



Reclaiming Voice: Challenges and Opportunities for Immigrant Women Learning English

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The Study in Brief

Issue

Language Education: Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Women

Overview

A significant number of immigrant women continue to struggle with English for many years after their arrival in Canada. This study identified barriers that prevented women from gaining fluency in English, as well as supports that

enabled them to improve their proficiency. Eighty-two interviews were conducted, 54 with women from four ethno-linguistic groups and 28 with service providers, to identify factors that stymied or facilitated their successful acquisition of English.

Key Findings

1. Lack of information about available services, inconvenient class schedules and locations, and competing financial and familial obligations were obstacles to gaining proficiency.
2. Culturally based roles as family caregivers, and as models and conduits of linguistic heritage impeded acquisition of English
3. The four language groups had different reasons for not attending classes, such as mixed gender classrooms, type of instruction, or levels of language proficiency.
4. Pedagogical approaches and teacher accents were matters of concern
5. A one-size-fits-all approach to language classes was not effective in reaching female immigrants.

Approach

The study began with an extensive review of the relevant literature. Next, focus group interviews with representatives of immigrant serving agencies were conducted. Finally, researchers held individual interviews with the immigrant women who had successfully acquired English in Canada and focus group interviews in their first language with women who continued to lack proficiency in English.

Policy Implications

1. Immigrant women's need for learning English, and ability to benefit from current provisions differ from those of immigrant men.
2. As family caregivers, immigrant women cannot meet the needs of their families if they remain linguistically isolated from Canadian society.
3. Programs that were successful in addressing the needs of women were flexible, listened to the issues affecting women, and adapted to their needs.
4. Effective programs will need additional funding, flexible programming, and wider, more innovative outreach strategies.

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The Study in Detail

Introduction

“If I have to take the English classes, I still have to go home to do all the chores”

(Cantonese speaker)

This study identifies the challenges faced by adult immigrant women who reach Canada without speaking English. Mostly arriving as sponsored family members, they do not need to meet the language proficiency criterion used for primary applicants. According to Statistics Canada, over 70% of women in some immigrant groups are unable to speak English even five years after their arrival.

This study compares immigrant women who are not yet able to speak English with those who have gained linguistic fluency to learn what challenges or supports contributed to this difference. The four linguistic groups that send the greatest number of non-English-speaking women to the Greater Toronto area (Mandarin, Cantonese, Urdu, and Punjabi) were selected for this study.

In-depth individual interviews or focus group interviews were conducted with 82 participants: key informants (KI), who provided settlement services, and immigrant women who had moved to Canada within the past ten years. The purpose of the study was to identify challenges immigrant women face in acquiring English

proficiency, programs that are helpful or not (in terms of outreach, curricula or pedagogy), and conditions that facilitate the acquisition of English.

Highlights

Major obstacles to gaining proficiency in English for the responding groups included financial obligations that precluded time to take classes; lack of information about the availability of LINC classes; transportation challenges; lack of appropriate childcare (non-existent for children under 3); and the inconvenient locations and schedules of classes.

“If I go to English classes my house is just a mess. Everyone looks at me in a mood. I am criticized if I try to speak even a word of English. My family does not support me.”

(Punjabi speaker)

Suggested ways to address these concerns included holding classes during school hours in the schools their children were attending; linking English instruction to the linguistic demands of specific professions; embedding the classes directly into the workplace; giving subsidies during the period of learning English; making the programs more widely known through first language media and materials sent home from their children’s schools; providing after-school programs and childcare for all ages; as well as offering classes within walking distance of women’s homes.

The immigrant women regretted that Canada’s language training programs did not take the specific needs of women into account. The Urdu and Punjabi women’s groups, in particular, expressed same-sex classes as most consistent with their cultural norms and noted they were uncomfortable studying with men in the same class. They were uncomfortable traveling alone and asked for classes to be close to their homes. Evening classes were more difficult for them because of their family obligations.

Some women believed their efforts to learn English were seen by their ethnic community as counter to their perceived roles as preservers and transmitters of cultural and linguistic heritage. They suggested the use of ethnic media to promote the financial and political value to the family and community of their women learning English.

Many women dropped out of English classes for pedagogical reasons, which included too rapid an immersion, curriculum focus, teachers’ accents, perceived racism, and issues related to assessment, placement, and promotion. Women who had not achieved proficiency in English lacked confidence in their ability to benefit from the classes, thus further reducing their motivation to take them. They suggested that having LINC graduates tell their success stories may improve general conceptions about the utility of classes. Others suggested provision of teachers’ aides who speak their language, and teachers with authentic Canadian accents to help them learn ‘correct’ English.

An English-speaking teacher is not helpful. It is like having a chicken talking to a duck: they cannot communicate with us. When a woman faces such difficulties in the first class she will not continue attending those classes.” (Cantonese speaker).

Overall, the data show that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to language classes is not effective in reaching female immigrants. For example, Cantonese and Mandarin speakers

specified an interest in weekend classes, while Urdu and Punjabi speakers wanted morning and afternoon classes when their children are in school. In addition, while some women view English proficiency as a requirement for a good job, others want to learn it as a means of integration into Canadian society and meeting their families’ needs.

Policy Implications

As immigrant women are important contributors to the well-being of their families, when their English language proficiency is limited, they cannot fulfill their families’ needs in the areas of health, education, and financial

security. Lack of proficiency also affects their mental health and well being by isolating them from Canadian society. All of the women, including grandmothers caring for young children, expressed an interest in learning English.

The challenges and obstacles to attaining English proficiency are complex and varied. Programs that were successful were those that were flexible, listened carefully to women, and adapted to their needs. Effective programs need additional funding, flexible programming tailored to the needs of specific groups, and wider outreach.

Native Language-Canadian Language Cross-Tabulation

The table below provides the numbers of immigrant women aged 18 or more who arrived in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area in 1996, their first language, and their proficiency in 2005 in either English or French, or both languages or neither. It is adapted from tables found on the CIC website:

<http://www.integration-net.cic.gc.ca/inet/English/n-info-n/index.htm#1>,

Female Immigrants 18 Years and Above in the Toronto CMA 1996-2005						
	Canadian Official Languages—in numbers of women					
Native Language Group	English	French	Both	Neither	Neither - %	Total
Mandarin	13,292	18	142	35,550	73%	49,002
Punjabi	9,109	18	50	15,777	63%	24,954
Cantonese	9,581	11	60	10,794	53%	20,446
Urdu	18,608	33	95	9,721	37%	26,456

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To make the findings from this study as accessible as possible, a website dedicated to the topic was created at Ryerson University, giving scholars, service providers, policy makers, and the general public access to the most relevant results of our findings, the final research report, publications from the research, and the bibliography. The URL for the website is:

<http://www.immigrantwomen.ca>

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- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
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- Statistics Canada

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For more information on the study, please visit the **website**:

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