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# Straddling Federal/Provincial Government Relations: The Work of Adult Additional Language Education for Immigrants' Employment Integration

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses some early findings from research examining the implementation of adult English-as-an-Additional Language (EAL) education policy in Canada. It examines the challenges adult language educators and language researchers encounter during the implementation of an initiative that straddles two levels of government in the Canadian federal system and is intended to assist new immigrants with settlement and employment integration.

## Introduction

This paper discusses some of the findings on the processes of policy implementation drawn from my doctoral research that examines the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (CLB 2000)*. The *CLB 2000* is a set of adult English as-an- Additional Language (EAL) policies developed by the Canadian federal government with the intention of facilitating consistent English language assessment and programming for the settlement and employment integration of immigrants to Canada. The Canadian government has had an interest in the language education of immigrants since World War II through funding various programs for the purposes of citizenship and employment integration. In the early 1990s, however, prompted by critiques on the inadequate state of adult EAL education (Derwing & Thomson, 2005), the Canadian government through the ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) consulted with English-as-an-Additional Language (EAL) teaching, testing and measurement experts and embarked on developing the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (CLB 2000)*. The *CLB 2000* represents a significant shift in the government's approach to language education. For the first time, the government has become actively involved in the development of a framework in an attempt to standardize and regulate EAL education across the country.

The CLB framework, articulated in a 186-page document, is a twelve-benchmark descriptive scale consisting of communication and performance tasks for each benchmark. The main problem the CLB is meant to address is the lack of consistency and coherency that exists in the assessment of immigrants' English language proficiency. The opening pages of the *CLB 2000* explains that the framework will establish a "common language" or "yardstick" for "describing and measuring, in a standard way, the communicative proficiency of [EAL] learners" and therefore ensure the "portability of [immigrants'] ESL credential" anywhere in Canada (p. viii). The CLB is competency based and focuses on language proficiency, therefore users of the document (instructors, language researchers, employment counsellors, etc.) are expected to delineate what a learner can and cannot do with language at each of the twelve distinct levels of communicative proficiency. CLB document users assess language learners according to four skill areas (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and four selected competencies (social interaction, giving and receiving instructions, suasion, and using information) (Pawlikowska-

Smith, 2005). The *CLB 2000* has been in circulation for ten years and it has been implemented, albeit somewhat inconsistently, across various contexts including settlement agencies, post-secondary institutions, and employment settings.

There is a small, but growing body of literature concerned with the role of power in the implementation of language policy, “from the daily interactions of ordinary people to the official policies of government” (Ricento, 2006). One aspect of my research looks at the social and power relations involved in the work of language researchers, instructors, and government administrators who are responsible for implementing the *CLB 2000* in work and employment-related contexts. In this paper, I discuss some of the complexities of implementation the participants encountered in trying to adhere to the policy goal of establishing a coherent system for assessing immigrants language abilities within the benchmark system. First, I examine participants’ conflicting standpoints on the effectiveness of the benchmarks and the extent to which they see it as a “revolutionary” solution, a discourse expressed in the *Preface* of the *CLB 2000* document. Second, I discuss how the different contexts in which the benchmarks are meant to be implemented contribute to the challenges of establishing a “common language” of assessment. Finally, I discuss briefly the extent to which differing provincial contexts contributed to establishing a “portable” EAL credential.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Policy initiatives are often developed to address some identified social or economic problem. During the implementation of policy, processes are laden with negotiations and tensions over the meanings embedded in the policy and how the policy should be enacted. Employing Dorothy Smith’s (1999, 2005) institutional ethnography, this study seeks to understand the tensions of how the *CLB 2000* as a policy text organizes and coordinates the social relations and work activities of language instructors, language researchers, and government representatives. A key aspect to understanding social organization is consideration of how individuals are in relation to one another. Institutional ethnography involves identifying “a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored” (Smith, 2005, p. 32). The issues and concerns of a particular standpoint are identified and explored through discussions with people situated from that standpoint. From here, the web expands uncovering the social relations constituting the organization of everyday activities within the institutional order. Everyday experiences are organized translocally; activities occurring in one location influence the organization of activities in other locations. “Social relations are *extended* courses of action that take place across social settings” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, pp. 30-31, emphasis original). This study seeks to understand how the work and activities of the language researchers, instructors, and government administrators are organized and regulated through the CLB policy initiative.

### **Research Design**

I conducted sixteen 60-minute semi-structured interviews with thirteen participants in two provinces who work with the *CLB 2000*. The participants included language instructors, language researchers, and government representatives who have been involved in the development and implementation of *CLB 2000* initiatives. I also attended workshops, symposiums and professional development meetings related to CLB initiatives. In addition, the

*CLB 2000* document, government reports, and institutional websites were analyzed. All interviews were fully transcribed and returned to participants for verification. All interviews were coded and analyzed for the common discourses organizing participants' work in language assessment and programming. Analysis of interviews, field notes, and documents was conducted following Smith's (2005) method of the text-reader conversation. In the text-reader conversation, the researcher examines how people talk about their experiences to gain insight into the problematic and the institutional or ruling discourses that organize participants' experiences.

## Findings

This section highlights some of the complexities of implementation participants encountered in trying to achieve the goals of establishing a coherent and standard system for assessing immigrants language abilities within the benchmark system. The first subsection articulates participants' conflicting standpoints on the effectiveness of the benchmarks and the extent to which they view them as a revolution. The second subsection examines the diverse teaching contexts in which the benchmarks are implemented and the challenges of "getting everyone speaking the same language" of assessment. The final subsection discusses the influence provincial contexts have on facilitating a "portable" EAL credential. Examining the experiences of the research participants, reveals that mounting a "revolution," establishing a "common language," and implementing a "portable" credential has been fraught.

### The Messiah? An Evolution? A Mystery?

The heading of this section alludes to the different interpretations participants had on the purposes and effectiveness of the CLB initiative. As mentioned earlier, the *CLB 2000* document frames the initiative as a revolution that will unify the EAL field in Canada. However, the extent to which the participants took up the revolutionary discourse ranged from exuberance to skepticism. Instructors who praised the initiative believed that it made their teaching practice easier because it provided guidelines for developing their lessons. Others described the EAL field as one that had been floundering from a lack of credibility and professionalization until the CLB was developed. They described the CLB as saving the field from embarrassment because of inconsistent standardization. One participant explained:

*It was like the Messiah. Yeah, that's funny isn't it. No, but seriously, it really saved the day I think because we couldn't have kept on going like that. It made no sense and so I think it really did more than just revolutionize, it saved us from further embarrassment of non-standardization of our field. [Administrator, former instructor]*

Other participants also expressed their belief that the CLB framework helped to establish credibility for the field of EAL education. For these participants, however, the revolutionary discourse articulated in the document over-simplified the complexity of implementing a nationwide initiative. They talked about the process of language learning in adulthood as complex and that communicating that complexity to people outside the EAL field, such as employers, was challenging.

*It wasn't revolutionary, but for me I would describe that document as a system trying, not perfect by any means, a flawed document but trying to describe language from very low proficiency to high in way that we can try to come to some common understanding; that we can use it to talk to people who are not applied linguists, for example; that we can talk to people in the workplace about language and so on. And hopefully, I'm not so convinced, we could use those levels to help transfer students into programs or into the workplace. [Language researcher, instructor]*

While most of the participants saw the intent of establishing a national framework as a worthy goal, a few of these participants discussed the problematic aspects of the revolutionary discourse. A few participants talked about the benchmarks as a “mystery” to many instructors given the complexity of using the 186-page document. A few of the participants talked about the homogenizing tone embedded in the document.

*It's very assimilationist, really, when you think about that. And again, I think that that diminishes professional autonomy. Like why do we all need to be speaking the same language. Is that even desirable are relevant questions that need to be asked. [Language researcher, instructor]*

These participants also described the document as a prescriptive approach to language teaching that diminished the autonomy of educators to make decisions based on the local context and specific needs of their individual students.

### **Speaking the Same Language?**

English proficiency for settlement, academic settings and employment are three of the main contexts in which the *CLB 2000* has been implemented. New immigrants to Canada often transition between these three contexts as they try to navigate their way into stable employment. The *CLB 2000* is meant to establish consistent assessment among these contexts and therefore enable new immigrants to transition smoothly between agencies and institutions. The participants' discussions, however, indicate that establishing a system in which everyone speaks the same language of assessment across institutions is extremely challenging. One participant described the implementation process as, “It's like turning an ocean liner on a dime in the middle of the ocean.” While most participants discussed the lack of consistency in assessment as problematic for new immigrants, their discussions indicate that some contexts for EAL teaching and assessment were more compatible theoretically and practically with the task-based benchmark framework than other contexts. For example, in English-for-Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts (colleges, universities), participants talked about the functional approach to language learning articulated in the document as inappropriate. Preparation for entrance to university requires learners to have mastery in understanding and synthesizing content information to a specific academic discipline. These participants explained that the functional approach to language learning, with its focus on the performance of tasks, made the document difficult to implement in academic settings.

Those working in vocational or employment programs had fewer difficulties in working with the *CLB 2000* document because these contexts lend themselves to task-based learning.

*From my perspective because we're in the area of work and occupation, of course likewise we need a refined way of being able to describe someone's skills, but I think the philosophy of having it more task based and more work oriented has allowed us to be more, it's a shift in a sense from a more grammar-based and traditional literature-based model that used to be used and so that shift in thinking and maybe in educational philosophy for us is more in alignment with what we do. [Language researcher, instructor]*

For these participants, the task-based approach enabled them to decipher what a learner could or could not do with language in a specific occupational context. Their work often involved determining which communication tasks learners would need to integrate into workplaces.

Participants teaching in settlement programs found the text appropriate for teaching the functional aspects of language for settlement (e.g. taking the bus, calling emergency services). For these same participants, however, teaching about social issues and preparing newcomers for employment was challenging. They talked about the CLB materials as “superficial” and presenting “Canada as having no problems,” which they believed did not prepare immigrants for the realities of Canadian life. In particular, a few of the participants talked about the problematic assumptions embedded in CLB materials, alluding to the stratified labour market that exists in Canada.

*There are some real big cultural problems. For example, one of the issues that I had when I was teaching level 3, one of the tasks they had to do was to write a letter to their boss to explain that they couldn't finish polishing the floor because the polisher had broken. Well, okay, it's task based and I guess it's related to real life because we know they're going to be in these low-paying jobs. Why couldn't my students do that? Because they didn't know what a polisher was because they had no background at all. Again, the tests are created from the benchmarks, but they're culturally really horrible.[Instructor]*

While speaking the language of task-based learning was possible in some settings, the array of contexts in which the document is expected to be used and the different purposes of language learning in each of those contexts contributes to the difficulties in establishing a “common language” for EAL teaching and assessment in Canada. As one participant explained, it is difficult for one document to be all things to all people.

### **Establishing a Portable EAL Credential**

In addition to establishing a “common language” for assessment, the second policy problem the CLB framework is meant to address is alleviating the lack of a “portable” EAL credential within Canada. The intent is that with a portable credential, immigrants could avoid re-testing and transition more easily among institutions. While several of the participants talked about the system currently being “fragmented” and “ad hoc,” the extent to which implementation was facilitated in some contexts and not in others partially depended the amount of institutional support language researchers and instructors received and the provincial context in which they worked. In Canada, responsibility for education lies with the ten provincial and three territorial governments. Matters of immigration, however, are a shared responsibility between the federal

government of Canada and the individual provinces (Section 95 of the *Constitution Act*, 1867). The *CLB 2000* was initiated by the federal ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). Even though the CLB is a federal initiative, the participants' discussions illuminate the central role provincial governments play in the coordination of implementing the benchmarks. Some of the key factors included the distribution of funding and support for teacher education.

For the study, I interviewed participants from two provinces having different approaches to CLB implementation. In province A, several of the participants described the funding as fragmented and commented that a fiercely competitive funding structure resulted in an inequitable distribution of resources to agencies. A few participants commented that the competitive structure hindered institutions from collaborating with one another and therefore made establishing a consistent system of assessment using the CLB across institutions in the province difficult. Another factor contributing to inconsistent implementation was the lack of coordination in provincial-wide training for instructors on using the CLB framework. While some individual institutions had a coordinated approach to educating instructors on the CLB, the resources available to instructors seemed to vary greatly across the province.

In Province B, however, all the participants talked about factors that facilitated coherency in implementation and enabled immigrants to transition between educational and employment contexts. They discussed the provincial government's commitment to pooling federal and provincial funds so that there can be a provincially coordinated implementation of programs. A few of them discussed the mandatory teacher education on using the CLB framework for all EAL instructors in the province as a factor that contributed to coordinating implementation.

*It's been thoroughly implemented in Province B. It really has, so everything is CLB related. All interactions come back to so what benchmark are we working in. I mean the language of the benchmarks is very prevalent. [Language researcher, instructor]*

Two other factors that seem to contribute to establishing consistency are provincially supported assessment centres and an administrative department within the provincial government focused specifically on addressing issues related to language and settlement. Even though some consistency seems to be achievable in Province B, a few of the participants expressed that there were still challenges in assisting instructors to understand and work within a benchmark system.

While a portable credential was seen to be a desirable goal for most participants, and perhaps achievable at the provincial level, several participants talked about establishing nationwide consistency as extremely complex.

*I do think that the idea behind it was good because newcomers often don't settle where they land, right. So the concept of if you land in Regina and you get benchmarked here and then you move to Edmonton, you can take that piece of paper with you and not have to get re-tested. I think that that concept is really good. It has a lot of promise. Is it working? No. . . . what we're finding is that there's huge resistance from teachers and some of the resistance comes from the fact that students from Province B are coming into Province A and they come with these beautiful portfolio packages and they're apparently at a CLB 5 and then they're being put into CLB 5 level classes and teachers actually realize that they're a CLB level 3. So, I think that the CLBs are a major frustration for newcomers. [Government administrator]*

## Discussion

In the now classic essay on policy texts and discourses, Ball (1993, 2006) explained that policy texts enter existing power relations and “should be expected to display ad hocery and messiness” given the localised nature of implementation (p. 46). The experiences of the research participants in this study provide some insight into the power relations and messiness of EAL education policy in Canada. The conflicting views on the purposes and effectiveness of the CLB initiative seem to suggest that language is a local social practice happening in a specific context (Pennycook, 2010). In addition, the complex web of agreements negotiated between the federal government and the individual provinces influences how EAL instructors and researchers carry out the work of language teaching and assessment. Therefore, attempts to standardize the assessment of language practices across institutional contexts (e.g. settlement agencies, post-secondary, employment) and across the nation is problematic. For some of the participants, the CLB initiative provides a unifying vision and lends the field credibility to groups such as employers and professional licensing bodies. For others, however, the CLB 2000 is a work-in-progress that is instigating conversations and raising questions on the role of language assessment in Canada. While they saw the goal of unity as “beautiful,” they struggled with communicating the realities and expectations of language learning to employers. Meanwhile, for some participants the initiative contributes to an assimilationist discourse within the existing stratified labour market in Canada. The conflicting standpoints presented here give pause for thought on the ways language policy “contributes to the gatekeeping function of social institutions” (Ricento, 2006) and raises questions as to whether a unified approach to language assessment is possible or even desirable within the Canadian federal system.

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