

**CULTURAL CONNECTIONS INSTITUTE –
THE LEARNING EXCHANGE**

Language Training Programs 2005-2006

Public Report

The Learning Exchange:

Enhancing Communication Skills

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PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Learning Exchange Program (LEX) is an innovative program funded by Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) which addresses the language learning needs of ESL learners in Edmonton. The project objective is to deliver an open access program for ESL learners ineligible for LINC or other ESL programs and unable to access responsive programming at a time and cost that match their needs. Along with language services, a further LEX objective is to provide a valuable focus for community development. As its name implies, this program provides an environment in which an exchange of learning can take place between ESL learners and volunteer teachers. LEX attracts volunteers who are looking for the opportunity to engage in the dynamic, multicultural community represented in Edmonton.

LEX presents a unique ESL delivery model in that it is the only full-time volunteer-based program of its kind in Edmonton. The LEX program runs entirely on volunteers working under the guidance, supervision and support of an ESL professional. Another unique and vital aspect contributing to the success of the LEX Program is its working relationship with Catholic Social Services – Community and Immigration Service, an organization that recruits volunteer tutors and supports programming directed toward integrating newcomers into the community. CSS acts as a referral center to LEX, recruits, screens and participates in the orientation, training, recognition and management of volunteers, and provides follow up and support services to LEX students on an as needed basis. A final unique and important component of the LEX program is its ongoing enrollment. Since the program operates on a drop-in basis, students may enter, exit and, if they so choose, re-enter the program according to their needs. This open access approach is intended to remove barriers to learning which newcomers often encounter as they struggle to deal with issues of language, resettlement, employment, childcare, family obligations, etc.

Volunteers and students alike who participate in the LEX program gain valuable skills and experience which can then be applied outside the classroom to enhance the quality of their personal and professional lives. The ability to contribute to and participate in Canadian society in a meaningful and productive way is the ultimate intended outcome for all those involved in the Learning Exchange.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

In the Project year 2005/2006, LEX offered, in addition to literacy, three levels of ESL instruction to newcomers:

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced

Students included landed immigrants, Canadian Citizens and refugees who were ineligible for LINC because they have exhausted their LINC hours or because they have become Canadian Citizens, those whose language skills, according to the CLB assessment, exceeded the scope of the LINC program, and those who were on waiting lists to enter LINC programs. LEX learners included a wide range of individuals including those with multiple barriers such as low levels of L1 and L2 literacy, low levels of formal education, limited employability skills, limited income, difficulty in entering the labor market in the profession in which they were trained, and those with lifestyle challenges such as seniors, parents with childcare responsibilities, and learners who are combining work and study.

Volunteer tutors taught all of the LEX classes. Thirty one new volunteers received orientation and training. All volunteers (new and continuing) received instructional support during the year both through the provision of workshops and through one-on-one consultation. Special AHRE funding was used to hold a conference for all volunteer ESL tutors in the Edmonton area. A number of agencies worked in cooperation with LEX to provide a full day of sessions designed to increase the skills and knowledge of this dedicated group of volunteers. LEX has a collection of resource materials to support the programs it offers. This collection has been used by the volunteer tutors to prepare lessons, research teaching methods, and provide variety to their instruction. Thanks to special funding from AHRE, a staff member was contracted so that a backlog of new items was reviewed for content and level, labeled, shelved and entered into the computer database.

Classes were offered Monday to Thursday, 9 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. One continuing challenge has been meeting the needs of pre-benchmark level literacy learners with no or low L1 literacy. Special ECALA funding allowed us to introduce in 2004-2005 eight hours a week of literacy instruction and in 2005-2006, this was increased to 14 hours a week. LEX funding was used to provide administrative and management support for this program. This includes the costs of supplies, photocopying, materials, staff time in maintaining student records, and overall management support.

The Learning Exchange served 320 individual students in 2005-2006. This included 141 men and 179 women in attendance. At various times throughout the year, there were waiting lists when classes were filled beyond capacity. Students originated from 57 countries. The top ten countries of origin were: China, Afghanistan, Russia, Colombia, Korea, Iran, Mexico, Ethiopia, Vietnam and Sudan.

The distribution of language proficiency among students attending daily was as follows:

Beginner = an average of 20 learners
Intermediate = an average of 20 learners
Advanced = an average of 20 learners

Students were placed in the LEX program according to the following chart:

LEX Level	CLB Level
Beginner	Pre-benchmark-2
Intermediate	3-5
Advanced	6-8

CCI-LEX was able to dedicate a newly renovated classroom as a computer room. Thanks to special funding from AHRE, LEX now has 8 microcomputers in this room for all levels of LEX students and teachers to use in the future. With the introduction of multimedia computer-based instruction, students will be able to set their own pace of learning, self-select the areas of language development which need special attention, and self-test for immediate feedback on their success.

LEARNER OUTCOMES

Learners, on average, progressed one benchmark level per three months of study. Since many of our learners remained in the program less than three months, they would not have had the opportunity to progress from one level to the next by the time they exited our program. This progression rate varied, as would be expected, depending on learners' skill levels upon program entry, educational background, L1 and L2 literacy levels, etc. As LEX operates as a drop-in program, attendance in the program varies which also greatly affects the rate at which students progress. Many learners are combining work and study or have other commitments such as childcare which prevent them from attending on a regular full-time basis. Measurement of learner outcomes took place through both formal and informal assessment methods. In class tests, assignments and quizzes were given regularly. Learners were willing to work hard and to put in the extra time in order to develop their skills and achieve desired results, such as employment or entrance into an academic program, more quickly. The New Interchange series continued to be used in all classes on a regular basis. Learners received review tests every four units, a mid-term test and a final test. A student satisfaction survey was conducted.

Feedback from learners indicated that the aspects of the LEX program which are most valued and of greatest help to learners in their struggle to develop second language competency are the quality of the lessons delivered by the volunteer teachers, the variety of teachers and teaching methods learners are exposed to, the professional yet friendly learning environment provided, and the flexibility of our programming. The credit for providing such an exceptional classroom atmosphere and for the high quality work that is accomplished within this program goes to the volunteers and students who are always so willing to do their personal best and who are so supportive of one another.

Special Project:

AHRE provided special funding for LEX to provide consultation and other services to the Calgary Immigrant Educational Society (CIES), which offers services similar to those of LEX. A needs assessment was conducted with CIES to determine the areas in which they would benefit from our experience. An identified need and interest was in the area of resources and materials. To this end, instructional and teacher support materials were purchased for CIES staff and volunteer tutors to use.

Conclusion:

There has been a lot of effort put into fostering a positive work and learning environment for all those who enter the doors of CCI-LEX and the fruit of that labor is evident in the satisfaction and success of our learners and program staff. A key element in the continued success of our program has been the development of solid relationships: between LEX and CSS as well as other immigrant serving agencies, between LEX and ECALA, PALS, etc., between program staff and volunteers, between board members and volunteers, between volunteers and learners, between volunteers and between learners themselves. We welcome anyone who would like to join us in the very important work that is being done as part of the Learning Exchange program. LEX's role as a provider of essential skills and services is a mainstay in Edmonton which strengthens the fabric of not only individual lives but the lives of our local and global communities as well.