

Community Based ESL: An Assessment of a Federal Pilot Initiative

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This article provides an overview of an assessment that TESL Canada undertook of Employment and Immigration Canada's pilot programme, the Settlement Language Training Program (1986/7). Ten projects in the programme in Ontario, Manitoba, and B.C. were studied. The programme was well received. Its community based delivery and the availability of babysitting and transportation supports were important

to its success. Good needs assessment for outreach and curriculum proved to be critical. Special attention needs to be paid to the needs of learners with low levels of literacy. Implications for future initiatives of this type are drawn on the topics of needs assessments, decision making structures, delivery agencies, time-frames and funding levels, and programme models.

TESL Canada has become increasingly involved in research projects with federal agencies on topics which relate to various aspects of federal policy and programmes for ESL. This paper provides an overview of an assessment TESL Canada conducted for the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) of a pilot programme in community based ESL delivery. This overview provides: background information on the programme assessed; comments on the assessment methodology; a discussion of the ways in which decisions were made by federal, provincial, and local parties; a description of the delivery agencies and students in the projects selected for study; a discussion of the findings of the assessment; and comments on the implications of the findings.

Background Information

The target of the assessment, the Settlement Language Training Program (SLTP), was a national pilot programme introduced by the Settlement Branch of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission in 1986/7. It aimed

to meet the language needs of adult immigrants not expected to join the labour force (not eligible for language training provided by Job Entry) by providing language training instruction through immigrant serving agencies. The priority target group is immigrant women at home. (CEIC 1986)

Up until this time, the federal government had not been involved in community based ESL delivery except indirectly through funding to the

provinces. The SLTP was initiated as a one-time-only provision of one million dollars for the year 1986/7. As it turns out, a similar amount has been available for this programme in 1987/8. As a pilot programme, it required an assessment of its effectiveness in order to ascertain what was gained by its implementation. TESL Canada was contracted to conduct the assessment.

Assessment Structure and Methods

TESL Canada and CEIC agreed to an assessment model based on the study of two sample SLTP projects in each of three provinces, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia. The Manitoba Department of Education provided additional funding so that four more projects in Manitoba could be included. TESL Canada agreed to hire researchers (Marjatta Holt, Nick Collins, and Nora Steltzer) who would spend three days on each project interviewing project personnel and learners, gathering documentation, and interviewing provincial and federal officials involved with the SLTP. In addition, TESL Canada provided a coordinator (Marjatta Holt) and an administrator (Barbara Burnaby) to conduct the business of the assessment and to analyse the results.

The analysis outlined below must be read as strictly qualitative and anecdotal. It was not possible for us to choose projects for study in such a way that our data could be considered representative of all SLTP projects for the purposes of quantitative analysis or nationally representative comparisons. The broad terms of reference for the SLTP permitted a wide range of project types to be developed. While our data suggest some interesting factors about the target population and the agencies which serve them, it cannot be assumed that they are representative of the whole population. Thus, our study is a combined assessment of the individual projects on the basis of only three days of data collection for each. In addition, factors relating to the ways in which decisions were made about the SLTP funds were studied through interview data from federal and provincial officials.

Key Terms

In light of recent reports on the delivery of social services to immigrants and visible minorities, two sets of distinctions were deliberately made in the analysis. First, in terms of agencies which contracted to deliver services under the SLTP, a distinction was made between "mainstream agencies" and "ethnic agencies" (Doyle and Visano 1987). Mainstream agencies are considered here to be those which: 1) are run by people whose ethnic origin is not specifically relevant to the service, 2) aim their services to

clients of any ethnic origin, and 3) usually focus on one particular kind of service such as children's aid, cancer prevention, and so on. A mainstream agency might be one run by a multi-ethnic group to provide services to immigrants of any origin. Ethnic agencies, on the other hand, are designated here as those run by members of a specific ethnic group for the benefit of others from that same group. The range of services may vary.

A second distinction made here is between "generic ESL" and ESL training targetted to the needs of "special" ESL learners (Manitoba Department of Education 1984). Generic ESL here means ESL training provided by the usual institutional deliverers of adult education—school boards, community colleges, universities, and so on—involving standard class sizes, a normative curriculum, limited learner support services, etc. Programmes for ESL learners with special needs would include those which attempt to overcome barriers to access to generic ESL programmes such as the need for childcare, geographic isolation, and low levels of formal education.

In terms of this discussion, "decision makers" are the people who chose the projects to be funded under SLTP or officially advised those who did. We refer to non-governmental organizations eligible for funding under SLTP as "agencies."

Decision Making Influences

In Ontario and B.C., the decisions to fund agencies for SLTP projects were made primarily by CEIC officials, probably with advice from community agency umbrella groups. In Ontario, the province offered suggestions which were, for the most part, followed by CEIC. In B.C., it is less clear what advice CEIC had access to or sought out. Provincial government bodies were not involved. In Manitoba, an advisory board of government officials and public sector delivery institutions was set up to give advice, and the province, through the Adult Continuing Education sector of the Department of Education, played a major role.

Three factors are important here with respect to the specific problems to be addressed, the resources available for decision making, the climate of cooperation (federal, provincial, and deliverers), and the effectiveness of the results. One is the history of federal-provincial relations on matters of immigrant settlement, specially that relating to adult ESL. In this regard, Ontario and Manitoba show evidence of effective relationships resulting in a good balance of administrative responsibilities and respect for appropriate expertise developed in each bureaucracy according to its mandate. In B.C., the distant relationship between the federal and provin-

cial governments suggests that valuable opportunities for collaboration are being missed and that suitable expertise may sometimes not be available for decision making.

The second factor is differences across the country in the history of development in ethnic communities within the context of Canadian society. In areas in which large concentrations of immigrants have appeared over a period of several decades, such as Toronto and Vancouver, leadership and structure have had a chance to develop in the ethnic communities to the extent that their political and administrative voices are heard regularly by provincial and federal authorities. In areas of less mature or less numerous ethnic populations, the only agencies serving immigrants and advising governments may be those of the mainstream. In some areas of the country there may be no agencies at all which are mandated to or are prepared to deal with the needs of immigrants and refugees.

The third factor concerns structures to coordinate and support ESL services and settlement services in a province and the relationship between the two. Networks for coordination and collaboration among stakeholders in ESL delivery seem to follow different patterns in different provinces and to be variously related to networks concerned with immigrant settlement. The fact that these systems are not always closely integrated exists, perhaps, because ESL is traditionally strongly linked to formal "generic" education systems whereas settlement issues are inclined to relate to other kinds of institutions. Of course there is overlap between the two networks, but the relationship between the two may not be close.

In Manitoba, leadership on the part of the provincial government meant that the SLTP experience served to strengthen the ESL network and to link it to settlement developments. In Ontario, a strong network between ESL and settlement interests fostered by the provincial government provided a receptive climate for SLTP initiatives. In B.C., a lack of provincial involvement led CEIC officials to rely on their settlement contacts in a context in which ESL support was not adequate to the needs of the deliverers. Decisions on language issues in settlement, such as in the SLTP, would be best informed if the views of representatives from both networks were solicited. One wonders why the provincial ESL associations were not directly involved in the SLTP in any of the three provinces since language training was the focus of the programme.

Delivery Agencies

Among the agencies studied (two in Ontario, two in B.C. and six in Manitoba), there was variety in terms of size, maturity, objectives, orientation toward particular client groups, access to ethnic and mainstream resources, experience with ESL services, and so on. Both agencies in

B.C. and two in Manitoba were mainstream. One in Ontario was borderline. The rest were all ethnic agencies.

The characteristics of the agencies studied undoubtedly influenced the character and clientele of SLTP projects. For example, one agency was an isolated agency in a smaller community compared with all the others which had access to other agencies and settlement related services in the large immigrant centres of Vancouver, Winnipeg and Toronto. One of the agencies served seniors and another focussed on immigrant women. All four of the Manitoba ethnic agencies were inexperienced in offering ESL services. These and other factors are taken into consideration as far as possible in the analysis of the SLTP projects themselves.

Learners

Learners served by the SLTP projects under study were recruited in homogeneous groups according to language ethnic backgrounds except in the B.C. projects. Predictably, the length of time that the learners had been in Canada varied with their ethnicity. The Cambodians, Tamils, and Salvadorans, for example, had all been in Canada for less than two years. On the other hand, some of the Punjabis and most of the Chileans had been here for more than ten years. The latter pointed out that they had had to work or mind children when they first came here and did not have the opportunity to learn English. Also, they mentioned that English classes were not as readily available when they first came here as they are now. Evidently, there is a backlog of people who immigrated to Canada some time ago but who have not received sufficient language training, in addition to new arrivals who are in need of language instruction. We did not ask learners about their status, but we expect that there were a number of Canadian citizens among the immigrants and refugees, and there was one Francophone Canadian in a small B.C. community who could not find an ESL course elsewhere in the community.

Most classes were made up of all or mostly women. The exception was one of the Manitoba ethnic agency classes that was predominantly male. It was pointed out, in this case, that women and men in that culture do not normally study together, so the women either did not enrol or gradually dropped out. In most classes, except the one directed toward seniors, the age range was fairly broad. However, the age range in one of the B.C. classes was quite restricted—29 to 35.

A minority of the learners said that they had tried generic ESL classes before but had left them. Some of the reasons given were that the classes were too difficult, that they did not understand what the teacher said, and that people at the school did not understand them. Two or three of the learners were currently enrolled in generic ESL classes at the same time

as they were taking the SLTP program. Several of the SLTP classes referred more advanced learners on to suitable generic ESL classes. Those who said that they had not tried generic ESL classes cited childcare responsibilities, lack of literacy skills, fear of generic classes, and lack of information as their reasons.

Assessment of the SLTP Projects Under Study

The SLTP was a programme that could hardly have failed. In light of the size of the need addressed, every project was certain to make effective and efficient use of the SLTP funds. Unless this money was grossly mismanaged, it was bound to get to people who needed it and be frugally and appropriately spent. Indeed, it survived some serious problems in timing in that serious delays were encountered in release of federal funds. Everyone we interviewed—decision-makers, agency personnel, teachers, and learners—were uniformly enthusiastic about the intent and the outcomes of the SLTP projects. They want more, longer, and now. One Toronto agency worker told us that “They [the learners] even want to come on Sundays!” This is not to say that there were not some concerns expressed as well, but the overall outcome was considered to be far more positive than negative.

Although a formal needs assessment at the federal level was not conducted to establish the target and objectives of this programme, the experience of CEIC’s personnel and deputations made by advocacy groups (e.g. TESL Canada 1982; Equality Now 1984) led to the decision as to the need for language training for immigrant women. The decision to use community agencies as deliverers was also good, since learners reported having had severe difficulties with generic ESL classes. Decisions at the regional level regarding which agencies and projects to fund was made easy by the existing relationship between CEIC and agencies funded by its Immigrant Settlement Assistance Program (ISAP), and on-going or new initiatives by the provincial governments (in Manitoba and Ontario) to develop the ESL delivery capacities of local agencies. The provisions of ESL training, with daycare and transportation support in the non-threatening environment of community agencies, was an ideal combination to meet the needs of the target population.

Pedagogy

We do not know, in measured terms, what or how much was learned in the classes, but we do know that virtually all of the learners felt that they had made progress in areas that they were concerned about. In our view, in two of the projects, learners might have learned more English if the quality of the teaching had been different. The researcher who visited

these projects felt that the learners in these agencies had made little English language progress. However, our impression was that, in one of these projects, the agendas of the learners were less directed towards language learning and more towards the social support of the class and gaining new information. Thus, the class was highly satisfactory to them and they reported learning things that would help them considerably in operating in Canadian society.

A national needs assessments and evaluation of the delivery system were not necessary in this small, one-time-only programme for the reasons outlined above. However, the outcomes of the individual projects were dependent on the existence and quality of the local needs assessment conducted by the funded agencies. Some agencies knew that they could contact more than enough suitable learners to fill SLTP classes from their regular contacts with their clientele. Others conducted community needs assessments and outreach with respect to the groups they thought were the most in need. Projects which did not do enough community needs assessment, suffered recruitment and retention problems.

Even more important, in our view, was the use of needs assessment procedures by teachers or supervisors with the learners before the curriculum was established. The initiative of the Manitoba government in assisting the Manitoba ethnic agencies in developing learner-centred curricula is an outstanding example of what can be done to develop good teaching programmes in settings which have not had such programmes before.

The importance cannot be overestimated of providing learners with the opportunity for personal experience with Canadians and their institutions. The field trips to banks, stores, clinics, and so on in the company of a teacher who could explain and answer questions, were one of the most popular features of the SLTP programmes. ESL teachers are often the first contact an immigrant has with someone who can authoritatively interpret the new society for them.

ESL pedagogical support played a critical role in the SLTP projects, both in their development and their implementation. The Ontario and Manitoba ethnic agency projects had strong support from the provincial system and the results, particularly in the challenging (low literacy) Manitoba ethnic agency cases, were promising. In B.C., project development was hampered, with respect to allocation of money for and selection of materials, by the lack of ESL expertise in the agencies and support from provincial quarters. Also, the teachers would have appreciated pedagogical support in their implementation of the project. Two Manitoba mainstream agencies, which were supported more from the federal than the provincial government, chose to address the needs of a challenging (again low literacy) group of immigrants, and their efforts, in one case in particular, were

diminished by their limited resources in ESL and adult literacy teaching.

It is clear from the results of the projects that bilingual teachers are a critical resource in classes for newly arrived immigrants and those with low levels of literacy. Bilingual teaching is not a panacea for ESL, since it tends to inhibit the development of independent coping skills, but for learners with low education levels and for newcomers who have profound needs for information about their new community, bilingual teaching is very effective. In communities which receive large numbers of immigrants, in recent years, it has become possible to find teachers who are both bilingual and have acceptable ESL qualifications, but this is not feasible everywhere.

When learners with low levels of education are involved, it is clear that teachers with training and experience in methods appropriate to such learners are significantly more successful in keeping learners in class and in helping them to make critical educational advances than are teachers with only conventional training and experience. The problem is that formal training in the teaching of literacy to adults, much less that for the teaching of ESL to non-literate adults, is rare in Canada.

Support Facilities

Babysitting support for ESL training was one of the most critical aspects of the success of the SLTP in relation to that of existing ESL programmes. The efforts of one of the B.C. projects to enrich its babysitting service so as to help the children develop new skills is to be highly commended. All of the babysitting services employed qualified babysitters, many of whom were bilingual or were assisted by bilingual volunteers. There were problems regarding facilities for babysitting in some of the projects, but these might have been due to the speed with which most of the projects were mounted.

The importance of transportation, both for those projects which did and those which did not budget for it in their SLTP funding, impressed on us the level of isolation and lack of integration into Canadian society which characterized the SLTP learners. In large centres such as Toronto, it appears that transportation is a problem for some learners. Some learners who are able and can afford to use public transportation may still need some of the extra supports provided by SLTP-like programmes. Others may need financial, physical, and psychological help in order for them to get to classes.

In all the projects studied, existing support facilities of the delivering agencies were important to the success of the project. The profile of the agency as an approachable institution in the ethnic community and formal needs assessments were important factors in recruitment, as was the net-

working ability of some of the workers. The distinction between mainstream (run by and directed to people of any ethnic background) and ethnic (run by and directed to people of a specific ethnic background) agencies was not significant in terms of performance on recruitment, referral, and support services. Mainstream agencies which had good bilingual facilities seemed to do well in providing support to the classes.

Implications

As noted above, the SLTP was an experimental programme providing a relatively small amount of money towards the alleviation of a large problem. The degree of success achieved in the ten projects studied would not necessarily be matched if such a programme were mounted on a larger scale unless a number of factors were taken into consideration. In this section the SLTP experience is considered in terms of its implications for future initiatives.

Needs Assessment

In the SLTP, needs assessments at the classroom and sometimes the community levels were conducted, and the resulting quality of the projects showed the value of having done this relative to that of projects which did not. Whatever was done at the national level to establish the programme's mandate and at the regional levels to decide on the agencies to receive project funding was informal and non-systematic—a reasonable approach given the short timeframe and the small size of the programme. However, if larger and/or more long term programmes of this sort were to be considered, needs assessments at the national and regional levels would have to be conducted.

From our interviews with decision makers and agency personnel and from various concerns expressed about needs assessment by Doyle and Visano in their 1987 study, it is clear that, as background to future initiatives in settlement language training, an explicit effort must be made to assess the needs of the target population. If agencies are going to be relied on to provide much of the information, they should be provided with the financial and expert support needed to do that work. It is recommended here that the principle of triangulation be applied to designing a needs analysis; in other words, as many perspectives as possible should be brought to bear on the questions addressed. Thus, information from the agencies should be considered, and statistical data and information from other institutions such as generic ESL deliverers can augment the picture. Information from people who deal with immigrants on other than service bases, such as employers or merchants, might be useful in indicating what immigrants face in unprotected, real life situations.

Decision Making

The role of the delivery agencies in the decision making structure is crucial to the success of future initiatives on settlement language training, particularly if funders continue to rely on them heavily for needs assessment information. The precise role played by the agencies at a regional or local level depends considerably on the range of agencies available and their maturity. In our view, the goal should be to develop a cooperative decision making structure involving all stakeholders. In some cases, less mature agencies may have to be treated as clients by government until their structures can be developed to the point that they can become full members in the decision making process. The leadership shown by the Adult Continuing Education sector in Manitoba to facilitate such development in provincial ethnic agencies in the SLTP is an excellent model.

Target Groups

Future settlement language training might be more effectively targeted if the goals of the programme are specified in more detail. We suggest that future initiatives along the lines of the SLTP would be well served if they were to focus on certain characteristics of those potential client groups whose needs are not normally met in the generic system. In looking at the whole spectrum of ESL delivery in Canada, a focus on those learners who are blocked from access to those generic programmes now available, as the SLTP did, is much needed.

Depending on individual and local circumstances, then, potential clients might be workers who do not have time to take generic ESL classes, homebound mothers and seniors, people with low levels of literacy who have difficulty with formal classroom situations, people in geographic locations in which ESL classes are not normally available, and so on. If the main criterion for the programme is to overcome blocks that would exist in the generic ESL system, the learners are likely to cover all age ranges, include men as well as women, affect people of all immigration statuses, and appeal to people who have been in Canada for varying lengths of time. In isolated areas, the learners might be those who would normally be served by generic ESL classes if they lived in a larger centre. The goals and expected outcomes of each class could be expected to vary greatly since the needs, interests, and backgrounds of the learners would vary.

Taking such an approach would devolve a great deal of decision making to local levels and create a reliance on agencies and other community bodies to identify needs and create unique solutions. The justification for this decentralization and variation in programming would be in the focus of the programme on filling the gaps left by the generic ESL delivery

system. See Manitoba Department of Education (1984:14) for a discussion of equality of condition as well as equality of access in adult ESL.

Deliverers

For those newcomers who have found access to Canadian institutions difficult, community agencies have generally had more success than public institutions in the area of ESL training and other services, in meeting their needs. The role of bilingual support services (Doyle and Visano 1987: 23) is a major factor in this area.

The Doyle and Visano report on Toronto health and social service agencies talks of "two solitudes" when discussing the relations between what they call mainstream and ethnic agencies (p. 18). Given the data gathered in the assessment of the SLTP, we see no grounds for describing the relationship between the ethnic agencies and the mainstream settlement agencies we studied as two solitudes. However, we were made aware that the mandates, resources, and directions of the two types of agencies may have a relevant bearing on the ways in which language programmes are delivered. The fact that bilingual services were available in both types of agencies was critical to the success of projects. That bilingual teaching was not provided in some of the mainstream projects was more of a problem. The ability of the mainstream agencies as opposed to the ethnic agencies to identify suitable target populations and provide suitable programmes is a matter for further consideration.

It is often the case that an agency can increase the effectiveness of classes greatly if it is able to prepare other parts of the community for the changes that will come about as a result of the learners' development. Thus, if seniors become more mobile or young mothers become employable as a result of their experience in class, agencies which can mediate the effects of such changes will maximize the positive effects. Obviously, those agencies which are in close contact and have influential relations with all aspects of the learners' community will be in a good position to mediate in this way.

Timeframe and Funding Levels

An important consideration, if the SLTP is looked on as a pilot project with implications for the future, was that the SLTP funds were spent over the period of only two or three months rather than over a whole year. The choice of ways to spend the funding in projects and the resulting effectiveness might have been different if the same amount of money had been used in each agency to support full year projects. It would be valuable to

experiment further to see what choices agencies would make if the time-frames or funding levels were different.

Special attention must be paid to the administrative capacities of agencies in relation to funding programmes like the SLTP. Unlike the public education system, they do not necessarily have the resources to develop proposals of funding, to network with assorted government bodies, or to survive cashflow problems resulting from bureaucratic delays. Agency personnel we interviewed were upset about the delays in the SLTP funding, such delays having caused differing degrees of problems depending on the agencies' resources. If future initiatives in settlement language training aim to take advantage of the evident strengths of community agencies in serving hard-to-reach learners, then special steps will have to be taken to ensure that the funding mechanisms are designed to suit the needs and capacities of these agencies.

Programme Models

One Ontario agency took a significantly different approach to using SLTP funding than did any of the other agencies studied. Perhaps because it was the most extensive deliverer of ESL among the agencies studied, it chose to use SLTP funding for programme support, such as coordination and outreach, rather than to fund many direct delivery costs through the SLTP. It is evident that the maturity and service configurations of agencies which would be suitable for SLTP funding in the future should have a strong influence on the kinds of support that would be the most useful.

The Doyle and Visano report states:

Firstly, it is important that health and social service organizations do not simply mirror the inequalities existing in society; instead these organizations need to represent *prototypes*, demonstrating how they can best promote justice, equality and fairness—providing equitable access to opportunities, structures and services for minorities . . .

Making these changes to increase access for minority group members means moving from charity to justice, from benevolence to rights, assuming the same entitlements for minorities that all citizens are supposed to have in our society. (pp. 38-39)

This quotation is provided to mark the need for positive and creative approaches to future initiatives in settlement language training rather than to embed them in a mindset focussing on disabilities, crisis and desperation. Such an approach can positively inform all the implications outlined here, especially needs assessment. Future programming for settlement language training can be an opportunity for innovation and experimentation with the best of the resources of government, local deliverers, and community agencies brought to bear on the needs, concerns, interests, and aspi-

rations of those learners whose needs are not regularly being served by generic ESL deliverers.

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