



Teachers of English as a Second Language Association of Ontario
27 Carlton Street, Suite 405, Toronto, Ontario M5B 1L2
Telephone (416) 593-4243 Fax (416) 593-0164
Email: teslontario@telus.net

TESL Ontario Position Paper on the Adult Education Review in Ontario.

1. Is there a need to have an Ontario definition for adult education? What would such a definition include?

The fact that such a question is now being posed indicates that there is a general lack of understanding and recognizes that adult education is a separate entity from mainstream education. Many studies have been done and many definitions exist, each intended to be relevant to its particular time and circumstances. TESL Ontario recommends that the definition recognize the diversity of the changing population of the province. Adult immigrants are the only group of individuals who can be identified as participants in all aspects of Adult Education, be it ESL classes, credit programs, Literacy/Basic Skills, seniors or General Interest. Like other adult learners, ESL learners span a large age group (18 +), yet they comprise an extremely diverse educational background.

Over the last 30 years the demographics of Ontario have changed due to global conflict and shifting economic realities. A look at statistical information from Citizenship and Immigration Canada for the year 2003 supports this (see The Monitor – statistical trends for the Third Quarter 2003 at www.settlement.org). In 2003 the number of immigrants destined to Ontario increased by 14%. This does not include numbers of people who have sought refuge and are still waiting for their cases to be heard, nor does it reflect secondary migration between provinces. Meanwhile, expectations among newcomers are as diverse as their experiences. Some expect an educational system that compares favorably with those of optional intended destinations; others feel privileged to be given the opportunity to improve upon their skills. This poses a definite dilemma for Ontario. At the same time, a failure to address cultural concerns will create systemic problems that may reflect poorly on the delivery of individual programs.

Therefore, the definition of Adult Education must be inclusive as it acknowledges the difference between pedagogy and androgogy. Such a definition might then be worded as follows:

In keeping with and recognizing the fundamentals of the philosophy of Life-Long Learning, adult education must be accessible to all, recognizing learning barriers, as well as socio-economic and cultural barriers, such as those that affect newcomers and immigrants who are participants in all fields of adult education. With this in mind, adult programs must be developed and delivered so that the necessary skills to function in society are attainable.

2. How are adult education, training and upgrading opportunities addressing current and anticipated economic and social challenges?

While MTCU has attempted to address some of the challenges faced by newcomer professionals entering Ontario through the APT unit and the Bridging Projects the individuals served represent a very small percentage –the tip of the iceberg. It is not sufficient to only attempt to address the employability of those who fall under this category; we must also look at avenues that assist newcomers with little or no skill or education enter the labor market. For many of these individuals the barriers in some ways are greater. ESL literacy needs must be recognized as distinct from adult ESL and Literacy/Basic Skills requirements, and should be supported by targeted programs and materials.

Herein lies the greater problem. In order to improve this situation, the Government of Ontario must recognize ESL, not only through funding but also more importantly by ensuring that both the Education Act within Ontario and its attendant policies are changed to reflect the current demographics of our province. Until ESL becomes an officially recognized program with all the same supports as others, discussion for future directions becomes moot. The recognition of ESL will facilitate cooperation between regulatory bodies and pave the way for integration and economic stability of foreign trained professionals. This will also assist in the implementation, monitoring, and accessibility of PLAR.

3. What can be done within existing budgets to enhance learning opportunities?

The first step that needs to be taken is the establishing of a clear framework for accountability. Currently within the province, dollars given to organizations through the General Legislative Grants for ESL and credit programs are not always put back into the program but are channeled elsewhere in school boards to support other programs. If these grants are dedicated for identified programs, then there must be a mechanism in place to ensure that the funds are indeed being spent for the purpose intended. There are real costs associated with these programs that are not being met. While financial monitoring is important, quality of program is equally important. It must, however, be recognized that flexibility in providing ESL classes is imperative.

Clearly, there are many barriers facing the ESL learner; childcare, accessibility, recognition of prior learning, and life experiences are but a few. The possibility of harmonizing the use of daycare dollars, or committing a percentage of these dollars to address childcare needs, represents a simple solution to one problem. Yet such remedies require agreement between with the provincial ministry and local governments.

- Establish a mechanism that will support workplace mentoring so that newcomers can acquire the language and social skills needed to work in Ontario. Financial support, or other incentives, for potential employers who participate in this would be an asset. {Mentors should be equipped with appropriate materials to facilitate this endeavor, much the same way that handbooks are available to tutors in community based Literacy programs.}
- Develop a variety of delivery mechanisms, which can help in meeting the needs of the ESL learner. Currently the majority of ESL classes are offered strictly with a language focus; few skills-specific courses exist and most programs are provided face-to-face. Providing opportunities for offering ESL through the use of technology would be beneficial. Recognizing the need for skills-specific ESL and allowing for workplace mentoring dollars would also be a move in the right direction.

4. **If an opportunity to relocate resources arises, what are the leading priorities?**

This is a complex issue. For so long within adult education, ESL has been viewed as the distant cousin. This has had an impact on the teaching environment, both as it pertains to the day-to-day work as well as training within recognized institutions. Teachers in adult education programs must have equitable work environments. Funding should be structured so that employers are able to provide at least the basic benefits such as paid sick leave and health care. In order to continue to provide quality programs, there must be a concerted effort to provide on-going professional development opportunities for teachers as well as more ESL training through recognized institutions as mentioned earlier.

When the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Ministry of Education were one Ministry, there was opportunity through the Adult Branch for program direction as there was a person responsible. During this period many innovative initiatives were undertaken, such as support for the Canadian Language Benchmarks and standards for instructors working in non-credit adult ESL. Today, outside of a solitary person in the Finance division of the Ministry of Education, there is no identified individual to answer questions related to program policy. This situation has existed for, not months but years, and must be corrected if delivery agents of adult education programs are going to be able to provide courses in keeping with changing demands.

Finally, there is a need to establish a data bank of resources, in general and specifically in ESL for teachers and learners. Until a few years ago this was in place through Alpha Plus, but due to funding cuts, ESL was removed as part of the organization's mandate. This has proven to be a tremendous hardship for smaller providers and for those who are not in urban settings.

5. Do you agree with the elements for a framework that are described in this discussion paper? What would you change? What would you add?

The general parameters of this paper are good. However, the issues are significantly broad and the requirements of ESL learners are deep. Our suggestion would be to establish another discussion, which is sector specific, to gain clearer insight. It would also help to get comprehensive input from learners of all sectors involved in order to understand their issues.

Another area that must be studied in reviewing adult education in Ontario deals with parallel processes currently in place. The Federal government funds the delivery of LINC programs, MTCU is involved in Bridging Projects, the Ministry of Education provides funding for ESL through its General Legislative Grants and more recently Enhanced Language Training funds have been made available.

While each differs to some degree, there are many similarities that have a common goal. It would be beneficial to investigate the strengths of each and look at mechanisms, which will ensure that there is no duplication so that the limited funds can be utilized to their utmost. Having said this, it is important to keep in mind that currently in Ontario through the Ministry of Education ESL programs are accessible to all be they immigrants, refugees, claimants or citizens. The flexibility with the provincially funded ESL programs allows gaps to be met on an on-going basis as the demographic and economic environments change.

6. How can we improve the results and outcomes for adult learners in Ontario?

In order to facilitate viable outcomes for learners, it is important to ensure that there are established standards. There is little acknowledgment of the fact that within the field of ESL there has been, for a number of years, standards that describe a learner's language competency. These descriptors also address ESL Literacy. The federal department of Citizenship and Immigration funded the development of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). These standards were developed in order to obtain a national criterion that would use a common language and a common set of descriptors to describe adult ESL learner progress.

The province of Ontario was an active partner in this venture and not only supported this initiative, but under Kay Eastham, who was at the time responsible for the Adult Branch, sent out letters to all ESL providers encouraging them to use the standards. The CLB documents are well regarded in the field; their standards are high. It is important that Ontario recognize the CLBs and officially directs ESL providers to use them not only as descriptors but also as a guide for program development. The CLBs must have the same degree of importance as the Literacy and Basic Skills descriptors.

Similarly, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks has developed a placement test (the CLBPT) for assessing adult ESL learners. Providers of adult ESL programs should be supported through training to use this as a common tool. Given the existence of two such fine tools, in recognizing them, and implementing them, Ontario will prevent duplication and can use its limited funds more efficiently.

Aware of the need for quality programming, and recognizing that a gap had long existed, the Ministry of Education and Training was also involved in the development and funding of a certification process for teachers in non-credit adult ESL. Today TESL Ontario is the body that issues certificates for instructors wanting to teach non-credit ESL. While this practice has now been in place for the past 4 years, the Ontario government has shown very little support in promoting this safeguard among providers of adult ESL programs. Once again, formal recognition would ensure that employers were hiring quality educators.

For the learner, who is a newcomer, it is important to ensure that adequate services are available from interpretation, to well-informed counselors who are able to assist them in choosing their path in a timely manner. To this end website information should be easy to navigate and available in the predominant newcomer language groups.

Summary Recommendations

In closing, TESL Ontario would like to summarize its response by highlighting the following recommendations:

1. The definition for Adult Education must reflect the diversity of our society and acknowledge the difference between pedagogy and androgogy.
2. Adult immigrants are the only group of individuals who can be identified as participants in all aspects of Adult Education, be it ESL classes, credit programs, Literacy/Basic Skills, seniors or General Interest. They span a large age group 18+ and an extremely diverse educational background.
3. ESL Literacy needs must be recognized and supported as separate and distinct from adult ESL programs and current Literacy/Basic Skills programs.
4. The Ontario Government must recognize ESL, not only through funding but also more importantly by ensuring that both the Education Act within Ontario and policy are changed to reflect this.
5. The Ontario Government must establish a unit similarly to the APT and LBS units, which is responsible for ESL programs in the province.
6. Establish a clear framework for accountability to ensure that the funds are indeed being spent for the purpose intended.

7. Establish a mechanism that will support workplace mentoring so that newcomers can acquire the language and social skills need to work in Ontario.
8. Develop a variety of delivery mechanisms, which can help in meeting the needs of the ESL learner.
9. Re-establish a data bank of resources for ESL teachers and learners.
10. Recognize the Canadian Language Benchmarks as the accepted standard and direct ESL providers to use them not only as descriptors but also as a guide for program development.
11. Recognize the TESL Ontario Certificate as a qualification for teaching in non-credit adult ESL programs.
12. Flexibility must be maintained so that on-going program development can occur to meet the ever-changing needs.

Prepared by: Shailja Verma, Past President

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