

Education in Chinese and Cree and Greek

The trouble with learning another language in Canada these days is that coercion is never very far away. Whether in the background as a political or social requirement or as a potential economic threat, that would deprive you of promotion in your job now or deny you access to one later; or in the foreground, as the immediate demand of the school you must attend; whatever the reason for the undertaking, it is not typically with enthusiasm that it is approached. You are not even free to choose what language it shall be. But there is nothing new about this, either in education or on the face of the globe.

Confrontation within the same community between people of different languages and cultures is now the general and familiar thing around the world rather than the exception — no matter how extraordinarily upsetting it may seem to proud races facing it for the first time. And that education should become the arena for resolution of the struggles for power that ensue when groups of people clash is nothing strange. Deplorable as the fact is often held to be, schooling is of necessity a part of politics, because it is intrinsically an exercise of power over the presently powerless. Someone else decides what you will do — in your own interests, of course (not to mention the interests of that future you share with whoever that someone is).

The human spirit rightly resents this proposition, especially when it results in its more naked acts of discrimination against small children growing up willy-nilly into situations of struggle. Education, we know, ought really to be guided by one's own desire to learn. It is in this sense that the concept of equality of opportunity in education is accepted as a first principle for any public system of education. And it is in this sense that the same first principle is violated when children, wherever they may live, are compelled to begin their education in any language other than the one they already use and know, whether that language be Chinese, Cree, Greek, Ukrainian, English, or French. That is one plain point that many adults in Canada seem to have forgotten.

Having said this, we must now make the second plain point that among the things available to learn, a second language is, and should appear to be, the most educationally rewarding; a bilingual person is the brighter person for it. "Should appear to be", because without enthusiastic motivation — as many articles here suggest — it simply cannot be learned well. Languages are matters of great complexity and subtlety; another language has a fitness to its own culture that renders it more or less a misfit with the learner's; cultural differences can be deeply disturbing. Perhaps the greatest obstacles are revealed in the manner in which most of us first learn any language at all; by a great deal of repetition of words and phrases for rather simple, indeed childish, situations, and with constant personal attention from certain rather tolerant and affectionate monitors.

It nevertheless follows from the accident of having been born a stranger, or having arrived at that status in some other way in another country, that you must sooner or later use that other language as if it were your own if you are to have the opportunities, educational and other, to which you are entitled. Nor can you reasonably expect your country of adoption to arrange for its expensive educational system to hang around waiting for every one of you until the spark of enthusiasm catches by itself. The compulsion must be accepted. The enthusiasm must follow, if it does not precede. It is the first charge of teachers to secure it, for without it they cannot function.

It is extraordinary to discover within these pages how little was systematically known about second language learning a mere ten years ago. Accordingly it is only now, amid the usual distrust of the stern-faced among academics, that the pedagogy of second language learning is emerging as something rather more humane, tolerant of intelligent error, and animated by cultural and affective considerations of a kind that hardly characterised the conditions under which our academics learned, in former days, their syntax and vocabularies. They rightly value the precisions they have acquired by such lengthy rigours. But they perhaps forget the privileges of motivation with which uniquely they had been endowed. Strong motivations can scale mountains; weak ones stumble on the first steps.

J. K. H.

ERRATUM

The cover of our last number read "Spring 1978 Vol. XII No. 1", both on the facing page and on the spine. It should have read "**Winter 1978 Vol. XIII No. 1**", like the first page inside. We can only assume that the fresh green of the cover had led us to hope for good luck. A month later it is still winter, and XIII seems the right number; but it should at least and at last be Spring when this issue appears.