



# Language

---

## Strategic overview

The ability to communicate effectively and efficiently in the language of the mainstream community – either English or French – is fundamental to social, civic and economic integration. Newcomers who lack the capacity to speak with, or to understand neighbours, employers, teachers, doctors, merchants, and service providers, are at profound risk of being excluded from society, incapable of accessing the ‘good life’, vulnerable to exploitation and illness, and unable to avail themselves of their rights as citizens of Canada and members of their communities. For these reasons, the provision of language services and its acquisition by newcomers must remain central to any and all strategies aimed at creating welcoming communities. Taking an example from the economic sphere, economists estimate that roughly one-third of the difference in economic attainment between newcomers and similarly skilled native-born Canadians can be attributed solely to language difficulties.

*“Language is that underlying thread that goes through the work of all OLIP tables ... [and] supports immigrants’ success in so many ways...”*

Member of the Language Sector Table

The central role played by language in newcomer integration has led it to figure prominently in recent federal policy changes. Selection policies and related administrative practices have significantly elevated the importance of language skills for gaining admission to Canada. Moreover, general admission policies have been adjusted to favour the entry of immigrants whose abilities are subject to scrutiny, rather than family relatives and humanitarian admissions. Language skills have also become more important for the acquisition of Canadian citizenship, signalling the importance of language not only for economic exchanges, but also for social and civic transactions.

Notwithstanding the central role played by language in newcomer integration, language service providers feel that language training does not receive the attention it merits. They also argue that language services have been especially vulnerable to budget cuts and that a fundamental

realignment is needed in national discussions of settlement to recognize the centrality of language services.

Four strategic priorities were chosen for implementation by the Language Sector Table:

- 1) Improving the planning and deployment of federal and provincial language courses so they are complementary and better matched to immigrant needs;
- 2) Improving newcomer access to specialized language training and enhancing the ability of language programs to respond to community needs;
- 3) Improving and extending access to interpretation services for a broad range of legal, justice, health and social services; and
- 4) Promoting special language programming for populations at risk of exclusion.

To address these priorities, the Language Sector Table identified a series of initiatives, many of which are being pursued in collaboration with other sector tables, including the Health and Wellbeing Sector, the Economic Sector, and the Settlement and Integration Capacity Development Sector. Other initiatives by the Language Table are at an early stage of development, where the background research has been completed but the project is awaiting funding and the formation of a partnership to carry it forward. To date, the principal financial and in-kind leverage achieved by the Language Table has been in relation to collaborative, cross-sectoral initiatives.

## Activities

### **Priority # 1: Improving the planning and deployment of federal and provincial language courses so they are complementary and better matched to immigrant needs**

#### **Action 1: Establishing a Centralized Language Assessment and Referral System**

A new centralized capacity for planning and delivering language services in Ottawa was introduced in May 2014: CLARS - Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral System. CLARS is operated by the YMCA-YWCA and is the result of cooperation between the federal and provincial governments, as well as collaboration among school boards and Ottawa's settlement sector. The new system will promote better operational coordination as well as facilitating interactions with stakeholders from other sectors. The Language Sector Table will undertake consultations with local service providers later this year to discuss how the new approach has affected language training services in Ottawa and what further benefits might be realized.

*The impact of CLARS on newcomers has been the biggest piece. CLARS allows for one point access and gives us the ability to combine language [funding] streams. “For example, newcomers could do ESL in the morning and do CLIC, which is the French federal piece, in the afternoon. Before we would say no, sorry, you can’t do that, you can only do French or you can only do English, now they can actually do French and English as long as the eligibility criteria are met, so that’s a huge change.”*

CLARS lead, Language Sector Table meeting

## **Action 2: Raising employer awareness of language benchmarks in order to enhance the returns to language assessments and language training**

National language benchmarks (CLBs) are used to assess the English and French language competencies of newcomers. Benchmarks are also associated with occupations identified in a national occupational compendium. In theory, this allows both employers and newcomers to determine the language skills required for a particular occupation, as well providing newcomers with an objective and expert assessment of their competencies.

Notwithstanding its potential value, language benchmarking data is underutilized by employers and human resource professionals who tend to assess needs and proficiencies subjectively. This results in systematic underestimates of newcomer language skills due to intercultural communication difficulties and accents.

This initiative aims to mount a pilot project that would identify and test alternative opportunities and methods for raising employer awareness of language benchmarking. The initiative is being pursued jointly with the Economic Sector Table. The next step is to locate a funder who would be willing to underwrite a pilot project in Ottawa.

## **Priority #2: Improving newcomer access to specialized language training and enhancing the ability of language programs to respond to community needs**

### **Action 1: Language learning and health promotion**

This action is being undertaken in collaboration with the Health and Wellbeing Sector. For details, see the health sector report - Priority 1 – Action 2.

## **Priority # 3: Improving and extending access to interpretation services for a broad range of legal, justice, health and social related services**

### **Action 1: Ottawa Language Access (OLA)**

This action is being undertaken in collaboration with the Health and Wellbeing Sector. For details, see Priority 2 – Action 3.

*“I can see potential for this initiative to have a significant impact on the standard of interpretation supports in health care, including the competence of the health service providers to work with an interpreter. There is potential to create a tri-sectoral partnership - involving [the] health, language, and employment sectors - to address the training, employment and accreditation of interpreters in Ottawa.”*

Jane Moloney, Health and Wellbeing Sector Table

## **Priority # 4: Promoting special language programming for populations at risk of exclusion**

### **Action 1: Understanding and addressing gaps in language training for low literacy Immigrants**

This project is still at a developmental stage. Notwithstanding the shift in policy to favour immigrants with high levels of language proficiency and labour market readiness, there remains a significant flow of newcomers with low levels of literacy and education. The flow includes members of the family class (especially, parents and grandparents), dependents of skilled migrants, refugees and persons admitted under various humanitarian programs. Ottawa receives a disproportionate share of humanitarian and refugee admissions and so is less likely to experience a significant reduction in the demand for language services ... an observation that is supported by local service delivery partners who confirm that the requests for customized language training for low literacy immigrants continue to be high.

The aim of this collaborative project is to undertake a study to chart the demand for language training by immigrants with low literacy levels. Based on the findings of this study, a language training plan would be developed. Initial talks with potential funders have been positive, though further discussions will be needed before research can be initiated.

## **Achievements, challenges and future directions**

### **Achievements**

The Language Sector Table was launched during a period of significant consolidation and restructuring in the language sector, absorbing much of the energy and focus of participants. Despite this, the language table was able to assemble an important and

interesting (and interested) mix of participants representing different facets of the language 'industry', including stakeholders concerned with literacy, training, occupational requirements, interpretation and the synergistic use of language training to convey social and economic information. The table was particularly successful in working with and supporting other sector tables in getting involved in bilateral, collaborative initiatives. Evaluations of these cross-sectoral projects have been especially promising and supportive. More comprehensive assessments will become possible as the sector's initiatives mature. Many are at early stages of development, including research.

## **Challenges**

One of the main challenges facing the Language Sector Table will be to convert its research studies and pilot programs into sustained and robust language training initiatives.

Beyond these matters, the Language Sector Table faces a series of challenges starting with the need for some consolidation within the sector around its strategic directions and capacities. Multiple possibilities exist. These include an effort to forge closer links with employers and employer institutions in order to develop better responses to recent policy directions through upgraded services and training that responds in a timely manner to existing and projected labour market needs. The language table will also continue to be challenged by the budgetary situation which is unlikely to improve.

## **Future directions for discussion**

Three major directions can be discerned for the Language Sector Table based on current initiatives and challenges. First and foremost is for the Sector to build on its success in developing innovative, cross-sectoral initiatives that combine programs to achieve synergies. Some thinking is already underway regarding the extension of the health-language initiative (that is, building health information into the language training curriculum) into other areas of social policy.

Such win-win situations are attractive to federal and provincial ministries that are all feeling the budgetary pinch. A second area that the language sector has begun to explore and where there is considerable potential is to make better use of new information and communication technologies, especially in regard to distance learning techniques. These 'solutions' can address existing problems such as the mismatch

between the location of language training facilities and newcomer communities, as well as offering the possibility of asynchronous training delivered to mobile platforms, such as smartphones. Great strides are being made in the educational sector and it should be possible to transfer and repurpose some of these technologies.

Finally, in light of budgetary constraints and policy directions, the Table may want to explore different financing models, including the possibility of commercialization and actively marketing some of its 'products' to employers, affluent newcomers, and prospective entrants. Again, interesting models can be borrowed from the educational sector.