Literacy, ESL and Canadian nation-building

by Douglas Fleming

In this article, I provide an overview as a way of explaining why there have been significant policy and curricular overlaps between literacy education and the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Canada. Citizenship is a common and significant theme in both fields historically but has been neglected in recent policy development. I argue for a more balanced approach to policy development, maintaining that although job-related programming content is important for both fields, citizenship is just as crucial.

Theory and practice

At the theoretical level, literacy education has undergone rapid conceptual changes so that the field has become much more broadly defined than previously. We now speak of new and multiple forms of literacy. ESL, while being much slower to adapt to changing circumstances in my opinion, is now breaking out of conceptualizations of language fluency that are related to monolingual norms. It is now possible to talk about bilingual and multilingual orientations toward language education.

The overlap between these two forms of education is not simply of academic interest, however. It has real implications for practitioners, since, as Shohet points out, ESL learners are often placed in programs designed for literacy students and vice versa, despite the fact that "methods appropriate for immigrant students who are highly literate in their mother tongue are not suited to students with limited or no mother tongue literacy" (Shohet p. 3).

The policy dimension

Even though there are many practical differences between how ESL and literacy are taught, there are many similarities between the two fields, based on the fact that they are both part of adult pedagogy. In the Canadian context, these relationships are strengthened (and further complicated) by the fact that many refugees and immigrants need both English-language training and literacy instruction. In view of these contexts, it is understandable why official documents (e.g., Council of the Federation 2004) have tended to conflate ESL and literacy education.

In this article I have concentrated on policy issues. In my opinion, policy development, particularly in terms of nation-building, has been a key and often poorly understood aspect of both fields.

To my mind, there are two closely related policy arguments commonly advanced in relationship to nation-building that are pertinent in this context. The first argues that it is important to enrol people in literacy and ESL programming because of the economic benefits derived from maximizing their earning potential for the overall benefit of the state. The second argues that it is important to work out with our learners what it means to be Canadian through these programs.

ESL and literacy education have historically been sites of struggle over the meaning of being Canadian, as I describe below. In recent years, however, there has been a major policy shift in both fields that has tended to greatly emphasize the economic aspects of nation-building. This shift is disturbing to me because I believe that this new emphasis has been to the detriment of citizenship development and has concrete implications for how we teach in our classrooms. In my opinion, regardless of how one views the current economic order or the nature of the nation-state, it is a serious mistake to view ESL or literacy simplistically as little more than job-related skill development.

In the remainder of this article, I first examine the history of literacy instruction in Canada in terms of citizenship development. The same is then done for ESL. In the next section, I provide some remarks on recent policy and programming developments, demonstrating how citizenship functions within the two fields have been neglected in favour of a narrow emphasis on job-related skills training. I conclude with recommendations on the need to develop balanced policy and programming, both in terms of ESL and literacy, and in terms of citizenship and job-related foci.

Literacy education and nation-building

Literacy education, as an aspect of adult education, has always been very closely associated with second-language training, social reform and nation-building (Tight). This has been especially true

in Canada, and stressed by most of our more influential literacy organizations. Alfred Fitzpatrick, the founder of Frontier College, for example, made it very clear that one of the principal aims of the college was to assimilate immigrants into the new Canadian nation-state.

The nation-building goals that many have had for literacy education should be seen in view of the fact that the field has long been associated with organized labour and attempts at political reform. In England, for example, literacy education was a major aspect of the Luddite movement in the early 1800s and the women's temperance and suffragette movements of the 1850s. Many forms of labour education for adults, in fact, developed quite rapidly in the second half of that century. By the advent of the First World War, up to 150,000 adults were enrolled in adult education programs organized by labour unions and other workers' organizations in the UK. Untold numbers of people also attended informal educational programs, discussion circles or lectures.

This trend also occurred in the United States. Although labour organizations were instrumental in the formation of what were called labour lyceums, mechanics' institutes or exciting places such as Myles Horton's Highlander centre, adult education in the US was more marked by individualistic self-improvement movements that never really challenged the status quo. The hugely popular Chautauqua Movement in the 1870s stands as a good example of this.

Early adult education in the US was given much greater government support than in Britain. Beginning with the Hatch Act in 1887, the federal government poured a significant amount of money into industrial training for poorer, immigrant and rural citizens. This money supported programs for individualized skills training and has expanded in more recent times, beginning with the Johnson administration in the 1960s.

In Canada, literacy education borrowed more heavily from British models than American, due to the heavy involvement of the labour movement through lyceums or mechanics' institutes, the women's movement and such social democratic or Marxist organizations as the Farm Radio Forum, the Citizens Forum, Fogo Island, the Centre for Community Studies, the Antigonish Movement and Frontier College (Welton).

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Government involvement in literacy education tended to be crisis driven, as when considerable government resources were devoted to retraining returning servicemen at the end of the Second World War. Government funding for literacy education, as Welton documents with regard to the history of university extension programs in the 1920s and 1930s, was set up explicitly to counter the perceived influence of Bolshevism on adult education that was linked to the labour movement's struggle for union rights.

Literacy education, then as now, has been marked by intense ideological struggle that has not, as I describe below, been a major hallmark of ESL training. A good example of this struggle within literacy education is what occurred within the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in the 1930s. Radical union activists, intellectuals and academics struggled for control over who taught the courses and curricular content. Sometimes these activists won, as evidenced by some of the courses that featured explicit Marxist and practical organizing content. More often than not, however, liberal and social democratic content was ascendant. This is evidenced by the progressively more prominent role in the WEA played by J. S. Woodworth (the first leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) and well-known liberal professors such as W. L. Grant, R. M. McIver and W. S. Milner (Welton).

These struggles for curricular control also took place in Frontier College, the most prominent literacy organization of its time in Canada. Its dedicated and dynamic founder, Alfred Fitzpatrick, was nevertheless a social conservative who inculcated a racialized vision of Canada within the organization. As Walter put it: "Frontier College, in providing literacy and citizenship education to labouring immigrant men on the resource frontier, was the quintessential embodiment of the grand project of Anglo-Canadian nation-building" (p.1). At the same time many left-wing activists, such as Norman Bethune, cut their political teeth within the College.

Governments in Canada only began to develop a systematic approach to adult education in the mid-50s. This approach was designed to be completely divorced from labour education through funding the construction of adult-oriented collegiate institutes through school districts (most notably in Toronto and Vancouver). These were essentially high schools in which adult and teenaged students studied work- and skills-related subjects in the same setting. Unlike today, adults simply went to day school if their schedules allowed for it. Night school was set up for students who worked during the day, regardless of age.

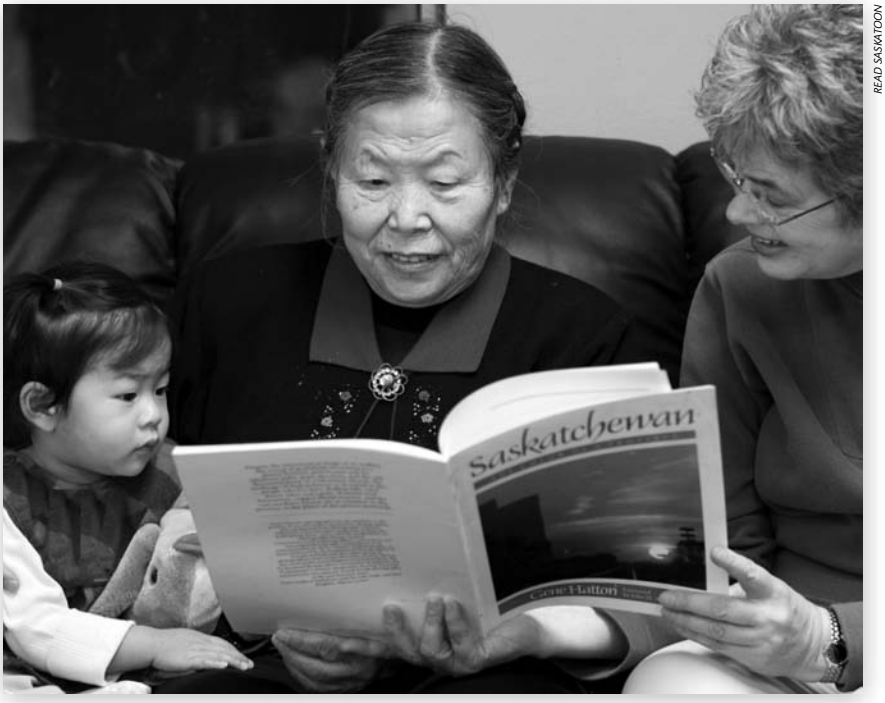
In the mid-1960s, these institutes were rapidly replaced by community college systems that specialized in the vocational training of adult students. Although there is significant variety across the country in how adult programming is designed (Horsman and Woodrow), high schools have become increasingly focused on education for minors and adult pedagogy has developed its own delivery models. This reflects the theoretical changes within the field that now make major distinctions between adult and childhood pedagogy. This distinction has become a hallmark of new theoretical models such as conscientization (Freire), andragogy (Knowles, M.) and communities of practice (Lave and Wegner).

ESL and nation-building

Although not a systematic federal policy preoccupation until recently, Canadian ESL instruction has long been a form of pedagogy subject to governmental involvement. According to Tomkins, second-language programming has stressed the value of integrating and assimilating new immigrants ever since the founding in 1632 of the first school in New France and was an important value explicitly expressed within Egerton Ryerson's rationale for founding the Ontario public school system in 1844.

On the Prairies, one of the most influential educators of new Canadians, J. T. M. Anderson, emphasized the need for teachers to adopt what he described as a missionary spirit for the task of stamping out bilingualism and promoting Anglo-Canadian values and culture. Anderson, later elected premier of Saskatchewan, headed a notoriously conservative government that restricted French and minority-language rights until being defeated at the polls in 1934, accused of corruption and having links with the Ku Klux Klan.

The systematic provision of ESL education by government did not commence until the 1970s, two decades after similar measures for literacy education. The impetus for this provision was two major policy initiatives undertaken by the Trudeau governments to remake the modern Canadian nation-state: bilingualism and multiculturalism. The first of these, bilingualism, is a central part of the federal strategy to maintain national unity in the face of the threat of Quebec separatism. The second, multiculturalism, is designed as a way to



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integrate increased numbers of immigrants (Esses and Gardiner).

As Ashworth notes, official multicultural policy quickly opened the door for programs that promoted heritage languages for children, but did not lead immediately to the systematic provision of adult ESL. Many difficulties arose over conflicts between federal and provincial jurisdictions. Under the Canadian Constitution, education is a provincial responsibility and immigration and citizenship is federal. Both jurisdictions have claimed that adult second-language education was the responsibility of the other.

The systematic provision of ESL instruction came about in light of previously identified financial barriers to participation (Fleming) and in response to the massive demographic changes now occurring within the country. Immigrants now account for over 70 per cent of the total national labour force growth in Canada. If current trends continue, immigration will account for 100 per cent of total labour force growth within ten years and all population growth by 2031. It is important to note that these new immigrants increasingly tend to come from countries where the dominant language is neither English nor French. In recent years, up to 43 per cent of all immigrants arriving in Canada have not been able to speak either official language beyond a marginal level. There have also been changes in the ethnic origins of immigrants. In 1966, 87 per cent of all immigrants to Canada were from Europe. Today, 80.3 per cent of all immigrants originate from Asia and the Pacific, Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central America. The need for adult language education is also clear, given the fact that over 70 per cent of all immigrants to Canada are adults (all figures, Statistics Canada).

Most current ESL training is done through Language Instruction to Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and its provincial counterparts (Fleming). There is much to say about these programs, of course. For my purposes here, however, I want to emphasize that the policy goals for LINC have been two-fold: language instruction and immigrant integration.

In the 1990 Immigration Plan (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1990), federal language policy systematically stressed the importance of linking English programming with newcomer integration within English-speaking parts of the country. Significantly, this document gave prominence to the need to integrate ESL training with "building a new Canada" (p. 3). In a recent *Report to Parliament* tabled by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006), English training programs "provide basic language training to adult newcomers...aimed at facilitating social, cultural and economic integration into Canada." Citizenship is the ultimate goal of this process of integration since, as this same document notes, it "signifies full participation in Canadian life." In this way, official government policy linked English-language training and citizenship preparation.

A recent shift

In recent years, debates within adult literacy education have revolved around what Tight has called the liberal/vocational divide within the field. Many contend that the field has lost its previous liberal emphasis on social cohesion in order to concentrate more narrowly on a job-related vocational focus. These and similar policy documents worldwide have led, as Jackson points out, to a neglect of the complex ways in which "individuals use problem-solving skills to make

sense of how old information fits each new context" (p. 41).

In Canada, this policy trend was first explicitly voiced in 1998, when the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada identified workplace-related skills as long-term training targets. No less a forum than the Council of the Federation, the annual meeting held by the provincial premiers, has recently argued that "literacy skills are the essential building blocks for the development of a vibrant society and economy."

This policy trend is backed up by new funding priorities. Canadian government funding of literacy programs has increasingly reflected an emphasis on targeted job-related foci. Thus, as part of the lead-up to the 2010 Olympics, the British Columbia government has pledged to commit significant new funds to job-focused literacy education for particular trades. In Ontario, the provincial government recently announced a $27.4-million initiative designed to help immigrants gain Canadian professional credentials. This policy builds on commitments that began in earnest in 2002, when the Ontario government earmarked $15 million for bridge training projects to re-license and train newcomers in specific fields, such as health care, education and the machining, millwright and tooling trades. At the federal level, Human Resources Development Canada's essential skills definitions are also good examples of how literacy has increasingly been defined as abstract sets of transferable and work-related skills.

These trends are occurring at the same time that cuts are being made to general literacy programs that do not necessarily have such an emphasis on targeted job-related skills. The primary example of this is the 2006 cuts to the Adult Learning and Literacy Skills Program.

As well, access to adult training, when not funded by government, is dependent on one's economic status. This is clear from the last major survey of demographic trends in this context (Statistics Canada 2003), which noted that although over 35 per cent of all Canadian workers aged 25-64 undertake some form of job-related training each year, the vast majority of these opportunities were not government funded. As Veeman has argued, these training opportunities are much more likely to be accessed by those who already have a significant level of education. In addition, as Myers and Broucker point out, adult education funding also comes nowhere close to meeting the needs of poorer Canadians. Thus,

people with limited education and financial resources are left out of adult literacy programming.

Similar trends around the purposes of instruction are occurring within Canadian ESL.

Funding for ESL programming has significantly increased. In 2006, the federal government increased funding for settlement services by $1.4 billion over the next five years and ESL programming takes up the lion's share of these funds.

At the same time, second-language education policy has increasingly stressed the need for job-related programming. This has been done through a number of initiatives such as new models of workplace-related LINC programming, increased curricular resources tied to employment, the development of a central agency to assist professionally trained immigrants gain Canadian credentials (the Foreign Credentials Referral Office), and a program designed to integrate language training with workplace placements (the Enhanced Language Training Program).

The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration made the link between language training and employment clear in a recent statement in Kitchener, Ontario, at the launch of a new model LINC program at the Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. She noted that through this new model of work-related programming, immigrants "will be able to improve their language proficiency, resulting in greater opportunities to find work. This will allow newcomers to become more productive members of this growing community" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2008).

While work-related ESL programming is on the ascendant, citizenship programming content has slowly been downplayed. This is most glaringly in evidence by the lack of citizenship content within the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) (Pawlikowska-Smith), the most important national adult ESL curriculum/assessment document.

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Fleming), the CLB is a large and complex document that describes English-language proficiency from basic levels to full fluency. Although nominally an assessment tool, this document is the basis for curriculum development for the vast majority of ESL programs within Canada.

Unfortunately, there are very few references to citizenship within the entire document. The few that do exist are vague and found only at the highest levels of English-language proficiency. In many ways, it is very revealing to note what is missing. The word vote, for example, does not appear. Community involvement, labour rights, democratic political engagement and group identity are also conspicuous by their absence.

Instead, the document tends to emphasize rights and responsibilities pertaining to being good consumers. The learner is meant to understand one's rights and responsibilities as a "client, customer, patient and student" (p. 95), but not as a worker, family member, participant in community activities, or advocate.

Conclusion

As Anderson noted, common language(s) and discourses are important elements in the construction of an imagined community such as a modern nation-state. Canada is a huge and complex entity, both geographically and culturally. Citizenship is an imaginative process in the sense that one never can experience or be cognizant of the nation in its entirety. Education is, of course, an important tool in the creation of citizens of this imagined entity. In Canada, given the significance and characteristics of current second-language immigration, ESL and literacy education are especially important in this regard.

As my account above indicates, nation-building has been the common impetus for much of the policy development in regards to both ESL and literacy education in Canada because of the degree to which ESL learners and literacy students have been the same.

And as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, there are many theoretical and practical differences between ESL and literacy education that make it highly problematic for practitioners to do both. Teachers are often expected to teach students who have been placed in their classes without due regard to the changing differences and similiarities of the needs of these two groups. As I know myself from my years in the classroom, the result is not simply frustration on the part of teachers and learners, but also inefficiency at the level of programming

However, as I hope I have demonstrated here, there is an important commonality between the two fields at the policy level, especially in recent years with the growing emphasis on vocational training. I have argued that the citizenship content found with ESL and literacy training, once so prevalent, has been neglected in recent policy developments.

There are two aspects to the challenges we face. On the one hand, we must develop innovative

programming that allows us to recognize and successfully deal with the differences and similarities between ESL and literacy learners. In some cases, we will have to clearly separate programming for these two groups of learners so as to avoid the frustrations and inefficiencies that Shohet refers to above. In other cases, we have to recognize that many recent immigrants need both English and literacy training.

The other aspect of the challenges we face is related to finding a better balance between citizenship preparation and job-related curricular content within both ESL and literacy instruction. In my opinion, there is no reason why the vocational aspects of adult education should be emphasized at the expense of citizenship development.

I have strongly argued elsewhere (Fleming) that citizenship content in adult education must not be conceived as a process of inculcating a normatively defined version of what it means to be Canadian. This approach inevitably results, in my opinion, in a racialized and hierarchical version of citizenship that privileges Anglocentric norms of social behaviour. We must find nuanced and up-to-date versions of citizenship that honour diversity and advocate equity.

Job-related programming content is indeed important, especially when everyone in our society can access it, regardless of one's educational or socio-economic status. However, I argue that citizenship content is just as crucial for our ESL and literacy programs, especially when that content emphasizes active and community-based participation in our nation's body politic. ■

DOUGLAS FLEMING is an Assistant Professor with the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. His research interests centre on Second Language Education Policy and Citizenship. He taught in and supervised ESL and Literacy programs for over 20 years for a variety of agencies, including the Toronto District School Board, MOSAIC, YMCA International College, the Surrey School District and George Brown College. For more information go to http://www.education.uottawa.ca/profs/fleming.html.

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