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# Gendered ESL : accommodating immigrant women's cultural diversity in ESL classes

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GENDERED ESL: ACCOMMODATING IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S CULTURAL  
DIVERSITY IN ESL CLASSES

by

Jennifer Kathleen Landsborough, BA, University of Western Ontario, 2008

A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Immigration and Settlement Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2009

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# GENDERED ESL: ACCOMMODATING IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN ESL CLASSES

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Master of Arts, 2009  
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## ABSTRACT

Research indicates that immigrant women have lower levels of English than men in English-speaking regions including Canada. In Canada, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) is a government-funded language program which assists immigrants in improving their language levels. However, immigrant women face a number of barriers to accessing this program. These barriers suggest that LINC does not successfully accommodate immigrant women's diverse gender-based roles. This study examines the barriers that exist including the barriers reported by four Spanish-speaking female immigrants. With the help of LINC key informants, this study suggests that the LINC Home Study program, a distance study program, may assist women who are unable to use the in-class LINC course to improve their English language level.

### **Key words:**

Immigrant, women, barrier, LINC, ESL, language

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# **Chapter 1: Defining the Research**

## ***I. Introduction***

In reviewing literature on second language acquisition and immigrant language levels, I noticed a trend of immigrant women having lower second language levels than immigrant men. Upon further investigation, I realized a common reason for this was that many women have family obligations or cultural expectations that keep them at home. On the other hand, having low English levels can limit women from accessing much-needed resources: some may be unable to use community services or they may experience isolation, but more significantly, some women may be unable to protest possible violation of their rights. Angered by the possibility of immigrant women having their rights violated and by the linguistic limitations in trying to contest these violations, I set out to understand the government of Canada's initiatives for these women, mainly the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, a classroom-style English language program. I also examined LINC's distance study program, LINC Home Study, as a possible alternative for immigrant women who are unable to use classroom-style LINC courses.

## ***II. Thesis statement***

The findings in this research suggest that the classroom-style LINC program does not successfully accommodate the diverse gender roles among newcomer women, as revealed by the barriers these women face in using this program, such as needing childcare (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 33). Alternately, the LINC Home Study program may be able to accommodate these roles to a much higher degree, which would enable women who would not otherwise attend these classes



to benefit from the LINC program. Although the extent to which women are able to benefit from the LINC Home Study program is unknown, it appears that Home Study would be a viable option for some women who are unable to attend LINC classes.

### ***III. Objectives***

To assist me in revealing the matters presented in the thesis statement, I have developed the following three objectives:

1. To reveal the barriers experienced by some newcomer women in accessing LINC classes and how these barriers relate to diverse gender roles. Identifying the barriers that immigrant women face in accessing LINC from a feminist perspective may reveal the particular areas in which the LINC program falls short in accommodating these women's diverse gender-based roles.
2. To bring to light the experiences of four women whose situations have not been accommodated by the LINC program and who are therefore currently not benefiting from LINC classes. This research examines the personal testimonies of four non-English-speaking women as a primary source to understand the barriers directly from their perspectives. By learning of their diverse backgrounds, life situations and personal awareness and opinions of LINC, we can attempt to understand the reasons why they are not using LINC to improve their English language skills and thus the areas that could be better accommodated within the LINC program.
3. To identify the LINC Home Study program as a possible method of reducing the barriers within LINC classes and of enabling the women who face these barriers to study English. The LINC Home Study program is considered for its relevancy as a possible alternative to the classroom LINC program because it already exists as a viable option and because

the flexibility of the program may allow greater accommodation to gender or culture-related responsibilities or roles than does the classroom LINC program.

#### ***IV. Organization of research paper***

In this research paper, Chapter 1 explains the background to the research: how it was conducted, who was consulted, my research goals, and the theory behind the research. Next, Chapter 2 reviews the literature: why learning English is important for immigrants, current government initiatives, and barriers to the LINC program, including those which concern women. I propose LINC Home Study as a possible solution for women who face barriers in using the LINC program. Then, Chapter 3 reveals my research findings and discussions broken down by source. Finally, Chapter 4 is a general discussion in relation to my thesis statement as well as a conclusion.

#### ***V. Defining the terms***

Before discussing the theory behind the research, it may be beneficial to define some of the common terms and acronyms used in the literature review and research. First, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) is a government-sponsored language program intended for newcomers to Canada (CIC 2004, 1.0). Within this research, the term *newcomer* refers to an immigrant who is a permanent resident but who has not obtained Canadian citizenship, as this is an eligibility requirement for LINC (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 4). Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is the federal department responsible for immigration and settlement and which funds the LINC program. The Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) is a standardized system to rate language level and is used as the basis of LINC class levels. The term *gender roles* refers to the responsibilities that may be expected of

individuals according to their gender and are based on variables like culture, situation and socioeconomic class (Narayan 1997; Popenoe 1996).

## ***VI. Theoretical considerations***

Certain theories and trends may assist in understanding the literature and the findings in the present research. It may seem obvious that a research paper based on improving newcomer women's access to language classes would use a feminist theory, because feminist theories are focused on the liberation of women. However, much of feminist theory within North America, which is categorized as Western Feminism, is criticized for its focus on white, middle-class women, and for overlooking the struggles of poor and/or racialized women (Narayan 1997). Further, in North American and European cultures there is a tendency to see poorer or colonized cultures as inferior (Bannerji 1995, 47). This can be especially common within an immigration context, where one prevailing culture and many secondary immigrant cultures exist within one society.

To avoid overlooking the struggles of racialized or poor women, I turn to the theory of Third World Feminism. Third World Feminists argue that gender cannot be examined without considering other parts of identity, such as class and race (Bannerji 1995, 49). Important to this theory is the idea of multiculturalism, which accepts and promotes the existence of different cultures within one society (Bannerji 1995). Third World Feminist Herr (2004) wrote that Western Feminists often object to the idea of multiculturalism, believing it to diminish women's struggles. She argues that multiculturalism is in fact beneficial to immigrant women because it brings attention to issues present in diverse cultures (74). Multiculturalism is not only significant because it reveals specific cultural issues, but also because it combats ideas of cultural superiority and inferiority. In the Canadian context, multiculturalism is also supported federally

by the Multiculturalism Act (1988), which endeavours to ensure equal opportunity to all people, regardless of origin or culture (CIC 2008).

Given these theoretical considerations, in this research I adopt several foundations from the Third World Feminist Theory:

1. All cultures need to be considered equally. Especially within a Canadian multiculturalist context, one culture cannot be considered superior to another (CIC 2008, Herr 2004), regardless of the particular group's relative share of power.
2. Culture or gender cannot be examined in isolation. Intersections with class and ethnicity must be considered as well (Bannerji 1995).
3. Immigrant women may suffer from gender role-related and settlement-related issues that are different from those faced by Canadian-born women (Bannerji 1995).

#### **a. Conceptualizing gender**

The notion of gender is much more complex than the biological differences between men and women. According to Kelly (2005), gender accounts for significant disparities in economic, political, and ideological spheres within society. The way that a culture conceptualizes gender results in gender-based variation across several categories; economic differences, such as culturally-defined labour roles and paid versus unpaid labour; political differences, regarding power/authority distribution and access to services; and ideological differences, including appropriate roles for men and women (347-348). Because gender divisions are culturally and socially constructed, people from diverse cultures may have varying political, economic and ideological ideals.

Further, the specific roles assigned to particular genders can vary within classes, cultures and personal situations. Unique family situations or life events may require individuals to stray from class or culturally-defined gender roles.

In summary, there may be a very wide range of gender roles represented among Canadian immigrants. Because Canada's Multiculturalism Act endeavours to ensure equal opportunity for all people, regardless of cultural origin (CIC 2008), government-sponsored language programs have an obligation to accommodate these diverse gender roles, so that all immigrants have equal opportunity to use these programs.

#### **b. Gender roles in Canadian families**

The ideal of a "traditional nuclear family" has been prevalent in North America from the early eighteenth century until the 1960s (Popenoe 1996). Even today, the commonly-held ideological concept of family involves the role of men as providers and women as caregivers of children (Kelly 2005, 348). Perhaps in reflection of this, within the Canadian workforce men are usually the primary earners within heterosexual families or partnerships. This is also reflected in men's and women's wages. After Drolet (2002) controlled for different characteristics like work experience and education, he found that on average women earn 82 to 89.5 percent of men's average hourly wages, a difference which does not seem to be based on any variant except gender (13). On the other hand, even though the idea of the nuclear family may be an ideal for many, in reality family structures are very diverse, including cohabiting couples, childless couples, children from different partners, and separated, divorced or homosexual couples.

The extent to which families are able to retain certain gender-based roles or divisions of labour can depend largely on socioeconomic class. Upper and middle classes are often much

more able to uphold the North American ideals (of father-provider and women-caregiver) than are lower classes (Kelly 2005, 348).

### **c. Diverse cultural gender roles**

For immigrants, cultural background or personal situations may ascribe gender roles that are different from commonly-held ideals in Canada; therefore, immigrants may not have the same beliefs regarding gender divisions as many Canadian-born residents. For example, it can be argued that work within the home, which is largely accomplished by women in North America (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 160-161), is often devalued in North American society. This is probably influenced by ideals of capitalism, which places a higher value on remunerated work in comparison with non-remunerated work. However, this is not necessarily the case in certain cultures, or in immigrant households within Canada, where people may view unpaid and paid labour more equally (Pallis 1980, 50-51). As a result, in some cultures women may work primarily within the home, and immigrant women from these cultures may be less willing to work outside of the home than are Canadian-born residents.

It is critical to discern the distinction between Canadian-based and non-Canadian-based ideologies of gender role divisions, because Canadian-based ideologies might not necessarily apply to people from other cultures. Specifically in this research, it is important to be aware that the idea that immigrant women *should* attend educational classes in the community is culturally-biased. To illustrate this, it may be natural for a Canadian-born woman to work and learn outside of the home, but for women from other cultures, the primary learning and/or working may be completed within the home or with family. Therefore it may be difficult or unattainable for immigrant women to attend community-based language classes.

It could be suggested that some of the barriers to accessing language classes may contribute to oppressing or silencing women and that attending community-based language classes may help them overcome these problems. However, some women may never be able to attend these classes: they may be primary caregivers of their children or not have access to adequate transportation and never have the opportunity to attend language classes. Increasing accessibility to English language courses through other means may assist women to learn English who may not have the opportunity otherwise. Therefore, rather than perpetuating oppression, making English classes more accessible through other means would likely help empower women to overcome barriers through learning English.

#### **d. Latin American gender roles and divisions**

As immigrants from Latin America were consulted for a significant portion of this research paper, it may be helpful to review some of the gender-related cultural trends within Latin America. Because a large number of countries and cultures exist within Latin America, a wide range of gender roles and responsibilities may exist within these different cultures. However, scholars have observed some general similarities across Latin American cultures with regards to male and female roles, especially the prevalence of patriarchy. Within the ideology of patriarchy, the role of women is to take care of the household and children, and they are encouraged to be dependent, virtuous, and submissive to their husbands and to their families. The role of men includes being the head of authority within the family, as well as the principal income earner. Men are encouraged to be powerful, authoritative and independent (De Los Rios 2007; Comas-Diaz 1987). Both Bavolek (1997) and Popenoe (1996) also observe these characteristics in several Latin American cultures. Additionally, in Latin American cultures, families are highly

valued social units (De Los Rios 2007, 115-116). Thus childbearing is an essential part of women's responsibilities (Flores et al, 1998, 76).

In an immigration context, some people may change their beliefs or practices because of necessity or due to influence from their new country. For example, many immigrant women who are visible minorities in the United States have paid employment out of necessity, even though they may not have been employed outside of the home before immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 551). However, in Latin American cultures, many people view paid employment as contrary to a mother's responsibilities of taking care of children and the household (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 551). As well, many Latin American women hold on to the ideal of taking care of their children as their primary role while their male partners earn income for the family (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 551).

Further, it is not generally culturally acceptable for a Latin American woman to rely on another person to fulfill these responsibilities, such as using paid daycare or relying on family members to be babysitters. As a result, female Latin American immigrants in Canada and in the USA may have to fulfill high expectations of being wage earners and the primary caregivers of children, and some mothers believe that they have fallen short in their responsibilities (Bernhard *et al.* 2005, 5).

Patriarchy appears in other ways among Latin American immigrants. Popenoe (1996) observes among US immigrants from Cuba and Mexico that women generally place a high value on marriage and motherhood, whereas men value authority and the ability to provide (350). De Los Rios (2007) agrees with the prevalence of patriarchy among US immigrants from Latin America, although she also observes that in some cases, immigrant women are able to challenge their gender roles within the United States (115-116).



From these scholars' observations, it can safely be assumed that many Canadian immigrants from Latin America conform to patriarchal characteristics, especially women as the primary caregiver of children and men as the primary income earner, although it is likely that in some cases, women also work outside of the home. These cultural characteristics, although they are general, may affect these women's ability to attend language classes. First of all, if women's primary responsibilities are carried out within the household, and they spend little time in an English-speaking community, it is possible that both the women and their spouses will not see a need for the women to learn English. In some cases, women may desire to learn English, but if their husband (as the head of authority) does not share this desire, they may not end up attending a language class. As well, mothers may have the primary responsibility of taking care of their children. It may be impossible for them to attend class while they have young children, either because of conflicts related to having children (needing childcare, not having sufficient transit), or because of conflicts related to cultural childcare responsibilities (such as not consenting to others taking care of their children). Further, home responsibilities may inhibit the time and energy that the women are able to dedicate to studying or to attending class.

#### **e. Barriers in adult education**

In an examination of adult learning, Cross (1981) wrote that there are three different categories of barriers to attending classes: dispositional, institutional, and situational. Dispositional barriers involve learners' attitudes and emotions towards attending class, such as refusing to attend because they dislike the teacher or the teaching method. Institutional barriers are difficulties that are caused by the institution that funds or that runs the classes, such as a learner not being able to attend classes because of his or her immigration status. Situational barriers are caused by factors in a person's life at a particular point in time, like a need for child-minding and transportation.

Much current research focuses on situational barriers. Institutional barriers (such as the inability of Canadian citizens to use LINC classes) are also common within the literature. However, because situational barriers are more closely connected with gender roles, the present research will focus on situational barriers.

## ***VII. Positionality***

Third World Feminists are generally women who write from Third World or developing nations, or who belong to immigrant ethnic groups. As a white female raised in Canada, I belong to neither of these groups, and I may unknowingly make assumptions that are not in line with a Third World Feminist viewpoint. Further, there may be other consequences of my ethnicity that may distort findings, such as if participants are not able or not willing to be completely forthcoming due to reasons stemming from my race, language or culture, or if I misinterpret their responses due to cultural or other reasons.

## ***VIII. Research process and methods***

### **a. Literature review**

To begin the research process, I conducted a review of the literature, primarily of English-language scholarly journals over the past fifteen years. Because very little research examined barriers to newcomer women learning English, I explored a range of topics. Generally these topics consisted of immigrant language acquisition including gender differences; language instruction and adult learning including barriers; and computer-assisted language learning. I examined these areas to see what barriers exist for women within language classes and if computer-assisted language learning was a viable alternative. Because several of these areas were under-researched, I also reviewed research published within the past twenty years that

specifically examined immigrant women's language acquisition and barriers to participation in ESL classes. The literature reviewed was primarily conducted in Canada, the United States and Australia. I conducted my search across various disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, education and economics, thereby encompassing a wide variety of perspectives.

Further, I consulted the most recently available Canadian government documents such as census reports and government-funded evaluations of the LINC program. I also examined a few articles conducted by Canadian non-governmental organizations. Finally, because research on the LINC program is limited, I consulted several websites of immigrant-serving agencies in Toronto to understand practices within the LINC program.

## **b. Interview process**

Primary research within this research paper consisted of two sets of interviews. For the first set, I consulted five LINC employees in southern Ontario: one LINC teacher, two Home Study employees and two language assessors (Appendix 1). I initiated communication with the LINC teacher and with the language assessors through personal contact and with the Home Study employees through the Home Study website (Centre for Education and Training n. d.). For the LINC teacher, I inquired about class attendance difficulties for women. I asked the LINC Home Study employees about the purpose, the benefits and the beneficiaries of the LINC Home Study program. The Home Study employees held different positions within the Home Study program and contributed their individual expertise within the interview. I interviewed the language assessors to understand the extent of LINC Home Study promotion and the criteria for referral. One of the language assessors worked in an urban centre outside of Toronto; all of the other LINC employees worked in the Greater Toronto Area. I focused on the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) because a large proportion of immigrants settle in this area; 43 percent of immigrants

who entered Canada in the 1990s lived in Toronto in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2002). Therefore, the responses gathered from interviews in Toronto would likely be representative of a larger number of Canadian immigrants. On the other hand, I interviewed one language assessor outside of the GTA to see if assessment practices and Home Study referrals and promotion were conducted differently in a non-immigrant hub, where Home Study may be more necessary because of fewer available services.

Despite the extensive experience of LINC employees, there are limitations to the data they are able to provide. They are experienced with newcomers who have been able to access the LINC or Home Study programs, or, in the case of the language assessors, newcomers who have at least made contact with a centre to begin English language training. These employees do not have contact with women who have been unable to access the programs and who are unable to connect with an assessment centre. The number of women who are in this category is unknown. However, their difficulties are most significant, as they are not able to use the language training programs that are offered.

Therefore, in this research paper I also interviewed four Spanish-speaking newcomer women who were not taking formal language classes. The purpose of interviewing participants was to expose some of the barriers experienced by women who do not use ESL classes and to see if they were similar as those reported in other literature.

I chose to consult Spanish-speaking newcomers from Latin America for several reasons. Foremost, because I consulted participants who were not currently using English language classes, they may be limited in their knowledge of English; therefore they must have the option of being interviewed in their first language. Because I speak Spanish, I chose to interview Spanish-speakers from Latin America. Also, I wanted a group that was sizeable; large enough

that information about language programs could spread through word-of-mouth. Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin American are a fairly large group in Canada; in 2006, Colombia was the tenth most prominent source country for new immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada 2007) and Spanish was the fourth most common mother tongue of foreign-born Canadians not including English or French (Statistics Canada 2008).

Immigrants from many nations speak Spanish, including from Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, and Argentina, and even within these national groups there may be divisions of ethnicity, class and race. Each individual group has its unique immigration history to Canada. The goal of choosing Spanish speakers from different countries is to capture some of the diversity that is present in the range of newcomers to Canada.

These participants were invited through posters and word of mouth at several immigrant service agencies in the GTA, as well as an immigrant service agency in an urban centre outside of Toronto. Again, I selected Toronto as a source because it receives a large portion of Canada's immigrants (Statistics Canada 2002); therefore, using participants from Toronto should result in findings that are representative of more Canadian immigrants than a smaller city. However, I also invited participants through a immigrant-serving agency in an urban area outside of Toronto, to see if any significant barriers were exposed that did not affect the participants in Toronto, such as transportation issues, as the particular urban area does not have a rapid, centralized transportation system like Toronto's subway system. All of the service agencies involved in this study offer services in Spanish and are easily accessible by public transit: in Toronto, they are within ten minutes walking from a subway stop or on a bus route which intersected with the subway; in the urban area outside of Toronto, the service agency is downtown and on several main bus routes.

Three of the four participants were from Toronto. They were born in Colombia, Panama or Argentina. Among them, there were a wide variety of family situations; all were mothers, yet one's children were adults, another's children were in school and two had babies or young children. As well, two of these women were living alone and two were living with partners. The participants were also of different ages: two were between thirty and thirty-nine, one was between forty and forty-nine, and one was over fifty. Again, the purpose of selecting participants with varied ages and family structures was to allow for greater diversity in the findings.

Interviews consisted of about fifteen minutes of oral questions (Appendix 2) and five minutes of a written questionnaire (Appendix 3). The purpose of these interviews and questionnaires was to understand the stories and lived experiences of these participants, who face challenges using the LINC program. For the oral section, there were a possible fifteen questions, depending on the participants' past experiences (I discarded several questions if they did not apply to the participants' individual situations). I first asked about their background, including their country of origin, their length of time living in Canada, and their family and work situations. Next, I inquired about their use of English and their opinions toward learning English, as well as their past experiences: if they had learned English through a course before, if they enjoyed it, in which country it was conducted, and if it was the LINC program. Finally, I asked if they are aware of the LINC Home Study program, gave them information if they desired it, and asked if they thought they might use the Home Study program.

The short questionnaire consisted of two questions: why the participants were not using a classroom English course and what concerns they had about using the Home Study program. From a list of reasons for each question, they were asked to rate the extent to which each reason affected them based on a scale of one to five; one representing a reason that did not affect them

and five representing a reason that was very significant to them. One participant had used the Home Study course in the past, so for the final question on the questionnaire she responded regarding why she was no longer taking the course. The specific reasons I listed on these two questions originated from common situational barriers that emerged from the literature. This included having to take care of children and not having access to transportation (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 33; CIC 2004, 3.0; McArthur 1998; Armstrong 1996, Hayes 1989), not knowing about English classes (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 32; McArthur 1998) and timing and scheduling difficulties including employment (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 33-35; Hayes 1989). I also included the dispositional barriers of “dislike of learning method” and “lack of family support” in the event that my participants experienced no situational barriers in accessing English language classes.

### **c. Process of analysis**

Once I conducted the interviews, I transcribed them in the original language. For the LINC employees, I analyzed the data that provided further information regarding the issues presented in thesis statement (such as barriers for women attending LINC classes and extent to which the Home Study method made it easier for women to learn English through LINC).

After transcribing the participants' interviews, I compiled the responses to the questionnaires. To respond to the first question of the questionnaire, the participants were instructed to use a scale of one to five. To analyze these responses, I classified each response as either “not significant” (for responses of 1 or 2) or “significant/very significant” (for responses of 3-5). Once these were tallied, I examined the reasons which were rated as “significant/very significant” by at least one participant. Within the interview transcriptions, I colour-coded data that related to each reason, as well as noted any other possible barriers to class attendance. In

addition, I noted areas of each transcript that revealed the participant's desire to learn English, as it may have changed the findings if they had little or no desire to learn English.

The second question inquired what would concern participants about taking the LINC Home Study course. Because each participant's situation is different, I analyzed these findings separately. I examined each of their responses and compared them with their responses to the final two interview questions, which asked about their knowledge of and thoughts about using the Home Study program. In the analysis and final report, I changed the names of these women to protect their identities. After analyzing the participants' responses, I compared the data gathered from the LINC employees and from the participants and examined the data in relation to my thesis.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *I. Gender and English language level*

Though few Canadian studies have examined gender differences in immigrant language acquisition, existing studies reveal that females generally have a lower level of communicative competence in the second language than males (Boyd 1992; Beiser and Hou 2000). Boyd (1992) reveals that, based on the 1986 Canadian census, 7.2 percent of foreign-born women compared to 3.7 percent of foreign-born men did not have conversational ability in English or French. Similarly, 1980 census data in the USA reveals that 8.5 percent of foreign-born women compared to 6 percent of foreign-born men were not able to speak English, suggesting that women's lower second language level is not a uniquely Canadian occurrence. In a more contemporary study, Beiser and Hou (2000) examined South Asians' language levels after ten years in Canada. They discovered that women have overall lower English levels and are less likely to learn English than men.

Several scholars have attempted to understand why immigrant women have lower levels of English than men. Rather than a definitive correlation between low English level and any particular factor, they have found a wide range of correlating factors. For example, using the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia, Chiswick *et al.* (2004) revealed that for both genders there are correlations between levels of language proficiency and exposure to English before arrival, educational level, age at immigration, economic incentives, immigration category, primary language of spouse, presence of a community with a similar ethnicity or language and the presence of friends and family in Canada before immigration. Several of these categories can have strong connections to culturally-based gender divisions. For example, women from cultures

where fewer women work outside of the home, such as Latin American cultures, would tend to have lower exposure to English, lower education levels, and a higher likelihood to arrive under spousal applications rather than as primary applicants. Similarly, because on average women earn lower hourly wages than men in Canada (Drolet 2002, 13), for immigrant women, improving their English would tend to be met with less financial return than for immigrant men. Therefore they may not see a great importance in improving their English levels. In short, there seems to be a distinction between individual genders and level of English proficiency and through scholars have not found a single clear reason behind it, correlations suggest that gender roles contribute to this distinction.

## ***II. The value of knowing English***

It is very difficult to participate in a society in which one cannot communicate in the dominant language. This is especially true regarding participation in the labour market. According to a report by Statistics Canada (2003), employed immigrants who were able to speak English well were more likely not only to have a higher-paying job than those who had a lower level of English, but they were also more likely to have a higher-skilled job within the area where they were trained. Similarly, in Gonzales' (2000) study on immigrants to the United States, the participants who reported high oral skills earned an average of 16 percent more than those who reported low oral skills. It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to produce unbiased statistics on language level and economic factors, because most data sources regarding language level (including the Canadian census, which is principally used in Canadian studies regarding language skills) rely on immigrants' self-perceived level of language, which is subjective, rather than a standardized language rating.

It could be argued that some women are able to carry on their lives in Canada without knowing English because they spend most of their time within the household. As we will see later, it is true that some women carry out many of their responsibilities within the household. However, even women who spend *all* their time within their household often need English in order to function well within Canada; immigrants with a low level of English have difficulty navigating the healthcare system and using other services, and women who spend most of their time within their homes may need to use these services (Breton 1999, 16). In addition, many people need support networks. Some women are not part of a close-knit ethnic community and without English proficiency, it may be impossible for them to develop a much-needed support network in Canada. Further, after several years of being in Canada, mothers with low levels of English may face challenges communicating with their children. Especially when the children were born in Canada or enter at a young age, they can acquire English very quickly and can have trouble retaining their first language. As a result, these children may have some difficulty communicating with their mothers, who may not acquire English as quickly (Breton 1999, 16). Lastly, immigrant women who spend much of their time within the home would need to know English if they are in a situation of abuse, a medical emergency, if they separate from their partner, or if they need to find employment. Thus, knowing English is necessary for many immigrant women to function in Canada, regardless of how much of their time is spent within the home.

### ***III. Overview of the LINC program***

As a department of the federal government, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) funds the LINC program as its principal method of assisting newcomers to learn English. According to the 2001 Canadian census, 60 percent of immigrants reported using language

classes to improve their English. This number excludes Quebec, where French rather than English is the primary language of instruction for newcomers to Quebec (Statistics Canada 2001, Figure 5.2). This statistic suggests that English classes are widely understood by immigrants to be beneficial.

The LINC program started in 1992 and offers part-time and full-time language classes free of charge to newcomer immigrants and refugees. These classes are available in a multitude of locations throughout the GTA (Toronto District School Board n.d. and The YMCA n.d.). Canadian citizens as well as refugee claimants are ineligible for LINC classes. Many locations that offer the LINC program also provide child-minding services and transportation vouchers (Minister of Public Works 2003; Toronto District School Board n.d.) The class levels correspond with a standard of levels called the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBA), which range on a scale of one to twelve. The LINC program is intended for learners with intermediate or beginner levels of English. Those with higher levels are directed towards the Enhanced Language Training (ELT) program, which is also government-funded and offers more advanced vocation-specific language training to newcomers.

Unfortunately, few scholars have examined the effectiveness of language classes at improving adults' language skills. A possible reason for this is that second-language scholars widely disagree on the best teaching method, and teachers vary in their teaching styles (Dryden-Peterson 2007, 3). Success of language classes could differ significantly depending on teaching methods. However, Gonzalez (2000) finds that among immigrants in the United States, participants who completed English as a Second Language (ESL) courses had a higher level of English comprehension, writing, reading and speaking than those who did not complete ESL courses.

## **a. Objectives of and barriers to LINC**

According to CIC (2004), the goals of LINC are as follows:

The program aims to facilitate the social, cultural and economic integration of immigrants and refugees in Canada by providing language instruction in either English or French, as well as information that helps newcomers to become oriented to the Canadian way of life. (1.0)

As well, “the program endeavours to train the same proportion of women and men as is reflected in the local immigrant population.” (CIC 2004, 1.0)

In an evaluation of LINC program published online by CIC, it is estimated that 20 percent of newcomers are involved in the LINC program. Within this evaluation, certain CIC employees and service providers indicate that the difficulties hindering other newcomers from participating include illness, distance (especially in smaller communities), and finances (generally employment conflicting with class attendance or success). However, these key informants from CIC note that the *major* barriers to using LINC classes are: lack of transportation, need for child-minding, and assistance for individuals with disabilities. They also believe that CIC has effectively addressed these barriers (CIC 2004, 3.0).

## **b. Situational barriers in ESL classes**

In the present research, I will examine situational barriers, which relate to factors in a person’s life and to gender roles, as opposed to institutional or dispositional barriers. Very little research on situational barriers to ESL classes has been published since the 1990s. Even in the 1990s, most studies examined adult education generally rather than ESL classes specifically. However, Hayes (1989), Armstrong (1996) and McArthur (1998) examined situational barriers to adult ESL classes. First, Hayes (1989) examined barriers among low-literate Hispanic participants in the USA. The situational barriers mentioned were associated with cost, employment, lack of

transportation, and time restraints. Similarly, Armstrong (1996) studied ESL literacy learners in the USA. Most of her participants were unemployed, so situational barriers regarding employment (such as class schedule conflicting with work schedule) were not significant in her study. The most prevalent situational barrier mentioned was the need to take care of children and elderly family members. As well, McArthur's (1998) article was based on a United States national survey conducted between 1994 and 1995. Of the twelve million adults who cited a language other than English as their main home language, three million reported being interested in taking ESL classes but having not done so in the last twelve months. Of these, 59 percent reported that they were not informed about the classes. Of the remaining adults, 40 percent stated that they did not have enough time to take classes, 26 percent reported that the cost prevented them from attending, and 23 percent reported that the lack of childcare or transportation was a significant barrier to attending classes.

### **c. Women in the LINC program**

The 2004 LINC evaluation notes that gender divisions can prevent certain women from attending LINC classes:

Gender barriers exist for some newcomers; in some cultures, educating women is not seen as necessary or women are not allowed to attend classes with men. This may in some cases limit the participation of women in LINC. (CIC 2004, 3.0)

This is the only mention of gender-specific barriers in the evaluation. Though it may be true that cultural reasons may inhibit some women from learning English in a classroom, this quote appears to ignore CIC's responsibility to accommodate diverse gender roles. Canada's Multiculturalism Act has as its purpose to promote different cultures and eliminate culturally-based disadvantage (CIC 2008), and as a department of the federal government, CIC must also

follow this federal Act and change policies and programming to better accommodate different gender role divisions and reduce these culturally-defined gender barriers.

Little scholarly research has been published on the specific barriers experienced by women in accessing ESL classes. However, Kilbride et al. conducted a significant contribution to this research in 2008. The study focused on female immigrants learning English in Toronto, using interviews with newcomers and service providers as well as newcomer focus groups. The situational barriers in ESL classes that are mentioned in Hayes' (1989), Armstrong's (1996) and McArthur's (1998) articles, including financial issues, need for child-minding and transportation, lack of information and scheduling conflicts, appear in Kilbride *et al.*'s findings. Most importantly, all of Kilbride *et al.*'s (2008, 32) key informants mentioned that financial issues make it difficult for female immigrants to become proficient in English. Although LINC classes are offered free of charge, women are still affected by difficult economic situations. Some require employment as soon as possible after arrival, which decreases their time and energy to attend LINC classes.

Similarly, child-minding and transportation can be barriers to women attending LINC. The child-minding offered during LINC classes is only available to children of certain ages: according to the Toronto District School Board (n.d.), children need to be between the ages of 18 months and six years. Therefore, anyone who has very young children must use alternate forms of childcare in order to use LINC classes. In addition, key informants in Kilbride *et al.*'s study indicate that there are not enough spaces available in LINC child-minding to accommodate the need (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 33). Alternately, some immigrant mothers may not be accustomed or may not approve of other people taking care of their children, so these mothers may not be able to attend language classes while their children are not in school.

Lack of transportation can also create challenges for newcomers wishing to attend language classes. Even if transportation is fully funded, classes can be too far away or too difficult for students to access. These difficulties can be compounded if the learners have very limited knowledge of English or have small children (33). Learning to use a transportation system could be very challenging if one is unable to request help, and traveling with small children could be logistically difficult or dangerous.

Beyond the original major barriers cited by the CIC LINC evaluation (2004), lack of information or lack of time could also discourage women from attending LINC classes. Many of Kilbride *et al.*'s participants mention challenges in finding out about government-sponsored LINC classes, and key informants mention a lack of funding for outreach (32). As well, both participants and key informants discussed a need for greater diversity in the hours that classes were offered (35).

In sum, CIC recognizes that lack of child-minding and transportation are among the most common barriers for newcomers wanting to use the LINC program. However, the study's key informants, who are CIC employees, feel that these barriers have been effectively addressed (CIC 2004, 3.0). According to Kilbride *et al.*'s (2008) working paper, not only have these not been fully addressed, but also the additional barriers of financial obstacles, lack of information, and class scheduling have not been successfully dealt with. These barriers are not uncommon, as they are reflected in Hayes' (1989), Armstrong's (1996) and McArthur's (1998) research on ESL classes in the United States.

#### **d. Summary of literature on LINC and connection to gender roles**

The barriers experienced by immigrant women may be strongly connected to their gender role. Before examining this connection, however, it is important to recall that immigrant women may



face certain issues which are different from those of Canadian-born women (Bannerji 1995), and immigrants are likely to have different definitions of gender roles than those held by many Canadian-born (Pallis 1980, 50-51). Therefore, whereas it is completely normal for Canadian-born women to work and/or attend classes outside of the home, it may not be accepted for immigrant women to do one or both of these. Even if attending classes is accepted, other aspects of their gender role may inhibit them from accessing LINC classes.

Many of the more significant situational barriers are connected to gender roles, including transportation, child-minding, and scheduling. Not only is transportation difficult for those with limited English levels, but women whose roles are carried out primarily within the home may not be comfortable using public transit, especially if they have small children (Kilbride 2008, 33).

Additionally, many immigrant mothers, including those from Latin American countries, may be primary caregivers of their children. Policy makers within the LINC program have tried to alleviate this barrier by funding child-minding in some centres. Nonetheless, the centres that do offer child-minding services have a limited number of spaces (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 33). As well, this service cannot accommodate all situations. In Latin American cultures specifically, parents or children may be uncomfortable leaving the child with a stranger, because they may not be accustomed to this practice, or because it may be culturally unacceptable to allow other people to take care of one's children.

Finally, women who work outside of the home may have difficulty attending LINC classes because of scheduling conflicts (Kilbride *et al.* 2008, 35), or they may not have the energy or the time to commit to LINC classes on a regular basis. This may be related to gender roles, but it could also be related to economic class. To illustrate, women who are accustomed to a culture where women generally carry out their responsibilities within the home (culturally-

defined gender role) may need to work outside of the home if their partners are not able to earn enough to provide for the family (class-defined gender role), thus making it difficult for them to have enough time or energy to attend classes.

In short, many of the common situational barriers experienced by women using LINC are connected to gender roles. Though efforts to combat these barriers include some child-minding services and transportation vouchers (Minister of Public Works 2003) these measures are insufficient, as they do not accommodate to certain gender roles. Consequently many women, whether they work within or outside of the home, are unable to access LINC classes.

#### ***IV. LINC Home Study – a more accommodating solution?***

The LINC Home Study program is part of the LINC program that allows learners to study English in their home through a traditional method or an online method. The traditional method is taught using books, CDs/cassette tapes, and weekly phone conversations with a teacher. The online method, which is much more commonly used, requires access to a computer and high-speed Internet. Learning materials include online exercises, text and voice chat (with a teacher and other students), online recording, and a weekly telephone conversation with a teacher (Centre for Education and Training n. d.). The curriculum for Home Study is the same as the LINC program (Power Analysis 2008, 8) and is taught by qualified LINC instructors. To be eligible for Home Study, students must fulfill the requirements for LINC and meet specific language requirements. (Centre for Education and Training n. d.).

To my knowledge, no scholarly research to date has been conducted on the success of Home Study in accommodating newcomers who are unable to take LINC classroom courses. However, based on its structure, the Home Study program is able to accommodate specific gender roles better than courses taught in a classroom. Women whose gender roles are mainly

carried out inside the home, who are primary caregivers of their children, or who work outside the home, can learn English in their own time and at their own pace through the Home Study program. According to a Home Study evaluation commissioned by CIC, in recent years 74 percent of Home Study students were women, compared to 67 percent in class (Power Analysis 2008, ii).

This Home Study evaluation surveyed a number of current and potential Home Study students. One common reason for students to use the Home Study course rather than the classroom course was that LINC classes were mainly offered on a full-time basis, and it was impossible for some students to attend full-time classes while they were working. Additionally, when Home Study students were asked if they would tell other newcomers about the program, 98 percent of students responded positively (Power Analysis 2008, 23).

#### **a. Effectiveness of online language learning**

A question that still begs to be asked is whether Home Study is as effective as LINC in-class courses. In CIC's evaluation of LINC, distance learning is described as "less costly, but not a good substitute for face-to-face learning," (CIC 2004, 3.0). Given the lack of research conducted on Home Study, it is impossible to know whether this program is as effective as the LINC in-class program. However, many scholars (such as Blake and Delforge 2006; Cummings 2004; Williams *et al.* 2003) have examined other online learning courses and have found that they can be an effective style of teaching and learning.

One way to examine if online courses are as effective as in-class courses is by examining a course that is taught in both methods using similar curricula. Blake and Delforge (2006) examined a first-year Spanish course taught at the University of California. Though the courses did not use the same curriculum, they both granted a first-year Spanish university credit to

successful students. The authors found that the online students have similar scores as the classroom students on the same grammar test, as well as similar or slightly better scores on writing tests. However, this research did not compare scores on oral or listening tests.

Alternately, Cummings (2004) was an English-as-a-foreign-language teacher at a university in Japan. After having difficulty with encouraging student participation in class, she began to conduct her course online instead of in the classroom. She found that the students' attitudes changed when using the online method; students became more willing to participate and to use English and their writing improved significantly. In comparison with similar classes she had taught in a classroom, the students studying online communicated more, shared more about themselves, and asked more questions of the professor. Students also mentioned that the course successfully facilitated communication with native speakers and with the instructor.

As well, in Williams *et al.* (2003), a Utah school board created a computer-assisted literacy program for ESL speakers. According to the study, this program assisted adults in improving English reading and speaking skills, enabled them to obtain better employment, and enabled them to assist their children with homework.

In summary, research conducted by Blake and Delforge (2006), Cummings (2004), and Williams *et al.* (2003) suggest that online classes may be effective learning tools and equally effective as in-class courses.

# Chapter 3: Research Findings and Discussion, by Source

## *I. LINC employees*

The five LINC employees provided greater background information as well as practical knowledge about the LINC and LINC Home Study programs.

### **a. LINC teacher**

#### **Findings**

The LINC teacher has several years of experience teaching LINC. Her classes, which are held at a women’s community centre, have around 80 or 90 percent women. Her centre offers transportation vouchers and child-minding for its LINC students. Regarding students with poor attendance levels, she states that there are a number of reasons that students miss classes and it is difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for it.

However, she observes a difference between men and women in her classes. Men typically excel compared to the women. She attributes this to home responsibilities: many women have substantial responsibilities at home and do not have a chance to study English, whereas men generally have fewer responsibilities in the home and therefore have more time to dedicate to studying English.

#### **Discussion**

If home responsibilities impede enough women to an extent that it creates a trend within the classroom, it can be assumed that there are many more women who are unable to attend classes at all because of these responsibilities. Although this idea is an assumption drawn from this key

informant's experiences and opinions, it will be confirmed within the experiences of the participants in this study.

This teacher reports about 80 or 90 percent of her students are women. This percentage is likely not representative of other LINC classes because hers are taught at a women's community centre. This agency would likely have more women than many other agencies because this centre specifically caters to women, offering child-minding and transportation vouchers for its LINC students. Not every centre is able to offer these services (Minister of Public Works 2003). On average about 67 percent of the students in LINC classes are female (Power Analysis 2008, ii).

## **b. LINC language assessors**

### **Findings**

As noted earlier, two language assessors were interviewed: one worked in Toronto; the other worked outside this city. The findings from these interviews were quite similar. To have their language assessed, newcomers go to an assessment centre where the language assessors rate their language skills using the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) system of assessment, and then refer them to a LINC language class corresponding to their level.

When asked about barriers to class attendance, both assessors commented at length on the difficulties that mothers experience in attending class while they are raising children. More specifically, the Toronto-based assessor stated that women with young children face many challenges to regular class attendance, especially those with time restraints. For example, women whose children attend kindergarten half-days have difficulty finding classes that accommodate their schedule. The other language assessor pointed out that LINC child-minding often has a waiting list. In addition, a mother with several children will have to wait longer for child-

mind than mothers with only one child. Beyond logistical constraints, the Toronto-based assessor also remarked that, in some cases, women might have family obligations that may make consistent class attendance difficult. Transportation was also an issue outside of Toronto; for some students, LINC classes at their level were not offered close to their place of residence.

Language assessors refer clients to Home Study based on a criteria set by the program. The language assessor outside of Toronto stated that the most common reasons for referral to this program were work conflicts and childcare responsibilities.

General flexibility was a major advantage of the Home Study program according to both language assessors. One language assessor also stated that Home Study was available to a wider region of people; even those who lived outside of a city could use the program. Alternately, both assessors mentioned the lack of personal contact with other students as a disadvantage to the Home Study program.

Regarding how to make the LINC in-class program more accessible, one language assessor emphasized the need for more child-minding spaces, stating that even though child-minding spaces have increased in recent years, there is still insufficient space in the program, resulting in long wait times.

Neither language assessor believed that going to an assessment centre would be a barrier for students who want to use the LINC Home Study course. The assessment centres try to be very flexible to students' needs, even offering assessment after hours and in alternate locations.

Promotion of the Home Study program is quite extensive according to both assessors. In Toronto, outreach is conducted through printed materials and personal visits to organizations that serve high proportions of immigrants. However, this assessor also noted that LINC Home Study has only recently been offered in the Toronto area. According to the other assessor, outreach in

her city conducted in a similar manner, although this language assessor remarked that most of their current Home Study clients have been referred by friends or family members.

## **Discussion**

Both LINC assessors commented at length about the difficulties for mothers in attending LINC classes and raising children, including scheduling challenges, lack of child-minding spaces and restrictions in the child-minding program. This confirms Kilbride *et al.* (2008) and CIC's LINC evaluation (CIC 2004, 3) that a need for childcare is a significant barrier to attending LINC classes.

The assessor outside of Toronto also mentioned the barrier of transportation, which the LINC evaluation deemed a "major barrier" (CIC 2004, 3.0). This may be less of an issue in Toronto, where there are so many LINC classes offered that transportation is probably less of a barrier than it would be in other smaller cities or rural areas across Canada.

The need for childcare and transportation could be gender-related barriers. Certain women may not be accustomed to taking public transit, their culture may discourage them from traveling outside of the home alone, or if they have a vehicle, their spouses may be the primary income earner and may use the car to travel to work. Regarding childcare, some women are the primary caregivers of their children and therefore a waiting list or a lack of child-minding offered near their place of residence may be a barrier to accessing language classes. On the other hand, some women may not be comfortable allowing someone outside of the family take care of their children, as would be required in the LINC child-minding service. Alternately, the barriers of lack of childcare or transportation may not always be caused by gender. As the Third World Feminist theory states, culture and gender must also be examined in connection to



socioeconomic class. Some women may not be able to use transportation or obtain childcare not for cultural reasons but for financial reasons, such as being unable to afford these services.

**c. LINC Home Study employees**

**Findings**

The two LINC Home Study employees drew from their extensive experience to provide more thorough information regarding this program. Home Study was created to address the need for English language instruction in rural areas. Its growth is attributed to its ability to address other areas of need, including needs of women who are unable to use classroom courses.

Approximately 75 percent of students in the Home Study program are women. According to one of the Home Study Employees, “Due to family care, a lot of women are unable to attend regular LINC classes even with the child-minding services. Therefore LINC Home Study is an option for them.” Currently 950 students across Ontario are enrolled in the program.

Compared to in-class courses, Home Study benefits students by offering a large amount of flexibility. Students can use the Home Study program in their own time and at their own pace. Between these factors as well as one-on-one phone calls with teachers, the program is individualized based on student need.

When asked about the effectiveness of Home Study as a method of learning English, the key informants referred to an evaluation about Home Study that was funded by CIC. This evaluation found that even though students spend more time studying English in a classroom than through Home Study, the overall progress, satisfaction, and effectiveness was the same between the LINC and Home Study programs when given the same time commitment.

Another point that the Home Study employees mentioned in this interview is that through one-on-one telephone conversations, some teachers are able to offer advice to assist students with settlement needs.

## **Discussion**

From the information provided by Home Study employees, it is clear that Home Study is more able to accommodate diverse gender roles than the in-class LINC program. First of all, one of the Home Study employees believes that the high percentage of women in the program (75 percent) is due to women's family responsibilities, which make it easier for them to use the Home Study program than to attend classes. Along with this, Home Study enables students to study English when it is most convenient and at the pace that suits them, which is one of the key advantages to the program according to the language assessors. Thus, women with a large amount of responsibilities or who work long hours are able to adjust their studying according to their schedules, allowing for as much or as little time to study English as best suits them. Additionally, women who have varying schedules, such as those with small children, can adjust their schedules accordingly: if a child is sick one day, his or her mother can postpone studying to a later date.

Further, one-on-one conversations allow the teacher to address certain settlement needs, which brings the service of settlement counseling to women who may not otherwise receive this type of assistance. Though this is not a linguistic need, or even part of the Home Study curriculum, it reveals how the individualization of the Home Study program enables greater accommodation of individual gender roles than classroom courses.

Overall, the Home Study program appears to accommodate certain women's roles better than the classroom LINC program. However, the Home Study employees also mention that students of Home Study do not tend to spend as much time studying as students of LINC spend

in class. Although it may be rightly assumed that this is due to the amount of time and energy needed to complete certain home responsibilities, it also indicates that Home Study students may be learning less than classroom students. This suggests that Home Study program may not be a good replacement for people who are already using LINC classes; however, it is likely a very good alternative to meet the needs of language learners that are not otherwise able to access LINC classes.

## ***II. Participant interviews***

### **a. Veronica<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Background**

Veronica is from Argentina and has two young children. In Canada, she does not live with a partner or with any other family member, as her family still lives in Argentina. Aside from several visits between Argentina and Canada, she has been in Canada for about nine years. She is not currently working outside of the home.

#### **Attitude toward learning English**

Veronica feels limited by her knowledge of English, which she mainly uses outside of her home, like when she goes shopping or runs errands. In general, Veronica thinks that classes are a good way to learn English, although she points out that she believes an individual's learning experience is often dependent on the teacher or on class dynamics. She has not taken an English course either in Argentina or in Canada. Since she arrived in Canada, she has not attended

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned previously, names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

language classes for a number of reasons: her elder child was ill for several years; following that, she gave birth to her second child, who is too young to qualify for LINC child-minding.

### **Knowledge of LINC**

Aware of the different LINC classes available, Veronica plans on starting a LINC class in a few months, when her younger child is old enough for child-minding. Though Veronica has not used a traditional-style language class, she has used the LINC Home Study course. She found it difficult to use this course, especially in taking care of her children while studying. One significant challenge was conversing with her teacher over the phone, especially when her children made noise or started crying. She did not feel that she learned very much from the program and she stopped using it.

### **b. Elena**

#### **Background**

Originally from Colombia, Elena has been in Canada for five years. Before arriving in Canada, she spent several years in the United States, followed by a year in a medium-sized Canadian city before moving to Toronto. She and her husband have a baby, while the rest of her family lives in Colombia. She does not work outside of the home. She is able to drive but her husband usually drives their vehicle to work, so she uses public transit when she is unable to use their vehicle.

#### **Attitude toward English**

When she arrived in Canada, Elena felt very limited by her level of English, but she has learned enough since then that she does not feel so limited. In her current situation, she does not have much opportunity to speak English, because she spends a lot of time at home with her child.

However, she speaks English when she goes shopping, to the library and around the community. Her husband supports her learning English, but at this time it is more important for them that Elena stay at home and take care of their baby. She emphasized that this was only temporary, as their child is so young.

Elena believes that classroom courses are a good way to learn English because the teachers help students learn various English skills like speaking and reading. She attended an English class in the United States, but she was only able to study for six months before she needed to start working. Because it was an intense course, she found it very difficult. In the Canadian city where she lived before coming to Toronto, Elena had taken an ESL course (although it was not a LINC course). She did not feel like she learned much in this course, but she appreciated that it was a short distance from her home. She left this course because she moved to Toronto and had a baby. She says, “Lo que pasa es que yo dejaba estudiar y trabajar cuando tuve [my child].” “What happened is that I stopped studying and working when I had [my child]”.

### **Knowledge of LINC**

Elena only recently learned about LINC, although she has been taking French classes in a settlement centre for some time. She is hoping to take a LINC course in the future, when her child is older and she can take advantage of child-minding services.

As well, Elena did not know about Home Study before the interview. After hearing about the program, she mentioned that she might not have a lot of time for Home Study right now, because she is busy with her baby. On the other hand, she appreciated knowing about the program, because she thought that she might be able to study a little bit at the present time, and attend a course in a class at a later date, when she is able to use the child-minding service.

### **c. Cecilia**

#### **Background**

Unlike the other participants, Cecilia lives in a city outside of Toronto. Originally from Colombia, she spent two years in the United States before immigrating to Canada. She lives with her two school-age children as well as her partner. She does not work outside of the house and she drives a vehicle.

#### **Attitude toward English**

Cecilia's husband supports her in learning English and she uses English whenever she can. However, she often feels limited communicating in English. In her home, "Desafortunadamente se hablan español." "Unfortunately, we speak Spanish."

Believing that courses are a good method of learning English, Cecilia used several different courses in the past to improve her English language skills. While she was in Colombia, she used a course to learn English via a CD that she listened to while sleeping. She felt that she learned a lot through this method. In the United States, Cecilia was only able to study English for six months, which she enjoyed despite its short duration.

#### **Knowledge of LINC**

Soon after she moved to Canada, Cecilia took a LINC course for several months, which helped improve her English. She stopped taking this class because her children were on summer vacation. While she takes care of her children, she is continuing to learn on her own through books and videos from the local library. She was unaware of Home Study before the interview, but she thinks the program would be a great opportunity for her to improve her English. She

expressed some uncertainty about conversing with a teacher over the telephone, because “Que es más difícil entender por teléfono.” “It’s more difficult to understand [someone] over the phone.”

**d. Daniela**

**Background**

Daniela is a Panamanian woman whose children are grown up and living independently. She lived in several different Latin American countries before arriving in Canada, where she has been for approximately fourteen years. She currently lives without a partner or other family members, but she is working as a live-in caregiver. In the house where she is working, she only speaks Spanish. She uses public transit when she needs to travel.

**Attitude toward English**

Daniela feels very limited because of her English level. She rarely speaks English, except for a few words when necessary. As well, she did not take any English classes before coming to Canada. Daniela wishes to learn more English because she wants to be able to communicate better and she believes that classroom courses are a good way to accomplish this. On the other hand, she has experienced much difficulty in her attempts to learn English this way. Different jobs have required her to relocate frequently, which made it impossible for her to complete a full course. In addition, she faces challenges in focusing and studying. Her current efforts to improve her English include listening to spoken English around her and independent book-based study.

**Knowledge of LINC**

At one point, Daniela was using the LINC program, which she felt she learned a lot from, but she had to leave the class when she relocated for work. She is aware of where LINC classes are

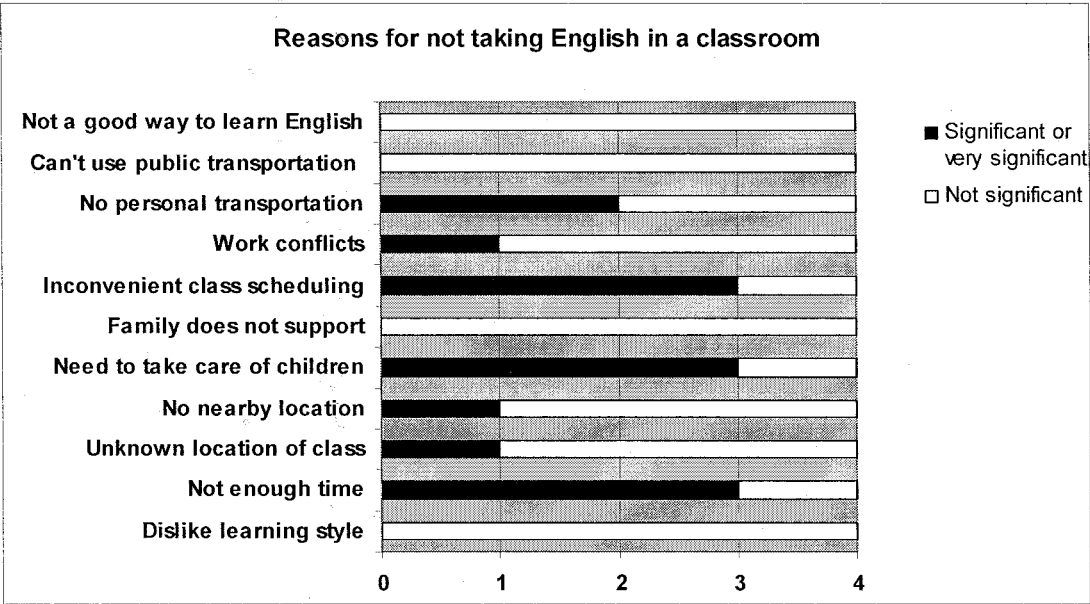
offered near her current place of residence. However, she did not know about the Home Study program before the interview. She does not think this program would benefit her for a number of reasons, including that she has difficulty learning, she moves frequently, and most significantly, she does not have easy access to a telephone. She would not be able to use a telephone on a consistent basis or for long periods of time as required by the Home Study program.

III. Participant questionnaires

a. Class attendance

Findings

Based on the first question of the questionnaire, the reasons that the four participants noted to be significant in not taking a classroom-based English language course are displayed below.



Among the participants, the most prevalent reasons for not taking an English language class are: inconvenient class scheduling, needing to take care of children, and not enough time. Three of



four participants note these as significant barriers. Next, two of four participants mention that a lack of personal transportation and not knowing class location are significant barriers to using an English language class. Work and no nearby class location are significant barriers for only one person respectively. None of the participants think that a classroom style is not a good way of learning English, nor do they think that a dislike of classroom-style learning is a significant barrier to them taking an English class. Also, none of the participants are deterred by a lack of family support. Although none of the participants are unable to use public transportation, it should be noted that two feel that a lack of personal transportation is a significant barrier in using language classes. As well, one participant wrote on her questionnaire that she is unable to take classes because she relocates frequently for work.

## **Discussion**

All of the participants who have young children note a need for childcare as a major barrier to attendance to LINC classes; thus it is the most significant barrier mentioned in this research. The LINC language assessors and the Home Study employees concur, as they also mention lack of childcare as a significant barrier to class attendance. The literature, including the LINC evaluation (CIC 2004, 3.0) and Kilbride *et al.* (2008) reflects this as well. Armstrong (1996) found the same need among ESL literacy learners in the USA, and McArthur (1998) discovered a similar need in a USA national survey. The need for childcare may be even more significant for these Latin American women than for immigrant women from other cultures. This is because taking care of children is a very significant part of women's gender roles in Latin American cultures (De Los Rios, 2007), and some of these women are unable to share this responsibility with their husbands or others (Bernhard et al 2005, 5).

The issue of “inconvenient class scheduling” is recognized as a significant barrier by three of the four participants. However, the Toronto-based language assessor states that over 700 classes are offered across Toronto, and about half of these are part-time, which includes evenings and weekends. Not including the response of the non-Toronto participant, the barrier at hand is therefore probably more accurately defined as “not having enough time”, which I assume to be correct because the same people noted both issues as barriers.

Timing and scheduling difficulties are barriers recognized by Kilbride *et al.* (2008, 33-35) and Hayes (1989). Similarly, the issue of not having sufficient time to attend class is noted by the LINC teacher, who attributes women’s reduced success in the LINC classroom (compared to men) to their home responsibilities. In Latin American cultures, taking care of the household is generally the woman’s responsibility. Thus, women may not have sufficient time to both take care of the household and attend class, especially if they also have to take care of children.

Further, because women’s roles are carried out within the household, either they or their partner may not see a need for the woman to attend class, or believe that there is no need for the woman to know English. These opinions may particularly be true in Latin American cultures, where paid employment is often viewed as contradictory to fulfilling a woman’s home and child responsibilities (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 551). However, these beliefs are not likely held by the two women with partners in this study, because both women mention that they desire to learn English and that their partner supports them in this.

Next, two participants noted “no personal transportation” as a significant barrier to class attendance; however, none of the participants mentioned that they were unable to use public transportation. The fact that transportation remains a barrier could be due to their home location; they may not live close to transit. To support this, the language assessor outside of Toronto

mentioned that transportation could be an obstacle to class attendance. Similarly, in the LINC evaluation (CIC 2004, 3.0) as well as in research conducted by Kilbride *et al.* (2008) in Toronto, Hayes (1989) and McArthur (1998) in the United States, lack of transportation is noted as a major barrier.

Work-related conflicts were only significant to Daniela, as she was the only participant with remunerated employment. This was perhaps the most important barrier for Daniela: not only was she unable to attend class consistently because of changing work locations, she was also unable to use the Home Study program.

In US-based research, where there is usually a charge for ESL classes, work-related conflicts are found to be barriers to class attendance (Hayes 1989; McArthur 1998), but in Canada, LINC is government-funded. The fact that work-related conflicts are still a barrier for Daniela shows that even though LINC classes are free, some women's employment responsibilities can hinder their ability to attend classes. This is confirmed in Kilbride *et al.*'s (2008) research on female language learners in Toronto.

As well, none of the participants have concerns with classroom-based learning as a method of learning, and none of them disliked this method enough for it to be a barrier to attendance. This corresponds with the LINC Home Study evaluation, which found that most people in the study preferred to learn English in a classroom (Power Analysis 2008, 30).

## **b. LINC Home Study**

### **Findings**

Elena had several concerns about using Home Study, especially regarding taking care of her baby. Most of the points that were listed in the interview concerned her, except that she

expressed little concern regarding her ability to learn on her own and she was not concerned about having her language skills tested. Although she is very busy with her young child, she feels that she might be able to study English on her own through Home Study when she is available, and could attend LINC classes once her child is old enough for child-minding.

Conversely, Cecilia is very enthusiastic about Home Study. Her questionnaire revealed that she has few concerns in using this program. Although she thinks that it may be difficult to speak on the phone in English, she already studies independently through books and videos.

On the other hand, Daniela is fairly certain she would be unable to use the Home Study program. She indicated that most of the items on the questionnaire concerned her. She also wrote on her questionnaire that she was unable to use the Home Study program because she did not have a telephone. In the interview, she confirmed that a lack of telephone access was her largest concern. She also mentioned that Home Study might not work for her as she relocates frequently and has difficulty learning.

Unlike the other participants, Veronica had used the Home Study program previously. Therefore, instead of answering the question regarding reasons that may concern her in taking the Home Study course, she answered the question by noting the reasons why she was no longer taking this course. Her significant challenges included having too many distractions and responsibilities at home and not having enough energy for the course. Her interview responses revealed that she found there were too many distractions around her house, especially in taking care of her children while studying, thereby leading her to stop using the course.

## **Discussion**

The findings from the participants regarding Home Study are different according to each woman's situation. For Elena and Cecilia, it appears that Home Study would be a good option.

The flexibility of the program allows it to accommodate their personal situations. For Cecilia, who already had attended LINC classes and who intends to return in the future, the ability to continue with the same curriculum on her own through Home Study would be of great benefit. She could use the program while her children are at home during the summer, then return to LINC classes when her children return to school. Similarly, Elena could use the Home Study program when she has time during her child's infancy.

Both Cecilia and Elena are unable to attend LINC classes largely because they are primary caregivers of their children, a responsibility that is likely affected by Latin American cultures, in which women are often the primary caregivers of children (De Los Rios 2007). However, the Home Study program would accommodate their situation by allowing them to learn English at home. This confirms the Home Study employees' and language assessors' comments on the flexibility of the Home Study program being extremely beneficial to students.

Alternately, Daniela's situation would not be sufficiently accommodated by Home Study. Her employment situation does not allow her enough flexibility even to study LINC at home. Unless she was able to obtain consistent employment with more telephone access, it is unlikely that Daniela would benefit from Home Study.

Veronica had already used the Home Study program and experienced too many distractions at her home to benefit very much, leading her to stop using this program. It appears that her responsibilities, to take care of children and the home, is actually inhibiting her from learning English, because she is unable to use LINC or the Home Study program. According to a language assessor, this is uncommon. Instead, many people make good progress and "Everybody who is doing it loves it." Despite this, the fact that Veronica's responsibilities inhibit or prevent her from using LINC and Home Study suggests that other women may also be inhibited from

using these programs due to their gender role, especially in Latin American cultures where women often have the primary responsibility of taking care of children and the household (De Los Rios 2007).

## Chapter 4: Final Discussion and Conclusion

### *I. Gender role accommodation*

The findings of the current study regarding LINC class attendance are largely in accordance with the findings in the literature. This literature and research reveals the significant barriers to language classes, which include, most importantly, a need for child-minding, not having enough time, lack of transportation and work conflicts, which can all be linked to the women's gender roles and responsibilities.

The women in this study who have children are the primary caregivers: a responsibility often assigned to women within Latin American cultures (De Los Rios, 2007). The women confirm that this responsibility hinders their ability to attend LINC classes. Both of the women with babies discuss a future desire to attend language classes when the children are old enough for LINC child-minding. This appears to contradict Bernhard *et al.*'s (2005, 5) suggestion that it is culturally unacceptable for Latin American women to allow others to fulfill their childcare duties, however it is possible that the women in the present study may see the social or emotional cost of not fulfilling their responsibilities as less significant than the ability to use English.

Similarly, not having enough time can be associated with many home responsibilities, including childcare. Both the Home Study employees and the LINC teacher discuss these responsibilities as being challenges for women in attending language class. These responsibilities may be strongly associated with culture. Many women in Latin American cultures highly value the family, and they are largely responsible for taking care of children and the household (De Los Rios, 2007). It is likely that culturally-defined child and household responsibilities interfere with the ability of the women in this study to access LINC classes.

A lack of transportation can also be caused by gender role: husbands or male partners, who work outside of the home, may take the vehicle to work. This may be caused by the man's responsibility as primary income earner, as is common in many Latin American cultures (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Alternately, work conflicts can occur when a woman's role is to gain remunerated employment and it hinders her ability to attend English classes.

On the other hand, the major barriers to class attendance are not always due to a woman's gender role or responsibilities. As the Third World Feminist theory states, culture and gender must be considered alongside socioeconomic class and race.

Socioeconomic class is related to a woman's role. For many of these participants, they are able to stay at home and work within the house, but for some women, due to their socioeconomic class, it may be necessary for them to work outside of the house even though they may not be accustomed to it. For example, in the present study, Daniela may need to work because no one is currently supporting her financially, even though she may have worked within the home when her children were young. In her situation today, her employment makes it difficult for her to benefit from LINC or the Home Study program. Therefore, it is possible that because of her economic status, she is essentially trapped in her situation: wanting to learn English, but being unable to because of inconsistent employment, while relying on employment to provide for her needs.

As well, some of these women may have more opportunity if they were of higher socioeconomic classes: they may be able to send their children to daycare or have a personal tutor teach them English within their home. This could result in fewer barriers, thereby enabling them to access English language classes.



Race is not as severe of an issue for the participants in the present study as others, because they do not belong to a particularly racialized group in Canada. However, it is possible that the fact that they are newcomers may disadvantage them to some opportunities within Canada, thereby intensifying some of the barriers that they already experience.

Overall, gender roles are significant to the barriers women experience in accessing language classes. On the other hand, other aspects of identity, like class and race, may also contribute to these barriers.

The barriers to LINC classes, which are revealed in the present study and other literature, expose the need for an alternative form of delivery of language courses for women who are not able to access LINC classes. LINC Home Study may be a good alternative for several reasons; most importantly, Home Study is less likely to interfere with childcare or household responsibilities. This is especially beneficial to women who are primary caregivers to children or who have extensive household responsibilities, which is true for many Latin American women (De Los Rios 2007). The flexibility of Home Study allows students to study basically whenever and wherever it is convenient to them. Similarly, women who work outside of the home can study whenever it best suits their schedules.

It is also true that the Home Study program is not suitable for everyone; in the present study, one participant had used Home Study and had experienced difficulty taking care of her children while studying or while speaking with her teacher on the phone. More research needs to be conducted regarding the extent of situations that can be accommodated by the Home Study program; however, it can be assumed that some of the women who are not currently able to access LINC classes would be able to benefit from Home Study.

## *II. Main objectives*

At the beginning of this research paper, I developed a number of objectives that I wanted to fulfill in order to successfully reveal the matters discussed in the thesis statement. As a reminder, these objectives were:

1. To reveal the barriers experienced by some newcomer women in accessing LINC classes and how these barriers relate to diverse gender roles.
2. To bring to light the experiences of four women whose situations have not been accommodated by the LINC program and who are therefore currently not benefiting from LINC classes.
3. To identify the LINC Home Study program as a possible method of reducing these barriers and of enabling women to study English who face barriers in using the classroom-based LINC course.

The following is how these objectives have been reached, in my opinion. A review of the literature revealed the wide range of barriers that inhibit women from using ESL classes. The present research revealed that among these barriers, a lack of childcare, not having enough time, a lack of personal transportation, and work conflicts are significant to the four women interviewed in this study, preventing them from accessing LINC classes. The most significant of these appears to be a need for childcare, which is connected to women's gender roles because women are often the primary caregivers to their children.

Alternately, the LINC Home Study program may better accommodate diverse gender roles. Some of the women interviewed in this study believed Home Study to be a good option for them, because it would reduce the barriers that were preventing them from using LINC classes. As well, LINC employees also emphasized the possibility of this program to assist women who

were not benefiting from in-class LINC, especially because the program's flexibility allows women to fit learning English to their schedules and situations.

### ***III. Directions for future research***

More research needs to be conducted on the Home Study program and other distance study language courses, especially on their ability to benefit immigrants who are not able to access in-class courses. The present research suggests that distance study would be an excellent alternative for some immigrants, especially for women who have extensive gender-related responsibilities such as taking care of children, other duties within the home, or working outside of the home.

Furthermore, the delivery of other services for immigrants should be examined, especially by consulting the immigrants who are not able to use such services. The present research suggests that the "one size fits all" format of service delivery; that is, delivering services through only one medium, does not accommodate all situations. As a result, it appears that immigrants do not have equal opportunity regarding accessing services, which contradicts the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which states that people in Canada must have equal opportunity, regardless of culture or origin (CIC 2008).

### ***IV. Policy recommendations***

Based on the findings offered by key informants in this research paper, along with the findings within the literature, I offer several policy recommendations to enable more Canadian immigrant women to benefit from English language programs.

Most importantly, the needs of immigrants who are not able to access English language classes must be addressed. The Home Study program and other distance English courses need to be expanded so that immigrants who are currently unable to access language classes may have

greater opportunity to increase their levels of English. As well, although the Home Study program already has a comprehensive outreach plan, as outlined by the language assessors in this study, some women still may not know about this program. Home Study, along with other distance English language courses should be promoted in different languages, as well as to immigrant-serving agencies, so that a newcomer who uses any service can be made aware of these programs.

Next, although many immigrants would greatly benefit from distance studies courses, some would receive greater benefit from LINC classroom-style courses. The barriers that they currently experience may be alleviated by a few programming changes. First of all, there needs to be more space available in the LINC child-minding program. Because the most significant barrier noted by the key informants in this study is a need for childcare, more spaces in the child-minding program will alleviate this barrier.

Along the same lines, transportation vouchers should be made available for all LINC students in all centres where LINC is offered, so that newcomers who need these vouchers are able to access LINC classes in the area which is most convenient for them.

Through these policy changes, more women may be able to benefit from the LINC English language programs, both distance study and classroom study, which may enable them to obtain higher levels of English fluency.

## ***V. Conclusion***

The present study reveals some of the barriers women face in accessing the in-class LINC program, and suggests that the classroom LINC program may not benefit some immigrants. More research needs to be conducted in order to understand the best method of overcoming these barriers. More generally, it appears that it would be beneficial for immigrant services to be

provided through different mediums so that a wider range of cultures and situations may be accommodated. In the present study, information regarding Home Study suggests that distance studies may be an effective way to accommodate women who are unable to use classroom-style English language courses, especially women who have extensive gender-related responsibilities, so that they have the opportunity to use government-funded assistance to improve their English to language levels.

## **Appendix 1: Interview Questions for LINC Employees**

### ***LINC Home Study employees***

1. What are your positions with LINC Home Study?
2. Why was the Home Study course developed?
3. Do you know approximately how many people take Home Study compared to those who take LINC courses in-class?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Home Study courses verses classroom LINC courses?
5. Do you think that Home Study is just as effective as LINC classes in learning or improving English?
6. Can you suggest any changes that could be made in order to enable more women to use Home Study?

### ***LINC teacher***

1. What work do you do with LINC?
2. What is the percentage of women compared to men in your classes?
3. Does your workplace offer childcare or transportation tokens for students?
4. What are some common difficulties that students mention in regards to attending LINC classes?
5. Do you think that certain women are not able to attend LINC classes? What are the reasons behind this?
6. What would you change so that the LINC program was more accessible to women?

### ***LINC language assessor***

1. What work do you do with LINC?
2. Do you know of any common difficulties that students mention in regards to attending classes?
3. Who do you recommend Home Study to?
4. What are the criteria for deciding who will take Home Study?
5. Do you know of any advantages and disadvantages of Home Study courses verses classroom courses?
6. Do you think that the fact that potential students need to be assessed at a settlement agency is a deterrent to those using Home Study? (Some students may prefer Home Study because they have difficulty attending a class and therefore may have difficulty going to an assessment centre)
7. Do you think there is any way to make the LINC program more accessible to all women?

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions with Hispanic Participants

(Translated from Spanish)

1. In which country did you spend most of your life?
2. How long have you been in Canada?
3. Do you have a spouse or partner that lives with you in Canada?
4. Do you have children or other family members living with you?
5. Do you work outside the home?
  - b) If yes, do you use English in your workplace?
6. Do you ever feel limited because of your level of English?
7. How often do you use English?
8. In what situations do you use English?
9. Why do you want to learn more English?
10. Does your family support you in learning English? How?
11. Do you think classes are good way to raise your level of English? Why/why not?
12. Do you often travel outside of your neighbourhood without another adult?
13. Did you take any English course before arriving in Canada?
  - a. Were they in-class or online or self-study?
  - b. Did you like them? Why/why not?
14. Did you take classes in Canada? Was it LINC?
  - a. (If you have - for #14, or #13 if only it applies), Did you learn a lot from it?
  - b. What problems did you encounter?
  - c. Why did you stop taking this class?
15. (If not taken English in Canada) Have you heard of language classes in Canada?
  - a. Have you heard of LINC? (If yes) Do you know where LINC is offered?
  - b. Can you tell me why you do not currently take classes in Canada?
16. Have you heard about courses where you can learn English at home?

(If yes) Have you heard of LINC Home Study?

(If yes) Have you used this program? (If no) Why not?

(If no, I explained the program)
17. (For those who have not used course) If you had known about this program before, would you have used it?
  - a. What would have made it more likely for you to use this program?
  - b. Would you like information on where to go to use this program?

# Appendix 3: Questionnaire

(Translated from Spanish)

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the reasons you aren't taking an English course in a classroom setting. Use 1 for a reason that does not affect you and 5 for reason that is very significant to you.

- ☐ I don't like the courses taught in a classroom
- ☐ I don't have enough time
- ☐ I don't know where classes are held
- ☐ Classes are not offered in a nearby location
- ☐ I have to take care of my children
- ☐ My family or my spouse doesn't support me going to class
- ☐ Classes are not offered at a convenient time
- ☐ I have to work
- ☐ I don't have transportation
- ☐ I don't know how to use public transit (TTC)
- ☐ I don't think taking a class is a good way to learn English

If there are any other reasons why you are not taking an English course in a classroom setting, write them here:

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If you were thinking about using the LINC Home Study program, which of the following would be concerns for you? Use a scale of 1 to 5: 1 is for 'not a concern' and 5 is for 'a very large concern'.

- ☐ I'm not sure I have enough time
- ☐ I'm not sure I would like to study at home
- ☐ There might be too many distractions at home
- ☐ I might have too many responsibilities at home
- ☐ I'm not sure I can learn from books, CDs or the internet
- ☐ It might be difficult to do on my own
- ☐ I might not have enough energy for the course
- ☐ I am unable to go to an assessment centre
- ☐ I might not have my language skills assessed because it might be stressful or difficult

If you would have other concerns, please list them below:

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