Western Education

Cantonese Chinese international language programs: an opportunity or a lost cause to the promotion of Chinese language maintenance?

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Abstract

In recent decades, the Chinese Canadian population has steadily increased and this trend is projected to continue (Statistics Canada, 2007). Despite a more culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student population in the Canadian classrooms, current resources in Ontario remain limited to education offered through the medium of Canada's official languages – English and/or French. Meanwhile, other languages, such as Chinese, remain outside the mainstream classrooms.

This master's research examines first language (L1) maintenance in a second language (L2) environment; in particular, the importance, implications, and challenges in relation to the International Language (IL) programs are explored. To investigate the role IL programs play in language and cultural maintenance, an ethnographic case study was conducted in two elementary school classrooms at a Greater Toronto Area IL program site.

Four different stakeholders – program administrators, teachers, students, and parents – participated in this study through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and in-class questionnaires; in doing so, they expressed concerns, challenges, and suggestions for various underlying issues pertaining to the teaching and learning of Cantonese Chinese within the IL program. On the macro level, current curriculum and educational policies are reviewed and suggestions for amendments are made for policies that are more relevant to the IL teaching and learning in Canada. On the micro level, the study examines parents', students', and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the language, the IL program, as well as the benefits of learning Cantonese Chinese in the Canadian setting, and how these factors contribute to the promotion of language maintenance.