



BC Safe Haven Language Curriculum Project Environmental Scan

March 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land Acknowledgement

As a provincial umbrella association, AMSSA acknowledges that BC is on the unceded homelands of First Nations who have stewarded this land since time immemorial. We recognize the privilege that we have as settlers on this land and acknowledge that AMSSA's operations is on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. As an organization, AMSSA is committed to creating a safe space for indigenous voices.

Funder Appreciation

The BC Safe Haven Resource Network would like to gratefully acknowledge the funding for this project from the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills.

Funded by / Financé par:



The BC Safe Haven Resource Network is a collaboration providing indirect supports to Safe Haven program service providers. This collaboration is led by AMSSA in partnership with ISSofBC, MAP-BC, VAST, Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria, United Way BC, and DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society.



Contributing Organizations

The following organizations were involved in the creation of these guidelines and the research that informs them:

ISSofBC

DIVERSEcity

Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA)

AMSSA

Background

AMSSA's Safe Haven Language Curriculum Project, funded by the province of BC, aims to develop curriculum guidelines to support English language teachers in meeting the specific needs of refugee claimants (RCs) in BC to learn English. Partner agencies working with AMSSA in the project include ISSofBC, ICA, and DIVERSEcity.

The first phase of the project involved a number of field research endeavors in order to gather information from RCs themselves about their situations and language goals, as well as from others who support RCs and who are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in areas that impact RCs.

The first research endeavor was a Canada-wide environmental scan of accessible curricula, teaching materials and other documents already created to teach English and/or other information to refugee claimants, or to inform teachers and others about the situations and needs of RCs.

Following the environmental scan, questions for a survey, and for interviews or focus groups, were written by the field research team to gather information from:

- Refugee claimants
- Teachers of English language learners (ELL Teachers)
- Employment Specialists and Settlement Staff who support RCs
- Employers
- Subject Matter Experts in:
 - the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ newcomers
 - trauma, and trauma-informed practice
 - mental health
 - EAL literacy
 - learning difficulties

Referrals of interested refugee claimants, ELL Teachers, Employment Specialists, and Settlement staff were made by organizations providing services to refugee claimants including in the provincial Safe Haven English language training program. Participants in surveys, focus groups, and interviews represented all seven service regions of Safe Haven and a variety of direct service providers. Employers and Subject Matter Experts were identified by AMSSA and partner agencies ISSofBC, ICA, and DIVERSEcity.

The environmental scan, interviews, and focus groups were completed October 2024 to January 2025.

Research Summaries and Recommendations

Environmental Scan of Resources (comprehensive online search through BC, the prairie provinces, Ontario and the maritime provinces - 24 digitally available resources located and reviewed)

The environmental scan revealed one key finding: there are no adequate, accessible curricula or resources designed for employment specialists, settlement workers, and language teachers to assess their services or utilize when supporting refugee claimants.

Of the resources found and reviewed by the project team, fewer than half were specifically created for refugees, and only two of those were focused specifically on refugee claimants and easily accessible online. The original 24 resources displayed little consistency in mode of delivery or in the online tools they provided for support and were also developed for varying CLB levels and ages.

Some recommendations emerging from the environmental scan for consideration by the Project team:

- create a set of guidelines for supporting refugee claimants;
- include an easy-to-follow checklist to enhance best practices in working with RCs;
- provide teachers with a resource package containing lesson plans, materials, and assessments for all CLB levels, tailored to the unique challenges faced by RCs;
- create a central, comprehensive, and user-friendly website to house the guidelines, checklist, resource package, and related documents.

Refugee Claimants (27 respondents in interviews or focus groups, mostly online)

The following chart represents the English language levels (measured in Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs)), first languages spoken, and the region of service of the RCs spoken to:

	CLB 1-2	CLB 3-4	CLB 5-6	TOTAL
Metro Vancouver	1 (Farsi)	5 (2 Farsi, 2 Spanish, Pashto)	2 (Arabic/ French, Arabic)	8
Vancouver Island	1 (Spanish)	2 (Amharic, Spanish)	1 (Wolof/ French)	4
Surrey-Delta	6 (Urdu, Kurdish, Dari, Arabic)	1 (Amharic)	1 (Arabic)	8
Tri-Cities	1 (Spanish)	1 (Farsi)	--	2
Fraser Valley	1 (Turkish)	1 (Russian)	1 (Amharic)	3
Interior / North	1 (Kurdish)	1 (Sinhalese/ Tamil)	--	2
TOTALS	11	11	5	27

The majority of RCs, 62%, indicated they preferred to study in person in order to have more opportunities for student-to-student communication, and more hands-on and group and/or pair activities. The least popular kinds of classroom activities were independent work and class

presentations. This may be because speaking was a major priority identified for RCs interviewed, particularly general, transferable, social or everyday communication skills. Preference for online classes when expressed was generally due to convenience, especially for students with long commutes. This included students assessed at CLB 1.

When asked about their current goals, improving English and finding a job were clearly at the top. For example, some requests were for “job-related training,” “research into career opportunities,” and “certifications,” “more community connections, like job search assistance programs,” “access to training programs,” help “building resume and cover letter,” introduction to “resources for finding out about career certifications and credential evaluation,” and “information about volunteering in Canada.” Other topics chosen or volunteered by RCs could be grouped into a theme of Survival English, such as English for finding stable long-term housing and connecting to local communities. A recommendation that emerged to meet these needs was to include support in the curriculum for connecting with community organizations and having Employment Specialists as guest speakers.

Not surprisingly, most RCs spoken to were reticent to share about or admit to mental health issues, highlighting a strong need for trauma-informed teaching and inclusion of vocabulary around mental wellness in the curriculum.

Finally, based on requests by RCs for “computer training to support language and digital literacy,” “more computer lab practice,” “more guidance in using publicly available equipment (e.g. library computers),” one other recommendation for consideration by the Project team is to include some face-to-face digital skills instruction. This could allow clients to better participate in online or hybrid classes while also building language and skills for everyday life and working in Canada.

ELL Teachers of RCs (23 responses to online surveys)

BC Safe Haven English language training is offered through a variety of delivery models including dedicated classes for RCs only and placement of RCs in federally funded LINC classes. Training ranged from one-on-one to classroom settings, and was delivered in person, online, or through a hybrid model.

A key theme that emerged from the surveys was the importance of a multifaceted, integrated approach to client support. Many of the survey respondents suggested that working closely with their organization’s support staff, digital literacy facilitators, settlement workers or employment managers has been vital to resolving some of the issues they’ve faced. This was true both within organizations and outside them, in the form of community connections and partnerships.

Other findings:

Teachers need more resources relevant to the real-world needs and experiences of Refugee Claimants. 48% of teacher respondents chose “Resources not specific to real-world experience and needs of Refugee Claimants” as a gap in teaching resources for RCs.

Employment should be a major focus: 48% of teachers reported that RC clients identify getting a job as their main purpose for studying English. From teachers' own perspectives, "Getting a Job" (22 teachers), "Skills for Work" (20) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, "Workplace Expectations" (13) rate high as the themes or topics that would best address the needs of RCs.

Time constraints are a major issue: Teachers were asked what obstacles they see RC students encountering, as well as what challenges they themselves encounter when teaching English to RC students. In both cases, the majority of teachers see time constraints and — a connected issue — inconsistent attendance as major hurdles.

Technology is also an issue: "Digital literacy issues" (10 teacher respondents), "limited access to a computer" (10) and "limited access to Wi-Fi" (5) were listed as obstacles RCs encounter when learning English, with many teachers indicating their clients face multiple of these related technological issues. This is particularly noteworthy as over half of our survey respondents' classes involve at least some online study (5 hybrid, 10 fully online).

From this research, recommendations for consideration by the Project team included:

- provide Safe Haven language teachers with access to suitable resources from the environmental scan;
- focus the curriculum on high priority needs of RCs;
- stress employment-related language in the curriculum;
- engage the support of Employment Specialists;
- structure the curriculum flexibly;
- include guest speaker and field trip guidance to connect RCs to their communities;
- include digital skills training.

Employment Specialists and Settlement Staff ("Support Staff" - 9 interviews)

Talking to service provider staff who support refugee claimants allowed a different perspective on their needs, including some areas the RCs themselves were reluctant to discuss, such as the need for mental health support.

Support Staff were able to point to several reasons RCs might not want to discuss mental health, including fear of stigma within cultural or community groups, lack of awareness about mental health services, and a cultural reliance on family support rather than external resources. They were also able to suggest some approaches to teaching mental health that would be beneficial for RCs, such as using non-threatening, generalized language when discussing mental health, building awareness of stress impacts and available supports, and fostering discussions to normalize mental health topics in Canadian society.

Top areas requiring support identified by Support Staff included basic needs and stability (such as housing and income security), social and community integration (English skills and social networking), and employment-readiness or job-related skills. Support Staff also suggested that a language curriculum for RCs could focus on practical language skills such as day-to-day

conversation and small talk, job-specific language skills such as interview communication, and how to understand and navigate systems like healthcare and housing.

Subject Matter Experts and Employment Contacts (7 interviews)

Subject Matter Experts were interviewed on the topics of

- trauma (VAST: Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture)
- gender equity and sexual diversity (ICA)
- literacy and learning difficulties (DIVERSEcity)

While an expert in trauma-informed learning was not immediately available for interviewing, a recently recorded webinar by Katie Crossman of Bow Valley College was reviewed (Equity Centered Trauma Informed Education, Tutela, December 2024) for relevant and useful information.

Four employment contacts were also interviewed as referred by ISSofBC including the BC Construction Association, go2HR (temporary work placements), BC Hotel Association, and Northwest Skills Institute.

Some key takeaways from this area of research were to include in the curriculum:

- representation of the refugee claimants' cultures and of marginalized communities in the classroom through visuals and vocabulary for diversity;
- real world experiences to support learning and increase confidence;
- guest speakers to connect more directly to resources.

With regards to mental health, besides teaching vocabulary for expression, the need to normalize the discussion in the classroom was emphasized. Creating community within the classroom to provide a sense of purpose and belonging was also a recommendation for the curriculum team to take into consideration, as was the need to provide up-to-date resources to make referrals if needed.

Some suggested curriculum topics included industry specific language and health and safety language to get RCs to work faster; Canadian culture for the community and workplace, specifically acceptable language and behaviours; human rights in Canada to enable communicating about marginalized communities; workplace etiquette; setting boundaries; and accessing resources.

Results of the Field Research

Synthesizing the Research

Once the different field research streams had been completed and analyses written, the Safe Haven Language Curriculum Project team studied the results, then came together in January 2025 to discuss what had been learned, and to sketch the outline of the Safe Haven Language Curriculum. The first draft of the outline is as follows:

Draft Outline: Safe Haven Language Curriculum

1. About the Safe Haven Language Program Curriculum project (the field research)
2. Why: The Refugee Claimant's Journey
 - a. An RC's first days in Canada
 - b. RCs' struggles
 - c. Services in BC for RCs
3. What to keep in mind: Principles Guiding the Safe Haven Language Program Curriculum
 - a. List of principles with explanations of what they are
 - b. Specific guidance for teachers on how to incorporate each of the principles within a unit and lesson
 - c. Checklist for teachers – questions to ensure principles are embedded as part of planning, and to reflect that principles were incorporated as planned during the lesson
4. How to deliver language training that meets the needs of RCs: What to teach in stand-alone programs
 - a. Organization of the curriculum and how to use the parts
 - i. List of themes and topics for Core SHLT (CLB 1-4) and for Employment-Related Language Training (CLB 4-6)
 - ii. Using the lesson plan template (stating objectives, choosing/writing activities to meet the objectives, using the embedded checklists)
 - b. Template for Safe Haven Language Lessons (with checklist embedded)
 - c. Activities for RC language training by theme and topic for Core SHLT (CLB 1-4) – Developed and Ready-Made
 - d. Activities for RC language training by theme and topic for Employment-Related Language Training (CLB 4-6) – Developed and Ready-Made
5. How to deliver language training that meets the needs of RCs: What to teach in LINC or other language programs that serve RCs
 - a. How to approach the LINC class with RCs – making choices of real-world tasks
 - b. Guidance for each LINC theme to also be relevant to the needs of RCs
6. Teacher Resources: Helping RCs engage with the community
 - a. Blank template to record specific community locations or contacts
 - b. Guest speaker suggestions (objective, who to contact, what to do in the classroom)
 - c. Field trip suggestions (suggestions, what to do on the field trip)

The Project team later worked on the list of principles guiding the Safe Haven Language Curriculum:

1. **Universal Design for Learning– firm objectives but different pathways of teaching (flexibility)**
 - a. Multiple means of Engagement
 - b. Multiple means of Representation
 - c. Multiple means of Action and Expression
2. **Trauma Informed Practice**
 - a. Mental Wellness
3. **Provide Relevant Content**
 - a. Focus on Employment
 - b. Canadian Culture
4. **Fostering Community and Connections**
 - a. Incorporating Community Engagement
 - b. Partnerships, guest speakers, field trips, referrals for support, community services *etc.*; “it takes a village” approach
5. **Accessibility**
 - a. Learning difficulties
 - b. Literacy
6. **Fostering Inclusivity, Diversity and Unity**
 - a. 2SLGBTQIA+
 - b. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Finally, based on the research, a list of themes to meet the needs of both the Core (CLB 1-4) Safe Haven stream and the Employment-Related (CLB 4-6) Safe Haven stream were determined:

- Culture and Canadian culture
- Employment: Finding and applying for a job
- Immediate survival skills
- Common workplace skills
- Workplace interactions
- Health – mental and physical
- Community engagement
- Digital skills
- Human rights
- Housing (this would be an additional topic for the Core stream only)

To provide clearer guidance to teachers on how to balance a choice of tasks within different timeframes of delivery, these themes were later grouped under the headings Employment, Survival English, and Embedded Themes such as Canadian Culture and Digital Skills.

Conclusion

The field research has led to a much deeper understanding of the needs of RCs by the Safe Haven Language Curriculum writing team. This in turn has led to a curriculum outline draft that is informed by key principles, representative of RCs and organizations in all the BC Safe Haven regions, and focused on practical, real-world topics for employment and survival. While much more work is needed to develop the full guidelines, the intention is to deliver some parts of the outline to the field by the end of year one of the project, in order to provide support and resources to currently operating Safe Haven direct service providers.