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# "I want to find a better place" : Assyrian immigrant women and English-language acquisition

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“I WANT TO FIND A BETTER PLACE”: ASSYRIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND  
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by

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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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ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Master of Arts, 2009  
Immigration and Settlement Studies  
Ryerson University

ABSTRACT

Canada’s point system has helped ensure that many immigrants, both men and women, are fluent in English upon arrival (Kilbride et. al, 2008). Consequently, research has indicated that those who enter as sponsored or dependent family members, the majority of whom are adult women, arrive with limited fluency in English. A qualitative research approach, including two focus-group interviews with seven Assyrian immigrant women helped identify factors that have stymied or facilitated their successful acquisition of English. Conceptualizing the relationship between the language learner and the social world, a feminist poststructural theory (Weedon, 1997) provided a glimpse into the ways in which proficiency or, lack thereof in English has impacted the lives of Assyrian immigrant women in the areas of work, family and well-being. The findings suggest there are needs specific to each ethno-linguistic group and that a one-size-fits-all approach in English programming does not help address these differences.

**Keywords:** immigrants; Assyrian women; English acquisition; feminist poststructural theory

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## INTRODUCTION

Canada's point system has helped ensure that many immigrants, both men and women, are fluent in English upon arrival (Kilbride et. al, 2008). Consequently, research has indicated that those who enter as sponsored or dependent family members, the majority of whom are adult women, arrive with limited fluency in English. Moreover, it should come as no surprise that immigrant women contribute significantly to the well-being of their families and that lacking proficiency in the English-language makes it difficult to access the services and resources that address their needs (Boyd, 1992).

Various social scientists have acknowledged the importance of immigrant language skills in shaping the social interaction and labour market experiences of immigrants. According to Boyd (1992), language becomes a form of economic capital, in that it influences where workers are hired, their job productivity and also, their wages. As argued by Kilbride et. al (2008), "understanding and addressing the challenges women face in learning English might contribute towards being able to prevent the present considerable loss in human and financial capital" (Kilbride et. al, 2008, pg.6).

Moreover, the high cost of housing in the large metropolitan areas and difficulties encountered in getting credentials recognized usually means that immigrants require more than one income in order to make ends meet. However, language instruction for immigrant women with children becomes an unaffordable luxury (Kilbride et. al, 2008). Similarly, unaffordable childcare requires that these women stay at home to care for their children. Subsequently, when their children enter the school system, English-learning classes may no longer be feasible either because they have been in the country for a long period of time or because they have acquired citizenship (Kilbride et. al, 2008).

There are a number of issues that impact the acquisition of English by immigrant women.

Some of these include: (1) country of origin; (2) immigration policies and economic conditions; (3) accessibility of services; (4) structural/institutional barriers and (5) differences in motivation (Abu-Rabia, 1997; Cumming, 1992; Kilbride et. al, 2008; Kobayashi, 2002; Kouritzin 2000; Rockhill, 1987; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

Against the background of the research done on immigrant women's English language acquisition, my research sought insight into the challenges and opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in their English-language acquisition. My reasons for focusing more specifically on Assyrian immigrant women are two-fold: (1) I share the same ethno-racial background; and (2) the subject of the acquisition of English by Assyrian immigrant women has been generally under-researched. Reflecting long-standing feminist criticisms of the absence or marginalization of immigrant women in research accounts (Olsen, 1994), this study intends to theorize the under-theorized.

This report is organized into seven sections: (1) introduction; (2) literature review; (3) theoretical framework; (4) methodology and research design; (5) findings; (6) discussion; and (7) policy recommendations. This report will provide new insights into the challenges and opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in their English-language acquisition. The intended goal of this report is to: (1) problematize the invisibility of Assyrian immigrant women in the research realm; and (2) to encourage both researchers and policy makers to recognize that there are needs specific to each ethno-linguistic group and that a one-size-fits-all approach does not help address these differences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A comprehensive overview of the multidisciplinary academic research currently available on adult immigrant women in Canada does not fit within the parameters of this paper. I have chosen to focus more specifically on the following factors: (1) the accessibility of services; (2) gender inequalities; and (3) economic conditions.

## **The Accessibility of Services**

On an annual basis, Canada receives approximately 250,000 immigrants (Triadafilopoulos, 2006). According to Triadafilopoulos (2006), in 2004, 57 percent of immigrants admitted into Canada belonged to the skilled or business class, whereas only 26 percent were admitted under the family class. Because immigrant women arrive with limited or no knowledge of the English language, the majority arrive principally as dependents and family class sponsored immigrants (Triadafilopoulos, 2006). According to Kilbride et. al, because men are more likely than women to be proficient in one of Canada's official languages (English, French), they have more than likely entered as principle applicants, on a points system that gives credit for levels of English/French language proficiency.

### **Immigrant Women and the 'Family Class' Status**

Women comprise just over half of all people who immigrate to Canada. For instance, between 1994 and 2003, a total of 1.1 million females were admitted to Canada as immigrants. These women made up 51% of all immigrants admitted to Canada during this period (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). The majority of females immigrating to Canada come with their family. In the period between 1994 and 2003, 36% of the females admitted were considered family class immigrants, while another 37% came as the spouse or dependent of an economic migrant. During the same time period, only 11% of female immigrants were admitted into the country as principle applicants in the economic class, compared with 33% of male entrants. Female immigrants are considerably more likely than males to be admitted to Canada as family members. For instance, between 1994 and 2003, 72% of female immigrants came to Canada as either family class immigrants or spouses or dependents of economic class applicants (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

The family class status has not only served as justification for the differential treatment of women in language training programs, it has also encouraged an increased dependency of women on their sponsors (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). In 2004, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) reported that 18 percent of principal applicants could not speak either English or French compared to 39 percent of family class immigrants and 50.5 percent for spouses and dependents (CIC Facts and Figures, 2004). The inability of family class immigrants, the majority of whom are women, to access particular language training programs not only impedes on their mobility within the labour market, limited proficiency in English makes it extremely difficult for these women to communicate with various central institutions and thus, encourages the “marginalization, isolation and extreme dependency on family members to carry out even basic daily activities and relationships” (Arat-Koç, 1999, pg.39). Moreover, the emphasis on knowledge of English or French in immigration policy is likely to have both racial and gendered implications. For instance, research has indicated that because women are less likely than men to learn foreign languages, they either risk exclusion from immigration or, even when included, are categorized as dependents in the family class (Thobani, 2000).

### Language Training in Canada

CIC is responsible for the selection and settlement of immigrants admitted to Canada. In particular, CIC maintains its focus on the settlement, adaptation and integration of immigrants in Canadian society (Kilbride et. al, 2008). The three associated programs run by CIC include: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC); the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP); and the Host Program (Man, 2004) (see Appendix 1). Prior to 1992, the federal government funded the National Language Training Program (NLTP) in efforts to assist immigrants with their acquisition of the official languages (Man, 2004). The program

not only offered full-time intensive training but it also provided a living allowance during the six-months training period. Consequently, because the program denied services to sponsored immigrants and those individuals were deemed insufficient contributors to the labour market, “this meant that women were disadvantaged, resulting in a significant gender gap in access to the program” (Arat-Koç, 1999, pg.46).

As a result, the federal government introduced a new policy which included two types of language training programs. However, both the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and the Labour Market Language Training (LMLT) program have been criticized for reproducing gender differences in access (Man, 2004). For example, in practice, both language programs deny services to immigrants who have been in Canada for longer than a year. Additionally, because the LMLT assumes a basic knowledge of the languages, it fails to take into account the gendered inequalities that have dictated access to formal and language education. As a result, “it is likely that the program is going to serve more men than women” (Arat-Koç, 1999, pg.47).

### The Effects of Education and Literacy on English Proficiency

Limited fluency in one of Canada’s official languages is a well known challenge for newcomers (Preston & Giles, 2004). Without fluent knowledge of English or French, immigrants are often not able to obtain jobs for which they are otherwise qualified for. For immigrant women, knowledge of English or French poses an even greater challenge because historically, they have had less knowledge in official languages than men (Boyd, 1992).

Among the several factors that play a role in the acquisition of English includes levels of education and literacy. Focusing on the experiences of highly-skilled immigrant women from five countries with large numbers of well-educated women (Romania, Philippines, North and

South Korea, Iran and the United States), Preston and Giles (2004) found that only women from Korea had less knowledge of Canada's official languages than all the immigrant women they studied. English is the best known official language but Preston and Giles found that among Romanians, more than 40 percent of women knew both official languages (Preston & Giles, 2004). Their research also indicated that knowledge of Canada's official languages did not improve much with length of residence. Except for the Korean women whose knowledge of English increased by about five percent between those who arrived in the 1990s and those who arrived in the 1980s, for the women from the other four countries, length of residence had almost no impact on their knowledge of official languages (Preston & Giles, 2004). Similarly, Fennelly and Palasz (2003), in their study on the linguistic abilities of refugees in Minneapolis, found that levels of education play a role in English proficiency. Whereas the Somalis and Russians in their study reported higher levels of education and in turn, higher levels of English proficiency, the Hmong and Mexican migrants were not as well educated thus, reporting lower levels of English proficiency.

Among the female immigrant population, recent arrivals are somewhat more likely than those who have been in the country for longer periods to be unable to speak either English or French (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). Whereas prior to 1971 only five percent of those who arrived were unable to conduct a conversation in either English or French, the numbers steadily increased going up to seven percent during 1971-1980 and then reaching 12% during 1991-2001. Research indicates that immigrant women are also somewhat more likely than their male counterparts to be unable to speak an official language. In 2001, five percent of immigrant men aged 15 and older could not conduct a conversation in either English or French, compared with eight percent of all immigrant women. Moreover, a substantial portion of recent female immigrants continue to speak a non-official language in their home. For instance, between 1991

and 2001, 68% of immigrant women in Canada spoke a language other than English or French at home, compared to 52% who arrived in the 1980s and less than 23% of those who arrived prior to the 1960s (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

A substantial majority of the female immigrant population in Canada has a mother tongue other than one of the two official languages (Preston & Giles, 2004). In 2001, 83% of all immigrant women aged 15 and over who arrived in Canada in the previous decade had a mother tongue other than English or French. Of these women, only 28% reported English as their mother tongue, while only 3% reported French (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). According to Chiswick and Miller (2005), the more distant the mother tongue is from English, the more difficult it becomes for the immigrant to learn it. Analyzing data from the 1991 Canadian Census, the authors assigned Korean and Japanese as having the greatest linguistic distance to English and Afrikaans, Swedish, and Norwegian as the least. They found that after five years in Canada, 25% of Korean and Japanese immigrants could not carry on a conversation in English, compared with five percent of those whose mother tongue was close to the English language (Chiswick & Miller, 2005).

#### Immigrant Women and English-Language Acquisition

In an analysis of LINC policy and programs, Cray (1997) reports that before restructuring in 1992, 28 percent of immigrants had access to language training. In an effort to have 45 percent of eligible immigrants and refugees enrolled in language training classes by 1995, the LINC program began stressing two major objectives: (1) accessibility, and (2) providing English-learning classes that meet the individual needs of the immigrants and refugees (Cray, 1997). Using the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) framework for language proficiency, immigrants undergo an initial assessment based on their level of proficiency and are then

directed to an appropriate language training facility. A subcomponent of this initiative includes the Enhanced Language Training (ELT) which involves workplace-specific language training (Cray, 1997). Unlike the LINC program, the ELT trains immigrants in higher levels of English proficiency and includes a job placement and mentoring program (Kilbride. et al, 2008).

According to Arat-Koç (1999), adult male immigrants, the majority of whom enter as principal applicants, and who are usually heads of households, receive the major advantages of Canada's language training programs so that they can enter the workforce quickly. Whereas the ELT provides specialized or advanced language training targeting those individuals whose labour market skills are in demand, most often being adult male immigrants, LINC is aimed at providing basic communication skills. As argued by Man (2004), one of the problems with Canada's language training policy is that the two tiers of language programs are likely to (re)produce gender differences in access. For instance, the LMLT assumes a basic knowledge of Canada's official languages and given existing worldwide inequalities in access to both formal and language education, women are placed at a disadvantage (Man, 2004).

Most of the literature exploring the relationship between immigrant women and English classes maintain accessibility as the biggest constraint in attracting and retaining students for English-language instruction (Kilbride et. al, 2008). For instance, in his research on access to literacy and language minority adults, Cumming (1992) argues that minority groups and more specifically immigrant women are confronted with a number of barriers that hinder their participation in instructional programs. Despite Cumming's recognition that "immigrant women may be bound to family responsibilities, jobs, or traditional roles, which prevent them from more extensive socialization and cultural adaptation" (Cumming, 1992, pg.1), many of the policy solutions he offers fail to take into account cultural conflicts that have complicated arguments

around the accessibility of English-learning classes.

Whereas Cumming suggests the introduction of classes within ethnic neighbourhoods, convenient class schedules, providing instructional materials these women can relate to, on-site daycare, and workplace ESL programs (Cumming, 1992), Kouritzin (2000) problematizes these solutions. For Kouritzin “when culturally, these women must prioritize their roles as mother, wife, daughter-in-law, paid worker, and caring for the needs of others, then their attendance is subject to the health and welfare of the members of their families” (Kouritzin, 2000, pg.26).

In an effort to remediate access difficulties in Canada, the state has redirected funds previously provided in the training (living) allowances to the purchase of more seats in English-learning classrooms. Consequently, Boldt (1994) has pointed out that such ‘remedy’ not only failed to provide spaces for women who required infant care but also, that many teachers argued that the exit-level criteria was insufficient to meet the demands of life and employment in Canada. Moreover, research has suggested that even the most accessible English classes suffer from student attrition because “the classes do not suit student needs, because of geographic inconvenience, or because of other reasons, perhaps less apparent” (Kouritzin, 2000, pg.17). As alluded to in Rockhill’s (1987) article, wide-scale drop-out rates in ESL classes may be precipitated by someone in the family getting sick, a change of work, or of living arrangements. Moreover, in Pierce’s (1995) case study, she found that most reported drop outs were women, the majority of whom were mothers who felt the instruction to be irrelevant to their needs.

### **Gender Inequalities**

Similar to Canadian-born women, immigrant women are confronted with gender discrimination in both their homes and communities (Kilbride et. al, 2008). For instance, Kouritzin argues that within the dominant ideology of the family, each family member has a

historically defined role. Whereas men have been defined as the financial providers who engage in the public sphere, women have been made responsible for the family's emotional and physical well-being and the educational development of their children (Kouritzin, 2000). According to Kouritzin, within immigrant cultural frameworks, many of these domestic tasks are first-language oriented in that "providing emotional sustenance and well-being requires mothers to be maintainers of the mother culture, keepers of the mother tongue, and guardians of familial heritage" (Kouritzin, 2000, pg.15).

Furthermore, Kouritzin argues that because these women are made responsible for the educational development of their children, it requires that they function in the majority language in order to interact with teachers, doctors and social system officials (Kouritzin, 2000). It is within this frame of thought that Kouritzin encourages us to think about the immigrant mother as having two distinct, and often contradictory roles where to accomplish one, "she must be seen to reject the English language and cultural mores in favour of those of her mother culture, and to accomplish the other, she must integrate as quickly as possible into the new life, acquiring English language and customs so as to benefit her children" (Kouritzin, 2000).

Research on immigrant women and language development has often discussed the ways in which increased language skills can disrupt cultural value systems that have defined gender roles (Abu-Rabia, 1997). For instance, in her research of fifty Hispanic immigrant women in Los Angeles, Rockhill (1987) explores "the role played by men in preventing women from going out of their homes" (Rockhill, 1987, pg.161) and argues that not being able to speak English further contributes to circumstances of vulnerability and reinforces their confinement to the home.

Similar to the argument advanced by Kouritzin, Rockhill maintains that culturally defined roles and responsibilities have constrained immigrant women's accessibility to English classes.

By arguing that “the gendered politics of literacy is about more than male/female differences in everyday communicative practices and that these differences are constructed culturally and socially, through the delegation of women to the private sphere” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.163), Rockhill encourages us to think of the way in which expressing interest in attending English classes can threaten the power relations in the family. Rockhill’s research revealed that one of the factors that complicated access to ELCs included husbands who restricted their behaviour. According to Rockhill, because men have been socialized to perform their roles as head of the household, they have been successful in exercising power over their wives by controlling what they think and do (Rockhill, 1987).

Rockhill’s work helped illustrate that the way women live sexual oppression is integrally connected to the ways they live race, class and ethnicity. For Rockhill, “these are not experienced as a series of ‘commatized’ back-ground variables but they are lived together in the mosaic of people’s lives” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.154). Rockhill’s work encourages us to consider the simultaneity of gender, race, class and ethnicity as lived experiences and also, that we consider their connection with power relations which are “lived through the construction of our subjectivities” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.154). Rockhill’s focus on literacy on the lives of 50 Hispanic women in Los Angeles provides a dynamic arena for seeing how power is manifested through “the everyday practices, social regulations and images of desire which govern their sexuality and use of language” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.155).

For Rockhill, the situation of women with respect to literacy is defined by “a pervasive male/female power dynamic, cross-cut by differing constructions of masculinity and femininity” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.161). Similarly, Ramdas (1985) argues that “there must be a clear recognition of the role played by men in preventing women from going out of their homes...”

(Ramdas, 1985, pg.103). The study Rockhill conducted in Los Angeles pointed towards gender differences in everyday literacy practices, as well as the integral relationship between the sexual oppression of women and literacy. Through the interviews with the Hispanic women, Rockhill identified a striking pattern: whereas the men acquired and used more spoken English, the women used and depended more upon the written word and as argued by Rockhill, “this has a great deal to do with the silencing of women, their confinement to the domestic sphere, and the structure of work available to people who speak little English” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.162).

Through Rockhill’s research, we realize the ways in which “men own the public” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.162), leaving no public place for the women to congregate, unless it is at work-or at school- and this is part of the threat that school poses to the gendered traditions of the people – “for it is a public place where women can potentially meet other people” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.162).

Rockhill argues that the confinement of these women to the private sphere suggests that the gendered politics of literacy is about more than male/female differences in everyday communicative practices and that these differences are constructed culturally and socially, through the delegation of women to the ‘private’ sphere where “literacy is integral to the power dynamic between men and women, to material differences in the options available to them, and to man’s domination of women through her sexuality” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.163). Even though the women in her study expressed a strong desire to take classes in order to learn English, they stopped attending because of the enormous pressures of their daily lives, including resistance at home. As one participant (Gladys) commented, “I am thinking of going to school within the next year. I went a few years ago, but I didn’t continue...you always regret it for not going to school, and for not learning....” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.164). For Gladys, attending classes is no longer a

question of learning English but of going to school. For Gladys, learning English signals advancement, of getting ahead and as pointed out by Rockhill, “Literacy and education are a different matter; they carry a symbolic dimension of movement into a better, more powerful class and culture- another world, another life, which is both desired and feared” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.164).

The construction of literacy is embedded in the discursive practices and power relationships of everyday life. Literacy, according to Rockhill is “caught up in the material, racial and sexual oppression of women, and it embodies their hope for escape” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.165). Rockhill concludes that far from being women’s right, literacy is women’s work; they do the work of literacy in the private sphere, “but they do not have the right to change-to be ‘somebody’-their husbands object, sometimes forcefully” (Rockhill, 1987, pg.165).

### Patriarchal Barriers

Other studies have pointed towards the importance of considering the relationship between patriarchal barriers and the acquisition of English by immigrant women (Kilbride et. al, 2008). For instance, in his research of Arab immigrant students’ attitudes toward second language learning within a multicultural society, Abu-Rabia (1997) interviewed fifty-two Arab immigrant students in Canada and hypothesized that one of two approaches towards English-language learning would be revealed: instrumental or integrative (Abu-Rabia, 1997). Abu-Rabia explained that whereas instrumental English involved “a more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement” (Abu-Rabia, 1997, pg.125), integrative English involved “learning more about the target language group and how to identify with it” (Abu-Rabia, 1997, pg.125). In his research, Abu-Rabia found that whereas the male students were more instrumental in their approach to English learning, the female students were more integrative in their approach.

Abu-Rabia argues that the difference between the male and female attitudes towards either instrumental or integrative English is reflective of the differential roles of men and women in these “conservative Arab societies” (Abu-Rabia, 1997). For instance, even though his research revealed that the female students and their mothers favoured integration into Canadian society, their fathers “rejected the modern behaviour of their daughters and forbade them to interact in Canadian society” (Abu-Rabia, 1997, pg.127). Abu-Rabia argues that such attitudes are reflective of the gendered divisions in conservative Arab societies where “women’s behaviour and activities are restricted and they are not encouraged to pursue careers” (Abu-Rabia, 1997, pg.127).

Subsequently, in her research on Japanese students’ attitudes towards English-learning classes, Kobayashi (2002) argues that most research into attitudes towards second language learning ends with the identification of gender differences but fails to explain aspects which account for this difference. For instance, in their study on foreign language motivation in the United States, Sung and Padilla (1998) concluded that the female students in their study were more interested in studying Asian languages than their male counterparts. The authors argued that they were uncertain as to whether or not the gender difference could be attributed to a type of socialization and that they were “inclined to believe that the advantage of female students in motivation to learn a new language had to do more with gender role modeling than with any female predisposition to learning languages” (Sung & Padilla, 1998, pg.215).

Whereas many published ethnographic studies have included researchers who “go into research settings and examine data (sources) through ‘gender-coloured spectacles’ so as to match what they see and find with their pre-assumptions about relations between gender and language” (Kobayashi, 2002, pg.184), Kobayashi draws on interdisciplinary studies in efforts to defy

essentialist explanations of gender. Kobayashi's research focuses on Japanese female students, ranging from their late teens to their mid-twenties who share positive attitudes towards English-learning classes in Japan.

Kobayashi's study revealed that the Japanese female students in her study had a more positive attitude towards English-learning classes because Japanese culture had introduced positive images of English (Kobayashi, 2002). Additionally, Kobayashi notes that these positive attitudes towards English stem partly from the nature of Japanese secondary and post-secondary education which refrains from teaching the students to think critically. As a result, Kobayashi argues that this way of learning not only "results in the production of young people who uncritically follow the crowd" (Kobayashi, 2002, pg.190), but also that the "lack of opportunities provided at school to think through lives is likely to be one factor in sustaining the gap between men and women in their choices and, in the case of women, their persistent choice of traditional feminine courses" (Kobayashi, 2002, pg.180).

### Gender, Migration and English Acquisition

Sociological research on migration and gender has documented gender identity shifts within many immigrant communities. Pessar's (1984) research on Dominican women in the United States illustrated the way in which the shift to wage labour resulted in women's greater autonomy and equality within the household. Similarly, Ui's (1991) research on Cambodian men in the United States demonstrated that although many tasks traditionally performed by women, such as housework and childcare, have endured in a new setting, Cambodian men lost many of their traditional status markers. However, other studies have pointed out that immigration can have the effect of reinforcing traditional gender roles. Lack of economic opportunities, the high costs associated with daycare, dependency on spouses and expectations to help ease the

adjustment of their children to the new country and to pass on their culture and language are but a few reasons explaining how immigrant women can “fall into a more traditional gender role almost by default” (Kilbride et. al, 2008, pg.71). For instance, Abu-Rabia notes how particular tensions along gender lines occur when the new Canadian culture is seen as clashing with the traditions of the old. In his research, it was found that fathers wanted their daughters to maintain their normative, traditional female roles as defined in the Arab society from which they came and so, forbade their daughters to interact in Canadian society. It was believed that integration into Canadian society would inhibit their ability to maintain the mother tongue and language for future generations (Abu-Rabia, 1997).

One might expect that changes in gender identity affect women’s access to second language resources. Research on sociolinguistics stresses the importance of understanding the sociocultural changes that can expand immigrant women’s opportunities for second language learning. For instance, Rockhill (1993) documented the way in which acquiring English literacy becomes “caught up in the power dynamic between men and women” (Rockhill, 1993, pg.156), and threatened the gendered cultural practices in a Latino immigrant community. Rockhill’s research helped illustrate the way in which when women attempt to enter literacy classes, men respond with violence and she explores how Latina’s “confinement to the domestic sphere” (Rockhill, 1993, pg.166) limited their opportunities to explore English. Tran and Nguyen (1994), in their research on a Southeast Asian refugee community, echoed Rockhill’s conclusion that women often have few options to learn English. Tran and Nguyen suggest that while men consider English necessary for their primary role as economic providers, women are less invested in acquiring English because their work is centered in the home.

However, as pointed out by Gordon (2004), the representation and ongoing

understanding of immigrant women as oppressed and confined to the domestic sphere requires problematization. Gordon does not deny that male violence and control do sometimes limit women's access to educational and linguistic resources but argues that we maintain caution when drawing conclusions which assume that these cases reflect the experiences of all women acquiring English. For Gordon, such an assumption "erases immigrant women's agency by failing to acknowledge their role in changing, modifying, and choosing to accept traditional gender identities in different contexts and by ignoring simultaneous shifts experienced by immigrant men" (Gordon, 2004, pg.439). Gordon cautions that such assumptions promote the inaccurate belief that immigrant women need English language skills only for domestic settings.

Gordon's research on 35 Lao women in the United States revealed that domestic tasks related to household maintenance and childrearing, tasks more frequently performed by women, often required more contact with native-English speakers and greater proficiency in spoken and written English. Gordon's research highlighted the way in which the Lao women in her study gained greater economic independence and authority in the family when having acquired English and access to wage work (Gordon, 2004). Their access to "American gendered cultural practices" (pg.444) enabled them to enact less restrictive gender identities while simultaneously eroding male authority. Participants spoke about the way in which material and cultural resources in the United States helped make Lao women "stronger" because as one Lao woman (Pha) noted, "Um, in here, is have police, have friends, have, uh, communities, help them about make the, make the woman stronger" (Gordon, 2004, pg.444). Her reflection stems from her comparison to Laos, where, in her view, "there is nothing to help them about make them stronger. Only tell her, patient and patient, you is a woman, you is a mother. You have to patient" (Gordon, 2004, pg.444).

According to Pha's account, it seems as though access to material resources affects women's lives and their ability to refuse their prescribed traditional gender identities. She mentions the importance of police, a resource not available to women in Laos. She also stresses the importance of social networks (friends, communities) and of paid work which helps "make Lao women stronger" by allowing for the opportunity to make their own choices about their identities. Of importance to note in Gordon's research is her illustration of the way in which Lao women's transition to wage labour in the United States has not only rendered their contribution to the family economy more visible and has changed family decision-making practices, but also that it has helped facilitated change in gender roles within the Lao family (Gordon, 2004).

Several researchers have indicated that in comparison to immigrant men who, are assumed to have more opportunities to acquire a second language through their everyday interactions in the workplace, immigrant women have fewer opportunities because they more often work in the home (Gordon, 2004). For instance, Goldstein (1995, 2001) demonstrated that in comparison to Portuguese women, Portuguese men entering Canada with some proficiency in English more easily obtained relatively high-paying jobs working with other English speakers, which helped them acquire English naturally.

However, as illustrated through the experiences of the Lao women in Gordon's research, working in the home does not necessarily impede women's acquisition of the English language. Because these women did not work outside the home and took responsibility for English domestic language events on behalf of their families, including interacting with school personnel, dealing with bills and communicating with English-speaking landlords, they experienced more opportunities to speak English than their husbands, who worked full-time with other Southeast Asian refugees (Gordon, 2004). More importantly, Gordon's research revealed that Lao women

were also more willing than men to ask a native-English speaker for help and as a result, contributed to their greater access to acquiring the English language. Gunthner's (1992) study on Chinese students' German acquisition helps substantiate this conclusion. Her study revealed that whereas the men concerned themselves with saving face and attempted to cope with the language problems themselves, the women did not hesitate to ask native speakers for help on a language task.

Similarly, in her study on the experiences of eight Hispanic adult females learning English as a second language in New York, Buttaro (2004) highlights factors that encouraged participation in ESL classes. The participants indicated that in addition to improving their employability by being able to get a better job, the benefits of participating in ESL classes included improving oneself, one's personal effectiveness in society and being able to help children with homework and communicating with their teachers. However, there is no denying that similar to other groups of immigrant, the women in Buttaro's study experienced a number of challenges that deterred them from participating in ESL classes. Some of these included: (1) moving to a different country; (2) their roles as wife, mother and woman; (3) a lack of understanding of English, and; (4) relationships with kin and community. One of the essential variables in the participants' success was the impact of the immediate family. The family environment and more particularly that of the child/mother relationship seemed to be the pivotal element determining academic success or failure (Buttaro, 2004). Studies have indicated that a child's motivation to succeed in school is largely influenced by the educational achievement of their mothers (Duran & Szymanski, 1995). Parents who read to their children and were involved with their children's school helped influence the achievement, attendance, motivation and behaviour of their children (Duran & Szymanski, 1995).

## Economic Conditions

The transformations of international migration generate potential inequalities in the integration experiences of immigrants to Canada. According to Boyd (1992), gender, race/ethnicity, and language are major factors that shape social interaction and labour market experiences of immigrants. Social scientists have also acknowledged the importance of immigrant language skills in integration. Language becomes a form of economic capital, in that it influences where workers are hired, their job productivity and also, their wages (Boyd, 1992). However, language skills have economic consequences. Boyd argues that as a form of capital, language proficiency is also associated with measures of economic integration. In particular, the higher the level of English/French language proficiency, the higher the labour force participation rate. For instance, studies have indicated that in the labour force, persons with low levels of proficiency have higher rates of unemployment, are more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations, and on average, have lower wages and salaries compared to other groups (Boyd, 1992).

### Earnings of Immigrant and Canadian-born Workers

In their research on the earnings of immigrant and Canadian-born workers, Frenette and Morissette (2003), using Census data covering the 1980-2000 period found that whereas the real earnings of Canadian-born men went up seven percent during this time period, recent immigrant men employed on a full-year, full-time basis experienced a seven percent fall in their real earnings. While in 1980, of all recent immigrant male workers, 22% had a university degree, by 2000, this number had doubled to 44%. Their study revealed that while the earnings of recent male immigrants have fallen over the last two decades, those of Canadian-born workers has risen thus, contributing to a growing earnings gap. Interestingly, the study also found that the earnings

of recent immigrant women increased during this time period. It is of importance to note that Canadian-born women saw their earnings increase considerably more (Frenette & Morissette, 2003).

Similar to recent male immigrants, recent female immigrants have encountered a growing earning gap with their Canadian-born counterparts. According to Frenette and Morissette, the real earnings of Canadian-born women rose 19% while those of recent female immigrants rose only 13%. Even though the educational attainment of recent immigrant women employed on a full-year, full-time bases increased faster than that of their Canadian-born counterparts, a growing earnings gap continues to worsen. Whereas the share of Canadian-born women with a degree more than doubled from ten percent in 1980 to 22% in 2000, the share of recent immigrant women with a university degree increased from 15% in 1980 to 38% in 2000. The poorer performance of recent female immigrants was seen only among women aged 30 to 54. This had clear and unfortunate consequences. Whereas in 1980, recent female immigrants were being paid 23% less than their Canadian-born female counterparts of similar ages and educational qualifications, in 2000, this gap had almost doubled to 45% (Frenette & Morissette, 2003).

The earnings gap between recent immigrant workers and Canadian-born ones has and continues to widen dramatically. While in 1980, recent immigrant men earned 85 cents for every dollar earned by their Canadian-born counterparts, in 2005 that number plummeted to 63 cents. The drop is even more pronounced for immigrant women, who went from earning 85 cents by comparison in 1980 to 56 cents in 2005 (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

## Unemployment among Recent Immigrants in Canada

Immigrants to Canada often experience difficulties finding jobs commensurate with their skills and education. Results from a new survey conducted by Statistics Canada (2003), which tracked immigrants' success in the Canadian labour market after arrival in Canada revealed that 70% of newcomers encounter problems and/or barriers in their search for employment. Lack of Canadian work experience, a lack of official language skills and the transferability of foreign credentials were the most critical obstacles to employment (Statistics Canada, 2003).

A study of market entry earnings of immigrant women and men to Canada by Aydemir and Skuterud (2005) focused on census data from 1981 to 2001 and found deterioration in successive immigrant cohorts. Their research indicated that an educated immigrant experiences difficulties finding gainful employment in Canada and that roughly one-third of their income deterioration is attributed to language ability and country of origin. The authors also found that the income decline was similar for both male and female immigrants who worked full-time (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2005).

Kahn and Watson (2005), in their research on the experiences of seven Pakistani women in Canada found that the women's hopes of prosperity had not been realized. The women spoke of the discrepancy between the assessment of their professional and work experience given to economic migrants under Canada's point system and the unfortunate reality of finding their work and professional experiences worthless in the Canadian labour force.

Generally, recent immigrants to Canada have higher levels of unemployment and lower earnings than Canadian-born workers (Preston & Giles, 2004). Whereas during the 1981 Census, the unemployment rate among those immigrants who arrived in Canada was 17.4%, the 2001 Census revealed that those immigrants who had been in Canada for less than five months faced an unemployment rate of roughly 30%. Even more troubling is the experience of immigrants

who have been in the country between one and five years. The Census revealed that these recent immigrants experience an unemployment rate significantly higher than that of the Canadian-born population (12.7% compared with 7.4%). As indicated throughout the research, on average, it takes more than 10 years before the observed unemployment rate of immigrants achieves parity with the level found among the Canadian-born population (Statistics Canada, 2003).

### Immigrants, the Canadian-born and Levels of Educational Attainment

Research has indicated that both male and female immigrants are more likely to be more highly educated than their Canadian-born counterparts (Boyd, 1992). Despite high levels of education, the unemployment rate of immigrants continues to worsen. For instance, recent immigrants with bachelor's degrees have an unemployment rate three times greater than a Canadian-born degree holder (11.8% compared with 3.9%) (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). Even more troubling is the experience of recent immigrants with Master's or Doctorate degrees. Their unemployment rates are more than 3.5 times higher than the Canadian-born graduate degree holders. Despite increasing demands for post-secondary credentials, recent immigrants with a university education have roughly the same rate of unemployment as those who did not complete high school (Statistics Canada, 2003).

According to the 2001 Census, 56% of unemployed recent immigrants held some form of post-secondary credentials, while 34% held a university degree. In comparison, roughly one-third of the Canadian-born unemployed had post-secondary credentials, while only eight percent held a university degree. Difficulties' acquiring Canadian recognition for qualifications obtained in another country is but one hurdle to employment thus, contributing to the under-utilization of immigrant skills (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

In 2001, 38.7% of immigrant women had some university education compared with only 30.4% of Canadian-born women. At the other end of the educational spectrum, the percentage of immigrant women with less than a grade nine education is double the percentage of Canadian-born women (7.4% compared with 3.2%) (Preston & Giles, 2004).

According to the 2006 Census, recent immigrant men holding a degree earned only 48 cents for each dollar their university educated, Canadian-born counterparts earned. Of those recent male immigrants who held a university degree, 30% worked in jobs that required no more than a high-school education (The Canadian Press, 2008). Though their educational levels have ‘grown remarkably’ in comparison to those of Canadian-born workers, Frenette and Morissette have argued that “experience in your home country is no longer rewarded the way it used to be, if it has any rewards at all”(The Canadian Press, 2008, pg.1).

According to Lindsay and Almey (2006) women born outside Canada are more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to have completed university. However, immigrant women continue to have lower levels of formal education than immigrant men. Moreover, immigrant women are also more likely to hold an advanced university degree in comparison to their Canadian-born female counterparts. In 2001, four percent of Canadian-born women had either a Master’s or doctorate degree, compared with six percent of immigrant women.

Consequently, while immigrant women are generally better educated than their Canadian-born counterparts, they experience higher rates of unemployment. For instance, between 1991 and 2001, only 58% of recent female arrivals between the ages of 25 and 64 were part of the paid workforce, compared with 70% of those who arrived in the 1970s and 63% of those who arrived between 1961 and 1970. In comparison to 34% of immigrant men and 45% of

Canadian-born women, 56% of immigrant women between the ages of 25 and 64 worked on a part-time, part-year basis (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

Despite high levels of education and many years of work experience, immigrant women with limited proficiency in either English/French become restricted to a particular workforce (Boyd, 1992). In her study on Chinese immigrant women in Canada, Man (2004) argues that despite high levels of education and training, employment opportunities are predicated on labour market conditions as well as “gendered and racialized institutional processes” (Man, 2004, pg.139). Left with very limited options, the Chinese immigrant women in her study found jobs in low-pay, entry level positions that did not utilize their skills, education and experience. Moreover, Man’s research indicated that long working hours and household responsibilities meant that “some women were unable to retrain or attend English language courses and so found themselves unable to extricate themselves from the menial positions they are ghettoized into” (Man, 2004, pg.142).

At first glance, educational programs offering special skills and training appear to be a way in which immigrant women can acquire additional credentials and move out of a ‘captive workforce’ (Ng, 1990). However, studies have indicated that in practice, these programs are inaccessible to most non-English-speaking immigrant women (Man, 2004). Several studies have indicated that a major obstacle to immigrant women’s acquisition of proficiency in English is programming that attempts to serve broad categories of people in the same way. Adult male immigrants, the majority of whom are heads of households, receive the major advantages of Canada’s language-training programs so that they can enter the workforce quickly.

In her research on the types of English classes offered to immigrant women, Ng (1990) argues that while the intention of the ELT is to assist women in overcoming the structural

barriers of the labour market and to promote their overall status, it is through the program that these women are constituted as particular commodities. Speaking more specifically about the employment counselling services offered to the women in this program, Ng notes that while the counselling process is a positive step in helping women with no marketable skills regarded as relevant to a highly advanced and differentiated labour process to secure employment, “it was at the same time the way in which immigrant women were organized into certain locations in the Canadian labour market” (Ng, 1990, pg.102). Feminist scholars have argued that gendered occupations exist as a result of social constructions and cultural ideologies that not only relegate but segregate these women in “occupations that require submission, dexterity, orientation to detail and sensitivity” (Cheng, 1999, pg.47). The concentration of women in particular gendered occupations causes these women to be stuck in certain job ghettos.

#### Employment in Traditional Female Jobs

The reality of the Canadian labour market is such that non-English speaking women tend to be concentrated at the bottom rungs of most service and manufacturing sectors in the so-called “non-skilled” and dead-end positions (Boyd, 1992). Similar to the overall female workforce in Canada, the majority of immigrant female workers are concentrated in occupations “traditionally held by women” (Lindsay & Almey, 2006, pg.225). For example in 2001, 46% of immigrant women who participated in the paid workforce maintained administrative, clerical, sales or service positions, compared with 22% of employed immigrant men. Moreover, immigrant women continue to be underrepresented as managers and in professional occupations in education, government, social services (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

Janke and Yaron (1979), in their research on the experiences of non-English speaking immigrant women in the metro Toronto area, found that the range of employment opportunities

open to the unskilled, non-English speaking immigrant women included: housekeepers, hotel stewards, kitchen help, dishwashers, cleaners, laundry workers, domestics, sewing machine operators, garment-cutters, light assembly-line workers, and food packers and wrappers. After surveying more than 125 employers, the authors were able to identify what kinds of employees were sought for the abovementioned jobs. Janke and Yaron found that employers were not so much concerned with previous experience however, stated that if the applicant possessed previous experience, they could obtain employment in plants producing very detailed and specialized garments for which remuneration is higher. The educational background and age of the job applicant was irrelevant to the employers, however, they did prefer middle-aged women because “their life-situations are more likely to remain stable” (Janke & Yaron, 1979, pg.7). In terms of fluency in the English language, the researchers found that some employers did hire women with minimal or no English skills, however, added that in these situations, the employer shared the same mother tongue as the job applicant (Janke & Yaron, 1979).

Focusing more specifically on the working conditions of non-English speaking immigrant women, Janke and Yaron found that these women were only able to command minimum wages or very slightly above or even below the minimum level. In terms of benefits offered to the women, the researchers learned that benefits given to these women by their employers were practically nil. Lastly, their research indicated that many of the jobs open to these women involved shift-work and/or overtime work. For instance, cleaning office buildings occurred either in the evening or at night, hotel work required shift and weekend work, and manufacturing plants that operated 24 hours with the majority of openings being for the night shift (Janke & Yaron, 1979).

One of the factors contributing to the under-utilization of immigrant skills includes a mismatch between the types of skills an immigrant possesses and the employment opportunities available to them upon arrival. Statistics Canada, in a study comparing the occupations of immigrants before and after arrival in Canada revealed that 60% of recent immigrants were finding it difficult, if not impossible, to find employment in a similar occupational field. The study found that six months after their arrival, 24.9% of employed immigrant men and 37.3% of employed immigrant women obtained employment in either sales or customer service occupations (Statistics Canada, 2003). This is particularly troubling considering that only 10.2% of these men and 12.1% of these women were employed in such occupations prior to arrival in Canada (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

When confronted with employers who undervalue foreign educational qualifications, many highly skilled immigrant women withdraw from the labour market rather than accept employment for which they are overqualified. Highly skilled immigrant women are more likely to be in less prestigious occupations such as manual workers, clerical occupations, sales and service than their Canadian-born counterparts (Preston & Giles, 2004). The disparities are substantial. For instance, the percentage of immigrant women with at least one university degree working in sales and service is 13.9%, compared with only 7.1% of Canadian-born women. Moreover, highly skilled immigrant women are more likely to be employed as clerical and manual workers than Canadian-born women (17.0% compared with 3.9%) (Lindsay & Almey, 2006).

According to a survey in Toronto on labour market conditions and training opportunities for non-English speaking women, the companies which were more likely to employ immigrant women included larger institutions such as factors and hotels (Ng, 1990). According to Das

Gupta and Ng (1981), this trend occurs because in a larger place, it is easier to accommodate new workers who need help in communicating in English (Das Gupta & Ng, 1981).

Consequently, small size companies that hire non-English speaking immigrant women usually have poor working conditions, pay low wages and moreover, due to the nature of this kind of employment (i.e. part-time, seasonal, or piece work), “labour standard legislation is not rigidly enforced in many cases, which further reinforces the poor circumstances under which immigrant women have to work” (Ng, 1990, pg.108).

According to Das Gupta and Ng, non-English-speaking immigrant women constitute a ‘captive labour force’ in Canada. By this, Das Gupta and Ng imply that the opportunities available to immigrant women, both as housewives and as wage earners, are severely limited owing to their location in society. When immigrant families come to Canada, they become more integrated into a money economy. Whereas in the home country, women produce many of the products used for family consumption, in Canada, these products need to be purchased with money. However, because the family’s expenditures cannot be met, the women are forced to seek wage-work outside the home to subsidize family incomes. Even though these women are working outside the home, they are still primarily responsible for organizing the work inside the home and so, “their paid work must always be organized in relation to their family responsibilities” (Das Gupta, Ng, 1981, pg.84). Unfortunately, this not only limits the options available to them, they become restricted to certain types of jobs which require little English and which can fit into a schedule of housework and childcare.

### Summary of the Literature Review

This review has offered an overview of the existing literature on immigrant women and their acquisition of the English language. More specifically, I have reviewed literature that has

explored the way in which (1) accessibility to services; (2) gender inequalities; and (3) economic conditions have impacted immigrant women's experiences with English learning. Immigrant women's lack of proficiency in English language is a significant barrier for their socio-economic integration in society. Despite their prior education and work experiences, they are unable to contribute fully to their family's financial well-being. The intended goal of this review has been to encourage recognition of the various challenges and/or opportunities immigrant women have been confronted with in their acquisition of language skills.

### **FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORY: COMMON ASSUMPTIONS**

While the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism serve as an umbrella for a variety of theoretical approaches, they maintain a common focus on language as the "locus of social organization, power, and individual consciousness" (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.120). Similarly, feminism also embraces a variety of movements, all of which focus on challenging the dominant patriarchy and improving life conditions for the "oppressed groups" (Pavlenko, 2001). Feminist poststructuralism is, therefore, understood as "an attempt to investigate and to theorize the role of language in construction and reproduction of gender relations, and the role of gender dynamics in language use and change" (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.120).

Pavlenko (2001), in a review of the literature on second language learning within a poststructuralist framework, outlines some of the common assumptions to all feminist poststructuralist inquiry which are critical when discussing gendered linguistic practices:

- (1) "*Rather than an individual property, gender is a system of social relations*" (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.124).

According to this assumption, gender is not so much a set of traits or a role rather, a system of culturally constructed relations of power (re)produced through interaction among men and women (Weedon, 1997). Moreover, it investigates the effects of gender as a system of social

relations on an individuals' access to linguistic resources and options for expression (Pavlenko, 2001).

- (2) *"The meaning of gender is socially and culturally constructed and, as a result, differs across cultures"* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.124).

If gender represents a system of social relations, both constructed and negotiated, then it should come as no surprise that different cultures maintain different beliefs and ideas about masculinities, femininities and the relations between the sexes (Peirce, 1994).

- (3) *"The meaning of gender is embodied in gender ideologies which are multiple, dynamic and subject to change"* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.124).

Several research studies have investigated the ways in which gender functions not only as a set of social relations but also as a hierarchy, whereby men are at the top of the hierarchy chain (Peirce, 1994). As a result, many communities attribute less value to women's way of speaking and render it inferior to men's linguistic behaviours. For instance, whereas highly valued linguistic behaviours are associated with the public sphere, which is most often dominated by men, female linguistic behaviours are associated with the private sphere and viewed as inferior (Weedon, 1997). As the gendered ideology continues to reproduce itself, the community internalizes such ideas and informs them of whose speech style is normative, whose language is seen as inferior, which forms of communication prevail and ultimately, who gets to speak and where (Pavlenko, 2001).

- (4) *"The construct of gender does not operate in isolation; it is inextricably linked to other aspects of social identity and social relations such as class, race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, age, and economic status"* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.125).

The portrayal of men and women as homogenous categories is based on ethnocentric assumptions. Even when we limit our discussion of gender to the binary opposition of female/male, it is clear that neither represents a homogenous group and that within these groups,

some identities are more powerful and thus, requires that as researchers we account for differences in class, race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, age and economic status (Peirce, 1994).

(5) *“Gender is constructed and negotiated in discourse; thus, language plays an active role in production and reproduction of gender asymmetries”* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.125).

Gender inequalities are reproduced through ideologies around language and gender which assign particular values to various social identities. Discourses become the key sites of construction and negotiation of superior and inferior gender identities. Thus, in North America, powerful masculinities are heterosexual, white middle-class ones. In contrast, research has demonstrated that any attempts at the construction of powerful femininities is more likely to bring repercussions and not rewards (Weedon, 1997).

(6) *“Power, itself a social and cultural construct, is the main intervening variable that allows us to understand the interaction between language and gender”* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.126).

Sociolinguistic researchers who investigate the relationship between language and gender examine: who defines meaning and imposes interpretation; who controls and perpetuates particular discourses; and how this control influences salient ideologies of gender and language (Pavlenko, 2001).

(7) *“Institutional settings and communities of practice are the key sites of the interaction between language and gender”* (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.127).

More recently, research on language and gender has focused on the ways in which “communities of practice” (Pavlenko, 2001), which are defined as groups whose joint engagement in some activity, gives rise to a range of shared practices. In an attempt to become a member of a particular community, individuals engage in minor participation and eventually become core members who engage in legitimate participation. Taking into account that individuals negotiate

multiple memberships, researchers focus on activity and practice to better understand how aspects of social identity interact across a variety of communities (Pavlenko, 2001).

In light of the above discussion, the analytical framework through which this research is guided is founded on feminist poststructuralist theory, which conceptualizes identity as multiply constructed, contradictory and fluid and posits a relationship between language and identity (Peirce, 1994). This theoretical framework acknowledges that gender is constructed along with other identity categories such as class, race and linguistic and cultural background (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). A feminist poststructuralist theory is productive for conceptualising the relationship between the language learner and the social world. At the level of the individual, this theory is able to offer an explanation of where our experience comes from, why it is contradictory or incoherent and why and how it can change (Peirce, 1994). It can also account for the political limitations of change at the level of subjective consciousness, stressing the importance of the material relations and practices which “constitute individuals as embodied subjects with particular but not inevitable forms of conscious and unconscious motivations and desires which are themselves the effects of the social institutions and processes which structure society” (Weedon, 1997, pg.40).

Feminism takes as its starting point the patriarchal structure of society (Peirce, 1994). The term ‘patriarchal’ refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men (Weedon, 1997). Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference (Brooks, 1997). In patriarchal discourse, “the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male” (Weedon, 1997, pg.2). Such discourse helps maintain assumptions about women’s biological difference from men and thus, fits them for different social tasks. Implicit in this patriarchal discourse are assumptions about women

being 'naturally' equipped to fulfill different social functions, primarily those of wife and mother. Consequently, these expectations about 'natural' femininity structure women's access to the labour market and to public life.

In theory, almost every walk of life is open to women, however, all the possibilities which are shared with men involve "accepting, negotiating or rejecting what is constantly being offered to them as their primary role – that of wife and mother" (Weedon, 1997, pg.3). An analysis of the patriarchal structures of society and the positions we occupy within them requires a theory which addresses forms of social organizations and the social meanings which guarantee or contest them (Weedon, 1997). More importantly, we must be able to theorize individual consciousness and the relationship between language, subjectivity, social organization and power. It requires an understanding of why women "tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men and the mechanisms whereby women and men adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interests" (Weedon, 1997, pg.12). Speaking to this agenda is a feminist poststructuralist theory.

For the feminist poststructural theorist, the common denominator in analysis of social organization, social meaning, power and individual consciousness is language (Brooks, 1997). Language is the place where "actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested" (Weedon, 1997, pg.21). Language becomes a site in which our subjective selves are constructed. These constructed forms of subjectivities are produced in a whole range of discursive practices (economic, social and political) "the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power" (Weedon, 1997, pg.21). Language becomes not so much an expression of unique individuality but instead "constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific" (Weedon, 1997,

pg.21).

This idea of subjectivity is central to poststructuralist theory and is used to refer to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1997, pg.32). Poststructuralism proposes a precarious and contradictory subjectivity which is constantly being reconstituted in discourse. Subjectivity becomes the product of the society and culture within which we live, where the individual becomes the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity (Brooks, 1997).

The conception of social identity as a site of struggle is an extension of the position that social identity is multiple and contradictory (Peirce, 1994). Social identity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different “subject positions” (Peirce, 1994). The subject in turn is not conceived as passive; “he or she is conceived of as both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community, and society: the subject has human agency” (Peirce, 1994, pg.3). What this means is that even though one is positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the individual might resist, or even set up a counter-discourse which, rather than assume a marginalized subject position, is powerful.

Poststructuralism assumes that language constitutes social reality for us and that “neither social reality nor the ‘natural’ world has fixed intrinsic meanings which language reflects or expresses” (Weedon, 1997, pg.22). Different languages and/or discourses attach meanings to the world that cannot be reduced to universally shared concepts which assume a fixed reality. A feminist poststructuralism pays full attention to the social and institutional context of textuality in order to address the power relations of everyday life. A feminist poststructuralism takes as its primary premise that social meanings are produced within social institutions and practices in

which the individuals who are shaped by these institutions are agents of change, “change which may either serve hegemonic interests or challenge existing power relations” (Weedon, 1997, pg.25).

Language offers various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity, through which we can consciously live our lives (Weedon, 1997). How we live our lives and how we attach meaning to the material social relations that structure our lives depends on “the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent” (Weedon, 1997, pg.26).

Common-sense has an important constitutive role to play in maintaining the centrality of gender difference as a focus of power in society (Brooks, 1997). Individuals are subject to gender differentiation from birth onwards. The ways in which norms of gender difference determine conventions of dress, play and social behaviour for girls and boys become normalized and/or naturalized. However, it is in language that differences acquire meaning for the individual. It is in language that we learn how to differentiate doll and truck and to understand their gendered connotations in western societies. Even though language differentiates and gives meaning to assertive and compliant behaviour and teaches us what is socially accepted as normal, language is not monolithic, “dominant meanings can be contested, alternative meanings affirmed” (Weedon, 1997, pg.73). Consequently, our preoccupation with commonsensical understandings of ‘normality’ which is believed to be necessary for future success in family and work life encourages most to “accept dominant definitions of the necessity and meaning of gender difference” (Weedon, 1997, pg.73). These commonsensical understandings are articulated through language and represent specific values and interests.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Research Question**

In this study, I was interested in finding out:

- (1) What are the challenges and/or opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in their English acquisition?

### **Population**

The population selected for this study included Assyrian immigrant women who arrived in Toronto within the past ten years. Following the rationale provided in Kilbride et. al, the reason for choosing this time frame is so that I would be able to “assess the fairly recent as opposed to historical, support mechanisms, programs, and difficulties women encounter in their attempts to become proficient in English” (Kilbride et. al, 2008, pg.10).

For the purpose of my research, the term immigrant woman refers to those women who have entered Canada either as sponsored or dependent family members under the family class. I have chosen to restrict the category to immigrant women between the ages of 25 to 44 because this is generally the age group in which individuals enter the labour market and are parenting. The research focused on two categories of immigrant women: (1) those who self-identified as not knowing English; and (2) those who self-identified as fluent in English. Whereas the former group helped highlight the challenges that have constrained their English-language learning, the latter group had the best insight on the types of challenges they have faced in learning the English-language and how they overcame them.

### **The Assyrians**

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the Assyrian population in Canada, including their migration and settlement patterns.

The Assyrians in Canada trace their origins to an ancient people whose homeland includes southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran (Ishaya, 1999). To date, the majority (1.2 million) of Assyrians live in Iraq. The Assyrians are distinguished from their neighbours in Iraq by both their language and religion. The Assyrians are Christian and speak various dialects of Aramaic (Ishaya, 1999).

In Canada, the Assyrians were among the first settlers of the northern Canadian prairies. The earliest immigrant colony was established in 1903 in what later came to be known as North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Consisting of thirty-six men and a few women, this group of Assyrians came from the town of Urmia and the surrounding villages in northwest Persia (Iran). After homesteading for a few years, in 1907, the men sent for their families and were soon joined with forty more settlers (Ishaya, 1999). However, the colony did not prosper economically, in part because of a lack of money. Confronted with a language barrier and discrimination, the majority of the Assyrians in Canada during this time left to establish a colony in California. Subsequent migrations shifted the locus of settlement to Toronto with smaller enclaves located in Montreal, Hamilton, Windsor, London, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon and Vancouver (Ishaya, 1999). Because Assyrians are not listed as a separate category in the Canadian Census, accurate figures are not available on the size of the various settlements but estimates have placed the total at about 15,000 (Ishaya, 1999).

Over half the Assyrians in Canada now live in the province of Ontario (Ishaya, 1999). Facilitating the migration of Assyrians to Ontario was Canada's immigration policy in the mid-1960s which established a quota system that included allowances for immigrants from the Middle East. During this time, there were no more than four Assyrian families living in Toronto. However, since then, there has been a steady flow of immigrants through chain migration. Peak

periods included: the early 1970s with the Iraqi war against the Kurds which drove the Assyrians of northern Iraq out of their villages; the mid-1980s with the Iran-Iraq war; and in the early 1990s following the Persian Gulf War (Ishaya, 1999). By 1993, 6,000 Assyrians were living in Toronto, the majority of whom came from the towns/villages of northern Iraq or the capital city of Baghdad.

The Assyrians of Canada live and work in tightly knit and well-organized ethnic enclaves. They are professionals, small business owners, office and factory workers (Ishaya, 1999). The most important social unit in the community is the child-centered family in which divorce rates are low. Similar to other immigrant families, the Assyrian immigrant family often pools resources, shares costs and functions cooperatively. The Assyrians in Canada are proud of their ancient ethnic and religious heritage and continue to preserve it. For instance, the language of liturgy in the churches is still the classic Aramaic. Moreover, the Assyrian churches and civic and political organizations in Canada participate in conventions and events sponsored by Assyrian organizations worldwide. Simultaneously, the rise of nationalist politics in their homeland and the value attached to multiculturalism in Canada has encouraged the Assyrians to retain their distinct identity in the Canadian ethnic mosaic (Ishaya, 1999).

### **Research Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative research approach. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationships between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003). The qualitative researcher is interested in seeking answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.

My reasons for choosing a qualitative approach are two-fold: (1) the subject of the

acquisition of proficiency in English by immigrant women has been generally under-researched; and (2) to date, there is no research that documents the experiences of Assyrian immigrant women in Canada. Qualitative studies are not designed to generalize findings rather, to generate and/or establish new links between conceptual categories (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003). While the findings in my research cannot be generalized even to the particular ethno-linguistic group being studied, a qualitative approach, nonetheless, will provide valuable insights into Assyrian immigrant women's experiences with English-language acquisition. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in finding out whether the knowledge claims made in previous studies on the relationship between immigrant women and English acquisition hold true for Assyrian immigrant women.

### **Study Design**

Involving human participants requires that researchers safeguard any potential risks before proceeding with the study in question. A request for an ethical review was submitted to Ryerson University's research ethics board. A research proposal was submitted which included: (1) the design and scientific rationale underlying my research; (2) the selection and characteristics of the subjects involved; (3) sources and methods of recruitment; (4) the identification of potential risks; (5) how these potential risks would be safeguarded; and (6) a copy of both the interview questions and consent forms used. After reviewing the research proposal, Ryerson's ethics board approved the study on June 29, 2009.

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling approaches (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003) were used to recruit the participants. The convenience sampling approach involved a Key Informant (KI) from Rexdale Women's Centre and a member of the Assyrian Church of the East located in Etobicoke, Ontario. Simultaneously, these KI's introduced me to a number of non-

English and English-speaking Assyrian immigrant women. I then engaged in a snowball sampling approach which involved referrals from these participants. Both approaches proved useful and helped me connect to the population I intended to study.

The characteristics for inclusion in this study were restricted to: (1) Assyrian immigrant women; (2) between the ages of 25 and 44; (3) who arrived in Canada within the last ten years; (4) and self-identified as fluent in English; or (5) who self-identified as not knowing English. All willing participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed consent forms indicating that an audio-tape recorder would be used and that confidentiality would be maintained. All participants were given the opportunity to stop the interviews at any point.

### **Data Collection**

Two focus-group interviews (Neuman, 2006) involving Assyrian immigrant women took place. All participants were interviewed in a location of their choice. Following the recommendation of one KI who stated that “transportation might be a problem”, it was decided that the interviews would take place at a recreational facility (park). The Assyrian Church of the East hosts a number of community gatherings throughout the summer and the participants informed me that this represented the most accessible of options given conflicting schedules and issues pertaining to transportation. The interviews took place in a remote area of the park, free from any interruptions, distractions or individuals not involved in the interview process. The non-English speaking focus group involved 4 participants and the English-speaking focus group involved 3 participants. The size of the groups was large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented.

The focus-group interviews began at a very broad level and gradually became more focused on the topic as the interviews progressed. The focus-group interviews enabled an open

exchange of feelings and opinions and enabled the participants to describe what was meaningful or important to them, using their own words rather than being restricted to the predetermined categories offered in surveys (Neuman, 2006).

A discussion guide setting the framework for discussion was prepared prior to the focus-group interviews. Two slightly different versions of questions were created, one for the non-English speaking women (see Appendix 2) and one for the English-speaking women (see Appendix 3), to benefit from the unique experiences and perspectives of each group. Significantly, both versions employed mainly open-ended questions in order to obtain as much information as possible, to avoid mechanical responses and to encourage respondents to think and talk freely. A list of probe questions was created in efforts to explore issues and/or concerns raised by the participants. In addition to taking notes, each session was audio-taped (Dane, 1990).

The uniqueness of a focus group is its ability to generate data based on the synergy of the group interaction (Dane, 1990). The members of the group should, therefore, feel comfortable with each other and engage in discussion. This will help encourage more honest and spontaneous expressions and prevent set behaviours relating to pre-existing relationships and patterns of leadership in the group (Dane, 1990). Taking this into account, I invested both time and effort in selecting members of the group who did not know each other.

### **Coding and Analysis of Data**

During the data collection phase, I used an audio tape recorder to help capture what was said and how it was said. The use of a tape recorder did not eliminate the needs for taking notes but allowed me to concentrate on taking strategic and focused notes (Dane, 1990). These notes consisted of key phrases, a list of the major points made by the participants and key terms and/or

words shown in quotation marks which captured the participant's own language. I developed a system of abbreviation (i.e coding) to facilitate my note taking process. For example, the letters "GI" was used to indicate gender inequalities.

The data was then organized according to themes, concepts and/or categories (Dane, 1990). This involved using different file folders that are specific to the theme, concept or category. Some of these files included: (1) access to classes; (2) gender inequalities; and (3) job opportunities. Organizing my data into files according to a pre-determined list of themes helped me keep track of what I had and still needed. Simultaneously, the use of an audio tape recorder, taking notes and filing my data helped me decide whether or not I obtained sufficient data.

Qualitative research, and in particular, focus-group interviews generate large amounts of data. In efforts to reduce the amount of data I looked for relationships and compared and contrasted the data (Dane, 1990). I started by looking for relationships among particular pieces of information or observations. For example, when the participants expressed concern over the types of classes being offered to them, some of the questions I asked myself included: Is participation in English-learning classes influenced by who is teaching the class? Does "irrelevant" class material deter participation? Next, I identified the similarities and/or differences between my study and others that have focused on the same issue. These involved questions such as: have gender inequalities constrained participation in English-learning classes? Has their identity as mother/wife helped facilitate participation?

Qualitative research is intended to form new concepts or refine concepts that are grounded in the data. Conceptualization helped organize and make sense of the data generated from the focus-group interviews (Neuman, 2006). This data was organized into categories on the basis of themes, concepts, or similar features. Some of these included: (1) inaccessible services;

(2) cultural challenges and opportunities; and (3) economic consequences.

Coding the data was an integral part of the data analysis and helped move me toward theory and generalizations (Neuman, 2006). Coding not only helped reduce my data into small, manageable quantities, but also made it easier for me to retrieve segments of interest. To help ensure that all participants remained anonymous throughout the research study, and in particular the discussion section, codes names were assigned (P1-P7).

During my first reading of the data, I condensed the material into preliminary analytic categories and/or codes. This helped me generate a list of themes that were then used during my second reading of the data. During the second reading of the data, I divided concepts into subcategories, looked for categories or concepts that clustered together and noted their relationship to a major topic of interest (Neuman, 2006). For example, I divided the general issue of “cultural challenges and opportunities” into subparts (i.e. identity as mother, identity as wife, identity as worker, etc). As the theme “cultural challenges and opportunities” reappears in different parts of the data, I started making comparisons in efforts to generate new themes. During the third reading of the data, I looked selectively for cases that illustrate themes and make comparisons and contrasts. Using “cultural challenges and opportunities” as an example, during this phase I went through my notes and looked for differences in how the women who were fluent in English and the women who could not speak English spoke about cultural challenges and opportunities. The notes made during the coding process allowed me to forge a link between themes/concepts and theoretical understandings.

### **Limitations of the Research Method**

One of the most significant limitations of the study included the size of the sample. Namely, it cannot be known to what extent the seven participants that formed the sample are

representative of all Assyrian immigrant women. No indisputable conclusions can be drawn about the general population of Assyrian immigrant women based on the sample of seven participants interviewed for the study.

The intended purpose of having both groups of women was based on the idea that: (1) the non-English speaking group would report on the challenges that have constrained their English language learning; and (2) the English-speaking group would provide the best insights on the challenges they faced in learning the English language and how they overcame these challenges. However, the findings reported no major differences in the types of challenges and opportunities they faced thus, indicating that a larger sample size is needed in order to make adequate comparisons between the two groups of women.

Nevertheless, it is also significant to note that the participants were chosen randomly and that they covered two different areas of Toronto – Scarborough and North York. Consequently, the sample does entail some diversity. In spite of this limitation, the study's findings offer an invaluable insight into the experiences and observations of the selected participants and serve as a catalyst of ideas for future research.

## **FINDINGS**

Presented in this section are the findings generated from both the demographic questionnaire and focus-group interviews.

A total of seven Assyrian immigrant women participated in two focus groups, held in August 2009. The focus-group interviews were approximately one hour long and took place at a recreational facility in Woodbridge, Ontario. I dedicated a significant amount of time introducing myself and the study and then explaining rights of refusal to participate in the focus-group

interview. The conversations were fluid and evolving but were premised on the initial research question:

- (1) What are the challenges and/or opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in their English acquisition?

The question may appear broad in scope but proved to be an excellent starting point for fruitful discussion with the participants in the focus-groups.

### **Demographic Data**

Seven women participated in the focus-group interviews. Four out of seven were between 20 to 30 years of age; one out of seven was between 30 to 40 years of age; and two out of seven were 40 years and above. Most participants, therefore, were between the ages of 20 to 30 years of age.

Seven out of seven identified Iraq as their country of origin. Six languages were represented. Three out of seven spoke Assyrian, Arabic and English; one out of seven spoke Assyrian, Arabic, Kurdish and Greek; one out of seven spoke Assyrian, Arabic, Kurdish and German; and two out of seven spoke Assyrian and Arabic. The majority, that is, five out of seven arrived to Canada within the last five years, with only two out of seven arriving between 1999-2003.

With respect to level of education, three out of seven completed secondary school; three out of seven had a university or college degree; and one out of seven reported no formal education. The majority, that is, four out of seven obtained their education in Iraq; and three out of seven obtained their education in both Iraq and Canada.

Four out of seven were married; two out of seven were single; and one out of seven was a widow. Three out of seven reported no children; two out of seven had one child; one out of seven

had two children; and one out of seven had three children. With respect to the ages of the children, three out of seven had children between the ages of 10 to 20; and one out of seven had a child less than one year old.

Three out of seven were not working; one out of seven worked at a restaurant; one out of seven worked at a daycare facility; one out of seven worked in an office environment; and one out of seven worked in the retail industry. Of the women who reported a job title (four out of seven), the majority, that is, three out of seven reported income levels between 10,000-19,999; and one out of seven reported an income level of 30,000-39,999.

Four out of seven were living in North York, Ontario; and three out of seven were living in Scarborough, Ontario. Three out of seven own a house; three out of seven are renting an apartment; and one out of seven is living in a government subsidized housing facility. It is of importance to note that all participants were living with members of either their immediate (i.e. husband) or extended family members, who maintained the financial responsibilities. Because of the small sample size, the demographic details reported here are purely descriptive and cannot be used to infer any general patterns.

### **Focus-Group Interviews**

The following five themes emerged from the focus-group interviews with the participants: (1) types of English classes; (2) financial obstacles; (3) cultural challenges and/or opportunities; (4) motivations to learn English; and (5) methods of outreach. As previously indicated, the findings reported no major differences in the types of challenges and opportunities both groups of women faced. Thus, I report simultaneously the results that emerged from both focus-group interviews.

## Types of English Classes

The women in both focus-groups referred to a number of challenges and/or opportunities they faced in relation to the English classes they attended. These included: (1) the significance of the role and ethno-racial background of the teacher; (2) requests for classes with a focus on advanced/employment English; (3) requests for “conversational” English classes; (4) dissatisfaction with multi-level English classes; (5) class size; (6) child care; and (7) location

### The significance of the role and ethno-racial background of the teacher

The participants often referred to their teachers and how they played a positive role in their English learning experiences.

I like my teacher. She teaches me stuff about computers. Also, she gives us a topic and then tells us to write a story on it. This was difficult but the teacher, she helped me a lot.

The classes, you know, they helped me a lot. Now, I can go to the doctor, I can go shopping and all that stuff. I can do it myself.

My teacher is great. Because of her, I have the confidence to communicate.

Less comfortable a finding was the common desire to be taught by “Canadian” teachers. When prompted for clarification, the participants stated that they preferred “Canadian-born” teachers not only because it encouraged their learning experiences but also because it entailed being taught the “right way”.

There was no translator in class and I enjoyed that. I like it better if the teacher is Canadian, it forces you to learn the right way.

I don't think the teacher should be Assyrian. If the teacher is Assyrian, the Assyrian students won't learn. If the teacher is Canadian, they will learn what's right. It is better if the class doesn't have either Assyrian students or teachers because it will force them to learn.

Conversely, one participant stated that if students and teachers share the same ethno-racial background, it may help facilitate the learning process/experience.

Maybe, if they have Assyrian ESL teachers. I'm not saying so they communicate with the teacher in Assyrian but it would encourage them more because they would feel more comfortable in class.

### Requests for classes with a focus on an advanced/employment English

Depending on the focus group and the individual participant, I heard requests for an advanced English class that enabled further education and better employment opportunities.

To be honest, I prefer advanced English classes. Kind of like the ones I took in high school. I wanted more formal instruction because I wanted to learn the right way. I knew for my future it was better, for my job. I've always wanted to work in an office. I started off with retail and I knew that it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

If you come from back home and you are an engineer, doctor or have a university degree, your English pretty good. In ESL they teach basic English so having an English class that is advanced will be better because that is the level they are at.

Advanced English good for those who want a job like the one they had back home. You know, if they teacher, doctor.

With ESL, your reading and writing is still not strong, so I don't think you'll get a good job. You can probably get a job in retail or customer service.

### Requests for "conversation" English classes

While some participants wanted an English class with a more academic focus, others preferred classes with a more practical, "conversational" focus.

Me personally, I want to learn how to talk English. Back home, in Iraq, they teach how to read and write but not how to talk. Now, I want to learn to talk.

You also need to take into account the age of the person who is learning. Older women want to learn more conversational English and younger people want to learn more than that.

### Dissatisfaction with multi-level classes

In the English-speaking focus group, participants expressed concern about multi-level English classes. They explained that it became difficult for them to improve their English skills because the instructor had to teach both high and low level learners.

They need to split the class up. They need to know what level you are at and put you in class with others at same level.

They don't test with ESL. They put everyone in same class. I felt like I was wasting my time that's why I stay only for two months then I go to high school and learn. I enjoy high school better because it was my level, it was more advanced.

If some women have higher education, should go in different class and some women with low education should go in different class. They should separate the levels so teacher pay more attention to your English level.

### Class size

Similarities occurred between the two groups of immigrant women; both reported on the need for classes to be smaller in size. The women explained that a smaller class size would encourage more one-on-one communication between the teacher and student.

I remember the classes always being too crowded. There were too many people in one class and this made me feel embarrassed to talk.

Smaller class sizes will mean that the teacher will spend time with you and we like that. When I'm learning something new, I want the teacher to give me more attention.

The classes were big. Maybe 25 or 30 students in the class. I would like it better if it was smaller because the teacher communicate with you more.

### Child care

Some of the women mentioned a lack of child care being an impediment to their English learning. This scenario was specific to the women attending ESL classes. Because these specific ESL classes did not offer child care, the women did not have the opportunity to learn English.

My friend, she want learn English but she can't because she have a child who is three but she can't find childcare because it's expensive. So, I teach her what I am being taught.

If you have no babysitter to watch kids of course it's difficult. I really wanted to go to school but I have no help so I take my kids to school and I don't go. Day-care too much money for six kids.

If I have no family to watch my kids and no money for daycare then what I do. I have no choice.

## Location

Much of the literature on immigrant women and English acquisition makes reference to the way in which travelling long distances becomes an insurmountable obstacle, especially for those women who do not speak or understand the language. While the women in both focus groups explained that distance can deter some women from attending English classes, they explained that travelling to class represented more of an opportunity than it did obstacle.

Travelling was a challenge because I lived about 20 minutes away from the class. I had to take 2 buses to get there. It was hard but still, it didn't stop me because like I said, I really wanted to learn.

When I enrolled I had no kids and I travelled by bus. It took me 25 minutes to get there. Even though it was by bus, I liked that because it forced me to communicate with people. I had to learn to get around on my own.

## **Financial Obstacles**

The non-English speaking focus-group expressed a desire to learn English but mentioned that financial circumstances made it difficult if not impossible to learn. The financial obstacles that stood in their way included: (1) the need to contribute to the family's financial situation; (2) childcare expenses; and (3) transportation.

### Contributing to the family's financial situation

When I come I don't take English class because we were new and I need to work. I need to pay the money for house, furniture and stuff like that.

I needed to help my parents first, then I study. I help them pay for everything when we come. I am oldest of three daughters and my sisters, they only work part-time, maybe four hours. That's enough money only for bus. So I work and give my money to my parents.

When I first come, I don't focus on me, I focus on family. I remember how hard it is to move to different country. I come, I work to support the family and when I ready to learn English, then I have to pay for that. ESL is not free like LINC.

### Child care expenses

Me, when I come, I have three kids. The young was six months. I have not lot money for ESL school. Even if I have money for ESL what about daycare? You know how much for six kids? That's a lot.

My friend, I feel bad for her. Even if she want to learn she can't. Everything too expensive now, especially daycare. That's why she don't go.

### Transportation

With ESL you pay for own transportation and it used to bother me to ask my family for money.

Sometimes I think, why they only give money to LINC and not ESL for transportation. Why they make it easier for them and more difficult for us.

### **Cultural Challenges and Opportunities**

Immigrant women can be subject to contradictory forces that impede on their English learning. Rooted in both cultural and familial expectations, women are made responsible for passing on the language and culture of their home countries to their children. While one of the participants in the study helped substantiate such claims, the others explained that Assyrian cultural practices encouraged their English learning experiences. The cultural challenges and/or opportunities they faced were in relation to their: (1) identity as a mother; (2) identity as an Assyrian; and (3) identity as "independent" women.

### Identity as a mother

Of course it more difficult to learn. I have son and husband to look after but when I start LINC my son, he come with me. This was good. We go to school together and do homework. Now, when he come home from school, I understand what he say. He practice with me and I with him.

I go to learn English especially because of my daughters. I want to communicate with them, with their teachers. I want to help them with homework when they come home. Before, I feel bad because they come home and ask for help with homework and I don't understand. Now, I do.

You know, the culture, they encourage you to go to school to learn English but no one know how difficult it is. They say go but how I go when I have to clean, cook, take my kids to school. No one help me with that and still they say go learn English.

### Identity as an Assyrian

One participant expressed reluctance and/or ambivalence in learning English, stating that being and speaking Assyrian is more important than speaking English.

I am Assyrian and I want kids to know Assyrian. If I speak English then they learn English and not speak Assyrian. Speaking Assyrian is very important, not only English. Also, because I live close to family and no need to speak English. We go out together, we go to each other's house and speak Assyrian, not English.

### Identity as an "independent" woman

When the English-speaking participants were asked, "Has learning English made it easier to settle and integrate into Canada?" they responded with,

In every way you can think of because you know, it's easy to communicate. That's the language here. Now, I'm all over the place. You don't have to rely on anyone, you become very independent and most of all, you feel good about yourself. You don't have to ask for someone's help. You do it yourself.

Yes, it has made it easier. When I want to learn something or go somewhere, I can do it myself. I don't have to depend on anyone. That's a great feeling.

Similarly, when asked, "Is not being able to speak English made it difficult to settle and integrate into Canada?", one non-English speaking participant expressed her desire for independence stating,

I want to learn English because I want to find a better place. I want to go and come as I please, I don't want to ask help from anyone. I don't want to keep calling my aunt for help and asking her what this and that means. I want to do it myself.

### Motivation to Learn English

There is a variety of motivating factors in learning a new language. Some of the motivating factors that emerged through the focus-group interviews with both sets of women

included: (1) supportive social networks; (2) employment opportunities; (3) self-confidence; and (4) feelings of exclusion.

### Supportive social networks

All my family say to me go work and school, you can do it. They say to me, first go to school, get education, then leave marriage and everything else for later. They say work, study, travel around.

My friends have been really supportive. That's what I love about them the most. Every time I say something and I get it wrong, they would correct me and try to teach me the right way. I never got upset because I wanted to learn the right way.

My husband, he helped me learn English especially when we go shopping. He helped translate and helped with home work. I only had problem when people talk to me so he helped me to learn with communication.

### Employment Opportunities

In Iraq, I got my Bachelor of Arts in Education. When I come here, how I teach class if I no speak English. So, just because of no English, I don't get hired.

If I don't speak English, I can't work where I want. Well, in the restaurant yes, they let us but if I knew better English, they would let me work in the office and stuff like that.

Everything here is in English. You have to learn, especially if you want to get a job.

### Self-Confidence

Not know the language make very difficult. When you learn English you feel more settled in Canada and have more confidence to communicate with other people.

I learned to talk English for me. I remember sitting in class and I understood what they were saying but when it came time to talk myself, I pull back because I am embarrassed that my English wasn't good. Now it is.

## Feelings of Exclusion

I used to feel left out all the time. With my cousins, they tried to speak Assyrian and stuff but it was natural for them to speak English. Kind of like me now. It's more natural for me to start speaking English. It used to bother me when I sat there and they all spoke English and I didn't understand. So, after a month, I told my sister-in-law to enrol me in classes. I wanted to feel included.

## Encouraging Participation in English Classes

When asked what they thought was the best way to get Assyrian women to participate in English classes, the women reported,

Help with transportation. If I have no money, then difficult. Even daycare. If I have no family to watch my kids and no money for daycare then what I do, I have no choice.

I think if they teach women what they want to learn it is good. For example, course about office work, company or government jobs.

Maybe if they teach about different cultures. This way, the women feel they are important in Canada and at the same time, they learn and respect other people who live in Canada.

Conversely, one participant reported that ultimately, the onus is up to the individual person and that all obstacles can somehow be resolved,

Maybe if they have night classes. Actually, I think they have that. I think they shouldn't have any excuse not to go to school. They shouldn't care if the classroom is not nice, if it's too full. If you really want to learn or do something, you do it no matter what. When I was going, I didn't care about all that stuff because I wanted to learn everything. So, what can we do to make Assyrian women go? I don't think we can do anything. It has to come from them.

These results will be discussed further on page 66.

## DISCUSSION

Peirce (1995), in her research on social identity and language learning argues that sociolinguistic theorists have struggled to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not “developed a comprehensive theory of social identity which integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (Peirce, 1995,

pg.9). According to Peirce, sociolinguistic theorists have not adequately addressed how relations of power affect interaction between minority language learners and majority language speakers. For Peirce, the idea of “investment” rather than motivation can better conceptualize the language learner because it “captures the complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it” (Peirce, 1995, pg.9). She goes on to say that “the notion of investment conceives of the language learner, not as ahistorical and unidimensional, but as having a complex social history and multiple desires” (Peirce, 1995, pg.9).

Although many sociolinguistic theorists recognize that language learners do not represent homogenous communities, the heterogeneity they attribute to such communities continues to be framed uncritically. Theories of the language learners have been developed on the premise that “language learners can choose under what conditions they will interact with members of the target language community and that the language learners’ access to the target language community is a function of the learner’s motivation” (Peirce, 1995, pg.12). Thus, they have failed to explore how inequitable relations of power limit the opportunities second language learners have to “practice the target language outside the classroom” (Peirce, 1995, pg.12). By defining these learners unproblematically, as either motivated or unmotivated, we fail to recognize that “such affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual” (Peirce, 1995, pg.12).

According to Peirce’s theory of social identity, “It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to-or is denied access to-powerful social networks

that give learners the opportunity to speak” (Peirce, 1995, pg.13). Thus, language is understood with reference to its social meaning. I support this argument with findings from the focus-group interviews with Assyrian immigrant women. For example, when I asked the non-English speaking focus-group to explain why they did not learn English, a 27 year-old high school graduate indicated that a communication breakdown with her co-worker confirmed her anxieties of being perceived as different:

P1: I wanted to learn English at one point.

R: Do you still want to learn?

P1: Not interested so much.

R: Why not?

P1: When I at work one day, this girl, she say to me, “Don’t you think you should learn English already? Everyone speaks English here you know”.

R: Did that bother you?

P1: Yes, a lot. I think, why she make me feel like that, you know, different. I want to learn but difficult and they don’t understand. I not so different then them, just don’t speak English.

She continued by informing me that she did not respond to her co-worker because she felt humiliated for being “different”. A closer analysis of the data helps explain how she internalized being different and how this affected her experiences with learning English. First off, her co-worker asked a rhetorical question. It seems as though the co-worker was not interested or possibly did not even expect a response from her: “Don’t you think you should learn English already? Everyone speaks English here you know”. It was her co-worker who determined the grounds on which interaction could proceed and when to finish the conversation. If, as argued by many sociolinguistic theorists that language learning results from participation in communicative events, it is crucial that we investigate the connection between power relations and language learning processes. Thus, while P1 had been offered the opportunity to learn English, her subject position as “different” undermined this opportunity.

Feminist poststructuralism explores how “power relations between individuals, groups, and communities affect the life chances of individuals at a given time and place” (Peirce, 1995, pg.15). It links individual experience and social power in a theory of subjectivity which Weedon (1987) defines as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, pg.32). According to Weedon, language is the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. This subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites and is structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different subject positions (woman, mother, wife), some of which conflict with each other. In addition, rather than being conceived as passive, this theory recognizes that the subject has human agency thus, providing the opportunity to resist ways they have been positioned within a given discourse. This is best illustrated through an exchange I had with one of the participants. The 44 year-old mother of two revealed the following:

R: What were some of the difficulties you encountered when learning English?

P2: When I back home, they say no go to school, so I quit school. In north Iraq, families tell their daughters not to go to school. You take care of family and work. But when I come here, even if difficult to go to school because of my kids or family, I find work and I learn from people at work. I talk to them, I ask questions and they teach me.

This exchange helps illustrate how P2 negotiated her prescribed role as the family’s caregiver by positioning herself in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position. Whereas in Iraq, P2 quit school to attend to the needs of her family, in Canada, she maintained her role as primary caregiver but no longer conformed or felt restricted to this subject position.

According to Peirce, the investment language learners make in a second language has been encouraged by their understanding that “they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (Peirce, 1995, pg.17). The notion of investment presupposes that when language learners speak, they are

constantly (re)negotiating a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus, an investment in the target language becomes an investment in a learner's own social identity.

All the participants in the English-speaking focus group expressed interest and motivation to learn English. They all took English classes; they all took extra courses in Iraq to learn English; they all desired as much social contact with Anglophone Canadians; and all of them felt comfortable speaking English in front of family and friends. However, it is of importance to note that some of the women stated that they felt uncomfortable speaking English to people whom they had a symbolic or material investment (Peirce, 1995). For example, P3, who had come to Canada in 1999 and had great affective investment in her Assyrian identity, felt most uncomfortable and embarrassed speaking English in front of Assyrians who speak English fluently:

R: Why did you learn English?

P3: Because I wanted to understand what people say to me. But now, I understand what they (Assyrian friends) are saying but when it came time to talk myself, I pull back because I am embarrassed that my English not as good as theirs.

Despite being highly motivated, there were conditions under which some of the women felt either embarrassed or uncomfortable and unlikely to speak thus, suggesting that their motivation to speak is mediated by investments that may conflict with the desire to speak.

Based on the focus-group results, I wish to argue that for the mothers in the study, their investment in English was largely structured by their identities as primary caregivers in the family. It became important for them to learn English so that they may communicate with their children, communicate with the school institution and to assist their children with their studies. The feminist poststructural view that identity is contradictory helps explain how these mothers responded to and created opportunities to learn English. The women all shared multiple sites of identity formation: mothers, women, immigrants, language learners, wives and workers. As an

immigrant woman who lacked proficiency in the English language, P3 felt uncomfortable and embarrassed speaking. Consequently, despite feeling embarrassed, P3 refused to be silenced in part because of her identity as a mother and caregiver in the home:

P3: The first time I go to ESL it was difficult.

R: Why was it difficult?

P3: Because I live 20 minutes away from the class. I don't know English and I feel very nervous to go out and take bus by myself.

R: What did you do?

P3: I thought about my family and it push me to go.

R: How so?

P3: I have two kids and I want to understand them. I want to help them with school. Also, what if one day they need to go to doctor or something. I want to understand what doctor is telling me.

R: How was the experience traveling by yourself?

P3: I had to take two buses to get there. It was hard but still, it didn't stop me because like I said, I really wanted to learn.

The perseverance of P3 with speaking (“It didn’t stop me”, “I really wanted to learn”) and her courage to resist marginalization intersect with her identity as a mother. Arriving in 2009, with only her two daughters, P2 expressed the added pressures single mothers’ who seek fluency in English experience. Participant P2 explained that as a widow, she could not rely on her husband to deal with the public world. Participant P2 had to do it herself regardless of her command of the English language. It became clear that for P2, despite feeling “nervous” or “embarrassed”, she made a conscious effort to learn English because without it, she felt inferior to her English-speaking counterparts. By resisting her subject position non-English speaking immigrant women in favour of her subject position as mother, P2 responded to and created opportunities to learn English.

As the women developed proficiency in the English language, they began negotiating ways in which they could transform social practices of marginalization. Participant P4 has been in Canada since 2001. When she arrived in Toronto, she focused her time and efforts on

contributing to her family's financial situation. With very limited fluency in the English language, P4 found a job at Swiss Chalet. Her main job was to clean the store and prepare the food for cooking. A feminist poststructural theory recognizes the conception of social identity as subject to change (Weedon, 1987). As P4 began explaining her experiences, I began recognizing the ways in which over time, she was responding to and creating opportunities to practice English in her workplace:

P4: When I first come I work at Swiss Chalet.

R: How was that experience?

P4: It was ok but you know, my English was no good at that time and it was difficult.

R: What was difficult?

P4: Speaking to the people who work with me. My English not as good as theirs so it was difficult for them to understand me.

R: So what did you do?

P4: Sometimes, when we together at work, I ask about Canada and life here and then they ask about Iraq. It was hard for me to explain things but I tried. I told them only things I could explain.

Later on, P4 goes on to say that it took a month or so for her to start communicating with her co-workers. She explained that she was embarrassed to approach them because she did not speak or understand English to the same extent as they did. Whereas in the beginning, P4 accepted that she was not a legitimate speaker of English, she slowly began challenging her subject position in the workplace. She tried to engage in conversation with her co-workers by speaking about her life in Iraq. While at first, P4 was apprehensive to engage in conversation with her co-workers, she soon developed an awareness of her "right to speak" (Peirce, 1995) and was able to transform some of the social practices of marginalization in her workplace.

Pavlenko and Norton (2007) introduce the notion of "imagined communities" as a way to better understand the relationship between second language learning and identity. For Pavlenko and Norton, "language learners actual and desired memberships in imagined communities affect their learning trajectories, influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in

learning English” (Pavlenko, Norton, 2007, pg.669). According to these authors, language learners engage in a process of “imagination” whereby they appropriate meanings and create new identities. Consequently, the authors emphasize that “those in power oftentimes do the imagining for the rest of their fellow citizens, offering them certain identity options and leaving other options unimaginable” (Pavlenko, Norton, 2007, pg.670). The authors argue that actual and desired memberships in various imagined communities mediate the learning of, or resistance to English.

Participant P5 came to Canada in 2005. Soon thereafter, she decided to change her name from an Assyrian one to an anglicized one. The reason for her name change was not discussed but research suggests that immigrants oftentimes perceive the “perfect Canadian” as one who is both white and English-speaking and in turn, internalize an inferior subject position because they do not belong to either category thus, choose to change their names to help remedy feelings of alienation (Peirce, 1995). P5 describes how her “desired membership” (Pavlenko, Norton, 2007) in the English imagined community affected her learning trajectories, influencing her motivation to learn English:

R: Why did you learn English?

P5: Because I used to feel left out all the time. With my cousins, they tried to speak Assyrian and stuff but it was natural for them to speak English. Kind of like me now, it’s more natural for me to start speaking English. It used to bug me when I sat there and they all spoke English and I didn’t understand. So, after a month, I told my sister-in-law to find me a school.

I suggest that for P5, her English imagined community presupposed an imagined identity; an identity that offered her possibilities for the future. For P5, feeling “left out all the time” because she did not speak or understand English encouraged her to go to school and learn English thus, “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it becomes an experience of

identity, a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge” (Pavlenko, Norton, 2007, pg.670).

One of the ways in which P5 gained access to this English imagined community was by utilizing her social support networks in her English learning process. As pointed out by Klassen and Burnaby (1993), immigrant women manage many literacy-dependent tasks through a number of strategies, one of which includes “asking friends, relatives, or officials for help with directions, with reading and writing, and with oral English when necessary” (Klassen, Burnaby, 1993, pg.384). As P5 states, “Every time I say something and I get it wrong, my friends would correct me and try to teach me the right way. I never got upset because I wanted to learn the right way”.

However, later on, P5 illustrates how she began to struggle with her identity as an English-speaking immigrant woman. As she becomes more confident with the new language, her mother accuses her of “becoming English”:

R: Have Assyrian cultural practices made it difficult for you to take English classes?

P5: No, not at all. However, now, it bothers my mom because I speak English more than Assyrian at home. She tells me I’m becoming English.

Morrow (1997) argues that women’s relationship to language is profoundly different from men’s because of the physical and psychological bond between mother and daughter. According to Morrow, learning a new language is more closely associated with the father than with the mother arguing that, “to relinquish the mother-tongue is to separate from the mother and identify more closely with the father’s power” (Morrow, 1997, pg.182).

Despite the differences between the seven women, all depicted themselves as committed wives, mothers, workers, daughters and/or students. For example, the daughters/students expressed an “investment” in their familial roles thus, explored the language learning

opportunities available to them. An exchange with P6 helps illustrate how she forfeits the possibility of a student identity in favour of her identity as daughter:

R: Have personal circumstances made it more difficult or easier for you to learn English?

P6: First when I come, I want to learn English but I couldn't. I needed to work. So I don't take English classes because we were new and I needed to work to help my parents to pay the money for house, furniture and stuff like that.

Portraying herself as a daughter who needed to place her own needs behind those of her family, P6 forfeit the options available to her for education and advancement. She said that in the beginning, she did not attend English classes because it would have meant less money for her family. In weighing priorities in the family, she put herself in last place. However, she quickly went on to say that when the family settled and was financial stable in their new country, her parents pointed out her duty as a young, “independent” woman who needed to learn English in order to “get a good job”. I suggest that in both situations, P6 continued to prioritize the interests of her family above her own. In the beginning, P6 felt as though it was her responsibility to attend to the financial needs of the family. When these needs were met, P6 indicated that it was her family who “tell me to go” thus, suggesting that it was her family, more specifically her parents who were making the decisions in the household.

Gendered practices within social groups have a strong influence on individuals' opportunities to engage with the target language (Menard-Warwick, 2004). Consequently, gendered practices and identities are often contested in immigrant communities, “with individuals and families making choices about which aspects of traditional gender roles they will struggle to maintain and which they will (sometimes happily) let go” (Menard-Warwick, 2004, pg.296).

Participant P7 came to Canada in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Iraq, where she was a qualified Early Childhood Educator. Participant P7 indicated that when they arrived to

Canada, the family decided that her husband would go out and work while she attended to the house and her eight year-old son. Participant P7 informed me that it was not as difficult a decision to make because “I didn’t speak English like my husband did, so it was easier for him to find a job”. However, like many immigrant mothers, she had begun to think about how she could help and encourage her son to do well in school. With her son in school, she decided it was time for her to learn English so that he would be inspired to study:

R: Have personal circumstances made it difficult or easier for you to learn English?

P7: Of course it’s more difficult to learn. I have a son and husband to look after.

R: So what did you do?

P7: My son, his English like mine and I want him to do good in school. So, my son started learning English with me. This was good. We go to school together and do, what you call, ummm, homework. Now, when he come home from school, I understand what he say. He practice with me and I with him.

For P7, her investment in her son’s future led her to invest in her own English learning. Her investment was strongly connected to her family role as mother.

In many immigrant communities, it is traditionally the woman’s role not only to take care of the children but also to educate the children in matters relating to ethnic traditions and values. It becomes the woman’s responsibility to transmit these values and appropriate knowledge of the cultural traditions to the children. If the woman’s role is often in the home, the man’s role is to seek work. This usually encourages a greater use of English by immigrant men than by women. Also, there is evidence to suggest that women’s patterns of language use and their social networks tend to favour greater use of the ethnic language than men’s (Holmes, 1993). Immigrant women generally take primary responsibility for the family’s emotional and physical well-being and the educational development of their children (Kouritzin, 2000). These responsibilities tend to favour the use of the ethnic language. Holmes argues that for immigrant women, maintaining the ethnic language has been influenced by perceptions about the

importance of the functions and values expressed by the ethnic language (Holmes, 1993).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that immigrant women emphasize the importance of their children learning the ethnic language:

R: Why did you not learn English?

P3: Because I am Assyrian and I want kids to know Assyrian. If I speak English then they learn English and no speak Assyrian. Speaking Assyrian is very important not only English. I teach them Assyrian at home, they learn English at school.

It seems as though for P3, learning and speaking English to her children meant that they would stop speaking Assyrian. However, it remains unclear as to whether or not it was her identity as an Assyrian, or her fear that her children would no longer speak Assyrian that made her prioritize her subject position as an Assyrian over that of an English-speaking immigrant woman. According to Pavlenko, language maintenance may alternatively be used as a resistance strategy to the mainstream language and culture or as an oppressive gatekeeping practice, “in which case the group, assigned to maintain the minority language and transmit it to children, may enjoy less access to the majority one” (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.133). As a resistance strategy, maintenance of the minority language may be adopted by men or women, as a gatekeeping practice, it becomes the role of “guardians of the home language may be enforced and not taken up by choice” (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.134). Consequently, in the latter case, it is always women who are positioned in this role, whether they aspire to it or not.

Pavlenko adds that “images of ideal femininity” place women inside the community, making them the transmitters of the home language, cultural, ethnic and religious traditions. Consequently, “women internalize this role and attempt to live up to it, often subscribing to the ideology of linguistic purism” (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.134), as evidenced in the case of P3, who positioned herself as preserver of the Assyrian traditional culture and language.

In sum, the results have helped confirm that there are needs specific to each ethno-linguistic group and that a one-size-fits-all approach in English programming does not help address these differences. While at times, the results confirmed the knowledge claims previously reported in the literature, they also revealed specific differences, making it clear that the issues facing immigrant women in their desire for English proficiency are quite complex and cannot be reduced to any one set of explanations.

While a review of the literature enabled an understanding of the various challenges and opportunities immigrant women face with their English language acquisition, there were still surprisingly new facts that emerged in the interviews with the Assyrian immigrant women. For example, while some women explained that their positive learning experiences had been facilitated by instructors who encouraged levels of “confidence to communicate”, others indicated that having teachers who share the same ethno-racial background may encourage participation by encouraging students to “feel more comfortable in class”. Both groups of women explained that traveling long distances did not represent an insurmountable obstacle rather, provided them with the opportunity to, as one 36 year-old, non-English speaking mother put it, “learn to get around on my own”.

While the older women in both focus-group interviews indicated a similarly strong preference for “conversational” English classes that help facilitate their integration into the larger society by teaching them how to “communicate with people”, the younger women indicated a strong preference for “advanced/employment” English classes, reporting a correlation with a “better future” or, “better job”. Some women even expressed fears of being trapped in “secondary employment” (Man, 2004) throughout their working careers. As one 28 year-old,

college graduate commented, “I started off working in retail and I knew that it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I DIDN’T want to do that for the rest of my life”.

Less comfortable a finding was the common desire to be taught by “Canadian-born” teachers. Although the women reported a strong preference for “Canadian” teachers, indicating, as one 40 year-old women put it, “Umm, for example, if the teacher is Assyrian, they feel comfortable and only talk Assyrian in class. Then they don’t learn”, it became clear that women from both focus-groups were equating “Canadian” instructors with learning English “the right way”.

In sum, this study found that the challenges and opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in acquiring English proficiency are quite complex. The women in this study indicated that successful programs are those that are flexible, acknowledge the perspectives of the women and cater to their specific needs. These findings are intended to encourage recognition of the “importance of the need for outreach and programs to be clearly tailored to the specific groups of the women they are intended to serve” (Kilbride et. al, 2008, pg.39). While the Assyrian immigrant women in both focus-groups indicated having instruction in English in Iraq, classes were roughly an hour per day and focused exclusively on reading and writing with very little attention to communicative practices in English thus, indicating that these women require more instruction and particularly practice.

Similarly, a feminist poststructural framework allows us to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world. It has encouraged an understanding of the ways in which identities are constructed, contradictory and fluid (Peirce, 1994). The findings from this study have helped illustrate the ways in which immigrant women accept, negotiate or reject particular subject positions. The significance of these findings is two-fold: (1) they

reiterate the importance of the need for English programs to be tailored to the specific group of the women they intend to serve; and (2) they help illustrate how language becomes a site in which subjective selves are constructed and how these constructed identities encourage or impede immigrant women's English language acquisition.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

A feminist poststructural theory (Weedon, 1997) has provided a framework for this study. Maintaining a focus on language as the "locus of social organization, power, and individual consciousness" (Pavlenko, 2001, pg.120), a feminist poststructural theory conceptualizes the relationship between the language learner and the social world. Using this framework, this study provided the first glimpse into the challenges and opportunities facing Assyrian immigrant women in their English-language acquisition. A qualitative research approach, including focus-group interviews with seven Assyrian immigrant women yields some valuable findings.

Based on the findings of this study, several steps can be taken to improve immigrant women's access to proficiency in English. The women in this study provided candid accounts of the ways in which proficiency or, lack thereof in English has impacted their lives in the areas of work, family and well-being. As indicated in the literature and as reinforced in this study, immigrant women experience differences in their needs to learn English and ability to benefit from current provisions. For immigrant women, lacking proficiency in the English language not only makes it difficult to meet the needs of their families but also continues to isolate them from Canadian society (Kilbride et. al, 2008).

Toronto has the highest rate of immigration of any Canadian city (Traidafilopoulos, 2006). We also have the highest rate of potential in working with immigrant women to maximize their success in this country. We must not squander this resource. The following

recommendations highlight the ways in which we can maximize this potential thus, deserves the attention of academics, policy makers and service providers. This report has not only raised concerns about issues facing immigrant women, but has also charted a course on how we might best serve these women in their quest for learning English. So long as we maintain a one-size-fits-all approach in addressing these needs, we risk the creation of an “underclass” of citizens in our country (Duffy, 2004).

This study is intended to enrich our limited understanding in this area of research. By making visible the experiences of Assyrian immigrant women, a population both under-theorized and under-researched, this report helps substantiate claims which maintain that “there are many more groups who should be included in similar studies, given their numbers or percentages of non-English-speaking adult women, and given the fact that there are needs specific to each group” (Kilbride et. al, 2008, pg.12). Successful programs are those that are flexible, acknowledge the perspectives of the women, and cater to their specific needs.

Outlined are the recommendations that emerged from the focus-group interviews:

1. The federally funded LINC program for adults limits access to immigrants for a maximum of three years from the time the student starts training (CIC, 2005). This restriction has had a negative impact on immigrant women. Tied to home and childrearing responsibilities, immigrant women are confronted with a number of interruptions that affect their studies. In order to accommodate these needs, it is recommended that language training be provided to all who are in need, regardless of how long they have been in the country (Regier et. al, 2005).
2. One challenging issue that continues to surface is a lack of programming for higher levels of English. The present levels are not sufficient for entrance into many educational

settings and the workforce. In order to accommodate these needs, it is recommended that English programs with specialized streams of study be offered (Gormley & Gill, 2005).

3. Although the federal government has developed assistance programs to increase the accessibility of immigrants to the programs, “the amount of assistance has been steadily reduced and only minimally subsidizes the actual cost” (Regier et. al, 2005, pg.19). The women in this study expressed concern over financial obstacles that served as an impediment on their participation, some of which included costs associated with transportation and daycare. It is recommended that more LINC and ESL students receiving income supplements be explored (Gormley & Gill, 2007).
4. Class size has direct implications on addressing student’s needs, especially for those who are learning a new language. It is recommended that both governments and especially school boards address the optimum class size and ensure that standards are maintained.
5. English-language learners are not a homogenous group; rather, express diversity in preferences for types of English classes. While some of the women in this study preferred “conversational” classes (wherein reading, writing, listening and speaking are taught in one class), the women who had a college/university degree expressed interest in advanced English classes (wherein reading, writing, listening and speaking are taught separately). It is recommended that LINC and ESL service providers explore the feasibility of offering both “conversational” and advanced skills classes.
6. The women who had a college/university degree expressed concern over multi-level classes. Multi-level classes make it difficult for teachers to juggle the competing demands of high and low level learners. It is recommended that the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) is reassessed so that it can more accurately reflect

English language competency. This way, students are placed in classes that not only reflect their level of proficiency but also contain other students at the same level.

7. The women often referred to different types of English classes which cater to different niches of the English learner market. For example, whereas the women with either a college or university degree expressed interest in more academic/employment focused classes, others expressed interest in classes that explored themes concerning Canada's cultural mosaic. It is recommended that comparative research around different types of English classes is investigated which can help suggest some possible ideas for future English curriculum reform.

## APPENDIX 1

<b>PROGRAM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>HOST</b></li> </ul>
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced as a pilot project in 1985, Host was designed to assist newcomers with integration into Canadian life.</li> <li>• Host helps immigrants overcome the stresses of moving to a new country by matching them with Canadian volunteer hosts.</li> <li>• The volunteer helps the newcomer by providing moral support, introducing them to available services, helping them learn English or French, connecting them to employers in their field of work.</li> </ul>
<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host program participants are recently-arrived newcomers.</li> <li>• They must be permanent residents or in the process of being granted permanent resident status (a landed immigrant or convention refugee)</li> </ul>
<b>FUNDING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)</li> </ul>
<b>LOATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are currently 25 agencies in Ontario that provide services under the Host program.</li> <li>• There are three programs in Toronto and twenty-two others scattered throughout Ontario. These communities include:</li> <li>• Toronto, Ajax, Belleville, Brampton, Brantford, Cornwell, Fort Erie, Hamilton, Kingston, London, Mississauga, North Bay, Oakville, Ottawa, Peterborough, Richmond Hill, St. Catherines, Sarnia, Thunder Bay, Welland and Windsor.</li> </ul>
<b>AREAS OF ACTIVITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host service providers organize “Host group activities” whereby one or more volunteers get together with a large group of newcomers.</li> <li>• An example of a Host group activity includes “English Conversation Circle” (ECC).</li> <li>• This type of activity is facilitated by a Host volunteer who, sets up a group meeting in which newcomers practice English in a conversational setting.</li> <li>• Some organizations have “Youth Host” (mentor-newcomer matches for young people). Some have special Host Programs for women or seniors.</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 1 CONTINUED

<b>PROGRAM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (<b>ISAP</b>)</li> </ul>
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced by the federal government in 1974, ISAP assists newcomers with settlement and integration in Canadian life.</li> <li>• The ISAP program delivers direct services to immigrants such as reception, orientation, translation, interpretation, referral to community resources, problem-solving counselling, and employment related services.</li> </ul>
<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants of the ISAP program are: new immigrants, convention refugees, landed immigrant status and live-in caregivers</li> </ul>
<b>FUNDING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)</li> </ul>
<b>LOCATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are approximately 219 agencies offering ISAP services in Ontario. For a complete list please visit: <a href="http://www.settlement.org">www.settlement.org</a></li> <li>• Albion Community Aids Services, Jewish Family &amp; Child Service of Greater Toronto, Newcomer Women's Services Toronto, Rexdale Women's Centre, Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre, The Arab Community Centre of Toronto, TCDSB, Toronto Community &amp; Culture Centre, Toronto Public Library, Working Women Community Centre, YMCA of Greater Toronto, East Toronto Family Resources, Ethiopian Association in GTA, Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre.</li> </ul>
<b>AREAS OF ACTIVITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Needs Assessments:</b> Assesses newcomers' needs, resources, strengths and barriers. Assessments can be carried out several times during the phase of settlement and helps assist newcomers in setting goals, priorities and developing realistic plans.</li> <li>• <b>Referrals to Community Services:</b> Involves referring newcomers to resources in the community relating to their immediate settlement needs.</li> <li>• <b>Information and Orientation:</b> provides information to newcomers regarding their rights and obligations in Canada and also, the skills needed to meet their everyday needs (i.e. housing, health care, social services, banking, etc).</li> <li>• <b>Interpretation and Translation:</b> provides newcomers with both oral and written translation in efforts to assist them with their settlement needs.</li> <li>• <b>Solution-focused Counselling:</b> Assists newcomers in articulating their problems and identifying the resources available to help remedy them.</li> <li>• <b>Employment-related Services:</b> Assists newcomers with networking, resume writing and interview skills. The Ontario Region offers Job Search Workshops which teaches newcomers how to search for jobs.</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 1 CONTINUED

<b>PROGRAM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)</li> </ul>
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established in 1992, LINC aims to facilitate the social, cultural and economic integration of immigrants and refugees by providing language instruction in either English or French.</li> <li>• The LINC program teaches newcomers to communicate effectively in the areas of: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and pronunciation.</li> </ul>
<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants of the LINC program are: permanent residents of Canada, convention refugees, or persons in Canada whose applications for Permanent Resident status are being processed in Canada</li> </ul>
<b>FUNDING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)</li> </ul>
<b>LOCATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are currently 39 organizations in the Toronto area that offer LINC classes:</li> <li>• ACCESS, Afghan Women’s Counselling and Integration Community Support Organization, African Training and Employment Centre, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, Canadian Centre for Language and Cultural Studies, Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Canadian Ukrainian Immigrant Aid Society, Catholic Cross Cultural Services, Catholic Cross Cultural Services Mississauga, Centennial College, Centre for Information and Community Services, COSTI-IIAS, Delta Family Resource Centre, Ethiopian Association in Toronto, Hincks Dellcrest Centre, Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada, Learning Enrichment Foundation, Mennonite New Life Centre of Toronto, Newcomer Women’s Services Toronto, North York Community House, Parkdale Intercultural Association, Skills for Change, Somali Immigrant Aid Organization, St. Stephen’s Community House, Sudanese Settlement and Community Services, Tamil Eelam Society of Canada, Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, Toronto Catholic School Board, Ukrainian Cultural Centre Toronto, University of Toronto, University Settlement Recreation Centre, Woodgreen Community Services, Working Women Community Centre, YMCA of Greater Toronto –Korean Community Services, YMCA of Greater Toronto – LINC Assessment Centre, YWCA –Toronto, College Boreal</li> </ul>
<b>AREAS OF ACTIVITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Language Assessment:</b> Using the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), clients are assessed in order to determine their level of language proficiency. After the assessment, clients are referred to a language training provider in their community.</li> <li>• <b>Language Training:</b> Language training is offered in a variety of ways and the amount of training varies according to the clients’ background and abilities. Upon successful completion of training, a client is awarded a LINC certificate.</li> <li>• <b>Delivery Assistance:</b> Includes funding to assist and/or improve the delivery of LINC activities in efforts to benefit newcomers.</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 2

### Focus-Group Interviews

(The following represent a list of open-ended questions. The bullet points are intended to prompt the participants and to instigate further conversation)

#### Non-English Speaking Participants

1. When you arrived in Canada, how much English did you know?
  - Could you read, write, speak it?
2. Why did you not learn English?
3. Have you taken English classes in Canada?
  - If yes, when and where? For how long? Are you still attending? What is the experience like?
4. Have personal circumstances made it more difficult or easier for you to learn English?
  - Did the settlement agency offer onsite day-care? If no, how did you overcome this difficulty?
  - Did you experience any financial difficulties? (i.e. costs associated with travel, classes, daycare, losses incurred from missing work)
  - How did you confront/deal with these issues?
  - Were there any other difficulties you experienced?
5. Have Assyrian cultural practices made it difficult for you to take English classes?
  - Is there an expectation that you stay at home and take care of the emotional and physical well-being of the family while your husband/partner works?
6. What do you think is the best way to get Assyrian women to participate in English classes?
7. In your opinion, is not being able to speak English made it difficult to settle and integrate into Canada? If yes, how so?

## APPENDIX 3

### Focus-Group Interviews

**(The following represent a list of open-ended questions. The bullet points are intended to prompt the participants and to instigate further conversation)**

#### English Speaking Participants

1. When you arrived in Canada, how much English did you know?
  - Could you read, write, speak it?
  - How long did it take you to learn English?
2. Did you learn how to speak English in Iraq? Why, why not?
3. Why did you learn English?
4. Have you taken English classes in Canada?
5. What have your experiences with English classes been like?
  - Were there any rules/policies that made it difficult for you to take the classes?
  - Or, did the rules/policies help encourage your participation in these classes?
  - When you were ready to learn English, did you qualify for LINC classes?
  - If no, how did you learn English? Did you enroll in ESL classes?
  - If yes, did you find that the costs associated with these classes were becoming a challenge?
  - If yes, what did you do to overcome these challenges?
6. Have personal circumstances made it more difficult or easier for you to learn English?
  - Did the settlement agency offer onsite day-care? If no, how did you overcome this difficulty?
  - Did you experience any financial difficulties? (i.e. costs associated with travel, classes, daycare, losses incurred from missing work)
  - How did you confront/deal with these issues?
  - Were there any other difficulties you experienced?
7. Have Assyrian cultural practices made it difficult for you to take English classes?
  - Is there an expectation that you stay at home and take care of the emotional and physical well-being of the family while your husband/partner works?
  - Did your learning English create any conflicts at home? (i.e. relationship with husband/family members)
  - What did your friends think about you taking these classes? Did they have husbands/children that did not want women to learn English?
  - Did your husband attend the classes with you? Did he help you speak English?
  - If you encountered any challenges, how did you overcome them?
  - What did your partner/family think about you wanting to learn English?

8. In terms of the English classes you attended, were you provided with more formal instruction in English, or was it more practical (conversation-like)?
  - Which do you prefer? Why?
  - Were there particular English classes you were looking for, or did you attend those that were offered at your level?
  - Did the teacher explain what form of English he/she was going to teach and why?
  - What challenges have made it more difficult for you to learn English?
9. How did you find out about the English classes offered at Rexdale Women's Centre?
  - How long had you been in Canada at this point?
  - What has the experience been like at Rexdale Women's Centre
10. What do you think is the best way to get other Assyrian women to participate in English classes?
11. In terms of your own experiences, or the experiences you have heard about:
  - Explain what you believe to be the best kinds of language programs for immigrant women
  - What makes these programs the best? (I.e. proximity, day-care facilities, relevant material, teachers, small class sizes, etc).
  - What, in your opinion would be the best program for those women who want to learn a higher level of English?
  - What, in your opinion would be the best program for those women who want to learn conversational English?
12. Do you think these English classes are training you for a particular workforce? (I.e. certain types of jobs: retail, service, etc).
13. In your opinion, has learning English made it easier to settle and integrate into Canada? If yes, how so?

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