

# Phase 1 Research: Unifying ESL Curriculum in Alberta

## Summary & Recommendations Report



**March 13, 2024**

Shawn de Raaf

Michael Dubois

Jacey Payne

## **SRDC Board of Directors**

Richard A. Wagner  
Former Partner, Norton Rose Fulbright LLP

Tim Aubry, Ph.D.  
Professor, School of Psychology  
Senior Researcher, Centre for Research on Educational and  
Community Services

Gordon Berlin  
Past President, MDRC

Gary Birch, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, Neil Squire Society

Satya Brink, Ph.D.  
International Consultant, Research, Policy Analysis and  
Strategic Policy advice  
Education, Lifelong Learning and Development

Erica Di Ruggiero, Ph.D.  
Director, Centre for Global Health  
Director, Collaborative Specialization in Global Health  
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

Marie-Lison Fougère  
Former Deputy Minister, Ministry of Francophone Affairs  
Former Deputy Minister Responsible for Women's Issues

Renée F. Lyons, Ph.D.  
Founding Chair and Scientific Director Emeritus,  
Bridgepoint Collaboratory for Research and Innovation,  
University of Toronto

Andrew Parkin, Ph.D.  
Executive Director of the Environics Institute

Nancy Reynolds  
Managing Partner, Sterling Lifestyle Solutions

## **SRDC President and CEO**

David Gyarmati

## **The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation**

**(SRDC)** is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 450 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Calgary, Hamilton, Montreal, Regina, St. John's, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

For more information on SRDC, contact

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation  
55 Murray Street, Suite 400  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 5M3  
613-237-4311 | 1-866-896-7732  
info@srdc.org | www.srdc.org

*Vancouver Office*  
890 West Pender Street, Suite 440  
Vancouver, British Columbia V6C 1J9  
604-601-4070

*Remote offices:*  
Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba,  
Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario,  
Quebec, and Saskatchewan  
1-866-896-7732

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                              |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>WHAT IS THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH?</b>                         | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>HOW WAS THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH CONDUCTED?</b>               | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>WHAT DID THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH SHOW?</b>                   | <b>5</b>  |
| Alberta's ESL context                                        | 5         |
| ESL curriculum resources                                     | 5         |
| Unified ESL curriculum                                       | 8         |
| Skills for Success                                           | 11        |
| <b>CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH</b>                 | <b>14</b> |
| <b>IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</b> | <b>16</b> |

## WHAT IS THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH?

In 2022, the Alberta Workforce Essential Skills Society (AWES) received a Settlement, Integration and Language Projects (SILP) grant from the Government of Alberta’s Ministry of Labour and Immigration to conduct **Phase 1 Research: Unifying English as a Second Language (ESL) Curriculum in Alberta**. This project was designed to build on the pre-existing *ATESL*<sup>1</sup> *Adult ESL Curriculum Framework* and *ATESL Best Practices for Adult ESL and LINC Programming in Alberta* by exploring the perspectives of ESL language instructors and program administrators across Alberta toward the idea of a unified ESL curriculum, that is, a common curriculum that all providers of provincially funded ESL programming in Alberta<sup>2</sup> could use.

The primary objective of this research is to create a foundation for bridging the existing *Curriculum Framework* to an instructor resource for day-to-day practice, promoting unity across Alberta’s ESL sector. The research also looked at the idea of incorporating the Skills for Success (SFS) model into the unified curriculum. SFS defines nine key skills—reading, writing, numeracy, digital skills, problem solving, communication, creativity & innovation, collaboration, and adaptability—needed by Canadians to participate in work, education and training, and modern society more broadly. Both the *Curriculum Framework* and *Best Practices* document emphasize the importance of integrating SFS into ESL curriculum and instruction. While integration of the model in the ESL sector has lagged to date, exploration of this area in the Phase 1 research provides an important first step to ensure newcomers have the requisite skills for succeeding in Alberta’s workforce.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL) is the professional organization for ESL teachers in Alberta. It “promotes the highest standards of teaching and English language program provision for all learners in Alberta whose first language is other than English” (<https://www.atesl.ca/>, para. 1).

<sup>2</sup> As distinct from the federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program and ESL programming for international students.

## HOW WAS THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

AWES engaged the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to lead the Phase 1 research design/planning, data collection, and analysis. AWES and SRDC collaboratively developed a set of research question to address the projects aims, as described above. The objective of the partners was to engage Alberta’s ESL sector as broadly as possible in the research, including individuals representing a range of roles, organizational types and sizes, and communities across the province. Accordingly, four methods were used to gather data.

- **Background research on the provincial ESL landscape (Spring 2022):** SRDC and AWES worked collaboratively to build a list of exemplars providing ESL instruction/programming in Alberta. Exemplars represented post-secondary institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, faith-based organizations, and other community-based organizations, including ethnocultural associations, as well as the Alberta Education-funded Community Adult Learning Program (CALP), which provides support to more than 80 community-based organizations offering adult literacy and foundational learning opportunities in the province. An online search and reviews of exemplar websites helped establish a portrait of ESL instruction/programming across Alberta to guide the subsequent consultation stages of the project.
- **Online survey of ESL stakeholders (Fall 2022):** In collaboration with AWES, SRDC designed, programmed, and administered an online survey of ESL stakeholders to gather their demographic and organizational information and learn about the ESL curriculum resources they use along with their perspectives on the development of a unified curriculum, which would incorporate the new Skills for Success framework. AWES led the distribution of the survey to individuals and organizations in Alberta’s ESL sector and garnered promotional support from key organizations like ATESL. The survey was available for completion for a four-week period and offered optional incentives to maximize response rates.

Ninety-nine individuals responded to the survey representing a range of roles—most commonly ESL instructors/facilitators (58 per cent) and/or program coordinators/administrators (47 per cent)—and years of experience in the ESL sector. They also represented a range of organizations—most frequently community-based organizations (45 per cent) and post-secondary institutions(30 per cent)—and nearly all worked at organizations that included immigrants, newcomers, refugees, and/or protected persons to Canada as at least part of their target population. Organizations providing general ESL training (74 per cent) and/or federal LINC programming (47 per cent) were most represented. Respondents were most commonly



concentrated in the Edmonton, Calgary, and Central regions, although there was representation from across the province.

- **Online focus groups with ESL practitioners (Winter-Spring 2023):** As a complement to the breadth of information gathered through the survey, SRDC conducted a series of nine online focus groups to gain deeper insights into the survey findings. The groups provided an opportunity to query participants directly about their use of resources and perspectives on a new unified curriculum and incorporation of Skills for Success as well as capture insights through the exchange of ideas among practitioners. AWES led the recruitment efforts for the focus groups using a variety of methods, including direct emails to practitioners representing major, minor, and faith-based organizations in Alberta, social media posts, an email campaign, and a blog post on the CALP online portal. Participants received a gift card in recognition of their time.

Thirty-seven individuals participated in nine focus groups. Over half of participants worked with CALPs and about one third with public or private post-secondary institutions. The remainder were from a mixture of organizations, including not-for-profit community organizations and immigrant service providers, which were mostly focused on LINC<sup>3</sup> offerings. They were involved in various types of language programming—including ESL and literacy programs, LINC, English for Academic Purposes, and more—in rural, small urban, and large urban communities. They indicated their learners represented different communities (primarily newcomers as well as distinct groups such as Low German Mennonites) and were at different English language proficiency levels. Nearly all participants were ESL instructors and/or had ESL teaching experience.

- **Key informant interviews (Round 1: Summer 2022; Round 2: Summer-Fall 2023):** SRDC conducted key informant interviews by telephone and Zoom in two rounds. The first round helped develop a base of understanding of interviewees' use of ESL curriculum resources and perspectives on a unified ESL curriculum, including incorporation of SFS, as a precursor to the sector survey and focus groups. The second round helped build on the survey and focus group results through individualized conversations and also provided an opportunity to query additional areas, such as interviewees' familiarity with and use of the two ATESL documents on which the Phase 1 research builds (*Adult ESL Curriculum Framework* and *Best Practices for Adult ESL and LINC Programming in Alberta*). AWES led

---

<sup>3</sup> Although LINC programming is distinct from ESL programming in Alberta, AWES and SRDC deemed LINC instructors eligible to participate as they could speak to experiences with LINC's own unified curriculum. Most, if not all, also had experience with ESL instruction.

the recruitment through direct emails to individuals identified in Alberta's ESL sector and social media posts. All interviewees received a gift card in recognition of their time.

SRDC interviewed a total of 15 key informants (six in Round 1 and nine in Round 2). Across the two rounds, approximately forty per cent of interviewees represented post-secondary institutions (polytechnic, college, and university level), and approximately a quarter represented immigrant-serving organizations. The remaining one third represented a combination of private providers and learning councils/centres. As a group, interviewees had previous or current experience in a range of roles, including instructor/facilitator (ESL or LINC), program coordinator (ESL or literacy), curriculum developer, program administrator, director, professor, and academic chair.

## WHAT DID THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH SHOW?

### ALBERTA'S ESL CONTEXT

#### A wide range of ESL programming exists in Alberta

The Phase 1 research confirmed a wide range of ESL programming exists across organizations and organizational types in Alberta, ranging from informal, one-on-one tutoring to formal classes available both in-person and online (basic to advanced, including courses for post-secondary credit). Post-secondary organizations and CALPs appear to offer the most variety of ESL programming at different learning levels (eligibility for certain programs is often dependent on learners' Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level). Most formal ESL programming appears to be offered mainly by organizations in large urban (population of 100,00 or greater) and medium-sized urban (population of 30,000 to 99,999) centres, suggesting residents in rural areas and smaller communities may travel to larger centres in their geographic area or access ESL instruction/programming through CALPs.

### ESL CURRICULUM RESOURCES

#### Use of formal ESL curricula is more common in post-secondary institutions and other larger organizations

Although it is not a fully representative sample of the sector, the online survey of ESL stakeholders provides important insights into the types of curricula that are used by Alberta's ESL providers. The majority of survey respondents (67 per cent) reported that they do *not* use a formal curriculum in the ESL training they or their organizations provide. While about 15 per cent of these respondents indicated there was no curriculum available/provided to them or said they had not been trained in a formal curriculum, most attributed this to a need or preference for adapting their instruction to suit their learners who differ in terms of their needs, goals, background skills and knowledge, current levels of English, pace of learning, and geographic area (e.g., urban versus rural). Among the one third of survey respondents (33 per cent) who indicated they do use a formal curriculum, most reported that the curriculum was created in-house by staff at the organization.

Practitioners who volunteered to participate in the interviews and focus groups tended to work in post-secondary institutions and larger ESL delivery organizations, including LINC program providers. As a result, most of the individuals consulted through these methods



reported that their instruction is based on a formal curriculum, often from a combination of in-house and external sources. Post-secondary institutions were more likely than other ESL providers to have an organization-specific curriculum or framework, often developed by instructors over the years (regularly added to and updated) for teaching various English courses. Many of the focus group participants and interviewees using a formal curriculum also noted that there tends to be a degree of flexibility for instructors to customize curricula to specific learners (e.g., in terms of their needs, goals, interests, current skills, and/or cultural backgrounds) or make suggestions for improvement.

### Finding or creating ESL resources is challenging and often leads to a “patchwork” of resources being used for instruction

A common theme arising from the research is that ESL practitioners find it challenging to source ESL resources to use with learners, leading to a “patchwork” of internally developed and externally sourced curriculum resources being used in the classroom. Among survey respondents, for example, 54 per cent said it is sometimes challenging, and 14 per cent said it is frequently challenging to find or create resources (only 21 per cent said it is never challenging, and the remainder indicated the issue was not relevant to their role). Likewise, nearly all focus group participants and interviewees also noted challenges.

One of the main challenges mentioned by practitioners was the large amount of time it takes to find, create, and/or adjust resources that match their program objectives or learners’ needs and language benchmark levels. Practitioners also noted the lack of paid time to source and prepare materials (even where at least some paid time is provided for this task, it is reportedly not enough). This issue was noted to be particularly challenging for newer instructors. Other common challenges related to curriculum content and materials included a lack of Alberta-specific or Canadian content; lack of authentic, real-life materials; lack of material appropriate for multi-level classes (i.e., learners with varying English proficiency levels in the same classroom); and lack of up-to-date information. Some also noted difficulty finding certain types of materials, such as well-structured, complete lesson plans; materials linked to expected outcomes or to their learners specifically (e.g., appropriate for differing literacy or language proficiency levels); and specific formats of materials (e.g., quality audio-visual materials or interactive resources for some and books for others). The cost and access fees for many resources were also reported by some to be a barrier.

Practitioners also identified challenges specific to the Alberta context. For example, participants from multiple organizations serving rural communities indicated the materials they are able to find online are often not relevant or meaningful to their learners (e.g., learning how to read a bus schedule when there is no public transit available). Participants from smaller organizations, especially in rural communities, added that they have to rely on volunteers for instructors.

These organizations often face rapid turnover of staff and volunteers, making it difficult to keep all instructors informed of where to find the best resources for their curriculum. Some participants also noted the need for further tailoring of materials for learners from different cultural contexts who may face special learning needs and challenges.

### Tailoring of ESL instruction and resources to learners from marginalized populations occurs, but efforts vary, and the adequacy of the tailoring is unclear

The Phase 1 research confirmed that tailoring of ESL instruction and resources is prevalent. Recognizing that many ESL learners come from marginalized backgrounds, most survey respondents indicated they tailor their instruction and resources to learner needs, either frequently (60 per cent) or occasionally (31 per cent). Likewise, most interviewees said they tailor their instruction to some degree, typically stemming more often from efforts to be responsive to learners' needs and backgrounds than requirements from their organizations. Examples of tailoring provided included:

- Customizing instruction or materials/resources to learners' strengths, needs, goals, interests, expectations, and/or demographics;
- Using culturally or politically relevant, sensitive, and/or responsive topics and materials or practices, including recognition of trauma and other life experiences and circumstances;
- Adjusting curriculum (e.g., contents, delivery, activities), for example, integrating concepts such as race, gender, and sexuality into readings and activities and providing opportunities to share experiences in the classroom;
- Offering special types of classes or events (e.g., conversation circles/groups);
- Relaxing requirements (e.g., assignment deadlines) to accommodate learners' lives;
- Connecting learners to additional supports (e.g., community members or employers); and
- Supporting settlement processes.

Among survey respondents who indicated that they or their organizations tailor content and resources for learners from marginalized groups, 43 per cent felt the tailoring was adequate, while 22 per cent did not, and 35 per cent were unsure either way. For research participants, challenges in this area included, for example, a lack of human resources or difficulty finding specific types of materials, including real-life information and information to help learners deal with adversity, and the need for better representation of different groups, including marginalized populations.

## UNIFIED ESL CURRICULUM

### ESL practitioners report limited familiarity and use of the existing ATESL Curriculum Framework and Best Practices document

The Phase 1 research was intended to build on two pre-existing documents: the *ATESL Adult ESL Curriculum Framework* and *ATESL Best Practices for Adult ESL and LINC Programming in Alberta*. Few survey respondents were very familiar with either document (eight per cent for the *Curriculum Framework* and 16 per cent for the *Best Practices* document). Rather, they more often tended to be somewhat familiar (36 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively) or not at all familiar (56 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively). Awareness was fairly similar (only slightly higher) among interviewees.

Use of the documents was also limited. One third of survey respondents and a single interviewee who were aware of the *Curriculum Framework* had used it, for example, as a general reference/guide or specifically to create or modify curricula, programming, and/or courses; to inform classroom instruction/management, lesson planning, and/or activities; or to identify and incorporate best practices. The *Best Practices* document reportedly had slightly more use with just under half of survey respondents and a couple of interviewees who were aware of it drawing on it in their work as a general reference or resource for program or curriculum development, assessments, and lesson planning, among other purposes, such as informing instructor qualifications, training and support, and group instruction. Approximately one third of survey respondents who were aware of the ATESL documents were not sure if they had used either of them.

Reasons varied as to why those who were aware of the documents had not used them. For the *Framework*, reasons included a lack of exposure to the document, a sense that it was not needed or the “right fit,” reliance on other resources, or preference for tailoring on their own. Some indicated the *Framework* was lacking practicality and usefulness for daily teaching (or preferred to rely more on their own experience) or felt it was not suitable for their learners. Similarly, for the *Best Practices* document, reasons included a lack of exposure to the document, lack of need (e.g., relied on their own experience instead), and lack of alignment to their learners. Some also described the document as too long for instructors with limited time.

### Top identified benefits of a unified curriculum relate to standardization in the sector and reduced time to create and source instructional content

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the main benefits of a unified curriculum (response options were aligned to a range of perceived benefits in the sector, as shared by

AWES based on past communications in the sector). The top benefits, as identified by over half of survey respondents each, include:

- Ensuring a minimum level of common or standard ESL programming across providers;
- Common understanding of proficiency levels from one program/provider to another;
- Better ability for English learners to transfer from one program/provider to another; and
- Reduced burden on ESL instructors/programs to create or source content.

Focus group participants and interviewees echoed similar perspectives on the benefits of a unified curriculum and also mentioned, for example, the value of a “one-stop shop” for reliable materials and contributions of a unified curriculum to a more “cohesive education” overall. Other benefits identified by research participants (survey respondents, focus group participants, and interviewees) include opportunities for “made in Alberta” curriculum content, more professionalization in the sector, and should the curriculum provide content for multiple English proficiency levels, better facilitation of multi-level classroom management.

### The research surfaced key elements of a unified curriculum that are important to the sector

Research participants identified numerous aspects of a unified curriculum that would be important or essential for them. Practitioners most commonly identified the need for the curriculum to be optional rather than mandatory and developed in such a way that it is flexible and adaptable to meet learners’ needs and goals.

Practitioners also emphasized the importance of being able to use a high-quality curriculum that is kept up-to-date and offers engaging content and materials that are appropriate for all learner levels. As well, participants expressed interest in seeing the inclusion of relevant, real-life materials (including Alberta and Canada-specific information and other special topics) and a centralized repository of resources that are curated to specific needs. They also mentioned the need for a unified curriculum to cover multiple English skills and include assessment materials and ties to CLBs. Free-of-charge access and fit with organizational mission were also emphasized, along with the need for training and professional development for instructors to use the curriculum.

However, participants tended to suggest key elements of a unified curriculum that were quite varied and, at times, at odds with each other. For instance, some focus group participants advocated for a clear progression in lessons they could adopt outright or give to new instructors with little guidance. Others would like to see a set of lessons and resources they can use to

create or supplement existing resources and materials, suggesting a need for further exploration of what truly matters the most in the sector.

Most research participants added they were at least somewhat or fairly, if not very, likely to use a unified curriculum if it were to be developed containing the elements they saw as essential (for some, at the very least as a guide or added resource). Even LINC instructors expressed interest in drawing on such a curriculum to supplement the LINC program.

### Practitioners' primary concern about developing a unified curriculum is whether it can meet the wide range of learner and organizational needs

The top concern raised by research participants about a unified curriculum relate to a perceived difficulty for a single curriculum to serve the wide variety of ESL learners in a manner that recognizes their different circumstances (including those living in rural versus) along with their learning needs, styles, and goals and their current levels of English proficiency and literacy in their first language – while at the same time aligning to the variety of programs already on offer in the province. Concerns were also expressed about implications of a unified curriculum for reducing opportunity for learner-led instruction and providing less flexibility for instructors to utilize their creativity. As well, the complexity and cost of developing a unified curriculum and keeping it up to date were a major concern for many.

Additional concerns identified by practitioners included the possibility that a unified curriculum could lead to “recreating the wheel,” particularly given the existing LINC curriculum and CLBs, as well as the potential implications for additional instructor training and professional development. Post-secondary institutions also flagged the implications of a standardized curriculum on their organizations' competitive advantage and the cost of re-credentialing their courses to align with it.

### Leadership, funding, and sector input are important next steps in the exploration of a unified curriculum

Phase 1 research participants provided suggestions for what should be included to ensure an inclusive and effective process for developing a unified curriculum for the sector, including:

- Clear articulation of goals, audience, and how the curriculum would be shared with instructors across the sector;
- A strong lead organization to champion the project;
- Funding to develop and maintain a unified curriculum;

- Input from instructors, students, and other key stakeholder groups at multiple points in the design, production, and vetting or testing of the curriculum;
- An opportunity to pilot the curriculum; and
- An oversight body to ensure the curriculum is continually updated.

## SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

While there is broad awareness of Skills for Success, in-depth knowledge and implementation of the new model are lacking in the ESL sector

The Phase 1 research examined the role that the Skills for Success framework could play in a unified curriculum. Nearly three quarters of survey respondents indicated they were somewhat (45 per cent) or very (27 per cent) familiar with Skills for Success, while 24 per cent were not at all familiar, and four per cent were not sure either way. Approximately half of focus group participants indicated they were at least somewhat familiar with the SFS framework or its essential skills predecessor while, for the most part, interviewees were unaware or minimally aware of either.

While these results indicate there is some awareness of Skills for Success, further discussions in the focus groups and interviews revealed the lack of incorporation of the model into ESL instruction in Alberta. Very few focus group participants and none of the interviewees said they had incorporated SFS into their ESL instruction. When they had, it was typically through task-based activities rather than a formal part of the curriculum.

These findings are in line with other research showing how an awareness of SFS is not sufficient for instructors to have the specialized knowledge and expertise to be able to effectively support their learners' skill development.



### What do we know from other Skills for Success research?

AWES' recent survey of ESL instructors who participated in its province-wide *Innovating ESL: Integrating Skills for Success* online professional development course found that although 65 per cent of respondents indicated prior to the training that they were familiar with SFS, and 59 per cent said they were able to apply concrete methods to support their students' skills needs, much smaller percentages were familiar with the skill complexity levels (24 per cent) or knew where to find relevant tools and resources (24 per cent) or how to use them in their classrooms (18 per cent). As well, only 18 per cent said they were able to assess their students' SFS abilities and challenges accurately, and only six per cent felt equipped to integrate SFS into their lessons. Following the training, all or nearly all (ranging from 94 to 100 per cent) responded affirmatively in these same areas.<sup>4</sup>

As well, a recently completed project to establish a framework for the professional development of essential skills practitioners, led by SkillPlan and supported by SRDC, speaks to the need for more applied knowledge of SFS among practitioners teaching the new model. More specifically, the project found that among a study of essential skills trainers,

*"It is critical for practitioners to not only have a detailed understanding of the essential skills framework/theory, but also how the essential skills can be integrated in the real-world context of learners' lives. It was also felt that practitioners need to have a high degree of skill in the areas in which they teach, whether it be numeracy, reading, problem solving, etc."*<sup>5</sup>

### Most research participants see value in incorporating the Skills for Success model into ESL instruction but would need support to do so effectively

Nearly all survey respondents shared that they see value in incorporating Skills for Success into a unified ESL curriculum, with 57 per cent indicating they see a great deal of value and 30 per cent somewhat of a value. When this topic was probed during the focus groups, participants suggested that instructors and learners would have to be convinced the model is useful to them and has its place in ESL instruction as opposed to being offered in a separate training program.

Examples from research participants of how SFS could be beneficial for ESL learners, ESL programs, and employers and the workforce more broadly include the following:

- **For ESL learners:** Opportunity to gain skills needed to support their education, employment, integration into Canadian society (in the case of newcomers), or success in general;

---

<sup>4</sup> AWES. (2024). *Innovating ESL: Integrating Skills for Success – Pilot course training highlights* [infographic].

<sup>5</sup> SRDC and SkillPlan. (2023). *ES Professionalization Project* (p. 18).

- **For ESL programs:** Opportunity to incorporate more explicitly what is already a natural fit between ESL and SFS and opportunity to create “a more holistic tool” and “standardization of best practices”; and
- **For employers and workforce:** More confidence among employers that their employees possess Skills for Success and fewer workplace incidents.

Focus group participants and interviewees suggested that instructors would need training/ professional development and materials/resources to incorporate Skills for Success into their programming, for example, through workshops or short trainings, live online presentations, or videos (e.g., of an instructor modelling the integration of SFS into ESL instruction). Incorporating SFS information into teacher training was also suggested, along with providing adequate time for instructors to integrate the model into their classes.

Research participants also saw a need for materials and resources, such as booklets/resource lists attached to the nine skills, free-of-charge examples of how to integrate skills into lessons, information to help incorporate SFS into activities suitable for different ESL learner levels (ensuring a real-life connection), and take-home print materials for students. Teaching notes embedded in materials were also suggested, along with providing multiple formats for materials and capitalizing on existing materials. The importance of funding for programs to cover the cost of training and materials was also noted, along with efforts to promote and raise awareness of SFS among instructors.

## CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PHASE 1 RESEARCH

The results of the Phase 1 research confirmed there is interest in a unified curriculum in Alberta's ESL sector. On a practical level, practitioners tend to see the development of a unified curriculum as a means of providing a one-stop shop to help reduce the substantial time—often unpaid—and burden on instructors to create or source ESL curriculum resources, which was identified as a major challenge in the sector. At the system level, a unified curriculum was also viewed as beneficial to ensure a common or standard level of programming, common understanding of proficiency levels and standardized measures of progress, and better ability for learners to transfer between programs and providers. The Phase 1 research also found that participants see value in incorporating Skills for Success into a unified curriculum, which would likely benefit the ESL programs themselves, their learners, and ultimately employers.

While most research participants indicated they would use or at least draw on a unified curriculum if it were to be developed and contained all elements they saw as essential, they also identified important elements to keep in mind for its conceptualization and development. These elements include, but are not limited to, the following.

- **The implementation framework:** How will the curriculum be developed to ensure ESL instruction is consistent and of high quality across the province while avoiding duplication or redundancy for organizations that have existing materials and resources, particularly among larger ESL providers?
- **Flexible and wide-reaching content:** Will the content of the curriculum be flexible enough to be relevant to and appropriate for a variety of student populations and their needs? Should the curriculum provide general content that instructors can tailor as needed or provide custom content for various student populations? Should the content span all English language and literacy proficiency levels, focus on specific levels, or incrementally release new content for each level over time?
- **Quality assurance:** The curriculum will have to be produced and/or certified by qualified and well-recognized organizations in the ESL sector to immediately lend credibility to the new tool. Quality assurance could be achieved through partnerships, consultations, and/or testing. This component also includes ongoing improvements/updates to the material on a yearly basis, which would further contribute to the curriculum's quality.
- **Additional features, such as the inclusion of Skills for Success:** How should SFS be included in the curriculum, and what type of supports for instructors will it provide in tandem with instruction on the main ESL curriculum?



## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the results of Phase 1 research already provide evidence on the interest, needs, and concerns of the sector related to the development of a unified ESL curriculum in Alberta, we recommend that AWES continue this work to develop a clear understanding about for whom the curriculum would be intended and how it can be developed to incorporate the concerns and suggestions offered by the sector in this initial phase of research. This section presents **recommendations** 🔄 as well as **possible avenues** 🔄 for moving these recommendations forward.

Based on the wide range of ESL programming currently available in Alberta—both in terms of the types of organizations providing programming and the content, style, and focus—a logical next step would be to 🔄 **narrow the scope of exploration to concentrate on organizations and/or programs that are most likely to use and benefit from a unified ESL curriculum.**

- 🔄 The findings suggest that post-secondary institutions are most likely to already benefit from paid development time, established curriculum and resources, and developers with strong institutional memory and therefore are less likely to adopt a new externally developed curriculum. They also typically serve learners with relatively higher English proficiency levels and are more concerned than other organizations about the possible loss of competitive advantage that a unified curriculum could pose to their business model. In addition to these concerns, a few participants noted the complexity of revising any new proposed curriculum by their institution and its subsequent approval by the Ministry of Advanced Education.
- 🔄 ESL practitioners in smaller organizations, however, typically do not have (or have little) paid preparation time, rely on an ever-changing roster of instructors with limited institutional memory, tend to serve learners with lower English proficiency levels or literacy, and are more readily able to adopt a new curriculum (i.e., fewer administrative regulations than post-secondary institutions or large ESL organizations). **Therefore, the next phase of research could focus on smaller organizations providing ESL programming.**

After focusing the audience, the next research exercise could involve the 🔄 **consultation of organizations that could guide the development of a prototype unified curriculum.** These organizations could include:

- 🕒 **Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL)** as the umbrella organization of ESL practitioners in Alberta and the developer of seminal publications, including the *Adult ESL Curriculum Framework* and *Best Practices for Adult ESL and LINC Programming in Alberta*, to better understand the process, timelines, and costs associated with developing these tools in the past and what would be envisioned for the curriculum and its rollout based on their intimate knowledge of their members' needs;
- 🕒 The **Community Learning Network (CLN)** responsible for the CALPs, as their members likely represent the ideal target population for a prototype implementation of a unified curriculum; and
- 🕒 Some federal and provincial organizations involved in the design and roll-out of national LINC tools and resources, such as **Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)** employees, the **Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB)**, and **providers who have adapted LINC guidelines into a well-known and industry-respected curriculum** (e.g., NorQuest College, Assist Community Services Centre, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society). The Phase 1 research included LINC instructors among research participants, and their needs were very similar to ESL instructors. However, the objective here would be to learn what works and does not work when developing and disseminating tools and resources and such a scale along with implementation guidelines, as well as to learn more broadly from their experiences.

Following the consultation stage, AWES and its partners could 🔄 **develop a high-level prototype curriculum plan, along with proposed implementation guidelines**, with the target group's needs in mind.

- 🕒 While the Phase 1 research identified a few suggestions from participants as to what is needed to introduce or increase the use of Skills for Success in ESL programming (e.g., raising awareness of the importance of SFS for learners and their outcomes, professional development, SFS tools specifically geared toward ESL learners, etc.), the range of perspectives also spoke to the need to share and test concrete examples of what a unified curriculum including SFS could look like.
- 🕒 Development could begin with an **outline of what a unified curriculum could contain, an overall sequence of activities, and a few example lessons/materials** that at the same time clearly demonstrates inclusion of what has already been flagged as essential by Phase 1 research participants (e.g., flexible, one-stop shop, Alberta-specific, free, appropriate for multiple-level classes, etc.).

- 🕒 The **prototype curriculum could be presented to instructors, learners, developers, coordinators, and other stakeholders** for comments, feedback, and guidance for the development and implementation of the full curriculum.

Another phase of research could  **develop a business case for the unified ESL curriculum in order to demonstrate its value to potential funders**. The goal of the business case would be to support sustained investment in a unified curriculum and demonstrate its benefits for a) instructors in terms of time savings that allow them to do their work more effectively (e.g., more student time, less staff turnover, easier onboarding) and b) for learners in terms of a more consistent pathway (e.g., clear progression, ability to move from one provider to another and communicate their progress with common terminology).

- 🕒 One way to do this would be to **estimate empirically the time spent creating, finding, and/or modifying content** by ESL instructors **relative to the cost of developing, updating, and freely distributing a curriculum**, as well as training instructors on how to use it. The former could be informed by surveying ESL instructors directly or could come from consultations with the ESL program providers, while the latter would have to be estimated based on the workload envisioned and informed by the initial consultations with the larger organizations listed above.

All the work from the recommendations proposed thus far could inform the  **development of a full or partial curriculum to be piloted in key ESL program providers**. A pilot would provide a more cost-effective way to test elements of the curriculum to assess its potential adoption and impact before a large-scale implementation.

- 🕒 The **scale of the pilot** could be influenced in multiple ways: geographic implementation, level implementation (e.g., CLB 1 only), learner-focused implementation (e.g., newcomers), or capacity-limited implementation (e.g., a full curriculum from CLB 1 to 3 only).
- 🕒 The use of a **developmental evaluation** would provide the ability to assess the implementation of the curriculum and its impact on an ongoing basis, providing an opportunity to course correct either the curriculum's content or implementation in real time.
- 🕒 The pilot phase would also inform the later-stage provincial implementation as well as the required environment for curriculum sustainability.



OTTAWA • VANCOUVER • CALGARY • HAMILTON • MONTREAL

REGINA • ST. JOHN'S • TORONTO • WINNIPEG

[www.srdc.org](http://www.srdc.org) • 1 866 896 7732 • [info@srdc.org](mailto:info@srdc.org)

