

**ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE:
COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL BARRIERS OF HIGHLY QUALIFIED
IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, CANADA**

by

Lei Wang

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of**

Master of Education

**Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba**

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Dedication

To my mom, and my dear Daddy, I love you both so much

&

To all those who have come in search of a better life for themselves and their families

Abstract

Immigrants have been recruited to Canada for their societal and economic importance. Yet it is well documented that skilled workers encounter many barriers re-entering their internationally trained fields in Canada. Among others, the communication and cultural barriers, although recognized as major ones, have more often been mentioned than studied in depth. A case study has been designed to explore this topic from the re-entry experiences of six immigrant professionals in three different fields: engineering, medicine, and banking. This study also examined the professional language re-socialization support provided by a new type of higher-level, occupational specific language training program (Enhanced Language Training) in the three mentioned professional fields.

Chapter One

Literature Review of Selected Topic

Introduction

When I first arrived in Canada, I met an immigrant from Turkey at a restaurant in which he worked at the time who was in possession of both a bachelor's degree in economics from a university in Russia, and a diploma in early childhood education from Turkey. Despite his education, he had to take a survival job as a baker in a restaurant, where he has been working for the past 10 years. I do not know his entire story, but one question has resurfaced repeatedly since I met him: Why is he not working in his profession? He could have achieved so much more!

I've since met many more people with similar situations. I met a brilliant man with a Master's degree who held an upper management position in his home country. Now, in Canada, he was demonstrating products in a grocery store. I met another man who worked as a senior mechanical engineer in China for 20 years before arriving in Canada; now he washes dishes in a Chinese restaurant. The more people I encounter in these circumstances, the more clearly I recognize the Turkish economist/baker's situation is a common social problem rather than a single sad story of a man's bad luck. Why couldn't these people find employment in the fields for which they were trained? Why couldn't they achieve as they had at home? What are the barriers they face? As a person who works in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), I could not help but wonder if language plays a part.

Although I have not been in the same situation as those immigrants, as a second language speaker myself, I know how hard it can be trying to integrate into a new society.

I studied English in China since the seventh grade. After I earned my bachelor's degree in China, majoring in English and education, I became an EFL teacher. I passed TOEFL with just less than full marks, and GRE with a high score as well. Yet, no matter how proficient my English was considered in China, it was not good enough here. Almost everything was different. I had to live and struggle to learn in two communities: my partner's social circle, (himself, his family and friends all native English speakers) and the local Canadian academic community of TESOL. Neither community was familiar to me. As an outsider, I see these two communities very differently. For me, entering both proved challenging.

I realize that to fit in and be recognized as a community member, I have to exhibit the expected and appropriate behaviours common and normal to that community. It is those expected behaviours that are the most difficult to learn, for you can find little guidance from textbooks. For example, I arranged to go on a shopping trip with a local woman. The initial excitement soon soured when we both realized we had no idea of how to interact with each other or what to talk about. I remember trying hard to think of something to say; then when I finally said something, she responded briefly and we both went quiet again. The rest of the trip became nothing but awkward and embarrassing. That is when I realized that in order to function in a new society, speaking the new language, important and difficult as it is, is insufficient to guarantee success. Indeed, much more has to be learned than language. I relived my childhood again, observing and learning the different rules of the locals, trying to match my conduct to theirs so I would be accepted as a member in all different contexts. I had to learn their ways of talking, their logic of thinking, their sense of humor, and even their dress code.

No matter how challenging my experiences, they have only affected my life to the point where I have occasionally felt shut out as an outsider. As yet, my difficulties have had no direct influence on my employment as I am still in the process of completing my Master's program. In contrast, for many immigrant professionals, barriers to employment can present major obstacles. Could language skills and the lack of sociocultural knowledge in any way affect their re-entry into their professions? More importantly, if so, then how? Through investigating the way language and cultural competence interact and affect immigrants' abilities to access their professions in Canada, we can gain better insight and understanding into their language and cultural needs.

Social and Economic Significance of Immigrants

In Canada, immigration has long been acknowledged as a means to mitigate problems brought about by economic and demographic trends. Blair (2003) writes that as Canada is now facing both a declining birthrate and an aging population, the country will depend on "continued immigration to support the shrinking population, to grow the labour force, and to maintain economic sustainability" (Internet source). Blair notes that in the 21st century, Canada's "knowledge-based" economy relies heavily on skilled labour, which its own population cannot supply. Thus, Canada looks beyond its borders to recruit those with the skills it most needs. In addition, the aging population implies higher workforce attrition rates than ever before. According to Dolin and Young (2004), using a 2001 Statistics Canada census, there was a 36 percent increase in the work-age population between the ages of 45 and 64 from 1991 to 2001. They also note that within the next four to nine years, the 10 million-strong baby boomer generation will be entering retirement. Immigration, therefore, has already played an important role in coping with

the corresponding pressures. A 2002 HRDC report reveals that more than 70 percent of the net growth in the labour force was attributed to immigration to Canada. Of the 608,000 individuals added to work force between 1991 and 1996, 431,000 were immigrants. The report further predicts that by 2011, immigrants will constitute 100 percent of net labour force growth, and 100 percent of net population growth by 2031.

Among all classes of immigrants (Skilled Workers, Business, Family, and Refugees)¹, the skilled workers/economic or independent class of immigrant was already the focus of immigration policy as early as 1999. As Brouwer (1999) reported, skilled workers were the “largest single group of immigrants” (p. 3) among all classes of immigrants. Using the statistics of Citizenship and Immigration Canada 1999, Brouwer pointed out that nearly half of the permanent residents were skilled workers/independent immigrants, totalling 81,146 out of 174,100. By 2002, this proportion grew to almost 70% of all immigration (Alboim, 2002). According to Reitz (2005), this immigration trend fits into the historical government policies in response to Canadian economic development. Unskilled labourers were recruited when agriculture was the economic priority. In response to the industrialization of Canada’s economy, immigrants were recruited for manufacturing and construction. As the economy now shifts towards a “postindustrial or knowledge economy” (p.5), the immigration policies has begun to focus on skilled workers.

The skilled worker category of immigrant is accepted into Canada for their high credentials in certain fields, their working experiences, and their level of training and language abilities. They are granted points for possessing different attributes, and when

¹ Skilled worker class is also referred to as Economic or Independent immigrants. They are further divided into professionals and skilled trades people.

they exceed a minimum number of points, they qualify for a visa. According to JobStart and Skills for Change (2001), the point system is built on “an occupational demand model” (p. 26) that can be traced back to 1967. The number of points an applicant receives in each of the categories depends on how valuable Canada determines their skills to be at the time. Those with skills and experience in high-demand areas are granted more points than those whose skills are already in high supply. Brouwer (1999) pointed out that they have to get at least 70 points to be considered. Since then, there has been some policy alteration reflecting new trends in the Canadian labour market. For example, the current pass mark has been reduced from 75 to 67 (Citizenship and Immigration, 2005).

Major strains are placed on certain sectors of the labour market from the “brain drain” phenomenon, whereby highly trained Canadians are lured out of Canada by superior salaries or growth opportunities. Torjman (2000) mentioned that each year about 10,000 highly skilled workers leave Canada for the U.S. and a similar amount leave for other parts of the world. Immigration to Canada then can be seen as a means of balancing the net outflow of talent. According to Murray (2000), “In the highly qualified sector, we are gaining four university-qualified people from around the world for every one lost to the US” (p.6). In addition, the number of post-secondary educated people lost to the U.S. is actually surpassed by the number of immigrants with Masters and Doctoral degrees. Yet, it is exactly this category of immigrant, those whose talents and skills are recognized by Canada, who, after actually arriving in Canada, soon find the reality is not as they were led to believe.

The Employment Situation for Well-Educated Immigrants

The handbook "Making a Change Together" by Skills for Change and the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (2001) states that although the Canadian government expects these types of new immigrants to immediately contribute to the economy in the capacity for which they were chosen, in reality, most of them have trouble finding work in their trained professions. Despite the fact that finding jobs is equally beneficial for both the individuals and the country, this tremendous opportunity for brain gain goes largely unrealized. In fact, many studies, as demonstrated below, have shown that access to trained professions and trades is a big problem faced by skilled immigrant workers in Canada.

Brouwer (1999), using data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, found that of all foreign trained engineers arriving in Canada between 1991 and 1994, only about half were able to find work in their field by 1996. He notes the severity of the problem and goes further to describe the phenomenon of "doctors driving taxis" and "chemists delivering pizza" as "well-worn clichés and part of our cultural consciousness" (p.3). Reitz (2005) also pointed out that the Canadian labour market underutilizes or even wastes the skills of highly qualified immigrant workers. Based on Canadian census data on the labour-force, Reitz calculated that immigrants, due to the fact that they were working at occupations below their skill level, earned \$2.4 billion less than their native-born counterparts with comparable skills. By his calculations, he also revealed the two-thirds of these unused skills could in fact be used in the Canadian context, and, if so, would have a productive value of about \$1.6 billion. The underlying problem, according to Reitz, is not the level of skills brought into the country, but rather the degree to which

the skills of these immigrants are effectively utilized in Canada.

In a similar case, Aycan & Berry (1996) studied one hundred and ten highly-educated Turkish immigrants in Montreal, two-thirds of whom reported they were either unemployed or underemployed. This and the studies discussed above demonstrate that the skills of internationally-educated, highly trained immigrants have not reached their full potential here in the Canada, which results in many negative effects. This issue impacts not just the immigrants themselves but the whole Canadian economy.

Negative Effects of Access Problems

When skilled immigrants encounter difficulty re-entering their fields in Canada, many negative effects occur. The individuals themselves suffer many ill-effects, as does the economy and society.

For the individual. When faced with so many barriers, immigrants experience frustration. JobStart and Skills For Change (2001) reported that many immigrants in the IT field are confused as to why they were accepted to come in the first place, since once they arrived they were left alone to find employment in their field. Similarly, Azuh (1998) reported incidences of emotional trauma caused by employment-related difficulties such as unemployment or underemployment, and the lowering or loss of social status. Stress management services may offer short-term relief, but the problem could be more effectively solved by confronting the actual causes. Aycan and Berry's (1996) study created a model to demonstrate how an immigrant's psychological well-being and adaptation can be partially predicted by their employment experiences after immigrating. The model was able to demonstrate a relationship between the high stresses of acculturation and the gap in the Turkish immigrants' social status before and after

immigrating. Those whose social status was the most reduced were least happy with their lives in Canada, and considered themselves economically unsuccessful. Aycan and Berry found that the amount of time spent unemployed was directly related to immigrants' well-being, self-image, and adaptation.

For the Canadian society and economy. Aside from the obvious economic inefficiencies resulting from rampant underutilization of workforce talent, the individual impact can itself create social and economic problems. When immigrant skilled workers can not integrate successfully into Canadian labour market, it causes a waste of human capital that could otherwise benefit the Canadian economy, fulfilling the Canadian immigration policy's intentions in the first place. Nixon (2005) pointed out, based on calculation, that if the skills of immigrants were in fact fully utilized, and their earnings equivalent to someone born in Canada, the increase to personal income would be to the tune of \$13 billion annually. By making full use of what is already present, the country could realize a one-time gain of around 400,000 workers. Nixon illustrated the irony of the underutilization with the analogy of driving a high-end sports car at 20 kilometres an hour.

Reitz (2005) also identified the increasing burden on Canada's social safety net as higher poverty rates result in additional "social-service take-up" (p. 11). Furthermore, he acknowledged the potential for the public's perception of immigrants to shift from positive and welcoming to viewing them as a social problem or "liability" if the underutilization of skills persists or worsens. Reitz also insightfully pointed out another scenario in which the immigrants themselves begin to react politically to their situations.

Having discussed the current situation for internationally trained skilled workers in Canada, it is now necessary to examine causative factors for their challenges, so a foundation for working out solutions may be established. We need to find out: what are the reasons behind this chronic underutilization? What are the barriers these highly qualified professionals are facing when they are looking for employment in their trained fields?

Barriers for Immigrants Re-Entry

First major milestone. As early as 1989, research has attempted to identify barriers limiting or restricting new immigrants' re-entry to their chosen professions. The first major work in this area was the final report based on a study by the Task Force on Access to Professions and Trades, commissioned by the Ontario government. The report became Ontario's first major milestone towards advancing this issue. Cumming, Lee and Oreopoulos (1989) identified many barriers skilled immigrant workers face, focusing on institutional structures and practices in force when foreign-trained immigrants try to re-enter their professions and trades. The study concluded that immigrants faced barriers with assessing and having their academic credentials recognized in Canada, and navigating the existing complicated licensing procedures in their respective fields. They also lacked adequate language training, nor were current language testing methods appropriately designed to predict their occupational-specific language performance. The lack of retraining guidance and support to bridge internationally-trained skills with their respective Canadian standards was also identified.

Many subsequent studies across Canada to identify barriers revealed various problems, similar and otherwise. I will discuss the various barriers under the following

categorizations: discrimination, systemic barriers, lack of Canadian work experience and communication/language.

Discrimination. Teelucksingh & Galabuzi (2005) pointed out that, as Canada's racial diversity expands due to immigration, discrimination based on race in employment settings is becoming even more of a critical issue. Using census data from 1996 to 2001, the authors pointed out whereas Canada's overall population grew 3.9 percent in this period, the percentage of the racialized population grew by 24.6 percent. By 2016, the authors calculate the total racialized group population to account for 20% of the total population in Canada. Teelucksingh & Galabuzi described two major forms of racial discrimination in the workplace: economic and exclusive. Economic discrimination occurs when employers generalize about a certain racial group's economic value when making employment decisions, whereas exclusive discrimination occurs when members of racialized groups are not treated equally in terms of employment, compensation, and promotion opportunities.

Azuh's (1998) study demonstrated immigrant professionals in several fields felt their unfavourable employment situations were attributed to discrimination. For instance, some teachers felt that ethnic discrimination was the reason that they were unable to obtain permanent teaching positions after years of working as substitute teachers. Some female immigrants in technical and engineering professions reported gender discrimination. Another type of discrimination was exemplified by two nursing professionals. They were required to have English fluency forms filled out by native English speaking past employers in order to be granted their nursing license. Their past

employers, because they were not themselves native English speakers, could not meet this particular criteria.

Lack of Canadian work experience. Lack of Canadian work experience is another barrier repeatedly identified by many studies. This is the area in which the frustrating *Catch 22* phenomenon commonly exists, where immigrant professionals need Canadian working experiences in order to be considered by employers for open positions. Harding (2003) illustrated this predicament using the experience of a civil engineer from Iran who came to Canada in 1994. The engineer, upon arriving in Canada, was told his previous work experience would not be counted towards his required experience for licensing purposes, even though he used American and European codes in Iran, which are similar to Canadian ones.

A summary report (2002) based on a focus group of eighteen immigrant professional engineers in Ontario organized by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) examined the issues that internationally trained engineers face integrating into their trained fields in Canada. Among others, difficulty in gaining Canadian working experiences is a major one. Not only do most employers require at least twelve months of Canadian work experience, but the provincial regulatory body also requires it before granting a Professional Engineering (P.Eng) license.

A study conducted by Public Policy Forum (2004) brought employers' perspectives into the discussion of the issues of integrating immigrant skilled workers into the Canadian labour market. The nation-wide study was comprised of 2,091 employer surveys, and focus group discussions. The results of the study found that about

25 percent of Canadian employers do not consider foreign work experience to be equivalent to local experience, but would still consider it. Another 25 percent of Canadian employers would not hire immigrants unless they possess Canadian work experience. Several employers who participated in the focus groups conceded they believed it to be easier and less risky to hire employees with previous Canadian work experience.

Systemic barriers. Some researchers have taken a different perspective, going so far as to say that all the barriers exist because of problems with the system itself. Brouwer (1999), though he also recognized the problems identified in the above cited studies, argued that the barriers, as serious as they are, could not be understood without looking into the interests of the broader stakeholders at different levels within the system. His report examined the interests of the federal and provincial governments, occupational regulatory bodies, educational institutions, employers, unions, and nongovernmental organizations. Brouwer demonstrated it is the lack of efforts, inconsistency in the system, and competing interests that make the problems both persistent and difficult to solve.

In their handbook "Making a Change Together" (2001), Skills for Change went further, directly claiming that all the problems and barriers skilled immigrants face are "systemic", meaning they arise through no fault of the individual. Rather, they are the product of missing components within the system. In fact, they even claim that the goal of the handbook is not to assist individuals in navigating their way through the system, but instead to modify the system itself to more appropriately accommodate the diverse needs of the individuals.

Reitz (2005) also pointed out some weaknesses that exist in the institutional model Canada applies that need to be modified according to new trends in the labour market and the knowledge-based economy. Unlike many other scholars, however, he challenged the widely accepted assumption that licensing plays the major role in the underutilization of immigrants' skills. He argued getting a licence does not guarantee getting into the desired profession. There are other factors at work: for instance, employers' inability to assess the value foreign training will bring to their firm; their reluctance to risk hiring immigrants; or required Canadian work experience. He suggested that the *mentoring* model, popular in Germany, might have value in the Canadian context, because it allows for the more experienced employees to impart occupation-specific knowledge of local practices to newcomers.

Communication/ language barrier. Azuh's (1998) study looked at different barriers for immigrant professionals, and provided many recommendations. The language barrier, according to Azuh, is often the first barrier with which immigrant professionals are confronted. Some immigrant professionals who participated in the study noted that the language requirements were usually based on a minimum TOEFL score, which emphasized technical linguistic abilities beyond what they would actually need in the workplace. Therefore, some immigrants even suspected that the hidden intention behind these high requirements is the deliberate control of the amount of people entering into the professions and trades.

Prefontaine & Benson's (1999) study on possible barriers to immigrants' economic integration in Canada considered language as the greatest barrier to overcome. Using data from the Landed Immigrant Data System, they demonstrated the proportion of

immigrants who speak one or both of the official languages (English/French) as their mother tongue has decreased from 1980 to 1998: from over 30% to only 12%, due to the shift of immigration source countries. The authors suggested that this trend could affect immigrants' labour market integration since performance in today's labour market depends on language ability; better language communicative abilities are rewarded with greater success.

Seevaratnam (1994) conducted a study on South Asian immigrant teachers' barriers accessing their profession in Toronto, Canada. The participants in the study learned to speak English as their first language when they began school. Despite their relative proficiency, they still experienced problems of non-verbal communication, such as understanding facial expressions at interviews. Their accents and different speech patterns also made it difficult to find employment. In addition, the participants felt the hiring boards of institutions lacked cross-cultural communication proficiency.

Communication Barriers Entering a New Environment in Second Language

Acquisition

After reviewing the literature on the re-entry of immigrant professionals, it is apparent that communication has indeed been recognized as one of the barriers they face. Studies I have found discussing barriers faced by immigrant professionals have tended to attempt to identify all possible barriers. Thus, I believe description and explanation focusing on the communicative barrier has not been conducted with a sufficient degree of depth. For instance, how does communicative competence affect re-entry, and what type of communication challenges do immigrant professionals in different fields face? In addition, culture is a concept which I believe to be inseparable from this issue, yet among