

The History and Evolution of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Curriculum in Quebec

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Language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. As means of communicating values, beliefs and customs, it has an important social function and fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is the means by which culture and its traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved. Language is fundamental to identity.

<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/library/understanding/index-The.html>

From the above quotation, we can see how charged language is with meaning for its speakers. As a vehicle for values, beliefs, culture, identity and tradition, language can easily be, and often is, an object of struggle. Cummins (2000) has demonstrated how debates and power struggles are ongoing in contexts as varied as Japan, Israel and the United States over the right to, or the necessity for, bilingual education. On the other hand, from a more pragmatic perspective, language can often be regarded as a tool for socioeconomic development. This is happening, for example, in a developing country like China where learning English is seen as a key component for speeding up transfer of technology on a national scale and accessing job opportunities on a more personal dimension (Chau, 2005). However, in situations where the learning of a language is imposed by one group upon another, it can potentially become a tool for control and assimilation. Bourdieu's (1982) analysis of the use of standard French illustrates, for example, how even the imposition of a specific form of language can create possibilities of symbolic domination.

The teaching and learning of English in the province of Quebec, Canada, is situated at the confluence of these issues concerning cultural survival, identity and the desire for economic development. The development and implementation of the ESL curriculum illustrates how history, economic necessity and sociopolitical concerns work to influence the school curriculum. As Goodson (1995) has already noted, curriculum does not develop in a social or historical vacuum: Quebec's history, first as a French colony and subsequently, as a British colony, has greatly influenced the evolution of its educational system and has had a significant impact on language issues as well. Therefore, in the following sections, a retrospective of its language history, the development of its educational system and language debates arising from these antecedents will be elaborated upon before issues touching on the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) is discussed.

A brief retrospective of the French and English language in Quebec History

The province of Quebec was first founded as a colony of France in 1608. In this colony, known as Nouvelle France (New France), French was the principal language of law, daily life, trade and religion (Lacoursière, 1995). In terms of

educating the young, religious orders such as the Ursulines and the Jesuits were of paramount importance; in fact, the first schools in the territory were established and entirely staffed and run by these orders. This situation changed with the conquest of New France by the British in 1760. The territory was divided into Upper Canada, which was mainly populated by the English Protestants and Lower Canada, which consisted mainly of the French Catholics. After the conquest, French lost its official status. However, the British rulers were forced to make concessions to the local language in order to govern the territory. As Plourde, Duval and Georgeault (2000) note, until the 1830s, French speakers formed the majority of the population. Aware of this demographic fact and the difficulty of governing a population that spoke almost exclusively French, the British Crown, although anxious to convert their new subjects to the Protestant faith, allowed the continued practice of the Roman Catholic religion. The majority of the religious orders were also permitted to continue their activities, but were obliged to sever all ties with their European counterparts. However, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 stipulated that the Catholics were free to practice their faith only within the limits of British law (Lacoursière, Vaugeois & Provencher, 1970). The governor could and did intervene in the selection of church leaders at the episcopal and parish levels. In effect, the Catholic clergy and elites of French Canadian society formed an unspoken (and uneasy) pact with the British administrators: the former maintained their social roles and positions under the new regime, and served as the principal interlocutors between the population and the government. According to Voisine (2000), in the post-conquest epoch, it was not unusual to have priests explaining official government documents to their congregation during the Sunday sermon.

The secular leaders and clergy of the French community were active in the defense of their language, which they saw as being closely linked with the survival of racial and religious identity. They fought for the right of French Canadians to be educated in French within Catholic schools and seminaries. They also won the right to be heard and represented in French in the courts of law and to be judged under the French Civil Code, rather than British Common Law. However, in the major urban centers such as Montreal and Quebec, the French language was in constant contact with the English language. Major commercial interests were in the hands of the British, and immigration from the American colonies was increasing the numbers of English-speaking, Protestant residents in these areas. The British government hoped, with the combined effect of economic and demographic pressure, to begin assimilating the local population. The cohabitation of the two languages did start to affect the French spoken in Quebec. "Anglicisms" (words borrowed from English) began to creep into French,

much to the dismay of French purists. In many ways, this was viewed as another kind of invasion. Only this time, it was an assault on the language and culture (Homel, 1992). It is within this context that the particular variety of Quebec French, known as Quebecois, developed. Maurais (2003) remarks that when speakers of a minority language realize they do not speak a “pure” language, they might no longer value what they perceive to be a “debased” language. Therefore, it is more likely, and tempting, for them to adopt the dominant language as their own. This is compounded by the ideological discourse often accompanying social and economic domination, which regards the dominated group as intellectually inferior and less civilized.

In this hostile environment, many French speakers had no choice but to learn the English language for reasons of economic survival: if they wished to obtain employment in most companies, they had to know English. Although French was used out of necessity in government and to conduct legal affairs, it did not have any official status in the colony. It was not until the British North American Act of 1867 was passed that the French language regained its legal and political status as one of the two official languages in the Canadian confederation.

Development of the Quebec Educational System

The development of the education system in Quebec, from its days as a colony to its present day reality, has been marked by two major historical events: the passage of the British North American Act mentioned above and the advent of the Quiet Revolution.

The Historical Basis of the Confessional (Denominational) System

As mentioned earlier, in the colony of New France, schools and other educational institutions were almost exclusively run by the Catholic church and staffed by members of the clergy. In 1867, after the British conquest, the British North American Act designated education as the exclusive responsibility of the provinces. However, according to Milner (1984, p.28) the Protestant English-speaking minority, fearful of the threat of assimilation by a predominantly Catholic, French-speaking majority, insisted that a clause be included to limit the legislative powers of the province (Section 93 of the BNA). This act reinforced and protected the right of each group to be educated in their own faith and language. In concrete terms, this meant that separate school boards were set up for each denomination: Catholic school boards, which mainly used French as the language of administration and instruction and Protestant school boards, which principally used English as the language of administration and instruction. While this safeguarded the cultural, linguistic and religious elements in these two founding communities, it also created a system that would be extremely recalcitrant to change and reform.

This was especially true of the Catholic school boards. These were usually controlled by ultramontain (ultra-conservative) clergy. The Catholic Church at that period

glorified rural life and encouraged the French population to stay on farms in rural areas so as to shield themselves from the threat of Protestant assimilation. In these remote regions, education was more of a luxury than a necessity. The clergy also spoke out firmly against science and modern ideas. Even as late as in 1960, a school official once boasted that in Catholic schools, “You will find no traces in our schools of progressivism...the exaggerations of the Dewey school...would not apply to our French schools.” (Magnuson, p.95) In its ideology, education was a means of producing priests and an elite to guide the people. It was staunchly against state intervention in the realm of education. In the view of the Catholic Church, education was a question of moral and spiritual guidance: something too important to leave to the whims of politicians. Until 1956, free public secondary education was not available to the Quebec population and the primary schools did not or could not prepare their students for university. Although the British government passed a law in 1801 called the Royal Institution Law, which aimed to multiply free schools for the instruction of the young, the Cardinal Plessis had recommended that the Catholic parishes not take advantage of this law for fear that good Catholics would be converted to Protestantism (Galarneau, 2000). What this translated into, in practical terms, was that in the first half of the twentieth century, the French Catholic school sector was behind every other Canadian province in terms of spending per student, teacher training and school completion of students.

The English Protestant sector evolved in a different manner. Schools were nominally religious, and “stressed several aims, including a grounding in subject matter, development of character and preparation for citizenship.”(Magnuson, p. 95) The English Canadians were economically better off and had fewer children. Therefore, with more financial resources and a smaller school population to serve, the Protestant schools were able to offer “kindergartens, better equipped schools, higher qualified and better paid teachers, all of which added up to a higher pupil retention rate.”(p.79)

The great disparity between the two sectors would continue until the French Catholic sector was able to break out of the grip of the Catholic Church at the outset of the movement called the Quiet Revolution. The following section sets out to examine how it affected the educational system in Quebec.

The Quiet Revolution and its impact on Education in Quebec

The Quiet Revolution is a term used to designate a period in Quebec history, in the 60s when it underwent rapid political, economic and social changes (Lacoursière, *Histoire populaire du Québec*, v. 4, 1997). According to Porter (1965), from 1945 – 1960, the Quebec economy grew rapidly, becoming a major supplier of natural resources to the North American industrial economy. Politically, it was however, under the grip of the ideologically conservative Union Nationale party led by Maurice Duplessis. During the reign of Duplessis, the state did not actively participate in the

province's economy. Very few francophones formed part of the economic elite and, under the constant admonition of the church to remain poor and humble, many Quebecers resigned themselves to a fate of poverty and menial jobs. Raynauld (1961) found that at that time, English Canadians controlled 43% of the manufacturing sector, while foreign firms controlled 42% - the rest, a meager 15% was in the hands of French Canadians. However, when the Lesage government was voted into power in 1960, its slogan was "Maître chez nous" (Masters in our own land). The Liberals under Lesage were an actively interventionist government. As part of its effort to reassert the rights of Quebecers over their resources and have a say in the decisions concerning the economy, the state began to invest heavily in local companies and to encourage the establishment of small and medium enterprises. It instituted the separation of church and state, nationalized electricity production and reformed vital sectors of the economy such as public services, health and education. (Those interested can watch Quebec inc. - La petite histoire d'une grande révolution a documentary by Gil Courtemanche (2003) where key actors describe the momentous events of the period.)

This period also saw the flowering of a latent sentiment among the French Quebecers that they constituted a nation, a people, in their own right. Based on an ethnic sense of identity grounded in a common history and language, those who believed in this idea claimed the necessity of making the province an independent country, where Quebecers could live, work and study in French. In place of former feelings of shame and embarrassment at the particular variety and dialect of French that was spoken in Quebec, artists, singers and writers proudly began using Québécois (Quebec French) in literature, popular songs and theatre. These sentiments of nationalism would lead to the founding of a new party on the political landscape, the Parti Québécois (translated as the Quebecer's Party, commonly known as the PQ) which would actively fight for the independence of Quebec from the rest of Canada. This party was elected to power in 1976 and would bring in key legislation to promote the use of French in all arenas of work and public life.

Along with these changes, came demands from concerned politicians, intellectuals and parents for a review of the educational system. The first ever Ministry of Education in Quebec [MEQ] was set up under the Liberal Lesage government despite the protests of religious authorities. The Parent Commission, which was set up to study the state of education and did so from 1961 to 1966, produced five reports which would be crucial for the new direction which education would take in Quebec (Smith & Donahue, 1999). One of their recommendations was the establishment of provincial guidelines for the teaching of subjects in school in 1971. This was, in effect, the precursor of the present Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ) programmes which define the general, overall orientation of education and also the content and structures of specific subjects as well.

Development of the formal ESL programme in Quebec

Prior to the curriculum guidelines of 1971, the teaching of English in Quebec was based on the Grammar Translation Method (Little, 1994), which emphasised rote memorization, grammar rules and vocabulary as well as the translation of written texts. Moreover, due to the historical issues surrounding the survival of the French language and culture, the teaching and learning of the English language met with resistance in the French community: "English was also taught but with mixed emotions. It was deemed necessary on economic grounds but was regarded with suspicion on ideological grounds..." (Magnuson, 1980; p.52)

The first ESL curriculum issued in 1971 by the MEQ was strongly influenced by the Audiolingual Approach. It stressed mastery of grammar and syntactic rules as well as the development of good language habits. Intended as a loose set of guidelines, it did not lead to satisfactory results for learners. The "general inability of pupils to communicate effectively outside the classroom" and "the community's clear desire for more pertinent and detailed programs" were cited as the underlying reasons for a new version of the ESL programme in 1981 (MEQ ESL Elementary school curriculum, p. 13). More structured and rigorous than its predecessor, it imposed a minimum core of basic knowledge and skills that pupils were supposed to have acquired on completion of elementary school. In this version of the ESL curriculum, which was largely inspired by the communicative approach, English learning was situated in the local and North American context. At the elementary level for example, its general overall aim was to foster positive attitudes and openness towards English and English speakers in the students' environment. More specifically, its focus was on communicative competence. Therefore, teachers were advised to emphasis meaning rather than form. Oral performance took predominance over written production, but nonetheless, students were expected to acquire listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In the programme, each skill was subdivided into specific objectives to be attained for each skill at a specific grade. (See Appendix 1 for sample of skills and objectives.) In some schools, at the request of parents anxious to ensure that their children would master English, immersion programs were set up to speed up the learning process. (The interest in immersion programs was sparked by research in second language learning which suggested that children learn another language faster and better in naturalistic, language rich environments) This ESL curriculum served as the basis for ESL teachers in elementary and secondary until a new curriculum was proposed in the year 2000 by the Quebec Education Ministry under the auspices of an educational reform called "La Grande Réforme".

La Grande Réforme

La Grande Réforme is an ambitious school reformation project which aims to equip the youth of Quebec with the necessary knowledge, social and cognitive competencies¹ to become active, aware citizens of Quebec society and of the

world. A series of reports on the state of education paved the way for this reform (See The Quebec Education Program [QEP], MEQ, 2000, p.3).

The reform recommends that as many connections as possible should also be made between different cycles and levels of education. As such, learning targets are defined as subject competencies and also cross-curricular competencies. The focus of student learning should not only be on the acquisition of knowledge, but also on how that knowledge can be used in real life as well. Learning and evaluation is learner centred. The role of teachers is clearly stated as being that of mediators between knowledge and students. Teachers are in class to provide a stimulating learning environment. They should also be there to motivate, encourage, guide and support students at all stages of their learning process. Students are the principal agents of their learning. Parents are viewed as partners of teachers and the school in the endeavour to educate children. Teachers are encouraged to communicate with parents and to keep them informed about what is happening in classrooms.

It could be said then that the new reform attempts to make the process of learning more permeable, inter-related and therefore, more coherent for students across grades and subjects.

La Grande Réforme vis-à-vis the ESL Curriculum

Following the changes affected by La Grande Réforme, students will have one more year of ESL at elementary level because ESL instruction begins in Grade Three rather than in Grade Four as was the case in the past. The transformation which the ESL curriculum has undergone under the present reform however is not one which involves drastic change. The new curriculum² grafts onto the communicative approach, already present in the previous curriculum, other approaches based on cognitive psychology and social constructivism. However, while meaning and notions or functions were formerly taught implicitly, the present ESL programme recommends that the semantic and syntactic structure of English be made explicit to the learner (See Appendix 2, p. 102 of QEP English as a Second Language curriculum guidelines). The programme also insists that the English language be presented to learners in varied forms, media and contexts representative of the linguistic and cultural environments where English is used. The use of computers as a teaching tool is highly recommended in order to familiarize students with a technological, multimedia environment. The new programme places more emphasis on developing the capacity of understanding written texts and being able to produce written texts than its predecessor. In this new programme, the use of French, the first language of the majority of learners in Quebec, in the classroom is clearly situated: “teachers should use it solely as a means of providing corrective feedback and to make students reflect on their learning”(The QEP, 2000, p.153) It also explicitly recommends that since ESL starts only at Grade Three, teachers should try to draw upon the cognitive capacities that learners have already acquired in their native language, French, and other subjects.

The three essential competencies which the new programme targets are the ability to:

- 1) interact orally in English
- 2) reinvest understanding of oral and written texts
- 3) write appropriate texts.

From the brief summary of the new ESL programme, it could be said that for teachers and learners, it represents an expansion and re-orientation of the ESL programme formerly in place.

Best practice versus political concerns

The descriptions given above of the constant changes that the ESL curriculum has undergone in Quebec since the inception of its Ministry of Education, indicate that teaching guidelines and recommendations, in terms of methodology, have often kept pace with developments of what can be considered ‘best practice’ in language pedagogy. These best practices are often derived from the research done in the field of linguistics and applied linguistics. However, apart from methodology and pedagogy, as Sarkar (2005) has noted, questions around the teaching of ESL in schools continue to attract intense local attention because they are linked to linguistic issues the continued survival of the French language in the province of Quebec. The prevailing policy concerning the ESL curriculum is also subject to shift according to the political party in power at a specific time.

Language issues surrounding French in Quebec

“Le Québec est un îlot de français entouré par une mer d’anglais”. The statement can literally be translated as, “Quebec is an island of French surrounded by a sea of English”. Its colonial history and geographic location has placed Quebec in a rather perplexing situation. MacMillan (1998) describes the case of Quebec in the following manner: “a local majority language perceived to be perpetually threatened by the language of its minority” (p.4). This is because, despite being a majority within the province, French speakers are a minority in Canada, constituting 25% of its population. In Canada, both French and English are recognised as official languages under its constitutional act. However, Quebec is the only predominantly French-speaking (francophone) province in Canada. It is also the only geographic area in North America whose population officially uses a language other than English in its public institutions such as parliament, courts, medical establishments, schools and so on. The use of French in private and public life has continued despite the fact that Quebec became a British colony in 1763. On the other hand, Maurais (2003), quoting the Conseil de la langue française (Council for French Language in Quebec), emphasizes that of Canada’s two official languages, only French is threatened, even in Québec...[Conseil, 1988: 21 & 25]

Why do francophones (French speakers in Quebec terminology) feel that there is a threat to the continued survival of French, in spite of language laws such as the French Language Charter (commonly known as Bill 101) that make the use of French mandatory on public signs, in the

delivery of public services and in schools? The historical factor cannot be underestimated – although the British North American Act (BNA) of 1867 guaranteed separate school systems for French and English speaking communities, the balance of political and economic power has definitely been in favour of the latter community. Spolsky (2004) has pointed that up until the early 1960s, in Montreal there was an apparent “imbalance between the widespread public use of English in signs and large stores, and the fact that 80 percent of the population spoke French.”(p. 5). Other reasons are the proximity of neighbouring Canadian provinces such as Ontario and even more importantly, the economic weight and cultural influence of the United States. Kachru (1981) discusses the growing impact of American English and mentions how it is slowly becoming the world’s language. The linguistic pull towards American English is even more intense for Quebec since it is located just across the US border and is directly subject not only to the economic imperatives of trade with the US (outside Canada, the United States is, in fact, Quebec’s biggest trading partner) but also the cultural influence of American television, radio, film, advertising and so on. These are powerful factors that work towards assimilation of francophones into a linguistic environment which is principally English.

From the 60s onwards, the arrival of new immigrants who have neither French nor English as their mother tongue (the term, allophones, is usually used in Quebec to describe this group) has constituted another force that threatens to change the linguistic balance within the province. Plourde (1988) gives us the example of St-Leonard, a neighbourhood in the city of Montreal. Until the early sixties, 99% of the residents of St-Leonard were francophones. By the end of that decade, the population had grown tenfold, but the proportion of francophones had dropped to 60%. Before the implementation of Bill 101, many immigrant parents chose to send their children first to bilingual primary school and then eventually to English secondary schools and colleges. As a result, these children would eventually be integrated into the anglophone (English-speaking) community. They did so because they considered English to be a key component to achieving success in North America. Globalization is another element which impacts on the survival of French in Quebec. According to Maurais (2003), globalization opens the door to linguistic domination: the fear is that, “...economic globalization will lead to the hegemony of a single language – English to be precise.”(p.92). Rassool (2000), in speaking of ‘world languages’, of which English is probably the foremost in this age of media and technology, comments on the hegemonic value and powerful signification of , “the ubiquity of American films and the global marketing of English language-based popular culture [and]...the dominance throughout the world of English broadcasts via cultural sites such as the BBC World Service, CNN Television, and the Voice of America.”(p.58). Although French itself, due to France’s colonial past, might be considered a world language (albeit on the wane), Ager (1999) posits that linguistic insecurity, based on the belief that the French language was threatened both within the country and also from without, is the rationale that drives the

agenda of language-management policies in France; this also seems to be the case in Quebec.

In Quebec issues of language are very closely tied to the concept of ethnic/racial identity and nationhood as well. René Levesque, one of the most influential figures in the Quebec nationalist movement had once commented that “everything else springs from the fact that Quebecers speak French”. British documents of the post –conquest period speak about the French-Canadian race and the English race. Influential public figures in Quebec, such as Lionel Groulx, continued to use this term at the turn of the twentieth century. In recent years however, the term race has been replaced by the notion of a people (people, in French) and there have been attempts to distance movements that promote French-use from arguments based on the racial concept. Instead, organisations that support the maintenance and increased use of French in schooling and public life now tend to focus their arguments around the building of a civic nation (CEQ [Quebec Teacher’s Union], 1992). Ager(1999) summarises the three motives that characterize language policy formulated around the world in the following manner: “insecurity or fear of others, identity or pride in one’s own community, and the creation or projection of an image, or the desire to ensure that others adopt or at least recognise the force of that identity.” (p.8)

These concerns tend to manifest themselves mainly in three ways when controversies regarding the ESL curriculum and its implementation arise.

Debates surrounding the teaching and learning of ESL

The first of these involves the question of when ESL courses should first be introduced in school. Under the 1971 and 1981 curriculum guidelines, students started learning ESL at Grade Four and continued until Grade Eleven. However, as many parents had voiced dissatisfaction over their children’s lack of proficiency in English after terminating secondary school, ESL starts at Grade Three under the reformed curriculum. At the very start of the reform in 2000, the PQ Minister of Education, Louise Beaudoin, the Minister of Education, was petitioned to start the teaching of ESL to francophones and allophones in Grade One. There is some evidence that “younger is better”, especially when it comes to acquiring a native-like accent, in the research on language acquisition (Oyama, 1976; Thompson, 1991). The Minister, however, argued that while there was no doubt that Quebec should improve its teaching of English as a Second Language, but this could not be at the expense of young francophones who had to master their mother tongues first (The Gazette, August 15, 2000). She seemed to be drawing upon theories such as those proposed by Laponce (1987) that suggest it is not beneficial, if not actually harmful, to the linguistic development and identity formation of the child to learn a second language at too early an age. A second language should be learned after mastery of the first language had been thoroughly established. He postulates that if two languages are learned simultaneously, a conflict of ethnic identity results, leading to tensions between language and social roles. If neither of the languages becomes dominant, the intellectual development of the child

could be slowed down. In 2002, however, the Liberal Party came to power. The Liberal Minister of Education, Pierre Reid, swung in the opposite direction: in fact, raised an outcry from concerned parents and teachers when he announced that the planned implementation of ESL courses beginning at Grade One (Le Devoir, 2003) would have to be postponed to 2004 due to budgetary constraints.

The second major issue concerns the modality of ESL courses offered. In most schools in the French system, children receive one hour of ESL instruction per week at the primary level. This hour is often broken into two thirty-minute periods. At the secondary level, students can receive between 150 to 200 minutes of ESL instruction weekly. This method of spreading out instructional time over a long period is often called the “dripfeed” method. On the other hand, more and more parents, concerned that their children will not be competitive on the North American job market without mastering English, are pressuring the Quebec government to run more intensive ESL or immersion programs. These two alternative modalities of delivering ESL to students allow children to experience a part of their school year entirely in English, while being schooled exclusively in French for the rest of the year. At present, only 10% of French school boards offer a special Intensive ESL program for Grade Six students.

Finally, there is the issue of who can have access to publicly funded schooling in English. Under the Quebec French Language Charter, which was enacted in 1977, Bill 101, English public schools could only enrol children who had at least one parent who had gone to school in English at primary level in Quebec or Canada. This effectively excluded the majority of immigrants and French mother tongue speakers from access to an education in English. The parents from these groups have to send their children to private school if they wish their children to be schooled in English. This is seen by certain parents as discriminatory and unconstitutional – Quebec anglophones have the right to choose between English or French schools, but francophone parents do not. They accused the state of practicing what Gaarder [as cited in Bratt Paulston (1981)] has labeled “elitist bilingualism”. This kind of bilingualism is a mark of prestige among the intellectuals and learned in many societies, and involves choice. In Quebec, francophone parents who have the means can send their children to language camps, private lessons or summer school abroad in order to learn English, the language of success and opportunity. The less financially privileged on the other hand, must usually content themselves with the dripfeed ESL courses available in public schools. A group of francophone parents took their case up to the Supreme Court of Canada, which ruled that the charter was overly rigid, but constitutional (The Globe and Mail, 2005).

At question here is whether the right to educate one’s own children in the language of choice is an individual right or a collective right: should personal choice and individual interest in social mobility take precedence over the survival of a community’s ancestral language? According to Larivée (2003), due to the competitive nature of languages in contact, inherent in the possibility of choice is conflict and tension

because one person’s choice can lead to denial of opportunity for another. Furthermore, for an entire community, the corollary/consequences of such choices can mean linguistic assimilation or linguistic and cultural survival. Witte and Van Verhoven (1999) discuss the dilemma that arises in such situations:

“According to the supporter of the dominant language group, the process should certainly not be inhibited. Every individual should have the right and opportunity to work his way up and become integrated in the language group with the greatest prestige, which functions best at a social level...For those who do not project their cultural identity solely on language, there is some loss of language, but no loss of identity. For those who support the view that “the language is the people” this process of the shift in language does result in internal conflicts for the individuals concerned and also to serious problems of identity.” (p.21)

The same question is compounded for members of non-anglophone or non-francophone immigrant communities, although it could be argued that the element of identity loss comes into play regardless of whether they opt for English or French. As MacMillan (1998) has remarked, “rights to official (French and English) language minority education are properly designated as fundamental because they are so designated in the [Canadian] Charter [of Rights and Freedoms]. The precise status of other languages remains unclear.” (p.48) This constitutional bilingualism stands in stark contrast to the linguistic reality of young allophones living in Montreal, a multi-ethnic, multilingual, pluricultural metropolis of Quebec. Since Quebec, like the rest of Canada, relies heavily on immigration to maintain its population base, the choices that these new citizens make will be crucial in determining the future outcome of these linguistic debates.

Conclusion

From the description and discussion of the ESL curriculum in Quebec, it is evident that the complex legacy of a colonial past continues to weigh heavily in the present educational context. The teaching and learning of the English language, which is at once the language of colonization and assimilation as well as the key to economic opportunity in the global economy, provokes intense reactions, within the francophone community. As the contemporary demographic, socio-economic and political landscapes continue to change, it is almost a certainty that the ongoing dialogue and contest over the “when”, “how” and “how much” of teaching ESL in Quebec schools will continue to evolve.

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¹ A competency is defined as a set of behaviours based on the mobilization and effective use of a set of resources (QEP, p.5)

² The description given applies only to the ESL programme for Cycle One, Two and Three of the Elementary school. At the time of writing, the ESL programme for secondary schools had not been finalised yet.