

*TESL Ontario's
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4th Annual Panel Discussion*

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4th Annual Panel Discussion

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Renate Tilson welcomed participants to the fourth annual panel discussion, *Future Directions*, at the Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL) Ontario's 37th Annual Conference. She said panel members, all representatives of ministries that fund TESL Ontario, would share information about new policy initiatives and answer participants' questions.

Tilson said panelist **Catherine Finlay** was brave enough to participate in last year's conference within days of joining the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI).

Finlay said, "In some respects, it was easier to be here last year. Now, I have a better understanding of how much there is still to learn." She said she would provide an update on the latest changes to MCI's Adult Non-Credit Language Training Program being implemented over the next three school years.

Service providers play an important role in helping MCI deliver on their commitment to make the provincial language training program more learner-centric and outcomes-based. The TESL community's support ensured the success of the ministry's recent survey of 5,000 Ontarian ESL learners. Finlay said she would share survey results throughout her presentation.

During the past five years, Ontario has become home to increasing numbers of immigrants. Despite the province's ability to attract newcomers, social and economic outcomes for

newcomers have been declining. In fact, the challenges of immigrants prior to the recession have been well-documented and include: higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, and higher rates of poverty than Canadian-born counterparts. These factors make immigrants particularly vulnerable to economic downturns.

During this past year, recent and very-recent newcomers (those in Canada for less than 10 or 5 years respectively) have been disproportionately affected in the labour market. At the peak of the recession, their unemployment rates were twice that of the Canadian-born. This has resulted in an increasing number of immigrants returning to school to re-train and improve their language skills. It also appears to have resulted in a significant number of recent and very recent immigrants leaving the workforce and maybe the province itself, said Finlay.

Ontario has a long tradition of welcoming and settling newcomers. In return, immigrants have contributed to the province's development, prosperity and cultural richness—a key element of a healthy society and vital economy. Finlay said the province's immigration framework supports the positive contribution of immigration and recognizes that:

- The net outcome of immigration is positive.
- The economic success of newcomers is a prerequisite for integration and participation in society.
- Diversity is a key element of a dynamic society and vibrant economy.

There are two main goals:

- Support the economic success of immigrants and the economic growth of the province.
- Contribute to the development of a multicultural, diverse society of fully participating citizens.

As a result, Ontario focuses on five priority areas:

- Attraction initiatives and pre-arrival services
- Coordinated settlement services
- A comprehensive language training system
- Labour market integration
- Community and employer engagement

Finlay's presentation focused on the third priority, a comprehensive language training system, as speaking English or French is key to newcomers' success in Ontario. A lack of language ability is one of the main barriers to employment and successful integration.

While there are a wide range of language training programs available to newcomers and immigrants in Ontario, accessing a language training class can be daunting, said Finlay.

Learners must navigate all the various programs, figure out what is available, where to go and how to register for a language training class, and then factor in how their status in Canada determines who can assess their language skills and what kind of language training classes they can take.

“More can be done to ensure that the language training systems in Ontario are more coordinated, accessible, visible, and easier to navigate so all learners can develop the language skills they need to integrate socially and economically,” Finlay said.

MCI is working with its partners, including school boards and TESL Ontario, to redesign the provincial language training program. The primary goal of the program redesign is to ensure the Adult Non-Credit ESL/French as a Second Language (FSL) Training Program is learner-focused and results-based. It also addresses the full spectrum of adult language training needs, aligns with provincial objectives for adult education, and coordinates with federal language training programs.

Feedback provided during stakeholder consultations informed the government’s decision-making and the enhancements that are being implemented over the next three school years.

Program enhancements will reflect five key program redesign objectives:

- Improving learner access to language training programs
- Establishing consistent program delivery standards and a reporting framework to improve program accountability and results
- Supporting programming that responds to language-training needs for labour market success
- Improving coordination with the federal language-training programs
- Maintaining the flexibility of the program’s unique funding model

Program enhancements will be phased in over three school years. The ministry will engage stakeholders in the development and piloting of enhancements where applicable.

Regarding access to training, Finlay said for newcomers to integrate quickly and successfully they must be able to easily access relevant information, be assessed to determine their existing language proficiencies, and be informed of available courses that meet their needs. Ontario’s portal, www.ontarioimmigration.ca/adultlanguagetraining, represents some progress in this area, said Finlay. With the help of school boards, MCI has updated its course offerings for the 2009/10 school year and distributed program brochures to help school boards promote the program in their communities.

In addition, MCI recently expanded and clarified the eligibility criteria for the provincial program to include provincial nominees, live-in caregivers, and Temporary Foreign Workers

approved for permanent resident status through the Canadian Experience Class. , MCI realizes that some learners can access both federally and provincially funded classes, as a result of comprehensive provincial eligibility criteria. It would be beneficial for learners to have a document that could be used to track their progress across the various programs.

During consultations, stakeholders suggested that learners could benefit from better documentation of their training. MCI is exploring the development of a learner passport. Learners would greatly benefit from having a document that would communicate their achieved language proficiency, open doors to other courses, and reduce the need for multiple assessments. Service providers would also benefit from being able to track learners' progress.

To further increase flexibility and accessibility to language training courses, the ministry is interested in the development of a distance education or e-learning model. Now more than ever, government and stakeholders must be creative and more effective in leveraging existing resources to meet the growing and changing demands of all learners, Finlay said.

Regarding the objective of program accountability and standards, MCI's consultations confirmed that all learners should have access to a consistently high-quality language training program, regardless of where they live in Ontario. In the absence of formal province-wide standards, individual school boards have developed their own standards for curriculum and instructors and have defined outcomes for their programs. To improve program accountability and ensure consistency, MCI plans to introduce province-wide standards that build on best practices, said Finlay.

For example, in preparing for the consultations MCI learned that 92% of school boards already used the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs). As a result, starting next year, language training courses will need to be aligned to the CLBs. To support this, MCI is working with their federal counterparts to ensure that instructors in MCI's language-training program receive training on the CLBs and the CLB 5 to 10 Exit Assessment tasks developed to support instructors in their assessment of learners' language proficiency.

MCI also recognizes the need to invest in ESL instructors, who play an instrumental role in helping newcomers acquire the language skills they need, said Finlay. As part of the Redesign, MCI will continue to support professional development opportunities for instructors, such as attendance at the TESL Ontario conference.

MCI will also be introducing a minimum instructor certification standard. As 85% of provincial instructors are already TESL Ontario-certified, MCI is considering this as the provincial standard. However, to prevent certification becoming a barrier to the delivery of language training, particularly in smaller, rural communities, MCI will look at strategies to address this.

Finlay reiterated that MCI is building on best practices, standards, and the successes within the system. One of the successes she highlighted was the high learner satisfaction that speaks to the outstanding job instructors are doing in helping immigrants improve their language skills. The Snapshot Survey revealed that 85% of learners rated their language class as “good” (highest category) for teaching them English or French.

Finlay said the survey provided MCI with invaluable information on learners accessing the program. For example, out of all of the learners surveyed, the primary reason they were taking language training classes was to improve their English or French for daily life (42%). The next-most important reason was to help them get a job (28%).

This demonstrates that learners have many different reasons for taking language training classes; performance measures must be developed to reflect this. As a result of this survey, for the first time the ministry was able to develop a profile of learners in the program. The survey results indicate that:

- 68% of learners in the provincial language training program are female
- 43% are post-secondary school graduates
- 45% are between 30 and 44 years of age
- Their first language is either Spanish (23%) or Chinese (18%)
- They were born in China (17%) or Colombia (12%)
- 60% of learners have lived in Canada for three years or less (in the FSL program 62% of learners lived in Canada for four years or more)
- 41% of learners are permanent residents and 33% are Canadian citizens
- 62% worked in a “white collar” job in their country of origin
- 72% are not currently working

The FSL learner profile was slightly different. Having this type of information is invaluable for MCI and the school boards to more effectively plan and develop courses and outreach strategies. In fact, this data was so useful that MCI will be doing a second snapshot survey early in 2010. “We will be counting on your help to make this a success,” Finlay said.

As evidenced by the snapshot survey results, newcomers to Ontario increasingly have high levels of education and expect to work in fields that require a high degree of language proficiency. While the ministry recognizes that general ESL provides labour market-relevant language training, there continues to be a need for occupation-specific language training.

MCI’s specialized language training initiative responds to this need by offering training to strengthen learners’ language skills so they can gain employment that reflects their qualifications, or function more effectively in jobs they currently hold.

The emphasis of specialized language training pilots is on the development of innovative training curriculum that, if proven to be effective, can have long-term positive benefits to learners. This becomes evident when school boards add former pilot project courses to their regular Grey Register course calendar.

MCI continues to learn and adapt this initiative to make the best use of existing resources and the expertise of potential partners.

For example, with the issuance of the third Invitation for Applications for the Specialized Language Training Pilot Projects in July 2009, MCI shared previously funded occupation-specific curriculum so school boards could take advantage of, and customize, already developed curriculum.

In addition, partnerships between school boards and other programs such as Employment Ontario are encouraged so that learners can benefit from having access to the expertise of other organizations.

MCI recognizes the value of partnerships in the work it does. For example, the ministry is continuing to work with partners such as the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks to develop resources such as the Work-Ready Tool which is intended for HR professionals and employment counsellors to support the hiring of internationally trained individuals. This tool was launched this week, said Finlay.

Also, to facilitate even greater access to curriculum resources, MCI is working with the federal government and other provinces on the development of a national repository for curriculum.

The ministry continues to work with the federal government under the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement to better coordinate both language training programs. The fourth objective, coordination with the federal government, is an important one as both orders of government recognize the benefits of improved coordination. By working together it is easier to identify service overlaps and gaps as well as to more effectively leverage existing resources, processes, tools, standards, and best practices.

MCI and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) co-chair the Language Training Working Group and most recently the Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral System (CLARS) advisory committee—a key element of the Strategic Plan for Settlement and Language Training under the Canada Ontario Immigration Agreement, and a key component of the provincial redesign. Through CLARS, a common process for learner assessment and referral would be used in both the federal and provincial language training programs.

The fifth objective of the program redesign focuses on funding and program design flexibility.

During consultations, school boards consistently voiced their appreciation for the flexibility of the program's funding model (the Average Daily Enrolment model). As a result, the ministry is maintaining this funding model as it gives school boards the ability to respond quickly to the needs of learners in their communities. Using the current increase in demand for language training as an example, school boards can respond to increasing enrolment at any time during the school year. School boards also have the ability to offer targeted classes that meet the needs of their learners, as well as decide what times to offer classes—day time, evenings, weekends, full-time, and part-time—giving learners many options.

Despite the challenging economic situation, the ministry announced a funding increase of \$4.5 million (or 9.4%) for the 2009/10 school year to better support Adult Non-Credit language training. Since 2003, this marks a 34% increase in funding levels for this program. The increase in funding can be used for a wide range of eligible expenses related to the delivery of language training, including but not limited to staff salaries, course materials, accommodation, childminding, and transportation costs.

The funding model does not have explicit requirements/criteria that identify how funding for language training should be spent. This flexibility allows school boards to manage their budgets and use their funding to address their local needs.

The provincial government recognizes that attracting newcomers and supporting their success is a key priority for Ontario. As a result, there is a need to continue providing a wide range of leading edge programs that attract and retain newcomers to Ontario. There is also a need to make it easier for newcomers to access these programs. MCI's vision of Ontario's future Adult Language Training System is a more "learner-centric" system that is easier to access and navigate as a result of improved coordination, consistent standards, and the offering of a range of language training options to meet learners' needs.

"To achieve this vision we need to continue to work collaboratively together, and to recognize the contributions each of us makes. Our government recognizes the importance of organization such as TESL Ontario in providing professional development opportunities for instructors who make a positive difference every day to learners in classrooms across the province," said Finlay.

Darlyn Mentor's presentation provided an overview of CIC's future vision for a newcomer's settlement pathway, and added another perspective on language and skills policies.

Canada intends to welcome 240,000 to 265,000 new permanent residents in 2010. In 2008, Ontario received 107,000 immigrants—43.6% of the national total. The Government of Canada's funding increase of \$1.4 billion over five years for settlement programs is helping newcomers obtain language training, job counselling, and information services to better integrate into Canadian society.

CIC has undertaken steps to strengthen the settlement pathway using a newcomer's perspective, said Mentor. The focus includes families as well as individuals, including services for parents, youth, children, and seniors. The delivery model proceeds from the needs expressed by the clients, taking their realities into account.

The first step on the path is the [Going to Canada portal](#), which describes the services available to immigrants before they leave their home country. CIC has also developed videos that illustrate daily life in Canada to give newcomers a "clear snapshot of what Canada and Ontario look like and what services are available there." Immigrants receive an information package about settlement services at the port of entry.

Mentor said immigrants coming to Canada have plenty of help, including 128 Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Programs (ISAP), and over 400 service-providing agencies. She noted that CIC has "brought services to clients where they go," including implementing settlement services in libraries. CIC is developing an Ontario orientation course in collaboration with MCI to provide newcomers with standard information that is consistent throughout the region. Welcoming Community initiatives are currently in development to ensure that communities are ready to receive immigrants and adequately manage the issues that arise with demographic changes.

CIC is engaged in capacity building to develop necessary supports for those organizations and communities that help newcomers access the help they need, Mentor said. "We are doing everything we can do to ensure these organizations function efficiently," she said. This effort has resulted in a focus on innovative partnerships that underpin service provision in Ontario. CIC has begun working with new service providers as part of the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement (COIA). Mentor said efficient functioning of the new pathway requires creating the right kind of partnerships, whether new or long-standing. Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) are crucial to this initiative as they enable collaboration that allows various partners to identify gaps and duplication in serving newcomers' needs.

"CIC's focus has been to recognize that for newcomers to succeed they need access to training, but will want to focus on obtaining employment," Mentor said. Ontario currently has 62 providers that offer enhanced and occupation-specific training. Alternative models to service delivery, such as a home model, are necessary. "We want them to have access to services when and where they need them," Mentor said.

Newcomers often ask how to choose a language program. Newcomers are informed that various options exist for choosing programs, including:

- A language training provider
- A Language Assessment Centre to assess their language skills and discuss their goals

- A settlement agency to help determine their goals
- Friends with information about language training
- Websites such as www.settlement.org, www.cic.gc.ca, and www.ontarioimmigration.ca/esl

Mentor said informal channels are often used to promote CIC's services and noted the importance of ensuring the accuracy of the information being shared.

CIC continually evaluates the adequacy of the available supports for language training. It offers professional development for both teachers and assessors and has sponsored numerous conferences in the past three years. Given that the majority of service providers use CLB, CIC has adopted these benchmarks as well. Mentor said the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Levels 1-7 curriculum guidelines are valuable tools for consistent learning.

Mentor said CIC is undertaking several initiatives to address immigrants' concerns about finding employment, including:

- Developing a new program through the foreign credentials office
- Offering job search workshops in 62 locations
- Offering placement, mentoring, and networking through Enhanced Language Training
- Potentially offering preparation for licensure through bridge-to-work training

"We recognize taking courses is one way to improve language skills, but if it is possible to access them while working, it becomes a win-win situation for the newcomer and employer," Mentor said.

To aid immigrants' integration into Canadian culture, CIC supports them in their short-term, intermediate, and long-term settlement. Basic orientation is the first step, followed by appropriate language training and employment support. In the long-term, newcomers should be encouraged to become engaged citizens through voting and volunteer work.

Mentor said CIC's future language skills policy direction will be based on four items:

- CLB levels rather than LINC levels
- A modernized approach to settlement programming
- An enhanced assessment system
- CLARS

A modernized approach to settlement programming is based on the four pillars of outcomes, needs assessment, planning, and performance measurement, Mentor said. An outcome-based model requires that CIC focus on newcomers and their needs. This emphasis necessitates a

method of needs assessment that identifies the specific needs of each learner, rather than a rubber stamp approach.

Changes to planning are well underway, especially with the establishment of LIP. These new partnerships “cannot be developed sitting in an ivory tower, but by engaging newcomers and service providers from various fields,” Mentor said.

Regarding performance measurement, information about outcomes, outputs, and financial resources will be gathered and monitored to ensure that activities continue to achieve expected results and services are linked to specific settlement outcomes.

CIC's shift from offering a suite of programs to a single program with a suite of activities is creating the most excitement of all the ministry's changes. The resulting flexibility gives CIC's partners the ability to mix the orientation component of the program with language skills, labour market access, community connections, and policy and program development. A service provider can combine any of these streams and develop them in a way that is responsive to a client, rather than being constrained by the different programs' demands.

Mentor said this change provides a valuable opportunity for service providers, but cautioned against a checkbox approach. “I will encourage everyone to stop thinking that from now on services need to include all the streams. It is very much based on what your area of specialization is, what opportunities these streams bring, rather than checking off every item—which would not be possible.”

Enhanced assessment refers to the creation of a two-part assessment system. The first part involves the use of language portfolios—binders with examples of a student's work demonstrating that they have completed the necessary work for certification at a given level.

“We want to make sure the portfolios will be sound and provide valid, reliable, and reportable results,” said Mentor. The portfolios will also be used to introduce students to key Canadian concepts. The second part of the assessment system are the CLB-based milestone tests to be administered at levels four, required for citizenship, and level eight, required for university enrolment.

Mentor said CLARS' primary benefit as a policy direction is the consistency it will bring to assessments of newcomers' language skills across Ontario.

Patti Redmond said the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' (TCU) mandate is to build Ontario's competitive advantage by ensuring that it has the most educated and highly skilled workforce in North America. Literacy and language proficiency are of particular concern to those in the post-secondary field because language skills are a strong determinant of a learner's ability to enrol in and complete a post-secondary program.

Employment Ontario (EO) is a major partner of TCU and helps the unemployed or underemployed seeking work and training. EO serves newcomers and others by offering such programs as Second Career and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS).

TCU funds schools to deliver the LBS program. Redmond said both the Ministry of Education (ME) and MCI are concerned with distinguishing literacy learners from second language learners. While the distinction is clear from a program definition perspective, this does not carry through to funding, and boundaries are often blurred. "ESL/FSL and literacy are at opposite ends of the continuum, but our learners populate all points on that continuum," said Redmond.

TCU has funded an Ontario Literacy Coalition study to document the needs and characteristics of the second language learner entering LBS and the implications for the LBS curriculum. The study's goal is to provide learners with services centered on their needs. The ministry is looking for ways to measure the outcomes of these programs without putting students through a "cookie cutter" approach. "That's the balance," Redmond said.

TCU also sponsors the Second Career program that helps employees who have been laid off find employment. The government announced this initiative last year. The program was introduced at just the right time as it coincided with the onset of the recession. The economic downturn resulted in a large number of people needing to retrain, including newcomers. TCU funds clients to participate in this training, much of which occurs within community and private colleges.

Not surprisingly, said Redmond, conditions have led to an unprecedented demand for the program. Although data on program participants is incomplete, it is known that many have not completed high school. These participants require upgrades to participate in a higher skills training program. While their lack of language ability might not have been a barrier in their previous employment, it becomes an issue when opportunities are scarce within a sector. Given this barrier, TCU has been referring clients to language training programs through EO. Many clients are realizing that language training is an important part of responding to economic changes. Redmond said TCU has recently launched an outcomes evaluation of Second Career, and is looking forward to exploring ways to improve the links between services and client needs.

Noting the importance of concise goals, **Richard Franz** said ME aims to maintain high levels of student achievement, reduce gaps in student achievement, and increase public confidence in education. The ministry's thinking is centred on four pillars:

- Literacy for the 21st century
- Numeracy for the 21st century
- Program Pathways and Supports

- Community, Culture, and Caring

Exploring pathways has involved examining the ways in which ME's programs build on each other to take learners to their destinations. "When we think about that, we do more than organize our courses, we organize supports," he said.

Franz said findings show a 21% gain in primary reading achievement among ESL/English Language learners (ELL) in the last six years. Calling this a significant improvement, he noted that a gap persists between these learners and Canadian-born students, although the trend is heading in the right direction. He credited language teachers for overall improvements in Ontario students' performances in reading and writing.

Ontario is a leader in the number of cooperative education programs it provides that offer language learners an opportunity to simultaneously participate in work and gain credit, Franz said. "A consistent critique of the Ministry of Education has been that we do not spend time on experiential learning. We think this is perfectly suitable for ESL learners."

The Ministry of Education has also made a significant investment in Adult and Continuing Education programs. Approximately 50 Ontario boards deliver this programming. Some have chosen to stop offering this content, and the ministry is interested in determining why these programs are not viable in certain regions. Franz said the answer may lie outside the boards in that other organizations are doing a better job offering these courses in those areas.

Discussion

Noting that newcomers must go through LINC before they can be accepted to other language training programs regardless of their language proficiency, a participant asked whether MCI or CIC are contemplating changes to this system. Finlay said this was the purpose behind CLARS, along with the learner's passport that could be used for any program as indicated by the particular needs of the learner. Mentor added that the passport is a national policy direction, while CLARS is a provincial effort.

Another participant asked Redmond about available college or training programs for someone who is illiterate in their own language. Redmond said learners in these situations participate in ESL/FSL classes or the literacy program. These programs have a continuum of student aptitudes. She said the goal is to improve how students move to ESL/FSL from LBS and vice versa.

A participant asked about incentives for employers to provide language training opportunities for their foreign-trained employees. Despite the significant potential for productivity increases, companies are wary of spending money in this area. It currently falls on individual learners to get the necessary training, even though they often work full-time. Agreeing that this is an issue, Redmond said many initiatives are in place to support employment, but the priority has been

on helping the unemployed. She said her ministry recently issued a call for proposals for literacy training in the workplace.

Mentor called this the "million dollar question." She said the government's challenge in offering such programming is to identify the "win-win situation and to communicate how beneficial it is for employers."

Finlay said MCI provides training in the workplace, but does not provide any financial incentives. She said convincing employers of the advantages of creating a diverse workplace and the return on investment from a business perspective would benefit government as well by relieving them from funding obligations. "We want them to become our incentive, so that other employers seeing those successes will want to make language training available on the job.