

REDEFINING LEARNING AFTER COVID-19

SUMMARY REPORT

**A Comparative Study of Hybrid and
Online Learning Models for Newcomers
and English Language Learners in the
Greater Toronto Area**



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic redefined how we live, work and deliver important services to stakeholders, particularly the most vulnerable groups. For Catholic Cross-cultural Services (CCS), the pandemic necessitated a swift transition to online service delivery, including occupation-specific language training (OSLT) programs, opening new opportunities and presenting barriers, particularly for newcomers seeking access to career opportunities in Canada. There was no clear evidence on how different service delivery methods—online or hybrid—serve newcomers with diverse backgrounds.

To address this gap, our project analyzed the effectiveness of hybrid and online occupation-specific language programming for newcomers with different characteristics.





RESEARCH IN PARTNERSHIP

Catholic Cross-cultural Services (CCS)

CCS is a non-profit organization based in the Greater Toronto Area that provides services to assist immigrants and refugees to settle, integrate and succeed in Canada. CCS serves immigrants and refugees helping them acquire the necessary information, skills, and knowledge required to settle, integrate, and succeed in Canada.

Founded in 1954, CCS believes in the power of diversity and inclusion to foster change, nurture progress, and move society forward. CCS delivers programs and services in thirty languages in Toronto and Peel Region, assisting clients to confidently navigate their integration into Canadian society. CCS' vision is to create a Canada where newcomers thrive and feel at home.

UTSC Partnership

Funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the 'Effectiveness of Online and In-Person Delivery for Occupation-specific Language Training (OSLT) Project' was a three-year collaboration between CCS and the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (UTSC), from December 2021 to March 2024.

The project examined what delivery method of OSLT programs - online and hybrid – works well for clients with different characteristics, including language level and educational backgrounds. Our objectives were to examine:

- The effectiveness of online and hybrid OSLT programs in achieving learning outcomes for various groups
- Program effectiveness regarding client knowledge, skills, and connections to prepare for the Canadian labour market
- Client satisfaction regarding supports provided

The partnership was structured as follows: Research materials were designed and prepared by the UTSC research team. Data were collected by CCS staff and course instructors throughout the course of the programs. Data analyses and reporting were conducted by the UTSC research team, with regular consultations with CCS staff.

PROGRAM DESIGN

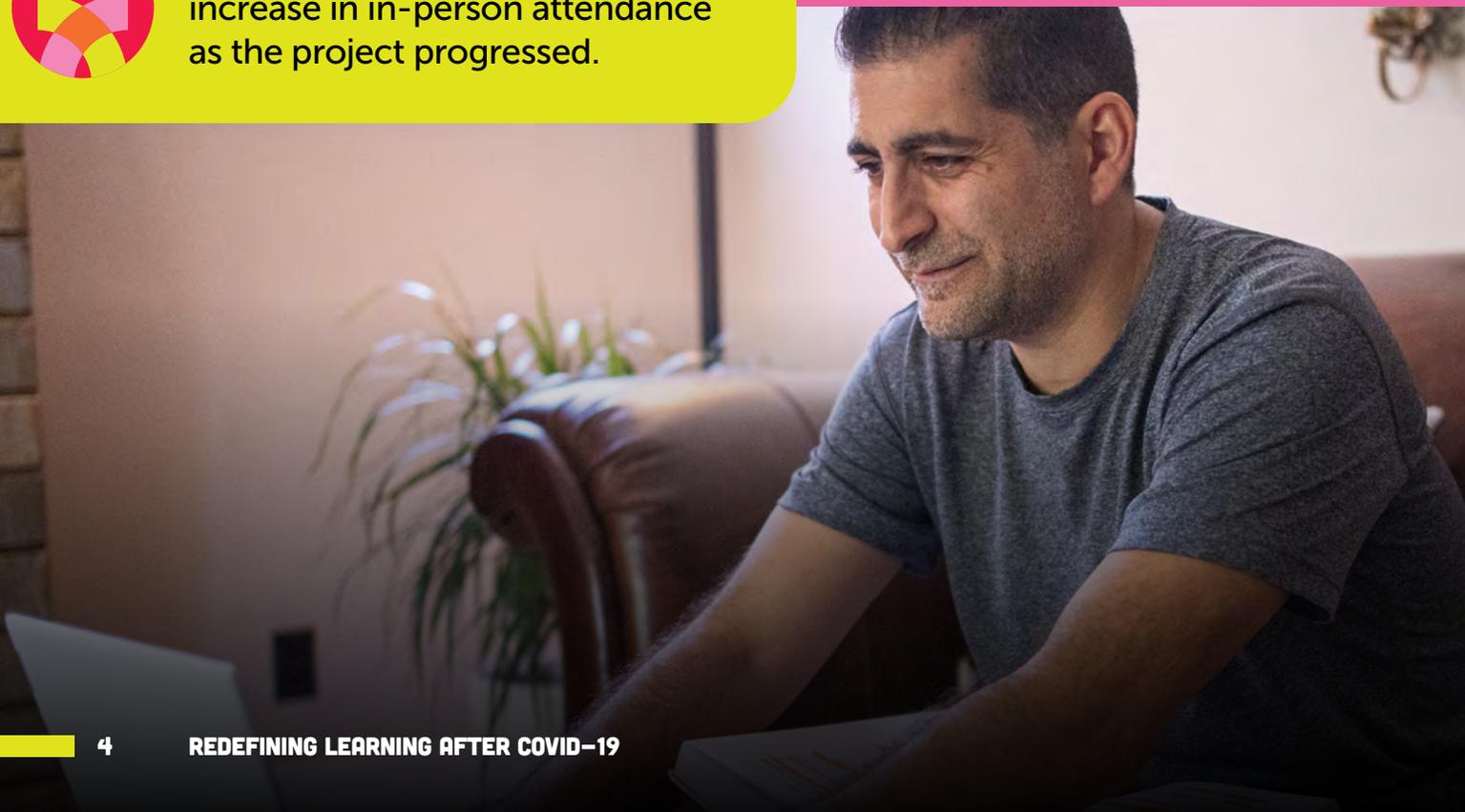
The initial aim to compare online and in-person training delivery methods evolved post-launch. Most prominently, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge for a full return to in-person formats, alongside evolving preferences and needs of clients which are prioritized in the service delivery approach. In response to client feedback emphasizing the need for flexibility due to health concerns or caregiving responsibilities, and a preference for options that accommodate their schedules, the project shifted focus to evaluate fully online and hybrid delivery models. In the hybrid format, instructors conducted classes from the classroom, offering clients the option to attend either in person or online, catering to those hesitant about on-site attendance due to the pandemic or other limitations. The decision to maintain the hybrid model throughout the project stemmed from its ability to flexibly meet client needs while ensuring the research study's continuity.

This study targeted two participant groups:

- 1) Internationally trained, highly educated healthcare professionals with an English proficiency of Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 6 or higher; and
- 2) Newcomers with lower levels of education and English language proficiency (CLB levels 2 to 4).



This approach led to a notable increase in in-person attendance as the project progressed.



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The project was designed to enroll 260 clients in 10 different cohorts over a two-year period.

The total number of cohorts was divided into five per year: two childminding (CM), one food handling (FH), and two ELT for Healthcare professionals for each fiscal year: FY2022-23 and FY 2023-2024. In total, 175 clients were enrolled in the project: 92 hybrid and 83 online.

RESEARCH DATA

Data was collected from the following sources:

Pre-program Registration and Intake Forms

CLB Scores: Collected once at registration and once when the program was complete

Self-report baseline surveys were distributed to clients at the start of the program which assessed their learner behaviours and digital literacy across five categories:

- Digital Literacy (basic technology skills, functional technology skills, and high-order technology skills)
- Attitudes toward technology
- Learning with technology
- Labour market knowledge and skills self-evaluation
- Learner characteristics

In-Session Data: We collected ongoing and regular attendance when programs were in session. In addition, we also tracked support services clients were receiving, including childcare, transportation assistance, technology loans, and technology training.

End of Program Survey: We asked clients to provide feedback about the program and assess themselves on three topics repeated from the baseline survey: attitudes toward technology, digital technology, and their labour market and skills.

Post-program Follow-ups: We collected information about clients' post-program experiences with the labour market.

RESULTS

Targets were established based on CCS' historical service delivery records, comparisons with similar programs and feedback from other service delivery organizations.

OUTCOME 1:

Clients are provided with support to access online and hybrid/in-person sessions that are useful to them.



TARGET:

90 percent of clients who required support were provided direct or indirect support to access the program.

RESULTS:

At registration, CCS assessed client needs for the following supports: childcare, transportation, technology borrowing, and technology training. Forty-eight requests for support were made during the initial registration. CCS fulfilled 100 percent of those requests.

CCS also assessed their clients' needs on an ongoing basis by conducting regular check-ins to ensure they were aware of and could access support as their needs change. For example, a client might not indicate that they need transportation support during intake. However, through regular check-ins conducted by CCS, transportation needs were identified. By the end of the program, 96 transportation supports were provided because of these regular check-ins.

Overall, including supports requested *after* intake, 128 supports were provided. Our finding that the number of supports requested increased as the course progressed, highlights the importance of regular follow-ups during service delivery as clients' initial assessments of their needs might prove inadequate.

OUTCOME 2:

Clients improve their English language skills by participating in online and hybrid programs.



TARGET:

80 percent of clients increase by at least 1 CLB level in at least two skill areas after completing the language training session.

RESULTS:

The CLB scores evaluate four skill areas: listening, writing, reading, and speaking. We analyzed clients' CLB scores before and after the program to evaluate improvement in English language skills. For the purpose of our analyses, a client was classified as showing improvement if they demonstrated an increase of at least 1 CLB level in at least two skill areas.

For clients in the hybrid format, about 85 percent showed an improvement, compared to about 37 percent of clients in the online-only format. We also observed differences across cohorts. For the CM and FH cohorts, about 91 percent of clients in the hybrid format improved compared to about 16 percent of clients in the online-only format.

Despite the high CLB level cutoff in the ELT healthcare cohort, we also saw improvement in these clients. About 65 percent of clients in the hybrid modality showed improvement, compared to about 77 percent of clients in the online-only cohort.

These results indicate that the program has significantly increased the English skills of learners with lower skills levels, particularly when they participate in the hybrid mode of delivery. This reinforces the notion that the in-person aspect of the hybrid format adds value over and above the course content.



OUTCOME 3:

Various labour market effects were observed in addition to language related results that are important to note.



TARGET 1:

80 percent of people improved their knowledge of the Canadian Labour Market specific to their field.

RESULTS:

In both the hybrid and online-only formats, statistically significant changes were noted in the cohorts understanding of the Canadian Labour Market. Across both cohorts, 47 percent of participants reported an improvement in their knowledge, 38 percent indicated no change, and 15 indicated a decrease. This result is statistically significant, showing that the language training program has increased clients' labour market knowledge in some capacities

TARGET 2:

70 percent of participants indicated their networking skills had improved since joining the program, and 70 percent of participants indicated that they had been practicing networking skills 6 months post-program

RESULTS:

We found a statistically significant increase in clients networking skills (with a median score of 3 at baseline and 4 at the post-program timepoint). In total, 41 percent of clients indicated their networking skills have improved since joining the program, 49 percent report their skills are the same, and about 10 percent indicate decreased skills.

Further analyses comparing online and hybrid cohorts revealed that only 35% of online participants reported an increase in networking skills, compared to 46% of hybrid participants. The results for the online cohort were statistically significant.

However, when we asked our clients whether they agreed or disagreed that they could practice their networking skills, most indicated they agreed. Furthermore, in the post-program survey, we ask the clients on a scale from 1-5 (1 is very poor to 5 is very good), "How would you rate your ability to practice networking skills in real-life situations?" We had a very small sample size of 24 respondents. Of those, 50 percent of the clients in the online format indicated that they were at least good with their ability to practice networking skills, and in the hybrid format, 65 percent of the clients rate their networking skills as good or very good.

TARGET 3:

80 percent of participants reported that the work placement was useful in improving job search skills.

RESULTS:

We asked clients to assess experiences with their work placement on a scale of 1 – 5, where 1 strongly disagrees and 5 strongly agree. Our results vary across cohorts. A similar trend exists between hybrid and online formats for the CM cohort, where at least 85 percent of placement participants found their experiences useful. We found that a small group of clients, about 13 percent, indicated that their experiences were neutral. With FH, all clients suggest that they agreed or strongly agreed that their work placement has met their expectations and provided them with meaningful opportunities.

The results were mixed for the ELT healthcare cohorts, especially for the hybrid format. About 10 percent of clients disagree that their work placements are useful, and about 18 percent indicate that they feel neutral about their experiences. However, a large proportion of ELT healthcare clients in the hybrid cohort agree or strongly agree that their work placements are useful, with 72 percent indicating so. However, for the online format, we see all clients have indicated that they either agree or strongly agree that their work placements have met their expectations and provided them with meaningful opportunities.

For more detailed results analysis of all outcomes, see the full report.

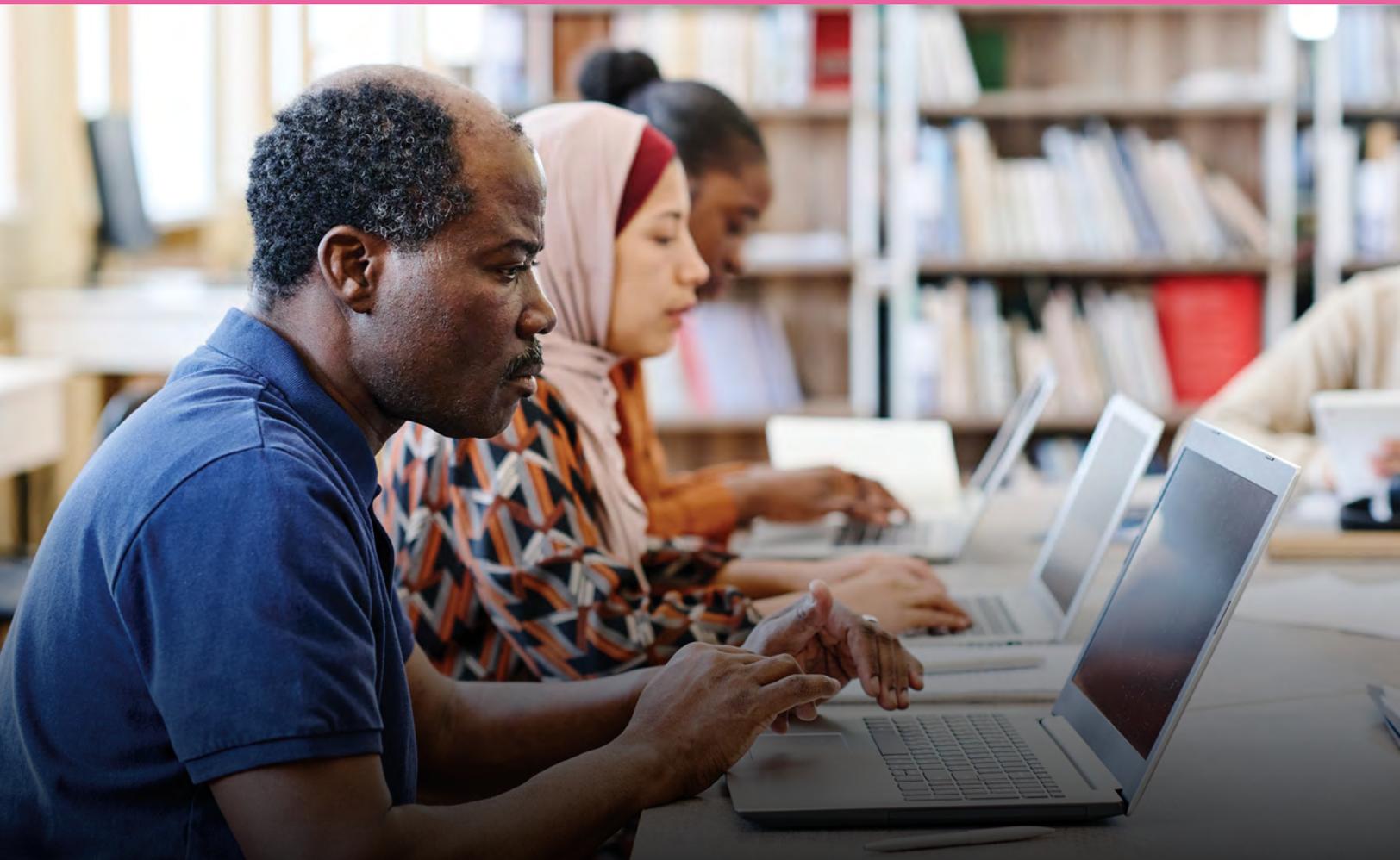




CONCLUSIONS

The key takeaway from this study is that occupation-specific language training (OSLT) programs provided by CCS effectively aid clients in enhancing their English language abilities.

We found that participants in the hybrid format (a mix of online and in-person learning) generally improved their CLB scores and skills self-assessment more than those who participated solely in online learning, especially clients with lower English language skills at the start of the program.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-program language abilities should be considered when offering online-only courses



The client's language levels should be considered prior to offering online-only courses. Our results show clients with lower CLB scores do not benefit to the same degree from online-only programming, and should be encouraged (with additional support) to attend programming in person.

Improving learning experiences for clients in online formats



The OSLT provider and instructors should adapt modules to better adhere to the online formats by providing a hands-on approach and activities to increase clients' interaction and participation in learning as well as other follow-up classroom activities.

Providers should regularly check-in on client needs



Clients may under-report their needs for learning and access supports, which can evolve as programs progress. The OSLT provider should regularly assess client needs and remind them of available supports to facilitate their learning experience.

Additional research and resources are needed



Granting agencies need to provide sufficient resources and require further quantitative evaluation on OSLT in Canada. OSLT providers should be required to share evaluation frameworks, data collection instruments, and procedures with other providers to maximize evaluation efficiencies. OSLT providers should be rewarded with additional resources for conducting high-quality, useful analyses of their programs.



Evidence Based Program & Policy Design

Telephone: 416-208-2687

Email: info@equityeducation.ca

equityeducation.ca



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