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# The Case for a Canadian Languages Strategy

**Presented to:** The Hon. Mobina Jaffer, Q.C.  
Senator, British Columbia

**Developed by:** The Canadian Languages Association (CLA /  
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## ***Background***

Canada's identity is the mosaic of its languages and cultures, all working together to illustrate our uniqueness as a peaceful multicultural country. Additional language education plays an important role in the strengthening of Canada's identity by providing an intercultural perspective on our country through language learning and appreciation. In other words, language education reinforces the Canadian identity and strengthens us as a society that values intercultural living.

English, French, Aboriginal languages, and International/Heritage languages, are key and equal members of Canada's multilingual mosaic inseparable from our concept of multiculturalism. The teaching of languages reinforces our Canadian multicultural identity and strengthens our country's unique sense of belonging. One of the most tangible outcomes of languages education is social and cultural cohesion, which promotes anti-racism initiatives, peace-building, civic participation and cross-cultural understanding. On the international stage, languages education is essential to Canada's relationships with the global community in the areas of international relations and cooperation, and international trade and development.

In short, Canadians possessing language skills in addition to our official languages are an invaluable human, social, cultural and economic resource for our communities and for our country.

## ***Importance of languages in the knowledge-society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

It is undeniable that federal support for official languages has created a favourable atmosphere for language learning in general. The unfortunate reality is that language education across Canada is marginalized and its marginalized status does little to encourage students to enroll and complete courses in additional languages. As a result, language learning does not attract the same public and political interest and support as studies such as math and science.

Language is the most vital communication skill in society. It is necessary for everyday life and is related to every single part of our community from industry including tourism, import export, economy, and social justice as well international relationship. Learning a language can also contribute towards social, cultural, educational and economic resources of the Canadian community.

The CLA strongly believes in the importance languages education can and will play in Canada's future with the assistance of a federal commitment. Through the creative and collaborative work of its affiliates, the CLA has identified four key pillars<sup>1</sup> that support the study of languages:

- 1. Identity:** Knowledge of a second and additional language strengthens first-language skills. It also helps students understand the role of language and culture in society and to appreciate the value of other languages and cultures. Families that see recognition and validity placed on their home languages understand that Canada is a truly inclusive society that values the skills and experiences of all of its peoples.

Since language and culture are inextricably linked, learning languages can contribute to cultural enrichment and intercultural understanding between people in several ways. Learning languages contributes to one's cultural identity, building self-esteem, self-confidence and mutual respect for others, helping our people become better aware of others' cultures and traditions, thus building social cohesion in our Canadian society.

<sup>1</sup> Developed by the International Languages Educators' Association (ILEA – [www.ilea.ca](http://www.ilea.ca)), a CLA Affiliate organization.

2. **Personal Growth:** The ability to communicate in additional languages provides unique opportunities to gain access to other peoples and other cultures. In the interest of peace in an increasingly interdependent world, it is important for every person to acquire skills for cross-cultural communication and understanding. Learners of additional languages are often able to provide clearer messages, communicate more effectively and are more open to understanding perspectives different from their own. Learning languages prepares an individual for a broader range of experiences in their future for their work, leisure and study purposes.
  
3. **Career Enhancement:** We live in a shrinking world where international trade, communication, and mutual understanding require openness to other people's experiences and points of view. Canadians who have access to the languages and cultures of the world not only increase their own job opportunities, but can also play an important role in promoting Canada's future economic development.

Canadians who lose their language skills over time reflect the potential loss for Canada's economic possibilities. Our success as a nation to perform well in markets around the world can be positively impacted by a workforce that is multilingual or at the very least linguistically aware of the world around them.

4. **ESL/EAL/FSL Support:** First-language literacy is important to second-language learning. It helps students grasp key concepts more easily and influences general academic achievement. Studies and research results conducted over the last 30 years have shown the positive impact of learning international/heritage languages for the development of additive bilingualism and integration in a new learning and social environment (Cummins, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, research has consistently demonstrated that when children can access and use their mother tongues proudly in educational environments, there is a significant increase in student achievement. Although this is supported in research literature, Canada, as an immigrant-welcoming nation, continues to be complacent in promoting international/heritage languages.

<sup>2</sup> Cummins, Jim (2000). Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire. *Multilingual Matters*.

## ***The Vision: A Canadian Languages Strategy***

A Canadian Languages Strategy is an imperative against a background of profound national and international change. We envision this Canadian Languages Strategy as vital in fostering public acceptance of language competence and intercultural understanding as essential components in the make up of an informed international citizen.

While we fully support Canada's Official Languages Act, it is also important to formally recognize and support linguistic plurality. According to the 2006 Canadian Census, Canada is becoming more and more a multilingual society with more than five million Canadians having a mother tongue other than English or French. Canadians also reported more than 100 languages spoken. As Dyane McAdam, former Commissioner of Official Languages said: *"We're seeing a nation that is embracing official bilingualism and multilingualism... We will continue to embrace diversity."*

**The Canadian Languages Strategy would clearly communicate the Federal Government's commitment to increasing Canada's languages capability, and a vision of languages as "a life long skill – to be used in business and for pleasure, to open up avenues of communication and exploration, and to promote, encourage and instill a broader cultural understanding."**

With that in mind, this proposed Strategy must address the four language components that make us truly Canadian: English; French; Aboriginal languages; and, International/Heritage languages.

The Strategy's objectives should include the following commitments:

- 1. To promote and improve the teaching and learning of languages** by encouraging provinces to draw upon experience of other educational systems around the world where multilingual education is provided in a core schooling system.
- 2. To increase the number of people studying languages** through the development and implementation of a strong and coherent national public education and awareness campaign creating a partnership between education, business, government.

- 3. To work with the provinces to provide effective and equitable funding for language programming at the school board and community levels.** This could include: increasing the number and types of languages offered at primary and secondary schools; supporting after school programs; encouraging school boards to designate key schools as “language learning centres;” and, explore bilingual programs where feasible.
  
- 4. To raise an awareness of the importance of multilingualism to all Canadians for individual and collective well-being.**

The Canadian Languages Association believes in the economic, cultural, and social benefits of multilingualism. We need to recognize that our much-celebrated cultural diversity can indeed be a wellspring for the new ideas and knowledge that will generate innovation, grow and attract high-technology industries, and spur economic growth and prosperity.

The CLA works to further this trend of promoting cross-cultural harmony through the development and promotion of languages education, respecting all of the diverse linguistic and cultural people, groups and communities across Canada.

It is our hope that a Canadian Languages Strategy will be the key component in recognizing the value of maintaining one’s own languages as well as developing others. We want to build world class leaders and a comprehensive commitment to second language education is an essential key to that goal.



## **CLA Organization Profile**

The **Canadian Languages Association (CLA) / L'Association canadienne des langues (ACL)**, established in 1990, is a national umbrella organization committed to working in cooperation with language and cultural associations, educational institutions, government departments and ministries, business groups, and community stakeholders at the local, provincial, and federal levels to promote the value of international/heritage languages education for all Canadians.

L'Association canadienne des langues (ACL), établie en 1990, est un corps national consacré à la conservation et la promotion de langues internationales/patrimoniales au Canada.

L'ACL agit comme réseau entre les organisations de langues internationales/patrimoniales à travers le Canada. L'Association canadienne des langues est engagée à travailler en collaboration avec toutes les associations de langues et les associations culturelles, les établissements d'enseignement, les départements gouvernementaux, les groupes en affaires, et les parties prenantes communautaires au niveau provincial ainsi que fédéral, afin de promouvoir la valeur de l'enseignement des langues internationales/ patrimoniales pour tous les Canadiens.

The **CLA's primary objectives** include: raising awareness of the value and benefits of language learning for all Canadians; promoting the development of programs in additional languages and other related areas for the creation of positive educational outcomes for learners; and, coordinating and participating in the sharing of information and resources pertinent to language education.

The **unique CLA team** is made up of dedicated and committed volunteers who are experts in the field of International language education. They bring a thorough understanding of the issues with a thoughtfulness and long-range vision that motivates others to become involved.

The Canadian Languages Association is currently led by the following regional individuals that represent our founding organizations:

*Dr. Shakeel Akhtar*, President, Canadian Languages Association and Past-President, Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages (SOHL), Regina, Saskatchewan

*Marisa Romilly*, President, Society for the Advancement of International Languages (SAIL BC), Vancouver, British Columbia

*Josephine Pallard*, President, International and Heritage Languages Association (IHLA), Edmonton, Alberta

*Michael Embaie*, President, Southern Alberta Heritage Languages Association (SAHLA), Calgary, Alberta

*Ved Aurora*, Director and Treasurer, Multilingual Association of Regina (MLAR), Regina, Saskatchewan

*Greg Sametz*, Retired Educator, Heritage Languages Program, Seven Oaks School District, Winnipeg, Manitoba

*Maria Makrakis*, Coordinator, International Languages, Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board *and* Chair and Ministry Liaison, International Languages Educators' Association (ILEA), Ontario

*Constantine Ioannou*, Program Director, International Centre, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board *and* Executive Director, International Languages Educators' Association (ILEA), Ontario

*Orazio Caltagirone*, Past Chair, International Languages Educators' Association (ILEA), Ontario

*Dr. Khatoune Temisjian*, Président, Association Québécoise des Langues d'Origine (AQLO) / Québec Heritage Language Association (QHLLA), (Québec)

Executive Director: *Bernard Bouska* (SAIL BC) - Vancouver

Regional Coordinator: *Mike Gretton* (SAHLA) – Calgary

Regional Coordinator: *Tamara Ruzic* (SOHL) - Regina

**The CLA's primary objectives are:**

1. To raise awareness of the value and benefits of language learning for all Canadians.
2. To recognize Canada's ethnocultural communities and their historical and ongoing contributions to language education.

3. To promote the development of programs in international/heritage languages and other related areas for the creation of positive educational outcomes for learners.
  4. To strengthen communication and cooperation among providers and supporters of international/heritage languages organizations across Canada.
  5. To coordinate and participate in the sharing of information and resources pertinent to language education.
  6. To enable the teaching of international/heritage languages within educational systems.
  7. To enhance teaching skills and resource development for language classrooms.
  8. To support the efforts of educators in international/heritage languages programs.
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**For more information, please contact:**

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