

Summary

Skills in an official language (English or French) significantly affect the economic integration of Canada's immigrants, including their employment levels and incomes. Official-language skills also have an impact on how well immigrants integrate socially in their workplaces and communities. In this study, Tracey Derwing and Erin Waugh examine the relationship between official-language knowledge and the social integration of adult immigrants to Canada.

The authors review a range of research findings, including those from a recent Citizenship and Immigration Canada study of the English-language proficiency levels of 3,827 immigrants, whose speaking and listening skills were assessed at the time of their citizenship test (the average time spent in Canada at the time of testing was six years). One notable finding was the low scores of Mandarin and Cantonese speakers, the majority of whom had entered the country through the independent immigration class.

Derwing and Waugh also report data from a seven-year longitudinal study of two groups of newcomers, one composed of Mandarin speakers and the other of Slavic-language (Russian, Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian) speakers. The participants in this study were recent arrivals at their first testing in year one; all were enrolled in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada classes. They were assessed at the end of their second year in Canada and at the seven-year point. The research found that the Mandarin speakers, faced considerably more linguistic and cultural challenges than the Slavic-language speakers and that current approaches to language training do not necessarily help immigrants develop the "soft skills" they need to find employment and integrate successfully into the workplace.

The authors conclude that although language proficiency is important, so are pragmatic skills and opportunities to interact with those who speak English or French. In particular, lack of proficiency in an official language combined with inadequate access to cultural knowledge can lead to limited opportunities for immigrants to fully participate in Canadian society. Derwing and Waugh make a number of policy recommendations, including expanding eligibility for language training funded by the federal government and increasing the focus on oral language ability and pragmatics; expanding the Community Connections program administered by Citizenship and Immigration Canada so that more immigrants can benefit from informal dialogue and networking experiences; involving immigrant parents in school district activities to promote social integration; sharing lessons from successful social integration activities among the various orders of government, Local Immigration Partnerships and others; and developing awareness-raising activities for native-born Canadians, some of whom hesitate to engage in conversation with those whose mother tongue is not English or French.