

Striving for Voice:

*Thoughts on language acquisition and integration
offered by women who do not yet speak English*

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Who are the women speaking to us?

- **Women who entered Canada:**
 - speaking Cantonese (8), Mandarin (8), Urdu (8), Punjabi (6)
 - as wives of independent, skilled immigrant males
 - not fluent in English



Differences between 24 women of similar backgrounds who are now proficient and these 30 women who are not:

- **Level of education**

- **Presence of pre-schoolers**

(4 among the English-fluent Punjabi and Urdu speakers; 11 among the same language groups without English)

- **Length of time in Canada**

Differences in language learning in countries of origin

- **Cantonese and Mandarin speakers said their English teachers had had insufficient experience in English prior to teaching them**
- **Punjabi and Urdu speakers never mentioned this**

Differences in goals expressed at landing:

- Women from Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking communities usually expect to work and contribute financially to their families
- Women from Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking communities overwhelmingly expect to have their husbands support their families, and that their roles would be domestic

Experiences in their attempts to learn English

- **Unanimous conviction of importance of learning English**
- **Common motivation:**
 - **to get better jobs;**
 - **to be able to deal with doctors for their own and their family's health,**
 - **to deal with teachers to support their children's progress,**
 - **to deal with the government regarding their own needs and obligations and the immigration needs of family members; and**
 - **for everyday living as well as emergencies**

Common challenges to learning English:

- **Financial struggles**
 - **Differences and similarities among groups**
- **Transportation to classes that aren't within walking distance**
- **Inconvenient scheduling**
- **Eligibility requirements as obstacles**
- **Teachers they didn't understand**
- **Concern about accents**

Challenges differing by ethnic group:

- **Family's lack of support or active opposition**
--husband's, extended family's, and children's
- **Role in family**
- **Responsibilities for extended family members**
- **Need for sex-segregated classes**
- **Ranking in family (daughter-in-law *vs* daughter)**
- **Racism**
- **Finances**

Results of not being able to speak English

- **Health**
 - **Lack of confidence in health dealings**
 - **Problems handling emergencies**
 - **Inability to meet older family members' health needs**
 - **Mental health effects of stress**

■ **Education**

- **Inability to support children in their studies**
- **Inability to advocate for children**
- **Family relations suffer from their incompetence in communication**
- **Inability to pursue higher studies themselves**

- **Workplace - Need for:**
 - **Advocating for oneself**
 - **Understanding instructions**
 - **Communicating difficulties**
 - **Dealing with injustices**

- **Daily life**

- **Shopping**

- **Banking**

- **Dealing with government services**

- **Relating to neighbours**

- **Overcoming powerlessness**

On teaching and teachers:

- Desire for assistance in learning *in their own language*, whether through teachers or teacher's aides, and in a kindly and respectful manner
- Desire for *instruction* in an accent that is "Canadian" rather than from someone with an accent from another place
- Desire to *acquire* a Canadian accent rather than an accent that is a hybrid of the teacher's origin and place of education and the student's place of origin
- Desire to progress quickly to *mastery of spoken English*, with instruction at a more sophisticated level reserved for those going on for higher education or more professional jobs

Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Subsidies for newcomers to be able to take classes**
- **Classes on weekends**
- **Classes in local schools, in normal school hours**
- **Public education on the value to each family & the whole community of women learning English**
- **Free language instruction to newcomers for as long as they need it**
- **Emphasis on clarity, not type, of accent in class:
“There are many types of Canadian accents now!”**
- **Teachers’ Aides to interpret for students who do not speak English**
- **Good screening & training for teachers to eliminate racism and promote anti-bias teaching**

Thank you!