



Movement for Canadian Literacy

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LINKAGES: Connecting Literacy and English as a Second Language

Discussion Paper:

*What do we know about the Connections between
Literacy and English as a Second Language
in Canada?*

Sue Folinsbee
November 2007

Acknowledgments

One of the ways that Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) fulfills its mandate is by bringing together literacy and non-literacy organizations to build consensus, capacity and commitment on shared concerns topic. This project, *Linkages: Connecting Literacy and English as a Second Language*, reflects MCL's desire to bring together people from the literacy, ESL and settlement fields to talk about the challenges Canadians with both literacy and language issues face.

This paper serves as a starting point for discussion. It will be used as background material for a forum connecting people from all three fields. We hope this exchange will deep our shared understanding of the issues and suggest directions for future collaboration.

We would like to thank our researcher and consultant, Sue Folinsbee for her commitment to the creation of this paper and her input into the development of the forum. Sue's work was guided by our working group: Sarah Buhkari, Phil Davison, Sandy Middleton, Robin Millar, Maria Moriarty, Cate Sills, Caroline Vaughan, Nadine Valk and Shailja Verma. Thanks and appreciation to Mary Ellen Belfiore who conducted many of the key informant interviews.

While Sue's work was guided by the working group, this report couldn't have been written without the willingness of people working in the literacy, ESL and settlement fields to be interviewed by Sue. The key informants (See Appendix 1) also suggested resources and other people to be interviewed. Thank you all for your contribution to this paper.

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I. Introduction

This discussion paper is part of a larger Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) project entitled *Linkages: Connecting Literacy and English as a Second Language* (ESL).¹ The goal of the overall project is for MCL to work with national organizations that support the ESL/Settlement and literacy fields to identify common issues and concerns and to document areas for mutual cooperation in the future.

A. Movement for Canadian Literacy's Interest in English as a Second Language Literacy

MLC is interested in the connections between literacy and ESL because of the incidence of low literacy for immigrants, as indicated by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS).² The IALSS shows that 60% of immigrants score below Level 3 on prose literacy compared to 37% of the Canadian born population. Furthermore, the results showed that immigrants whose mother tongue differs from that of test language (English or French) had lower average scores overall than immigrants whose mother tongue was English or French.³ MCL sees the importance of looking at literacy as an issue of integration—in this case, literacy and immigration and citizenship. To examine this topic further, MCL decided to explore two questions in this project:

- How does literacy fits with ESL and settlement issues and positive integration into Canadian life?
- How are these issues linked and/or coordinated at a systems level?

This discussion paper serves as a starting point and background material for a one-day forum connecting literacy, ESL, and settlement sectors sponsored by MCL. Delegates attending will be key players in the literacy, ESL, and settlement sectors.

¹ In other jurisdictions may be referred to as English as an Additional Language (EAL).

² See ABC CANADA's IALSS Report summary at http://www.abc-canada.org/media_room/media/ialss_summary_nov_05.pdf

³ See *Literacy skills among Canada's immigrant population* by Statistics Canada <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/81-004-XIE/2005005/impop.htm>

The purpose of the forum will be to:

- identify areas of common concern and document these issues
- develop a plan of action to address common concerns

B. Purpose of the Discussion Paper

The purpose of the discussion paper is to highlight and summarize current Canadian research over the last five to seven years in terms of key themes, issues, gaps and needed strategies on connections between literacy and ESL. The paper will also reflect the perspectives of a small number of key informants from the literacy, ESL, and settlement fields on key themes. The paper will be distributed to all delegates prior to a national symposium on ESL and literacy to be held in November 2007.

II. Methodology

MCL was interested in exploring connections between ESL and literacy for this discussion paper especially with respect to immigrants who have low literacy and education in their mother tongue. This is often referred to as ESL literacy and this is the area where much of the research focuses. As such, this term is the focal point of discussion in this paper. The discussion paper includes a focus on both recent newcomers who join ESL or Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs, do not join a program, as well as immigrants and refugees who have been in Canada for many years who, at some point, may attend a literacy or Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. In other cases, there could be a benefit in looking at effective practices in Aboriginal and Inuit education where adults speak English as a second language.

A. Working Group

MCL convened a cross-national working group to guide and advise the development of the discussion paper. The working group was composed of key informants for ESL and literacy including MCL board members. Working group members, along with others, gave feedback on interview protocols, and

identified key research papers and literature reviews on the topic of ESL and literacy in the Canadian context. They also identified key informants for the paper.

B. Review of the Literature

With the working group's input, the researcher developed an ongoing list of recent, relevant papers, reports and policy statements particularly related to ESL literacy and literacy for immigrants in general. Although most reports focused on the Canadian context, several documents focusing on the international context were also reviewed.

The researcher reviewed each document for themes that included definitions, profile of immigrants with ESL literacy needs, policy statements, good practice, professional development, gaps and issues, along with solutions and recommendations for the future.

C. Key Informants

With the working group input, the researcher also developed a working list of key informants to be interviewed. The key informant list grew through the data collection process as additional people were recommended.

We attempted to talk to a wide range of key informants across the country including:

- instructors and coordinators working in both literacy and ESL programs
- researchers
- academics
- policymakers
- representatives from provincial literacy coalitions and national literacy organizations

Twenty-three interviews were conducted with key informants. An additional key informant gave input into the draft paper. See Table 1 for a breakdown of key informants by sector. See Table 2 for a breakdown of key informants by province/territory.

Table 1: Key informants by sector			
Literacy programs/ Organizations respondents	ESL literacy program respondents	Researchers and/or Academics	Policymakers
8	6	3-ESL; 2-Literacy	3

Table 2: Key informants by Province/Territory			
British Columbia	4	Nova Scotia	2
Alberta	3	Newfoundland	2
Manitoba	3	Northwest Territories	2
Ontario	4	Nunavut	1
Quebec	1		

Key informant interviews focused on:

- definitions of ESL literacy
- profiles of immigrants and refugees with literacy needs
- where adults with ESL literacy needs attend programs
- what kind of professional development practitioners receive
- good practice in programming for ESL literacy
- policies that support the development of ESL literacy
- the challenges and gaps in delivering ESL literacy programming
- strategies to address gaps and challenges
- role of MCL in addressing common national concerns

D. Limitations of the Discussion Paper

It is important to re-emphasize that the discussion paper is a starting point on the dialogue looking at connections between literacy and ESL, not an end point. The limited time frame and funds available for this paper influenced where to focus, who and how many key informants to interview, and what to include in the discussion paper.

Overall, there were very few research reports that addressed the complexities of the connections between literacy and ESL. Most of the reports found and reviewed focused on programs in ESL. Very little was found on connections between settlement issues of immigrants and refugees and having low literacy in one's first language. In addition, the literature reviewed did not tend to make distinctions between the needs of immigrants and refugees.

We were not able to make the connections with key informants in the settlement sector that we had hoped for. The lack of perspectives from the settlement sector is an identified gap in the discussion paper.

III. Findings

A. Introduction

Overall, there has been very little Canadian research on connections between literacy and ESL in the last decade.⁴ However, there are several recent research reports. Most of the recent research has been conducted in Ontario and focuses on literacy as it relates to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.

Feedback from key informants shows that immigrants learn literacy in both ESL programs, and literacy and ABE programs. However, there is little formal knowledge on the demographics of who ESL literacy learners are and why they end up in certain kinds of programs.

⁴ The 2005 *State of the Field Review: Adult Literacy* sponsored by the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre, Canadian Council on Learning found that that was an absence of research on second language speakers with literacy challenges in their own language. The report identified this lack of knowledge as a serious gap in the knowledge base. See <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/sotfr/adultlit/adultlit.pdf>

B. Definitions of ESL Literacy

This paper deliberately does not embrace or assume a particular definition of ESL literacy. Rather, one goal of the project was to find out what definitions were in use across the country. The research shows a range of different definitions in use.

i. Review of the Literature

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)⁵ refers to ESL literacy as a program for people who are not functionally literate in their own language for variety of reasons. This includes those individuals:

- with little schooling in their own language
- from an oral culture with no written language
- who do not read or write at all in any language
- who are literate or not in their own language but use a non-Roman alphabet⁶

Jangles Productions embraces the CLB definition in its study of instructional and assessment best practices in LINC programs in Ontario that focus on ESL literacy.⁷ Recent research by the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) looks at ESL literacy through the lens of adult immigrant Canadians in Ontario who are newcomers or settled, and have limited or no literacy in their first language (other than English or French). The OLC's research attempted to provide a picture of ESL literacy in Ontario through an ESL lens rather than a mainstream literacy lens.⁸

⁵ CLB refers to "a descriptive scale of communicative proficiency in English as a Second Language (ESL) expressed as 12 benchmarks or reference points." CLB includes ESL Literacy Benchmarks that lay out the progression of reading, writing and numeracy skills for ESL adults who have little or no literacy skills in their first language. See http://www.language.ca/pdfs/clb_adults.pdf

⁶ Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. (2000). *ESL for literacy learners*. Retrieved from <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/CLB2000/content.htm> August 2007.

⁷ Jangles Productions. (2006). An investigation of best practices in the instruction and assessment of *LINC literacy learners in Ontario*. Retrieved from http://atwork.settlement.org/sys/atwork_library_detail.asp?passed_lang=EN&doc_id=1004302 August 2007.

⁸ Ontario Literacy Coalition. (2007). *Creating a bridge: A snapshot of ESL literacy in Ontario. Executive summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/bridge/bridge.pdf> August 2007.

The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre used a benchmark of less than Grade 9 to define literacy in a study that focused on the settlement needs of newcomers in Toronto with limited literacy in their first language.⁹

Robin Millar has a different take and has coined the term “ES/FSliteracy.” Her working definition refers to immigrants who have been in Canada for five or more years, have oral communicative competence in English or French, have limited mother tongue literacy, and attend “mainstream” literacy programs.¹⁰

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Key informants’ perspectives show that there are multiple understandings of ESL literacy that reveal complexities and nuances. Most key informants acknowledge that ESL literacy focuses on those adults who have low literacy and education in their first language. Those working on the ESL side of the literacy equation in LINC or ESL programs tend to adhere more closely to a definition similar to the CLB. Some people working in literacy and ABE see second language literacy as focusing on those adults who have good oral fluency in English but low literacy and/or education in their mother tongue as well as English. Others acknowledge that there are Aboriginal adults in literacy programs whose mother tongue is not English with high school or less who speak their own language in their community but work in English. Some informants work more broadly with a definition that encompasses all these perspectives.

One group that several informants described as part of the concept of ESL literacy was that of young adults who were born in Canada or who came to Canada at a young age. They have native fluency in English, but grew up in homes where the parents do not have strong literacy skills in their mother tongue.

⁹ Geronimo, J., Folinsbee, S. & Goveas, J. (2001). A research project into the settlement need of adult immigrants with limited literacy in their first language who have settled in the Greater Toronto Area. Retrieved from http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/settlement_needs_first_language_literacy_skills.pdf August 2007.

¹⁰ From presentation at the Ontario Literacy Coalition’s ESL Literacy symposium in May 2007.

Interestingly, in Eastern Canada, the notion of ESL literacy included anyone who needed to learn English literacy including those immigrants highly educated and literate in their own language.

C. Adults with ESL Literacy Needs

Overall, there is not a complete or common understanding of who might be considered an ESL literacy learner. Nor is there is systematic, detailed, and formalized knowledge about immigrants and refugees with low education and literacy in their own language in Canada. Most information about this group is very general and informal, with only small pockets of information about their demographics and experiences. Overall, we do not know what literacy skills and learning strategies people bring in their own language. We do not know the proportion of those immigrants and refugees who have high oral skills in English or French but limited literacy skills. Additionally, the particular needs of refugees with ESL literacy needs are not reflected in the literature.

i. Review of the Literature

In its 2007 report *Creating a Bridge: A Snapshot of ESL Literacy in Ontario*, the OLC reviewed what is known about newcomers to Canada and their proficiency in their first language literacy. The findings indicate that there is very little Canadian research that provides information on immigrants and refugees and their proficiency in first language literacy. The OLC research states that provincial or federal governments do not collect this information. The report notes that only broad information is available in that the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALS) found that 60% of immigrants score below Level 3¹¹ compared to 37% for those adults born in Canada. This difference remains relatively consistent for immigrants who have been here both less and more than ten years.

¹¹ The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has five levels. Those adults who perform at levels 1 and 2 have low literacy skills and would find most everyday material difficult. For more information see the backgrounder on IALS by the Government of Canada from *Reading the future: A portrait of Canada* at <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/nls/ials/ialsreps/backgrounder.pdf>

Using IALS data, Susan Sussman found that one of the demographic groups with the lowest literacy skills (level 1) is those adult Canadians who speak neither English nor French. In describing this group, she notes that some do not have literacy in any language while others may be highly literate in their own language. In addition, some have been here for decades, while others are newcomers. She notes that Native Canadians may also have ESL literacy needs.¹²

In her literature review, Diane Millar found that there were no studies that indicated specifically how many immigrants have high oral skills in Canada's official languages, but limited literacy skills in reading and writing.¹³

The Centre for Education and Work in Winnipeg is presently heading up a study that examines the issue of immigrants who attend literacy programs. The study is being carried out in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. The subjects of this study include individuals living in Canada for more than 5 years, who speak French or English but have limited literacy in their first language.¹⁴

The study is being undertaken because currently there is little research in this area and as many as 20–30% of participants in literacy programs are immigrants. The purpose of the study is to find out the characteristics of these learners. Interim findings show that issues for learners and instructors in these programs are similar to those found in ESL programming with ESL literacy students. For example, instructors find it difficult to meet the needs of these learners, there are few resources to assist them, and the target population is generally underserved.¹⁵

The 2006 Jangles Productions study surveyed 13 Ontario sites with 247 ESL literacy students in LINC classes. The findings showed that these students tended to be between 31 and 50 years old and were Convention refugees,

¹² Sussman, S. (2003). *Moving the makers. New perspectives on adult literacy rates in Canada*. Retrieved August 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/mcl/moving/moving.pdf>

¹³ Millar, D. (1997). *Second language students in adult literacy programs: Issues and concerns*. Retrieved August 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/slsinclip/cover.htm>

¹⁴ Lauzon, C. (in press). *Creating a bridge: A snapshot of ESL Literacy, Ontario 2006*. Symposium proceedings report. Toronto ON: Ontario Literacy Coalition.

¹⁵ Ibid.

government sponsored refugees, or family class.¹⁶ Countries predominantly represented were Somalia, Afghanistan, Sudan, China, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Vietnam, Iraq, and Iran. The study does not indicate the gender of learners, their length of time in Canada, or their educational backgrounds.

The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre conducted a series of focus groups in Toronto with immigrants and refugees who had come mainly from developing countries. Most participants were female between the ages of 20 and 60. Also, the majority were members of a racialized community and had arrived as Convention refugees, refugee claimants, or landed immigrants. Most had been here for 5 years or less but others had been in Canada longer. The authors identified common factors among those who had low literacy in their own language. One common factor was that many participants had come from rural, agrarian cultures where they had left school early to work. War was another common factor, resulting in a lack of opportunity to go to school. For some women, getting married and having children was more important than going to school. Participants in the research indicated they wanted to work but could not get jobs. Along with literacy and language difficulties, racism and discrimination also factored into this lack of employment.¹⁷

The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre and OLC reports indicate that low literacy in one's first language compounds the issues faced by immigrants and refugees. The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre report shows that together with low literacy, issues such as racism and discrimination, poor housing, lack of access to health care, and lack of employment opportunities prevent integration and quality of life for these immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, the report indicates that there are few settlement programs other than literacy and ESL training programs that address the particular needs of those adults with ESL literacy needs. Similarly, the OLC report acknowledged that language training is only one aspect of a host of larger social issues that need to be supported for adults with ESL literacy needs.

¹⁶ A Convention refugee is a person who by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, (a) is outside each of their countries of nationality and is unable or, by reason of that fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of each of those countries, or (ii) not having a country of nationality, is outside their country of former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country. The family class refers to immigrants who are close relatives of a sponsor in Canada. See Citizenship and Immigration Canada web site at <http://cicnet.ci.gc.ca/english/about/terms-e.html>

¹⁷ Geronimo et al. (2001).

The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre report detailed the experiences of immigrants and refugees with low literacy in their own language who participated in the research. One of the overarching findings from consultations with immigrants and refugee communities was the double barrier they faced on the basis of race and their language and literacy abilities. Consistently, participants spoke about the marginalization they faced from racism, and discrimination based on language across the spectrum of society. For women and girls, gender was identified as a barrier with Canadian society in general and within their own ethno-specific communities.

The findings indicated that immigrants and refugees with low literacy in their own language experience extreme disadvantage in a culture that is governed by print. Participants in the research spoke about the discrimination they faced because they could not understand legal and other important documents. They also spoke about the lack of cultural interpretation, and specifically emphasized their isolation and marginalization. Many said they depend entirely on family and friends for help with print materials. In addition, they may not know where or how to access services. They are also limited in their job opportunities in a society where jobs without a need for literacy skills are few and far between. They may also not be able to help their children with their schoolwork. Participants spoke about wanting to be independent, and able to access programs that would help them to break out of the cycle to solve problems for themselves.¹⁸

Feedback in the study from immigrants and refugees with low literacy in their own language indicates that the literacy issue is intertwined with other concerns in their attempts to settle and is a key barrier. Literacy cannot be isolated out from other issues, concerns, and barriers that newcomers face. The report states, “Basic needs such as housing, health care, and employment are all compounded by low literacy skills.”¹⁹ All these are felt as a whole and impact on one another leading to a cycle of poverty that is made more complex and severe for this group because of low literacy.²⁰

¹⁸ Geronimo et al. (2001).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁰ Ibid.

For example, the whole issue of finding and obtaining housing assumes good literacy skills from reading the newspaper, to understanding and signing agreements, and writing complaints if conflicts arise. Employment is another concern where a prerequisite for most jobs is good literacy skills. There are few jobs that match the experience and skills of immigrants and refugees with low literacy in their own language. Health and literacy are also intertwined. Low literacy skills makes it difficult to read and understand health related material and forms. But just as importantly, low literacy keeps immigrants and refugees isolated from the rest of society which can lead to mental health issues, notably depression.²¹

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Key informants paint a picture of a diverse and complex picture of the adults considered “ESL literacy,” The descriptions that follow provide an emerging picture of some of the specific groups that may have low literacy or education in their first language.

Immigrants and Refugees

Overall, immigrants and refugees in ESL literacy programs represent a wide variety of countries, age ranges, time in Canada, learning strategies, and oral fluency in English. They were identified mostly as having low literacy skills in their own language and usually with less than a high school education. They attend programs for a variety of reasons depending on their length of time in Canada. The particular barriers and isolation facing women at home with children were stressed. Often women have no way of getting to class or there may be a waiting list for childcare. They may not want to go out. They may not be sure of their options or the expectations of school. Many have little or no independence, depending entirely on their husbands.

Within this group, some informants identified a group of immigrants who had been in Canada for 5 to 30 years who were fluent orally in English, had low literacy or little education in their own language, and low literacy in English. These adults may have been working for a numbers of years. Some have had

²¹ Ibid.

no ESL instruction and learned English from those around them. They communicate easily in speaking, and understand without a lot of repetition and are comfortable with Canadian culture.

Refugees were identified as a specific group. These adults are described as being from war-torn countries and are escaping some kind of danger. These adults, along with their children, may have spent many years in refugee camps. These children may be young adults who had little past opportunities for education and with cultural and education backgrounds vastly different from anything in Canada. Refugee adults and their children have had limited resources and choices from spending many years in refugee camps. In addition to literacy and educational needs, refugees were described as having multiple settlement needs.

Refugees with ESL literacy needs were described as representing a range of ages. Informants instructing or coordinating programs said that they had students predominantly from Northern Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central America. Some have come from small villages where they did not have opportunities for much schooling. Others may have never gone to school. This group was described as resourceful, hard working, and resilient. Some informants noted that this group is facing emotional pain and that trauma affects their learning. They emphasized the importance of respecting and allowing for it.

Refugees who were child soldiers were identified as a distinct group. They tend to be between the ages of 17 and early 30s who have previously lived a life of violence. They have oral fluency speaking a camp English but difficulty with writing. They have not had the opportunity to develop academic skills. They have different expectations about how learning happens and what they can achieve for themselves than what is realistic. The cultural gap is significant. Literacy is only one need among many.

Young adults born in Canada with mother tongue home language

Young adults who were born in Canada or came to Canada at an early age but grew up in families whose home language was not English but their own mother tongue were identified as another specific group of students working

on English literacy. In these cases, the parents were immigrants and may not have had strong first language literacy or language because of interruptions in their education; yet, the student has good oral skills and sounds like a typical Canadian. In other cases, these young adults may have had their own education interrupted due to years in a refugee camp.

Farm workers

Several informants identified Mennonites who have repatriated to Canada from Mexico especially in Manitoba, Ontario, and Alberta as a specific group of ESL literacy learners. These adults and their families may have low literacy and low education in their mother tongue and are in programs to learn English literacy.

Temporary farm workers were identified as a specific group that previously ended up in literacy programs because they were not eligible for language training. However, one informant indicated that this group is now eligible for language training in Manitoba.

Aboriginal and Inuit adults with a range of English skills

Other groups identified were Aboriginal and Inuit adults who might want English literacy skills for work or to help their children. These adults may have English as a second language or grew up in homes where they learned English from parents who spoke it as a second language.

In Nunavut, the majority of Inuit in adult education classes are young adults who have some high school with many dropping out in Grade 10. They come to adult education classes because they want to upgrade their skills for apprenticeships and jobs in the mining industry or to help their kids in school.

In the Northwest Territories, there is an impression of a sizeable group of adults who appear to have, or self-report as having, English as a first language, but who come from families and communities where English is not traditionally the first language. These adults may not have completed high school. For those who almost complete high school, English is often the subject they are lacking. This group straddles two languages. Some may be

more fluent in their mother tongue, and less fluent in English, while others (often younger adults) may have limited proficiency in both languages. Today, both groups tend to use English as their dominant language.

D. Policy Highlights and Challenges

Literacy and English language instruction are quite separate policy jurisdictions. Adult literacy is an educational issue and constitutionally falls under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments. On the other hand, language training is federal and falls under the control of the federal government through Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). At the same time, provinces may provide language instruction with funding from the federal government through institutions such as school boards.

i. Review of the Literature

Canada's adult learning policy environment is complex with diverse provincial and territorial policies and provision across Canada. Different ministries take the lead in different provinces and territories. In some cases, there may be more than one ministry involved. In addition, the federal government has a long-standing involvement in various aspects of adult education. In practice, adult education is supported by both provincial and federal funds.²²

Literacy programs in Canada

Most provinces provide options for adults who do not have a high school diploma that include the ability to pursue either a regular secondary diploma or a special diploma that has been modified to meet the specific needs of adult learners. They can also write a General Educational Development (GED) test in order to obtain a high-school equivalency certificate. They can also join a literacy and basic skills program that goes roughly up to Grade 10. Research shows that there are a variety of different options, costs, and frameworks across provinces and territories.²³

²² CPRN (2006). *Too many left behind: Canada's adult education and training system*. Retrieved August 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/leftbhnd/leftbhnd.pdf>

²³ Ibid.

Language training programs in Canada

Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) is one program that newcomers with ESL literacy needs can access. LINC is a federal program of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) that is of no cost to participants. To be eligible, one must be a landed immigrant, a convention refugee, or have received initial approval in their application to become a permanent resident. Canadian citizens and refugee claimants cannot access this program except under some circumstances. Some provinces receive federal dollars but manage their own language training programs.

Participants can attend LINC for 3 years from the time they start the program. LINC is delivered through funding arrangements with school boards, community colleges, universities, and community organizations. LINC clients are assessed using Canadian language benchmarks (CLBs) to determine their language level. In addition to LINC, provinces may also fund their own second language programs which may also be open to Canadian citizens and refugee claimants.²⁴

Of significance is that TESL Ontario called for a provincial adult education system that recognizes the diversity of the changing population of the province. It emphasized that adult immigrants are the only group that cross all aspects of adult education including ESL classes, credit programs, and literacy and basic skills programs. It called for the need for ESL literacy to be recognized as a distinct area from adult ESL and literacy and basic skills requirements.²⁵

Similarly, the 2006 Jangles Productions study *An investigation of best practices in the instruction and assessment of LINC literacy learners in Ontario* called for a specific recognition for ESL literacy.²⁶ The Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre report *A research project into the settlement need of adult immigrants with limited literacy in their first language who*

²⁴ MPM/Flaman Management Partners Ltd. (2007). *Second language services and programs in Canada*. Retrieved August 2007, from <http://www.cpsc-ccsp.ca/PDFS/Final%20Report.pdf>

²⁵ Teachers of English as a Second Language Association of Ontario. (2004). TESL Ontario position paper on the adult education review in Ontario. Retrieved September 2007, from <http://www.teslontario.org/new/research/AdEdRevPosPaper.pdf>

²⁶ See http://atwork.settlement.org/sys/atwork_library_detail.asp?passed_lang=EN&doc_id=1004302

have settled in the Greater Toronto Area also concluded that there was no policy framework or systematic approach that integrates literacy training for newcomers with low literacy in their own language into present settlement services.²⁷ The OLC report indicated that policy for ESL literacy is yet to be developed.²⁸

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Key informants spoke about the difficulty of the current policy arrangements as they apply to the range of adults who have ESL literacy needs. One issue is that there is not enough funding or specific ESL literacy programs offered through LINC. However, the CIC, Ontario Region agreed with most of the recommendations in the Jangles Productions report and is now taking action on many of the recommendations.²⁹

In addition, there is a policy gap for those adults who do not fit LINC eligibility requirements, have been in Canada for many years, have high oral fluency in English, and low literacy and education in their first language. This can lead to difficulty in figuring out where these adults might receive the most effective programming. As a result, many adults with literacy needs fall through the cracks. One informant said that a person could either be turned away by a literacy program or taken in when they should really be in ESL.

To create a clearer pathway for learners, British Columbia is working on addressing this policy issue through discussion and strategizing among ministries that have a responsibility for ESL and literacy. The province recognizes through the results of the IALS that there is a large group of immigrants who have low literacy. The province's definition of literacy based on IALS includes ESL. There were also indications of policy work or projects

²⁷ Geronimo et al. (2001).

²⁸ Ontario Literacy Coalition. (2007). *Creating a bridge: A snapshot of ESL literacy in Ontario. Executive summary*. Retrieved August 2007 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/bridge/bridge.pdf>

²⁹ Citizenship & Immigration Canada, Ontario Region. (2006). CIC Ontario Region response to the Jangles Productions Report on "An investigation of best practices in the instruction and assessment of LINC literacy learners in Ontario". Retrieved August 2007, from http://www.settlementatwork.org/wp-content/downloads/LINC_Literacy_Study_2006-CIC_Response.pdf

between literacy and ESL in other provinces such as Alberta and Manitoba to address policy gaps between ESL and literacy.

Some of the difficulties that arise out of the current policy arrangements with respect to literacy and language instruction are that:

- Overall there is little (1) recognition of the importance or nature of ESL literacy, (2) professional development for practitioners, (3) research on the range of adults with ESL literacy needs, or 4) importance placed on the need for a coherent policy to address the needs of this group of adults.
- A lack of understanding of the specifics of the population with low literacy in first language can lead to programs that do not match the actual needs.
- There is little or no tracking or data on students in literacy programs with low literacy or little education in their first language.
- There may not be enough separate programming or funding for ESL literacy learners under LINC or other programs; adults with ESL literacy needs may end up in regular LINC programming or other inappropriate programs where they may not be successful.
- There is no specialized programming for adults with ESL literacy needs who do not meet LINC requirements. (adults in Canada for many years with high oral fluency in English and low literacy and education in their first language)
- Adults with ESL literacy needs might bounce around from ESL-type programs to literacy and basic skills programs trying to find out what meets their needs; in some cases, they might not fit well in either program and fall through the cracks.
- Mainstream literacy programs tend not to focus on the specialized needs and requirements of ESL literacy learners—they are lumped with all learners who have reading and writing upgrading needs and considered literacy or ABE students.
- ESL and literacy practitioners tend to remain in different silos unless they work together in the same institution or building; this can lead to a lack of sharing or learning from each other about what works for ESL literacy. (literacy practitioners need ESL training and cross-cultural awareness and ESL practitioners need literacy training)

- ⇒ A lack of a coordinated policy approach can lead to different forms of tuition for similar programs, overlaps in programming, and competition among providers.
- ⇒ There is a tendency to believe that all ESL literacy learners belong in the ESL stream and that their needs will be best served by ESL practitioners.

These described difficulties lead to a situation where adults with low literacy and education in their first language (1) have unequal access to the services they need, or (2) get services that do not meet their needs.

E. Programs Attended by Adults with ESL literacy Needs

Across the country, adults with ESL literacy needs can be found in LINC and provincially funded ESL programs, as well as in literacy and ABE programs. Community-based organizations, colleges, school boards, and other types of organizations offer these programs.

i. Review of the Literature

In its examination of LINC programs, the Jangles Productions study found that most immigrants and refugees in Ontario with literacy needs attending LINC are mostly in the regular stream of designated LINC programs rather than in a separate stream based on ESL literacy needs. Similarly, the Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre and OLC reports also suggest that these adults are attending mostly regular ESL and LINC programs rather than specific ESL literacy classes.

Diane Millar looked at mainstream literacy programs in her 1997 literature review. She found that there was no data or national studies on immigrants who attend mainstream literacy programs. However, she found that some researchers indicated that many ESL learners are attending general literacy or workplace programs.

A decade later, Robin Millar also reported that there are large numbers of students with ES/FSLiteracy³⁰ needs in mainstream literacy programs.³¹

Overall in the recent literature, there was a strong indication that available programs do not adequately meet the needs of adults with little education or literacy in their mother tongue.³²

In Ontario, the CIC, Ontario Region responded positively to the Jangles Productions study *An investigation of best practices in the instruction and assessment of LINC literacy learners in Ontario*. As a result of the findings, CIC has increased the number of ESL literacy classes along with its support for learners and practitioners.³³

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Interviews with key informants showed that immigrants with ESL literacy needs attend LINC, ESL,³⁴ mainstream literacy, Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs and workplace literacy programs. Many informants stated that especially in urban centres across the country there are large numbers of immigrants attending literacy programs. An estimate for one program was that 60% of students were second language speakers. Informant interviews also revealed that choice of a program is influenced by availability and access, especially in provinces and territories with small numbers of immigrants. For example, in rural or remote areas, adults with ESL needs may attend literacy programs because there is no ESL program.

Informants reported that in their provinces the ESL/LINC stream and the literacy stream generally operate as two silos and usually do not work together. Several informants indicated that there was an un-stated

³⁰ Students who are orally fluent in English or French with limited mother tongue literacy and have been in Canada for five years or more.

³¹ From presentation at the OLC ESL literacy symposium held in May 2007.

³² See *An Investigation of Best Practices in the Instruction and Assessment of LINC Literacy Learners in Ontario; A research project into the settlement need of adult immigrants with limited literacy in their first language who have settled in the Greater Toronto Area*; and *Creating a bridge: A snapshot of ESL literacy in Ontario*. Executive summary

³³ CIC, Ontario Region. (2006).

³⁴ Refers to provincially funded programs as well as others that may not be formally recognized such as those offered by churches and other organizations through fundraising.

understanding that mainstream literacy programs were for those born in Canada and that the presence of immigrants in literacy programs was not something that could be talked about. However, other informants stated that there was no difficulty with second language speakers attending literacy programs who had reading and writing needs and enough oral proficiency to attend such programs. Interestingly, several informants said that the profile of the learners in ESL literacy and literacy programs might be quite similar.

According to information gained from key informant interviews, in situations where immigrants attend literacy or ABE programs there appears to be two predominant situations. The first is that immigrants who attend literacy programs tend to have been in Canada for many years and have a high degree of oral proficiency in English. However, they do not have high literacy or education in their own language and want to upgrade their literacy skills in English and/or get more education. These adults usually are not labelled as ESL learners. Rather, they are adults with ESL who are learning side by side with students born in Canada. The second situation is when immigrants go to literacy programs to further their language development in English because there are no other services or they have completed the programs available. These immigrants tend to be literate in their own language and have a need for more ESL development. People may also choose to go to literacy programs over other programs because they are free or because they live in rural areas where no other programs are available.

F. ESL Literacy Program Practice: What is Working

i. Review of the Literature

There was little research found on good practice in ESL literacy in a Canadian context. Moreover, there was no Canadian research found that shows particular strategies for ESL literacy learning and instruction that lead to progress and positive outcomes.

ESL and LINC classes

Overall, the Jangles Productions report found that some of the overall elements in LINC classes that make ESL literacy learning work include supports like child care, money for transportation, teaching assistants,

appropriate resources and materials, and an excellent physical environment along with stable funding. The study also reports the need for enough time for literacy learning along with having a case management approach with counselling and interpretation regarding literacy goals. Professional development for teachers was identified as key. In addition, good practice in teaching and learning activities included a focus on using authentic materials of interest to learners, creativity in use of multiple learning strategies, community building, routines, field trips, and a well-thought-out physical environment. Similarly, in *Creating a Bridge*, the OLC also emphasizes the need for similar supports and learning activities to address the complex range of needs for these learners.³⁵

A study conducted in the United States with ESL literacy students presents some comparable findings to the Canadian research. The results of the study showed that the use of real world materials from the outside, use of the student's first language to explain things, longer scheduled classes, regular attendance, routine, and a variety of teaching modalities all had a positive impact on increasing students' reading skills.³⁶

However, the Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre presents a different view. The Centre reported that the evidence suggests that literacy development in the first language can be a positive bridge to literacy development in the second language. It also indicated that this concept was not widely accepted.

Mainstream literacy classes

In 2006, The Centre for Education and Work conducted an international literature review on ESLiteracy.³⁷ The findings indicated that this group of learners use their other languages help them learn and that instructors need to be aware of this. In addition, other students can provide these learners with key supports in literacy programs. Moreover, a rigorous assessment and placement process was considered necessary to place students in the most

³⁵ Ontario Literacy Coalition. (2007). *Creating a bridge: A snapshot of ESL literacy in Ontario. Executive summary*. Retrieved August 2007 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/bridge/bridge.pdf>

³⁶ Spruck Wrigley, H. (2003). *What works for adult ESL students. Focus on Basics*, 6 (C), 14-17. Retrieved August 2007, from http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fob/2003/fob_6c.pdf

³⁷ Millar, D. (2006). *International review of ESLiteracy for the CEW*. Winnipeg, MN: Centre for Education and Work.

appropriate program. The review found there were advantages and disadvantages to placing these learners with mainstream literacy learners. One advantage is the diverse cultural mix and the potential for cross-cultural communication. Another advantage is that these learners are exposed to natural language and culture. A disadvantage identified was that working on cross-cultural communication in addition to their own learning needs might be too big an expectation for native speakers.

The review emphasized that literacy learners who were well-educated in their own language and newcomers who had with low oral proficiency in English should not be in the same learning class as low level literacy students.

Some of the best practice guidelines used by instructors who had students with English as a second language in their literacy classes included:

- using ESL methodologies that worked well for everyone in the class
- working on pronunciation of particular words
- exploring different text types
- using whole language approaches
- using some grammar instruction
- focusing on vocabulary development³⁸

The review also concluded that an approach that uses both individualized and group learning allows a chance for students of other languages to practice their English but also addresses the problem of different levels and needs within a group. It was also recommended that volunteers be used to provide extra assistance to English language learners.

Teaching strategies recommended for a mixed group of learners included a focus on how language makes meaning in texts, cross-cultural communication, learning-to-learn strategies, and embedding learning in specific content. Team-teaching approaches between literacy and ESL practitioners were also recommended.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Key informants spoke of many of the same good practices and elements of successful learning reflected in the literature. Solid funding for ESL literacy was a prerequisite. Some informants spoke about the need to address the usual barriers that adult learners face and the need to respect general adult education principles. Key informants also noted the importance of adequate resources and the fact that instructors trained in ESL literacy really make a difference. One informant spoke about having a community liaison worker in the program to address settlement concerns of students and the importance of interpreters to find out people's beliefs about learning.

Instructional guidelines and strategies

Informants who instruct in or manage ESL literacy classes both on the ESL and literacy side of the equation stressed the great diversity of the groups of learners they work with in terms of cultural diversity, exposure to literacy, different learning and educational strategies, effects of trauma, and time in Canada. They noted that progress for an ESL literacy learner is slow and difficult and that enough time is needed for progress to happen. They emphasized ESL literacy is a specialized area that is different from ESL and from mainstream literacy.

In terms of strategies for success, these informants identify small classes, individualized learning, multiple learning strategies, use of language strategies, appropriate and authentic resources of interest to students, and trained volunteers as key. Program participants need to know how to get things done in the system and need a program that will help them integrate into their community. Getting out of the classroom was cited as important too. It is also important to build ideas and learning from small to large as it may be difficult for people to retain concepts. Some key informants indicated that it was difficult for these students to work independently.

In addition, informants noted that instructors need to be empathetic, dedicated, reflective, patient and without assumptions. They need to be able to think out of the box to try creative strategies including building on whatever ways participants may have learned in the past. Sensitivity to the cultural environments that people are coming from is key.

Similar to the information uncovered by the Centre for Education and Work in their literature review, some informants said that a mixed first and second language literacy class could promote cultural understanding and be a place for anti-racist work. Strategies that work include using individual and group approaches and field trips along with learning strategies that build on the strengths of both groups. An approach that respects comfort and safety for students, that is interesting and builds on people's lives was encouraged. Learning through the arts and encouraging students to publish their work were identified as positive learning strategies.

Some informants stressed that it is those adults with high oral fluency in English who will integrate well and be successful in a literacy or ABE class. A strong assessment process for the individual components of listening, speaking, reading, and writing was deemed as important for deciding whether to place people in ABE or ESL programs in cases where institutions offer both. The emphasis was placed on a good match between learners' needs and goals and an appropriate program to address these needs. In addition, these learners need to know what stage of learning they are in and have manageable short-term goals that allow them to identify their progress.

Good practice for what works in literacy programs for Aboriginal and Inuit adults focuses on respect for the first language and the importance of the culture of students. It means valuing what learners bring and integrating this into new learning.

Informants said success for these learners includes sticking to learning, transferring what they have learned to the real world, going on to other learning (LINC 1 or further education), completing tasks, and becoming more independent.

G. Issues and Challenges in Programming

i. Review of the Literature

One of the challenges in programming is the multi-level class. Both the OLC and Jangles Productions reported that multi-level classes mean that it is difficult to meet individual needs, and that planning takes a long time.

Moreover, the Jangles study found that over 70% of LINC ESL literacy classes were combined with regular ones, making it difficult to meet the needs of ESL literacy students. Both studies called for more ESL literacy-specific classes. Similarly, the Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre research indicated that ESL programs often place those adults with little formal education and professionals in the same class, leading to frustration on both sides.

The Jangles Productions report stated that there are not enough childcare spots for LINC ESL literacy and that assistance for transportation is inadequate. The report called for action on these two items. The OLC report indicated the importance of social supports as well. The OLC report emphasized the importance of sufficient food, affordable housing, accessible health care, and the ability to navigate systems in the community.

ESL instructors who participated in the OLC research stated that they were not well-equipped to teach ESL literacy and felt overwhelmed about how to teach literacy to students in this environment. The instructors emphasized that there is little formal ESL literacy training when obtaining their ESL certification and few opportunities for professional development afterwards. The OLC concluded that instructors do not have the tools and are ill-equipped to teach ESL literacy.⁴⁰ Similarly in the 2006 Jangles Productions study, ongoing professional development, “get togethers” and mentoring opportunities were identified as key for ESL literacy instructors.

In her 1997 review of the literature, Diane Millar found that there was no systematic training for literacy instructors around second language learning or cross-cultural awareness. She also found that literacy practitioners saw a need for training in these areas.

Both the OLC and Jangles Productions reports identified the lack of appropriate resources as a concern and challenge for ESL literacy learning. There was agreement that there is a lack of suitable instructional materials that is specifically related to ESL literacy students in a Canadian context. The OLC study indicated that a great deal of time is needed to prepare lessons and materials for ESL literacy learning.

⁴⁰ Ontario Literacy Coalition. (2007).

There is a debate in the literature over whether it is best or necessary for adults to become literate in their first language before their second. The report by the Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre advocates an approach that focuses on developing literacy skills in one's first language before moving on to the second. The OLC report identifies that whether adults should learn language in their first language before the second language is an issue that has not been resolved or researched in-depth.

ii. Key Informant Perspectives

Interviews with key informants generally reflect the findings of the literature review. Challenges identified include:

- the definition of ESL literacy is not clear enough
- lack of supports and services for learners with ESL literacy needs
- not enough professional development and sharing of effective practices for practitioners

Comments on the definition challenges focused on the need to tighten up the definition for ESL literacy along with descriptors, and outcomes for learners. Moreover, while the Canadian Language Benchmarks have covered some of this,⁴¹ there is still not a common understanding of how an ESL literacy learner differs from someone who is in a literacy or ABE program or how they qualify for one program over another. In addition, clearer pathways of progress are needed for ESL Learners. This includes looking at what literacy skills are needed for the labour market and helping with integration into the labour market.

Informants identified multiple external barriers that must be removed for participants to attend ESL literacy programs. Tuition, childcare facilities, and transportation costs need to be covered. People need to have enough food to eat. In addition, programming must be flexible to accommodate people's schedules. Informants also stressed the need for volunteers to complement instructors for the intensive one-on-one work that needs to happen.

⁴¹ See Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. (2000). *Canadian language benchmarks 2000: English as a second language – for adults* at http://www.language.ca/pdfs/clb_adults.pdf

Some informants stated that in areas of Canada that traditionally have not had a lot of immigrants but are now receiving greater numbers, newcomers may not feel welcome. As well, there may not be adequate services and trained practitioners to address their programming needs.

Informants agree that one challenge is that there is very little professional development or training for ESL literacy. There is the feeling that practitioners have to fend for themselves. There are some workshops available and there are TESL and ESL certificates. However, there is no systematic approach or strategy for training and professional development for ESL literacy. Informants indicate that most of what practitioners learn is through trial and error and on the job for both ESL and literacy practitioners. In some cases in ESL, new teachers may get an orientation, support and mentoring from more experienced colleagues. However, it appears there are more opportunities for professional development in ESL than in literacy. Some larger institutions offer professional development and opportunities for knowledge exchange but this is the exception rather than the norm. Some literacy practitioners have had ESL training or attended workshops, but this was generally done on their own time rather than as a systematic institutional approach.

Not enough instructional materials and resources for ESL literacy learners was also identified as a challenge. Large institutions that can afford to buy resources may not see this as an issue. Some instructors and coordinators develop their own materials and student books to use in their classes. Some informants indicated that instructors use children's books. Others buy resources with their own money.

IV. Potential Strategic Directions

This section outlines some starting strategies for addressing the challenges and gaps that have been identified in this discussion paper. These strategies come from both a review of the literature and from key informants. The ideas that follow are not meant as formal recommendations but as more food for thought.

A. Strategies to Address Gaps and Challenges

Strategies to address gaps and challenges identified in the literature and by key informants are included in this section. The strategies are organized according to (i) policy, (ii) professional development, (iii) program development, and (iv) research.

i. Policy

Key informants advocate for an integrated policy framework that recognizes and addresses the need for second language literacy for adults who have low literacy and education in their first language. This recognition includes the fact that second language speakers with low literacy in their first language are attending mainstream literacy programs. They would like policy that recognizes that ESL and literacy are connected and that different ministries and jurisdictions work together to address the range of needs including those in rural and remote areas. They would also like to see adequate social supports for these adults so that they are able to attend programs. In addition, they would like to see that all adults with literacy needs are able to access programming regardless of status and length of time in Canada.

The importance of building awareness about ESL literacy and working out a plan of action as to who should do what was stressed. All levels of government, employers and unions should be part of this discussion. Priority issues for discussion are existing program models, which ones work and which do not. Issues, challenges, and barriers in relation to federal/provincial jurisdictional concerns are also priority concerns.

The OLC research recommends policy that builds capacity to capture literacy levels through more precise immigration intake data and census-taking data collection. One informant suggested that a language assessment some time after arrival in Canada would allow for a determination of what kinds of programs to offer.

ii. Program Development

In its recommendations, the OLC identified the need to address all the needs of ESL literacy learners, starting with the basic needs of food, safety and shelter. They recommended literacy-specific classes, bilingual instructors, and the need to develop and share an inventory of existing instructional materials. The Jangles Productions report recommendations are similar. They also recommend clear learner pathways among the different LINC, ESL, and literacy programs found in a community and more work around assessment.

Key informant proposals also included the need to assess learners holistically and provide supports that break down the multiple barriers they face. People vouched for more resources for more ESL literacy classes and a focus on doing ESL literacy in an integrated way—with their lives and with other programs that these learners might attend. Integration also includes addressing ESL literacy through public health initiatives and through income assistance. More supports are needed for groups such as women raising children and for young adults. More awareness in the community about available programming and how it can help is also needed.

Key informants also proposed ways to evaluate the progress of second language literacy learners. A suggestion was also made to increase the levels literacy benchmarks under the CLB as a way to show progress.

iii. Professional Development

More practitioner support and professional development was identified as key. A mentoring system in which experienced practitioners mentor those less experienced was recommended by the OLC and the Jangles Productions studies. These reports include recommendations for more professional development opportunities such as workshops at TESL conferences and more opportunities for practitioners to share what they are doing and discuss issues. The OLC research recommended having ESL literacy as a specialization within TESL and ESL certificates and programs.

Key informant suggestions are similar. However, a key factor that is different is that informants suggest the need for cross-fertilization among literacy and

ESL practitioners—a community of practitioners from both fields who can talk to one another. Networking forums for ESL and literacy practitioners, and an exchange of workshops were recommended. Literacy practitioners could benefit from workshops on language learning. ESL instructors teaching literacy could benefit from the knowledge of literacy practitioners.

iv. Research

Information from key informants and the review of the literature reveal that there is little research in Canada related to ESL literacy. Some recommended areas for further research include:

- ☞ a demographic profiling of who people with second language literacy needs are and how the profiling matches with existing programming
- ☞ what impact and outcomes there have been from current programming; how well it is meeting needs
- ☞ how those second language speakers with high oral fluency and low literacy and education are being served
- ☞ why these adults choose to go to one program over another

B. National Directions

Key informants indicated that an organization such as MCL, in partnership with other national, like-minded organizations would have a role in addressing common concerns in the areas that follow. Partnership with national organizations such as TESL Canada and settlement organizations are key to making this work. Partnerships are critically important because MCL is not known in the ESL and settlement worlds. MCL could help bridge this divide and take the first step in recognizing the needs of the diversity of literacy learners as a whole.

i. Awareness, Education and Advocacy

Informants noted that there is a great deal of work to be done in building awareness of ESL literacy with policy makers and practitioners. This awareness building includes showing the links between literacy and ESL and the differences between literacy and ESL literacy. MCL and its partners should advocate for an integrated policy platform that addresses gaps for ESL

literacy learners and ensures accessible resources and services. This includes ensuring more communication between appropriate provincial ministries as well as communication among the provinces and the federal government. MCL could develop a business case with learner success stories for ESL literacy that could be shared with policymakers. Connections need to be made between literacy learning and skill shortages and the fact that immigrants will be meeting these labour shortages. Developing learners from all over the world as public speakers is also a role that MCL could take on.

MCL could also make recommendations to the Council of Ministers about what should happen in the provinces to address the situations in which immigrants are not well served. MCL has the capacity to reach out across the country. It needs to stay current with activities within the regions, gather relevant documents and papers from the provinces and territories, and share this information across the country.

ii. Professional Development

Professional development was a key area where informants thought that MCL could take a lead. This includes providing opportunities for ESL and literacy practitioners to come together (in person or on-line) to share best practices and critical issues and to discuss other aspects of their work. This also includes hosting specific workshops and professional development opportunities, along with developing a special interest group for this area.

iii. Research

With other partners, MCL could set a research agenda for ESL literacy that addresses some of the questions that have not been answered and gaps with respect to ESL literacy. This work could include reviewing international literature and policies that look at ESL and literacy under the same umbrella.

iv. Resources and Tools

Key informants would like to see a compilation of resources that would be useful to practitioners who are teaching literacy in both ESL and literacy situations.

V. Summary

Overall, we could find little Canadian research on the connections between ESL and literacy over the last decade. Most of the available research addresses the issue of ESL literacy in ESL programs. Furthermore, there is no one common definition of ESL literacy as it applies to immigrants and refugees who have low literacy and education in their first language. The most widely used definition is the one developed by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.

While there is an emerging informal sketch of the range of adults who might fit the profile of having low literacy and education in their own language, there is no systematic, detailed, and formalized knowledge about this group. Most of the information about these adults is informal and anecdotal.

The available literature indicates that low literacy in one's own language compounds the issues that immigrants face, such as racism and discrimination, poor housing, lack of access to health care services, unemployment, and overall quality of life. Immigrants and refugees with low literacy in their own language face extreme disadvantage in a society that is governed by print.

Information from key informants and the literature paints a picture of a wide and diverse group of adults who have low literacy in their first language. The group includes newcomers as well as those who have been in Canada for many years. It includes adults with little oral fluency as well as those with a great deal. It includes refugees with particular circumstances and needs. Overall, women face particular barriers and great isolation. Aboriginal and Inuit adults with English as a second language may also have low literacy in their first language.

Even though ESL and literacy are separate policy jurisdictions, adults with low literacy and education in their first language attend both ESL and literacy programs in Canada. However, there is no systematic research on why they end up in one program instead of another.

Over all, there is little recognition of the needs of the range of adults who have low literacy in their first language. Although some provinces are working to address policy gaps, there is not enough importance placed on a coherent policy framework to address the range of needs of these adults. There is little research on this group, their needs and what works to address needs. There is not enough specific training on how to work with this group in both the ESL and literacy sectors. Moreover, there is not much exchange among ESL and literacy practitioners working with this same group of adults. In the literacy sector, this group is not formally recognized as having a specific set of needs that is different from literacy learners whose first language is English.

The research shows that more specific ESL literacy programs for newcomers who attend LINC programs are needed. But more than that, there is a policy gap for those adults with low literacy and education in their first language who do not meet LINC requirements and may have been in Canada a long time. They may bounce back and forth between ESL and literacy programs or end up in the wrong program. There is also a geographical inequity where there are fewer relevant programs for the range of ESL needs in rural areas. In these cases, adults with ESL oral needs or high education in their own language may end up in literacy programs. Ultimately, this policy gap leads to a situation where these adults do not have equal access to services they need or they may get services that do not meet their needs.

There is also little research that shows what specific instructional and learning strategies work with adults with low literacy and education in their first language. Many of the good practices noted in the research and by key informants are quite general in nature and could apply to other adult education scenarios. There is no agreement on whether or not adults should learn literacy in their first language first.

Challenges in programming include multi-level classes, not enough support for childcare, inadequate transportation, inadequate instructor training, and few appropriate resources. Additionally, there is not a clear or common definition of literacy for this group or clear pathways they can take to make progress. More support is also need to address the multiple barriers that these adults face.

The findings show that there is much work to be done with respect to adults who have low literacy and education in their first language. This work includes:

- a better understanding and awareness of who these adults are—their circumstances, their needs, and what works
- a coherent policy framework with resources to address current gaps in service
- more professional development opportunities for both ESL and literacy practitioners who work with these groups

Key informants would like to see national leadership across the literacy, ESL, and settlement sectors to address the challenges identified in this paper.

Appendix 1: Key Informants

Lorene Anderson

ESL and Workplace Essential Skills
Consultant
Calgary, AB

Helen Balanoff

Research
NWT Literacy Council
Yellowknife, NWT

Mary Ellen Belfiore

Adult Educator and Consultant
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Sarah Bukhari

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Shailja Verma

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Barbara Wynes

Adult Learning and Literacy
Manitoba Advanced Education
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Jan Weiten

Assessments
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Dorene Weston

OLC ESL Literacy Project
Evaluator
Toronto, Ontario

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. What working definition of ESL literacy is used in your province/territory/constituency?
2. Where do adults who have ESL literacy needs attend programs in your province/territory/constituency?
3. Who delivers these programs? (community-based, school boards, colleges, etc.)
4. What kind of professional development (initial and ongoing) do instructors working with ESL literacy students get?
5. What would be a composite profile of the adults who attend ESL literacy programs?
6. What are the characteristics of a successful program? Could you give me some examples of where ESL literacy has been delivered successfully?
7. What policies support the development of ESL literacy in your province or territory?
8. What are the challenges and gaps in delivering ESL literacy programming?
9. What strategies do you recommend to address the gaps and challenges you have identified?
10. What role could MCL and others play in addressing common national concerns with respect to ESL Literacy?
11. Could you recommend any other key informants who could provide useful input on ESL literacy for this briefing paper?

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