



**Literacy for Deaf Immigrant Adults:
A Symposium for Collaboration and Learning**

Final report

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Background

The Literacy for Deaf Immigrant Adults: A Symposium for Collaboration and Learning was a unique event, the first of its kind in Western Canada. Inspired by the research project “Effective Techniques and Tools for Immigrant Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adults in Bilingual and Bicultural Literacy Programs” conducted by Bow Valley College instructor, Brent Novodvorski, preparations for this symposium began in late 2008.

The organizing committee consisted of representatives from Bow Valley College, the Centre for Newcomers and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society.

Funding

In addition to the in-kind donations of time, expertise and space provided by the organizing committee we are grateful to the following funders for their support of this event:

- Calgary Learns (major funder)
- Alberta Association of the Deaf
- Alberta Cultural Society of the Deaf
- Calgary Association of the Deaf
- The Calgary Foundation

Symposium Synopsis

The Literacy for Deaf Immigrant Adults: A Symposium for Collaboration and Learning brought together people from a variety of sectors such as education (Bow Valley College, Calgary Board of Education, University of Alberta, Vancouver Community College), immigrant-serving agencies (Centre for Newcomers, Calgary Immigrant Aid, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Immigrant Language and Vocational Assessment Referral Centre (ILVARC), agencies serving the Deaf (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society, Calgary Association for the Deaf) as well as other non-profit agencies (Calgary Learns, Catholic Family Services) and private consultants (D.G. Mason Consultants). There were approximately thirty (30) people in attendance.

The room was filled with positive energy as participants eagerly shared stories about their experiences working with Deaf immigrants as well as information and resources. There was an emphasis on valuing the skills and experiences that Deaf immigrants bring with them from their home countries, including their knowledge base and desire to integrate into Canadian society the same as many other immigrants. There was a genuine interest in the room in helping these immigrants build the language skills (both American Sign Language and English as a Second Language) they need in order to be successful in Canada.

Bow Valley College instructor and researcher, Brent Novodvorski, opened the day by sharing the results of his applied research project, “Effective techniques and tools for immigrant Deaf adults in bilingual bicultural (ASL and English) literacy programs”. Two Bow Valley College students who have taken the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program at the college talked about their experiences.

Roua El Hacha talked about her experiences growing up as a Deaf person in Lebanon and how she found Canadian culture more inclusive. Osama Yassin, a native of Iraq who grew up in Libya, shared that he was unable to communicate with his family due to his unique language needs, using gestures to get across basic ideas, but was never able to have meaningful conversations with them until he learned sign language. They are currently enrolled in ESL classes and ASL for Academic Purposes at Bow Valley College. They reported the urgent need to expand the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adult Learners program into full time studies. Both students expressed a desire to give back by becoming educators themselves.

The keynote speaker, Dr. Dave Mason, talked about literacy from a Deaf perspective, noting that literacy has traditionally been seen as reading and writing, but can and should go beyond that to include other types of literacy, such as financial literacy, working with computers and even signing. He challenged the participants to re-think the sign that is currently used to indicate literacy, proposing that perhaps it does not adequately represent the scope of what it means to be literate.

Aastrid Evansen-Flanjak, an instructor at Vancouver Community College, gave a presentation on their very successful Deaf and Hard of Hearing program, which has a 36-year history and serves almost 100 students (ten times the number of students currently served at BVC) from 21 countries.

After lunch participants explored questions and issues around literacy for Deaf immigrants and spent time formulating an action plan.

Questions

Some pressing questions that emerged from this group work were:

- Would it benefit the students if there were one Deaf and one hearing instructor in the classroom?
- As there seems to be a lack of qualified teachers where are the Deaf instructors going to come from?
- If there are insufficient learner numbers for a full-time program, and insufficient funding, how can the program grow?
- How can we recruit more learners?
- How do we get leaders from the ethno-cultural communities (respected members of communities) to act as brokers to teach parents about the possibilities?

Issues, concerns and challenges

In addition to the questions that were asked, a number of key issues were identified by the participants. These include:

Values, myths and perceptions

Different cultures view Deafness in different ways. In many cultures there is a sense of unfounded family shame and embarrassment around Deafness. Families may not want the Deaf person to learn sign language and the hearing members of the family may not want to learn it either. So in addition to negative emotions, there is also a lack of communication, which makes the situation worse.

There is stigma in ethnic communities around being Deaf or Hard of Hearing. These are seen as disabilities and therefore undesirable or shameful. The impetus for change may be most effective coming from the ethnocultural leaders. It is important to build confidence in family members to understand the importance of Deaf culture. Some Deaf students are not comfortable pursuing school or further studies due to bad experiences in the past or lack of schooling in their home country. These perceptions must change before new immigrants can fully benefit from the services that are available.

It is important to treat Deaf immigrants as newcomers to Deaf culture, not solely to the mainstream with the expectation of “fitting in”. This would include such things as parents putting students into a Deaf school and seeing it as a positive experience.

One idea that emerged was that of having workshops for families. Topics might include: Signing myths, what does it mean to be Deaf or How do the Deaf learn?

Deaf mentors and role models can build connections and act as resource people for Deaf immigrants. This includes demystifying what it will mean to be in the new culture, encourage confidence building, share success stories, and show Deaf newcomers what possibilities exist for them.

Lack of awareness and information

Community organizations, ethnocultural communities and families all need to be aware of resources and services available. The information needs to be accessible in a variety of written languages, as well as visually. It may be helpful to recruit students using the WWW, such as ASL video logs (vlogs) or links from the BVC website to Deaf organizations.

It may be useful to host presentations at the public library, immigrant-serving organizations. If the Deaf person has had a negative education experience in one or more other countries, the prospect of going to BVC could be scary. As such, the first point of contact should be a Deaf person. This may help to increase comfort levels and encourage communication.

Another idea might be to have a mobile settlement (pilot program), with immigrant-serving agencies partnering with BVC to bring education to the families.

Funding, services and programming

There is a circular relationship between lack of funding, lack of students and the limited growth of educational programs. More funding would allow more students to take part, which would facilitate program growth.

Funding for the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program does not apply to the ASL language needs of Deaf immigrants. This is another barrier.

Lack of funding deters potential instructors for Deaf and Hard of Hearing programs. Lack of funding is a significant barrier to students. It was further noted that those who receive Employment Insurance cannot access programs due to their cost. On a related note, the pay for teaching in Deaf education programs needs to be questioned.

Advocacy, lobbying and education

Financial agents should become sensitized to the existence and significance of Deaf culture and provide more funding. There is a need for advocacy regarding funding. Government departments need to be lobbied and awareness generally needs to be raised.

There is systemic oppression of Deaf immigrants because Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) funding does not cover ASL. Eventually LINC funding should cover ASL, too.

Immigrant serving agencies and Deaf agencies need to work together to communicate these needs and information to the government. One goal could be to have a minimum of one agency can get funding and act as a centre for Deaf immigrants.

It is not only agencies and Deaf immigrants who need to be informed and educated about the issues and services. It is important to let others in the Deaf community aware of the resources and supports that do exist. That way informal referrals can happen and there can be more appreciation of the unique situation of Deaf immigrants.

Political champions are needed. It would be good to have at least one prominent politician promote the issues around Deaf immigrant literacy. One goal would be to educate politicians with a view to eventually recruiting one person to speak up for this cause.

Action Plan

After questions were asked, the next step was to develop an action plan to address some of the issues that were raised. This involved coming up with concrete, realistic and achievable goals that can be realized.

Develop partnerships to continue the work

It was noted that in BC there is an “ASL articulation” committee. Having a parallel committee here would create a systematic approach. Some participants committed to following up on the action plan to continue the work generated at the symposium and moving forward to expand the resources and services available. A follow-up meeting will be planned after the symposium to keep the momentum going.

BVC’s Foundational Learning Centre can be innovative and project-based and could be the place from which to start. A partnership between immigrant serving agencies, Deaf agencies and BVC would aim to:

- Identify Deaf immigrants
- Develop rapid assessment tools to assess Deaf immigrants’ language abilities.
- Develop materials for immigrant communities

Other partners might include:

- Alberta Health Services
- Ethnocultural communities

We can encourage collaboration among our agencies. For example, invite Deaf organizations to join events at the Centre for Newcomers, have the Centre for Newcomers give out brochures from DHHS. These are small gestures of acknowledgement and support that can build the foundation for long-term relationships and cooperation.

It was noted that there should be URL links to each other’s programs on the websites of those who partner. It was acknowledged that

Promote education, advocacy and lobbying

An ongoing aim of the committee would be to get rid of stigma, educating others to see Deafness as a way of life, not a disability.

A committee could advocate this issue with the funders (e.g. letter writing campaign to funders). New immigrants cannot afford these services. Funding is needed. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) takes proposals for university-associated projects.

Immigrant serving agencies can incorporate information about Deaf and Hard of Hearing programs into their welcome events or have a welcome event specific to Deaf and Hard of Hearing immigrants.

Develop and deliver workshops

The possibility of having workshops on Deaf culture, both for service providers and immigrants was proposed. Workshops could be given by DHHS or Catholic Family Services (Butterfly project). It was suggested that further symposia could be held, with more agencies present.

Also, workshops could be held for Deaf immigrant to inform them about the services available to them in Calgary. This could either be part of a welcome session through the Centre for Newcomers or a special welcome for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Immigrant-serving agencies need to inform immigrants that Deaf culture is real and does exist and furthermore, that services are resources are available to them.

One idea was to have Deaf students become volunteers at events. The result would be that the students would take on the role of helpers, thus raising their self-esteem.

Community Information Kit

The action plan included developing a community information kit that can be used by agencies to refer Deaf immigrants to the appropriate programs and services. The kit would be both text based and have a complementary website with video. It was suggested that we could use the DHHS kit as a starting point.

Pay to have the kit professionally translated into other languages. (Check with the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Alberta).

Agencies who could contribute to the kit include:

- BVC
- DHHS
- Alberta Health Services
- Ethnocultural communities
- Immigrant-serving agencies

Interpretation

Professional interpretation services were provided by Freelance Interpreters Consolidated (FLIC) Inc. Four interpreters rotated throughout the day to provide ASL to English and English to ASL interpretations during the presentations, group work, coffee and lunch breaks.

Media coverage

The event was covered by OMNI Television. A reporter and cameraman stopped by in the afternoon to interview Brent Novodvorski (instructor), Osama Yassin (student) and Leonor Hong (Program Coordinator), all of Bow Valley College.

Evaluations

Overall, the symposium received a positive review from those who responded to the evaluations. Highlights from the evaluations included:

- 78% of respondents rated Brent Novodvorski's presentation as "Excellent", with the remainder rating it as "Very good".
- 84% of respondents rated Dave Mason's presentation as "Excellent" and 89% rated Aastrid Evansen-Flanjak's as "Excellent".
- 95% of respondents found the group discussions "very useful".
- 75% of respondents found the information "very useful" in establishing an action plan.
- 100% of respondents said they would "Absolutely" recommend the event to others.

Comments about the presenters included:

- "Brent is providing needed local leadership in this work."
- "David (Mason)'s life experience and view of education strategies were the things I found that I could take away from the symposium and apply in the classroom."
- Aastrid Evansen-Flanjak was described as a "powerful presenter".
- "Loved seeing input from two learners."
- "Including students in the presentation was an excellent idea."

Other selected comments:

- "Can't wait to attend more."
- "Loved seeing input from two learners."
- "Including students in the presentation was an excellent idea."
- "Great information on bilingual learning!"
- "The diversity and experience of the group opened many windows."
- "I feel all the points raised were pertinent."
- "One of the most energetic, positive symposiums I have been a part of."

The points for improvement included having a larger, cooler room and more time for presentations and discussion.

Conclusions

This symposium generated significant discussion of issues around literacy for Deaf immigrants. The speakers shared information, results of research and personal stories, offering a variety of ways for participants to learn. Following the presentations, participants were able to ask questions, raise issues and think deeply about some of the challenges faced by both the Deaf immigrants and the agencies and organizations who serve them. Finally, participants formulated an action plan that both closed the symposium and opened the possibility for work in this area to continue.

The evaluations of the day were positive overall, though some participants expressed some concern that sometimes ideas that come out of symposia are not pursued and the potential for future work is lost. ***It is important that a working committee be established and that the action plan is set into motion in order to move forward and benefit those who need it.***

The organizing committee for this symposium has committed to following up with interested individuals to establish an on-going working committee to realize some of the goals established in the action plan.