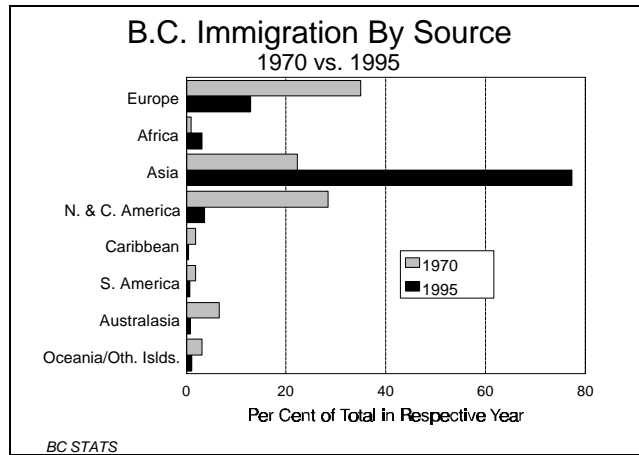
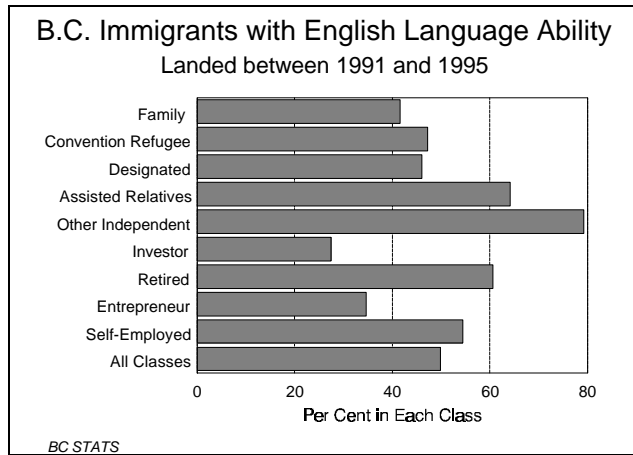


Special Feature: English Language Ability of Recent Immigrants

Over the last two decades, the origin of immigrants to Canada has shifted significantly. In the early 1970's, most immigrants came from either the United States or European countries, whereas a majority of recent immigrants came from Asia. As a result of the higher proportion of immigrants coming from countries where English is not the native language, the overall English language ability of recent immigrants has dropped.

Statistics show that about half of the immigrants who came to British Columbia between 1991 and 1995 possessed no English language ability. During that period, seven of the top ten source countries of B.C. immigrants were Asian countries and they accounted for 87 per cent of all landings to the province. A total of 92,543 persons from these top 10 sources possessed no English language ability. The top three home language spoken by immigrants who did not speak English at time of landing were Cantonese, Mandarin, and Punjabi.



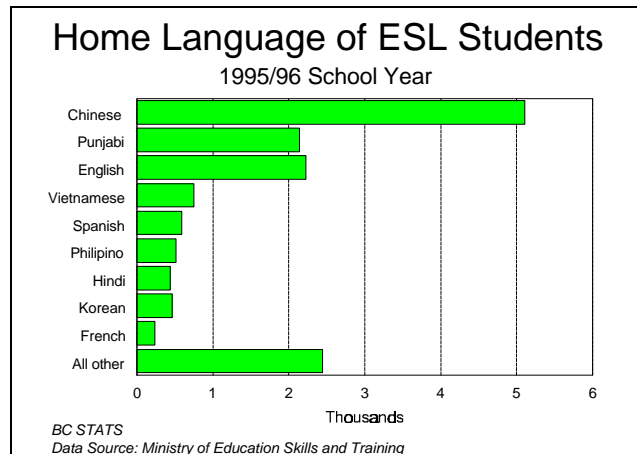
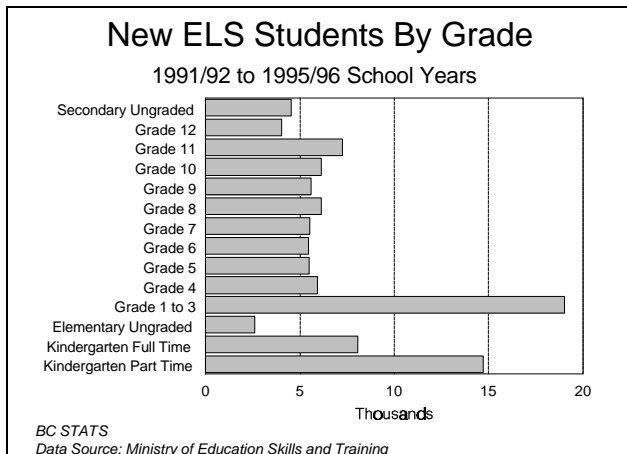
Immigrants in the business classes and Refugee/Designated classes tend to have a relatively lower English language ability than those in the skilled worker classes or Retired Class. This is primarily a result of the different selection criteria in admitting various classes of immigrants. Immigrants in the Other Independent Class and Assisted Relative Class are assessed under a point system in which English language ability is one of the factors for consideration. Although English proficiency is also one of the considerations for assessing immigrants in the business classes, overall English language ability tends to be lower for immigrants in business classes due to the fact that most business immigrants come from non-English speaking countries such as Hong Kong or Taiwan, and that only the principal applicants are assessed. The relatively higher number of non-English speaking family members accompanying the principal applicants tends to further lower the overall English language ability of immigrants landed under the Entrepreneur, Investor and Self-Employed classes.

A high proportion of immigrants who possessed no English language ability at the time of landing were of school age. For those who landed between 1991 and 1995 in the province, approximately 40 per cent (or a total of 78,654 persons) were between age 5 and 24. Due to the increasing number of non-English speaking immigrants entering the education system in the province, the demand on English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the school system has grown significantly during the last few years.

Over the five school years between 1991/92 and 1995/96, there were approximately 100,000 new students enrolled in ESL programs in the public school system in B.C. In the 1995/96 school year

alone, there were 67,842 ESL students in public schools and a majority of them were in the levels from kindergarten to grade eight. In each of the five school years between the 1991/92 and 1995/96, more than 70 per cent of the new ESL students were below the grade nine level. In the private/independent school system, there were 1,459 ESL students enrolled in the 1995/96 school year.

Most ESL students are recent immigrants who come from non-English speaking countries. However, some of the ESL students are also Canadian-born children whose home language is not English. They are usually children of recent immigrants who continued to speak a non-English language at home. As a result, these children require ESL assistance as they enter the school system due to insufficient exposure to the English language. The predominate non-English languages spoken by ESL students are Chinese, Punjabi, Vietnamese and Spanish.



In British Columbia, budgeted expenditures for ESL programs in the public school system were \$69.5 million during the 1995/96 school year. This is equivalent to approximately \$1,100 per full time student per school year in 1995/96. The number of years a student remains in ESL programs varies. For example, of ESL students below grade nine who started ESL in 1991/92 school year, the average number of years a student stayed in the ESL program was 3 years for Spanish speaking students, 3.4 years for Punjabi speaking students, 3.5 years for Chinese speaking students, and 1.9 years for aboriginal students.

With the increasing proportion of immigrants arriving from non-English speaking countries, there will be an on-going challenge of increasing demand on ESL in the provincial education system. While recently announced federal immigration policy indicated that more emphasis will be placed on selecting immigrants with better official language proficiency, it is somewhat difficult to monitor the overall level of English language ability of immigrants coming to settle in any province as accompanying family members and immigrants under certain classes are not subject to assessment for admission. Moreover, ESL demands in B.C. are relatively more difficult to accurately predict based solely on the expected inflow of non-English speaking immigrants to B.C. because demands for ESL are also generated from secondary-migration of immigrants from other provinces. Statistics show that there is a ongoing trend of positive inflow of immigrants coming to settle in B.C. after they originally land elsewhere in Canada.