ACQUIRING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN METRO VANCOUVER

by

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges in acquiring English language proficiency among Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver and the impacts on their social and economic integration in the community. Through semi-structured interviews and photovoice research, the women share their experiences of language barriers and the impact on daily lives. The thematic analysis shows that women with limited English language abilities face four major challenges: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers. In addition to formal language training, women want more opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills outside of classrooms and interact with others in social settings. This research suggests that Chinese women can benefit greatly from informal language training. I propose three policy options to support informal learning: Volunteer Mentoring Program, Women’s Conversation Circles and Interactive Learning Program. The study recommends Women’s Conversation Circles to improve immigrants’ English language skills.

Keywords: Chinese immigrant women; language proficiency; social and economic integration; Metro Vancouver, British Columbia.
Executive Summary

For new immigrants in Canada, the ability to communicate in one of the official languages affects how successfully they are able to participate in the social, economic and cultural life. This study examines the challenges to acquiring English language proficiency among Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver and the impact on their social and economic integration in the community. I investigate the policy problem through semi-structured interviews and photovoice research with Chinese women, and propose policy options to improve their English language skills through various models of informal learning.

In B.C., the share of immigrant population has been increasing over the years with 80 percent of new immigrants settling in Metro Vancouver. Immigrant women are more likely to enter Canada as spouses or dependents without being assessed for knowledge of the official languages. The Census 2006 shows that Chinese immigrants represented the largest ethnic group who reported the least knowledge of English or French. In particular, a high percentage of Chinese immigrant women face language difficulties in their daily lives.

The lack of language proficiency is a key barrier to social and labour market integration for many Chinese women. Immigrating to a new country can pose challenges for women, especially those with children when settling in communities in absence of familiar social networks. Lack of English skills limits women’s abilities to build social networks, access support services and volunteer in the community. Language challenges also affect women’s participation in the labour market, and returns from education and work experience. Literature shows there are social and economic costs when immigrants are not able to fully participate in the labour market, which may result in a greater reliance on social programs. Since language barriers concern major
stakeholders in governments, businesses and immigrant organisations, it is important to analyse the problem by looking at the specific needs of Chinese immigrant women and providing policy options to improve their English language skills.

In this qualitative research, I conducted semi-structured interviews and photovoice research with Chinese immigrant women to learn about their experiences of language barriers. The thematic analysis shows that women with limited English language abilities face four major challenges: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers. While both groups of women who are employed or looking for work and those who are not interested in working share similar challenges to social integration, those who are looking for work face additional obstacles such as finding labour market information, getting their credentials recognised and finding jobs that match their education and work experiences. These challenges can isolate women and prevent them from participating in communities and workplaces.

Because of language barriers, women are highly motivated to learn English to help their children with school, manage daily life, build social networks and better understand Canadian culture. Through the interviews and pictures, women indicate a number of difficulties to acquiring language proficiency: lack of time, few opportunities to practice English, listening and speaking difficulties, and inadequate hours of formal language training. To improve their English language abilities, women want more opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in social settings. Informal learning is key to help women improve English skills and deal with some of their everyday challenges. It also provides opportunities for women to expand their social networks and learn about Canadian culture.

Based on the findings, I propose three options to support informal learning and increase women’s English language skills: 1) Volunteer Mentoring Program, 2) Women’s Conversation Circles and 3) Interactive Learning Program. To achieve the long-term policy goal of developing women’s language proficiency, short-term goal focuses on providing more opportunities to
practice English in social settings. The first option is designed to increase opportunities for women to volunteer in their communities, build social networks and practice their English with local English speakers. The second option aims to help women increase their conversational English skills, meet new people, learn about Canadian culture and discuss important topics of their concerns through conversation circles. Finally, the third option allows women to interact with local English speakers in social settings, learn to take public transit and access services in the city through field trips.

Cost, effectiveness, and key stakeholder acceptability are the criteria used to evaluate and determine the option that best achieves the policy goals. The evaluation recommends implementing Women’s Conversation Circles through ESL Learning Centres in public libraries and bridging programs in Neighbourhood Houses as a way to support informal learning and improve Chinese women’s English language abilities. Conversation circles would help women improve their listening and speaking skills, build new relationships, share their challenges and find support in each other. This option is most desirable because it is moderate in cost for the provincial government, highly effective in improving women’s English conversational skills and expanding their social networks, and well supported by key stakeholders.
Dedication

To all Chinese immigrant mothers who are resilient and motivated to learn a new language to help their families settle and integrate into communities.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the community organisations, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., Immigrant Services Society of BC and Little Mountain Neighbourhood House for providing assistance and supporting my research. In particular, I would like to thank Audrey Truth, Judy Zhu, Mark Batt, Karen Lai, Joel Bronstein and Aseefa Merali for giving their time and sharing their insights with me. I would also like to thank the staff at WelcomeBC for providing me with data and information on their programs and services. To the Chinese immigrant women who participated in the interviews and photovoice research, thank you for your honesty, openness and support throughout this process. I could not have done this study without your stories and experiences.

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Glossary

CIC    Citizenship and Immigration Canada
CEFR  Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
ELSA  English Language Services for Adults
ELT   Enhanced Language Training
ESL   English as a Second Language
LINC  Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
LSIC  Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada
1: Introduction

For immigrants, the ability to communicate in one of the Canadian official languages has a major impact on how successfully they are able to participate in the social, economic and cultural life. This study examines the challenges to acquiring English language proficiency among Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver and the impact on their social and economic integration in the community. It proposes policy options to improve women’s English language abilities through various models of informal learning.

Immigrant population in B.C. has been rising over the years with 80 percent of new immigrants settling in Metro Vancouver (Chui et al., 2007). Chinese immigrants represented the largest ethnic group who reported the least knowledge of Canada’s official languages. In particular, a high percentage of Chinese women have no knowledge of English as most likely they entered Canada as spouses or dependents and were not assessed for knowledge of the official languages.

For many Chinese immigrant women, a lack of language proficiency is a key barrier to social and labour market integration. Moving to a new country can pose challenges for women, especially those with children when settling in communities in absence of familiar social networks. Lack of English skills limits women’s abilities to build social networks and access services in the community. Language difficulties also affect women’s entry in the labour market, and returns from education and work experience. Literature shows there are social and economic costs when immigrants are not able to fully participate in the labour market, which may result in a greater reliance on social programs. Therefore, it is important to analyse the problem by looking at the specific needs of Chinese immigrant women and providing policy options to improve their English language skills.
In this study, I investigate the problem by conducting semi-structured interviews and photovoice research with women to understand their experiences of language barriers and the impact on their everyday life. The thematic analysis shows that women with limited English language abilities face four major challenges: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers. These challenges can isolate women and prevent them from participating in the community. To improve their English language skills, women want more opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills in social settings. While formal English classes are helpful, many find the hours are not long enough to become proficient. Informal learning is key to help women improve their English abilities and deal with some of their challenges. It also gives women opportunities to expand social networks and learn about Canadian culture. This research considers three policy options to support informal learning and increase women’s English language skills: Volunteer Mentoring Program, Women’s Conversation Circles and Interactive Learning Program.

The rest of the paper is organised in the following way: Section 2 gives an overview of Canada’s immigration policy; Section 3 provides background information on Chinese immigrant women in British Columbia and Section 4 describes the impact of language proficiency on economic and social integration; Section 5 reviews language acquisition and Section 6 describes language training programs in Canada; Section 7 defines the policy problem; Section 8 provides a detailed account of the methodology, data collection and types of analysis used; Section 9 presents the analysis of the interviews and pictures; Section 10 describes the policy framework with objectives, criteria and measures; Section 11 presents the policy options and analysis; and Section 12 concludes with a brief summary and future considerations.
2: Canada’s Immigration Policy

Canada’s immigration policy is based on the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRAP), which is the primary federal legislation that came into effect on June 2002. The IRAP is guided by three broad objectives: fostering the development of a strong and viable economy, facilitating the reunion of Canadian residents with close family members from abroad, and fulfilling Canada’s legal obligations to protect refugees (Statistics Canada, 2003). While the relative emphasis of these objectives has shifted over years, each goal remains an integral part of the Canadian immigration system.

The three objectives of Canada’s immigration policy are reflected through four main classes of immigrants that are admitted as permanent residents: economic class, family class, refugees and others. In order to build a competitive economy, the government selects economic class immigrants by awarding points for age, education, work experience, arranged employment, adaptability and knowledge of Canada’s official languages of English and French. Individuals that enter through the economic class include skilled workers, business immigrants, provincial and territorial nominees, and Canadian experience class. They form the largest group selected for their skills and abilities to contribute to the labour force. In 2008, economic class immigrants represented 60.3 percent of permanent residents in Canada (CIC, 2009).¹ The second largest group of immigrants is family class with 26.5 percent, which includes close relatives or family members such as spouses, dependent children, parents and grandparents sponsored by a permanent resident or Canadian citizen. Those entering under family class do not have to fulfil specific skills or language requirements. The third class is refugees, with 8.8 percent admitted to

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, statistics from section 2 are from CIC (2009).
Canada. Other immigrants that do not belong to a specific category make up the remaining with 4.4 percent.

Looking at the gender factor, men are more likely to enter Canada as principal applicants through the point system. In 2008, 24.1 percent of immigrant men were admitted to Canada as economic principal applicants compared to 11.5 percent of immigrant women. Thus, immigrant women are more likely to enter as spouses or dependents without being assessed under the point system. In 2008, 26.9 percent of immigrant women entered as spouses or dependents under the economic class compared to 21.7 percent of men. Under the family class, immigrant women also outnumbered immigrant men and entered as spouses, dependents or grandparents. In 2008, women represented 30.2 percent of family class immigrants while immigrant men constituted 22.5 percent of the family class.
3: Immigration in British Columbia

Immigrant population in B.C. has been rising over the years with a growth of 10.8 percent between 2001 and 2006. In 2006, it represented 27.5 percent of B.C.'s population and was second only to Ontario (28.3 percent) among all the provinces and territories (Welcome BC, 2008). This section gives a general overview of immigrants in B.C. and specifically, the characteristics of Chinese immigrant women population.

3.1 Immigrant population

In 2006, the majority of immigrants moved to British Columbia or Ontario when they arrived in Canada. Table 1 shows that while B.C. was home to 13 percent of Canada’s population, the province received 16 percent of recent immigrant, or 177,800 of the 1.1 million new immigrants who arrived in Canada five years or less (Chui et al., 2007). The ratio of recent immigrants to total population was 1.2, which means the share of immigrants is increasing in B.C. There were slightly more females than males in the immigrant population of B.C. In 2006, of 100 immigrants residing in the province, 52 were women.
Table 1: Distribution of Total Population, Total Immigration Population and Recent Immigrants in Provinces and Territories, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Total immigrant population</th>
<th>Recent immigrants</th>
<th>Ratio of recent immigrants to total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland and Labrador</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Edward Island</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Québec</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yukon Territory</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Territories</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunavut</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Chui et al. (2007)

According to 2006 Census, metropolitan areas attracted mostly recent immigrants with 80 percent of newcomers to B.C. settling in Metro Vancouver (Chui et al., 2007). Metro Vancouver include the City of Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Richmond, North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Port Moody, New Westminster, Delta and Surrey. In 2006, almost two out of five residents (39.6 percent) of Metro Vancouver were immigrants. Over the last ten years, the immigrant population grew at a rate of 31.2 percent, which was much higher than the non-immigrant population at 6.2 percent (Welcome BC, 2008).

The fast growing foreign-born population in Metro Vancouver has implications for settlement and integration of immigrants. Figure 1 shows the increase in number of immigrants as proportion of total population for selected years in Metro Vancouver between 1986 and 2006. The majority of immigrants chose to settle in one of the four largest municipalities in Metro Vancouver: the City of Vancouver, Richmond, Surrey or Burnaby. Immigrants often choose their
destination area based on existing networks of friends or family, job prospects or lifestyle choices (Statistic Canada, 2005).

**Figure 1: Immigrant as Proportion of Total Population in Metro Vancouver, 1986-2006**

Source: Metro Vancouver (2008)

### 3.2 Chinese Immigrant Women

In 2006, among recent immigrants to Canada, Mainland China was the leading source country with 14 percent of newcomers, followed by India with 11.6 percent and Philippines with 7 percent (Chui et al., 2007). In B.C., Chinese immigrants represented the largest ethnic group in 2006 with 17 percent of immigrant population (BC Stats, 2008b). Table 2 shows that 26 percent of recent immigrants who came from China arrived in Metro Vancouver between 2001 and 2006, followed by India and Philippines (Metro Vancouver, 2008). In particular, a large number of Chinese communities are concentrated in the City of Vancouver and Richmond.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Total Immigrants</th>
<th>Recent Immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Immigrants</td>
<td>831,265</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia (includes Middle East)</td>
<td>543,255</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>137,245</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>90,095</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>62,960</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>75,780</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>182,150</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Europe (U.K.)</td>
<td>73,435</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>31,740</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
<td>40,420</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
<td>36,550</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>27,260</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>24,780</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania and other</td>
<td>24,090</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Metro Vancouver (2008)*

Figure 2 shows increasing number of Chinese women immigrating to B.C. and to Canada between 1951 and 1991, with a gradual decrease since 1990s. The declining number of immigrant women could be explained by various factors, such as the tightening of immigration policy because of previous high level of immigration and the shift in selection of immigrants toward economic principle applicants under the point system (Green, 1995). The point system steered the composition of immigrants toward occupations and skills believed to be high demand in Canada.
To better understand the demographic of Chinese immigrant women, it is important to look at the characteristics of this population in B.C. The characteristics that I am considering are: age, education and mother tongue.

### 3.2.1 Age

Figure 3 shows the age distribution of Chinese immigrant women. The majority of Chinese women fall between the age group of 35 to 44 years old, and 45 to 54 years old. The distribution has implications for labour force participation since a high proportion of these women are in their prime working years. There is also a high percentage (16.8 percent) of senior Chinese women age 65 years and over, who have likely immigrated through the family class category and are looking after their grandchildren. The ability to fully integrate and adapt to life in a new community and culture often declines with age (Kilbride et al., 2008).
When looking at the pre-migration level of education for Chinese immigrant women, recent immigrants have a higher level of education than previous waves of immigrants. Figure 4 shows that the largest share (35 percent) of recent Chinese immigrant women had university degrees. However, 23.2 percent of Chinese women did not have high school certificate or equivalent. The literature suggests that there is a relationship between level of education and immigrant integration after landing in Canada (Boyd, 2009; Aydemir and Skyterud, 2005). The broad conclusions are that the more educated women are, the better they stand in terms of labour force participation, employment and earnings. However, in the early years of arrival, immigrants may experience a downgrading of their education or occupation due to a number of factors, such as lack of Canadian work experience, transferability of foreign credentials, and language barriers. For some immigrants, taking additional education or training courses may facilitate labour market integration.
3.2.3 Mother Tongue

There is a wide linguistic diversity of immigrant population in B.C., which is reflected in the growing Chinese community. Over the last 25 years, the proportion of recent immigrants whose mother tongue was neither English nor French has steadily increased. The census defined mother tongue as the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual. In B.C., 27 percent of immigrants reported a non-official language as their mother tongue compared to an average of 20 percent as a whole for Canada (BC Stats, 2008c). Figure 5 shows that among immigrants, Chinese was identified as the most common language followed by Punjabi. While each of provinces and regions in China has its own dialect, Mandarin is the official language of the country. Immigrants from China represent the largest proportion of immigrants who reported the least knowledge of Canada’s official languages (BC Stats, 2008c).
The 2006 Census shows that the highest percentages of immigrants with no knowledge of English or French were among Chinese speakers (19.6 percent), followed by Punjabi speakers (18.2 percent) (BC Stats, 2008c). Within the Chinese immigrant population, 24 percent of women were not able to communicate in one of Canada’s official languages. This indicates that a high percentage of Chinese immigrant women face language barriers.

Figure 5: Top 10 Non-English Mother Tongues in B.C.

Source: BC Stats (2008c)

Overall, the characteristics of Chinese immigrant women in B.C. reveal that a high percentage of women are middle aged and in prime working years. Recent immigrant women are more educated than previous waves of immigrants, which have implications for finding jobs that match their level of education. Among immigrants in B.C., Chinese immigrants have the least knowledge of English or French, which means they face more language barriers. These factors among others affect immigrants’ ability to adapt to a new life and integrate into Canadian society.
4: Economic and Social Integration

While Canada is a multicultural and multilingual country, English and French are the official languages. Language is a central means in which most social interactions take place. Having the ability to communicate in one of Canada’s official languages is important for immigrants to enter labour market, access services and build social networks. For recent immigrants, knowing English can have a major impact on how successful they integrate into the economic, social and cultural life of their new country.

4.1 Economic Integration

Language proficiency is a major asset for immigrants to access the labour market and is one of the main components of human capital. Immigrants who are able to speak English have higher employment rates and incomes (Grondin, 2007; Boyd, 2009; Aydemir and Skuterud, 2008). Conversely, the lack of language proficiency presents hiring challenges for employers and limits the degree to which immigrants can utilize their education and work experience (Boyd, 2009b). This section looks at the impact of language on labour market participation, wages and its link with linguistic enclaves.

4.1.1 Labour Market Participation

Immigrants with a high level of language proficiency are more likely to have a job in their intended field of work than those who have limited English knowledge. Boyd (2009a) confirms that low level of language proficiency among immigrants reduces labour force participation, increases vulnerability to unemployment and creates mismatches between education and jobs. Recent immigrants with limited English knowledge had low-skill jobs and worked
fewer than 30 weeks (Boyd, 2009a). In particular, George et al. (2004) show that most Chinese newcomers are forced to take on jobs, which are far below their level of training.

According to the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) in 2001, 70 percent of immigrants reported problems finding employment within the first six months of arrival in Canada. Figure 6 shows that language problems were cited by immigrants as the third most serious difficulty when entering the labour market, behind the lack of Canadian work experience and transferring foreign qualifications. While skilled principal applicants reported lack of job experience in Canada and recognition of foreign credential as the two most common problems, language barrier was the most commonly reported difficulty faced by spouses or dependents in the economic and family class (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Figure 6: The Most Serious Difficulties Immigrants Experienced when Entering the Labour Market


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2 The LSIC, conducted by Statistics Canada and CIC, surveyed approximately 12,000 immigrants six months after their arrival between April 2001 and May 2002. The study followed the same respondents two years after their arrival in 2003, and then four years after their arrival in 2005 (Statistics Canada, 2003).
Immigrant women in the LSIC population also reported more difficulties finding employment than their male counterparts. Table 3 shows that female immigrants experienced higher unemployment rate than male immigrants. The participation rate in the labour force for female immigrants was 58 percent compared to 83 percent for male immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Table 3: Labour Force Rates, by Gender, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Employment rate</th>
<th>Unemployment rate</th>
<th>Participation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Canada (2005)

Man (2004)’s study of Chinese immigrant women in Canada shows that inadequate language skill specific to their professions is one of the major barriers to employment. Interviewed participants noted that language training did not help them acquire the vocabulary they needed to find employment commensurate with their qualifications. Language difficulties coupled with lack of Canadian work experience and foreign credential recognition contributed to a high level of unemployment or underemployment among immigrant women. While some women were able to find employment, they were overqualified for the jobs and ended up working in retail and service sectors such as restaurants, sales and garment industries. Poor working conditions, discriminatory practices, irregular hours and the unstable nature of the work made it difficult for women to hold on to the jobs (Man, 2004).

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3 Employment rate is the number of employed immigrants over the total number of immigrants aged 15 and over.
4 Unemployment rate is the number of immigrants who are unemployed or looking for work over the total number of immigrants in the labour force.
5 Participation rate is the number of immigrants in the labour force over the total number of immigrants aged 15 and over.
4.1.2 Wages

In a competitive labour market, language proficiency can enhance earnings by enabling immigrants to find a better match between their training and the job requirements. Immigrants’ language abilities have an effect on productivity through greater efficient communication with supervisors, peers, suppliers and customers (Chiswick and Miller, 2000). Language proficiency can also increase the returns from immigrants’ education and work experience. Hiebert (2009)’s study in Metro Vancouver shows that immigrant women who arrived with higher education and are proficient in one of the official languages are more likely to find employment and earn higher wages.

In Canada, there is an increasing wage gap between recent immigrant women and Canadian workers. In 2000, immigrant women earned 65 cents for each dollar received by Canadian women. By 2005, the ratio had dropped to 56 cents (Statistics Canada, 2009). The gaps in earnings widened even though the educational attainment of recent immigrant women rose faster than that of their Canadian counterparts. A quantitative analysis of earnings of women who immigrated from Hong Kong and China to Greater Toronto Area reveals that Chinese immigrant women earn less than Canadian-born women despite higher levels of education and occupational status (Preston, 2001). In-depth interviews identified lack of language proficiency and difficulties recognizing foreign credentials as two main challenges to finding employment. Preston (2001) shows that immigrant women have difficulty translating human capital in the form of education, qualifications, and work experience gained overseas into appropriate and remunerative work in Toronto labour market. Overall, language proficiency is an important determinant of immigrants’ earnings; therefore improving language abilities can enhance economic outcomes.

4.1.3 Linguistic Enclaves

Linguistic enclaves are defined as “groups of people who are similar with respect to languages used on their jobs” (Boyd, 2009c, p.6). There are competing arguments on how
enclaves affect labour market integration of immigrants. On one hand, employment in linguistic enclaves may allocate immigrants to certain sectors of the economy or jobs where English skills are not as relevant. Immigrants who use non-official languages at work may receive lower wages because of competition, be more at risk of unemployment and their mobility into mainstream economy may be affected (Evans, 2005). Boyd (2009c) analyses allophone immigrants, age 25 to 64 who were employed in 2006 and spoke neither English nor French at work. She shows that those who use non-official languages at work have average weekly earnings between 50 and 60 percent lower than those who use only English at work. Moreover, Li and Dong (2007) find that Chinese immigrants who work in an enclave economy where no English or French is spoken earn substantially less than their counterparts in the mainstream economy.

Proponents of immigrant enclave economy argue that enclave economy offers immigrants an alternative avenue of mobility because they can enjoy economic returns from past human capital investments similar to those in the mainstream labour market (Nee et al., 1994). Instead of seeing language as a barrier to employment, linguistic enclave can promote ethnic cohesion and establish the basis of labour recruitment for immigrant employers. Recent immigrants are often attracted to enclave economy because of linguistic convenience, cultural familiarity and ethnic support. Moreover, security in the enclave economy offers them some opportunities to become ethnic entrepreneurs (Nee et al., 1994). According to Gross and Schmitt (2003), ethnic community contributes to segmentation of the labour market by attracting new immigrants through more employment opportunities and higher wages in their cultural community than in the general labour market. Immigrant employers have access to a low-cost immigrant labour pool, as well as to an ethnically based consumer market. Li (1992)'s study of the creation of an ethnic sub-economy of Chinese businesses in Richmond, B.C. confirms the positive aspects of a linguistic enclave economy. With increasing influx of immigrants in urban centres, the contribution of human capital and financial investment from immigrants helps enclave economy to prosper.
4.2 Social Integration

Immigrating to a new country can pose great challenges for recent immigrant women, especially those with children, to settle and integrate into their communities in absence of kinship ties and familiar social networks. Language difficulties can create barriers for women to expand their social networks, find job opportunities, access health care services and get involved in the communities. This section looks at the impact of language barriers on women’s ability to build social capital, access services, and volunteer in the community.

4.2.1 Social Support and Networks

For new immigrants, building social capital is a key part of successful settlement and integration into community. By definition, social capital is “a product of social networks and the resources available through such networks, as well as the extent to which the people in such networks are willing to share their resources with one another” (Kazemipur, 2004, p. 5). Social networks vary in size and provide different types of communal resources. Kazemipur (2004) finds that immigrants with a smaller number of networks or weak social ties have a higher chance of isolation and loneliness, and a lower level of social and emotional support in times of family difficulty and personal crisis. For most immigrants, their social networks consist of those who share the same ethnic background, which can offer a source of social support and cultural comfort. However, this type of network can limit immigrants’ access to resources to what is available within their ethnic communities. Such networks can also lessen the frequency for new immigrants to expand their networks, which can slow down the process of language acquisition and cultural adaptation (Wierzbicki, 2004). In turn, this has a significant impact on the socioeconomic outcomes of immigrants by limiting their job choices as well as their potential for economic mobility.

According to Ooka and Wellman (2003), social networks within and outside of ethnic communities in job searches can either maintain or reduce inequality along ethnic lines. In a
segmented labor market such as Toronto, members of ‘low-status’ ethnic groups (i.e. Ukrainians as defined in this study) tended to achieve higher income when they had ties outside of their own ethnic group, whereas members of ‘high-status’ groups (i.e. Germans as defined in this study) tended to do better when they had ties within their own group. Age, generation of immigration, gender and education affected the use of inter-ethnic ties in job searches. For example, highly educated immigrants had more access to social capital in the host society beyond their own ethnic circle of relatives and friends. Immigrant women also benefit more from having social networks than men because they have more difficulties finding jobs and cannot benefit from social ties in workplaces, whereas men have more opportunities to gain social networks through workplaces.

Not having access to a range of social networks outside immigrants’ ethnic community may limit their abilities to acquire English language proficiency. For example, Norton (1995) argues that language plays an important role in forming social networks and constructing social identities. For immigrants with little or no English skills, language limits the pool which they can develop strong social ties outside their ethnic community. Immigrants often have to renegotiate their identities and roles after arriving to a new country. It is through language that an individual develops a sense of self and has capacity to build social networks. According to Norton and Gao (2008), the construction of ‘cultural identity’ among Chinese learners of English involves confrontation between two cultures or two sets of values. To an extent, immigrants’ tendency to seek out others like themselves and network within their own ethnic group is related to their desired cultural identities.

The presence of social support has an impact on the social inclusion of immigrant women in their communities. Social support can be broadly interpreted as social networks and support systems such as settlement services, job search assistance, health care and social services (Stewart et al., 2008). For recent immigrants, acquiring English language proficiency is important for building social support (Neufeld et al., 2002). While family ties are crucial to immigrants’
adjustment to life in a new country, many women are moving beyond the traditional networks of kinship ties, neighbourhood and ethnic community, and building up their social networks in the mainstream to help them find employment and support their families (Stewart et al., 2008). For immigrant women raising children in a new socio-cultural context, maintaining a strong social network is crucial. A study of Chinese immigrant women with children living in London, Ontario reveals that women seek social support and networks through religious participation and the internet (Da, 2008).

Among Chinese immigrants, social support is perceived as both formal support from the government or informal support from friends and family. Stewart et al. (2008) find that Chinese immigrants identified language difficulties as one of the major challenges in accessing social services. The study emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant support to help immigrants navigate the social system. The ability to communicate in English is also important for immigrants to access health care system. Figure 7 shows that 24 percent of new immigrants, surveyed six months after their arrival in 2001, reported language barrier as one of the most serious difficulties when accessing health care services. However, language problems declined for respondents to 13 percent four years after arrival in Canada.
Language difficulties further affect women’s ability to care for family members with illnesses or disabilities. Neufeld et. al (2002) find that women with no or limited English had more challenges navigating health care system and finding appropriate information for their families. Language limitations can prevent women from expressing emotional needs to their doctors. Guruge et al. (2009) show that immigrant women with limited English skills experienced delay in receiving care and feared receiving the wrong diagnosis and treatment. Language barriers also restrict women’s ability to advocate for themselves and their family when dealing with health care providers. In some instances, women have to rely on their children to act as translators with health care professionals, which limit their ability to talk about sensitive health issues (Guruge et al., 2009).
4.2.2 Volunteering

On arrival to a new country, immigrants typically look for ways to develop social or professional connections. One way to build social capital is by joining groups such as religious organisations, social clubs, sports associations, and professional agencies. Volunteering is another important form of participation that helps immigrants to get involved in their communities. Handy and Greenspan (2008) note that immigrants are less likely than native-born Canadians to volunteer, but immigrants who do contribute almost the same number of hours as native-born Canadians. For immigrants, the benefits of volunteering include increased social capital and strengthened ethnic identity (Handy and Greenspan, 2008). Volunteering can help immigrants gain valuable work experience, improve English language skills, and strengthen feelings of belonging, trust and community connectedness. While volunteering is an important contributor to the development of social capital, low level of language proficiency can affect immigrants’ readiness to volunteer. Dudley (2007) shows that over one in five of the 50 immigrants surveyed indicated that they did not volunteer because of their limited language abilities.

In summary, language proficiency is integral to the success of economic and social integration for recent immigrants. Having the ability to communicate in one of Canada’s official languages can improve immigrants’ entry into the labour market. In terms of social integration, knowing English is important for immigrants to build social networks, access services and volunteer in the community.
5: Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is often seen as a continuous process in which learning contributes to an individual’s growth, not only cognitively, but also emotionally and socially (Eaton, 2010). While Canada has two official languages, there are many benefits of learning other languages in a diverse multilingual society. Archibald et al. (2006) show that learning a second language can enhance language skills, including narrative strategies and literacy skills in the first language, and develop non-linguistic skills such as divergent thinking and attitudes toward others. For immigrants learning a new language in Canada, it is important to consider the different types of learning and understand the motivations and barriers for acquiring English language proficiency.

5.1 Types of Learning

Learners have different preferences for formality of learning, which can take place in a formal and structured way in classrooms or an informal and loosely organized way in community hubs and public libraries. While formal language learning is viewed as valid and considered credible by tests and scores, informal learning is becoming more valued on a national and international level (Eaton, 2010). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an asset-based model that values learners’ language abilities in both formal and informal learning settings (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR examines an individual’s knowledge of a given language based on their competencies, which is measured on six benchmark levels. The traditional tests used in formal learning are based on a deficiency model where learners are penalized for what they don’t know and must fill the knowledge gaps before progressing to the next level. The CEFR theoretical framework is based on the premise that all

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6 The CEFR framework is comprised of six different levels, which are categorized in three broad levels and correlated to an individual’s language competency: basic user, independent user and proficient user.
individuals have the capacity to learn and there are different ways of learning that continue throughout one’s life span.

While this framework is implemented across the European Union, discussions have been happening in Canada about how this common framework of reference for language learning could be used in the Canadian context. In 2010, the Council of Ministers of Education, an intergovernmental body of provincial and territorial ministers of education, recommended the CEFR approach for assessing both formal and informal language learning (Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). In Alberta, the provincial government emphasizes the value of lifelong learning and community-based learning, and incorporates the CEFR into some of their language programs (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). With increasing numbers of multilingual immigrants to Canada, it is important to value different types of learning and find common ways to evaluate formal and informal learning.

5.2 Motivations and Barriers in Learning English

There are several motivating factors for new immigrants to learn a new language. For economic immigrants, their primary motivation may be finding employment and succeeding in their professions; for family immigrants, it is more likely to be facilitating the settlement of their family. Since immigrant women are important contributors to the well-being of their family, language proficiency is crucial to deal with health or schooling issues (Kilbride et al., 2008). Guruge et al. (2009) show that there are two important types of language skills for immigrant women: conversational and advanced English skills. Women voiced the need for conversational skills to better manage their daily life. Advanced-level English was seen as necessary for success in obtaining a job at the level of their education and training.

While immigrants may be motivated to learn English, there are barriers to acquiring language proficiency. Some of the key challenges immigrant women face in learning English include time constraints, childcare, lack of information, scheduling of classes, transportation and
cultural differences (Kilbride et al., 2008). Preston (2001) finds that domestic responsibilities and childcare constrained the time Chinese immigrant women are able to spend in English language classes. Immigrant women can loose household assistance during the immigration process from either family members or paid help, therefore they are more likely to stay at home to care for their children. Cultural differences and traditional gender roles can also impact immigrants’ ability to acquire English language proficiency. Li (2000) shows that body language, norms and directness of manners differ among cultures; therefore what could be considered polite in one culture could be misinterpreted in another. This can affect immigrants using English in workplaces and day-to-day life. Ho (2006)’s study of Chinese born female immigrants to Australia shows that immigration can reinforce traditional gender roles and woman’s perceived need to stay at home and spend more time with the children in order to help them with their adjustment to a new country. The lack of economic opportunities, high cost of daycare and greater dependence on their husbands can push women to take on a more traditional gender role as mother and homemaker. These reasons can prevent women from taking language classes and getting involved in the community. Financial concern is also identified as a main barrier to language training (Maheux and Schellenberg, 2007). The fear of debt can require women to work, thus decreasing time and energy for language training (Beiser and Hou, 2000).
In Canada, the federal and provincial governments share responsibility for settlement and integration of immigrants. The federal department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) facilitates the arrival of immigrants and their integration into Canada, and fosters equal opportunities for all (CIC, 2009). Several provinces, including B.C., have formal agreements with the federal government to provide settlement services and integration programs.

CIC provides basic language training in English or French to permanent residents. Its largest investment in language training is the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program (CIC, 2009). It offers free basic and intermediate English language training to new immigrants. LINC is delivered in local communities by immigrant-serving agencies, community organisations and post-secondary institutions. CIC administers LINC in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Atlantic Region, while British Columbia, Manitoba and Quebec have their own language training programs. Overall, CIC spent an estimated $200 million on language training in 2008/2009 for 60,000 clients (CIC, 2010). To be eligible for LINC classes, participants must be 17 years of age or older, and approved for permanent residency. Before entering a LINC class, immigrants must get their level of English assessed at LINC-funded Assessment Centres. The level of language abilities is evaluated by the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), which is a national standard used for describing, measuring and recognizing English or French proficiency. New immigrants are assessed on a voluntary basis and referred to suitable level of English training in their community. Family class immigrants are over represented in the LINC population, and women account for three-quarters of people taking language classes (CIC, 2010). LINC is taught by certified instructors in classroom settings. Topics covered in LINC include housing, education, health care, transportation and employment.
CIC also operates Enhanced Language Training (ELT) initiative, which provides job-specific language training coupled with employment supports to ease the transition for immigrants into the workforce. The main difference between LINC and ELT is that the latter is aimed at training immigrants for higher levels of language proficiency and has job placement and mentoring components. Finally, on a smaller scale, the federal government runs the Host Program, which connects new immigrants with Canadian volunteers who introduce them to social, educational and employment activities in the community.

Provincial governments play an active role in immigrants’ integration process (Hiebert and Sherrell, 2009). In B.C., federal funds are transferred to the provincial government through the Canada-British Columbia Immigration Agreement. Under the Agreement B.C. delivers settlement and integration services for immigrants and refugees. In 2009/2010, B.C. received over $100 million from CIC for its services and programs (Welcome BC, 2010).

The Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development is the lead ministry responsible for the management and administration of the provincial and federal funding for immigration programs. Within the Ministry, the Integration and Multicultural Branch supports the settlement and integration of immigrants through WelcomeBC, the province’s umbrella of services to help newcomers adapt to life in B.C. and foster inclusive communities and workplaces for newcomers. Figure 8 shows three priority areas under the strategic framework of WelcomeBC: English Language Development, Settlement and Inclusive Communities, and Labour Market Participation.

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7 In 2010, there was a government-wide reorganisation and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development was changed to Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development. Within the Ministry, the WelcomeBC Branch was changed to Integration and Multicultural Branch.
Under English Language Development, the provincial government delivers language training through three main avenues: English language training for adults, alternative service delivery for English training, and regional access to language training. In 2009/10, the government allocated $54.31 million for English language training for adults, $0.44 million for alternative service delivery and $1.78 million for regional access. Funding for language training is distributed through contracts with service providers including immigrant agencies, post-secondary institutions and community organisations. Under English language training for adults, the government funds English Language Services for Adults (ELSA), ESL training in public post-secondary institutions, and ELSA sectoral support. The ELSA program is the province’s largest investment in language training with $36.46 million in 2009/10 (WelcomeBC, 2010).

ELSA is free for immigrants and combines formal English training with a broader introduction to B.C. that provide information on topics such as health care, housing, employment and the justice system. The ELSA levels start with a pre-beginner level (literacy) and go from level 1 (low beginner) to level 5 (high intermediate). Levels 4 and 5 provide labour market preparation classes (ELSA Net, 2010). Some post-secondary institutions also provide ESL classes to help immigrants to bridge into academic programs. According to the 2007 independent review
of ELSA, the evaluation indicated both strengths and areas of improvement for the program (Ference Weicker & Company, 2009). According to participants in ELSA, some of the classes were too large and the teacher/student ratio was too high, which made it difficult to learn and follow along the English lessons. Participants also indicated difficulties advancing to intermediate English because ELSA Level 4 and 5 are either not available or the waiting lists are long. They reported that Level 4 and 5 classes improve their vocabulary and English speaking skills but do not prepare them for college, higher education or professional jobs. Therefore, informal language learning is needed to supplement formal learning and improve immigrants’ English skills outside of classrooms.

The government recognises the importance of a multi-faceted, community-based approach to support informal language training. Through alternative service delivery, the government piloted a range of informal learning models that included volunteer-based conversational program, tutoring and family literacy program. The government also supports regional access to language training for immigrants in smaller centres and rural communities through volunteer-based tutoring services (WelcomeBC, 2010).8

Under Settlement and Inclusive Communities, the government provides funding for settlement services, anti-racism initiatives and multiculturalism dialogues. Some key actions include enhancement of WelcomeBC portal and EmbraceBC, an initiative that deepens cross-cultural understanding through community engagement and capacity building. Finally, under Labour Market Participation, the government supports programs and services aimed at improving economic integration of immigrants. Some key initiatives include workplace-focused English language training, connecting immigrants to employment (i.e., Skills Connect Program), and recognition of immigrants’ qualifications through the Foreign Qualifications Framework.

8 The Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development delivers English as a Second Language Settlement Assistance Program (ESLSAP) in 39 regional locations in B.C.
In short, the government of B.C. has several initiatives to improve English proficiency of new immigrants but according to the statistics, Chinese immigrant women still face language challenges. Therefore, the next section presents my policy problem.
7: Policy Problem

The policy problem studied in this paper is: the lack of English language proficiency is a key barrier for the social and economic integration of Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver. Numerous studies have shown that language proficiency has an impact on immigrants’ earnings and labour market participation. Immigrants with limited language abilities are more likely to earn less than their Canadian counterparts or be unemployed, which may result in a greater reliance on social programs and income assistance (Toronto Board of Trade, 2010). Language barriers also affect immigrants’ abilities to build social capital and expand social networks, which have implications for social integration (Stewart et al., 2008).

There are social and economic costs when immigrants are not able to fully participate in Canadian society. The cost per year to the Canadian economy resulting from failure to integrate immigrants in the labour market has been estimated to $3.42 to $4.97 billion (Kitagawa et al., 2008). The economic cost reflects lost wages and productivity. If immigrant workers were as successful as those born in the country, personal incomes would be about $13 billion higher each year (Royal Bank Financial Group, 2005). On a national level, English language ability and literacy is an economic imperative since it is estimated that one percent increase in national literacy scores would boost national income by $32 billion (Coulombe et al., 2004). In B.C, the preliminary assessment on the returns for investment in English language training is 35 percent (Powell and Catala, 2010).

English language ability is one of the main components of human capital\(^9\) and creates social capital\(^9\), which facilitates integration into communities (Grondin, 2005). Lack of English

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\(^9\) Human capital may be defined as the various economically productive attributes of an individual, such as education level, the ability to speak the language of the country, health, etc.
knowledge makes it difficult for immigrants to socialise and build networks in the community. The costs of lack of social integration and cohesion include increased public expenses in health, education and justice system (Toronto Board of Trade, 2010). Acquiring language proficiency improves social and economic integration of immigrants and provides valuable returns to the Canadian economy.

This policy problem concerns major stakeholders from public, private and non-profit sectors. In the public sector, both the federal and provincial governments have a stake in ensuring that Canada has the skills and talents it needs for successful integration in workplaces and communities. Business employers have a stake in immigrants’ language abilities because of the implications for hiring challenges. Lower economic returns for immigrants are associated with communication costs carried by employers if they hire workers who are not proficient in the dominant language of the workplace (Evans, 2005). In the non-profit sector, immigrant agencies and community organisations play a key role in providing language training and helping immigrants adapt to life in Canada.

In the rest of the study I analyse the challenges for Chinese immigrant women to acquire English language proficiency and the social and economic impacts on their everyday lives. I also offer some policy options to improve their English language skills.

Social capital may be defined as the various links which exits among individuals who share similar values, standards and understandings, which facilitates inter and intro group cohesion.
8: Methodology

Specifically, I am interested in two research questions: 1) What are the challenges to acquiring English language proficiency among Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver, and how do they differ between those who are employed or looking for work and those who are not interested in working? 2) What are the social and economic impacts of language barriers in their everyday lives? This section describes my research design.

8.1 Data Collection

I am using semi-structured interviews as my primary methodology and photovoice research as my secondary methodology to collect data for a qualitative analysis. The secondary methodology supports findings from the primary methodology and provides a more in-depth analysis of language challenges faced by immigrant women.

8.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

I have conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 recent Chinese immigrant women from Mainland China who arrived in Metro Vancouver within the last five years and whose mother tongue is Mandarin. At the time of the interviews, 8 women lived in Vancouver and 6 in Richmond; both cities have large Chinese communities. All of the women were enrolled in ELSA classes at various levels between beginner level 1 and level 3. I chose to recruit participants at different language levels because I wanted to evaluate the different impacts of language difficulties faced by women with little or no English and women with basic English skills.

Out of the 14 women, nine were either employed or looking for work and five were not interested in working. There were 12 women who were in their prime working years (i.e. between the age of 26 and 44) with the majority in their 40s, and two were aged between 45 and 64. The
majority of women are from urban centres with 12 out of 14 having lived in cities in China and two came from rural areas. Almost all of the women from cities have post-secondary education, while those from rural areas only have high school diploma. The number of years of schooling that an immigrant had can impact the likelihood of exposure to English in the home country and affect ability to acquire English proficiency (Kilbride et al., 2008). The backgrounds of women have implications for language acquisition as those who are less educated or illiterate in their own mother tongue can face more difficulties learning English. In this study, all of the women are married with at least one child, but only five husbands live with their family; the others work in China and fly back to Canada a few times a year to visit. This type of family arrangement appears quite common among Chinese immigrants and the women take on the role of a single parent raising their children in a new country.

Semi-structured interview provides in-depth dialogue that maintains focus but allows the interviewer to diverge from planned questions (Kvale, 2007). The interview is flexible in that it is not a strictly structured question and answer session, but more of a conversation style interview. In the context of my research questions, I chose to use semi-structured interview because it gives room for participants to narrate their experiences of language barriers. Prior to the interviews, I prepared an interview guide with a set of demographic questions to identify the characteristics of the participants, and five themes to help me understand the importance of language proficiency and the challenges they face in their day-to-day life. The five themes are: motivations for learning English, difficulties in acquiring language proficiency, employment opportunities, social support and community life, and preferences for formal and informal ways of learning English. Specifically, I wanted to find out women’s motivations for taking language training and factors that contribute to the lack of English proficiency. In terms of economic integration, I posed questions about the implications of language barriers in finding jobs that are suitable to the women’s level of education and training. Moreover, I wanted to learn about their social networks,

11 For detailed information on the interview guide please see Appendix A.
community involvement or volunteering activities, and their access to social services. For the large part, I wanted to know what are some effective ways of learning to help women improve their English language skills.

Since I wanted the interview to be more of a conversation, I chose to memorize the interview questions in advance, so I could be actively listening and making eye contact with the participants without looking down at the questions in front of me. By having an open conversation, I was able to minimize the power relation between the participants and myself. I did not want to portray the image that I was an expert on the research.

Participants in the interviews were recruited on a voluntary basis through three immigrant organisations in Metro Vancouver. In order to get a range of immigrant women with different needs and backgrounds, I selected three organisations with unique mandates and language programs targeted to immigrants who live in Metro Vancouver. The first organisation is Little Mountain Neighbourhood House (LMNH) in Vancouver, which runs community programs and language training for immigrants. Two larger organisations with offices in Richmond and Vancouver are Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia (ISS of BC) and S.U.C.C.E.S.S. ISS of BC is the first immigrant-serving agency in the province that provides settlement, integration and language training programs for immigrants; S.U.C.C.E.S.S. is a multi-service agency that mainly serves Chinese immigrant population.

After making initial connections with the three immigrant organisations, I went to the ELSA classes and introduced my research to the women. Next, I set up interview times after the classes. I enlisted the assistance of a staff or language program coordinator at each organisation to help with translation during the interviews. I chose to use interpreters who work in the organisations because I wanted participants to feel comfortable and open in the interview with someone they knew. At the beginning of each interview, participants were given information about the study, and asked for verbal consent and permission to audiotape the interview. All 14
interviews were conducted within 5 weeks in November and December 2010, with each interview lasting about 40 minutes.  

8.1.2 Photovoice Research

For my secondary methodology, I chose to use photovoice to enable Chinese immigrant women to use pictures to further reflect on the impacts of language barriers in their everyday lives. Visual methods, such as photographic images, have been increasingly used in social science research over recent years (Rose, 2007; Reavey and Johnson, 2008). For example, photovoice has been used by Chinese village women promoting reproductive health; young mothers and grandmothers establishing cross-generational links in Detroit; and Black and Latino youth drawing attention to the AIDS epidemic in the San Francisco Bay area (Wang and Pies, 2004). Photovoice is grounded in the Freirian theory that believes that people should be active participants in understanding their community’s issues and that photography can be used as personal voice to express people’s experiences (Strack et al., 2004). In this study, photography is employed as a visual tool to help participants share their perceptions and experiences of language difficulties. The goal is to engage participants in deeper conversations about the importance of language proficiency.

Participants were recruited after each interview on a voluntary basis. Out of 14 participants, two women volunteered to take part in the process. To explain the photovoice project, I showed the women pictures that I took earlier that represented language barriers to me, such as signs in Chinese, shops, restaurants and Chinese cultural centres in Chinatown. Participants were given the options of either using disposable cameras or their own digital cameras to take pictures of English items that represent language barriers experienced in daily life. While I realised that my examples of pictures could have influenced the women’s experience in doing this project, the women clearly understood the purpose of photovoice and took pictures

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12 Details of the interview timeline are given in Appendix B.
of language barriers from their own perspectives. After one week, participants dropped off the cameras at their ELSA classes. I arranged for a follow-up interview with each participant to discuss the reasons and meanings behind each picture.

8.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is broadly defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is used to organise rich data in such a way that clear patterns and recurring themes can emerge. Researchers use thematic analysis because of its flexibility, i.e., it is not confined to one particular theoretical or epistemological framework. The advantage of using thematic analysis is the ability to generate unanticipated insights, and highlight similarities and differences within the data. This type of analysis both summarises key issues and retains in-depth descriptions of the data. Within thematic analysis, there is room to see how I affected the data as a researcher. Thus, analyzing is a reflective process where the researcher is examining the choices that are made and reflecting on the meanings of the themes described by the participants. Through the interviews and pictures, I am able to reflect on my own experiences and my role as both a researcher and an active participant studying the languages barriers faced by Chinese immigrant women.13

In this study, I use six analytical steps as set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization**: Recording, transcribing, reading, re-reading data, and writing initial thoughts
2. **Generation of codes**: Coding data and collating the data relevant to each code
3. **Search for themes**: Organizing codes into tentative themes
4. **Reviewing themes**: Ensuring themes have enough data to support them and revising themes as necessary
5. **Defining and naming themes**: Refining themes and ensuring each theme is accompanied by detailed analysis and textual examples

13 For detailed personal reflection on the research design and process please see Appendix C.
6. *Producing report:* Final analysis should illustrate how the themes relate to one another, to the research question and relevant literature.

Overall, a qualitative approach was selected for this project because there is little research done specifically on Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver. There are limitations to the methodology since semi-structured interviews and photovoice enable only a partial picture of the participants’ experiences. While findings cannot be generalized to the whole population of Chinese immigrant women, the data collected can be used to generate new concepts and/or to establish new links among already known concepts.
9: Data Analysis

Using the information from the interviews with Chinese immigrant women, I identify similarities and differences between women who are employed or looking for work and women who are not interested in working at this time. First, I analyse the five themes identified under 8.1.1, and then look at the themes in the pictures taken by the women and compare them to the interviews to identify common challenges faced by women and find ways to improve their English language skills.

9.1 Interviews

The first two themes attempt to look at reasons for learning English and difficulties in acquiring language proficiency between the two groups of women. The next two themes explore the economic and social impacts of language barriers in the women’s everyday lives. The last theme looks at women’s preferences for formal and informal ways of learning English. Under each theme, I identify sub-themes that capture something important in relation to the research questions and represent a number of instances across the interviews.

9.1.1 Theme 1: Reasons and Motivations for Learning English

By looking at the participants’ motives for learning English, I gain a better understanding of what they want to learn and how to help them achieve their goals. Between the two groups of women, there are four similar reasons and motivations for learning English: helping their children with school and communicating with the teachers; managing daily life; building social networks; and learning about the Canadian culture.

All the participants had one or more children when they immigrated to Canada and their main priority is taking care of their children. Not knowing English makes it difficult for them to
be involved in their children’s schooling. One participant expresses: “As a parent, I want to help them and know about their education progress. I want to learn English to help them if they have any problems in school” (Participant #3). Another participant voices similar concerns: “I think right now communicating to the teachers is the most difficult. I can’t help my daughter with her homework. At parent-teacher meetings, I have a hard time talking to the teachers and knowing how my daughter is doing in school. I have to ask my friend to help me translate with the teacher” (Participant #6). The women are motivated to learn English because they want to communicate to their children’s teachers without always relying on an interpreter. Lack of English knowledge prevents women from playing an important role in their children’s learning and education.

As part of adapting to a new life, the participants want to learn English to access services and manage daily life. One participant expresses: “I want to go shopping, do banking, go to the doctors, know the roads, and look through the mail” (Participant # 5). Learning English is important for women who want to be more independent and help their family settle. Since most of their husbands are in China, they become heads of the family and have to manage their household and deal with everyday matters. Kilbride et al. (2008) note that immigrant women are important contributors to the well-being of their families, hence if their English is limited, they cannot fully access available services and resources to address their families’ needs.

The ability to communicate with others and make new friends is another important reason for learning English. One participant states: “It is important to know English so you can talk to others and make friends. It is quite painful if you can’t communicate to people. My neighbors are mostly English speaking Canadians, so it is difficult to talk to them” (Participant # 13). Language barriers can isolate women and make it difficult for them to meet new people and build social networks. According to one participant: “Since I have settled down here, I want to be part of the community. When I get my citizenship, I don’t want to go back to China, I want to make a life here for myself. Right now I feel like an outsider, I want to be a member of the community”
Interestingly, the participant sees herself as an outsider because she feels disconnected to others in the community. Learning English can help women better integrate into their communities and create a stronger sense of belonging.

Many women also want to learn English to know more about Canadian culture and traditions. According to one participant, “I don’t really know the Canadian culture. If I know more English, I will understand the culture more. For example, I learn about Halloween in English class. There are Halloween activities in class, we got to dress up in costumes and carved pumpkins and learned how to say ‘trick or treat.’ I took my daughters out on Halloween. Now I understand why people are dressed in ghost costumes on the streets” (Participant # 2). Having English knowledge allows new immigrants to participate in cultural activities and events in the community. Interestingly, some women see volunteering as a part of the Canadian culture.

According to one participant: “I think volunteering is part of living in Canada because I see that a lot of Canadians like to volunteer and since I have time, I would like to volunteer to learn more about Canadian culture and practice my English skills” (Participant #14). Volunteering provides opportunities for immigrants to be involved in the communities and engage in Canadian culture.

However, most women do not know what types of volunteer opportunities are available. One participant expresses: “I have no idea where to look for volunteer opportunities. Where do I go to sign up? My daughter is older now and also needs this kind of volunteer opportunities” (Participant #9). Limited English makes it difficult for women to access information and find suitable volunteer opportunities.

While there are a lot of similar responses between the two groups of women, there are some differences in their reasons and motivations for learning English. In particular, for women who want to work, they are motivated to learn English so they can find a job. One participant expresses: “I want to have a better life and find a job, but my English is not good, so I don’t know if I can find a job here” (Participant # 3). This group recognises the need for English to find
suitable jobs in their profession, such as accounting, teaching or business. Numerous studies show that employment rate of immigrants increases with the ability to speak English (Grondin, 2005; Boyd, 2009; Hiebert, 2009). Another motive to continue learning English is to attain further education in Canada. One participant voices her desire to go to school in Canada: “I want to continue learning English and when my kids are older, I want to do more education and go to college here” (Participant #8). For many immigrants, the key to labour market success depends on furthering education or training in Canada and learning one or both of the official languages (Statistics Canada, 2005). Moreover, women note that they are learning English to prepare for their citizenship tests to become Canadian citizens, settle down and find a permanent job.

9.1.2 Theme 2: Difficulties in Acquiring Language Proficiency

There are a number of factors that contribute to the lack of language proficiency which are shared by both groups of women: lack of time, few opportunities to practice English, listening and speaking difficulties, and inadequate hours of formal language training. One of the main challenges faced by women is having enough time to practice their English. One participant explains: “I feel like I don’t have enough time to practice and review my English. I go to class, then I have to work, go home, do household chores and take care of my children. In China, I had help around the house from grandparents who would look after my children. But here in Canada, I don’t get a lot of help around the house, so I have to do everything myself” (Participant #11). For many women, there is a sense of personal loss in terms of family support when they leave behind their friends and families and immigrate to a new country. Starting a new life can be difficult as women are busy trying to adapt to their new surroundings with less family support, while learning a new language.

Another challenge voiced by many women is the lack of opportunities to practice English outside their ELSA classes. All the participants believe that their English skills would be better if they could use more English in social settings. One participant explains: “I think because I live in
a Chinese community, it is very hard to practice my English and make English speaking friends” (Participant #8). While it is easier for immigrant women to settle into a Chinese community, it is difficult for them to improve their English. Therefore, the environment plays an important role in the women’s ability to acquire language proficiency.

Out of the four basic English skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing), all the women convey that listening and speaking skills are the most difficult to learn. According to one participant: “I have difficulties with listening and speaking. It is hard to listen because people speak very fast and I can’t talk to them” (Participant #5). While the teacher often talks slowly in class, the women find it difficult to follow the pace of daily conversations. The inability to understand English and communicate with others affects their interactions with native English speakers.

One of the challenges for women in acquiring language proficiency is learning English in a relatively short amount of time. For each ELSA level, there are a set number of hours of classes and according to the participants, an average of three hours each day is too short to acquire proficiency. One participant expresses: “The class could be longer and the number of hours of language training should be more, so we have more time to learn English” (Participant #6). It is difficult to set a time length for language training because it is an ongoing process that happens both inside and outside the classroom. According to Li (2000), a person born into an English-speaking culture will start learning a language at birth and continue through adulthood as new experiences arise.

Even though there are similar challenges faced by both groups of women, there are a few noticeable differences. For women who are employed or looking for work, one of the obstacles is dealing with conflict of schedules between work and English classes. According to one participant: “Learning in the classroom is good but the time is not good because it is not flexible and I have to go work and miss the classes” (Participant #1). Likewise, there may be scheduling
conflicts for women who want to attend employment preparation classes. One participant explains: “S.U.C.E.S.S. provides a three weeks course on how to find a job, write a resume and prepare for interviews, but the course time is the same time as my English class. If I want to get information on finding a job, I have to stop going to my English class. The two class times conflict with each other, so now I have to think about which class to take at the end of this month” (Participant #6). The flexibility of language classes is an issue, especially for women who are looking for work. For others, there are financial issues with attending English classes instead of working. In addition, finding childcare is often difficult for this group of women. The shortage of childcare has negative implications for immigrant women with young children who would otherwise benefit from English classes.

For women who are not interested in working, one of the main challenges is accessing information online and learning to find English resources on the internet. According to one participant: “I think it is important to have computer skills in order to find information. Sometimes I have difficulties when I want to find things online. They don’t teach us computer skills in class, but I would like to use computers and search for things” (Participant #14). Lack of computer skills can hinder progress in learning English and limit their ability to find information. In a digital age, computer skills are important because they are an essential component of learning and communication. The inability to access information and resources in English contribute to further social exclusion of immigrants. Most women who are working or looking for work have some basic computer skills.

9.1.3 Theme 3: Economic Integration

The lack of English proficiency has several economic implications for women who are currently employed or looking for work. First, language difficulties can limit women’s choices to Chinese speaking jobs. According to one participant who works in a Chinese restaurant, “Working in the restaurant you don’t have to speak English because it’s all Chinese people. I’m
afraid to go out and look for work outside the Chinese community because of language. My English is not good, so it is hard to find a job in an English setting. I want to learn more English to get a better job” (Participant #1). Li and Dong (2007) and Evans (2005) show how participation in linguistically bounded workplace constrains immigrants to environments where English skills are not as relevant. Chinese women working in an enclave economy have fewer opportunities to improve their English and find jobs in the mainstream economy.

Language problems also affect women’s ability to use their specific education and training. One participant expresses her concerns: “Back in China, I worked as an accountant for 20 years. Now that I am here, I feel like I am wasting my education if I can’t find work in Canada. I have talked to friends and went on the internet. I think to be an accountant here, you have to take more tests and do more schooling to get the certificate. Language is the most difficult thing for me because the tests are in English. I have the knowledge in accounting but it is difficult to transfer that to English” (Participant #6). Immigrants’ lack of technical language proficiency can prevent entry into the appropriate jobs. Boyd (2009a) shows that immigrants who have a higher level of language proficiency are more likely to have a high-skill job or job in the intended field than those who have limited knowledge of English.

In addition, women with years of work experience often have difficulties getting their credentials recognised and applying for licenses. When I asked the same participant if she was aware of the steps to get her accounting credential recognised, she replied: “It is difficult for me to read some of the information on the website because my English is not good. I can read a little bit, but there is too much information and I get confused of whom I have to call and what I have to do” (Participant #6). Statistics Canada (2003) confirms that the lack of job experience in Canada, difficulties getting credentials recognised, and limited language abilities are the most serious barriers to economic integration for immigrants.
The lack of language proficiency further makes it difficult for women to find information for job postings in newspapers and on the internet. One participant explains: “I want to find a job but I don’t know where to look for a job. I’m trying to look but I can’t find any jobs. I read the Chinese newspaper and go on Chinese job websites, but I can’t read English newspapers and other job websites. I also try to find jobs through friends but the jobs are not suitable for me” (Participant #2). Language barriers can limit women’s search, thus leaving them with fewer job opportunities. Ultimately, the failure to tap into immigrants’ skills and integrate them in the labour market has significant economic impacts on the country’s economy.

9.1.4 Theme 4: Social Integration

Both groups of women face similar language challenges for social integration. Language difficulties have significant impacts on women’s ability to build social networks, volunteer in the community, take public transit, and access essential services such as health care and banking. When women immigrate to a new country, they often leave behind friends, families and relatives. Once they are in Canada, they have to make new friends and slowly build a network of support. The presence of social networks is crucial to women’s integration into the community. Many women have made some Chinese friends through their ELSA classes. One participant expresses: “I have only been here for six months, so I don’t have a lot of friends but I have made some new friends from class” (Participant #9). Enrolling in language training classes after arrival in Canada is a good way for immigrant women to meet new people with similar experiences. However, a lack of English proficiency affects women’s ability to expand their social networks. According to one participant: “I have some Chinese friends but I don’t have friends who speak English. I see some parents at the daycare but I can’t talk to them. Even in the Chinese community, it is not easy to make friends” (Participant #2). Another participant voices similar concerns: “Because I can’t speak English well, it’s difficult for me to find friends here. Usually I just talk to my family” (Participant #3). New immigrants can feel isolated from the community if they have difficulties
communicating with others, hence social networks are important in creating a sense of belonging.

According to participants, a good way to get more involved in the community and meet new people is through volunteering. While women think that volunteering can help them improve their English, the biggest obstacle to volunteering is their limited language abilities. According to one participant: “I really want to volunteer but I can’t because my English is not good. For example, I want to volunteer at my children’s school because they need volunteer parents and I would like to help, but I can’t talk to them. I think volunteering can help me to practice English and talk to new people, but right now I feel like I am burdening others” (Participant #7). Even though women want to volunteer, language is a barrier and they don’t want to always rely on others for translation. Dudley (2007) shows that a large number of immigrants did not volunteer because of language difficulty.

Language barriers can also affect women’s mobility by limiting their ability to take public transit. In fact, 12 out of 14 women do not take public transit because they don’t know how to use the system and have difficulties understanding the signs or asking for directions. According to one participant: “I don’t take the bus here. I think the bus signs are not very clear. If you want to go some place, you have to check how to get there and how to transfer. I can’t just go to a bus stop and find out which bus I need to take because the times and routes are not listed” (Participant #6). Another participant expresses similar feelings: “I don’t know how to use the transit system. I’m afraid to take the bus because I might get lost and can’t ask for directions. But if my English is better, I would try to take the bus because it is more convenient and you don’t have to find parking” (Participant #9). Many women indicate that they would like to take public transit if their English improves. The only time they were on the bus was when the teacher took them on a field trip to the public library and they felt more confident using transit since they were traveling in a group. While women can drive to places, they mostly stay within their immediate
The ability to access services is an important part of integration for immigrants. According to the participants, health care and banking are two types of services where they face language barriers. Some women had difficulties finding a doctor that accepts new patients and speaks Mandarin. Lack of English proficiency restricts access to a range of health care services. The biggest concerns for the women are communicating with doctors in the hospitals or going to see specialists given that they are more likely to be English-speaking doctors. One participant shares her recent experience: “I had a problem with my eyes before, so I went to my family doctor. He referred me to a specialist. I went to see the specialist and she referred me again to another specialist. I have not gone to the last specialist yet because he only speaks English and I can’t communicate with him. I need to bring my friend to help me interpret” (Participant #12).

Language limitations can create delays in seeking care, and cause potential wrong diagnosis and treatment through miscommunication. Women often rely on their friends or children to act as translators with health care professionals, despite issues with confidentiality. Guruge et al. (2009) show that language barriers have a negative effect on immigrant women’s access to and use of quality care, thus preventing them from fully benefiting from the Canadian health care system.

When participants were asked if they have any difficulty accessing services because of language difficulties, half of the women responded that they do. In particular, they have difficulties understanding financial services such as loans and mortgages. One participant gives an example: “If you want to do banking on the internet, you need to know English to do online banking and understand thing such as income tax and different banking account. I want to know English, learn about my options, make decisions myself and not rely on others for information. If you are totally dependent on others, you might miss important information” (Participant #5).

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14 One of the participants explains how her friend made a mistake in the hospital when he misinterpreted the doctor’s diagnosis for her son.
explains further that there is a lesson on banking in the ELSA class, but it is only for one class and she still does not understand the banking system and terminologies. Another participant shares her experience: “When I go to the bank, I can take money out and deposit money no problem. But if I want to take out a loan or mortgage for a house, then I need to find someone to help me translate and explain to me in Chinese how the system works” (Participant #10). Learning English to access information is important for new immigrants to acquire knowledge, skills and confidence to make financial decisions.

9.1.5 Theme 5: Preferences for Formal and Informal Ways of Learning English

Because of the language barriers women face in their new surroundings, they are motivated to learn English. When asked about their preferences for types of learning, all of them explain that both formal and informal ways are important. According to the participants, learning in classroom is good for reading and writing skills, but it is important to practice speaking and listening skills outside the classroom to improve conversational skills.

In ELSA classes (i.e., formal learning), there is more pressure from the teachers and peers to study English. Most women find out about free language training classes through friends, relatives or pamphlets given to them upon arrival in Canada. While they find the classes helpful, they indicated that the hours are too limited; they need more time to learn and acquire language proficiency. Some of them want to supplement their learning with tutoring related to lessons done in class.

Outside of the classroom, women try to improve their listening and speaking skills through daily activities, such as shopping, watching TV, listening to radio, talking to neighbours or other parents (i.e., informal learning). Some women go to public libraries to use English as a Second Language (ESL) resources or join activities at the community centres. One participant explains: “I want to learn more English, so every Saturday I would go to a walking club in my community centre. It is a good way to meet new people because there are a lot of Canadians in
the club and I would try to listen to their conversations. I understand some of the words now, so I am very happy because I know what they are saying. Sometimes I would even try to talk to them” (Participant #30). Another effective way of learning is going on field trips and interacting with local English speakers. Teachers would sometime bring students on field trips to learn about places they are studying. According to one participant: “I think field trips are really helpful to learn about different places around us because you can see them, whereas if you are sitting in a classroom, it is harder to visualize these places. For example, we went to the police museum and law courts, and learn about the justice system in Canada. As new immigrants, we don’t know where these places are in the city, so it is good to follow the teacher and learn how things work” (Participant #14). Field trips provide opportunities for immigrants to practice their English with the local English speakers and discover new resources and places in the city.

According to most participants, one of the best ways to improve English is to join a conversation circle. One participant shares her experience: “Every Tuesday I would go to the conversational circle at my church and practice speaking and listening. There are usually 5 or 6 students, which is good because the teacher pay more attention to us and I find it helpful to learn. The teacher is a volunteer and we pick different topics to talk about each time. The topics cover current events, so I learn new words and hear about news and events happening in the city” (Participant #10). There are advantages to learning in small groups to improve conversational skills. Another participant talks about a conversation circle: “There is a conversational circle every Friday at my church, which is close to my house. There are Koreans, Chinese and Chileans in the group, so I get to meet lots of new people too. There is a retired teacher who volunteers and leads the conversation. The conversation is spontaneous and we discuss different topics. Last week was Remembrance Day, so we talked about Remembrance Day and what a red poppy means” (Participant #5). The conversation circles provide women opportunities to meet new people and discuss topics of their concerns. Overall, informal learning seems to be effective in helping women gain more confidence in practicing their English in social settings.
9.2 Photovoice

Among participants interviewed, two volunteered to take pictures of things that represented language barriers around them. Based on the pictures and follow-up interviews with the women, I identify four main aspects that are identified in the earlier themes: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers. This sub section analyses the four aspects and compare them with the five themes in the first interviews.

9.2.1 Aspect 1: Access to Public Transportation

One participant took two pictures of bus stop signs (Figure 9), which show she has difficulties taking the bus. When I asked why she took the pictures she explained: “I took the pictures because there are different ways to show the bus stops signs. In China, we have bus stop signs that show you the starting and ending point and the number of stops in between. You can see where you need to go and there are bus times and routes. But here in Canada, it is completely different. My English is not good and I don’t know how to take the bus because I don’t know where the bus comes from or where it goes. I don’t understand the signs and can’t find the bus schedules, so I don’t ride the bus. I would take the bus if I have more information and know where I am going” (Participant #3). For many people, the bus is an important means of transportation to go to work or school. For immigrants, the lack of English language proficiency limits ability to use public transit, which in turn can restrict their mobility and access to a range of settlement services. George et al. (2004) show that in Toronto some settlement services were inaccessible to new immigrants who could not use public transit.
Alternatively, some Chinese immigrant women get around the city by driving. One participant took a picture of a gas station. She explains: “This gas station is close to my house. At first I had a hard time talking to the people at the gas station and telling them what I want. But then I figured out the self service station and how to put my credit card in the machine. I don’t know what the sign ‘diesel’ means in this picture” (Participant #9). Even though she drives, she mostly stays within the familiar areas and her immediate community in Vancouver. She mentions that she would like to use public transit so she doesn’t have to find parking, however she doesn’t know how the bus system works and is afraid of getting lost and not being able to ask for directions. Gaining more English skills can clearly help women use public transit and go to neighbouring municipalities.

9.2.2 Aspect 2: Financial Literacy

A revealing picture taken by one participant is a picture of a bank (Figure 10). She took this picture initially because she had difficulties learning about the banking system. Another participant took a picture of a banking advertisement (Figure 11): “I looked up the word ‘investment’ in the dictionary. I know what it means now but I don’t know what are the different investment options” (Participant #9). She further explained her difficulties with banking: “When I
go to the bank, I have to look for Chinese bank tellers so I can talk to them. I have never tried to use the ATM machines because I don’t know how they work. One time my friend told me her card got stuck in the ATM machine, so she said it is better to go inside the bank and not use the machine” (Participant #9). Financial literacy is important for immigrant women because, as mentioned earlier, they are usually heads of household. One participant expresses: “I think banking is an important topic to learn because when I first arrive in Canada, I didn’t know what are checking account and savings account. I still don’t really understand the financial system here. We have not learned about banking in our English class yet” (Participant #3). While there is a lesson on banking in the ELSA class, the topic is taught only once in a semester and women have to wait if they miss the lesson. Learning English is important for women to gain financial literacy and make informed financial decisions.

Figure 10: Bank
9.2.3 Aspect 3: Lack of Information

There were a number of interesting pictures that show women’s desire to find information and be more connected to their communities. One participant took a picture of pamphlets on activities and events in the city (Figure 12). She explains: “This picture was taken at the arrival area in the airport. I went to the airport to pick up my relatives. When I first saw the pamphlets, I thought they were advertisements, but didn’t know what they were advertising for. If the pamphlets are in both Chinese and English, then I can understand the pamphlets, but right now I can’t get any helpful information from the pamphlets. Airport is a good place for new immigrants to get information when they first arrive in Canada. When I first arrived, I didn’t have any friends here so I was looking for information about things to do in the city so I can meet some people” (Participant #3). For new immigrants, language plays a key role in selecting information sources. Since many immigrants have few social networks when they arrive in Canada, they have less access to information sources. As a result, they have more difficulties finding information about relevant activities in the community. Those without adequate access to information risk being socially excluded.
Another example is a picture of newspaper boxes (Figure 13), which the participant explains: “I have difficulty reading the English newspapers because there are a lot of new words in one article and it is hard to understand. I feel like I don’t really know what’s going on in the city. Sometimes my friends will tell me if there are things happening in the community” (Participant #3). Newspapers are important information sources about events happening locally as well as in Canada and around the world.
9.2.4 Aspect 4: Cultural Barriers

The two women took a range of pictures of things that highlighted cultural barriers. There are a few pictures of food in the grocery stores (Figure 14). One participant explains: “I want to try to cook western style food so I went to the library and borrowed cooking books. There were a lot of words that I didn’t understand and I tried to look them up in the dictionary, but there were many different meanings to them. When I went to the grocery store, I looked for cheese but I didn’t know there were so many kinds of cheese and I didn’t know which one I need. So I took a picture of the cheeses because I don’t understand the English words on them and I don’t know how to ask for help” (Participant #3). The lack of language proficiency prevents new immigrants from getting acquainted with local food and affects simple daily tasks such as grocery shopping.
Another example of cultural barrier is a picture of a sculpture taken by a participant in the park near her English school (Figure 15). The participant explains: “I think this sculpture is portraying somebody important, but I don’t know who it is. It is strange that there is one small person standing on top of a big person head. I don’t understand the meaning of this art and I’m not sure if it has to do with the culture or politics in the city” (Participant #3). For new immigrants, cultural and language barriers are linked because a lack of English knowledge makes it more difficult to understand the social, historical and political context of Canadian culture.
Cultural barriers are also evident in different ways of socializing. An interesting picture taken by one participant is a photograph of a pub sign (Figure 16). The participant expresses her thoughts: “I took this picture on my way home. I saw this sign and didn’t know what this place is and what the words on the sign mean. There is a beer mug on the picture, so maybe it is a place to drink” (Participant #3). Part of integrating into a new society is learning about Canadian culture and the different cultural ways of socializing. The ability to speak English is important when immigrants try to socialize outside their ethnic communities.

Next I summarize the interview and photovoice findings.

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15 I explained to her afterward that the place is a pub and it is a common space for people to socialize and meet other people. The pub culture is not part of the Chinese culture; Chinese people would often go to karaoke or restaurants to socialize.
9.2.5 Summary of Findings

Based on the interviews and pictures, Chinese immigrant women are motivated to learn English to help their children with school, manage daily life, build social networks, and better understand Canadian culture. Language acquisition is important for building social networks and constructing social identities (Norton, 2005). Lack of English language proficiency limits women’s abilities to develop strong social ties outside their ethnic community. While both groups of women who are employed or looking for work and those who are not interested in working share similar challenges for social integration, those who are looking for work face additional obstacles such as finding labour market information, getting their credentials recognized and searching for jobs that match their education and work experiences. Women with limited English language abilities face four major challenges: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers.

A lack of English language proficiency poses challenges for women to take public transit system and, in turn, restrict their mobility and hinder their access to settlement services outside
their immediate communities. Language barriers also contribute to a lack of financial literacy, which affect women’s knowledge, skills and confidence to make responsible financial decisions. For new immigrants, English language ability is important for finding information about activities and events that are happening in the community. Limited language skills along with cultural barriers make it difficult for women to expand their social networks and learn about Canadian culture. These challenges can isolate women and prevent them from participating in the social, economic and cultural community life.

In this study, the women indicate a number of difficulties to acquiring language proficiency: lack of time, few opportunities to practice English, listening and speaking difficulties, and inadequate hours of formal language training. While ELSA classes are helpful, many find the hours are not long enough to acquire language proficiency. My analysis shows that women want more opportunities to improve their speaking and listening skills in social settings. Informal language learning such as conversation circles and volunteering is a key way to help women improve their conversational skills, expand their social networks and learn about Canadian culture. For many immigrants, informal learning is an important bridge to formal learning because it allows learning through everyday experiences. Women can gain confidence in conversational English and deal with some of their challenges such as taking public transit, banking and finding information in the community. Thus, I suggest policy options to support informal learning and increase women’s English language skills.
10: Policy Framework

This section sets out the framework for policy analysis with long and short-term objectives and with a set of criteria and measures to evaluate suggested policy options.

10.1 Policy Objectives

For the purpose of this study, the short-term is within the next five years and the long-term is within the subsequent ten years. My findings show that ability to communicate in English is important for Chinese immigrant women to successfully integrate into Canadian society and participate in the social, economic and cultural life. According to 2001 Census, 30.5 percent of Chinese immigrants in B.C. reported not knowing either English or French (BC Stats, 2003). The 2006 Census shows improvement in language proficiency with only 19.6 percent of Chinese immigrants reporting no knowledge of either official language (BC Stats, 2008c). Therefore, in five years there has been a decrease of 10.9 percentage points of Chinese immigrants not knowing English. It is important to note that the significant decline of language barriers may be due to several factors over the years, such as higher education attainment among immigrants and different immigration regulations. Nevertheless, this improvement is the basis for setting the policy goals.

According to 2006 Census, 151,690 recent immigrants arrived in Metro Vancouver between 2001 and 2006, and 39,790 or 26 percent were Chinese (Metro Vancouver, 2008). Statistics show that approximately half of them are women, which means there were 19,895 Chinese immigrant women. As mentioned above, 19.6 percent of Chinese immigrants reported no knowledge of English. Therefore, it is estimated that over five years 3,780 Chinese immigrant
women came to Metro Vancouver without English skills and each year at least 756 newcomers need English language training.

Based on the calculations, the long-term goal is to develop women’s English language proficiency by maintaining or further decreasing the percentage of immigrants that lack English skills. To achieve the long-term goal, short-term goals focus on improving women’s language abilities and providing more opportunities to practice English. Since the women in this study are already attending ELSA classes, the short-term goal then is to increase informal learning opportunities in communities by serving at least 756 new women each year. The following section looks at the criteria and measures to assess the policy options.

10.2 Criteria and Measures

To evaluate and determine the policy option that best achieves the short-term goals, three criteria have been chosen: cost, effectiveness, and key stakeholder acceptability. Since this study is targeted toward Chinese immigrant women, horizontal equity is not used as a criterion because the policy options do not specifically address challenges faced by other ethnic groups of immigrants in Metro Vancouver. Given the focus of the research, I recognise that the options do not allow equal access to language training for all immigrants but the policies could be extended to other ethnic groups facing similar barriers. By limiting the study to only Chinese women, the options are inequitable by design but take into account the benefits of including different ethnic groups of women to increase capacity for social networking and language acquisition.

In Table 4, a measure is assigned to each criterion with benchmarks for index of values from one to three, which indicates a low, moderate and high performance. When a criterion has more than one component, the average of the index of values is taken to ensure an equal weight for each criterion. Both effectiveness and key stakeholder acceptability are multifaceted criteria,

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16 My policy evaluation is for newcomers only. Of course the suggested programs would be open to Chinese women already in B.C.
which have more than one measurement for evaluating policy options. While criteria are equally weighted in this study, in the end decision makers will determine which criterion is the most important to them. The policy that has the highest total score is deemed to be the most desirable option that will be recommended. Table 4 illustrates how I measure and value each criterion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>Index Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount spent per participant</td>
<td>Financial cost of implementing the policy each year</td>
<td>The cost of hiring staff and program expenses per participant</td>
<td>Less than $280</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Between $281 - $420</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than $421</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effectiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of English language skills</td>
<td>The extent to which immigrants’ language abilities are improved</td>
<td>Advance from beginner ELSA level to intermediate ELSA level</td>
<td>Advance by 2 levels</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advance by 1 level</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No advancement</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of social networks</td>
<td>The extent to which the immigrants are more connected to the community</td>
<td>Opportunities to meet new people and expand social networks</td>
<td>Many opportunities</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Few opportunities</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Stakeholder Acceptability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service providers</td>
<td>The extent to which immigrant organisations, post-secondary institutions, and community groups are involved in the policy</td>
<td>The level of consultation and participation of service providers</td>
<td>Involved in both steps of the process</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Involved in one step of the process</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not involved in the process</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese immigrant women</td>
<td>The extent to which women are likely to participate</td>
<td>Perception of demand on the women’s time</td>
<td>Little demand of time</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some demand of time</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Substantial demand of time</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government agencies</td>
<td>The extent to which policy is supported by government agencies</td>
<td>The number of B.C. ministries involved</td>
<td>More than 2 ministries</td>
<td>High = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 ministries</td>
<td>Moderate = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Only 1 ministry</td>
<td>Low = 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10.2.1 Cost

This criterion measures the financial cost of implementing each policy based on the amount spent per participant for informal language training. The cost takes account hiring of staff, including ESL instructors and program coordinators, and other program expenses such as travel costs or fees. The benchmark for the cost is determined by the estimated cost per participant in informal learning through the alternative service delivery for English language training in 2009/10. The government spent $440,000 in total for four models of informal language training: Immigrant Parents as Literacy Supporters (iPALS), UBC Learning Exchange School-Based ESL Conversation Project, SHARE Program and Friends of Simon (WelcomeBC, 2010). Funding for the four programs includes staffing costs and program expenses, and does not take into account the use of volunteers.

In 2009/10, 1590 immigrants received informal language training through these four programs mentioned above (WelcomeBC, 2011). By dividing the total amount spent in alternative service delivery with the number of immigrants served, it is estimated that the government spent approximately $277 per participant for informal learning in one year. Given this amount, a policy that spends less than $280 per participant is considered desirable because it requires less spending than existing programs. It is ranked high and assigned an index value of 3. A policy that spends between $281 and $480 per student is considered moderate in cost and has an index value of 2, and a policy that spends more than $481 per student is costly and considered low with an index value of 1.

10.2.2 Effectiveness

This criterion measures the extent to which immigrants’ English language skills are improved based on the number of advancement through ELSA levels from beginner to

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17 In 2009/10, Immigrant Parents as Literacy Supporters served 340 learners, UBC Learning Exchange School-Based ESL Conversation Project served 118 learners, SHARE Program served 927 learners and Friends of Simon served 205 learners.
intermediate. For example, a person advancing from ELSA level 1 to level 2 can ask simple questions, understand some instructions and parts of conversations. A person advancing from ELSA level 3 to level 5 can use longer sentences, join in conversations on familiar topics and comfortably use English with others in social settings. If a policy advances immigrants’ language abilities by two levels (i.e., level 3 to 5), it is considered highly effective. If it advances by one level (i.e., level 1 to 2), it is considered moderately effective and if there is no advancement, it is considered least effective.

In addition to improving English language skills, this criterion also measures the extent to which immigrants are more connected to their communities. The measure is based on the amount of opportunities to meet new people and expand social networks. Having opportunities to make new friends and practice their English are important for immigrants to gain confidence using the language. If a policy provides many opportunities, for example a program runs more than once a week for different groups of people, it is considered highly effective. If a policy provides only few opportunities, for example a program runs only once a week for the same group of people, it is considered moderately effective. If there are no opportunities to expand social networks, the policy is considered least effective. Highly effective policies are assigned an index value of 3, moderately effective policies are given an index value of 2, and least effective policies have an index value of 1. The two measurements of effectiveness are evaluated separately and the average of the total score is computed.

10.2.3 Key Stakeholder Acceptability

This criterion evaluates the level of acceptance of policy by three key stakeholder groups: service providers, Chinese immigrant women and government agencies. Service providers who are actively involved in facilitating immigrant settlement and integration include immigrant organisations, post-secondary institutions and community groups. Acceptability measures the extent to which service providers are involved in the policy based on two key steps of the
process: 1) consultation over policy and 2) delivery of policy. A policy is considered to have high acceptability (index = 3) when service providers are involved in both steps; moderate acceptability (index = 2) when they are involved in only one step of the process and low acceptability (index = 1) when they have no involvement in the policy.

Chinese women are key stakeholders since they are directly affected by the policies. Acceptability measures the extent to which women are likely to participate in the program based on their perception of the demand on their time. As they have indicated in the interviews, time is a strong constraint for them. A policy is highly acceptable (index = 3) when it demands little time from the women and they can easily fit it into their schedule. A policy is moderately acceptable (index = 2) when it demands time that has to be set apart to participate in the program. For example, a program would take 2 hours of the women’s time in a day. A policy is low in acceptability (index = 1) when it demands a substantial amount of time from the women. For example, a program would take at least four hours of the women’s time in a day.

Acceptability among government agencies is important as partnerships between ministries can maximize service delivery to immigrants and develop capacity to better respond to immigrants’ needs. Under WelcomeBC, there are currently a number of partnerships with B.C. ministries through Memoranda of Understanding that focus on English language development. This criterion measures the number of B.C. ministries involved in implementing the policy. High acceptability (index = 3) occurs when there are two or more ministries involved, moderate acceptability (index = 2) occurs when there are two ministries involved; and low acceptability occurs (index = 1) when there is only one ministry. The average of the score of the three key stakeholder groups is calculated to give equal weight to each criterion.
11: Policy Options and Analysis

As mentioned earlier from findings in the data analysis, informal learning is a key way to help women improve their English language skills to better integrate into the community and workplaces. Informal learning provides opportunities for women to expand their social networks, learn about Canadian culture, and deal with some challenges such as accessing public transit, banking and finding information about activities and events in the community. For women who are looking for jobs, informal language learning can help them find more information on employment opportunities, enhance employable skills and gain Canadian work experience. Since all the participants in this study are enrolled in ELSA classes, informal learning would supplement formal learning and increase opportunities to practice English outside the classroom. Moreover, informal learning would really benefit women who are not taking language classes for some reason (i.e. less educated women may be intimidated to go to classes) and want to learn English in a flexible and experiential way. Informal learning provides opportunities for immigrants to experience authentic language in everyday situations that may enrich their learning experience beyond formal learning. With increasing numbers of multilingual immigrants to Canada, it is important to value different types of learning and find common ways, such as the CEFR framework, to evaluate formal and informal learning (Council of Europe, 2001). I propose three options to support informal learning for Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver: Volunteer Mentoring Program, Women’s Conversation Circles and Interactive Learning Program. Under each option, I provide an analysis based on the criteria and measures presented in sub section 10.2. Table 5 shows a summary of the policy evaluation.
11.1 Option 1: Volunteer Mentoring Program

This option gives women opportunities to volunteer in their communities, build social networks and practice their English with local English speakers. The Volunteer Mentoring Program matches immigrant women with mentors in the volunteer community based on language skills, areas of interests and time availability. This program provides opportunities for women to volunteer for activities in various places such as community centres, public libraries, schools, recreation centres and non-profit organisations. Women would partner up with experienced volunteers in the community and shadow them in their work. The volunteer mentors would introduce immigrants to the position and support their experience. There would be two types of matchups with volunteer mentors based on immigrants’ language abilities: a beginner English level and an intermediate level.

The mentoring relationship is an informal relationship that develops between the participants in the program. There are benefits to both volunteers and immigrants in this program. Volunteers can learn more about different cultures, meet new immigrants and acquire mentoring skills. Immigrants can get more involved in their communities, learn about Canadian culture, practice their English and build social networks. For women who are looking for employment, this option provides opportunities for them to volunteer in a work-related setting to gain Canadian work experience and enhance employable skills such as communication and computer skills.

The government would provide funding for four immigrant organisations to each hire one program coordinator to connect immigrant women with appropriate volunteer mentors based on the level of English. Immigrant organisations would work in four municipalities that have large Chinese immigrant population in Metro Vancouver: Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby and Surrey. The Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development would partner with the Government, Non-Profit, and Volunteer Secretariat within the Ministry of Social Development to promote
volunteering among immigrants and improve linkages between immigrant organisations, volunteer groups and government.

Cost:

To determine the annual cost of this option I use data from Statistics Canada’s average hourly wages of employees by selected profession in 2011. In B.C., the average hourly wage of a person working full time (40 hours per week) in social science or education profession is $30 (Statistics Canada, 2011). By multiplying the hourly wage by 40 hours over 52 weeks, the annual wage with vacation pay is $62,400 or a total annual cost for hiring four program coordinators of $249,600. Besides staff costs, it is unlikely there would be other program expenses. To calculate the cost per participant in the program I use the total cost of staff and divided by the number of women that need to be served each year (i.e., 249,600 divided by 756). As a result, the annual cost per participant is approximately $330, making it a moderate cost option with an index value of 2.

Effectiveness:

Since volunteering gives women opportunities to practice their English with local English speakers, this would help them advance by one ELSA level (i.e., level 1 to 2). For example, women would gain more vocabulary in everyday conversations, understand some instructions, and ask simple questions. However, depending on the nature of the volunteer work, it might take some time for women to acquire language proficiency. So the effectiveness for improving language ability is moderate (index = 2). There would be many opportunities to meet new people and get involved in community activities and events. Women would have opportunities to volunteer more than once a week in the community and meet different people. For those seeking employment, volunteering could increase their chances to make professional connections and enhance their skills related to entry in the labour market. The effectiveness of this option to expand women’s social networks is high (index = 3). The average score is thus 2.5.
Key stakeholder acceptability:

In this option immigrant organisations would not be consulted in the process and would be only involved in the delivery of the program, so their acceptability is moderate (index = 2). Chinese immigrant women could choose the type of volunteer work and time commitment that bests fit their schedules. The option demands little time seeing as it can be combined into women’s daily activities, so acceptability is high (index = 3). Finally, there would be a partnership between the Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development and the Ministry of Social Development to strengthen volunteering capacity and integrate immigrants into communities. Therefore, acceptability by government agencies is moderate (index = 2). The average score is thus 2.3. This policy as a whole has a score of 6.8.

11.2 Option 2: Women’s Conversation Circles

This option provides opportunities for immigrant women to improve their listening and speaking skills, meet new people, learn about Canadian culture and discuss important topics through conversation circles. The goal of conversation circles is to help women increase confidence in conversational English in a friendly, relaxed and informal setting. Since many women find it difficult to learn in large English classes, small group setting is important for women to participate in conversations and practice English with each other (Ference Weicker & Company, 2009). Under this option, trained ESL Instructional Assistants would meet with small groups of 10 to 15 immigrant women in public libraries and Neighbourhood Houses, and facilitate conversations around topics such as parenting, education, health, work and career, banking, culture, and current events. ESL Instructional Assistants have teaching experiences and are able to plan activities and lead topics. The program would offer afternoon and evening conversation circles to accommodate different schedules. The conversation circles would last about an hour and a half each time. It would be divided into a beginner and an intermediate English levels to meet the needs of learners. Conversation circles also allow space for women to
share common challenges they face such as helping their children with school and communicating to their teachers. A conversation circle would be an effective form of support group for women to meet others in similar situations and help each other adapt to life in Canada. Women would have opportunities to expand their social networks and share their experiences in searching for jobs and getting their credentials recognised.

This option builds on existing infrastructures and partnerships between Vancouver Community College (VCC)’s ESL Learning Centres and public libraries in Metro Vancouver. The ESL Learning Centres currently provide guided independent studies and individual tutoring for immigrants. They are equipped with ESL resources and materials for learners to use during conversation circles. While public libraries are accessible public spaces, it may be difficult for immigrants who do not live close to libraries, have multiple needs including language, and find public libraries too intimidating because they have poor literacy skills. In addition to using public libraries, this option builds on bridging programs for immigrants in Neighbourhood Houses, which are located in immigrant-concentrated areas. Neighbourhood Houses, such as Little Mountain Neighbourhood House, provide a range of multilingual services and language training, and bridge immigrants to the community through network building and cultural events (Lauer and Yan, 2011). Since Neighbourhood Houses are within walking distance of most neighbourhood residents, conversation circles would be highly accessible for immigrants to practice English and build ties within the community.

The government would consult with VCC, public library partners and Neighbourhood Houses in the process and work with them to deliver conversation circles in communities. The Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development would partner with the Ministry of Education to fund conversation circles. This option is aligned with one of goals of the Ministry of Education to support life-long learning and literacy for adults through public libraries. Through a
Memoranda of Understanding, the two ministries would work together to increase opportunities for women to improve their English language skills.

While this study is targeted to Chinese immigrant women, government should consider increasing funding and opening up conversation circles to all different ethnic groups of women to ensure equity. There are many benefits to a conversation circle with multilingual participants since Chinese women would have to use English to communicate to other immigrant women who have different mother tongues. Chinese women would also have more opportunities to meet people from different ethnic backgrounds, learn more about other cultures and expand their social networks.

Cost:

Using Statistics Canada’s average $30 hourly wage of a person working in social science or education profession in B.C., a half-time (20 hours per week) Instructional Assistant’s annual wage would be $28,800. Since there are nine ESL Learning Centre locations and Neighbourhood Houses, this option would hire nine half-time ESL Instructional Assistants to facilitate conversation circles. Thus, the total annual cost for staff would be $259,200 (i.e., 28,800 multiplied by 9). The hired staff would work in both ESL Learning Centres and Neighbourhood Houses. Since the program is delivered through existing spaces in public libraries and Neighbourhood Houses, there is no additional cost for space or materials. To calculate the cost per participant in this model of informal learning I use the total cost of nine ESL Instructional Assistants and divided by the number of women that need to be served each year (i.e., 259,200 divided by 756), which means the annual cost per participant is approximately $343. Hence, the cost falls between $281 and $420 and is moderate (index = 2).

Effectiveness:

Conversation circles allow women to practice conversational English on various topics, learn formal and causal language, and use long sentences in conversations. By improving
conversational skills on a regular basis, women would gain more confidence using English daily and advance by two ELSA levels (i.e., level 3 to 5), thus the option ranks high (index = 3). Since conversation circles are also a form of support group, there would be many opportunities to develop relationships and build strong social ties to better integrate into communities and workplaces. Women could join several conversation circles during the week and meet different groups of people. Therefore, the effectiveness of this option to expand women’s social networks is high (index = 3). This option ranks high for improving immigrant women’s language abilities. The average effectiveness score is 3.

*Key stakeholder acceptability:*

VCC, public libraries and Neighbourhood Houses are involved in both steps of the process from consultation to delivery of the program, so acceptability among service providers is high (index = 3). Since the conversation circles have set schedules and last about an hour and a half each time, women would need to set apart time to go to each circle. Thus, acceptability among immigrant women is moderate since it demands some additional time to participate in conversation circles (index = 2). Both the Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development and the Ministry of Education would support the program, so acceptability among government agencies would be moderate (index = 2). The average score for acceptability is thus 2.3 and the total score for this policy is 7.3.

**11.3 Option 3: Interactive Learning Program**

This option would offer opportunities for immigrant women to interact with local English speakers in social settings and learn about different institutions, businesses and services in the city. The Interactive Learning Program expands on the field trip component in ELSA classes. Many women find excursions are an effective way of learning and would like more opportunities to take lessons outside of the classrooms and use English in real life situations. Interactive learning is a method of acquiring information through hands-on experiences. The program would
be held once a week for 10 weeks for a group of 15 to 20 women. There would be two interactive classes that are divided into beginner and intermediate English levels. Trained ESL instructors would introduce lessons before each class, prepare activity sheets for the field trip and review the lessons after each outing. Instructors would take participants on public transit and visit places such as city hall, banks, community centres, public libraries, schools, cultural centres and museums. Women would learn about available resources and services in the community and use public transit to navigate around the city. In particular for those who are looking for employment, this program could inform women about potential areas of work in the city.

Under this option, the Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development would consult with service providers to develop this program. The Ministry would provide funding for four immigrant organisations to coordinate and deliver the program in Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby and Surrey. Funding would cover costs for ESL instructors, public transit expenses and admission fees to some places in the city.

Cost:

To calculate the annual cost of this option I combine the cost of hiring four ESL instructors with other program costs. Based on Statistics Canada’s average $30 hourly wage of a person working full time (40 hours per week) in social science or education profession in B.C., an ESL instructor would earn an annual wage of $62,400. Therefore, the total cost for four full-time ESL instructors would be $249,600. In addition for field trips, each participant would receive a booklet of TransLink FareSaver tickets (10 transit tickets) that can be used on buses, sky train or sea bus. Since the program has 10 field trips, each participant would use two booklets for travelling between two zones (i.e., between municipalities such as Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby and Surrey). One book of 10 transit tickets is $31.50, for a total cost of $63 for each participant. To serve 756 women in a year, the total cost of travel would be $47,628 (i.e., 63 multiplied by 756). While some places are free to visit such as city hall and schools, other venues have admission
fees such as museums. To calculate the estimated admission fees for each participant, I assume that the average adult admission fee in a group is between $10 and $15, and that 5 out of 10 field trips would require admission fees. Taking the higher values, the cost of admission fees for each participant would be $75 (i.e., 15 multiplied by 5) or a total for all women of $56,700 (i.e., 75 multiplied by 756). The total cost of the program divided by the number of women that need to be trained each year (i.e., 353,928 divided by 756) gives an annual cost per participant of approximately $468, which means the cost of this option ranks low (index = 1).

**Effectiveness:**

The 10 weeks Interactive Learning Program has lesson plans and exercises to help women practice their English with local English speakers in social settings. This would allow women to engage in longer conversations and advance by two ELSA levels (i.e., level 3 to 5), hence the effectiveness in improving language ability is high (index = 3). Since this program only runs once a week for 10 weeks for the same group of people, women would have fewer opportunities to meet new people and expand social networks. The group composition would be similar to the classes in formal language training. Therefore, the effectiveness of this option is moderate (index = 2). However, the field trips to different places around the city would introduce women to more resources and services in the community. The average score is thus 2.5.

**Key stakeholder acceptability:**

Service providers would be involved in both the consultation and delivery of the program, so their acceptability would be high (index = 3). This option demands a substantial amount of time from the women. Taking into account of the travel time, site visit and lesson activities, each field trip would last about four to five hours; hence this would be a big time commitment for women and their acceptability is likely to be low (index = 1). This program would be especially time-consuming for those who are working and have scheduling conflicts. Finally, since only the Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development is running the program, acceptability
among government agencies is low because there is no partnership with other ministries (index = 1). The average for acceptability is 1.7 and the overall score for this option is 5.2. Next I explain my policy recommendation.

Table 5: Policy Analysis Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Option</th>
<th>Option 1: Volunteer Mentoring Program</th>
<th>Option 2: Women’s Conversation Circles</th>
<th>Option 3: Interactive Learning Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount spent per participant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of English language skills</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of social networks</td>
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<td>Key Stakeholder Acceptability</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1.7</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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11.4 Policy Recommendation

Based on the highest total value in the evaluation, I recommend implementing Women’s Conversation Circles through ESL Learning Centres in public libraries and bridging programs in Neighbourhood Houses as a way to support informal learning and improve Chinese women’s English language abilities. This option is moderate in cost for the provincial government, highly effective in improving women’s English conversational skills and expanding their social networks, and well supported by key stakeholders. Through conversation circles, women can share their experiences and find support in each other. Women have opportunities to network with others and increase social capital to enhance their social and economic capacity. By increasing women’s confidence in using English daily, they can better deal with some of their challenges such as accessing public transit, banking, finding information about activities and events in the community, and cultural barriers. Learning English in an open, informal and supportive setting enhances social inclusion and creates a sense of belonging for women in the community.

At this time, one of the Ministry’s goals is for immigrants “to fully contribute to the social and economic prosperity of the province” by investing over $100 million per year and developing a range of English language training opportunities (Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, 2011). There is a policy window to invest in informal learning to improve immigrants’ English language skills and promote greater social and economic integration. Currently, the government does not provide direct funding for adult conversation circles for immigrants in Metro Vancouver. Earlier funding of UBC Learning Exchange School-Based ESL Conversation Project, an ESL adult conversation pilot, ended in 2010. This is an opportunity for the provincial government to partner with post-secondary institutions and public libraries to fund conversation circles in communities. Based on the successful partnership between Vancouver Community College and the public libraries, the Ministry Regional Economic and Skills Development can build future partnerships with post-secondary institutions.
and public libraries in other municipalities. The government can increase support for local Neighbourhood Houses as primary integration sites that offer multilingual support and bridge immigrants into communities. Since there is committed funding for English language development from the Ministry, the Women’s Conversation Circles can be extended to other ethnic groups to ensure more equity among all immigrants.
12: Conclusion

For new immigrant women in Canada, a lack of English language proficiency prevents them from accessing a range of services, participating in their communities and fully integrating into the labour market. This study examines the challenges to acquiring English language proficiency among Chinese immigrant women in Metro Vancouver and the social and economic impacts on their everyday lives. The research suggests policies to help women improve their English language skills through various models of informal learning.

For this qualitative research, data was gathered about the experiences and insights of Chinese immigrant women through semi-structured interviews and photovoice. The thematic analysis shows four major challenges faced by women with limited English language skills: access to public transportation, financial literacy, lack of information and cultural barriers. These challenges can isolate women and exclude them from accessing services and participating in activities in the community. Because of language barriers, women are highly motivated to learn English to help their children with school, manage daily life, build social networks and understand Canadian culture. In this study, women indicate a number of difficulties to acquiring language proficiency: lack of time, few opportunities to practice English, listening and speaking difficulties, and inadequate hours of formal language training. Women want more opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills outside of formal language classes. Informal learning is key to help women improve English abilities and deal with some of their everyday challenges. It also provides opportunities for women to expand their social networks and learn about Canadian culture.

Given different models of informal learning, the best policy option is implementing Women’s Conversation Circles through ESL Learning Centres in public libraries and bridging
programs in Neighbourhood Houses. The option builds on the existing infrastructures in public libraries and Neighbourhood Houses. Conversation circles would help women improve their listening and speaking skills, gain more confidence in conversational skills, build new relationships, and discuss important topics of their concerns such as health, parenting, work and career, Canadian culture, and current events. The circles would also be a support group for women to share with each other their experiences and challenges in adapting to a new life in Canada.

One of the priorities of the Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development is to support immigrant settlement and integration into communities in order to ensure long-term social and economic prosperity (Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, 2011). Building on this priority, the Ministry has a window of opportunity to both increase English language training opportunities and enhance integration for immigrant women through conversation circles. Looking ahead, the government can extend Women’s Conversation Circles to all immigrants who face similar difficulties to ensure more equity.

Since my research is limited to a sample of one ethnic immigrant population in Metro Vancouver, considerations for future research would be investigating the language needs of other ethnic groups of immigrants in B.C. to provide appropriate options to improve their English language abilities. More assessments and evaluations of informal learning and alternative service delivery are also needed to ensure language training is effective and accessible to learners. For future research on language barriers, it is important to consider the different needs and situations of immigrant men and women, and develop policies that address those specific needs.
Appendices
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Section A
Screening questions are needed to identify the demographic of Chinese immigrant women and separate them based on labour market participation. These characteristics or factors include:

- **Age group**
  - 25 to 44 years
  - 45 to 64 years
  - 65 years and older

- **Level of education**
  - Less than high school
  - High school degree
  - Apprenticeship or trades
  - College/University

- **Place of birth**
  - City
  - Countryside

- **Martial status (husband’s occupation if any)**
  - Married
  - Divorced
  - Widowed
  - Single

- **Number of Children**
  - 1 child
  - 2 children
  - 3 or more children

- **Labour market participation**
  - Employed or looking for work
  - Not interested in working at this point
Section B
Open-ended questions based on themes:

1) Reasons and motivations for learning English
   • Learn about Canada and the Canadian culture
   • Help family settlement (i.e. Helping their children with school)
   • Find employment
   • Meet new people
   • Access health care, social services, banking and find housing
   • Participate in community activities or volunteering
   • Further education or training

2) Difficulties acquiring language proficiency
   • Is it difficult for you to find enough time to come to class? Are the classes held at a convenient time for you?
   • Do you have access to child care?
   • How are you getting to class? (i.e. car? public transit?)
   • Does it cost you money to attend classes? (i.e. Transit fares, car gas, class time is cutting into potential work hours)
   • Do cultural barriers create more challenges in learning English?
   • Do you find it more difficult to speak, read or write in English?

3) Social support and community life
   • Do you have a good social network or friends? Do they speak English or Chinese? Do you find it difficult to make new friends?
   • Do you volunteer? What kinds of volunteer activities? Are they within or outside your ethnic community? Do you practice your English?
   • Have you use health care for yourself or your family? Do you find it difficult to communicate to your doctors? Do you use other social services?
   • Do you help your children with school work? Do you find it difficult to communicate to the teachers?

4) Employment opportunities
   • Is it difficult to find a job? How did you find a job and where did you look for work? (i.e. Internet, Chinese or English newspaper, or friends)
   • Are you able to find a job that correspond to your education and training? Have you had your skills or qualification assessed?
   • Do you find it difficult to communicate to your manager and colleagues?
   • Do you know your employment rights and the standard wage?

5) Preferences for formal and informal ways of learning English
   • Formal language training classes/ classes in post-secondary institutions
   • Conversation circle
   • Internet/media (i.e. TV, radio, newspaper)
   • Volunteering
   • Participating in religious groups (i.e. Being involved in a church)
## Appendix B: Interview Timeline

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\(^1\) ISS of BC = Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia  
\(^2\) LMNH = Little Mountain Neighbourhood House
Appendix C: Reflection

In this study, I recognised that my role is not just a researcher, but an active participant learning about the impact of language barriers in Chinese immigrant women’s everyday lives. This has been a personal journey as I went through a reflective process thinking about how I have affected the knowledge generated through my assumptions, beliefs and background. In qualitative research, reflexivity is “a theoretical, critical and analytical process…based on the fact that in research the access we do and do not have to participants, the data we gather and do not gather, the questions we ask and do not ask, and the interpretations we make and do not make, are all mediated by the different identities we inhabit” (Pini, 2004, p.176). By reflecting on my experiences, I hope to give the reader a better understanding of my thought process and decisions.

I was born in Taiwan and grew up as a child of Chinese immigrant parents. I learned English at very young age when I moved to Singapore and later the United States for schooling. As a family, we immigrated to Canada when I was in junior high school and lived in a Chinese community in Richmond, B.C. While I was fluent in English, my parents had language difficulties and could not communicate in English. Even today, they still face language barriers in their daily lives. I was able to easily settle and adapt to a new life in Canada. I also made new friends quickly because I could speak English. On the other hand, my parents had a difficult time integrating into a new culture and learning a new language. My experiences growing up as a second-generation immigrant had an impact on the choice of my research topic and design, method of data collection, form of analysis and interpretation. I chose to work with Chinese immigrant women because I felt that I could relate to some of their experiences and hoped that they would be more open to share their stories with me. For this reason, I wanted to interview them in a comfortable setting in their language classes and hear their perspectives on language barriers through words and pictures. The women were more willing to convey their thoughts with
me because of our shared experience of culture and language, which lead to more trust and an open dialogue. Some of the women even told me that they wanted to help me and participate in the research because they saw me as “a daughter.” The women gave me their time and expressed their experiences of language difficulties and the impact on their ability to integrate into society.

Throughout the interview process I also dealt with some language barriers as I had difficulties conversing with the women. While I can speak some Mandarin, I have a hard time communicating beyond a basic level of Mandarin. During the photovoice research, I went around Chinatown taking pictures of things that I didn’t understand and that represented language barriers to me. There were moments when I felt like an outsider because I couldn’t talk to some groups of Chinese people. I was also overwhelmed when I went to the Chinese markets and didn’t know what are some of the food items. In a way, I could identify with the women facing language barriers and understand their feelings of exclusion and sense of frustration when you have difficulties communicating to others.

I found that the ability to acquire English language proficiency has large implications for women’s daily lives and it deeply affects the relationships with their children and friends. Nevertheless, the women are highly motivated to learn English in hopes of having a better life and being part of the community. The women have taught me to look at language issues in a rich and multifaceted way. Through this research, I hope that I have shed some light on immigrant women’s experiences and the importance of acquiring English proficiency to participate in the social, economic and cultural life of the community.
Bibliography

Works Cited


