



Language Teaching in Canada



ID

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Position: English and French teacher

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Trading Places: Why participate in a teaching exchange?

The single most compelling factor contributing to my decision to participate in a teaching exchange was simply that it was possible to do it. Many friends outside the teaching profession envy our opportunity to explore another country, its language and culture for one year, with salary, and being able to return to our own jobs. Second language teachers in particular are in the unique position of perfecting their language skills, and taking home new ideas and approaches toward language learning (I have always maintained that putting ourselves in the role of a student makes us better teachers). The immediate motivating factor was hearing about the tremendous experiences of a colleague upon her return from an exchange between my school in Peterborough, Ontario, at St. Peter's Secondary School, and Belfast, Ireland. My first teaching exchange in Brittany, France, was very positive and fruitful for shedding light on important differences in pedagogy and philosophies of education between France and Canada. Four years later I was bitten by the bug again, and was lucky that in my new position in Toronto, both my principal at Malvern Collegiate and the Toronto District School Board agreed to my request to do it all over again. In August 2009, I embarked on my second teaching exchange, this time in Geneva, Switzerland. So, in addition to the insights unique to Switzerland this year has afforded me, it has been interesting to be able to make further comparisons with another European country.

Toronto

For the past two years I have been an English and French teacher at Malvern Collegiate, an academic high school in Toronto's fairly affluent Beaches area. This public school consistently ranks first in literacy scores across the city, and both the pride and pressures of that status are reflected in high enrolment in both literature and creative writing courses, and in the ongoing professional development of a strongly committed, collaborative English department. I also work in the Modern Languages Department, one of the few in the city to offer three streams in French as a second language: Core, Enriched and Immersion, so students can choose the degree of exposure to French during their four years in high school. In addition, like all Immersion schools in Canada, up to half of a student's course load can consist in courses taught in French. Typically, students in the Enriched or Immersion stream are motivated learners with parents who tend to be readily engaged in their education generally and in their academic standing specifically. But even those who continue in Core French past grade 9 (the last year it is compulsory) are almost always keen students with a special interest and or strong ability in languages.

Teaching French and English in a dynamic, multicultural city like Toronto with a population of over 3.4 million is facilitated by the visible benefits of learning a second language that serve as daily reminders: job ads often cite a second language as an asset, and well-paid positions in government, many of which are located in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver or Ottawa, require proficiency in our country's two official languages. To-

ronto's immigrant population is also highly motivated to acquire a working knowledge of one or both languages to improve their chances for employment, while their children can more easily integrate into Canadian society. In an effort to further encourage language learning, the Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes a student's heritage language as equivalent to one credit toward their high school diploma. In order to obtain this credit, students must demonstrate proficiency in the language (through written and oral exams) in accordance with exit standards set by the Education Ministry. In the 1980's, when more funding was available for Heritage languages, I taught Italian to children aged 8 to 12 in an after-school program; similar classes were taught across the city in Cantonese or Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, and Greek, according to the neighbourhood's demography.

Rural Ontario

I have also taught in Peterborough, Ontario, a small city of about 70,000, where rural life, a static economy and a dominant hockey culture (the city is home to an excellent hockey team whose players often go on to play at a professional level) eclipsed somewhat the necessity of French language learning, especially in non-immersion schools. Yet some of my students were applying for summer jobs in the newly established Provincial Ministry of the Environment, where French was considered an asset, and the Moderns department worked tirelessly to stay abreast of language programs and policies to enhance student learning. When my family lived in Vancouver, my son was taught French by his homeroom teacher who happened to know a little of the language (her own admission). In that city, teaching Canada's second official language was more haphazard, with no specialists at the elementary level, and most certainly this was due

to British Columbia's unique position within the Pacific Rim, hence language courses are offered in Mandarin or Cantonese.

Language programs and cultural diversity

Finally, whether you teach in Saskatoon, in the middle of the prairies, as my sister does, where government education policy emphasizes Native Indian languages and practices, or in the heart of Toronto's little Italy, in Canada, language teaching is closely tied to cultural identity. This sounds like a cliché until you understand Canada's emergence and development as a multicultural society, in which ethnicity, race and language are interwoven and diversity "works." Large cities like Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton and Vancouver promote it through festivals organized by various cultural groups and attended by thousands of people. This is not to say that cities like Victoria in Vancouver

Island do not also contain pockets of xenophobia; some Canadians there, for example, are ambivalent about that city's large immigrant Asian population, but I'm not sure that is not just a reflection of Islanders concerned with the ratio of land to numbers of people it can reasonably sustain. It seems to me that an important difference between Geneva, an "international city," and most major Canadian cities, is that our commitment to accepting the concept of multiculturalism, as opposed to simply tolerating other cultural groups within an already well-defined dominant culture, is founded on institutional policies and practices. Government funding helps newcomers access English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and our Faculties of Education, notably the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, provide excellent training in teaching ESL. Partnerships between various ethnic groups in the city and the Faculty of Education have led to the development of programs which emphasize the language skills necessary to survive and thrive in the



immigrants' adopted city. One of the most important objectives in language learning is to broaden a student's cultural horizons, promote acceptance of diversity and the responsibility of global citizenship. Our students should expect excellence and commitment to teaching, as well as the recognition that in this country, we are all from somewhere else first.

There is no doubt that resources in language teaching vary considerably from province to province, or even school to school (in Toronto our inner-city schools, or "high needs" schools suffer from lack of resources and high teacher turnover because of the challenging issues associated with socio-economic pressures on working-poor families); these are current problems all levels of government are trying to address. We are fortunate that the Canadian education system has placed a high priority on computers in the classroom, a valuable resource, and our teacher-librarians work closely with classroom teachers to develop skills in research and information technology. In the classroom, my challenges, after twenty years of teaching, relate to technology: when students are more apt to watch a movie or check their facebook status rather than read, it's crucial to stay current, link up with their world and find points of intersection. Interestingly, those same technologies are our biggest allies: in Geneva, my students are eager to learn English, the language of computers and music! My most satisfying rewards stem from the bridge we can provide to help students access that world, and the culture of technology.

Challenges and ongoing issues

In most Canadian provinces, Core French is a compulsory subject up to grade 9, or age 14, and it is introduced at age 5 or 6. Our challenge during the later adolescent years, from 12 to 14, is

to engage students who have no intention of pursuing the study of languages, and to encourage those who do, but may not have strong skills. Fortunately, recent research on the teenage brain and critical thinking has revealed two notions that are crucial for teachers: first, that all learning makes "imprints" on neurological pathways, reinforcing associations between and among sometimes disparate concepts. This means that when students understand that conjugating verbs in my class will also prepare their brain to perform other functions in another discipline area, they will be more likely to persevere; second, content is more easily absorbed and processed by the teenage brain in chunks of 12 to 15 minutes, immediately followed by a practice or application activity. Teachers are already benefitting from workshops on how the teenage brain functions, and bringing the implications of the new research into the classroom, to motivate reluctant learners of any subject area. Even when a language course is optional, however, I must still find ways to make my course relevant, and the obvious challenge is how to facilitate communication, how to ensure I provide frequent opportunities for my students to communicate, and just as important, eliciting the desire to do so. An important part of my job is to build community within the classroom so I can discover what is important to my students. They will be more willing to talk about topics they already know something about, and to take risks when speaking if I express a genuine readiness to know their world better.

Some ongoing issues in language education in Canada have been whether students with learning difficulties should be exempt from learning a second language, and to what extent we should emphasize oral fluency over reading and writing skills. The Ontario Ministry of Education's recent emphasis on the role of metacognition

in teaching will likely be key in addressing these issues. When we teach students to think about their thinking we dramatically improve their chances of success. We can teach them the language needed to articulate what strategies work for them and why, and to identify which strategies can be appropriate for different learning situations. Canadian courses of study place a high emphasis on speaking skills, and what it means to have a sense of audience and purpose; teachers are trained to evaluate these skills. One positive outcome of my exchange experience in Geneva has been the sharing of our practices in this kind of evaluation, and how we can encourage teachers to value oral fluency by making this skill figure more prominently as part of a student's overall mark. In Geneva I am regularly amazed and impressed by my students' command of grammar terms and rules (something many of my Toronto students lack) and at the same time, struck by their inhibitions regarding prolonged speaking or even brief presentations for their peers. But they are both capable and proud when they do accomplish what is for them, a daunting task, and seeing the look of joy (or relief) on their faces is one of my many rewards of being here!