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Understanding the Interaction of Language, Literacy and Essential Skills – Possible Policy Directions to Address the Needs of Immigrants with Low Literacy and Essential Skills

Rachel Wernick
Director General
Office of Literacy and Essential Skills
Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

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Language, Literacy and Essential Skills Are Interconnected

Language

- Speaking and comprehension
- Used to refer to immigrants' proficiency in one of Canada's official languages
- Many immigrants self-report language ability as a key barrier to employment (LSIC)

Literacy

- Ability to understand and use printed information
- Skill taught and learned
- Some immigrants have no/limited literacy in their mother tongue
- International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS 2003) was administered in English or French only
- IALSS added document use, problem-solving, and numeracy to prose reading → more composite measure of proficiency

Essential Skills

- Include IALSS measures
 - reading
 - document use
 - numeracy
 - problem solvingand other essential skills
 - writing
 - working with others
 - oral communication
 - computer use
 - continuous learning
- Identified through HRSDC's research with employers, employees and educators.
- Used across all categories of occupations to enable people to adapt to workplace change

Large-Scale Surveys Have Been Instrumental (ALL 1994, IALSS 2003) in Building the Evidence Base

- Measure three skills: reading, document use, numeracy [and problem solving in IALSS]
- Benchmark and measure trends over time
- Allow for international and interprovincial comparisons
- Highly reliable data, and excellent starting points for further research
- Evolving design over time: depth (IALSS) vs. breath (PIAAC)

IALSS Levels (scale 1-500)

- Level 1 (0-225) - very poor skills
- Level 2 (226-275) - reading level is poor; possible coping abilities to manage everyday demands
- Level 3 (276-325) - skill level approximates level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry; requires ability to integrate several sources of information and solve more complex problems
- Levels 4 and 5 (326-375, 376-500) - ability to perform higher-order information processing

LEVEL 3 IS THE MINIMUM LEVEL REQUIRED TO FUNCTION WELL IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY.

Significant Differences Between Immigrants and Canadian-Born Adults

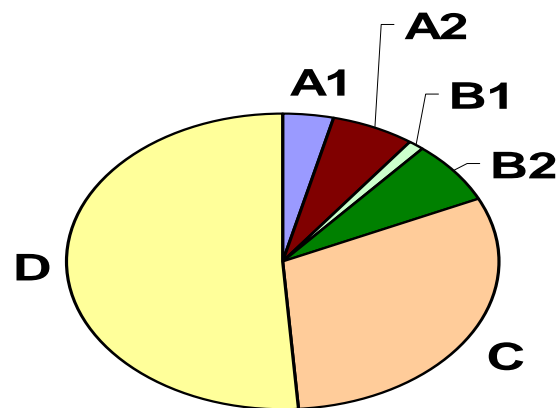
- 60% of immigrants, compared to 37% of the Canadian-born, score at levels 1 and 2 in IALSS prose literacy
- The largest gaps between immigrants and Canadian-born are in prose literacy and problem solving, and the smallest are in numeracy
 - problem solving strategies may be culturally linked whereas numeracy is more universal
- The proportion of immigrants within each proficiency level decreases by level
- The proportion of immigrants with a mother tongue other than English/French decreases by level
- BUT: close to 50% of immigrants whose mother tongue **IS** English or French perform below level 3

Segmentation Analysis

International Survey of Reading Skills (ISRS)

- Focused on adults who performed below level 3 in IALSS
- Performance on the component parts (print and meaning) necessary for developing reading skills

A1	Very limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, English mother tongue		
A2	Very limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, non-English mother tongues		
B1	Limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, English mother tongue		
B2	Limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, non-English mother tongues		
C	Limited print skills, adequate comprehension skills		
D	Adequate print skills, adequate comprehension skills		



Who are the most vulnerable?

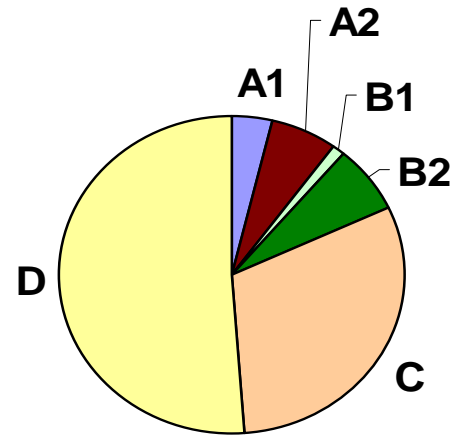
- A sizable proportion of English speaking adults are at a high level 2, and need only some upgrading to make it to level 3 (Groups C and D)
- Among the native English speakers (groups A1 and B1) with very low LES, many may have an undiagnosed reading disability, and/or have not completed high school
- **All adults with low reading skills (groups A2 and B2) do not speak English as their mother tongue**

What are the demographics of immigrants with low reading skills?

Immigrant Women Have Particularly Low Literacy and Essential Skills

- 34% of recent female immigrants are at Level 1 in IALSS (in contrast to 9% for the Canadian-born women)
- Only 7% of recent female immigrants attain the highest levels of literacy (at Level 4/5), compared to 25% for the Canadian-born women
- Segmentation analysis identified two similar subgroups of immigrant women with particularly low reading skills

A1	Very limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, English mother tongue		
A2	Very limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, non-English mother tongues		
B1	Limited print skills, limited comprehension skills, English mother tongue		
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- A2 and B2**
- Majority female, foreign born, non-English speakers
 - Majority older and employed
 - Ranging from none and/or little to some PSE education
 - Most report that their reading is adequate for their work

Education and Labour Market Outcomes

Immigrants are better educated than before, but with lower reading skills

- Among those at the same level of educational attainment, there are large differences between immigrants and Canadian-born
 - Foreign-educated male immigrants with a university degree have an average prose reading score that is 20-25% lower than that for a university-educated Canadian-born male
- About 2% of the university educated Canadian-born score at level 1 prose literacy, in comparison to 14% of established and 37% recent university-educated immigrants

Despite being better educated than before, immigrants have lower returns to education than Canadian-born

- Most immigrants with low literacy skills are employed (63% of level 1 and 69% of level 2)
- Among Canadians with PSE and low literacy, there are more immigrants in bottom two income quintiles when compared to their Canadian born counterparts (40% vs. 32%)
- Immigrants receive a lower return to foreign-acquired university education because foreign universities generate lower levels of 'usable' (in Canada) literacy skills

Literacy skills are not the only reason for earnings differential, but they do play an important role

Age and the Length of Residence

- Many adult immigrants with low literacy are in their prime working years

Level 1 23% were between 16-35
51% were between 36-55
26% were between 56-65

Level 2 34% were between 16-35
49% were between 36-55
17% were between 56-66

- The majority of immigrants with low reading skills have lived in Canada for more than ten years
- Duration of residence does not have a significant impact on the average performance of immigrants in the four domains
- This raises the issue of how to ensure that adult immigrants improve and maintain their literacy skills

Language

- 20% of recent immigrants spoke English or French as a mother tongue in 2006, compared to 48% of recent immigrants in 1981
- More than 200 languages are spoken at present by Canadians whose mother tongue is neither English nor French (around 20% of the population)
- The growing language groups
 - Chinese languages
 - Punjabi
 - Spanish
 - Arabic
 - Tagalog
 - Urdu
- Except for Spanish, all of these languages are linguistically very different from both English and French
- More attention is being focused on 'linguistic distance' - a quantitative measure of distance between English and other languages (Chiswick and Miller 2004)

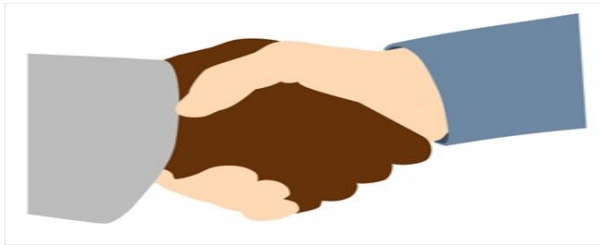
Areas for Further Exploration

- Understanding the relationships
 - between first language literacy and second language proficiency, literacy and essential skills
 - between the age, the length of residence, literacy and essential skills in English/French and the second language acquisition ceiling
 - Between proficiency in English/French and literacy and essential skills, in relation to changing linguistic patterns of immigration to Canada
- Best practices are not widely known and/or shared
 - How did some immigrants get to level 3 and above?
 - Which are examples of projects and/or promising practices?

Potential Paths Forward

Embedding literacy and essential skills into

- Existing work-oriented programs (pre-employment, bridge-to-work)
- Language/literacy focused programs (ELT, CLB)



Linking literacy and essential skills practitioners to immigrant serving organizations and settlement service providers (sharing of best practices, tools)

Targeted approaches (e.g. immigrant women with low LES)

