

**MORE THAN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION:  
AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF  
ISANS' ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE PROGRAM**

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A Pathways to  
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## **Introduction**

This qualitative study offers an in-depth exploration of an innovative one-to-one language and cultural training program offered by the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) called English in the Workplace (EWP). Drawing on the experiences and perspectives of 30 EWP participants, we provide a robust account of the Program and its potential benefits, while identifying ways it can be strengthened. In sum, we conclude that while the program offers considerable social and economic benefit to both newcomers and their employers, ISANS' delivery of the program is limited by a lack of resources.

## **Background**

Immigrant success has often been defined and described in terms of self-sufficiency (Li, 2003). Migrants are regarded as successful in their settlement efforts when they achieve economic independence (Barber, 2008; Barber, 2013; Ley, 2011; Reitz, 2005). To this end, settlement programs have typically been designed to ensure labour market readiness, with employment as their final objective. However, and mapping onto to the academic literature of immigrant experience (Frideres, 2008; Reitz et al., 2009; Simich et al., 2005), policy makers and front-line agencies have become increasingly aware of the social requirements of and impediments to successful settlement. Indeed, employment and economic integration are but one element of a list that consistently—across the literature—includes access to education, decent housing and health care; ability to worship according to one's faith and engage in cultural practice and tradition; capacity to establish networks of friends locally and to take part in local community; and being able to participate in transnational social and family life. Language is a central component of many of these, with newcomers simultaneously wanting to retain their language of origin and improve their proficiency in an official language (Chow, 2001; Phinney et al., 2003).

While official language proficiency can have significant impact on a newcomer's ability to engage across these areas (Chiswick & Miller, 2006; Jezek, 2017; Pottie, Spitzer & Ng, 2008), it is only one element of effective communication. As demonstrated across a vast and interdisciplinary literature, in addition to the words we use, meaning is expressed through a range of cues that often correspond to unstated cultural norms, expectations, and practices. A singular emphasis of newcomer language acquisition also serves to de-emphasize the interactive nature of communication, which typically involves more than one person. A growing body of critical scholarship on immigrant integration increasingly stresses integration as a two-way process. Here, the onus is not exclusively on the migrant to learn the language and norms of the receiving society. Rather, that society must also learn, expand, and develop in response to the presence of newcomers. Under this model of integration, then, successful settlement is conceptualized as a relational process that incorporates newcomers and members of the receiving-society.

Over the last ten years, Nova Scotia has worked to raise its profile as a province welcoming of newcomers. These efforts reflect larger national trends in provincially driven immigration (Carter, Morris & Amoyaw, 2008; Derwing & Krahn, 2008), but they are also indicative of Nova Scotia's unique economic and demographic needs (Stalker & Phyne, 2014), as well as the

difficulties the province has faced retaining newcomers traditionally (Bruce, 2007; Bryan, 2012; Dobrowolsky, 2011; Ramos & Yoshida, 2011). These conditions have culminated in a series of innovative policy initiatives and settlement programs, intended to support new immigrants as they make Nova Scotia their home and to maximize their success.

The focus of this Program Evaluation, English in the Workplace, is one such program. It integrates the social and the economic facets of integration by prioritizing not only language proficiency, but the skills required to communicate effectively. This necessarily accounts for the cultural and social norms and practices embedded, but often unspoken, within the workplace. The program also works with employers so that they develop a better understanding of the experiences of newcomers in Canada and to facilitate a deeper appreciation for the challenges of immigration. More precisely, English in the Workplace is an onsite customized one-to-one language and cultural training program designed to work with employers and newcomers to develop better communication in the workplace. Offering 36 hours of on-the-job language training over a 12-week period, the objectives of the program are to (1) develop the workplace language of employed and self-employed newcomers in the workforce; (2) increase newcomers' knowledge and understanding of Canadian workplace culture; and (3) increase the capacity of Nova Scotian workplaces to support newcomers' workforce integration.

Instruction focuses on the language and cultural competence newcomers need to communicate in the workplace, perform their duties effectively, become more integrated in their work setting and meet their employment potential. Each instructor works with the employer to develop a customized training program based on the communication needs of the workplace and the newcomer employee. For example, curriculum content develops language for practical skills such as the use of the telephone; writing business emails; participating in meetings; communicating with supervisors; and customer service. In addition to language, many of these tasks require skills that correspond to social norms and rules of interpersonal interaction that while often taken-for-granted, vary from context to context.

EWP instruction, then, has a dual-focus and purpose. On the one hand, curriculum responds to the very real need for workplace language proficiency; on the other, the instructor works with the newcomer and the employer to explore those less immediately apparent, but equally important, workplace practices. Specifically those practices that correspond to Canadian social and cultural norms, of what one participant referred to as "Canadian politeness". Our research reveals that this type of instruction improves the ability of the newcomer employees to communicate; is critical in increasing their confidence; and goes a significant way in improving workplace relationships.

## **Methodology**

To generate an in-depth account of ISANS' English in the Workplace Program and to determine its benefits and limitations, this study conducted 30 interviews with EWP participants—including newcomer learners (17), employers (9), and instructors (4). In addition to determining how the program was experienced by these different participants, as well as their objectives and rationale for participation, the interviews were designed to determine the program's

effectiveness vis-à-vis those objectives. More precisely we sought to (1) to understand program objectives and to determine if program objectives correspond to participant objectives; (2) to offer an assessment of the successes and potential limitations of the program; and (3) to provide recommendations on how the program can be further developed or enhanced to ensure program objectives—as well as those of each subset of participants—are met. Interview questions were designed by Dr. Catherine Bryan, the project's principle investigator. The interviews were conducted by Lauren Matheson—the project's lead research assistant. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour in length.

## **Findings**

Our research yields several key insights into ISANS' English in the Workplace Program, and following from those insights, offers a series recommendations for enhancing workplace integration amongst newcomers.

### *Insights*

In sum, this study reveals the following about the value of ISANS' English in the Language Program for both newcomer employees and their employers:

1. Intensive, individualized language training that fosters task-specific language communication skills and confidence is vital for workplace integration.
2. Workplace-specific language training better enables newcomer employees to assume new responsibilities and to draw on the myriad skills they already have, often developed through training, education, and employment experience in the country of origin.
3. Newcomers are interested in positive relationships with their Canadian co-workers and enhanced worker relations improve the quality and experience of the workplace.
4. Newcomers are not resistant to adapting to Canadian workplace norms, but they need to understand those norms to do so effectively. Language proficiency is only one part of this process, and local workers and employers need to also be responsive to and respectful ways of interacting that do not immediately correspond to their expectations.
5. Finally, workplace integration is not a one-way street; EWP employer participants noted their increased capacity to support their newcomer employees, and subsequently the likelihood that they would hire newcomers in the future.

*More precisely*, EWP participants—both employee learners and employers—reported high levels of satisfaction with the Program. Corresponding to the objectives of the EWP, newcomer learners developed new language skills, as well insights into Canadian workplace norms that enhanced their on-the-job performance as well as their ability to connect and establish relationships with their co-workers. Content was flexible and task-based which allowed employers, newcomer employees, and instructors to generate curriculum responsive to the

employee's unique communication needs in the context of the workplace. Here, participants focused on increased capacity to complete specific tasks like communicating by phone or email, as well as increase capacity to communicate in meetings, share ideas, and engage with co-workers. One participant explained:

*I use [the skills I learned in EWP] in my emails, on the phone, and in meetings. I'm also able to now prepare very [detailed] minutes.*

In addition to new language skills, newcomer learners described increased feelings of independence and enjoyment in their workplace. New skills and greater confidence also meant, for many of the study's participants, an increased capacity to deploy existing competencies and to assume a wider range of responsibilities, often corresponding to previous training, education, and workplace experience.

*Sometimes when we had meeting, I'd have a great idea or business opportunity, and I'd want to explain it, [but] I felt like I was not able to. [ After EWP], I am more relaxed [and able to] communicate... [I] use [the skills I learned through EWP] in my emails and in meetings, which I now lead.*

This participant had arrived in Canada from Germany where they had attained a Master's Degree in Business and had worked as a job development consultant. This kind of educational and employment profile was relatively common amongst those interviewed for the project. Many—if not most—arrived in Canada with, even in the absence of formal education, high levels of training and employment experience.

Prior to the individualized instruction of EWP, these participants described feeling inhibited in their workplace contributions and engagements with co-workers. For example, offering similar observations of their own progress, a number of newcomer employee participants commented: *"I feel more relaxed", "I enjoy working now", "I feel comfortable again", "I am able and confident [in my communications with colleagues]"*. These sentiments were echoed by employers who not only noticed increases in English proficiency, but in levels of confidence. As one employer recounted: *He was like a different person; after he was finished [EWP], his communications were so much stronger but it wasn't just that, he was more confident.*

According to newcomer employee participants, EWP enabled them to be "more fully themselves" and subsequently, to draw on their existing repertoire of competencies and abilities in the context of their Canadian employment. The value of these otherwise latent skills was not lost on employers. As one explained: *Well, we got a really good employee. Like his technical abilities were really great. And so, to not have him here just because he spoke French rather than English [didn't make sense].*

Additional confidence coupled with improved communication skills also very importantly, fostered and strengthened relationships between newcomer employees and their Canadian co-workers. Many participants in the study commented that prior to EWP instruction, they found

their interactions with co-workers to be strained and limited to specific work-place tasks. Newcomer employees expressed anxiety over asking questions, relaying concerns, and more broadly, making connections within their workplaces. In a similar vein, another newcomer employee participant remarked that new language skills and enhanced self-confidence opened up a range of opportunities to engage with co-workers. Whereas initially, newcomer employee participants were often inclined to interact with the co-workers as-needed, they came to seek out a range of opportunities to engage (for example, during lunch and on-breaks). These less formal encounters provided employees—newcomers and Canadians alike—the opportunity to know each other differently and to develop personal connections and affiliations that improved the workplace environment for everyone.

Reflecting on these dynamics, one newcomer employee participant explains: *Prior to English in the Workplace Program, I felt isolated and unable to ask questions of my co-workers.* The participant went on to say that after completing the Program, they felt much more comfortable with their co-workers and that from there, could develop effective work and more personal, relationships with them. They explained:

*I was able to understand other accents of people in the office. I didn't have to ask them to repeat themselves as often. And they didn't have to ask me to repeat myself often. I could understand what they were saying. My coworkers were starting to start conversations with me.*

Part of this increased comfort followed from a growing mutual understanding between different workers, and capacity to navigate different practices and communication norms. As one newcomer employee participant reflected:

*I also felt that um sometimes they were, they were hesitant to work with me because I was perceived to be too "fast forward"... I realized through the EWP, that it's a matter of changing the form of communication from being very direct, which is my cultural background, to a little bit more indirect.*

Though largely an outcome of the EWP's emphasis of Canadian workplace norms, it also stemmed from the growing and deepening interaction between Canadian and newcomer workers. These interactions served to "denaturalize" workplace practices and behaviours often taken for granted by local workers. In other words, both groups of workers were able to adjust to the norms, expectations, and workplace practices of the other. This generated feelings of collegiately and solidarity, and enhanced the quality and experience of the workplace as a whole. Enjoying work and the company of their co-workers often encouraged newcomer employee participants to remain with their employers. This was further facilitated by the growing ability of these workers to use existing skills, to assume new responsibilities, and in some instances, to be promoted—all of which were, according to those who participated in this study, fostered by the English in the Workplace Program.

In addition to helping newcomer employees realize their full potential, enhancing workplace relationships, and creating a work environment conducive to retention, English in the Workplace serves to disseminate—amongst Nova Scotian employers—greater understanding of the wide range of skills and competencies newcomers possess as well, the challenges they face. Such an outcome is, in the first place, advantageous for individual newcomers as they seek out and secure employment. It is, more broadly, of importance for newcomers who have struggled to find employment in the province despite political and public discourse concerning the region’s demographic decline and the adjoining scarcity of labour. Indeed, provincial efforts to redress these challenges have been frustrated—an outcome, it has been argued by front-line workers and academic researchers—of a lack of resources on the one hand, and persistent xenophobia on the other (CBC, 2014; CBC, 2015; Dobrowolsky & Ramos, 2014; Miedema & Tastsoglou, 2000; Tastsoglou, Dobrowolsky & Cotrell, 2015).

The success of the EWP signals the viability of a re-imagined project of immigrant settlement, integration, and inclusion. Over the last decade, Nova Scotia has worked to raise its profile as a “welcoming community”. This has necessitated the re-conceptualization of successful settlement as a relational process that incorporates newcomers and members of the receiving-society. By prioritizing client-needs *and* intervening in the workplace (a context in which those needs have, historically, gone unmet), EWP effectively balances the social and the economic in its approach to labour market integration, and more over ensures the investment and participation of a wide range of actors in that process. Following from the Programs focus on the workplace, a growing number of Nova Scotian employers have insight into the challenges facing newcomers, as well as the wealth of talent they bring with them. For those interviewed, this has facilitated the establishment of more inclusive hiring practices and working conditions. It has, more broadly, facilitated new, more inclusive and responsive ways of relating to newcomers.

### *Recommendations*

Following from these insights, we recommend the expansion of the English in the Workplace Program and the development of similar programs outside of Nova Scotia. The flexibility and on-the-job delivery of the Program, should in particular be duplicated as it effectively responds to a number of challenges commonly faced by newcomers in the province (as elsewhere) that can limit their ability to strengthen their English language skills in traditional, classroom settings. Indeed, given the work schedules of many newcomers who, for example, find employment in the service and hospitality industry, the EWP offers a flexible alternative to in-class language instruction which may be inaccessible for people who work irregular or variable hours.

The EWP also offers an attractive option for newcomer run family-owned and operated businesses, which often require long hours, particularly initially. A number of participants recounted the challenges of finding the time to attend language classes in light of the intensity of establishing a small business. One participant who had accessed EWP as a learner and then later as an employer, explained that his wife was the cook in their restaurant. Although she was

very motivated to improve her English language capacity, the labour required to operate their small family business limited her ability to attend classes. He elaborates:

*My wife wants to become a Canadian citizen, and so she really wants to improve her English. But the situation at the restaurant...she is the cook. We have others, but they aren't as skilled, and so she couldn't leave for another class. The English in the Workplace instructor helped us. They were very very useful; it was a wonderful course; the perfect program.*

His wife's inability to attend language courses was compounded by the relatively isolated nature of her work, which kept her in the restaurant's kitchen. Workplace isolation was noted by a number of participants, and specifically those who worked in hotel housekeeping. Here, in addition to inconsistent hours that constrain people's ability to attend language classes with regularity, working in relative isolation from co-workers and customers restricts the extent to which newcomers can practice their English.

While all EWP participants interviewed for this study regarded their experience with the Program as positive, most noted that they would have benefitted from additional sessions and longer periods of instruction and learning. Additionally, a number of participants commented that spouses or family members who were self-employed would have benefitted from the program, or a slightly modified version of it. Here again, anxieties about scheduling and spending too much time away from the business impeded newcomers from pursuing conventional English as an Additional Language programs.

In sum, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Expand the EWP program both in terms of delivery (more sessions over a longer period of time) and accessing (ensuring a wider client base, including self-employer / small business-owning newcomers).
2. Integrating language instruction in the workplace facilitates attendance, generating an authentic opportunity for learning.
3. Offering a range of options for language instruction strengthens the likelihood of newcomer success across a range of activities.
4. Meaningful communication encompasses both language proficiency and cultural understanding. Learning to communicate, then, must include practices and norms that may be taken-for-granted by long-standing residents, or in the context of a workplace, employees.
5. Cultural competency and integration is a two-way street; developing integration programs that integrate Canadians fosters more authentically welcoming and inclusive workplaces and communities.



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