

**Best Practices For English As An Additional Language Programs: Investigating Language Instruction in Small and Medium-sized Population Centres**

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By: Beth Vreugdenhil, Beth Wallace

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Supervising Professor: Bharati Sethi

Trent Community Research Centre Project Coordinator: Sarah Khaki

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Suite 3.10, Trent University Student Centre

1600 West Bank Drive

Peterborough, ON K9L 0G2

Phone: [\(705\) 748-1093](tel:(705)748-1093)

Email: [tcrc@trentu.ca](mailto:tcrc@trentu.ca)

Website: [trentu.ca/tcrc](http://trentu.ca/tcrc)

# Executive Summary

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This community-based research project focuses on best practices for English language learning and training for newcomers in small and medium-sized population centres in partnership with the New Canadians Centre (NCC) in Peterborough. We used the method of a literature review to complete our research and completed a thematic analysis of the literature we found to identify key themes that affect newcomer's experiences in language learning programs. These themes are: 1. common barriers that impact newcomer access to EAL instruction along gendered, geographical, and cultural lines; 2. Informal and formal instruction methods; and 3. The importance of curricula in EAL programming. We then analyzed these core themes and identified five recommendations to improve newcomers' experiences in language learning programs. These recommendations suggest that newcomer centres should help facilitate transportation to programming, provide professional support in EAL content, and ensure that programming is physically and culturally accessible. The following report will summarize how we completed this community-based research with an introduction to our project, an explanation of our research methods and our research results, and conclude with our recommendations.

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## Introduction

This community-based research report was done in partnership with the New Canadians Centre (NCC) in Peterborough to provide them with locally relevant information and feasible recommendations on English as an Additional Language (EAL) practices and newcomers' experiences in small and medium-sized communities. This research is important as immigration to Canada has been increasing in recent years, and the successful settlement and integration of newcomers is an essential part of Canada's economic and social future. Newcomers have recently been settling outside of urban centres like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, and instead immigrating to small and medium-sized population centres such as Peterborough (StatsCan, 2022). For these newcomers, language skills in English or French are a necessity for them to integrate into these communities. Yet, most research on best practices for language learning programs is based on highly populated urban centres, and very little on what can be done in small to medium-sized population centres. To address this, our research looks into the best practices for English language learning and training for newcomers, and newcomer experiences in small and medium-sized population centres.

## Research Methods - What We Did

Following a presentation by Michelle Nguyen, the Peterborough Immigration Partnerships (PIP) Officer, we decided to research the best practices for English language learning and training for newcomers in small and medium-sized population centres for our **community-based**

### Definition: Community Based Research

Community-based research (CBR) is a participatory approach where research projects are driven by community priorities and the community is involved throughout the entire research process, from writing the project proposal to analyzing the results to taking action. (Friendship et al, 2012).

**research** (CBR) project. The research we did was based on the question given to us by the NCC: “how are English language learning and training opportunities for newcomers (individuals and groups) organized in smaller centres like Peterborough?” It was important for us to stay true to this research question because the main purpose for community-based research is to work with the community to find solutions to social problems through research that serves them.

We used the research method of a literature review to answer this question. A literature review is “is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers” (Taylor). To review the literature on English language learning and training for newcomers in small and medium-sized population centres we used academic databases such as Google Scholar and Trent University’s library database to find academic work as well as general internet searches to find non-academic resources. We searched these databases using key terms like “newcomer”, “English as an additional language”, and “medium-sized population centre”. After looking at the literature that matched our research question, we ended up with a variety of sources such as academic pieces from scholars in the migration field and non-academic literature like reports from newcomer centres and information from the Government of Canada’s census and programs. With these sources, we then completed a thematic analysis of the literature. A thematic analysis is “a ‘type of qualitative analysis’ used to ‘analyze classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data’” (Sovacool, Iskandarova, & Hall, 2023, p.3). Our thematic analysis found several themes that relate to the best practices for English language learning and training for newcomers in small and medium-sized population centres which will be discussed in the following results section.

## Results - What We Found

The thematic analysis we did found three themes that showed up in the research on the best practices of language learning for newcomers. These themes were: 1. barriers faced by newcomers based on culture, gender, and geography; 2. differences between informal and formal learning methods, and 3. The importance of curricula in language learning for newcomers.

### 1. Barriers

We found that newcomers face barriers to accessing language instruction programs because of their gender, cultural identity, and geographical location. Newcomer women often have less proficiency in English when coming to Canada compared to men which impacts their ability to integrate into society (Adamuti-Trache, Anisef, & Sweet, 2018). However, women often face barriers to attending language classes that do not offer childcare services (Ludin, 2008). Newcomers also face barriers to accessing language learning programs depending on their cultural identity. This might happen when newcomer culture and identity is excluded in language instruction and activities. Lastly, newcomers that live in **medium-sized population centres**, like Peterborough, face difficulties accessing language learning programs due to fewer services or funding for programs being available and a lack of transportation options in these geographical locations (Lam, 2019; Sethi, 2013).

#### **Definition: Medium Population Centre**

A medium population centre is a town with a population between 30,000 and 99,999 people (Statistics Canada, 2017).

### 2. Learning methods

Another theme we found is that English language learning programs for newcomers often fall under two categories, formal and informal programs. Formal programs include formal standardized classroom settings like those that occur through the Federal Government of

Canada's Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) program. Informal programs consist of casual conversation groups and social events. Both formal and informal programs are offered at medium-sized population newcomer centres and have their advantages as well as disadvantages.

### 3. Curricula

The curriculum used during language learning classes has a large impact on the knowledge and opportunities provided to newcomers. Language instruction programs can be adapted to include employment preparation, community or workplace participation, and psychosocial support.

## **Discussion**

The themes we found in the literature of newcomer language programming are important because they shape whether newcomers can access language instruction and if they can benefit from its full potential. If someone cannot access useful language instruction, it delays their integration into social and economic life in Canada (Huang, 2024).

### Barriers

Barriers to language instruction can come in many forms, like challenges that stop someone from physically accessing instruction or more subtle barriers that restrict what is learnt. Barriers that limit full access to language instruction are especially important because language skills are known to be a key step in gaining employment, pursuing education, and overall success in settlement (Sethi, 2013; Kosny et al., 2020; McLellan, Kartchava, & Rodgers, 2021).

All newcomers face different barriers depending on their identity and resources. For example, the gendered barriers we found in accessing language instruction restrict how well women can access these programs. One explanation for this is that women are more often

responsible for their children's care and cannot leave them to attend these programs (Ludin, 2008). This leads to unequal situations where men gain better language skills, and have better access to employment and social connections, while women do not (Adamuti-Trache, Anisef, & Sweet). To resolve this, many newcomer centres like the ones in Peterborough, Windsor, and Thunder Bay offer childcare with their language classes.

Another type of barrier that affects certain newcomers are the specific challenges posed by their geographical location. For many newcomers in smaller cities, common challenges to their settlement include racism and discrimination, reduced government funding for services, and limited infrastructures that cannot keep up with increasing populations (Lam, 2019). Another important limitation to accessing language programming in small towns is an inability to get to the locations where services are offered. Newcomers may struggle with this due to difficulties gaining a driver's license and car, language-related issues on public transportation, and unfamiliarity with city routes (Ludin, 2008). In response, some newcomer centres like the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association have begun offering free bus passes to newcomers eligible for LINC classes so they can access these courses.

The last main barrier we found was the exclusion of newcomer cultures and identities in language instruction, and their misrepresentation in language content. These restrictions on language content and learner participation can limit how much newcomers engage with language instruction and what they learn from it. We found that many language classes and materials often frame Canadian citizenship in exclusionary, restrictive ways that promote assimilation (Guo, 2013), and do not include language content on citizenship practices and rights or professional experiences (Fleming, 2010; Huang, 2022). These practices do not align with Canada's policy of multiculturalism, which promotes respect for all cultures as part of the Canadian identity (Berry,

2013), and they do not incorporate cultural humility into instruction. A cultural humility approach means that service providers must be open to learning about other's experiences and cultures and challenge power dynamics (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015). This can be incorporated into language instruction through opportunities for newcomers to engage with language through connections to their own experiences, identities, and cultures (Huang, 2022).

### Informal and formal learning methods

In our review of English language learning programming, we found that EAL programming can either be offered as formal structured classes or informal groups, with pros and cons to each. The formal LINC classes are federally funded to provide free access to language instruction and provide nationally recognized language proficiency standards (Service Canada, 2025). However, LINC classes have been criticized for their standardized assessments, sterile learning environments, and lack of trauma-informed practices (Dudley, 2007; Waterhouse, 2016). By contrast, informal learning groups and volunteering have a wide variety of opportunities for newcomers to practice their language skills in creative and interactive ways (Dudley, 2007; Pryce et al., 2018; Waterhouse, 2016). Choosing between these program methods depends on the goals of service providers and newcomers.

### Curricula

The final theme that we found was the power that language instruction curricula can hold over what information is passed to newcomers, what opportunities they are presented with, and which of their needs are prioritised. EAL classes are in a great position to pass on important information to newcomers, such as their rights as workers and citizens, or standards of treatment to expect at work or in the community (Kosny et al., 2020). Even though most course content is dependent on the intended target community (Campbell et al., 2015), like specific professions or

student majors, some EAL courses choose to focus on transferable skills and language content that is helpful across different professions and scenarios instead of designing content for one group (Huang, 2022). EAL class curriculum can also support newcomers outside of language content. Language learning activities can include employment preparation through resume building and interview practice as instruction (Kosny et al., 2020). Many courses also include opportunities for volunteering or placements that can provide Canadian work experience, informal language learning, and community connections (Campbell et al., 2015). Finally, language programming can also provide psychosocial or emotional support through personal connections and peer advice that can assist language learning and settlement (Crawford & Candlin, 2018).

### **Moving Forward - Conclusion and Recommendations**

Because our findings identified key barriers to accessing and benefiting from language instruction, we developed several recommendations for the NCC and other language service providers in small and medium sized communities. These recommendations were developed based on our own research and what has been done in other communities to improve EAL experiences for newcomers

- 1. Newcomer centres could provide free bus passes to newcomers to improve their access to classes in mid-sized population centres*
- 2. Service providers working with newcomers can include workplace safety expectations and worker rights in language instruction programs*
- 3. Engage newcomer's own language and identities during learning.*

4. *Any workplace language placements or partnerships should ensure constant feedback and communication to avoid facilitating exploitation*
5. *Organize programming during accessible times or in alternative formats, like online meetings or accessible locations*

Moving forward, it is important that newcomer centres like the NCC take into account the experiences and barriers that newcomers may face when attempting to access language instruction. Our research and recommendations are designed to highlight these challenges and provide potential solutions to support newcomer settlement and integration. Hopefully, this research will encourage others to study the particular needs and experiences of newcomers in small and medium sized communities, and work with newcomers to adapt programming to their needs.

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