According to the Canadian Learning and Literacy Network (CLLN), 42% of all Canadian adults between age 16 and 65 have low literacy skills. Unsurprisingly, new immigrants to Canada have the highest rates of low English language literacy (61%), but virtually unchanged rates among established immigrants (60%) indicate that existing programs are failing to address and support this population. To exacerbate the problem, only 5-10% of eligible adults register in literacy upgrade programs as a result of various barriers that learners encounter, including time constraints and accessibility. Low literacy skills limit Canadians' abilities to effectively participate in the digital economy or to realize their full potential in their civic and personal lives.

Recognizing the risks of pervasive low literacy levels amongst Canadians, a collaboration between George Brown College, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Toronto, Literacy Nipissing, and Development Made Simple will build upon the potential of mobile learning to promote and support literacy training for these learners. The proposed research will develop a set of design principles for an effective mobile learning literacy solution that will address low literacy skills amongst Canadian adult first and second language English learners, and equip them with the language and digital literacy skills needed to thrive in Canadian communities and workplaces. Based on these principles, a prototype of an effective mobile learning solution will be produced.

This research project, supported by SSHRC funding, is aimed at Canadian adults (16-65 years old) from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. The project aims to create a set of mobile learning (m-learning) tasks and activities that will result in increasing the literacy level of the learner to at least level 3 on a Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) test (recognized as sufficient by Employment and Development Canada) in order to facilitate their success in Canadian socio-cultural and workplace environments. This m-learning solution targets learners who lack reading and writing skills in English, regardless of their first language and any other language proficiency. It will promote the development of basic abilities in typing and printing, understanding sound-symbol correspondence and reading survival words. It will focus on alphanumeric perceptual knowledge, word recognition, word knowledge (vocabulary), sentence processing, and passage fluency. The solution will be designed for a variety of learners' own mobile devices (a cross-platform solution).

Mobilizing the research knowledge gained through this project has the potential to realize significant social and economic benefits, particularly among newcomers to Canada, who are among the groups most affected by low language proficiency. Using mobile based approach to literacy learning, the time commitment required for learning can be distributed more flexibly and learning content can be accessed at the users convenience. We expect this will result in higher engagement of learners in the learning process. Numerous studies have shown that both higher literacy and income rates have positive effects on social and civic engagement, and on physical and mental wellness and related life chances. Investing in improving the literacy level of low literacy learners benefits all of Canadian society, as educated populations are better able to contribute to the social and economic growth of the country.