

**Research Note**

# Identifying Barriers to the English Language Training of Underemployed Immigrants in Edmonton

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Extensive research has examined the difficulties refugees and immigrants to Canada face in the Canadian job market (e.g., Chui & Tran, 2005; Ferrer & Riddell, 2008; Galarneau & Morissette, 2004, 2008; Gilmore, 2009; Reitz, 2007; Sweetman, 2004). Recent estimates have shown that more than half of immigrants with a university degree are underemployed; that is, they are working in jobs for which they are overqualified in terms of education, skills, and previous work experience (Li, Gervais, & Duval, 2006). Of those immigrants, 72% continue to remain underemployed while living in Canada (Li et al., 2006). Considering the prevalence of immigrant underemployment, the negative economic, social, psychological, and political impacts of immigrant underemployment in Canada are significant to all Canadians (Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Reitz, 2005).

A major barrier to integration into the Canadian labour market is known to be limited language ability (Galarneau & Morissette, 2004; Grondin, 2007; Plante, 2011). It has been reported that the ability to converse in one of Canada's official languages (i.e., English or French), particularly English, increases the likelihood of having good education-job skills matches (Plante, 2011) and facilitates access to the same type of job held prior to immigration (Statistics Canada, 2003). Moreover, an insufficient knowledge of the official languages has been found to be an underlying cause of the earnings inequality of immigrants in Canada (Ostrovsky, 2008). Despite such evidence, many immigrants do not access higher-level language training to meet their professional communication demands and expectations (Sutherland, Wheller, & Conrad, 2008), and consequently become or remain underemployed.

## **The Present Study**

The main objective of this research project was to gain a broader perspective of the English as a second language (ESL) needs of underemployed immigrants in the Edmonton area, who—despite limited English language proficiency—do not access ESL training to meet their occupational communication needs. By determining the factors that hinder their access to ESL courses, the purpose of this present study was to identify ways to reduce barriers to ESL training for these immigrants.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

**ESL providers.** Six participants (directors, managers, and ESL program coordinators) representing six different ESL providers and settlement agencies across Edmonton were recruited for this study. The participants had an average of 18.5 years of full-time experience working with immigrants and refugees to Canada (range: 12-30 years, median: 18.5 years).

**ESL students.** Thirty-eight immigrants accessing ESL training at two institutions in Edmonton (MacEwan English Language Institute and NorQuest College) volunteered to participate in this study. Their mean length of residence in Canada was 2.7 years (range: 1 month to 10 years, median: 1.5 years).

### **Instruments**

Two online surveys were developed using Survey Monkey: one survey (11 questions) for ESL program representatives and settlement agencies providing services to immigrants, and another (17 questions) for immigrants accessing ESL training. The surveys consisted of only closed questions; most questions were followed by an “other” option where respondents were free to provide alternate responses. Both surveys elicited participants’ demographic information; perceived reasons for immigrant underemployment; the most problematic aspects of language for immigrants in the workplace; and suggestions for encouraging underemployed immigrants with limited language ability to access ESL training. Three demographic questions and two underemployment-related questions in the ESL students’ survey were adapted from Hamilton’s (2011) study concerning the development of a model of immigrant underemployment in Canada.

### **Procedure**

The survey for ESL providers and settlement agencies was disseminated via the Language Assessment, Referral and Counselling Centre (LARCC) and the Building Strength in Our Community (BSOC) listservs. The survey for ESL students was emailed to the ESL program coordinators at MacEwan English Language Institute and NorQuest College to be forwarded to their ESL students.

### **Data Analysis**

All responses to both surveys were imported into Excel spreadsheets and verified for accuracy and completeness. Descriptive statistics were calculated and provided by Survey Monkey. Responses to other options were manually and thematically classified for each question, and then quantified by counting the number of respondents who provided the same or similar answers.

## **Results and Discussion**

All six ESL providers (100%) and 35 ESL students (92%) identified limited English proficiency as a main reason for immigrant underemployment in Edmonton. When asked which aspects of the English language were most problematic for immigrants in the workplace, five (83%) of the

ESL providers selected pronunciation; four (67%) indicated listening, speaking, reading, and writing; three (50%) selected cultural knowledge (i.e., pragmatics); two (33%) vocabulary; and one (17%) grammar. On the other hand, of the 37 ESL students, 29 (78%) indicated speaking, 27 (73%) listening, 18 (49%) pronunciation, 17 (46%) vocabulary, 12 (32%) each for pragmatics and writing, 11 (30%) reading, and four (11%) grammar. Thus, ESL students in comparison to ESL providers gave more prominence to oral/aural skills.

All six ESL providers (100%) and 30 (79%) ESL students reported high tuition fees as the major reason that many underemployed immigrants with limited English proficiency do not access ESL training. Other perceived factors were lack of time (ESL providers: 67%, ESL students: 60%) and lack of information about ESL courses (ESL providers: 33%, ESL students: 34%). Fifty percent of the ESL providers and 21% of the ESL students also selected scheduling difficulties/conflicts as a barrier to accessing ESL training.

When asked about factors that would encourage underemployed immigrants with limited English language proficiency to access ESL training, all of the ESL providers selected lower tuition fees and ESL training offered in the workplace. Of the ESL students, 85% chose lower tuition fees, 44% more scheduling options, and 41% more accessible information about ESL courses.

### **Conclusion**

As the results show, there is a great deal of agreement in the responses provided by both groups of participants. However, the findings of this study reflect the perceptions of only two groups of stakeholders: (1) representatives of ESL programs and settlement agencies, that is, those working closely with the target population of this study; and (2) ESL students, that is, individuals with needs and concerns somewhat similar to those of the target population. In order to improve the results of this study, data must also be collected from underemployed immigrants who are not accessing ESL training. Subsequently, community stakeholders—including employers—must take steps to address barriers and facilitate access to ESL training to enhance the employment potential of immigrants.

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