

DRAFT

CREATING A BRIDGE:

**A SNAPSHOT OF ESL LITERACY
IN ONTARIO**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The research team expresses thanks to those working in ESL literacy for taking the time to discuss your work, answer surveys and demonstrate your passion for, as one practitioner said, “creating a bridge” for adult ESL literacy learners whose courage inspires you.

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INTRODUCTION

This ESL literacy study aims to examine the literacy issues and challenges faced by a specific immigrant group defined by education and language. It is made up of adult immigrant Canadians in Ontario, newcomers or those already settled, whose first language is neither French nor English and who have limited or no literacy skills in their first language. The focus of the study is on the English as a Second Language (ESL) training community in Ontario, and their students who are studying to become literate in ESL, with limited or no literacy skills in their first language.

The aim of the study is to provide a current picture for the purpose of identifying issues, gaps, opportunities that could be addressed through policy and programming. What are current ESL literacy issues? Who are its learners? Who are its practitioners? The Ontario Literacy Coalition with funding from the Trillium Foundation undertook a literature review, collected information from practitioners and administrations through a web discussion forum and conducted interviews and surveys.

The study builds a profile of the adult ESL literacy learner and the language training programs offered in the province of Ontario. Adult ESL literacy learners face the same barriers as immigrants learning a new language. However, difficulties for ESL literacy learners are considerably compounded. They face extra obstacles because of lack of education, unfamiliarity of written language and learning to learn in a foreign language.

Programs providing language training services to ESL literacy learners also face barriers. While more general ESL program delivery is well established, there are few well-established supports in place to deal with the unique demands of the ESL literacy classroom. Barriers identified through the study include lack of professional development opportunities and funding, underdeveloped understanding of literacy theory and practice, unclear or inadequate outreach, among others.

The growing ESL literacy field is revealed as being significantly distinct from more general ESL delivery. The fields of more general ESL delivery and adult literacy acquisition have much to learn from each other. An emergent theme that has become clear is that those who work in ESL literacy are beginning to understand their roles as participants of a special subgroup of ESL delivery.

Methodology

An extensive review of the literature on ESL literacy to establish background and guide other data collection was undertaken in consultation with the project's advisory group. The advisory group as well gave feedback on the research framework. An environmental scan, an open web discussion group, structure informal interviews and two surveys were the data collection tools. Multiple tools were used to provide reliable cross-referencing.

The research targeted people who work in ESL related areas such as an ESL program. A sample of convenience was chosen, targeting those directly involved with ESL literacy delivery in some way. This sample allowed the gathering of ESL literacy-specific information. It also was an opportunity to alert the broader ESL community of the research and the ESL literacy field as a potentially distinct community of practice.

FINDINGS

The Literature

The literature reveals seven major themes and issues ongoing in ESL literacy work. While, by definition, instruction of ESL necessarily demands a focus on the written language, instructors generally possess a weak knowledge base of literacy theory. There is a great deal of concern over the question of the need to become literate in one's first language (L1) before doing the same in a second language (L2).

The detailing of how having a first language affects the acquisition of a second language is critical for ESL literacy instructors and learners. The literature underlines the importance of understanding the relationship between oral and written language learning in ESL literacy. The use of the ESL literacy learner's first language in the learning experience, either through bilingual instruction or bilingual tutors who speak the learner's first language and can thus explain concepts and classroom language, is put forward as a critical issue for optimum learning. Establishing a profile of the ESL literacy learner as distinct from a general ESL learner is a priority. Establishing a foundation of ESL literacy best practices in programming and in instruction as having nuances distinct from general ESL delivery is imperative.

Gaps in the Literature

There is a need for clear and consistent language or terminology in ESL literacy. There are numerous terms for ESL as well as definitions of literacy. In the well-established general literacy field, there is an underdeveloped focus on ESL literacy. There are few studies on ESL literacy learners, their classrooms and their successes and failures. Indeed, the literature reveals that there is a lack of global or holistic focus on ESL literacy learners. The focus of the literature is generally pointed at English language learning in a mainstream sense without a take on the whole person and what that learner may bring socially, culturally and linguistically to the language learning equation. There are inconsistent indicators of what

level of education or number of years of previous education, constitute a need for ESL literacy instruction.

The debate over “first language first” remains a gap requiring definitive research. That is to say, is it important for a learner to be literate in their own language first before attempting to master another language? As well, the literature review revealed that policy regarding ESL literacy is yet to be developed. Most policy regarding language training for immigrants begins at Canadian Language Benchmark 1, leaving ESL literacy learners subject to the effects of policy designed for learners functioning at more advanced levels.

Finally, there is little mention in ESL literature of the attempt to engage what ESL literacy learners already know in their own mother tongue language. It is possible that an emphasis in the literature on using authentic materials is related to activating meaningful communicative exchange but this is unclear. Awareness of learning process and awareness of meta-level or thinking about thinking in second language learning may be important areas for future investigation.

What Does It All Mean?

The knowledge base in the ESL field has tended to be focused on oral aspects of language. Speaking, listening and conversation activities make up the majority of classroom practice. The challenge of written language acquisition, as a result, has not been a prime focus even though western society relies heavily on written systems. Many ESL classroom goals, even oral conversation goals, are supported by literate means. In this context, the importance of understanding literacy acquisition within the complex dynamic of the ESL literacy classroom takes on greater urgency.

Much policy devoted to language training is driven by labour force needs. The demands of vocational language, the ability to read instructions and to produce the language of work are often unrealistic expectations, even for ESL learners in Canadian Language Benchmarks

levels who already have some level of functional everyday language or some literate background. For the ESL literacy learner work language expectations are truly distanced from the reality of the learner. The language training focus and the requirements of the workplace are disconnected.

Learner Challenges

The task faced by ESL literacy learners is immense even for confident learners whose self-esteem and sense of security are intact. Certainly ESL literacy learners suffer the same kind of anxiety as any immigrant seeking language training in a new homeland. However, practitioners identified that many ESL literacy learners are from war-torn countries and suffer security fears and issues. Few are willing to attend class unless it is offered close to their own community. The shame about not being able to read and write and self-perceived inability to learn or progress is a serious factor in ESL literacy classes. Practitioners noticed that conversation class attendance would be consistent, but when reading and writing activities were introduced attendance declined. Some learners even dropped out. The perception of increased difficulty and/or increased instructional difficulties presents very real challenges to instructors and programs.

It is clear that ESL literacy learners who exhibit so many potential learning barriers need a special brand of instructional characteristics that need to be addressed in a methodical manner through professional development. Learners need consistency to feel some security in knowing that the same one or two instructors or tutors will be their trustworthy guides in the maze of language training. Part-time instruction issues are concerns in terms of creating stability for the ESL literacy learner as classroom instructors change throughout the course of the program as a result of bumping. Large class size is also problematic for the ESL literacy learner who may need a great deal of individual attention to get the learning curve under way. ESL literacy learners' lack of familiarity with formal education and written language usage means that initially, they lack the ability to work independently. So tutors, bilingual

instruction aides and engaging classroom activities become critical elements.

Complex Needs

Language training is quite simply not enough. There is a whole gamut of needs present for the ESL literacy learner. These include having sufficient food and affordable housing; accessing health care; learning to deal with the school system; navigating the community quite literally, and knowing the community's laws. The more social supports included in language training, the better. Program and learner success depend on these supports and networks in the community.

Physical environment may be a critical factor in setting a scene for positive learning for the ESL literacy learner. Does the program appear friendly and welcoming? Is the ESL literacy classroom packed with books and posters that cannot be read? Is the assessment room quiet and soothing? Is the classroom adult-friendly or does it have alphabets designed with children in mind? Are materials simply presented and chosen for adult use and cultural suitability? Line drawings may have no meaning for some ESL literacy learners. Learners from oral cultures may not understand western grid-constructed concepts of time and punctuality. Many adult programs are offered in classroom for children and cannot be rearranged.

Instructor Qualifications

Instructor qualifications have emerged as a significant issue in this study. Instructors have voiced their concerns about being suitably qualified to teach ESL literacy students. Overall, instructors are challenged initially when obtaining their ESL certification, citing a lack of suitable coverage of ESL literacy. The opportunities to participate in ESL literacy professional development activities are rare for most instructors. Programs indicated a lack of formal ESL literacy recognition and overall information for purposes of developing hiring criteria to teach ESL literacy.

Although there are a significant number of tasks that are consistently applied in either an ESL or ESL literacy classroom, the greatest need of instructors is their ability to also provide literacy instruction in the context of providing language instruction. This is a challenge that regular ESL instructors do not face. The characteristics of ESL literacy learners require instructors to broaden their skill areas, such as the counseling skills that are needed to assist students experiencing trauma from war-torn countries, an issue which can impact on their ability to learn.

Certain aspects of teaching in an ESL literacy classroom demand specific skills and knowledge from practitioners. Without a clear articulation of these demands, programs are generally unable to produce appropriate job description. Our findings demonstrate the varying range of years people have been employed in the field of ESL; however, the vast majority of instructors have spent precious little time specifically teaching in ESL literacy environments. The result is that it challenges programs to provide appropriate program responses from an instructional perspective, when there is a critical lack of instructors with expertise in ESL literacy.

Professional Development

One of the lynchpins to successfully building a group of experienced ESL literacy instructors is the opportunity to obtain continuing education in the field of ESL literacy. Initial ESL certification provides a foundational basis for individuals embarking on this journey. Respondents reported that the provision of professional development opportunities is insufficient and that there is a shortage of opportunities. The lack of professional development results in instructors spending endless hours on research and material preparation for each lesson. This influences an instructor's ability to cope in this context. It unfortunately, causes many to seek out other teaching opportunities that provide an overall improved set of working conditions, balanced with salary expectations. In addition, many instructors are only paid for the actual hours they teach. Any preparation time has to be done

on their own time. There are not enough ESL literacy experts that have been identified to serve as models. Finally, there are few resources and training opportunities for specific ESL literacy programs.

Instructional Materials

Accessing appropriate instructional materials is another issue facing instructors of ESL literacy students. This may be due in part to the uneven distribution of materials. Some school boards have the ability to provide a greater volume of materials, and furthermore to have experienced ESL literacy instructors mentor those with less experience, even providing them with materials they have prepared during their own time. Again, we can trace the increased workload of an instructor's preparation time not only to lack of formal education to address ESL literacy student instructional needs, but also to the general lack of appropriate materials. As well, access to published and instructor-created materials, particularly for the more isolated instructors is an issue for practitioners.

Certain adaptations are necessary for ESL literacy students. Lessons must be presented repeatedly in a variety of ways. Higher level materials need to be broken down into smaller learning segments, and further altered into several versions in order to be taught over and over again without becoming mundane and repetitious. In some cases, the higher level materials cannot be suitably modified if we recall that this group of learners requires literacy instruction in addition to language instruction. Higher level materials may not always be suitable for this purpose, requiring instructors to create lessons that will not only accomplish language acquisition goals, but also foster literacy development as well.

Assessments

Learner assessments appear to be strongest in the initial stages of the programming model, relying to a greater extent on trained assessors to perform assessments, and applying formal assessment tools, tested for their reliability and validity. The assessment tools that are used however, are mainly those provided by Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs, and some larger school boards. There are some individual learners who may not have an opportunity to be properly assessed depending on where they live in Ontario. Assessments provide some guidance to instructors in that they indicate gaps in knowledge and generally place individuals in a learning context that is most suitable for them. The task of determining where to direct individual learning lies with the instructors.

Half of the instructors surveyed indicated that they had four (4) years or less experience teaching ESL literacy students. Without formal tools to clearly identify gaps in learning, instructors have to rely on their own experience of working with ESL literacy students to guide them in their judgment of using assessments to inform instruction and promotion to higher levels.

Program Practices

In terms of best practices for program design, our findings indicated that there is good baseline activity for ESL programs in general. Many of the principles and guidelines that have been developed could be successfully adapted to ESL literacy programming practices. A number of suggestions from the field can be taken into consideration for the development of more specific guidelines for ESL literacy programs. Such suggestions include: smaller class sizes, suitable instructional materials and professional development opportunities for instructors. More work needs to be done in this area through a study that specifically focuses on ESL literacy distinctly and that dissects and hones in on specific segments of the field to produce a document unique to ESL literacy.

The broad ESL literacy framework provided in this report suggests the need for a great deal of further work to explore the large scope of the topic. These broad strokes however, do provide a meaningful platform upon which to build.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research offers a snapshot of ESL literacy in Ontario. The research findings and literature review have brought forth the recommendations listed below. While these recommendations are not exhaustive, they offer some insight into some important areas.

Program Development

- Develop a Maslow-style hierarchy in terms of ESL literacy learner needs; that is meeting basic needs first (food, safety/shelter) to allow further development (belonging, followed by self-esteem and finally by self-actualization). Such a framework, aligned with language training, would address the multiple, urgent concurrent needs of ESL literacy learners. The framework could guide classroom activities and curriculum with appropriate attention to "survival" language and the ESL literacy learning curve.
- Provide classes for ESL literacy learners only (not mixed with other more advanced ESL learners).
- Limit class size, to a maximum of 8-10 ESL literacy learners.
- Assign to classes, bilingual instructors who have command of both English and the learner's first language, to encourage optimal learning
- Investigate ESL literacy within a family literacy framework to address the significant social, parenting and school interface needs of ESL literacy learners
- Connect practitioners experienced in the delivery of ESL literacy instruction with those less experienced, in order to create more of a community in this specific field of ESL
- Develop virtual networks and promote the existence of these to the ESL community
- Conduct an inventory of existing instructional materials, both published and instructor-created; provide reviews and where possible, actual material over the internet.

Training/Certification Qualification

- Increase literacy training for ESL practitioners.
- Include a more extensive course of study within the current TESL Certificate, or offer specialization courses in addition to the certificate program;
- Increase accessible ESL literacy training opportunities for practitioners. Make ESL literacy training eligible for hours of upgrading/maintenance for those with existing ESL certification.
- Develop and provide an introductory course in ESL literacy to individuals pursuing an ESL certificate.
- Investigate ESL literacy- specific qualifications or specialization paths within existing ESL certification systems.
- Develop tutor or mentor training for successful ESL learners that better supports them by explaining concepts and classroom needs in the learner's first language.
- Provide opportunities for ESL literacy instructors to meet and hold discussions, face to face at the annual TESL Ontario conference and other appropriate venues.

Policy

- Investigate the effectiveness of policy “harbours” (the possibility of an exception that could address exceptional needs) for ESL literacy learner language training needs to address unrealistic workforce and citizenship expectations.
- Investigate micro community networks as an effective model of communicating and creating effective outreach /recruitment for ESL literacy programming.
- Investigate increasing the capacity to identify literacy levels through more precise immigration intake data and census taking data collection.

Research

- Consider increasing the knowledge base of international culture and languages to provide a more holistic approach to ESL literacy learning and instruction.
- Further investigate the case of ESL literacy learners in Ontario who are literate in their first language but whose written language is non-Roman alphabet. An example would be Chinese ESL learners, as potentially distinct from ESL literacy learners with limited or no literacy skills in their first language.
- Investigate the case of ESL literacy learners with relatively higher fluency in speaking/listening skills but with limited literacy skills.
- Continue research into best practices for program design and ESL literacy instructors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study of ESL literacy reveals a variety of emerging needs. The more we probed, the more we discovered how little we knew about ESL literacy learners. There is little in the way of statistical data about immigrants and their literacy levels upon entering Canada. There is still less documented information on their general characteristics. Although the literature does provide some insights, the ever varying ebb and flow of immigration patterns produces populations that reflect the times we live in. The characteristics of immigrants now are as unique as they were 20 years ago, and as they may be 20 years from now. In short, we clearly do not know enough about today's ESL literacy learners and as time progresses, we must be vigilant about keeping informed of who they are.

Instructional responses to ESL literacy learner needs have vary from program to program. The quality of the response has been largely dependent upon the level of experience and expertise of program managers and instructors. An effective instructional response greatly depends upon this experience and expertise; yet, the findings revealed that instructors face various struggles and challenges in responding to ESL literacy student needs.

Policy makers face the challenge of making the decisions that set the stage to achieve measurable results, both efficiently and effectively. As is so often the case in our society, the fate of the ESL literacy learner depends upon a coordinated response from a group of individuals who must perform at a level of professionalism that puts the well being of ESL literacy learners above all else. This study has broken ground, and provides insights for key stakeholders to respond to the ESL literacy learner's needs.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) aims to find effective and respectful ways to help people in Ontario who have literacy challenges. We are committed to a future vision of Ontario where people with literacy challenges have access to high-quality supports and opportunities, and can find and use the information they need.

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