LANGUAGE TRAINING INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION

Fluency in spoken and written English or French is important to the success of newcomers to Canada. Not only are language skills awarded points in the immigration process and critical to accessing postsecondary education, but these skills are essential for navigating Canadian society and finding employment. Empirical research has shown that official language skills are critical to both social belonging and career progression for newcomers, and key to building the social capital and networks essential for success (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003; Grenier & Xue, 2011; Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Globally, research shows similar findings – that language training plays a significant role for newcomer integration (Arendt et al., 2021).

Yet Canada's track record in supporting the development of language skills for newcomers is uneven. Studies of the effectiveness of current approaches are not encouraging in spite of the massive investments governments make. There is evidence to suggest that we need to rethink our approaches and consider new models, which offer more accessible, flexible, applicable, and customizable approaches. This paper reviews some of the issues as well as promising and innovative practices.

TRADITIONAL MODELS OF LANGUAGE TRAINING IN CANADA

Across Canada, the federal government collaborates with settlement agencies to offer free language courses to eligible newcomers. The Government of Canada has established its long-term goals through the "Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada" (LINC) program. LINC courses are based on the national standards for measuring and recognizing the language skills of adult immigrants – the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) – in both official languages of English and French. LINC programs are offered by a variety of partners including community organizations and Boards of Education. Much of the delivery is in traditional classroom mode, although the pandemic has accelerated the pace of online and digital delivery.

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Evaluations of the LINC program have suggested there is room for improvement. For example, a report by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) identified language training to be the least effective service in Canada's Settlement Program (IRCC, 2017). Previous evaluations of the LINC program observed no improvements regarding participants' listening and speaking skills beyond what they would have acquired from living in Canada (IRCC, 2010). Other researchers have found evidence that many students graduate from LINC needing further language education (Baril, 2011; Fleming, 2010). A criticism of classroom environments is that they are based on a "one-size-fits-all" approach, which does

not always offer relevant content for the settings in which language will be used (Eaton, 2010; Holden & Sykes, 2011; ALLIES Canada, 2015). Generalized courses, moreover, are not effective in enhancing skills for employment. For example, a recent IRCC evaluation found clients that undertook general formal language training used English or French less frequently at work and were less comfortable using official languages than non-clients (IRCC, 2020).

Similarly, the auditor general of Ontario has identified several issues requiring follow-up regarding language training services in the province:

- Less than half of all learners have shown progress in English or French.
- Substantial variations exist in learner progress depending on the training institute, ranging from no progress shown among learners having received at least 100 hours of language training at one school board to progress shown among 78% of learners at another school board.
- Low learner progress even among learners that received more instruction, with only 33% of students with at least 800 hours of instruction progressing by an average of one Canadian language benchmark.
- Many learners report that their objectives have not been realized, with only 58% of English learners and 37% of French learners reporting that their language improved enough to obtain employment (Auditor General of Ontario, 2017).

Acquiring fluency in a second language is challenging at the best of times, particularly for adult learners. While children's acquisition of English or French as a second language can proceed at a remarkable pace, older newcomers often struggle. In addition, they often are balancing other priorities such as finding regular employment to support their family. A recent survey of 7,700 recent immigrants to Canada found stress related to work (22%) and finances (17%) to be far more prevalent than language barriers (2.8%) (Robert & Gilkinson, 2012). Consequently, many newcomers "cannot attend even the most convenient classes" (Kouritzin, 2000, p. 26).

Additionally, some research suggests that employers are more likely than newcomers to see language issues as a significant barrier and that many newcomers may not be aware of how their skills are being assessed by others. For example, a study comparing newcomer and employer perceptions of employment barriers showed that only 27% of newcomers reported language and communication skills as a barrier for them seeking employment while 95% of employers indicated that language and communications skills were a barrier to newcomers seeking employment (Allies, 2005).

One of the biggest shortcomings of traditional classroom instruction is the limited opportunity for participants to practise essential speaking and listening skills. Clients of the LINC program have reported too much emphasis on reading, writing and grammar, and not enough on listening/oral comprehension and speaking (IRCC, 2010). Practice and engagement are critical to developing an understanding of the rhythm of speech, knowledge of Canadian expressions, idioms, and/or slangs, and applied terms for employment (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018).

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PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

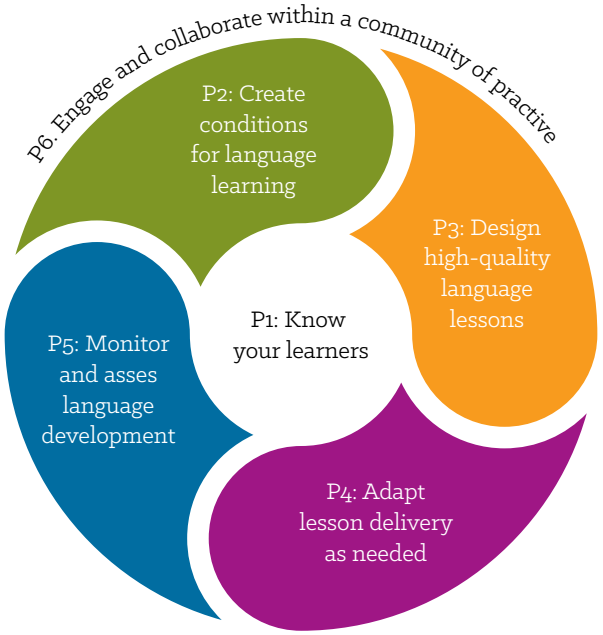
The science of language acquisition and training is well established and many programs draw on the essential principles that focus on understanding learner needs, creating the conditions for language learning, designing high quality language lessons, adapt lesson delivery as needed, monitor and assess language develop and engage and collaborate with a community of practice. However very often programs are tied to traditional classroom delivery modes and pay limited attention to contextual factors – socio economic conditions, access to infrastructure, constraints in terms of time and place, needs for wrap around supports, requirements for customization and above all the need to create opportunities to apply learning.

Extensive work has been done examining the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches, for example the importance of interactivity, gamification, use of humour (Bishay, nd) in the design of language training classes and applications as well as the ways in which relevant subject matter plays a roles. But in spite of extensive research over decades, the effectiveness of language training in Canada has not improved. (See Figure 1 on page 32)

DEMANDS FOR INNOVATION

With shifts to digitization, there is more demand for anytime anywhere learning which better meets the needs of learners. Even before COVID accelerated the adoption of technology across sectors, a survey of LINC's LearnIT2Teach project revealed that learners are asking for technology integration in their learning (71.4%) as well as online alternatives (9.4%). The instructors tended to agree with 87.5% indicating that

FIGURE 1: PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH AND SECOND LANGUAGE TRAINING (TESOL CENTRE)



improving access to learning technologies would enhance language acquisition for newcomers (Sturm et al., 2018). However, there was limited innovation in part because of the reward and funding structures. Moreover, while online learning has a definite appeal, retention of learners is a major issue with many forms and there is limited infrastructure or standardization across service providers as well as uneven digital skills among instructors. Additionally, many applications require access to high speed internet and devices which many newcomers are unable to afford.

Technology does not need to replace place-based learning programs, but an assessment of the blended learning programs which added technology to the classroom experience increased participation and retention. Participants reported improvements in their English language skills for work, searching for employment, communicating with their children's teachers, as well as overall integration in the community (Cummings et al., 2018).

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED APPROACHES

"Adaptive Learning" using Artificial Intelligence (AI) enabled systems support more targeted and customized language programs. One study showed that students using AI-powered textbooks performed four times better than those using the standard e-textbooks, while also collecting valuable data that could be used to create personalized reports (Leddo et al., 2020). Another example of AI's capacity to deliver more tailored education are language chatbots, which are AI-powered software designed to mimic human conversations (Dokukina & Gumanova, 2020).

Currently, there are a range of commercial products available to support language learning. One of the most popular is Babbel, which boasts one million users and offers lessons in 15-minute formats online. Also online, Rosetta Stone offers multiple languages with gamification elements (using game features like achievement badges and point systems to meet learning objectives). Busuu is an innovative social learning language network. Preply is a network of expert teachers and tutors. Mondly is another application which uses chatbot and gamification features for lessons in 33 languages. Duolingo is another example that supports language learning through bite-sized lessons. AI-powered language learning platforms allow learners to work at their own pace, repeating topics and emphasizing things they have trouble with, engaging them with the tasks they're best at, appealing to their interests, and taking into account such factors as cultural background (Rohalevych, 2020).

While lacking some of the bells and whistles of other applications, Learning Upgrade, is a platform that provides online learning lessons aligned with standardized competencies, scalable mobile delivery and testing, with powerful learning management tracking and support. With the audacious goal "to transform the lives of 1 billion people with upskilling in literacy, math, and technology" the x-prize willing application uses internationally recognized testing for "skills for success" – literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The program offers over 1,020 lessons and 22 courses that work with students of all ages and abilities and while designed for a more general audience has had significant impact on ESL learners. The learning management system allows instructors to track progress and send reminders and it includes an elaborate reward and "badging" system to help "nudge" learners to persist. The Learning Upgrade App is a grand prize winner of the Barbara Bush Foundation Adult Literacy XPRIZE, a $7 million global competition challenging teams to develop a mobile app that would result in the greatest increase in literacy skills among a participating group of adult learners in just 12 months. Learning Upgrade was proven and validated in a field test of 12,000 adult learners, and produced the greatest gains pre- and post-test on a standardized reading assessment. It produced gains greater than what learners would have experienced during a year of classroom study alone. (Learning Upgrade).

> "Although they have yet to gain widespread adaptation, many studies of these tools in education have demonstrated positive results such as increased motivation to deeper learning and long-term retention."

These simulations offer language courses through real-world activities and narrative-based approaches, which can be personalized for any social and professional environment (Rieber, 2005; Nielsen & Gonzales-Lloret, 2010). Although they have yet to gain widespread adaptation, many studies of these tools in education have demonstrated positive results such as increased motivation to deeper learning and long-term retention (Kavanagh et al., 2017). VR and AR are linked to pedagogical methods that encourage learners to be actively engaged with the content, rather than passive receptors of information. Many of these tools incorporate game-based learning and gamification that are designed not only to increase their motivation but facilitate their ongoing interaction with the subject (Huang et al., 2021; Taskiran, 2019). New tools have emerged which support more interaction and track student performance in real time using a combination of AI and AR/VR. Vancouver based Vitro, for example, is piloting a new product LincLingo designed to map to the goals of the LINC program – with sessions available at several tiers of the CLB, including levels 3–8 for both English and French. The application provides interactive experiences newcomers encounter when they arrive in Canada – such as booking a doctor's appointment, opening a bank account, and renting an apartment using AI Virtual Humans providing opportunities to practice, get feedback and gain confidence. Each session delivers detailed analytics to learners for self-review, providing timely feedback to help accelerate the acquisition of pronunciation and grammar skills.

Unfortunately, while many technology applications for language have extensive user reviews and rankings (Trusted, 2022), there have been limited formal evaluations to assess how well they work and for whom. There is a big difference between an audience of highly educated and literate language learners from those who may not be literate in their native tongue and need to start with basic ABCs and principles of grammar. There are for example almost no randomized controlled trials investigating the effectiveness of a software intervention on all four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Most focus on the effectiveness of a literacy intervention (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016) or include receptive skills only (Troia, 2004). One recent study of school-age children (Harper et al. 2021) using Rosetta Stone to supplement their learning did indicate significant improvements in oral/aural skills when compared with the typical curriculum used by the partner district and the amount of software usage was positively correlated with learning gains for these skills. The authors noted that the technology provides "personalized instruction that gives students more opportunities for speaking practice and allows students to proceed at their own pace" (Harper et al., 2021, p. 14). Automated feedback on speaking accuracy allows students to practise without the fear of making a mistake in front of others. Thus, in this context, "technology may provide a low-anxiety learning environment and lead to a subsequent willingness to participate more in English in the classroom" (Harper et al., 2021, pp. 14–15). In regard to reading and writing skills, however, the software did not provide learning gains above that of the typical classroom curriculum.

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Other initiatives focus on providing programs relevant to the workplace. Not only does evidence suggest that classroom-based instruction is not effective for developing certain language skills, but research shows that these language courses often fail to provide immigrants a tangible boost in the labour market (McHugh & Challinor, 2011). As such, innovators are increasingly challenging the notion that language training has to precede employment and are exploring ways of "learning while earning."

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Work-integrated learning is incredibly effective when the capacity-building burden is shared with employers. For example, McDonald's English Under the Arches program, received the E Pluribus Unum award by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) for serving as a "powerful, replicable model for workplace ESOL [English as a second or foreign language]" (MPI, 2010). Partnering with national language instruction experts and community colleges to develop and implement a work-based English curriculum, the program provides shift managers with the language skills needed to effectively manage operations and staff. Even before the pandemic, the program leveraged web-conferencing technology to allow workers in different locations to participate simultaneously from their own restaurants. Danby, a mid-sized manufacturer in Ontario, developed custom language training programs when it sponsored and hired Syrian refugees. In addition to formal ESL training, the company has implemented several initiatives including English word of the day, English lunch buddies, English learning programs with Skype tutors, TV, Mango Language, Duolingo, tea circle, etc. (GRSI, n.d.)

One example of an ambitious large-scale employer-centred program is the US-based Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce, supported by the Walmart Foundation. The program includes both face-to-face learning and online instruction targeting workers with limited English language proficiency (approximately 10% of the US workforce). Targeting retail, manufacturing, transportation, accommodation

and food services, the program responded to employer concerns that limited language skills were blocking pathways to mid-skilled roles and thus impeding retention. The project included local instruction partners across the country to deliver the training in each region at the worksite or on campus. The preliminary evaluation suggested significant benefits for workers who not only improved their language skills but also their digital skills. The majority of the participants demonstrated improved English skills (83% in Miami, 91% in Houston, and 67% in New York) and over 80% were on track to obtaining higher wages. Employers reported improvements in job performance (95%) in store productivity (89%) as well as in retention (100%) (National Immigration Forum, 2016). With labour and skills shortages currently at the forefront for many businesses, there is a renewed interest in innovative workplace-based programming to support pathways for newcomers.

SOCIAL LEARNING AND INFORMAL LEARNING CIRCLES

Research has shown that engendering a sense of belonging is critical to encouraging performance of English as a Second Language (ESL) (Lacosse, et. al., 2020). Students in a university setting have demonstrated similar findings as other newcomer populations. Community organizations also offer support to newcomers learning English and French. For example, the Syrian Canadian Foundation's English Tutoring Program (ETP) is a unique service catering to vulnerable newcomers, offering personalized classes to those who are not able to access traditional language training – including people with health issues, workers with irregular hours, seniors, and parents without access to daycare. Since 2016, ETP has provided nearly 20,000 hours of personalized language support to 600 newcomers. In a survey of one cohort of newcomers, 90% expressed that their confidence in speaking English had improved. Additionally, 95% of respondents indicated that they would recommend the program to other newcomers.

In the United Kingdom, a large-scale randomized control trial of community-based language training aimed at people with very low levels of functional English proficiency examined the impact of guided learning and support delivered through 22 classes and 11 club sessions over an 11-week period for 527 participants (Patel et al., 2018). Participants' English language proficiency and social integration were measured at the beginning and end of the intervention period. The intervention was delivered by a consortium of partners led by Manchester Talk English (part of Manchester City Council) across five local authorities. The findings showed significant improvements in English language acquisition as a result of the intervention as well as progress in several areas pertaining to social integration, including: confidence in engaging with public services, levels of trust in other people, and number of social interactions and friendships formed.

DEFINING, ASSESSING, TRACKING AND REWARDING LANGUAGE LEARNING COMPETENCIES

One of the most significant barriers, particularly to adult language learners, is the time and commitment required to succeed. Many learners face multiple barriers, including trauma, confidence, access to technology, as well as the time and other resources needed to invest in learning. The process needs to start with careful assessments of learner needs and to harness a range of tools to both track and demonstrate progress as well as to reward and acknowledge success as retention is one of the most significant challenges facing ESL programs particularly those targeting adults.

CONCLUSION

Proficiency in English or French are critical to the success of newcomers to Canada and there are opportunities to use evidence-based innovations to maximize impact for learners.

Technology can provide more convenient anytime/anyplace access while also offering more customization and self-paced approaches. But many newcomers do not have access to high speed internet or computers so scalability for example to smart phones is critical to extend access. While technology can also provide more opportunities for practice and "richness" to experiences, it is only one dimension of innovation with language training, pedagogical design, relevance and intangibles like "fun" are essential. With the support of employers, work-integrated learning can better align the priorities of employment and language training through innovations like establishing on-site language instruction at work, or developing curricula that more accurately reflect real-world professional experiences. Additionally, more informal approaches to providing conversation circles, mentoring and tutoring can offer high levels of customization in a safe environment as well as helping to build the networks and social capital that are critical for employment success. Finally, harnessing lessons from behavioural economics to track and reward progress, to provide nudges and follow up, to recognize achievement often are critical to promoting engagement, practice and retention as well as providing evidence of achievement and mastery of competencies.

It is clear that no one size fits all program can work for everyone – age, education, literacy, and other individual factors play a role, as does the mother tongue – but we need to better understand how best to meet the needs of newcomers while supporting other aspects of integration including access to employment and social networks. More systematic reviews of different approaches and exploration of innovative models are critical given the uneven results our current investments are producing.

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