

Newcomer Integration and Academic Support in Newfoundland and Labrador

Xuemei Li
Hua Que
Memorial University
xuemei.li@mun.ca

This article extracts eight points for discussion from many years of research in newcomer academic support and social integration in Newfoundland and Labrador. These points include: transportation to school for newcomer students; resources and support for ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers; coordination of the ESL program; workload and student-teacher ratio in ESL & LEARN (Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers) programs; hiring criteria and qualifications for ESL and LEARN positions; assessment of newcomer learners for placement and learning disability; non-ESL teachers' in-service training on working with newcomer students; and collaboration of educational stakeholders. Some of the points were elaborated in other articles (e.g., Doyle, Li, & Grineva, 2016; Li & Grineva, 2016; Li, Que, & Power, 2017) while others are first-time mentions. The majority of these points were highlighted in the last stage of our previous SSHRC project that focused on best practices and policy recommendations in the education sector. For the purpose of this discussion article, we summarize information from multiple data sources without using direct quotations from the participants.

Transportation to School for Newcomer Students

Transportation of newcomer students to and from school has been a recurring theme in our past studies (e.g., Li, Que, & Power, 2017). Due to limited resources, all high school aged newcomer students from a refugee background are placed in the only high school that offers both a comprehensive ESL program and a LEARN program. The programs have been a huge success in terms of bridging the language and academic gaps of these students. However, some of the students are settled in houses beyond the school bus zone. They have to take public transportation to and from school and pay the bus fare out of their own pockets, which cause them additional stress in terms of time and money. They also felt unwelcome and discriminated against, knowing that all other students were bused to school. Although the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has a "mandate to ensure that all children in Newfoundland and Labrador have access to safe, caring and inclusive learning environments" (DEECD, 2018, p. 2), no specific policies have addressed the transportation difficulties encountered by some of the refugee students. The current Alternate Transportation Policy (DEECD, 2012) only applies to students with medical needs. Transportation for refugee students

outside of the school zone has fallen through the cracks for many years and warrants immediate attention.

Resources and Support for ESL Teachers

Support for ESL teachers has been identified by administrators, classroom teachers and ESL teachers themselves as an area for improvement with regard to instructional budget, instructional time, workspace, and curriculum guidelines.

Lack of funding for ESL programs and ESL students was a prominent issue raised by many educators. Unlike other provinces, there is no instructional budget allocated for ESL students in Newfoundland and Labrador. The itinerant ESL teachers have no funds to purchase teaching materials, not even a picture dictionary or workbook. Some teachers spent their own money on dictionaries and books in order to help their students. However, this should not be a common practice.

Principals, classroom teachers, and ESL teachers agreed unanimously that ESL instructional time should be increased. ESL instruction is offered on an itinerant basis except for one high school, where two ESL teachers provide day-to-day instruction to students at four different proficiency levels. In all other schools, the limited number of itinerant ESL teachers travel from school to school to offer two-to-four hours of instruction per seven-day cycle, far from adequate to meet the needs of the students.

Lack of appropriate work space is another issue identified by teachers. In the first place, the itinerant ESL teachers have no office space to meet, prepare lessons, and store materials, and thus little opportunity to communicate with and support one another. Secondly, they do not have a designated classroom in schools they visit. They work with their ESL students in any space available, which can sometimes be a corridor.

Although some general guiding materials have been available on the Department of Education website on working with ESL students, there are no specific curriculum documents detailing placements or assessments of ESL students, nor requirements of teaching contents and levels of difficulty to each grade level. Teachers have to create their own materials and curriculum, and work in uncertainty of the appropriateness of what they do with the learners.

Educators also agreed that ESL teachers need better representation in the school district and teachers' association. This point will be presented separately below.

Coordination of the ESL Program

Coordination of ESL and LEARN programs are needed at both the Department and District levels. The Department of Education and Early Childhood had an ESL specialist for a few years to develop materials on working with multilingual and multicultural newcomer students. However, the position went vacant for over five years until early 2018 when a new specialist was hired, following the recommendations of the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes (Collins, Fushell, Philpott, & Wakeham, 2017).

At the School District level, we noted several years of inconsistency in coordination of the ESL program. At certain times, the coordinator who oversaw both the FSL (French as a second language) and ESL (English as a second language) programs met with ESL teachers at regular intervals to provide opportunities for discussion and community building and to relay information between the District and the teachers. At other times with another coordinator, ESL teachers were left on their own with little support from the District or from each other.

In the Teachers' Association, there is no ESL special interest group due to relatively small numbers of ESL teachers. The way to create an interest group is to increase the number of teachers involved in working with ESL students. With the Task Force recommendations on multicultural education and potential hiring of new ESL teachers, it is possible that a special interest group representing ESL teachers will be set up in the future.

Workload and Student-Teacher Ratio in ESL & LEARN Programs

Workload demands in the ESL and LEARN (Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science) programs were noted by many educators, who complained that the two specialized programs were understaffed. For example, the ESL student-teacher ratio in one high school was as high as 45:1 whereas the proficiency levels and learning needs of the students were very diverse. The LEARN program was initially offered at one middle school and one high school, with one full-time teacher in each, delivering all the LEARN courses to all the students with all levels of knowledge gaps. The teachers have to tailor their teaching contents to meet the needs of individual students while maintaining the class order and engaging other students. In addition, the ESL and LEARN teachers are normally the go-to persons in schools when classroom teachers and administrators encounter difficulties with newcomer students. Although ESL and LEARN teachers are happy to help, requests for time, advice, and teaching materials add to their workload.

Fortunately, this issue has received the attention of policymakers. According to the newly released Education Action Plan (DEECD, 2018), the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is committed to increasing the number of ESL and LEARN teachers. The School District added three more LEARN programs at other middle schools across St John's

in response to the wave of Syrian refugees arriving during the years of 2015-2016. The effort has been applauded.

Hiring Criteria and Qualifications for ESL and LEARN Positions

Current ESL teachers received specialized education in teaching newcomer students, be it through a TESL certificate or a Master's degree in related areas. Historically, there has not been any issue with the preparedness of ESL teachers from the school, District, or Department levels. However, with the increase of newcomer students in recent years and the urgent need to hire more ESL teachers, criteria in hiring has become a concern.

Educators pointed out that while teachers are hired based on proper qualification in some specialized areas such as French and Math, this is not the case in hiring ESL teachers. For example, an Instructional Resource Teacher (formerly called special education teacher) may be given the opportunity to switch to an ESL position without expertise or adequate training in working with ESL students. There is a worry that the ESL positions may not be filled by the most qualified candidate.

The same concern applies to LEARN teacher hiring. In addition to knowledge in middle school and high school subject areas, expertise in TESL theories and approaches should also be considered in assessing candidates' qualifications.

Assessment of Newcomer Learners for Placement and Learning Disability

Assessing newcomer students poses significant challenges for both administrators and teachers. Language barriers are the obvious culprit. These students have varied competencies in English; some may speak a different dialect of English, others may not speak English at all. While students progress in courses could be tracked by ESL and classroom teachers with effort, assessing newcomers for initial placement and learning disability can be very problematic.

The current grade placement is by age regardless of students' prior education. The merit is that students are able to interact with peers in their age group whereas the drawback is that newcomers with educational gaps feel overwhelmed by the language requirements and subject contents. This is where ESL and LEARN programs are successful in lifting these students to their grade level.

More challenging is assessing newcomer students for learning disabilities. Language difficulties cause delayed and broken responses on the part of students and confusion for both sides. There were cases in which students were incorrectly diagnosed with learning disability and they reported feeling indignant, and cases that students' disabilities were disguised by language

barriers which deprived students of timely support. Proper assessment would entail careful collaboration of experts in several areas, including ESL and PTSD counselling.

Non-ESL Teachers' In-Service Training on Working with Newcomer Students

While ESL teachers are trained to work with newcomer students, other educators may not have the knowledge and expertise to work with such students. Some school administrators indicated that they received no training or formal education in working with newcomer students and their families. A few attended a workshop, received a handout, or learned about newcomer students' issues at meetings. All administrators agreed that ESL teachers played an important role and the school could use more ESL support.

Challenged also are the subject teachers who have a few of these newcomer students in their classes. The teachers who were interviewed felt their hands were tied in terms of how to integrate these students, perceived as reticent and unresponsive, into the class interactions. They naturally went to the ESL and LEARN teachers, school counsellors, or social workers in schools for advice. They expressed strong desires to learn more about their newcomer students' cultures, life experiences, learning challenges, learning styles, and most importantly, strategies they could use to better support their newcomer students. Within the scope of our multiple projects, there was no mention of any professional development opportunities in this area in the province.

Collaboration of Educational Stakeholders

Although newcomer student numbers have been rising, it has to be noted that Newfoundland and Labrador is not a province with large numbers of immigrants and refugees. The increase in the newcomer population is relative to its historically low ratio of linguistically and ethnically diverse newcomers. The province has no TESL Canada recognized certificate programs. ESL teachers in the school system were educated and trained elsewhere. Those who wish to obtain a proper certificate have to seek other means, such as taking a short TESL crash course offered by business TESL operations during a few weekends, or attending TESL programs online or in other provinces.

Educators who participated in our studies agreed on the need to develop a TESL program that is recognized by educational stakeholders, such as the Department of Education, the School District, and Teachers' Association, so pre-service teacher candidates have the option of specializing in TESL and current teachers are able to upgrade their knowledge and skills by attending such a certificate program. With policy-makers' recognition and incentives, pre-service candidates and in-service teachers will be encouraged to improve their skills in working with ESL newcomer students.

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The Authors

Dr. Xuemei Li is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Memorial University. Her research covers TESL/TEFL, academic writing, migration experiences, and identity construction in additional language contexts. Her SSHRC and other projects in the past eight years have focused on newcomer (immigrant, refugee, and international student) language, social, settlement, career issues in Canada. She also look into graduate English writing instruction and teacher education at the tertiary level in China.

Ms. Hua Que is a Ph.D candidate at the Faculty of Education, Memorial University. She has participated in multiple projects on immigrant and refugee integration in Newfoundland and Labrador. Her doctoral research focuses on newcomer youth post-secondary educational opportunities in the province. She can be reached at hua.que@mun.ca.

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