

CASE ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE FOR YOUNG ADULTS PROGRAM:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LANGUAGE, SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF REFUGEE YOUTH



Principal Investigator: Christine Doe, MSVU

Co-Investigator: Krista Ritchie, MSVU

Collaborators: Erin McDonald (LENS); Carol Derby (ISANS), and Alicia Couto (ISANS)



OVERVIEW

The goal of this study was to understand how social and emotional factors shape and inform language learning experiences from the student perspective. This qualitative exploratory study interviewed 21 newcomer youth and young adults (ages 16-29) during the summer in an intensive language learning program.

Key findings related to the youths' developmental trajectory mapping onto their adolescence and early adult years impacting how they expressed and pursued their present and future aspirations. The youth emphasized the importance of a comfortable learning context, facilitated through kindness from teacher and student relationships. The youth recognized supportive feedback as essential when practicing their language skills.

BACKGROUND

For youth, their experiences and the mechanisms involved in attaining their objectives are of utmost importance for both their current and future well-being. Agency, skill, and relatedness are essential psychological components that are necessary for happiness and a desire to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, Ryan & Deci, 2000b). In the Canadian setting, the likelihood of satisfying social requirements and achieving meaningful integration into larger communities is enhanced when individuals possess linguistic proficiency in one of the official languages.

The present research investigates the learning requirements of newcomer youth participating in a language learning program centred on settlement, as seen from their own standpoint. For newcomers, learning English is a tool for them to achieve their goals.

For this study, we adopted a positive psychology perspective to investigate how newcomer youth and young adults navigate the two educational systems in Canada: adult language learning and/or the K-12 system.

The Bachman and Palmer framework (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010) is one of the main theoretical approaches for language constructs in defining curricula and tests worldwide. In Canada, the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) serve as the key benchmarks for adult language ability in Canada, guiding language instruction for newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes (Government of Canada, 2018).



In K-12 education, the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Cummins & Swain, 1986; Cummins, 1981, 1984) is a predominant language model, highlighting the importance of literacy-related concepts learned in another language. The CUP is fundamental for understanding how students learn academic language, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), over social, conversational language, the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1984).

Positive psychology, rooted in Western approaches, aims to understand routine and optimal human development, experience, and functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It focuses on understanding how people develop and learn in complex social contexts. This study explores the perspectives of newcomer youth on language learning experiences across K-12 and adult educational contexts from a positive psychology perspective.

Self-determination theory highlights the role of basic psychological needs in motivating students to learn a new language. These needs include relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Learning a new language is deeply personal, and newcomer youth often feel vulnerable in a new place without peer relationships. The PERMA and PERMA+4 model (Cabrera & Donaldson, 2023); Seligman, 2018), which emphasizes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement, is consistent with Self-determination theory.

Research Questions asked:

- (1) how newcomers' previous educational experiences and motivations influence engagement in a language program offered through an immigrant settlement organization, and
- (2) what learners need to achieve their personal goals.





METHODS

A total of 21 newcomer youth participated in individual and focus group interviews after they had completed 50% or more of the summer portion of the language program. See the table below for a summary about the study participants.

The research used a deductive approach for data analysis (Saldaña, 2020). Each theme identified in the data was further elucidated by using direct quotations, therefore prioritizing the voices of the study participants.

Participants	Age	Immigration Status	Months in Canada	Home Languages	Education in Canada
21	16-29	15 - Refugee; 4 Immigrants; 1 international student; 1 Canadian Citizen	1-48	Afan Oromo, Arabic, Dari, Korean, Mandarin, Persian, Serbian, Spanish, Somalia, and Tigrinya	High School, Workshops

FINDINGS

The most profound pattern that emerged from the data related to the developmental trajectory of the participants from ages 16 to 19. Young adults exhibited a higher level of educational achievement and more clearly defined life objectives in comparison to the teenagers (adolescents), who seemed to prioritize peer-group friendship above all else.



“Now the most important thing is that I have will power “

Here, no one supported me, I support myself by myself, I have a strong will to learn

Deliberate practice for variability with actionable feedback was also mentioned outside formal learning settings, such as community assistance in correcting pronunciation. For the youth, however, the rapport and relationships they established with the teacher and peers was more important than feedback. Overall, the program the youth studied in aimed to provide a more inclusive and effective learning environment for students.

“The most important thing for me was the way I was treated, it made very comfortable, the welcoming was very nice”



“There was a time at school where I stopped attending, I pretended to come to school but I stopped coming, I started getting out of classes, again because of the language “

“So that’s what annoyed me, is that time was lost, I felt that a lot of time was wasted”

While the students were able to report positive and supportive learning experiences, the youth also narrated times when they felt isolated, lost or that attending school was a ‘waste of time’.

According to the youth, the curriculum and the instruction was out of reach and unattainable based on their level of English language skills.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- The research revealed that the personal characteristics of newcomer youth, such as their progression into adulthood and experience of positive emotions, had a substantial impact on their language learning experiences.
- It was clear the learning context was essential for newcomer youth to establish a safe and comfortable place for them to be able to feel vulnerable while learning.
- Facilitating regular and meaningful interactions between learners and the wider community may aid in the development of their language skills, as it actively involves them in the communities they want to join.
- In order to foster advancements in the field, it is imperative that future research prioritize the promotion of enhanced collaborative and interdisciplinary methodologies for the formulation of questions that best support the organizations.

REFERENCES

- Cabrera, V. & Donaldson, S. I. (2023). PERMA to PERMA+4 building blocks of well-being: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2023.2208099>
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: a theoretical framework* (pp. 3–49). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center.
- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J., & Swain, M. (1986). Linguistic interdependence: A central principle of bilingual education. In J. Cummins & M. Swain (Eds.), *Bilingualism in education* (pp. 80-95). New York: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Saldaña, J. (2020). Qualitative data analysis strategies. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 876-911). Oxford Handbooks.
- Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L. (2000a). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54-67. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L., (2000b). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Seligman, m. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: an introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5 – 14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>
- Seligman, M. (2018). PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 13(4), 333-335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1437466>