

A Study of Language Learner Needs and Barriers to Accessing  
Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Programs  
in Hamilton, Ontario

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by

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed methods research using both qualitative and quantitative inquiry explored language learner needs and barriers to accessing Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in Hamilton, Ontario. It drew insights from nine focus groups with 118 currently-enrolled LINC students, six focus groups with 29 currently employed LINC teachers, three focus groups with 20 newcomers to Hamilton, six interviews with six LINC service providers and three interviews with 3 key LINC stakeholders, and 319 completed questionnaires to currently enrolled LINC students. The analysis of data revealed that the typical LINC participant in this study held a university or college education and that the majority of LINC learners want their own copy of a LINC textbook, a course outline, integrated (versus discrete) skills classes, and a combined practical and academic focus to their English studies. However, there are clusters of LINC learners who do not fit such a profile, for example, some LINC learners with higher levels of education prefer discrete skills classes. The majority of the currently-enrolled LINC students who participated in focus groups were generally satisfied with their LINC learning experience but had suggestions for improvement. Female newcomers with young children have unique gender-related obstacles because, among other concerns, LINC eligibility rules force them to choose between the right to vote and free childminding. LINC teachers face many challenges including continuous intake, multi-level classes, the changing profile of the LINC learner, among other issues. Recommendations include further research that explores the feasibility of a LINC textbook, considers best practices with respect to how to provide course outlines for students, examines how to build a more collaborative environment between LINC service providers, investigates effective models of outreach, compares LINC programs to other English programs such as College, Coop, ESL, etc., and investigates ways to increase the general public's understanding of LINC and Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), among other suggestions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research study investigated language learner needs and barriers to accessing Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in Hamilton, Ontario. LINC provides language training in one of Canada's official languages to adult immigrants after their arrival in Canada, so that they may acquire the necessary language skills to integrate into Canadian society.

The research design was a mixed methods approach, which combines both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to analyze a research question (Creswell, 2005). In January to April of 2007, data was collected from the following sources:

- Nine focus groups with 118 currently-enrolled LINC students
- Six focus groups with 29 currently employed LINC teachers
- Three focus groups with 20 members of the Hamilton newcomer community
- Six interviews with 6 LINC coordinators
- Three interviews with 3 key LINC stakeholders
- 319 questionnaires completed by currently enrolled LINC students

### Focus Groups with currently-enrolled LINC students

The majority of currently-enrolled LINC students who participated in the focus groups reported that they were generally satisfied with their LINC learning experience but had suggestions for improvement. Twelve themes emerged from the focus groups with LINC students: (1) the important role of the teacher in the learning experience (2) family obligations and financial/work concerns (3) requests for his/her own copy of a LINC textbook (4) requests for a course outline (5) varied requests for classes with a focus on an academic/practical/employment English (6) requests that the LINC rules for Canadian citizenship and childminding be revisited from a gender sensitive perspective (7) some requests for discrete skills classes (8) some dissatisfaction with the Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment (9) requests for more school/classroom resources (10) dissatisfaction with multi-level classes (11) scheduling concerns and (12) cold weather obstacles.

### Focus Groups with currently-employed LINC teachers

Ten themes emerged from the focus groups with currently employed LINC teachers: (1) the challenges of multi-level classes (2) the challenges of continuous intake (3) a changing LINC student profile (4) issues over SISO's impartiality in advising newcomers (5) inconvenience of SISO assessment (6) CLB and LINC – lack of awareness in the working world (7) Canadian citizenship/LINC eligibility issues (8) students' personal issues (9) income supplements for students, and (10) more resources.

### Focus Groups with members of the Hamilton newcomer community

Four themes emerged in the focus groups with newcomers: (1) requests for more English conversation practice (2) smaller classes (3) increased availability of evening classes, and (4) socio-emotional concerns.

### Interviews with LINC service providers and key LINC stakeholders

Two main themes emerged from the interviews with LINC service providers and stakeholders: (1) the importance of outreach, and (2) the need for a more collaborative environment amongst the LINC service providers and stakeholders.

### Questionnaires with currently enrolled LINC students

The questionnaire was designed by drawing on themes that emerged from the focus groups. The following represent the LINC student questionnaire findings:

1. Ninety percent of respondents who answered this item want their own copy of a LINC textbook that can be taken home (instead of only photocopies) to assist them in their language learning. The desire for a LINC textbook is predominant for all LINC students across all levels of educational backgrounds.
2. Eighty-three percent of respondents who answered this item want a monthly/weekly, possibly even daily course outline that will help them understand the classroom plan of study. This holds especially true for LINC students enrolled in levels 3, 4, 5, and 6.
3. Ninety-three percent of the respondents who answered this item preferred integrated skills classes (where reading, writing, speaking, listening, etc. are taught in the same class by the same teacher) over discrete skills classes (where reading, writing, speaking, listening, etc. are taught in separate classes, often by different teachers). The twenty-one percent of respondents who answered this item and who preferred discrete skills classes represent a cluster of students who are more likely to have a higher level of educational background such as college/university or graduate studies.
4. The most popular focus for type of English language study was a combined academic and practical focus, chosen by 40% of respondents who answered this item. The second most popular focus was a practical focus, selected by 19% of respondents who answered this item. LINC students in lower levels were more likely to prefer a practical English focus, but as LINC levels rise, interest increased in academic English or a combined academic and practical English focus.

5. There were no substantial differences in the questionnaire data between the genders regarding LINC textbook, course outline, discrete versus integrated skills classes, and preference for type of English language study.

**Recommendations:**

Please see the section “Summary and Recommendations” in this report for a 3 page discussion that includes possible next steps for best practices as well as suggestions for future research.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to its proximity to the City of Toronto in the province of Ontario, the City of Hamilton is becoming an important centre for receiving newcomers to Canada as well as a noted destination for secondary migration. Every year, approximately 3,500 to 4,000 newcomers choose Hamilton as their home. According to Statistics Canada's 2001 Census, more than one-quarter of the population of the Hamilton Census Metropolitan Area were foreign-born (26.5%). This represents the third highest proportion of foreign-born residents among such urban areas in Canada, surpassed only by Toronto and Vancouver. Hamilton is a multicultural city whose people have come from all over the world. Many of those arriving today have limited knowledge of English and need assistance in acquiring it.

English as a Second Language (ESL) training has grown steadily in recent years in response to the numbers of non-English speaking people settling in Hamilton for reasons of education, business, and resettlement. According to the LINC Assessment Centre, a total of 1363 assessments were completed from April 2005 to March 2006. In addition, 57% of the learners assessed reported completing some form of post secondary education and were predominantly young adults with only 16% of all learners assessed being over the age of 46 (LINC Trends and Gaps Community Forum Report April 2005 to March 2006). Moreover, 512 seats were filled out of 607 contracted full time seats; this shows an 84% fill rate. Considering these numbers, a research study was proposed by Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO) funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to explore the language learner needs and barriers to accessing Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Programs in Hamilton, Ontario.

The Canadian federal government, in its Immigration Plan for 1991-1995, introduced Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to facilitate the immigration and settlement of newcomers to Canada. The basic goal of LINC instructional programs was "to help learners develop communicative competence in English in order to be able to participate more fully in Canadian society" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada – Hutt & Young, 1997, p. 4). Since its introduction, LINC has become a major part of the adult ESL education in Canada. LINC training can be taken full-time, part-time or as home study. Classes are currently offered at boards of education, private language schools, colleges, churches, and community centers across the country. Where necessary, and when eligibility requirements are met, transportation and childminding are provided.

This report is a study on newcomers' language learning needs and barriers to accessing LINC programs in Hamilton. This was an independent, contracted study in that the researchers have no direct involvement in the delivery of LINC programs, though both researchers have had extensive

experience with ESL education and research on this topic. We emphasize that the purpose of the study was to document the experiences of current LINC students, teachers, coordinators and other LINC stakeholders. The study was not intended to evaluate the performances of specific LINC service providers, although some incidental information about respondents' impressions of LINC was gathered in the process. This was a necessary basis for describing learner needs and barriers to accessing LINC programs in Hamilton; however, these descriptions of LINC should not be interpreted as evaluations of LINC programs because they are not matched systematically to specific LINC service providers in Hamilton. Moreover, the focus group schedules did not include items asking participants to evaluate the particular LINC programs in which they had participated. The value of the study is primarily descriptive, documenting information about the learners that should help to guide LINC programming in the future.

This report is organised into seven sections: introduction, literature review, research design and method, data analysis and findings, recommendations and summary, references, and appendices. This report will help to provide new insights into newcomers' language learning needs and barriers to accessing LINC programs in Hamilton.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review is not an exhaustive review on topics related to newcomers who are English language learners. Nonetheless, the literature cited here can provide the reader with an introductory understanding of the unique language learning needs of new immigrants and some of the challenges facing them. When one conducts a literature review, numerous criterion decisions must be made, including deciding what reporting venues to include (Kennedy, 2007). For the purposes of this literature review, in addition to peer-reviewed scholarly articles, we have chosen to also include some selected documents and reports that were published outside the academy. We made such a reporting venue decision in order to attempt to represent a fuller range of people who seek to participate in educational debates. “This is an important issue ... because education...is of concern [also] to people outside the academy who may subscribe to different cultural and political views than university scholars” (Kennedy, p. 143).

There are countless barriers that newcomer learners encounter when pursuing an education. Apps (1988) found several general barriers for adult learners. Cross (1981) identified three categories of limitations: situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Cross felt that potential learners in the 25 – 45 year-old group often find situational barriers, which are due to the learners’ situations in life. An example of this is lack of time due to a job and home responsibilities. Institutional barriers are those practices and procedures imposed by educational institutions and organizations that exclude or discourage adults from participating in programs. Many older learners and those with a limited educational background fall into the category of dispositional barriers, which are related to attitudes and self-perception about oneself as a learner.

Johnstone and Rivera (1995) clustered ten potential barriers into categories: external (situational), and internal (dispositional). External barriers are influences external to the individual or at least beyond the individual’s control, such as cost of the program. Internal barriers reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Cumming (1992) outlined four kinds of obstacles that tend to hinder adult participation in formal education: institutional barriers, including location, schedules, fees, site atmosphere; situational barriers, including job commitments, home and family responsibilities, lack of money, lack of child care, and transportation problems; psychosocial barriers, such as attitudes, beliefs, values, past experience as a student, self esteem, and the opinions of others; and pedagogical barriers, such as a program’s lack of responsiveness to the interests, backgrounds, and existing skills of those groups they seek to serve.

Language learning is influenced by factors such as: aptitude, personality, attitude, age, motivation and learning style (Kottler & Kottler, 2002). Learners

come from all over the world, represent all walks and stages of life and cover the spectrum in terms of professional qualifications and experiences and are increasingly diverse (Kottler & Kottler, 2002, p. v). Adults learn differently because they have unique characteristics including experience, motivation and limitations (Knowles, 1980 & 1984; Apps, 1988). The adult ESL classroom needs to provide a supportive environment for its students. This means that it should encourage interaction that enables learners to understand and appreciate one another's experiences and backgrounds. This type of interaction should become a major means of language learning. The learners should be encouraged to share ideas, attitudes, and feelings about topics relevant to their daily lives. Learners can consider how these thoughts and feelings vary from culture to culture and in so doing, develop appreciation and respect for one another.

### Characteristics of the Adult ESL Learner

There are countless factors that may influence adult learning, including adjustment to a multicultural and multiracial society; physical condition; background experiences; motivation; and learning styles and ability (Brown, 2000; Lightbrown and Spada, 1999). Sensitivity to all these factors should improve the chances of student success. ESL students differ in many ways, including: age, gender, education, appearance, class, ethnic background, interests, marital status, level of confidence, occupation, preoccupations and anxieties, ability, levels and kinds of skills, attitudes to learn, and affiliations (Brown, 2000). There can be no assumptions made about learners having similar experiences, similar views, or similar levels of achievement. Some will have grasped life with both hands, taken risks, and will have rich and colourful experiences to draw upon. Some will have experienced misfortune or tragedy. Some will have chosen a clearly defined goal and will be pursuing it single-mindedly. Although LINC learners may be seen as a generic group of people with some very general characteristics, they still remain individuals bringing their own unique and personal realities, including unique needs and goals, into the classroom. Adult ESL learners have to be valued for their experiences because their richness and diversity in class is a resource.

### Adjustment to a Multicultural and Multiracial Society

Newcomers must deal with changes as they move from their home country to Canada. In the process of acculturation, most newcomers experience some stress and anxiety (Brown, 2000). Their initial euphoria and excitement may give way to feelings of disorientation and culture shock as they realize how different the new culture is from their native culture. The adjustment of refugees may be even more difficult because of trauma experienced in their native countries. Both immigrants and refugees may be suffering from loss of extended family and traditional support systems. Language providers should be sensitive

to the stress their students may be experiencing and should take whatever steps they can to reduce it. Developing a warm, welcoming atmosphere as well as advising adult learners of agencies that can assist them may alleviate some of the stress and thereby increasing learners' chances for succeeding in both second language and second culture learning (Brown, 2000).

Another factor is that most newcomers come from homogeneous societies. They need to recognize that the Canadian society is multicultural and multiracial. Learners should be encouraged to share their interpretations of the instructor's body language, so that misunderstandings can be corrected. Also, differences in belief systems should be openly discussed.

### Physical Condition

Some older newcomers may suffer from physical disabilities associated with advancing years; instructors should be alert to such physical impairments as loss of vision or hearing and low energy level. Where such impairments exist, classroom instruction should be adjusted accordingly; they should provide large-print editions of written materials if necessary and should rearrange classroom seating so that everyone can participate as fully as possible (Brown, 2000).

### Background Experiences

Adult newcomers will have had many and varied formal and informal educational and life experiences. Some learners may not be literate in their native language. Others may have had educational experiences that lead them to view the classroom as teacher-centred. Some learners may never have had a female instructor.

Learners attend classes in order to learn more English, but may have other reasons for attending class such as to relax, have fun, meet people, keep mind active, keep on learning, make up for what they missed at school, do well in a job, escape, develop themselves, engage in social or community activity, and perform certain roles better (Brown, 2000).

As students disclose information about their backgrounds, these responses must be consistently respected. These responses will not only build students' self-esteem, but also increase their comfort with the learner-centred approach. In addition, students' experiences, needs, and preferences could be used to involve students actively in curriculum development (Brown, 2000).

## Motivation

Language is the key to survival and participation in the new culture; adult learners of a new language are usually highly motivated. Dornyei defined motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it” (2002, p. 8). He discussed two different types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. His studies indicated that integrative motivation (i.e. wanting to learn a language in order to identify with the community that speaks it) promotes second language acquisition regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or a foreign language. Learners may have instrumental motivation, the desire to learn the language to meet their needs and goals, such as getting a job.

Motivation is important not only because it improves learning but also it mediates learning and is a consequence of learning as well. Historically, teachers have known that when learners are motivated during the learning process, things go more smoothly, communication flows, anxiety decreases, and creativity and learning are more apparent. Learners who complete a learning experience and leave the situation feeling motivated about what they have learned seem more likely to have a future interest in what they will learn and more likely to use what they learned (Wlodkowski, 1999).

When adults can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspectives, their motivation emerges; and they want to learn. Motivation is governed to a large extent by emotions. In turn, our emotions are socialized through culture (Galbraith, 2004).

Some adults may be motivated by social as well as educational needs. Some, although highly motivated, may have economic and family obligations that cause sporadic attendance or repeated entry and withdrawal. Therefore, to meet the needs of adult learners who must repeatedly enter and exit the program, the classroom environment should be welcoming and a specific objective should be met in each session.

A supportive environment within the classroom serves as a basis for trust and respect between the learners and the teacher. Where there is such trust and respect, learners will feel comfortable about participating in classroom activities.

## Learning Style and Ability

Learning styles, skill levels, and abilities of adult learners will vary. Each ESL adult learner has an individual learning style that has been shaped by physical and environmental factors. Some learners prefer a teacher-centred approach, with lectures and demonstrations, but others might prefer the learner-

centred approach, which involves learners' working at separate tasks (Brown, 2000; Lightbrown and Spada, 1999). The individual differences of each adult learner's skills and abilities must be identified. Each adult learner is unique; therefore, a variety of techniques should be used to satisfy all learning styles (Brown, 2000). It should be noted that there are many factors to consider. Those which have been detailed above are perhaps the most common.

### Literature on LINC

A comparatively limited amount of research has been conducted on LINC programs, but more literature has been published on the wider topic of immigrant and settlement issues. A report entitled *Consultations on the Settlement and Language Training Services Needs of Newcomers* (CIC – InterQuest Consulting, 2006) represents a large consultation project designed to “obtain an update on the state of newcomer needs, related service gaps and ways to improve services and delivery” (p.1). Although not scholarly research, we include it in the literature review because “many people outside the academy publish reports through their institutions and websites yet are capable of producing studies that meet these standards of quality” (Kennedy, 2007, p. 144). In addition, “because education is a cultural enterprise, a wide spectrum of the public may participate not just in the debates but also in the production of knowledge” (Kennedy, p. 144). Guided by a planning committee with representation from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, and the City of Toronto, the project involved a two-phase consultation process. Seventeen half-day newcomer sessions were held in Toronto, Peel Region, York-Durham Region, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Ottawa, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Windsor. Thirty-one organization sessions were held in Toronto, Peel Region, York-Durham Region, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Ottawa, St. Catharines, Sudbury, and Windsor. Language was only one issue among many explored, but it was found that francophone newcomers felt at a disadvantage, as they reported it difficult to access English language classes. However, the team reported mostly positive feedback from newcomers on LINC:

On the whole, participants were happy with their experiences in both Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and English as a Second Language (ESL) schools. Newcomers recommended the following improvements to language services: provide better assessment of language skill and organization of classes so that curriculum can be better targeted to specific skill levels and employment needs, provide additional training in employment-related language and teach additional curriculum around Canadian idioms, customs and other idiosyncrasies of Canadian culture and language. (CIC – InterQuest Consulting, 2006, p. iii)

*LINC then and now: 10-year anniversary* (Bettencourt, 2003) is also not a scholarly publication, but is nonetheless worth reading for its brief contextual

information. Bettencourt describes the 10 year evolution of the LINC program and outlines some of the services offered to new immigrants, and the eligibility requirements for those being admitted to LINC. She outlines changes to the program, such as the expansion of LINC from Levels 1 through 3 to 4 and 5, higher educational levels of clientele, and changing source countries.

In *The Contestation of Citizenship Education at Three Stages of the LINC 4 & 5 Curriculum Guidelines: Production, Reception, and Implementation*, Pinet (2006) situated the LINC programs from the stance of curriculum theory. He conducted research with five present or former LINC teachers in which the majority of the teachers used the LINC Curriculum Guidelines to aid in the teaching of practical topics using “transmission-oriented pedagogy, often centered around form-based grammatical points” (p.14) while several took a critical approach to teaching citizenship and social justice issues.

In *Teachers’ Perceptions of a Language Policy: “Teaching LINC”*, Cray (1997) analyzed six LINC teachers in the Ottawa area. She discovered that teachers found it challenging to deal with multi-level classes, continuous intake and off-site locations. The teachers in her study did not draw insights for their classroom teaching from the formal LINC curriculum documents nor from any assessment procedures. Rather, they planned their classes by relying much more often on their own experience, their preferences, and the preferences of their students.

In *The Use of CLBA Scores in LINC Program Placement Practices in Western Canada*, Rossiter and Pawlikowska-Smith (1999) conducted a study of the efficacy of the CLBA as administered in LINC institutions in Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver, and made recommendations on ways to refine the test.

With seven research assistants as well as a five-person advisory committee, Hart and Cumming (1997) conducted a follow-up study on LINC Level 3 learners in southern Ontario, with most of the participating service-provider organizations being located in Metro Toronto, York, and Peel. Using telephone interviews, the researchers contacted 103 native speakers of Arabic, 208 speakers of Cantonese, 198 speakers of Polish, 40 speakers of Somali, 155 of Spanish, and 196 of Tamil, and then held in-depth interviews with 50 of such participants. Hart and Cumming’s research is now ten years old, and so no longer can be considered current. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that at the time of the study, most of the LINC Level 3 students were pleased with their experiences with LINC but were very clear that LINC only provided them with a basic facility in English and orientation to Canada. Respondents noted their needs for further language training, and for continuity with respect to training and links to employment programs.

An important point in the above non-exhaustive review on literature published to date on the LINC program is that language learner needs and

barriers to access are not necessarily the key research questions, but in most cases, peripheral concerns. Nor has any study been done which specifically focused on the unique characteristics of learners in Hamilton, Ontario. Thus, this present study not only has a practical and pragmatic purpose in providing insights for future LINC program-planners, but also contributes to filling the gap in the research literature on LINC programs.

In the next section, research design and methodology will be discussed.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a mixed methods case study approach. A mixed methods research design is “a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and ‘mixing’ both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to analyze a research problem” (Creswell, 2005, p. 510). By combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed methods study, one is able to integrate multiple types of data to better understand the research question.

The organizations offering LINC classes who were involved in this study were Hamilton Public Library, Circle of Friends, Mohawk College, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, and St. Joseph’s Immigrant Women’s Centre. All of the organizations listed above were not only willing to participate, but very helpful and cooperative during all phases of the research. Please note that the Hamilton Public Library’s mode of instruction is different from the other organizations because HPL entails individual tutoring by volunteer teachers rather than teaching/learning within a group inside a classroom setting. Therefore, for this study, data was not collected from HPL-LINC tutors or students, but HPL- LINC coordinators certainly contributed valuable information on the success of their unique program. Because its student body is mainly composed of francophone newcomers and it represents a dissimilar teaching/learning experience, College Boreal was not included in this study. However, as noted in the literature review, a previous consultation project (CIC - InterQuest Consulting 2006), found that francophone newcomers in Ontario feel it is particularly difficult to access language classes. Therefore, it is worth conducting future research that concentrates and delves into the unique experiences of francophone LINC learners in Hamilton.

The two researchers were both insiders and outsiders to the study. As former ESL or LINC teachers, they were insiders who brought insights of the LINC experience. However, as outsiders to Hamilton, they brought a certain level of neutrality and objectivity to the study. The researchers asked questions during the focus groups and interviews, but the participants were the ones who dominated the discussion. In addition, prior to and during the focus groups and interviews, participants were encouraged to ask any questions or clarify any concerns that they might have had with respect to the study or with the delivery of the LINC program.

Participants for this research were selected from the population of:

- currently-enrolled students in Hamilton LINC programs
- members of the wider Hamilton newcomer community
- currently-employed teachers in Hamilton LINC programs
- currently-employed coordinators in Hamilton LINC programs
- other stakeholders of the Hamilton LINC programs

The invitation to participate was open to everyone who fell into the above categories, regardless of gender, race, religion, age (except that no children were participants), or place of origin. Between January to April of 2007, data was collected from the following sources:

- Nine focus groups with 118 currently-enrolled LINC students
- Six focus groups with 29 current LINC teachers
- Three focus groups with 20 members of the Hamilton newcomer community
- Six interviews with 6 LINC coordinators
- Three interviews with 3 key LINC stakeholders
- 319 questionnaires completed by currently-enrolled LINC students

Between them, the two researchers spoke a total of seven languages and on several occasions, they communicated in these languages in addition to English when speaking with some of the newcomers. In an ideal research setting, all of the participants would have received translation and interpretation of all aspects of the study; however, with newcomer participants coming from at least 41 different countries, this was not financially feasible. Nonetheless, the use of basic English in all documents, discussions, and research instruments as well as the researchers' frequent clarifications with newcomers, whenever needed, minimized the risk of misunderstandings.

With respect to ethical considerations, all participants in this study received an explanation of the purposes of the study and were given opportunities to ask clarifying questions. All were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. No participants' names are used in this report.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section begins with a discussion of the findings from (a) LINC student focus groups. Next the LINC teacher focus groups, newcomer community focus groups, and interviews with LINC service providers and stakeholders will be presented. Finally, the LINC student questionnaire will be analyzed.

### (A) LINC STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

A total of 118 LINC students participated in nine focus groups, held in February and March of 2007. Focus groups were approximately one hour long and were held in classrooms and meeting rooms at the various LINC service provider sites. The researchers dedicated a significant amount of time introducing themselves and the study and then explaining students' rights of refusal to participate in the focus group without any penalty. The conversation was fluid and evolving but began from two basic questions:

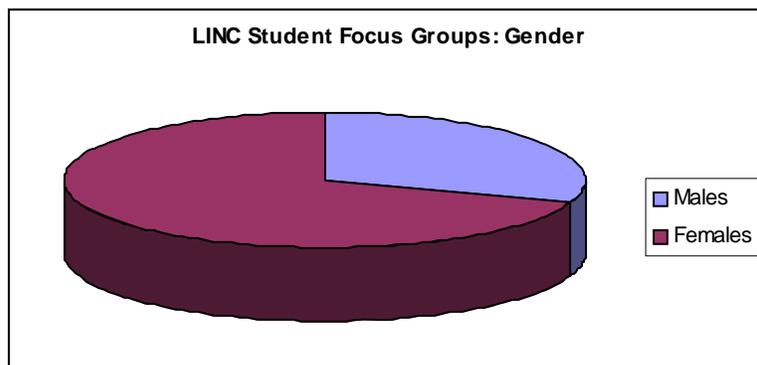
1. Please tell us about your experiences learning English in Hamilton LINC classes.
2. Can the LINC program help you more? If yes, how?

These questions may appear simple, but they proved to be an excellent starting point for fruitful and rich discussions with the LINC students in the focus groups.

#### Demographic Data on LINC student focus groups:

Eighty-two (82) females and 36 males participated. Please see Chart 1.

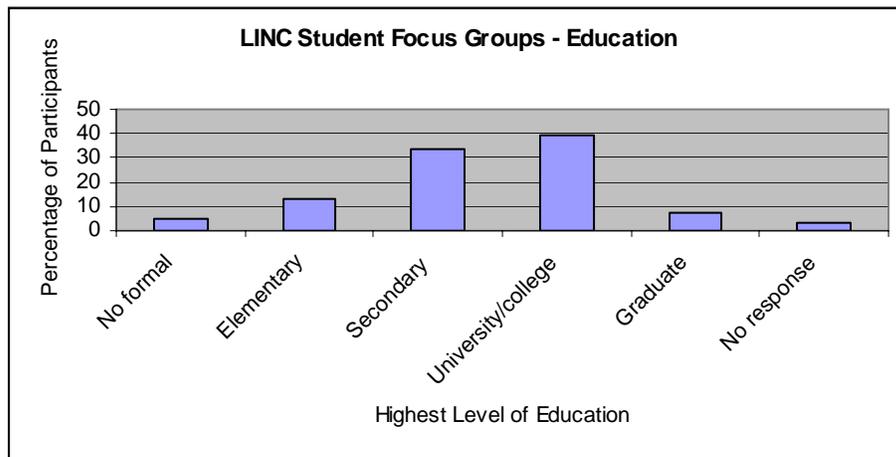
Chart 1: LINC Student Focus Groups: Participation by Gender



Thirty-three percent of them were 30 to 39 years of age; thirty-two percent of them were 40 to 49 years of age, 27 percent were aged 20 to 29 years of age; 2 percent were 50 to 59 years of age; 1 percent were 60 years and above (1 percent represent missing responses). Most participants, therefore, were between the ages of 30 to 49 years of age. Forty-one countries of origin were

represented and the most frequent were Iraq (18%), Columbia (13%), Afghanistan (9%), and China (7%). Twenty-seven languages were represented and the most frequent were Arabic (24%), Spanish (20%), and Mandarin Chinese (7%). The majority, that is, thirty-two percent arrived to Canada between 2 to 5 years ago. With respect to level of education, the majority, that is, 39% have a university or college degree. Thirty-four percent completed secondary school or its equivalent, 13% completed elementary school or its equivalent; 5% reported no formal education; 7% reported a graduate degree (Masters, Ph.D) and 3% represent a missing response. Please see Chart 2.

Chart 2: LINC Student Focus Groups by Highest Level of Education



The majority of participants (33%) were in LINC Level 3; 20% were in LINC Level 2; 20% were in LINC Level 1; 17% were in LINC Level 4; 7% were in LINC Level 5; there were no participants in LINC Level 6, and 2 % represent a missing response. Most have children (76%) but 24% do not. Of those who have children, 68 participants had between 1 to 3 children and 21 participants had 4 or more children. With respect to the ages of the children, 70% of participants' children were over the age of 7 years old; 25% had children between the ages of 1 to 6 years of age; 4% had children under the age of 1 year old, and 2% represent a missing response. The top reasons cited for attending LINC classes were: To improve my English (36%); Close to my house (20%); and Teachers/Class/School is good (9%).

The following twelve themes emerged from the focus groups with LINC students:

- the important role of the teacher in the learning experience,
- family obligations and financial/work concerns,
- requests for his/her own copy of a LINC textbook,
- requests for a course outline,
- varied requests for classes with a focus on an academic/practical/employment English,
- requests that the LINC rules for Canadian citizenship and childminding be revisited,
- requests for discrete skills classes
- dissatisfaction with the Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment,
- requests for more school/classroom resources,
- dissatisfaction with multi-level classes,
- scheduling concerns, and
- cold weather obstacles.

## **1. The important role of the teacher in the learning experience**

Students often referred to their teachers, mostly stating how their teachers had played a positive role in their lives, and had been very helpful in assisting them to acquire new language competencies and new understandings of Canada.

*“The personality and pedagogical methods of the teacher is very important. If she is a good teacher, we go to our friends and tell our friends: ‘She is a good teacher’ and then we convince our friends to come to class with us.”* LINC student

*“The teacher’s ability to explain is very important.”* LINC student

*“I like my teacher, I like my school, I like my friends, I am happy.”* LINC student

*“The classes are very helpful. Now I can go to the doctor alone, and the classes have increased my confidence.”* LINC student

However, some students had had negative experiences in the classroom and expressed disappointment in their teachers.

*“Some teachers don’t prepare before coming to teach us.”* LINC student

## **2. Family obligations and financial/work concerns**

Students spoke of the difficulty of balancing LINC classes with family obligations, and this especially held true for female LINC students with children and elderly parents at home. Many LINC students are concerned about finding employment

(either in the immediate or the long-term future). Others are attempting to balance their present jobs with their LINC classes. The fact that many newcomers need to earn money and/or need to take care of their families comes as no surprise; nonetheless, such concerns should not be dismissed lightly because they can represent serious barriers to newcomers' participation in the LINC program.

### **3. Requests for his/her own copy of a LINC textbook**

An overwhelming number of students in the focus groups requested their own copy of a LINC textbook, possibly with a workbook, that could be taken home. Many objected to what they perceive as a random distribution of photocopies from various sources, which sometimes creates the impression that their LINC classes are disjointed and fragmented. A textbook, they argued, would allow them to progress in their English language studies in a more directed and step-by-step manner. In addition, they would be able to more systematically review their lessons after class. An item on the LINC student questionnaire on this matter explores this theme further.

*"Photocopies waste money, waste chemicals, and a book is much cheaper"* LINC student

*"I am so sick and tired of photocopies. I just want a book!"* LINC student, who pulled out a huge stack of photocopies from his backpack to demonstrate his point, and was then applauded by his classmates.

*"We want a book that you can take home, sometimes you lose the photocopy paper."* LINC student

*"When the teachers copy the paper, it probably costs the government more than if they gave us a book."* LINC student

It must be noted that the parameters of this study can only identify the fact that almost all LINC students in the focus groups perceive their own copy of a textbook as a highly instrumental learning tool. Further studies would be required to explore how the LINC program can best meet this need – for example, the contents of such a textbook, at what cost, and other considerations.

### **4. Requests for a course outline**

Students expressed the need for a course outline, including a weekly lesson plan, possibly even a daily plan. A course schedule, they pointed out, will help them to study English in a more structured fashion. While the researchers are aware that most LINC teachers already do have a weekly/monthly/daily plan, many students do not appear to be aware of such a plan, and therefore perceive their LINC classes as somewhat lacking in direction. Sharing the

monthly/weekly/daily course outline with students may reduce such erroneous perceptions.

*“We want a schedule for the month – you feel like you have done more for your future with a schedule. You don’t waste your time.”* LINC student

*“We want a course outline, a program schedule: “This is what we’re going to do today.”* LINC student

*“I need a course schedule, for example, “For the first hour, we’ll do listening, then the next hour, we’ll do this...”* LINC student

*“The program is good but it needs some changes – we want a standardized course outline.”* LINC student

*“If we have a curriculum, then we can have the feeling that we are progressing.”* LINC student

## **5. Varied requests for classes with a focus on academic/employment/practical English**

Depending upon the focus group and the individual student, the researchers heard varied requests in which some students want an English class with a more academic focus (so they can proceed onwards to further study perhaps at college or university), while others prefer classes with a more practical focus on daily life (shopping, doctor’s visits), and yet others want classes with an employment focus. It is evident that LINC learners are not a homogeneous group with respect to “the type” or the focus of English classes that they need. An item on the LINC student questionnaire on this matter explores this phenomenon further.

## **6. Requests for revisits to LINC rules: Canadian citizenship & childminding:**

In some focus groups, female students spoke of female friends and relatives who were not enrolled in LINC because of Canadian citizenship and childminding barriers. While only applicable to a subgroup of (potential) LINC students, such concerns constitute a major obstacle to enrollment for such students.

Acquiring Canadian citizenship is extremely problematic within the LINC program framework because childminding and Canadian citizenship are inextricably intertwined. To explain, newcomers who are Canadian citizens are not eligible for the LINC program; but are eligible for ESL and other related programs. Free childminding, however, is available only to LINC students and not to students in other programs. Therefore, newcomer parents who need childminding may enroll or stay in the LINC program only if they are not Canadian citizens. In actual practice, this a gender-related dilemma because it is mainly women, that is, the

mothers of small children, who through barriers in childminding, are denied access to study English as a result of their Canadian citizenship. Ultimately, this leads to questions of equal opportunity to study English regardless of gender.

In some focus groups, women described female relatives and friends who wanted to attend LINC classes but could not because they were already Canadian citizens and needed childminding. For example, in one focus group of 12 students, six female students reported that they had female relatives and/or friends who fit this description. In another focus group of seven students, three female students had female friends and/or relatives who fit this description. In yet another focus group, one student reported she had four female friends/relatives in this dilemma, another student said she had three female friends/relatives trapped in this dilemma, and yet another student stated she had five female friends/relatives who fit this description. This study does not provide the actual or estimated number of female newcomers (that is, mothers of young children) in the Hamilton community who do not enroll in LINC due to this dilemma, but it does suggest that the childminding / Canadian citizenship predicament appears to be an insurmountable barrier for a substantial group of women. More studies are required to explore this issue further and to quantify the extent of the problem.

The free childminding versus Canadian citizenship quandary also leads to deeper citizenship issues. For example, LINC students who are mothers of small children must choose between the opportunity to improve their English via free childminding services OR the right to vote. For them, both scenarios cannot exist simultaneously.

*“As a citizen you have rights, for example, voting which is very important. But I am waiting to become a Canadian citizen only because of the free LINC childcare. But then I don’t have the same rights as a Canadian.”* LINC student, mother of a two-year-old boy

## **7. Some requests for discrete skills classes**

To explain the difference between integrated and discrete skills classes, integrated skills classes combine the four major skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking into one class whereas in discrete skills classes, there is an emphasis on teaching one particular skill, for example, writing. In some focus groups, a large number of students requested discrete skills classes. For example, they would like to attend one class focused on writing, and then another class focused on listening, etc. LINC students may have widely varying levels of competency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and therefore some students want to be able to more accurately match a particular skill competency to the appropriate class level. By including an item in the LINC student questionnaire on this matter, this study explores this theme further.

*“My reading is LINC level 3, but my speaking is LINC level 6 – we need to have separate classes for reading, writing, listening, and speaking.”* LINC student

## **8. Dissatisfaction with the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA)**

Some students were unhappy with the CLBA. For example, in one focus group of 17 students, 10 expressed dissatisfaction with their LINC level result. They stated that the CLBA was not a test that provided an accurate reflection of their English language competency and they also complained that the assessment process at SISO was too long (3 hours) and tiring.

## **9. Requests for more school/classroom resources**

In some focus groups, students requested more classroom resources. Some LINC schools do not have enough computers and at such locations, the students stated that they would like more opportunities to learn English through computer-assisted methods. There were also requests in some focus groups for dictionaries for each student when in the classroom, and more textbooks and classroom resources in general.

## **10. Dissatisfaction with multi-level classes**

In some focus groups wherein students were in multi-level classes, some students felt that it was very difficult to improve their English, since the teacher had to juggle the competing demands of high-level learners with those of low-level learners.

## **11. Scheduling concerns**

Students attending evening classes hoped for more frequent night class availability, because at present, there are few evening classes available to them. Some students in daytime classes expressed the desire for changes to their daily class schedule, so that lunch breaks or rest breaks would be shorter, or longer, etc.

## **12. Cold weather**

Probably reflecting the fact that the focus groups were held in the snowy months of February and March, numerous students stated that when the winter weather conditions were too harsh, they would stay home and not go to their LINC class. While the cold Canadian winter may not necessarily deter them from enrolling in LINC classes, it does appear to dramatically influence attendance, a tendency corroborated by LINC teachers in the LINC Teachers Focus Groups.

From these twelve themes, the researchers identified the most frequently stated ones and then created items for a LINC student questionnaire. To summarize, focus groups, a qualitative mode of inquiry, were an excellent forum that gave LINC students the opportunity to speak about any concerns that were important to them. The next step was for the researchers to draw on the insights gained from the focus groups to create a questionnaire, a quantitative mode of inquiry, to additionally explore the experience of being a LINC student in Hamilton.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS CONTINUED

The previous paragraphs described the focus groups with LINC students. Here we present the themes that emerged from the LINC teacher focus groups.

### **(B) LINC TEACHER FOCUS GROUPS**

Nine focus groups were held with a total of 29 LINC teachers. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour and were held in meeting rooms at various LINC service provider sites. Although many topics were discussed, the following ten themes represent the most frequently-expressed concerns of LINC teachers:

#### **1. Multi-level classes**

It was widely acknowledged that teaching a multi-level LINC class is particularly challenging and not always satisfying to the students. (A multi-level class is one in which the class is composed of students with widely different levels of English fluency.) Teachers of multi-level classes often feel stressed and pulled in many directions, as they attempt to meet the learning needs of a wide range of language level abilities.

#### **2. Continuous intake**

Continuous intake is another challenge. (Continuous intake is the practice of allowing new students to enroll at any point during a term.) Teachers find it difficult to keep the attention and interest of current students while reviewing old material for newly-arrived students. Continuous intake also presents problems for following a planned curriculum.

#### **3. A changing LINC student profile**

Some LINC sites occupy a niche and cater mainly to literacy and low-level students. Certainly such a LINC service provider fills an important need. But the majority of teachers are experiencing a more educated LINC learner in comparison to the profile of LINC learners in the 1990s. Thus, they noted that LINC learners as a group are more discerning now, sometimes requesting specialized streams of study. For example, some want a more academic focus, some want a more practical focus, and yet others want a more employment-oriented focus. Thus, especially at certain sites, a number of teachers are experiencing more student demands for differentiation in the learning/teaching model. (Further research would be required to explore if and how implementing additional streams of study is feasible.)

#### **4. Issues over SISO's impartiality in advising newcomers**

Some teachers expressed concerns over impartiality at the SISO Assessment Centre. In particular, such teachers wondered if the SISO Assessment Centre is playing a neutral role when advising students how to select and where to enroll in LINC classes. Observations were made that potential LINC students were sent to SISO for an assessment, but such students did not return to the original school.

Therefore, some teachers wondered if the SISO Assessment Centre was unofficially steering LINC students to more favoured schools. Since some teachers are not confident of SISO's impartiality on this matter, more transparency in SISO Assessment Centre's practices is recommended.

#### **5. Inconvenience of SISO assessment**

For some potential LINC students, it is difficult to physically get to SISO for an assessment, especially for single mothers with young children. Transportation obstacles can loom large, and so some teachers have accompanied students on a public transit bus to show them how to get to SISO, or sometimes teachers even drive students there. Some suggestions were made for SISO to purchase a mini-bus to transport potential LINC students to SISO for assessments. At one location, it was revealed that since it is often inconvenient for a newcomer to get to SISO for an assessment, such students are sometimes classified instead as ESL students.

#### **6. CLB and LINC - Lack of awareness in the working world**

Teachers reported that students who were job-searching did not find it helpful to tell potential employers about their LINC level, because LINC levels held little or no meaning to employers. As one teacher stated, "*Make the working world aware of LINC Level 5.*" Teachers suggested that more outreach be done to the general public in order to increase awareness and understanding of LINC and CLB.

#### **7. Canadian citizenship/LINC eligibility issues**

In some locations, teachers report that newcomers do not attend LINC classes because they have already become Canadian citizens and are thus ineligible. If a woman has young children and needs free childminding and is already a Canadian citizen, she faces obvious eligibility barriers in studying English in LINC classes. In fact, at some schools, a teacher may delay reporting that a female LINC student with children in LINC childminding has recently acquired Canadian citizenship, so that such student may continue to study English for at least a few months longer. A number of LINC teachers felt sadness and guilt when they had to turn away mothers who came inquiring about enrolling in LINC classes and needed free childminding but who had already acquired Canadian citizenship.

#### **8. Students' personal Issues**

Teachers discussed the many issues that LINC students often must grapple with such as finding employment and family obligations, to name a few. Students may have experienced tragedy in their countries of origin, and may now be dealing with feelings of depression or isolation. In some cases, a spouse may not practically and/or ideologically support his partner's going out of the home to study English and so such students will not regularly attend class, or perhaps not even enroll in the first place. Teachers emphasized how their professional work requires that they have high sensitivity and dedicate significant time to the socio-emotional aspects of their students' lives.

**9. Income supplements for students**

Some teachers recommended all LINC students receive a temporary income supplement, to free them up to study English. Many students drop out of LINC classes in order to make money, and an income supplement would help relieve the financial pressures.

**10. More resources**

At certain locations, teachers need more resources such as more books or a LINC textbook, a photocopier that works, and ample and professional classroom space.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS CONTINUED**

This previous paragraphs described the focus groups with LINC students, and the focus groups with LINC teachers. Here we present the four themes that emerged from the newcomer community focus groups.

### **(C) NEWCOMER COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUPS**

Three focus groups of approximately one hour each with a total of 20 newcomers (non-LINC students) were held. For the purposes of these newcomer focus groups, newcomers were defined as persons who had arrived in Canada within the last five years. Newcomer focus groups were included in the data collection as an additional source of insights regarding newcomers' language learning needs. Two focus groups were held at SISO and one was held at another LINC service provider site. One limitation of this study is the low level of participation in newcomer focus groups. Other endeavours (CIC – InterQuest Consulting, 2006) have been more successful in attracting newcomers to focus groups, but it must be noted that newcomers in the afore-mentioned project each received \$50 as a financial incentive for focus group participation. Because of cost restrictions, this LINC study could not offer such a financial incentive to potential focus group participants, although childcare during the focus groups, refreshments and snacks, bus-tickets if needed, and SISO pens and magnets were available and offered. Therefore, future LINC research endeavours could explore ways to attract more newcomers to focus groups. In spite of the low levels of participation in the newcomer focus groups, however, important insights were still gathered. The following themes emerged the most frequently:

#### **1. More English conversation practice**

Newcomers spoke of the difficulty of having authentic opportunities to practice their English. They felt that LINC (and ESL classes) did not offer sufficient time to engage in conversational English. Some reported that they had only superficial conversations with native speakers of English (for example, the cashier at a grocery store) and wished for longer and more in-depth interpersonal exchanges so that their conversational skills could improve. A couple of former LINC students had switched to a college English language class because they felt that the instruction was more fast-paced and would better meet their needs for an academic future.

#### **2. Smaller classes**

Some newcomers spoke of the need for LINC (and ESL) classes to be smaller, so that a smaller teacher-student ratio would result in more student learning.

#### **3. Increased availability of evening classes**

Some newcomers work during the day and wished for more evening LINC classes.

#### **4. Socio-emotional concerns**

Some newcomers spoke of feelings of frustration and cultural isolation. They hoped to speak better English and to integrate more fully into Canadian society but were feeling discouraged.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS CONTINUED**

This previous paragraphs described the focus groups with LINC students, the focus groups with LINC teachers, and the focus groups with newcomers. Here we present the themes from the interviews with LINC service providers and LINC stakeholders.

### **(D) INTERVIEWS WITH LINC SERVICE PROVIDERS AND LINC STAKEHOLDERS**

Six interviews of approximately one hour were held with six LINC service providers at their school locations and three interviews of one hour were held with key LINC stakeholders at SISO and other locations. These interviews were held at the beginning of the study and their main purpose was to gather background information on the various details of the LINC program offered at their sites and to better understand their challenges and successes. Many topics were discussed but the following themes emerged the most frequently:

#### **1. The importance of outreach**

In some LINC schools, attracting students was a challenge whereas in other schools, the LINC seats were filled to the maximum number. Nonetheless, almost all LINC coordinators discussed the importance of outreach. All LINC service providers were engaged in outreach activities and were experimenting with various modes of delivery. Further research would be required to determine which outreach methods are the most effective.

#### **2. The need for a more collaborative environment**

Almost all LINC service providers and LINC stakeholders spoke, to a lesser or greater degree, of the somewhat competitive atmosphere within which LINC service providers are attempting to build their LINC programs. To explain, almost all expressed the need for more cooperation and more collegiality between the LINC service providers, since all share the common goal of assisting newcomers to learn English and integrate into Canadian society. Some commented on the vital importance of SISO representing a neutral stance on this matter. Suggestions included SISO taking a leadership role in building more trusting relationships between the LINC service providers wherein LINC-related information could be more openly shared.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS CONTINUED**

The previous paragraphs presented the findings from the focus groups with LINC students, the focus groups with LINC teachers, the focus groups with newcomers, and the interviews with LINC service providers and other stakeholders. Here the LINC student questionnaire will be analyzed.

### **(E) LINC STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

In this mixed methods study, qualitative data via focus groups and interviews was first collected to explore the experience of being a LINC student in the Hamilton area. From the focus groups and interviews, the researchers identified themes and designed an instrument that incorporated these themes. This instrument was a questionnaire for currently-enrolled LINC students, which will be discussed in this section of the report.

Before administering the LINC-student questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 21 currently-enrolled LINC students. Minor revisions were made to the questionnaire according to their suggestions. The questionnaires were administered in February and March of 2007 to currently enrolled LINC students and a total of 319 LINC student questionnaires were returned. According to the Automated Reservation System (ARS), the total number of active LINC clients (students) in Hamilton in March 2007 was a total of 897. The breakdown of the total LINC student population in Hamilton according to LINC levels is 70 Literacy students, 129 Level 1 students, 153 Level 2 students, 236 Level 3 students, 143 Level 4 students, 141 Level 5 students, 17 Level 6 students, and 8 Level 7 students. Thus, Level 3 students are the most frequent type of LINC language learner in Hamilton – a demographic fact that was mirrored in this study because the majority of respondents were Level 3 learners.

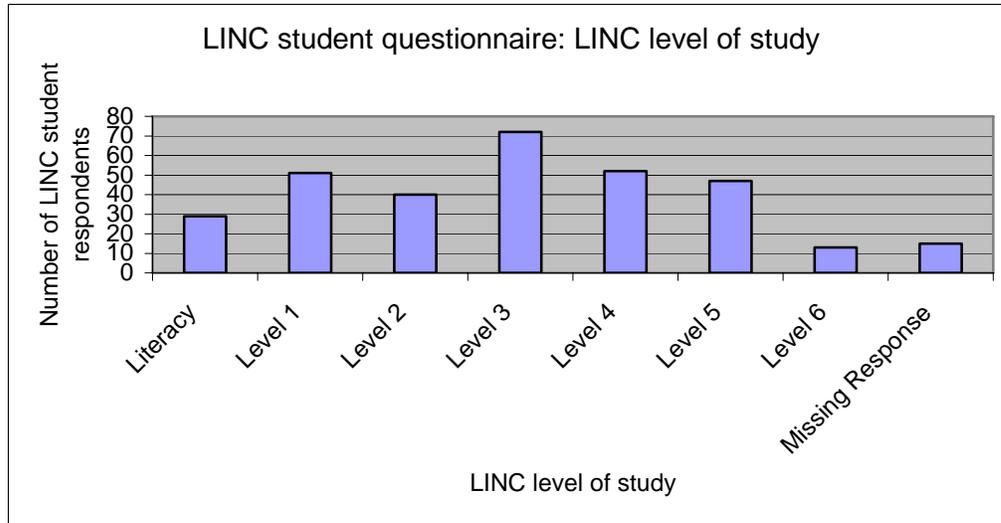
The language used in the questionnaire is basic English, but whenever needed, Literacy and LINC level 1 students were helped by their LINC teachers to understand the items. The results were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Because the sample sizes were small, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, in particular, cross-tabulations.

### **DEMOGRAPHICS OF LINC QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

Of the 319 respondents, 223 were female, 93 were male, and 3 represent missing responses. Thus, the respondents were typically female. With respect to LINC level of study, most of the respondents were LINC level 3 students (n = 72, 22.6%), followed by LINC level 4 students (n = 52, 16.3%), LINC level 1 (n = 51, 16.0%), LINC level 5 (n = 47, 14.7%), LINC level 2 (n = 40, 12.5%), Literacy (n = 29, 9.1%), and LINC level 6 (n = 13, 4.1%) with 15 (4.7%) missing responses. Considering that Level 3 students are the most frequent type of LINC student amongst the total population of LINC students in Hamilton, it is not surprising that

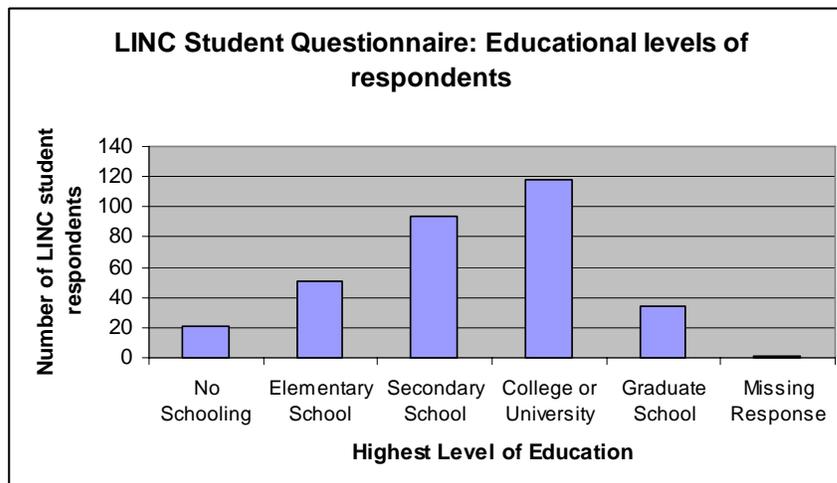
in this study, the majority of respondents were Level 3 students. Please see Chart 3.

Chart 3: Breakdown of LINC questionnaire respondents according to LINC Level



With respect to the highest level of education obtained, the majority of respondents had a college/university education (n = 118, 37%). The second most frequent category was secondary education (n = 94, 29.5%), followed by elementary school (n = 51, 16%), graduate school (n = 34, 11.7%), no schooling (n = 21, 6.6%), and 1 missing response. Please see Chart 4.

Chart 4: LINC student questionnaire respondent according to educational level



### LINC textbook:

The need for a LINC textbook was a major theme in the LINC student focus groups. Participants hoped for an instructional book/guide that would be intended specifically for studying in the LINC program and which they could take home for further review. Questionnaire results allow us to refine this theme by telling us exactly how many respondents want or do not want their own LINC textbook. Of the 309 students who answered this item (10 are missing response), an overwhelming majority, that is, 287 students, or 90%, want their own textbook. Because questionnaire results corroborate the focus group themes, it is clear that currently-enrolled students want a more structured path for their language journey, wherein their learning can be augmented by a LINC textbook. Please see Table 1.

Table 1. *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards own textbook (analyzed by aggregate)*

Textbook	Frequency	Percent %
Wants own textbook	287	90.0%
Does not want own textbook	22	6.9%
Missing response	10	3.1%
Total	319	100.0%

Interestingly, the expressed need for a LINC textbook is representative of the attitude held by the majority of LINC students regardless of their level of education. Please see Table 2. One might have predicted that students with lower levels of education may not report a high need for a LINC textbook, but a cross-tabulation of the questionnaire results show otherwise. Across all levels of education, the majority of students reported that their learning would be improved by possessing their own textbook. For example, of those students with no formal schooling and who answered the item, 18 out of 21 (1 missing response), that is, 86% want a textbook. Of those students whose highest level of schooling is elementary school and who responded to the item, 39 out of 51 (5 missing response), that is 76%, want a textbook. Of those students whose highest level of schooling is secondary school, 88 out of 94 (2 missing responses), that is 94%, want a textbook. Of those students whose highest level of education is college or university and who responded to the item, 108 out of 118 (1 missing response), that is 92%, want a textbook. Finally, of those students whose highest level of education is graduate studies, 34 out of 34 (no missing responses), that is 100%, want a textbook.

These analyses should not be interpreted to mean that LINC teachers should be restricted to only using such a textbook, but rather that LINC students feel they would benefit from such an additional resource instead of only receiving photocopies to take home. To add to the discussion on this matter, it is also worth noting that in the LINC teacher focus groups, numerous teachers similarly expressed the need for more resources from which to plan their classes, including the option of drawing teaching ideas from a LINC textbook. Please see Table 2.

Table 2: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards a textbook according to their educational levels*

Textbook	No Formal Schooling	Attended or completed elementary school	Attended or completed Secondary (High) School	Attended or completed college or university	Attended or completed graduate studies	Missing response	Total
Wants textbook	18	39	88	108	34	0	287(90%)
Does not want textbook	2	7	4	9	0	0	22 (7%)
Missing Response	1	5	2	1	0	1	10 (3%)
Total	21 (7%)	51 (16%)	94 (29%)	118 (37%)	34 (11%)	1 (0.3%)	319 (100%)*

*This data represents actual count of responses. Percentages are given for subtotals. \*Due to rounding error, total percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.*

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

The importance of a course outline was another major theme in the LINC student focus groups. Participants hoped to study English in a more step-by-step and structured manner by having some type of course outline (monthly, weekly, or possibly even daily) that would map ahead their study plan. As mentioned earlier, the researchers realize that most LINC teachers have a teaching plan, but many LINC student focus group participants were not aware of this. Questionnaire results allow us to refine this theme by telling us exactly how many respondents want or do not want a course outline. Of the 297 students who answered this item (22 are missing response), an overwhelming majority, that is, 266 students, or 83%, expressed the need for a course outline. Again, questionnaire results substantiate the focus group themes, and it is clear that currently-enrolled LINC

students want a more structured path for their language journey, wherein their learning can be directed by a course outline. Please see Table 3.

Table 3: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards a course outline*

Course Outline	Frequency	Percent %
Wants course outline	266	83.4%
Does not want course outline	31	9.7%
Missing response	22	6.9%
Total	319	100.0%

It is also noteworthy that most students across all LINC levels saw the need for a course outline. This holds especially true at the higher LINC levels. Students enrolled in Literacy, LINC 1, and LINC 2 were somewhat less likely than students enrolled in LINC 3, 4, 5, and 6 to report a need for a course outline. Nonetheless, even when taking into consideration the greater number of missing responses at the lower LINC levels, the majority of Literacy, LINC 1, and LINC 2 students want a course outline. Please see Table 4.

Table 4: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards a course outline according to LINC level*

Course Outline	Literacy	LINC 1	LINC 2	LINC 3	LINC 4	LINC 5	LINC 6	Missing response	Total response
Wants course outline	17	30	31	69	49	45	13	12	266 (83%)
Does not want course outline	8	12	6	2	0	2	0	1	31 (10%)
Missing Response	4	9	3	1	3	9	0	2	22 (7%)
Total	29 (9%)	51 (16%)	40 (13%)	72 (23%)	52 (16%)	47 (15%)	13 (4%)	15 (5%)	319 (100%)*

*This data represents actual count of responses. Percentages are given for subtotals. \* Due to rounding error, total percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.*

### Integrated versus Discrete Skills Classes:

The expressed desire for discrete skills LINC classes (wherein the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught separately, often by different teachers in different classes) was compared to the expressed desire for integrated skills LINC classes (wherein the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are taught by the same teacher in the same class). Interestingly, the number of students who prefer discrete skills classes was less than the researchers expected, given its prominence as a theme in some LINC student focus group discussions. This demonstrates the value of using a mixed methods research approach in which *both* qualitative and quantitative data are employed to better understand the research problem. In spite of spirited discussion on this issue during some LINC student focus groups, questionnaire results reveal that overall, only 21% of respondents wish for discrete skills classes. Please see Table 5.

Table 5: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards discrete skills classes versus integrated skills classes*

Type of Study	Frequency	Percent %
Wants Discrete skills class	66	20.7%
Wants Integrated skills class	232	72.7%
Wants both Discrete & Integrated Classes	8	2.5%
Missing Response	13	4.1%
Total	319	100.0%

A cross-tabulation of “level of education” with “type of study” revealed that the respondents who prefer discrete skills classes represent a cluster of students who tend to have higher levels of education. If a student wants discrete skills classes, it is likely that he/she attended college/university or graduate school. This demographic information may be useful to LINC coordinators when planning the types of courses offered. Please see Table 6 on the next page.

Table 6: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' attitudes towards discrete skills classes versus integrated skills classes according to their level of education*

Type of study	No Formal Schooling	Attended or completed Elementary School	Attended or completed secondary (high) school	Attended or completed college or university	Attended or completed graduate school	Missing Response	Total
Wants Discrete Skills classes	1	1	19	33	12	0	66 (21%)
Wants Integrated Skills classes	14	44	70	82	22	0	232(73%)
Wants both Integrated & Discrete Skills Classes	1	4	3	0	0	0	8 (3%)
Missing Response	5	2	2	3	0	1	13 (4%)
Total	21 (7%)	51 (16%)	94 (29%)	118 (37%)	34 (11%)	1 (0.3%)	319 (100%)*

*This data represents actual count of responses. Percentages are given for subtotals. \* Due to rounding error, total percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.*

## **TYPE OF ENGLISH STUDY**

As stated earlier, in some LINC student focus groups, there were varied requests for classes with a focus on academic and/or practical and/or employment themes. LINC learners are not uniform with respect to the type or the focus of English classes that they request. Questionnaire results provide the breakdown of the various groups of LINC students who prefer each type of learning focus. The majority, that is 40% of respondents, preferred a combination of both academic and practical English. Please note that respondents were deemed to have selected a combined focus, for example, academic and practical, when they checked off both options on the questionnaire. The second most popular focus was practical English only, with 19% choosing this option. Please see Table 7.

Table 7: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' preferences for type of English study*

Type of Study	Frequency	Percent %
Academic English	45	14.1%
Practical English	61	19.1%
Academic & Practical English	126	39.5%
Employment English	30	9.4%
Practical & Employment English	23	7.2%
Academic & Employment English	9	2.8%
Academic, Practical and Employment (all) English	19	6.0%
Missing response	6	1.9%
Total	319	100.0%

It is also worth taking a look at LINC students' preferences for type of English focus according to their LINC level. Not surprisingly, there is a trend for LINC students in the lower levels to prefer a practical English focus. As LINC students rise in their LINC levels, their interest in practical English diminishes but their preference increases for academic English and for a combined academic and practical English. Please see Table 8.

Table 8: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' preferences for Type of English Study according to their LINC level*

Type of Study	Literacy	Level1	Level2	Level3	Level4	Level5	Level6	Missing Response	Total
Academic English	0	2	6	10	8	10	5	4	45 (14%)
Practical English	14	14	12	16	1	0	0	4	61 (19%)
Academic & Practical English	4	10	9	31	33	29	6	4	126(39%)
Employment English	1	11	6	7	2	1	0	2	30 (9%)
Practical & Employment English	9	8	2	2	1	1	0	0	23 (7%)
Academic & Employment English	0	0	0	2	2	4	1	0	9 (3%)
Academic, Practical, & Employment (all) English	1	2	4	4	4	2	1	1	19 (6%)
Missing Response	0	4	1	0	1	0	0	0	6 (2%)
Total	29 (9%)	51 (16%)	40 (13%)	72 (23%)	52 (16%)	47 (15%)	13 (4%)	15 (5%)	319 (100%)*

*This data represents actual count of responses. Percentages are given for subtotals. \* Due to rounding error, total percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.*

There were no dramatic differences between the genders with respect to desire for a textbook, desire for course outline, preference of discrete skills versus integrated skills classes, nor the type of English study. Here is a cross-tabulation of gender and type of English language study that shows both sexes prefer a combined approach focusing on academic and practical English. Considering that there were 223 female respondents compared to only 93 male respondents, however, a slightly greater proportion of the male respondents (compared to the proportion of female respondents) preferred an employment focus. Please see Table 9.

Table 9: *Currently-enrolled LINC students' preferences for type of English study according to gender*

Type of Study	Male	Female	Missing response	Total
Academic English	13	31	1	45 (14%)
Practical English	14	47	0	61 (19%)
Academic & Practical English	33	92	1	126 (39%)
Employment English	13	17	0	30 (9%)
Practical & Employment English	10	13	0	23 (7%)
Academic and Employment English	5	4	0	9 (3%)
Academic, Practical & Employment (all) English	4	15	0	19 (6%)
Missing response	1	4	1	6 (2%)
Total	93 (29%)	223 (70%)	3 (1%)	319 (100%)*

*This data represents actual count of responses. Percentages are given for subtotals. \* Due to rounding error, total percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.*

## Summary of LINC Student questionnaire results

1. Ninety-percent of the currently-enrolled LINC students who answered this item on the questionnaire want their own copy of a LINC textbook to assist them in their language learning. Analyzing the data at an aggregate level, the desire for a textbook is predominant for all LINC students across all levels of educational background.
2. Eighty-three percent of respondents who answered this item want a course outline and this is especially true for LINC students who are enrolled in LINC levels 3, 4, 5, and 6.
3. Although discrete skills emerged as a theme in the LINC student focus groups, questionnaire results revealed that in fact, only 21% of LINC students who responded to this item, prefer discrete skills classes over integrated skills classes or over both discrete and integrated skills classes. Those who desire discrete skills classes represent a cluster of students who are more likely to have a higher level of educational background such as college/university or graduate studies.
4. The most popular focus for type of English language study was a combined academic and practical focus, with 40% of students choosing this option, followed by a practical focus only, with 19% choosing this latter option. LINC students in lower levels were more likely to prefer a practical English focus, but as LINC levels rise, interest increased in academic English or a combined academic and practical English focus. However, LINC students are a heterogeneous group with respect to their preferences for type of study. This widespread diversity in LINC students' preferences for teaching focus poses challenges for those who plan LINC programs of study.
5. There were no outstanding differences in the data between the genders regarding LINC textbook, course outline, discrete versus integrated skills classes, and type of study.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The majority of currently-enrolled LINC students who participated in the focus groups reported that they were generally satisfied with their LINC learning experience but had suggestions for improvement.
- Currently-enrolled LINC students, across all LINC levels and educational levels, want their own copy of a LINC textbook for home review, instead of only receiving photocopies. This does not mean that LINC teachers would be required to only use such a LINC textbook, but rather that teachers could use such a textbook to enhance their teaching. Further research would be required to determine the content and feasibility of the textbook.
- Currently-enrolled LINC students, across all LINC levels and educational levels, want to be regularly given a course outline which gives them the monthly/weekly, possibly even daily, plan of study.
- For those who coordinate/plan LINC programs, it may be helpful information to know that the most popular focus of study is a combination of both academic and practical English (chosen by 40% of LINC questionnaire respondents) and the second most popular focus was practical English only, with 19% choosing this option. As LINC students rise in their LINC levels, their interest in practical English diminishes but their preference increases for academic English and for a combined academic and practical English. However, a caveat must be issued because LINC students are not a homogeneous group; rather, there is widespread diversity in their reported preferences for type of English study (for example, academic, practical, employment orientations).
- Although there are Literacy and low level LINC learners, the profile of the typical LINC student has changed over the years towards a more educated learner, some of whom are asking for more differentiation in the teaching/learning model and for specialized streams of study.
- The majority of currently enrolled LINC students want integrated skills classes (wherein reading, writing, listening, speaking are taught in one class by the same teacher) but approximately 21% of such students prefer a discrete skills class (wherein the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking are taught separately by different teachers). Students preferring discrete skills classes tend to have a college/university or graduate studies background. Some LINC service providers can explore the feasibility of offering discrete skills classes for the cluster of more highly educated LINC students expressing a desire for this type of class.

- LINC eligibility rules regarding Canadian citizenship are forcing mothers with small children to choose between becoming Canadians or attending LINC classes with free childminding. LINC eligibility rules must be revisited from a gender-sensitive perspective that acknowledges the unique challenges facing female newcomers.
- All LINC service providers are currently involved in outreach. Multilingual, culturally-sensitive persons in an outreach capacity is one possibility but further studies could determine the most effective delivery model. In the ARS telephone survey, with respect to how participants learned about LINC, for both genders, “family and friends” was the most frequently-cited source of information, followed by SISO. This finding may be a starting point for future studies on best practices for LINC outreach.
- The SISO Assessment Centre may need to explore ways to increase transparency with respect to its role in assisting students in their selection of LINC schools.
- There is a need to build more open and collaborative working relationships between the LINC service providers. Suggestions include SISO taking a leadership role in this regard.
- Transportation to SISO for an assessment is an obstacle for some newcomers that should be explored and addressed.
- The majority of currently-enrolled LINC students speak warmly of the important role played by their teacher(s) in their language learning. This research drew upon LINC teachers’ insights but was not an evaluation of teachers’ performance in the classroom nor was it an evaluation of LINC service providers vis-a-vis whether LINC teachers are receiving adequate support to teach at their best. Nonetheless, this study revealed that LINC teachers are facing many challenges including continuous intake, multi-level classes, a changing LINC student profile, and in some cases, insufficient resources, to name a few. Future research could explore how Citizenship and Immigration Canada, SISO, and LINC service providers can further help, guide and support LINC teachers in their professional lives.
- Perhaps Hamilton Public Library’s success (with the individual tutoring LINC model using volunteer teachers) could be repeated in other parts of the province. Interested LINC stakeholders could explore this possibility.
- LINC students have unique individual needs (both academic and personal) and are facing many socio-emotional challenges as they settle and integrate into Canadian society. Therefore, the possibility of offering support services and/or counseling services to LINC students and/or of

increasing LINC students' awareness of how to better access such services could also be explored.

- The general public needs to be educated on LINC and CLB so that potential employers can recognize the value of newcomers having achieved certain LINC levels.
- Further research with higher participation in newcomer focus groups, is recommended, to see what, if any additional insights can be gained.
- In the LINC student focus groups, family obligations and financial/work concerns were frequently cited barriers to accessing LINC programs. Thus, as was suggested by LINC teachers in some teacher focus groups, the possibility of more LINC students receiving income supplements could be explored
- Using this study as a springboard, it may be worth doing comparative research around different types of English classes, such as College, Coop, ESL credit, etc. Perhaps each of these other types of English classes simply cater to different niches of the English learner market by offering, say, more academic or more employment focused themes, etc. Or perhaps an in-depth comparison of the LINC program with some of the above English language programs would suggest some possible ideas for future LINC curriculum reform. Since this research focused mainly on the Hamilton LINC experience and was not a comparative study that additionally investigated other English language programs, this study cannot answer such questions, but it does point to directions for further inquiry using comparative research methodologies.
- Future decisions involving LINC such as eligibility rules, curriculum reform, or further research should continue to place emphasis on newcomers' insights and perspectives.

In keeping with this final recommendation, it is fitting to end this report with Hamilton LINC students' voices, capturing both frustration and hope.

*"I'm lucky I have a car so I can drive to the night class after work, but many people are not so lucky. But I have a plan and next year I'm going to study in college and get my engineering certificate."* LINC student

*"I want to learn better English, and get a job, and help my kids in school. It is difficult but every morning I get up early to do the housework and I go out in the cold when it's still dark. And then I wait for the bus and I come to class here. And then I go home and take care of my family and I'm so tired by the end of the day."* LINC student

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## APPENDICES

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)  
LINC RESEARCH STUDY 2007  
INTERVIEWS WITH LINC SERVICE PROVIDERS

January/February 2007

First of all, we would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. The purpose of this introductory meeting is to help us to better understand the educational environment of the LINC program at your school/centre. At this stage, we are exploring ideas as to how to best conduct the research and we are open to any suggestions that you may have regarding the LINC program and about our research endeavour. Our conversation today will be fluid and evolving, but the following questions are a good starting point:

1. Please tell us about your school/centre and the services/classes it offers.
2. From your experience, what are some of challenges facing your school/centre in providing LINC classes?
3. From your experience, what success(es) has your school/centre had in providing LINC classes?
4. From your experience, what are some of the language learning needs of your students?
5. From your experience, what are some of the reasons that students drop out or switch schools?
6. Could you kindly give us some suggestions for convenient days and times to hold focus groups/interviews with your language learners, and focus groups/interviews with your LINC teachers?

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have any questions, ideas, or suggestions. Thank you again for your time.

Bhupinder S. Gill, M. Ed., SISO LINC Researcher, [bgill@siso-ham.org](mailto:bgill@siso-ham.org)  
and Louise Gormley, Ph.D., SISO LINC Researcher, [lgormley@siso-ham.org](mailto:lgormley@siso-ham.org)  
Tel 905-578-9270

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)  
LINC RESEARCH STUDY 2007  
FOCUS GROUPS WITH LINC TEACHERS

First of all, we would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. The purpose of today's focus group is to help us to better understand the language learning needs of your LINC students, and the barriers they face in accessing the LINC program in Hamilton. Your experience as a LINC teacher and your understanding of the educational environment of the LINC program at your school/center will provide us with valuable insights.

We welcome any ideas, thoughts or suggestions that you may have regarding the LINC program and about our research endeavour. Our conversation today will be fluid and evolving, but the following questions are a good starting point:

1. From your experience as a LINC teacher, what are some of the language learning needs of your students?
2. From your experience as a LINC teacher, what are some of the challenges facing your school/center in providing LINC classes?
3. From your experience as a LINC teacher, what are some of the reasons that students do not enroll in LINC classes or drop out or switch schools?

We are very grateful for your time. Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have any questions, ideas, or suggestions.

Thank you again.

Bhupinder S. Gill, M. Ed., SISO LINC Researcher, [bgill@siso-ham.org](mailto:bgill@siso-ham.org)  
and Louise Gormley, Ph.D., SISO LINC Researcher, [lgormley@siso-ham.org](mailto:lgormley@siso-ham.org)  
Tel 905-578-9270

Are you a newcomer to Hamilton?  
We need your help.

Focus Group (meeting)  
Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)

You are invited to discuss language learner needs and the challenges facing learners. Your ideas and suggestions will help us to understand the issues that language learners face in Hamilton.

All are welcome!

Men

Youth

Seniors

Women



Wednesday, March 14, 2007 4-5 PM

at

Settlement and Integration Service Organization (SISO)

Liuna Station 360 James St. North Hamilton

Refreshments will be served

For more information please contact:

Bhupinder S. Gill, B.A. TESL Cert., M.Ed., [bgill@siso-ham.org](mailto:bgill@siso-ham.org) or 905-578-9270

Louise Gormley, TESL Cert., Ph.D., [lgormley@siso-ham.org](mailto:lgormley@siso-ham.org) or 905-578-9270

Funding for this study provided by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)  
LINC RESEARCH STUDY 2007  
Questionnaire for LINC students

Dear Newcomer:

Thank you for volunteering to fill out this questionnaire. We are conducting a study exploring LINC language learner needs and the challenges facing them in the Hamilton area. We are asking for your help because newcomers are a source of rich information.

You do not have to fill out this questionnaire if you do not want to. We do not need your name. Your questionnaire will be kept confidential. Your responses will be combined with the responses of other newcomers and you will not be identified.

The LINC program in Hamilton offers free English language classes to adult permanent residents and some types of refugees.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please do not hesitate to ask us by telephone at 905-578-9270 or by email.

We thank you for your thoughts and ideas.

Sincerely,

Bhupinder S. Gill, B. A., TESL Certificate, M.Ed. [bgill@siso-ham.org](mailto:bgill@siso-ham.org)  
Louise Gormley, TESL Certificate, Ph.D. [lgormley@siso-ham.org](mailto:lgormley@siso-ham.org)

Funding for this study provided by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)  
RESEARCH 2007 - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LINC STUDENTS

Thank you for volunteering to fill out this questionnaire.  
Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you \_\_\_\_\_ male \_\_\_\_\_ female?
2. What level are you? \_\_\_\_\_ LINC class level
3. In your home country, what was your highest level of education?  
\_\_\_\_\_ None  
\_\_\_\_\_ Elementary/Primary School (Grades 1 to 8)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Secondary/High School (Grades 9 to 12)  
\_\_\_\_\_ College or University  
\_\_\_\_\_ Graduate Degree (Masters, Ph.D.)
4. What type of English do you want to learn?  
\_\_\_\_\_ academic English (for college or university)?  
\_\_\_\_\_ practical English (shopping, doctors visits)?  
\_\_\_\_\_ both academic and practical English?  
\_\_\_\_\_ employment English
5. How do you like to learn English?  
\_\_\_\_\_ a Listening Class (1 hour), a Reading Class (1 hour), etc?  
\_\_\_\_\_ listening, speaking, reading, writing skills in the same class?
6. Would a LINC textbook help you to learn English?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
7. Would a LINC course outline (plan of study) help you to learn English?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
8. Do you have any suggestions or comments about learning English?

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Thank you very much for your help!