



TOWNSHIPERS' ASSOCIATION

Inclusive Mentorship Initiative

2023-2024

This evaluative report was prepared by Sunita Nigam, Ph.D., an independent consultant for Townshippers' Association. Any changes to this document must be approved by the author to ensure accuracy. If excerpts from this text are used in other publications, the source must be identified.

This report provides an overview and evaluation of the 2023–2024 fiscal year of Townshippers' Association's Inclusive Mentorship Initiative (IMI) funded by the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise from December 2021 to the present.

Founded in 1979, Townshippers' Association is mandated to promote the interests of the ESC in the historical Eastern Townships, strengthening the cultural identity of this community, and encouraging the full participation of the English-speaking population in the community at large. Townshippers' Association's projects address heritage and culture, community development, access to health and social services, support for seniors, and youth retention.

The Secretariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise is responsible for ensuring that the concerns of English-speaking Quebecers are taken into account in government orientations and decisions in collaboration with government ministries and bodies.

Key Terminology

ESC: English-speaking Community

OLMC: Official Language Minority Community

IMI: Inclusive Mentorship Initiative

SRQEA: Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise

PERT: Provincial Employment Roundtable



Introduction to the IMI

The Inclusive Mentorship Initiative (IMI) is a mentoring strategy piloted by Townshippers' Association beginning in December 2018 and funded by the Secretariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SQREA) since 2021. With the IMI, Townshippers' Association pairs adult members of the English-speaking community (ESC) in the Historical Eastern Townships with French-speaking language mentors working within a similar professional field for a language training mentorship. The goal of the IMI is to facilitate the integration of English speakers into a predominantly francophone workforce in the Eastern Townships region. Townshippers' Association has conceived the IMI as a strategy for:

- (1) supporting the community vitality of the minoritarian ESC of the Historical Eastern Townships—a community facing record levels of unemployment levels and poverty—and;
- (2) enhancing the vitality of the Eastern Townships at large by supporting the retention of workers in the region. The IMI has been designed to be applied across multiple professional sectors.

The IMI project has so far run for six cohorts:

- 1) December 2018–March 2019 (8 pairs)
- 2) October 2019–May 2020 (12 pairs)
- 3) October 2020–March 2021 (9 pairs)
- 4) October 2021–February 2022 (18 pairs)
- 5) October 2022–February 2023 (12 pairs)
- 6) October 2023–February 2024 (24 pairs)

To provide an immersive learning experience mentor-mentee pairs are encouraged to meet once per week, virtually or in person, to converse in French about a range of topics. Several learning resources and activities are provided by the IMI project manager to facilitate this learning experience, such as an orientation and informational training session, speed-networking events, lexicons, dictionaries, workbooks, and curated mentee and mentor guide booklets. Thoughtful measures to prevent volunteer burnout and promote, sociability, community, sustainability, and fun are also integral to the project design. These measures include offering tokens of appreciation to participants (gift bags of environmentally sustainable local products and gift cards) and creating events focused on supporting the well-being (emotional, financial, social) of participants. Each cohort of the IMI lasts approximately five months.

A broader objective of the IMI is to develop a tried and tested language mentoring blueprint that Townshippers' Association can share with other organizations and institutions working with Québec's English-speaking Official Language Minority Community (OLMC). With the help of this blueprint, which will include project design strategies, resources, toolkits, case studies, literature reviews, and coaching, Townshippers' Association will be poised to support other organizations and institutions in developing their own language mentorship programs to help integrate Québec's ESC into the workforce, thereby addressing surging unemployment rates amongst this population and facilitating interlinguistic sociability and community.

Between its own IMI and the creation of an adaptable blueprint for other organizations and institutions in Québec, the Townshippers' Association is establishing itself as a leader in strengthening what the Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT) has called, "Québec's adult French-language training ecosystem" ("Québec and the Rest," 4).

Methodology

The information contained in this evaluative report on the 2023–2024 year of the IMI is derived from an analysis of a diverse set of data. This data includes:

- extensive qualitative and quantitative information collected through pre- and post-mentorship surveys completed by the mentors and the mentees;
- six “before and after” French evaluations completed voluntarily by 6 of the mentees;
- comprehensive lists of supportive social events created for IMI participants and networking, and recruitment activities carried out as part of this year of the IMI;
- pertinent research about the target demographic of the IMI (Québec’s English speakers) used in the design of the project, including that of the Provincial Employment Round Table (PERT);
- leading-edge research in the field of adult language learning;
- evaluation reports for previous years of the IMI;
- the IMI Workplan;
- and an interview with the IMI manager.

For the full compilation of the results of the pre- and post-mentorship surveys for the mentees and mentors of Cohorts 6 (2023–2024), see appendices A and B.

Context

Addressing the Disproportionate Precarity of the ESC

The IMI responds to a pressing need to develop effective strategies for addressing the economic precarity of Québec's 1.2 million English speakers, which represents 14.9% of the provincial population. Data from the 2021 census of Canada continues to show that Québec's English speakers are "experiencing higher rates of poverty and unemployment and earning lower median incomes" than their French-speaking counterparts (PERT, "A Snapshot of Poverty among Québec's English-Speaking Communities" 2). Indeed, the provincial poverty rate for English speakers is 10.0%, which is nearly twice as high as that of French speakers (5.8%) (ibid). English speakers have an unemployment rate of 10.9% compared with 6.9% for French speakers. Alarming, this gap has doubled since the 2016 census. The Provincial Employment Round Table (PERT) has identified the following barriers and challenges faced by English speakers in integrating into and remaining in the Québec labour market:

- a lack of French-language training for the workforce;
- a lack of English-language employability services;
- a lack of English-language vocational training;
- and a lack of wrap-around support services. (ibid)

As PERT outlines, these barriers do not only directly contribute to poverty—they also result from poverty. As such, "utilizing a linguistic lens to address poverty would allow Québec policymakers to combat the specific disparities faced by linguistic minority communities, advancing to the goal of a poverty-free Québec." (ibid) Addressing the identified barriers for Québec's English speakers to accessing and retaining employment will be essential to combat poverty across Québec without discrimination. The IMI piloted by Townshippers' Association does precisely this by addressing the barrier of a lack of French-language training for the workforce and thereby supporting a more inclusive integration of Québec's ESC into the regional and provincial workforce.

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Context

A Changing Linguistic Landscape

The need for programs like the IMI is increasingly urgent. In 2023, the Québec government announced that 80% of out-of-province students attending Québec's English universities will be required to graduate with an intermediate knowledge of spoken French. While these students will have access to courses at the university, initiatives like the IMI can help to supplement their language training beyond the classroom. In 2022, Québec updated its Charter of the French Language with Bill 96. Bill 96 seeks to "affirm that the only official language of Québec is French" through the imposition of new French language requirements on government services, businesses, and the workplace ("Bill 96"). The Charter now requires that employment documentation, job postings, and official written communication with employees be conducted in French, although employers are allowed to communicate with a worker in another language if the latter so requests. Together, the new amendments made to the Charter of the French Language work to more firmly establish French as the language of work throughout the province. Bill 96 is greatly affecting Québec's English speakers and their employment prospects, especially given that a lack of French-language training for the workforce presented an important barrier for English speakers in integrating into Québec's workforce even before 2022. In this changing linguistic landscape, initiatives like the IMI are needed more than ever.

A 2023 study published by PERT that joins a "public re-examining of the effectiveness, quality, and accessibility of French-language training in Québec" since the passing of Bill 96, confirms the timeliness and value of the IMI in no uncertain terms. In this study, 3 of the 8 recommendations are:

1) That the Québec Government leverage a multi-stakeholder model in the delivery of French-language training programs for both immigrant and Canadian-born language learners by partnering with post-secondary institutions, language schools, and community organizations to support integration. (27)

2) That the Québec Government create volunteer language training programs to match language learners with fluent French language speakers by: 1) funding formal and informal language-learning programs, including book clubs, conversation circles, and cultural events, and 2) developing multi-level volunteer-based programs to accommodate learners with different levels of proficiency. (31)

3) That the Québec Government should implement a province-wide language assessment and referral model that is accessible to all Quebecers. This model can leverage pre-existing community centres and service providers across the regions to provide assessments and refer learners to appropriate programs. (28)

Context

Leveraging Community Organizations and Institutions for Language Learning

As the PERT report explains, while “Québec currently funds the delivery of informal and volunteer language learning opportunities, [these are] primarily targeted at newcomers” (30). Significantly, “Québec does not currently have a comprehensive framework or dedicated fund that supports informal and volunteer French-language training programs for [Canadian-born language learners]” (ibid). The report’s authors emphasize the important benefits of creating such a framework and implementing it in partnership with organizations and institutions rooted in communities to ensure accessibility. What is more, as the authors explain, “Informal and volunteer French-language training programs are also an opportunity for citizen engagement by leveraging the province’s 7 million French speakers to include them in the joint project of strengthening French-language learning and making Québec the best place to learn French” (30).

Significantly, the PERT report emphasizes the value of partnering with community organizations “that are already providing front-line services to English-speaking communities across the regions. These organizations are patchwork and subject to regional conditions and unstable funding. However, the Québec government can support these organizations by incorporating them directly into the francisation ecosystem, funding workforce integration language learning programs, and ensuring that teaching materials and resources are readily available to all to address regional disparities” (27).

“Informal language training settings can encourage hesitant language learners to practice their language skills in a non-classroom environment and help language learners to navigate various social and professional contexts.”

—PERT, “Québec and the Rest: A survey of National and International Approaches to Adult Language Training”

Context

Optimizing Adult French Language-Learning in Québec

Research on adult language learning reveals some interesting mental barriers that can prevent a person from learning a new language. These include: 1) bad past experiences trying to learn the language; 2) feeling that it's too late to learn; 3) wanting results too fast; 4) aiming for perfection; and 5) negative associations with the language (Language Advantage). Such barriers can create resistance to learning a new language and make us more likely to quit when we encounter challenges. Identifying and strategizing how best to address any existing barriers can help us to optimize our language-learning.

Here it is relevant to consider the different kinds of mental barriers faced by French language learners in Québec, which will no doubt be different based on personal experiences as well as one's status as either an immigrant, Canadian-, or Québec-born learner. For example, a recent study by French Professors, Dr. Maria Popica and Dr. Philippe Gagné involving nearly a thousand English-speaking CEGEP students in Québec revealed that many of these students demonstrate resistance to learning French. The reasons for this resistance are multiple. One reason is because of insecurity about their low proficiency in French.

Another important reason is related to feelings of exclusion from (and fears of "Othering" and judgment by) the dominant

francophone society because of bad experiences in the past and because of feeling forced to learn French rather than feeling invited to learn. Popica and Gagné maintain that these experiences lead to the formation of negative emotional associations with learning French and this becomes a learning barrier. Popica and Gagné's findings are echoed by other leading research on French language learning within Québec's ESC. Dr. Richard Koestner, who specializes in motivational psychology at McGill University, has found in his research on French language learning amongst Québec's English speakers in the context of Bill 96 that:

Regardless of their cultural heritage, feel that their sense of autonomy is being constrained by the recent language laws. Research based on self-determination theory indicates that compulsory demands on a population destroy intrinsic motivation, as well as any sense of meaning and value associated with wanting to fit into a larger society. Therefore, despite government courses being available for English speakers to foster French proficiency, the motivation for people to take them is impacted by the perception that they would not be doing so out of choice. (Research Portrait with QUESCREN).

Koestner's and Popica's and Gagné's study highlights the importance of creating new positive emotional associations and a relationship of self-determination and intrinsic motivation with learning French as a pathway to removing important language French learning barriers for the ESC in Québec.

Context

Optimizing Adult French Language-Learning in Québec

Significantly, the research of Popica and Gagné reveals that interlinguistic friendships and informal exchanges (specifically, having “fun” together!) between English-speaking and French-speaking youth significantly lowered the resistance to learning French on the part of the English speaker. Informal mentorship programs accompanied by social activities and the promise of making new friends such as the IMI create contexts for the formation of new positive emotional associations with learning French.

*“I think there is a lot of pressure to speak French well in Québec and if you don’t speak it with the right accent or like you don’t say your words right, then people give you funny looks (...) that’s why I’m always shy to speak French ‘cause I’m scared people are going to judge the way I’m speaking.”
(Cindy)*

—“Je résiste, donc nous sommes :
Résistance à l’apprentissage du
français langue seconde au Québec”

“Research based on self-determination theory indicates that compulsory demands on a population destroy intrinsic motivation, as well as any sense of meaning and value associated with wanting to fit into a larger society. Therefore, despite government courses being available for English speakers to foster French proficiency, the motivation for people to take them is impacted by the perception that they would not be doing so out of choice.”

—Dr. Richard Koestner

Survey Highlights: Mentees



83%

said they have felt unqualified for a job because of their French skills in the past

78%

said their mentors were able to support all of their learning goals

78%

said they felt their mentor was a good match for them (personality, interests, profession)

96%

said they felt they improved their confidence, vocabulary, comprehension, and/or spelling in French

83%

said they felt their participation in the IMI provided them with a sense of belonging

87%

said their expectations for this initiative were met

Findings

Global

Through its IMI, Townshippers' Association has established itself as a leader in the adult French-language training ecosystem of Québec. Over the past six years, Townshippers' Association has developed a highly effective strategy for running a volunteer adult language learning mentorship program. Each new project year has led to many learnings that have fed back into the program design for subsequent years. The IMI is now running optimally. The program overwhelmingly meets the expectations of participants and is greatly appreciated by them. The program also meets its goal of supporting adult language learners to improve their French proficiency. Indeed, 96% of mentees reported feeling like they had improved some aspect of their French, and the 6 mentees who elected to take "before and after" French proficiency exams with a professional were all found to have progressed in their French proficiency, with 2 jumping entire levels of French proficiency.

The last funding year of the IMI has been the strongest yet, with the largest cohort and the most positive participant feedback. Because the project manager for the IMI is building strong inroads with diverse regional stakeholders both the English-speaking and French-speaking communities in the region, including those working with new arrivals, the manager has been able to recruit a large pool of motivated mentors and mentees.

By creating positive emotional associations with learning French, a factor that leading language-learning research suggests removes barriers to learning a new language, the IMI is removing barriers to French language learning for the ESC (including new arrivals whose First Official Language Spoken is English) in the region.

Notably, the IMI is also building community and a sense of belonging across linguistic divides in the region. This is especially relevant considering the finding of Dr. Popica and Dr. Gagné's study that interlinguistic friendships removed language-learning barriers for the English-speaking CEGEP students who took part in the study.

As outlined in detail in previous sections of this report, given the urgency of addressing precarity in the ESC and adapting to transforming linguistic landscapes that are establishing French as the dominant and official language of work in Québec, the contributions of the IMI could not be more timely. It is particularly encouraging that the recommendations of PERT researchers for enhancing the adult French-language training ecosystem of Québec in a post-Bill-96 context (as outlined in the section, "A Changing Linguistic Landscape") neatly align with the mentorship initiative Townshippers' Association has been developing over the last six years.

Indeed, PERT recommends that the Québec Government partner with community organizations and institutions to "create volunteer language training programs to match language learners with fluent French language speakers" (31). As a community organization with a long history of serving the ESC in the Eastern Townships, Townshippers' Association is precisely one of the "patchwork" organizations scattered across Québec that are already serving the ESC and which PERT recommends the Québec Government support "by incorporating them directly into the francization ecosystem, funding workforce integration language learning programs, and ensuring that teaching materials and resources are readily available to all to address regional disparities" (PERT 27).

Findings

Key Strengths: 2023–2024

- The high level of satisfaction with the initiative reported in the surveys by both mentees and mentors
- The diversity of employment fields of the mentors and mentees
- The reported usefulness of the resources and guidance provided by the project manager to the mentors and mentees.
- The mentees' and mentors' enjoyment of the social events organized by the IMI manager (i.e. the "fun!").
- The fact that the CIUSSS has been secured as a dependable source of motivated mentors;
- The voluminous pertinent data systematically collected by the project manager that: 1) allows us to learn about project successes and challenges as well as avenues for optimizing project design and; 2) allows this knowledge to be mobilized and shared with other organizations and institutions to support the creation of new language mentorship programs.
- The fact that all of the mentors completed both the pre- and post-mentorship surveys and all but one of the mentees completed both surveys. This allows for the collection of statistically significant project data.
- The networking and recruitment activities of the project, which includes diverse regional stakeholders in both the English-speaking and French-speaking communities, including those working with new arrivals, and has resulted in the ability of the project manager to recruit the largest pool of mentors and mentees yet.
- The diversity of the recruitment methods used, which worked to attract a large pool of participants.
- The engagement of the project manager with leading-edge researchers and workers in the area of mentorship, adult language learning, and employment barriers for the ESC.
- The organization, dedication, and approachability of the project manager, which many of the mentees and mentors made a point of highlighting in their surveys and contributed to the success of the IMI.

"I want to highlight Heather (Ancliffe)'s work, who, through her involvement, kindness, and skills, supported me when I talked to her about the difficulties I was encountering with my mentee. She is a significant asset to this program."

—IMI Mentor, 2023–2024

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