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*Canadian Language Benchmarks and Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens*: Supporting the second language needs of adult immigrants — an evolving role

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**Abstract**

*This article outlines the history and evolution of the Canadian Language Benchmarks/Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens in the context of their expanding roles as key components of Canada's second language policy for immigrants as Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks prepare to release extensively revised and validated versions of the standards following a Pan-Canadian National Consultation.*

*Key words: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, second language training, immigration, adult literacy*

**Résumé**

*L'article présente l'histoire et l'évolution des Canadian Language Benchmarks/Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens, éléments clés de la politique en matière de langues secondes pour immigrants au Canada, dans le contexte de la révision de ces instruments qui est menée actuellement par Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada et par le Centre des Niveaux de Compétence Linguistique Canadiens suite au processus de consultation nationale.*

*Mots-clés: Centre des niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens, formation en langues secondes, immigration, littératie des adultes*

**Introduction**

The *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (CLB) and *Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens* (NCLC) are national language standards or frameworks that describe the English or French language proficiency of adult immigrants. Their development, by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB),

was funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to enable new immigrants to demonstrate and understand their language proficiency and to help them access the services, supports and jobs that they need to settle in Canada (CCLB, 2010). The standards continue to play a valuable role as immigrants become a key driver in the Canadian economy and an important component in Canada's population growth (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2011).

This article presents information on the following: background, the need for standards, changing policy in language training delivery, the evolution of the standards, a recent history of immigration issues and the second language needs of adult immigrants, the role of benchmarks in supporting the needs of immigrants in a widening range of contexts, such as higher level language training, literacy, assessment, employment and a bilingual country, and finally what may need to happen next.

### ***Background to the CLB/NCLC***

Adult immigrants to Canada have cultural, occupational and educational experiences that represent who they are and what they know. For most immigrants, knowledge of one of the official languages of Canada (English or French) is vital to facilitate integration in their adopted country. In 2007, as part of their immigration process, landed immigrants were asked to identify their ability to speak one of the official languages. 58% identified ability in either English or French, 4.4% identified ability in both languages and another 37.5% indicated ability in neither (Government of Canada, 2009). While, at first glance, it would appear that the majority of newcomers to Canada speak some of one of the official languages, what is not known from these statistics is the actual level of proficiency in English or French. Nor do these statistics indicate competency in speaking, listening, reading or writing.

### ***The need for language standards***

Prior to 1986, language training was offered in Canada to some new immigrants. It was available mainly to the identified head of a family, who was eligible to receive up to six months of paid language training and a training allowance to provide some financial support. This Citizenship and Immigration program was challenged because it was felt that the criteria for 'head of family' discriminated against women. As a result, CIC created a new program in 1986 called the *Settlement Language Program*. It did not provide training allowances, but did provide free childminding and transportation allowances to learners (Anna Ananadias, 2007). The program lacked consistency: most service deliverers provided their own systems for describing language proficiency levels and for the assessment of learners in their programs; this made it diffi-

cult for the government to evaluate the effectiveness of the language training being offered on a national level.

### ***A change in policy***

In 1990, at the Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL), English as a Second Language (ESL) Learner Conference, a recommendation was made to the government to establish a national standard for language learners (Pawlikowska-Smith, 1996). An intensive period of pan-Canadian consultation with practitioners in the field followed. A National Working Group, established by CIC and led by Grazyna Pawlikowska-Smith, then developed a draft or working version of the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*, which was released in 1996. A revised version, reflecting changes to the working draft, was published in 2000 (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000). A French version, *Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens*, followed (Centre des Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens, 2006). The NCLC was developed with a similar intent to CLB to support immigrants but evolved from a government initiative to ensure that services were being provided in Canada's other official language, French. The NCLC was first established in 2002, primarily as a translated version of the CLB. A more robust version was developed in 2006. The NCLC is younger; has a smaller base of stakeholders located primarily in French minority communities; exists in an environment in which immigrants are primarily choosing to learn English as a second language; and has a unique relationship to the work being done by the Quebec government (CCLB, 2010, p. 5).

The CLB/NCLC national standards or frameworks consist of descriptors at twelve levels or benchmarks that describe language proficiency from beginner to very fluent or advanced. They are task-based and describe communicative competence.

The first significant change to the language training programs provided to immigrants was in 1992, when the *Language Instruction for Newcomers* (LINC) program was created by CIC. This introduced a wider opportunity for immigrants to access language training in a variety of institutions and also centralized the language assessment and placement process done through a number of newly created LINC assessment centres (Anna Ananadias, 2007).

The 1996 draft CLB working document provided a common reference point, for the first time, for federal government language training programs across Canada, recognizing distinct proficiency descriptors for oral communication, reading and writing.

Federal integration programming has continued to evolve under federal-provincial agreements as several provinces administer language training programs for newcomers, for example, in British Columbia, the *English Language Services for Adults* (ELSA) program or in Manitoba, where it is referred to as



**FIGURE 1**

Range of CLB/NCLC applications in Canada. Used with permission of CCLB.

the *English as an Additional Language Program* (EALP).

### ***Evolution of the standards***

The CLB and the NCLC now exist in a complex self-organizing system with many stakeholders who depend on the Benchmarks as the foundation for their work with existing and prospective immigrants. The different contexts within which the CLB and the NCLC are applied include citizenship, language training, employment and academia. Figure 1 (CCLB, 2010, p. 2) clearly demonstrates the range and influence of CLB/NCLC in Canada.

Among the reasons why CLB/NCLC have been chosen as the backbone for language training and assessment of adult second language learners is that they provide a fair, valid and reliable means of determining language proficiency. In addition, they define proficiency in every-day common situations and behaviours. They also provide an easy way to identify clearly what a person can do in terms of language performance.

As frameworks that are now recognized national standards, it should be remembered that the CLB/NCLC are not curricula, tests, nor syllabus but are references on which all of these resources can be based.

### ***Recent history of immigration issues and second language needs of adult immigrants***

Canada has a long tradition of welcoming newcomers, and in recent years immigration has continued to grow. In the 1990s the Canadian population increased by 1.4 million people with 70% of the growth resulting from immigration (CLBC, 2004, p. 12). Throughout the first decade of the 21st century Canada has welcomed approximately 250,000 new immigrants annually (CIC, 2011, graph 1).

Canadian immigration policy, in the last decade, reflects immigrant selection of more highly educated professionals and skilled workers than in previous decades. Yet while this group is more highly trained, there are continuing problems with employability and economic success. The 2006 labour market data for immigrants coming to Ontario shows that, while the unemployment rate for the Canadian-born population is 4.4%, the rate for very recent immigrants is 11% (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 15).

Statistics Canada has listed three barriers identified by immigrants that prevented their finding work:

1. Work experience
2. Transferability of foreign credentials
3. Lack of official language skills

In a similar survey, when asked what prevented them from hiring immigrants, employers cited the same three barriers, but two-thirds of them ranked lack of official language skills in first place (CLBC, 2003, p. 17). The study, *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Statistics Canada, 2005a), showed an interesting lack of correlation between educational credentials and the ability to perform well in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving tasks. Education credentials, it states, do not necessarily translate into functional levels of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in the official language(s) of the host country. It concludes that “knowledge of the official language (as measured by the mother tongue of the immigrant) is favourably associated with literacy performance” (p. 205).

### ***The role of CLB/NCLC in supporting the second language needs of adult immigrants in a range of contexts***

The CLB and the NCLC were established primarily with a settlement focus. While the Benchmarks are grounded in an understanding that they have relevance in the community, school and work environments, changes in the labour market and immigration policy have resulted in an exponential demand for their application in employment and academic contexts. Canada's immigration policy has increasingly been oriented toward bringing in professionals to respond to labour demands. The focus of the Provincial Nominee Program to expedite the entry of prospective immigrants with the skills required for specific types of employment has resulted in immigrants going to each province in the country. Some provinces that are just now coming to terms with how to serve the immigrant population are looking to apply the CLB and the NCLC in their context (CCLB, 2010, p. 5).

Addressing the needs of, and supporting ESL, FSL and literacy practitioners is a key activity for the CCLB, which is the centre of expertise in support of the national standards. It provides a wide variety of government-funded and fee-for-service training across Canada for ESL and LINC/ELSA/EAP programs, LINC language assessors, community colleges, school boards and other groups such as human resources professionals or employment counsellors who work with immigrants. In some cases there are CLB/NCLC resource manuals which accompany the training, while others are workshops or conference sessions on key areas to help practitioners with improving their abilities to teach or assess CLB/NCLC-based assessment. Increasingly, CCLB has seen a growth and demand for using the CLB/NCLC standards to define language levels appropriate for various occupations and professions as well as different types of programming.

#### **Higher level language training**

The language training sector itself is undergoing significant change as it seeks to fulfil a role in bridging language proficiency training and assessment with academic training, certification and licensing and employment (CCLB, 2010, p. 5).

Bridging programs or Enhanced Language Training (ELT) programs are higher level language training programs that usually are at the CLB 5-10 level. They usually include pre-employment, occupations-specific language training, mentoring and often offer opportunities for job-shadowing or co-op placements.

## Literacy

The CLB Literacy Benchmarks, developed by the province of Manitoba and funded by the government of Manitoba (Johansson, 2000) describe how second language learners with no literacy or minimal literacy/numeracy skills perform in relation to reading, writing and numeracy. The literacy benchmarks describe literacy language competencies up to the equivalent of CLB 5, at which level the learner should be capable of functioning in a wider variety of contexts.

The CLB Literacy Benchmarks provide information on a variety of learner needs in terms of literacy including ESL/FSL learners who have (Johansson, 2000, p. ii):

- a language background with no written code
- minimal education in their home countries
- up to 8 years of sporadic education, and who may be able to recognize that a written word has meaning but who do not have the skills to read new words
- a first language with a non-Roman alphabet, but who have developed reading and study skills which help transfer to second language learning

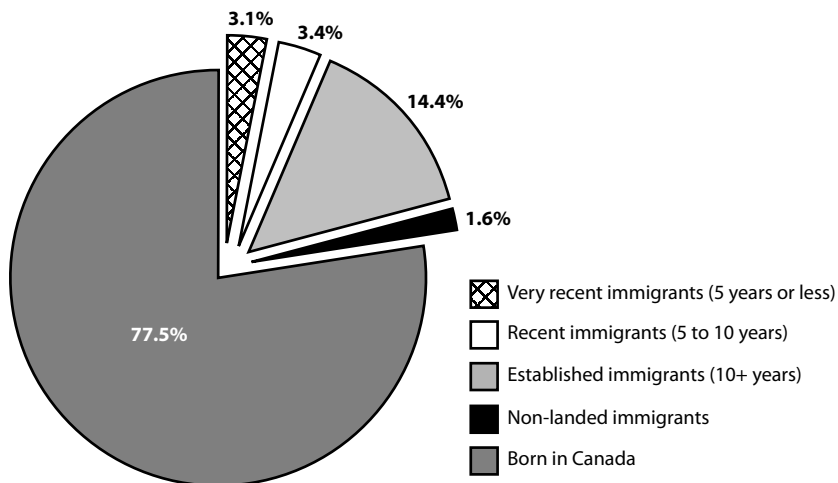
The Literacy Benchmarks provided a framework on which to develop a series of English and French literacy assessments for ESL/FSL programs. This provided options for teachers and tutors for assessing second language literacy skills and helped meet the demand from the field by ESL/FSL/literacy practitioners for tools to use with immigrant clients (CCLB, 2005, p. viii).

It is often difficult to find data on second language literacy programs for adults as two things happen in literacy programs in Canada (OLC, 2010, p. 67):

1. Second language literacy learners may be eligible for some ESL/FSL literacy programming depending on the province and the community where they live, keeping in mind that in smaller communities ESL/FSL services are often more limited than in larger municipal areas, and
2. Second language literacy learners in some communities where there are limited or no ESL/FSL literacy programs are involved in literacy programs aimed at first language learners. It is estimated that there are 1.5 million immigrants in Ontario alone who have some literacy challenges.

## Assessment

CCLB has established and maintains standards to govern a comprehensive national CLB assessment system based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) for use in adult ESL, education, training and labour market. CCLB also



**FIGURE 2**

Composition of the Canadian labour force, 2010. Source: CIC, 2011, graph 3

provides a system of recognition for assessors and assessment service providers throughout Canada.

CCLB has also developed tools for formative and summative assessment, as well as an online self-assessment in French (CET/CCLB, 2008).

### Employment

Immigrants make up almost one quarter of the Canadian workforce (Figure 2). Recognizing the importance of the four language skills in the workplace or in an employment context has also been a key focus point for CCLB. In the last three years, there has been an increasing demand for CCLB services in the area of identifying national language demands for an occupation or profession (often done by *benchmarking* an occupation in a variety of contexts and regions) or by the development of Occupational Language Analyses (OLAs).<sup>1</sup> To date over forty OLAs have been developed, based on National Occupational Classification (NOC) codes and referenced to Essential Skills Profiles (ESP) and the National Occupational Standards (NOS) of a sector; many are available at the CCLB website ([www.itsessential.ca](http://www.itsessential.ca)). All of this has resulted in higher stakes applications of the CLB/NCLC standards where the implications of not meeting an identified CLB/NCLC level are more critical than for placement into a LINC/ELSA/EAP program. Much of the project work done by CCLB in the area

<sup>1</sup>These are also developed in French and are known as *Analyse linguistique des professions*, or ALPs.



of occupational use of CLB/NCLC has been possible with support from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), while other projects have relied on provinces or other federal organizations for funding.

To meet the needs of various stakeholders who work with immigrants in pre-employment, counselling or hiring/retention of immigrants, CCLB has developed several tools and resources for counsellors, teachers in bridging/ELT programs, human resources sector councils and employers. These include a PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) Checklist (RL/CCLB, 2007), a Workplace Language Assessment (WLA), a WLA Pre-Screening Tool for counsellors and several national benchmarking and OLA initiatives for nursing, Red Seal trades and various occupations in tourism, the grocery sector and child care.

Since 2003, CCLB has also been involved in research aligning the CLB/NCLC with a set of Essential Skills developed by HRSDC. Essential Skills are often used to define work-related skills in HRSDC's Essential Skills Profiles, a series of job skills used nationally in an occupation. They include some aspects of communication based on native speakers of English or French; however, this is complemented when paired with the defined language tasks and skills of the CLB/NCLC framework. Building on this premise, CCLB has been innovative in developing several resources based on CLB/NCLC and Essential Skills to support the work of ESL/FSL teachers, job analysts (ESP and NOS developers) and people who offer training but who are not language teachers (e.g. corporate trainers). Much of this work is available in both official languages.

### ***CLB/NCLC in a bilingual country***

When looking at adult language training policy and programming in Canada, there is a difference between the number of ESL programs in relation to FSL programs; the latter are offered very sparsely in French minority contexts in Canada (i.e. in provinces outside of Quebec). While CCLB has attempted to provide and develop similar or parallel resources based on the French-language NCLC when possible, demand related to programming and needs of newcomers across Canada often drives CLB/NCLC resource development. Part of this is inherent in the fact that the majority of immigrants wish to participate in ESL programs to learn or improve their proficiency. It might be assumed that they feel this will help them find work and integrate into Canadian society quicker than if they participated in FSL programs. As a result, there is a larger number of ESL programs (both government funded and private) than FSL programs for immigrants. A second factor is that many of the non-publicly funded FSL programs for adults available outside of Quebec are for people in Canada who wish to improve their French (e.g. to meet requirements of some jobs or for other purposes, not necessarily for settling in a new country). Thirdly, the needs

of adult Francophone immigrants in FSL programs are different than those in ESL programs as they struggle to learn a second language in a minority context where there are often insufficient learners to form a homogeneous class (CCLB, 2010, p. 38). All of these factors affect the demand by FSL programs for using or wanting to integrate NCLC into their existing programs.

### ***The future role of CLB and NCLC***

In 2008 CIC demonstrated a long-term commitment to the national standards by funding an extensive National Consultation and revision process. Over 1,300 stakeholders provided input. Both standards have undergone comprehensive revision and validation to enable them to be used for high-stakes purposes in a variety of contexts.

### ***Conclusion***

The *Canadian Language Benchmarks/Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens* continue to evolve to support the successful integration of immigrants into Canadian communities. Their original basis in settlement has widened to encompass workplace, academic and citizenship contexts; they are frequently referenced by CIC in settlement policy. Lessons learned over the last decade have led to an intensive review process resulting in more robust standards. The revised documents have been comprehensively validated for a multitude of purposes, but some work remains to be done, including the development of more tools and resources to support the expansion of CLB/NCLC into different and higher stakes contexts and research into CLB/NCLC and their relationship with other standards and tools nationally and internationally.

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