

When Two Languages Collide: French Cultural Assimilation and English as a Second Language (ESL) Instruction in Canada

Michael T. R. Madill

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), Seoul, South Korea

Abstract

The learning environment in regard to English as a Second Language (ESL) is becoming increasingly complex in its cultural makeup. New languages are being introduced and older ones are becoming extinct. What stays consistent is the fact that in bilingual countries such as Canada, cultural ideologies are more difficult to acquire in contrast to monolingual countries. Such places have languages that are influenced by each other and the new learner must recognize the importance of learning the cultural characteristics of both languages in order to understand the identity of the nation. It is this important dual acculturation ideology and its influence on ESL students' language development that is being explored in this examination of gaining French cultural competence in the Canadian bilingual ESL school environment.

Introduction

The evolution of the many varieties of English has been filled with events that have increased its significance on a worldwide stage. Such things as migration, colonization, globalization, and the technological revolution are only a few examples that have changed the significance of the language we know of today. It is from these, and many other language development milestones, that people from all over the world are recognizing the significance of learning English. This has sparked an increase in learning initiatives and this will continue for some time to come.

To speak this language in an English speaking country will better enable non-native speakers to conduct business, gain meaningful employment, go to better schools, understand national news, and can even lead to more social status in some situations. For example, Guo and Beckett (2007) state that "English has become the dominant global language of communication, business, aviation, entertainment, diplomacy and the Internet" (Guo & Beckett, p.117). This language has become the Lingua Franca and its influence covers many areas of the globe. This is reinforced as Kachru and Nelson (2001) state that "There is little question that English is the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known" (Kachru & Nelson, p.1). This is not a trend that is going to fade away anytime soon and countries are becoming more aware of this language movement. Some non-native speakers see it as a competitive advantage that will increase global commerce while others see it as a ticket to a higher quality of life.

Not only do ESL students have to learn the new language, but they also need to acquire the important and deeply embedded cultural characteristics attributed to the specific environment in which they are learning. Such things as body gestures, cultural cues,

stereotypes, and general ways of life are very important in gaining meaningful knowledge of the country in question and the associated use of culture in speaking the language.

Thus, it is very important to immerse new ESL learners in the culture behind a language as “success in L2 acquisition depends on the degree of social and psychological distance between the learner and the target language and culture” (Singleton, 2005, p. 278).

Teachers and instructors in ESL environments need to get students motivated to learn the new language and its underlying culture. Closing the gap between the student’s current cultural beliefs and the new ideologies will increase overall retention and comprehension.

French Canadian Acculturation

It must be noted that the way in which a student learns a new language is based on their underlying cultural background and beliefs, which have been instilled from their first language. Lessons based on such things as hand gestures and body posture are some methods that teachers are using today to teach culture in the ESL classroom. This is important because, all too often, communication can occur without saying any words at all using non-verbal communication. To further illustrate this point, Anisimova (n.d.) states:

Of utmost importance has been the awareness of culturally-determined patterns of non-verbal communication (as an important part of Strategic Competence) such as gesture, posture, and facial expression. Studies have shown these non-verbal elements to be the most culturally-influenced part of behavior, for one thing because non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable in another (p.1).

This is just one of the many hurdles that new speakers have when they begin their English language journey in an ESL environment. Knowledge of these cultural characteristics will strengthen the all-important foundational understanding behind the new language.

It is the fundamental culture or cultures entrenched in each country that helps form the languages we know of today. It is sometimes just as difficult gaining an understanding of the new culture as it is learning the associated language. This becomes even more apparent when we look at cases where two or more languages might be widely used within a country. For instance, in Canada there are two official languages that have played a vital role in the development of its identity and culture since they formed as a nation. The French Canadian culture is embedded into Canadian culture, thus understanding its significance will greatly increase comprehension and self-confidence among new ESL students. They will understand how Canadian English functions; given they learn the underlying cultural characteristics.

It is from this realization that we could conclude that it would be more difficult to learn a new language in an ESL environment where more than one official language is spoken. This is due to the cultural variations between the two vernaculars. Not only do you have to learn the cultural characteristics of one language, but also the culture of the contrasting

language, which may be based on different values and belief systems. This is the case in Canada, and it would be more difficult to learn English and French cultural characteristics than it would be in a monolingual country. Nevertheless, it is necessary in order to develop a balanced cultural awareness of this unique dual language relationship in Canada.

When a student understands both sides of the cultural equilibrium, they will have higher confidence levels because “Self-confidence...develops as a result of positive experiences in the context of the second language and serves to motivate individuals to learn the second language” (Pierce, 1995, p. 11). By successfully incorporating the dual-cultural aspects of Canada into ESL lessons in an enthusiastic manner, the student will become motivated and confident to pursue their language studies and thus have higher success rates. This is very important in Canadian ESL environments and needs much more investigation in order to truly understand how much cultural assimilation is required by new language learners in order to have a better understanding of Canadian English.

From this we can introduce a few ways in which French Canadian culture has played a major role in the development of the Canadian identity. The first is the importance of bilingualism within Canada and the way it has shaped the diversity of Canadians. Starting at an early age, students are taught Canadian French and its underlying cultural significance. Canada is seen as a country of two languages, and to speak English and French is the goal of many educational settings around the nation. In fact, there are many parents throughout the country who choose to send their children to French immersion schools where they learn all subjects in French with only a few classes in English. This is a unique part of Canada’s history and an important cultural characteristic of how the two languages operate together.

The second example is how the language has been accepted within Canada and how the country accepts both vernaculars as their own. Many Canadians know and can sing the Canadian national anthem in both French and English. Throughout the nation, there are many bilingual road signs and all product labeling is required by law to be in English and French. This clearly shows its cultural significance and penetration as it is instilled in the population. Even sports have this dual language assimilation as many hockey games are aired in both English and French around the nation, thus showing the acceptance of having a dual language society and how it is embedded into the Canadian way of life.

Conclusion

There are many nations around the world that have the unique situation where there are two or more official languages. This creates an interesting condition for new language learners as they have to understand two cultural aspects of the country instead of just one. They need to gain an understanding of why there might be two official languages and how they both influence each other. This can be confusing and can sometimes act as a deterrent in understanding how both cultures affect the identity of the nation.

To remedy this situation, Canadian ESL instruction should be geared towards identifying the significance that both languages play in the development of Canadian culture and how much the language is intertwined with elements from French and English. To successfully acculturate new learners into the bilingual cultural diversity within a nation will better influence overall comprehension and social identity.

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