrive in Canada. In the city of Toronto, about one in four of all children aged five to 16 were immigrants who arrived in the 1990s; in Markham, Richmond Hill, and Mississauga, newcomers make up about one-fifth of the school aged population (Statistics Canada, 2006). Therefore, it seems natural that the most common barrier immigrants and their children face in establishing themselves in Canada is that of language and culture. This barrier carries through in all areas of a newcomer's life, including the school.

Research suggests that when parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Olmstead & Rubin, 1982). However, some parents find it difficult to become involved in their children's schooling when they are not proficient in the language that is spoken in the school. Therefore, notices, report cards and parent-teacher interviews all become obstacles for parents rather than useful ways to keep them informed about their children's school and education. Teachers of immigrant children, as well as the newcomer parents themselves, no matter where they are from, find that language can create a challenge when it comes to parental involvement in schools.

In some cases, immigrant parents rely on their children to translate and interpret for them. These children are often referred to as language brokers, and are expected to assist their parents in complex and "adult-like situations" (McQuillan & Tse, 1995, Tse, 1996). It has been argued that such a technique can be detrimental to parent-teacher communication and to communication with the child. For example, when information is being sent from or to the school, the children may report only what they believe is relevant. As well, child language brokers may become overwhelmed by their responsibilities of translating, thus affecting academic achievement (Tse, 1996). Some parents are concerned that their children will lose respect for their authority and not view them as competent caregivers who can advocate on their behalf.

Teachers and school administrators try to communicate with and involve parents in the school community through a variety of techniques such as parent-teacher interviews, volunteering, and special events. However, many immigrant parents are hesitant to enter their children's school because they are not confident that they will have the linguistic skills and confidence to communicate with the various school personnel that they may encounter. As a result, having school information translated or interpreted into the language that the parents understand gives the parents access to critical information about their children's education.

## **Strategies for Dealing with Language Barriers**

### **The use of translated materials and interpretation**

- Ask bilingual parents for feedback about translated materials. Sometimes the translation may not be correct or may convey misinformation.
- Translate important signs, such as rules, procedures, and directions in the school into a variety of languages. Use graphics whenever possible. Graphics such as pictures, arrows, and other indicators are easier to understand than text for parents who lack alphabetic literacy.
- Avoid using educational jargon in your outgoing messages. Avoid using acronyms.
- Use bilingual staff to help you interpret or translate. However, it's important to note that the interpreting role needs to be properly recognized and rewarded. Furthermore, it is important that staff be provided with professional development opportunities to make sure they are properly trained (Martin-Jones & Saxena, 1995).
- Be aware of whom you ask to be an interpreter. Just because they speak the same language does not mean they are appropriate. In a British study, it was found that a number of Bangladeshi women initially refused to participate when an eighteen-year-old interpreter approached them. Once an older, married woman was found, they were more responsive (Blackledge, 2000).

### **Staffing and resources**

- Attempt to hire teaching staff that represent the communities and cultures of the school population.
- Stock the library with multilingual and dual language books. Encourage students and family members to come to the library and borrow books.
- Utilize the services provided by settlement workers as much as possible.
- Have signage in all major languages to create a welcoming environment for people of all linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Arrange for students to create bilingual newsletters and pamphlets describing the school and its events.
- Utilize websites including online translation sites.

### **Communication**

- The more familiarity and contact you have with families, the more trust is developed. Trust allows a relationship to grow.
- If you are having trouble communicating with family members, stay relaxed and respectful.
- Do not lose your temper. You will gain more respect if you demonstrate quiet but firm authority and knowledge.

## Annotated Bibliography

Ahearn, C., Childs-Bowen, D., Coady, M., Dickson, K., Heintz, C., Hughes, K., et al. (2002). *The diversity kit: An introductory resource for social change in education*. Retrieved January 22, 2007 from The Education Alliance at Brown University, Teaching Diverse Learners Web site: [http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/diversity\\_kit/index.shtml](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/diversity_kit/index.shtml)

Part two of the *Diversity Kit*, entitled "Culture" highlights the importance of the teacher's awareness of the student's culture and cultural identity. The fourth chapter in this section entitled "Culture, Family, and Community" explores how to cultivate collaboration with families and communities in order to support the learning of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Blackledge, A. (2000). *Literacy, power and social justice*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books Ltd.

This book discusses the importance of community language literacies in the lives of immigrant learners and their parents. Blackledge shows how full literacy can be achieved for minority language communities and brings together examples of good practice and recent research.

Flaitz, J. (2006). *Understanding your refugee and immigrant students: An educational, cultural, and linguistic guide*. Jackson TN: University of Michigan Press.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first one occupies almost two thirds of the book and focuses on the educational and cultural backgrounds of Brazil, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Cuba, Egypt, Haiti, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, People's Republic of China, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The second part provides some detail about the linguistic features of the languages adopted in these countries.

Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. St. Louis, MO: Danforth Foundation and Flint, MI: Mott (C. S.) Foundation.

This report presents a collection of research papers on the function and importance of family to a student's achievement and education in school and the community. The research is divided into two categories: (1) studies on programs and interventions from early childhood through high school, including school policy and (2) studies on family processes.

*Hints on working with new arrival refugee immigrant families at your library.* (n.d.). Retrieved January 20, 2006 from <http://www.kcls.org/clc/APP%20C-44%20Hints%20on%20working%20with%20new%20arrival.pdf>

This document was created by the King Country Library System for librarians. However, its content is useful for educators as it provides multiple strategies to prepare them to welcome and communicate with new arrival refugee immigrant families.

Illinois State Board of Education. (2003). *Involving immigrant and refugee families in their children's schools: Barriers, challenges, and successful strategies.* Retrieved January 16, 2007 from [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/bilingual/pdfs/involving\\_families.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/bilingual/pdfs/involving_families.pdf)

This report, written in 2003, represents effective strategies to assist schools to reach out to refugee and other immigrant parents.

Martin-Jones, M., & Saxena, M. (1995). Supporting or containing bilingualism? Policies, power asymmetries, and pedagogic practices in mainstream primary classrooms. In J. Tollefson (Ed.), *Power and inequality in language education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In *Power and Inequality in Language Education*, Tollefson assembles the work of twelve scholars who explore the relationship between language policy, wealth, and power. Their original research demonstrates how language planning and education reflect existing inequalities in the distribution of economic, political, and social power, and how language policy is used to obtain and maintain power.

McQuillan, J., & Tse, L. (1995). Child language brokering in linguistic minority communities: Effects on cultural interaction, cognition, and literacy. *Language and Education*, 9(3), 195-215.

This study examines the contexts of cultural interaction and the development of cognition and language among language minority children who brokered for their limited-English-speaking parents. Nine research participants who brokered for their parents as children were interviewed to determine the effects of brokering.

Olmstead, P. P., & Rubin, R. I. (1982). Linking parent behaviours to child achievement: Four evaluation studies from the parent education follow-through programs. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 8(3), 317-325.

Four evaluation studies concerning the relationship between parent behaviours/attitudes and child achievement are presented. In each study, parental data were obtained either by direct observation or through lengthy face-to-face interviews. In all four studies, significant relationships were found between parental measures and child achievement.

Settlement.Org. (2007, January 18). *Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.settlement.org/site/ED/>

The Education section of the Settlement.Org website provides valuable information for both educators and families. Information includes how to get a translator, procedures for enrolling children in school, links to information on where to go to improve English skills for parents, and a copy of the “Newcomers’ Guide to Education in Ontario.”

Statistics Canada. (2007, January 20). <http://www.statscan.ca>

Provides information such as community profiles, census data, summary tables, geographic data, and publications.

Toronto City Summit Alliance. (2007, January 12). *Issues facing our city: Economic integration of immigrant families*. Retrieved from [http://www.torontoalliance.ca/urban\\_challenges/economic\\_integration](http://www.torontoalliance.ca/urban_challenges/economic_integration)

This article is an important read for educators as it draws attention to some of the issues immigrant families face upon arriving in Canada. Specifically, this article addresses the barriers skilled immigrants face when trying to attain suitable employment that matches their qualifications.

Tse, L. (1996). Language brokering in linguistic minority communities: The case of Chinese- and Vietnamese-American students. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 20(3/4), 485-498.

The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence of language brokering among Chinese- and Vietnamese-American bilingual students and to explore the linguistic, cultural, and affective factors associated with brokering. The results suggest that nearly all of the research participants brokered for a variety of people in the home and at school, among many other settings, and that brokering has a number of affective and linguistic consequences for language minority students.

## Summary of the DVD Chapter

### **The DVD chapter on language addresses the following topics:**

- Parents' views on the language barrier
- Immigrant families' experiences accessing information about their children's schooling
- The school's role in helping parents understand the language of the school
- The role of the settlement worker
- Strategies to overcome language barriers

### **Questions to consider before viewing:**

- What languages are spoken in the homes of your students?
- What resources are available to help parents to become proficient in the language used by the school community? How are these resources made accessible to parents?
- What community organizations exist in the school neighbourhood to assist newcomer families settle into their new environment?
- Who has access to translated materials (newsletters, school policies, classroom books, etc.)?

### **Questions to consider after viewing:**

- How can school personnel establish and maintain communication with parents who are not proficient in the language used by the school?
- What can you do to ensure parents are receiving the appropriate information at all times?
- Is there an atmosphere of trust and approachability that encourages open lines of communication between you/your school and students' parents?
- What types of classroom activities can students take part in to help their parents with a low level of proficiency in English?