

# The Role of Plurilingual Pedagogy in Affirming Immigrants' Identities in Canada

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**Background and Purpose:** This perspective article supports the need of an alternative plurilingual model to teaching languages to assert immigrants' identities in Canada.

**Approach:** It examines the interplay between language and identity in immigration contexts, and investigates current language teaching models, including limitations, adopted in Canada. Although the article discusses the case of Quebec where the official language is French, it is not limited or restricted to a specific context. The case of Quebec is only given as an example to illustrate potential challenges immigrants might face in Canada.

**Results and Implication:** This article sheds light on advantageous future research orientations pertaining to immigrants' identities in the language learning process. It can also inform language policies and pedagogies in Canada and other immigration contexts.

**Keywords:** identities, immigrants, pluricultural competence, plurilingual competence, plurilingual pedagogy

## Introduction

As immigrants account for over 80% of the Canadian population growth, Canada is becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural (Statistics Canada<sup>1</sup>, 2020). Despite its official bilingual (French and English) policies, at least at the federal level, educational institutions are still biased towards a monolingual approach to language teaching (Kiernan, 2011).

Immigrants contribute to Canada's multilingualism and cultural diversity by bringing in new languages, ideas and customs (Government of Canada<sup>2</sup>, 2019). To increase their integration in different aspects of the Canadian society, immigrants seek to improve their English and French language skills, Canada's official languages. However, research has repeatedly shown that current language instruction to immigrants disregard their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Li & Sah, 2019) and can impede immigrants' linguistic and cultural identities, as language and culture are closely tied (Moore, 2019). Without recognition of

their linguistic and cultural repertoire, immigrants lose the connection to their cultural groups and ultimately struggle to develop the official languages in the new country (Sterzuk & Shin, 2021). Thus, Canada's current language learning instruction to immigrants risk leading to poorer results – counter to the goal of immigrant integration.

An alternative model of language teaching that holds significant potential regarding preserving and affirming immigrants' identities is *plurilingualism*. The latter perceives language learners as social agents with proficiency in different languages and experiences in other cultures (CEFRCV<sup>3</sup>, CoE, 2020). Although a vast body of research highlights the positive impact of plurilingualism on student identity (e.g., Beacco, 2005; Piccardo, 2019; Takeda, 2021), there is a lack of research on how it can support adult immigrant populations in Canada. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) examine the interplay between language and immigrants' identities, (2) examine current language teaching models and practices for immigrants and identify limitations, and (3) propose plurilingual pedagogy as an alternative language teaching model that can empower immigrants' identities.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2020). Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-re-censement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016010/98-200-x2016010-eng.cfm#:text=In%202016%2C%202.4%25%20of%20Canadians,of%20these%20languages%20at%20home>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada. (2019). 2020 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2020.html>

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment-Companion volume with new descriptors. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

### The Nexus of Language and Identity in Immigration Trajectories

Although different terms (i.e., immigration, migration, and emigration) exist to describe human movements from one place in the world to another, I use *migration* in this section as an encompassing term to transnational human movements. I do so in consistency with the terminology of the sources cited below.

Language is intrinsic to the construction, validation, and expression of identity (Block, 2010; Karam, 2018). In the case of migrants, identity is often reshaped and rebuilt during migration journeys (Scuzzarello & Carlson, 2019). It is a site of struggle as migrants negotiate identity through language and social interactions (Darvin & Norton, 2015), and navigate relevant power dynamics that are often implicated in language (Conley et al., 2019). In other words, the way migrants use language is often a reflection of how they see themselves and how they want others to perceive them. It is crucial, then, not only to understand the concept of identity but also to develop a clear understanding of migrant identity in particular, including its different components and the different variables that influence its formation. Of the various definitions of identity, I adopt the following by Tracy and Robles (2014): “Identities are best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation and as dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion or the next. Identities are social categories and are personal and unique” (p. 21). In other words, identities are a plural concept that are embodied in a range of categories such as gender, ethnicity, and religion, and are discursively performed through interactions (Zhu Hua, 2017). The concept of identity recognizes that the “self” cannot exist without the “other” and hence acknowledges the existence of the “other” (Hegel, 1807, 2007).

In the context of mobility, migrants negotiate their identities by adopting different strategies, all of which influence their use of languages. At the same time, identities in mobility entail that their holders manage memberships to groups by either ascribing them to others, claiming them for themselves or resisting memberships assigned by others (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Rampton, 2017). In this sense, membership illustrates how migrants interact with and react to a set of social and cultural values and practices in both the source and the host countries. However, some scholars (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019; Yazan and Rudolph, 2018) challenge description of identity into binary dichotomies, such as marginal or liminal,

native or non-native, source country or host country. They argue that recent and mainly technological developments allow individuals, in general, and migrants to be “here” and “there” at the same time; this creates a dual identity (or more) that transcends the common binary categorization of identity. Other scholars (Lorente & Tupas, 2013; Tupas, 2019) refute the celebratory tone used to describe linguistic and cultural hybridity. They believe that there is a hidden neoliberal economic agenda that celebrates hybridity to hide societal inequalities. They add that such exaggeration of the positive impact of hybridity aims to overlook existing issues of authenticity (i.e., accepting one “correct” language variety), legitimacy (i.e., right to speak), power struggles and tensions between structure and migrants’ agency. Among these issues of inequality is the notion of class (social and economic) that plays an important role in the migration process; however, it is often overlooked in research about migration, identity, and language (Block & Corona, 2019).

In relation to language, the role of language has become more salient now that language is used as a medium to mediate space and time diffusion (Emenanjo, 2016). Although migration is not a new experience, it has recently attracted considerable attention due to new developments (i.e., social, technological, geopolitical) that have made it easier not only for people to cross boundaries, but also for texts, languages, and semiotic resources (Pennycook, 2018). In fact, these developments provide conveniences that intensify *the space and time compression* (Altvater, 1989; Harvey, 1990, 2005; Virilio, 2012). That is, contemporary life presents new phenomena (i.e., the internet) that can alter the qualities of and relationship between space and time. For example, I, who live in Quebec, Canada, can chat, send voice messages and videocall with my sister who is in Paris,

France, and my friends in Lebanon, at any time. While internet is the tool, language is the medium to compress many distinct temporal-spatial geographical locations.

In addition, globalization has heightened the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity of societies all over the world (Rowntree et al., 2015), and scholars, mainly in the field of sociology, have coined different terms to describe emerging hybrid and dynamic forms of communities. Terms such as “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007, 2019), “homogeneity paradigm” (Keskinen et al., 2019), “diaspora” (Brubaker, 2005; Shuval, 2002), and “cosmopolitanism” (Benhabib, 2008; Vertovec &

Cohen, 2002) have been used to explain evolving forms of communities. Paralleling the *mobility construct* in sociology discussed above, applied linguists have also started talking about a *multilingual construct* to highlight a hybrid and unbounded approach to languages that is representative of how migrants utilize different linguistic and communicative repertoires in different mobile settings (Canagarajah, 2020). Terms such as “translanguaging” (García 2009; García & Orthegey, 2020), “plurilingualism” (CEFR; Council of Europe [CoE], 2001; CEFRCV<sup>5</sup>, CoE, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2020), “multilingualism” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, 2020), “truncated multilingualism” (Blommaert et al., 2005), and “metrolingualism” (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015, 2020) have been used to describe how migrants borrow linguistic codes and semiotic resources and produce new meanings and grammars to affirm identities and construct new affiliations.

In the contemporary neoliberal economy, language has had a particularly important role in enhancing or diminishing migrants' integration in the host country (Allan & McElhinny, 2017). While earlier forms of industrialization depended mostly on physical labor, modern industrialization is based on production and marketing relationships (i.e., client service, branding) that are facilitated by cross-border flows of mobile workers (Sugihara, 2019). In these, language is considered an integral human capital that workers from different nationalities and backgrounds can utilize to enhance production and create productive work relationships (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019). Moreover, to improve their economic integration in the host country, migrants learn the country's official languages as this increases their chances of finding and maintaining a job (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Lochmann et al., 2019).

While this section of the article provides a thorough overview of language and identity in migration trajectories, the next section provides an overview of current language teaching models for migrants in Quebec, Canada, in an attempt to identify the gap to be filled by suggesting plurilingual pedagogy as an alternative solution.

### Overview of Current Language Teaching Models for Immigrants in Quebec

The following overview will highlight current language teaching models adopted in Quebec as the latter was the 3<sup>rd</sup> province with most immigrants in 2021 (Statistics Canada<sup>6</sup>, 2021). Although Quebec is a francophone province, the purpose of this overview is not to highlight immigrants' French language barriers per se, but rather to emphasize the importance of taking into account immigrant learners' entire linguistic repertoire.

Between 2019 and 2020, 11.7% of the total immigrant population (284,382) that arrived in Canada settled in Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2020). While the government of Quebec offers free French courses such as *francization*, these courses are anchored in monolingual and monocultural ideologies as a way to promote French as the official language in Quebec and a Quebecois identity. In spite of the government of Quebec's investments in improving French programs, there are concerns about the efficacy of these programs: data between 2012 and 2017 shows that 18% of immigrant registrants drop out of the courses, 31% leave advanced courses, many who register do not attend the courses and many who complete the courses are still unable to use French effectively (Gouvernement du Québec<sup>7</sup>, 2019). It could be that learners leave advanced courses because they would have already achieved CLB 4 (Canadian Level Benchmark 4) which is the government-set minimum oral skills to pursue post-secondary studies and enter the workplace (Gouvernement du Québec, 2019). However, only 9% of immigrant registrants develop the government-set minimum oral skills to pursue post-secondary studies and enter the workplace (Gouvernement du Québec, 2019) which means they drop out for other reasons. The root cause for these discouraging results is yet to be determined as the government of Quebec has not performed a program evaluation in years. Nevertheless, previous research on various French programs in Quebec suggest that French education is problematic for multilingual or minoritized students and raise deep concerns in relation to immigrants' sense of belonging to the Canadian and

<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Cambridge University Press. <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97>.

<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment-Companion volume with new descriptors. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada (2021). Number of immigrants arriving in Canada in 2021, by province or territory of residence. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/444906/number-of-immigrants-in-canada/>

<sup>7</sup> Gouvernement du Québec. (2019). Report of the Auditor General of Québec to the National Assembly for 2017-2018. [https://www.vgq.qc.ca/Fichiers/Publications/rapport-annuel/2017-2018-Automne/en\\_Rapport2017-2018-Fall.pdf](https://www.vgq.qc.ca/Fichiers/Publications/rapport-annuel/2017-2018-Automne/en_Rapport2017-2018-Fall.pdf).

Quebecois community (Mady & Masson, 2018; Mady & Black, 2012). This may be particularly due to the lack of inclusion towards multilingual and minoritized students (Magnan & Lamarre, 2016), lack of sufficient teacher education on how to serve multilingual and multicultural students (Querrien, 2017) and overall lack of policy support for inclusion of immigrants (Mady & Black, 2012; Mady & Turnbull, 2010).

### The Affordances of Plurilingualism as an Alternative Model

Plurilingualism can serve as one alternative to current language learning models to empower immigrants to affirm their linguistic and cultural identities. As theorized in the Common European Framework (CEFR, Council of Europe [CoE<sup>8</sup>], 2001; Piccardo & North, 2020) and its companion volume (CEFRCV<sup>9</sup>; CoE, 2020), *plurilingualism* focuses on learners having “a single, inter-related, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies to accomplish tasks” (CEFR, Council of Europe [CoE], 2001, p. 28; CEFRCV, 2020, p. 30). In other words, plurilingualism does not deny the existence of named languages; yet it treats them as one entity of inter-connected traits rather than separate entities with fixed boundaries. It is often confused with *multilingualism* which is centered around the co-existence, at the societal and individual level, of different languages with the official languages of a specific context. That is, various languages (i.e., heritage language, home language) are used and spoken alongside official and dominant languages (i.e., English, and French) in schools, homes, public spaces, and social settings. In this sense, multilingualism refers to a register in which languages are considered separate items and used for different purposes.

Plurilingualism interrelates different languages and cultures and denies the dominance of *one way of speaking* or *one way of being* (Coste, 2014). It also acknowledges the use of knowledge of one language as a scaffolding method to learn another. As such, language is not perceived as a tool or a means to an end but as a form of interaction that often has underlying sociocultural dimensions (Galante, 2020). Plurilingualism does not expect plurilingual learners to have equal proficiency in all the languages of their

linguistic repertoire; however, learners are encouraged to use their knowledge of one language to learn or understand another (Galante & Dela Cruz, 2021). Learners are considered social agents as they interact with different social groups in authentic social contexts, experiment with various linguistic and cultural resources, and draw conclusions based on their own experiences (Piccardo, 2017). Plurilingualism thus challenges the dominant idea that language learning can only happen through a monolingual approach consisting of labeling languages into different unrelated compartments (Slaughter & Cross, 2021). It advocates for the use of learners’ repertoire while extensively using the target language as well.

Amid the current worldwide increase of immigration influx, plurilingualism has become a social reality; hence, schools have a formative responsibility to adopt a language pedagogy that is inclusive of societal differences and paves the way for social cohesion (Smythe, 2020). Plurilingualism supports immigrants’ learning as it protects, revises, or maintains heritage languages, and creates a rich language environment in which immigrant learners can develop their plurilingual skills. In addition, immigrants are “intellectually privileged travelers” (p. 157) who consider immigration as a learning experience to explore new languages and sociocultural contexts and bring with them experiences and knowledge from their native lands (Kalan, 2021). As such, immigrants are catalysts and sources of knowledge that could inspire transformative pedagogical narratives to support marginalized, vulnerable, and silenced populations. In fact, plurilingualism validates and appreciates immigrants’ past experiences which reinforces their sense of belonging to the host country, Canada in this case.

### Conclusion

While migration forecasts predict a surge of immigration influx worldwide, Canada is strongly committed to increasing its immigration levels and making necessary policy changes and educational reforms to accommodate newcomers. Yet, while a vast body of research highlights the positive impact of plurilingualism on student identity, there is a lack of pedagogical implementations and research on how it can support immigrant populations in Canada to affirm their identities. That is why this article aims to shed light on the role of plurilingual pedagogy in affirming immigrants’ identities. Such a research orientation would result in creating a curriculum specifically tailored for immigrants and would inform

<sup>8</sup> Council of Europe (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Cambridge University Press. <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97>.

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment-Companion volume with new descriptors. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

language policies not only in Quebec, but potentially other provinces in Canada, and other countries with similar immigration influx.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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