
Engaging the hidden curriculum within the Canadian Language Benchmarks (2000 and 2012) as a complicated conversation

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Abstract

This article examines the Canadian Language Benchmarks (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000; Hajer and Kaskens 2012) within the context of national second language programming. I argue that students and teachers can view such documents as hidden curriculum with which they can engage as complicated conversations (Pinar, 2012).

Key words: education, second language education, language policy, language assessment

Résumé

Cet article examine les niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000; Hajer et Kaskens 2012) dans le contexte des programmes nationaux d'apprentissage d'une langue seconde. Je soutiens que les étudiants et les enseignants peuvent considérer de tels outils comme un programme caché grâce auquel ils peuvent s'engager dans des conversations compliquées (Pinar, 2012).

Mots-clés : éducation, enseignement de langue seconde, politique linguistique, évaluation linguistique

Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000

The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), as described by Pawlikowska-Smith (2000) and then revised by Hajer and Kaskens (2012), define and organise English language proficiency into 12 levels, from beginner to full fluency. As Norton Pierce and Stewart (1997) noted, the policy initiatives that gave rise to this document were framed around the need to develop a systematic and seamless set of English language training opportunities out of the myriad federal and provincial programs that existed previously.

The bulk of the content found in both the 2000 and 2012 English versions of the CLB was arranged for each level in a series of matrices that correspond to

the language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. As in the Common European Framework for Languages, each benchmark (or level) contains a general overview of the tasks to be performed upon completion of the level, the conditions under which this performance should take place, a more specific description of what a learner is expected to do, and examples and criteria that indicate that the task performance has been successful.

To put it simply, benchmarks are meant to provide general direction for the development of specific curricula. As I have argued elsewhere (Fleming, 1998), the distinctions as to what constitutes decision-making as regards benchmarks and curricula revolve around the degree of autonomy enjoyed by instructors and practitioners. As Howatt (1984) notes, most second language education (SLE) theorists and program administrators have historically regarded instructors as technical implementers of fully developed curricula with few formal responsibilities for curriculum writing. Some well-known examples of this tradition are *The Berlitz Method* (first taught ca. 1888), and Sweet's *Practical Study of Languages* (1899). As Howatt notes (p. 230), Palmer (1922) was the first major modern SLE theoretician to describe language instructors as having a formal role in curriculum implementation in the 1920s, counseling instructors to choose materials and teaching strategies appropriate to specific circumstances and objectives.

Markee's (1997, pp. 42–69) highly influential three-tier ESL curriculum innovation model attempted to formally outline ESL curriculum decision-making in terms of delegated responsibilities: long-term *strategic planning* has the largest scope and is the purview of the project director or change agent. Medium-term *tactical planning* consisted of syllabus design decisions made through negotiation between the teachers and the project director. Short-term *operational planning* was syllabus implementation decisions made through negotiations between teachers and students.

In general education, Paris (1993) used *agency* when characterizing relationships of teachers to curriculum that are marked by “personal initiative and intellectual engagement” (p. 16). As she describes it, “teacher agency in curriculum matters involves initiating the creation or critique of curriculum, an awareness of alternatives to established curriculum practices, the autonomy to make informed choices, an investment of self, and on-going interaction with others” (p. 16). Similar sentiments have been echoed within second language education by Auerbach (1997), who used the term *participatory curriculum development*, by Nunan (1992) (*collaborative language curricula*) and by Wrigley and Guth (1992) (*negotiated curriculum*).

Breen (1987), in fact, argues that with the advent of the communicative approach, teacher agency in curriculum design has become a hallmark of the field. This is because the goal of second language pedagogy is now centered on

the development of meaningful communicative competence in specific social situations. At face value, the CLB is thus a set of benchmarks that instructors use to inform their curriculum work.

However, given the fact that the CLB is quite clearly task-based, some scholars and practitioners have referred to it as a *de facto* curriculum document (e.g. DeVoretz, Hinte and Werner, 2002; Fox and Courchène, 2005; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006), despite contrary claims made within the first version of the CLB. The empirical content of pedagogical tasks are of key importance here, particularly when they are represented as exemplars in documents used to inform curriculum development (Fleming and Walter, 2004). Practitioners inevitably use the CLB as a set of guidelines to inform pedagogical choices, particularly in view of a lack of nationally prescribed curricula (Shohamy, 2007). In effect, given the official nature of the CLB, the document privileges content found within the sample tasks they provide. To be meaningful in terms of assessment or pedagogy, tasks have to have clear reference to non-linguistic content (Nunan, 2004; Long and Crookes, 1992; Skehan, 2002). Thus, the CLB specifies what should be given priority in terms of English language training and, in view of its official character, represents itself as an instrument of national language policy.

In the entire Pawlikowska-Smith document (2000), there were only three references to tasks or competencies broadly associated with citizenship. These were to “understand rights and responsibilities of client, customer, patient and student” (p. 95); “indicate knowledge of laws, rights, etc.” (p. 116); and “write a letter to express an opinion as a citizen” (p. 176). Unfortunately, these competencies are not elaborated upon further, and so remain rather vague and incomplete. Most revealing is what was missing, especially in terms of how language is connected to exercising citizenship. For example, the word *vote* did not appear in the document.

In addition, through admission and omission the document represented good citizens as obedient workers. Issues related to trade unions and collective agreements were given next to no attention in the document. References to labour rights, such as filing grievances or recognizing and reporting dangerous working conditions, were non-existent. Employment standards legislation is covered in a single vague reference to knowledge about the existence of minimum wage legislation. The 2000 CLB fails to mention other aspects of standards of employment legislation, workers’ compensation, employment insurance, or safety in the workplace. However, a lot of space in the document was devoted to giving polite and respectful feedback to one’s employer, participating in job performance reviews and meetings about trivial issues such as lunchroom cleanliness.

While the original document did represent language learners as having

rights and responsibilities, these were almost exclusively related to being good consumers. Learners were to understand their rights and responsibilities as a “client, customer, patient and student” (p. 95), but not as a worker, family member, participant in community activities, or advocate. Adult English language learners enrolled in programs informed by the CLB often complain about consistently having been denied overtime pay and access to benefits, being forced to work statutory holidays, or being fired without cause (Fleming, 2010). It was also disconcerting to note the limitations placed on the few references to citizenship and the manner in which they were often couched. Only one of the three instances noted above (writing a letter) provided a view of citizenship as active, albeit fairly limited, engagement. The other two examples I have noted above were decidedly individualistic, vague, passive and abstract. No content linked citizenship to collective action or group identity.

Significantly all three of the 2000 CLB competencies referring to citizenship occurred at the very highest benchmark levels, at which point students are writing research papers at universities. The document thus implied that opinions expressed in languages other than English had little value and that voting not informed by a high level of proficiency is an activity that warrants little engagement, a position that recalls the ways in which voting rights have been denied in other jurisdictions on the basis of low levels of education.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2012

The new version of the CLB (Hajer and Kaskens, 2012) is based on an extensive process designed to establish the validity and reliability of descriptors included within the document. As noted in the document’s introduction, these revisions were made in consultation with selected experts in the field of language testing, who evaluated the document in light of technical guidelines provided by the American Education Research Association and the Council of Europe. Unlike the 2000 version, the new version is forthright about claims that it is designed to be “a national standard for planning curricula for language instruction in a variety of contexts” (p. v).

Although the focus on consumer rights continues to dominate in the new version of the CLB, a few references to labour rights were added. Benchmark 5, for example, contains an exemplary task that requires an understanding of employment standards legislation (Hajer and Kaskens, 2012, p. 89). Within benchmark 7, there is reference to pedagogical tasks in which one “participate[s] in a union meeting to discuss workload, wages and working conditions” (p. 57). These are laudable, if somewhat scant, improvements.

However, citizenship rights remain undeveloped in the new version. Voting is mentioned only twice and in reference to passive language skills: once within an exemplar task in which a learner is expected to “listen to an all-

candidates' debate during an election campaign to analyse and evaluate arguments presented by each candidate and determine which candidate to vote for" (Hajer and Kaskens, 2012, p. 35), and a second task almost identical in content that appears on the same page. Both references are found in the passive listening framework at benchmark 12 (the highest in the document), the level at which one is writing graduate level assignments.

The hidden curriculum within the CLB

As Stern (1983) noted, the term *curriculum* can be defined in two ways. The first has a restricted sense, as pertaining to the topics covered in a particular course or program. The second is much broader, as pertaining to the overall functions of an educational institution or instrument. Johnson (1989) was among the first within our field to systematically elaborate the implications inherent within this broader use of the term to focus on "all the relevant decision-making processes of all the participants" (p. 1). Johnson compared and contrasted three approaches to participant roles in policy determination and implementation. In the first, the *specialist* approach, a hierarchical chain of command separates different participants who have different responsibilities for decision-making. Needs analysts determine syllabus goals, material writers make materials, and teachers implement teaching acts. There is little communication between the levels of this hierarchy that is not top-down. In contrast, Johnson's second approach, the *learner-centered*, involves all the participants, particularly students and teachers, at every stage of decision-making. The *integrated approach*, Johnson's third, allows all the participants to have an awareness of all the curriculum decisions being made, but delegates responsibility to those who are best positioned and qualified to make decisions in particular areas. Communication and input goes both up and down the levels. The *integrated approach* sounds ideal. In contrast to the *learner-centred approach*, it is realistic in terms of the amount of time allotted to participants in the curriculum development process while being more egalitarian than the *specialist approach* to decision-making.

However, as Richards (2001) notes, there are numerous concrete restraints on classroom teachers that restrict their freedom to make decisions along these abstract lines. These restrictions consist of complex sets of environmental factors that relate to program goals, the concrete restraints related to the resources that are available and the particular learners and teachers involved. The most important of these concrete restraints is that of time. Most teachers have little time or resources to worry about things that occur outside of the immediacies within their classroom doors. As Nation and Macalister (2010) point out, most actual curricular processes do not follow sequences in which one step is fully treated before the next one in line is covered, despite the recommenda-

tions made by many curriculum theorists in the field (e.g. Stern, 1983; Breen, 1987; Murdock, 1989; Markee, 1997; Graves, 2000; Richards, 2001). So, for example, even though practitioners have been encouraged to use needs assessments as a starting point in determining curriculum components since at least the time of Nunan's (1988) seminal work on the *learner-centered curriculum*, very few teachers working in the marginalised field of settlement second language teaching actually conduct them in any kind of systematic manner for the reasons noted above by Haque and Cray (2007).

As a result, teachers in second language education often adopt a position at the bottom of the curriculum development hierarchy. Typically, this means that teachers exercise control over the "how" of teaching but not the "what". Teachers in a study in South Korea conducted by Parent (2011), for example, complained that the nationally proscribed English textbook (which doubled as the curriculum) was too restrictive. Even though it provided leeway in terms of procedures, they argued that, "part of teaching is deciding what is to be taught, not simply how" (p. 93).

What is the *hidden curriculum* that is represented within the CLB and how is it meant to be actualized in classroom instruction? As I have indicated above, the policy that informs the document makes it clear that the CLB is designed for more than simply framing English language instruction. The CLB is designed additionally to acculturate second language immigrants into Canadian citizenship. However, as pointed out above, the way that citizenship is defined in the document is very different from how it is commonly conceptualized by learners. Instead of the active participatory conceptions expressed to Fleming (2007) by a sample of ESL learners, the CLB represents second language immigrants as infantilized and passive, and unable to exercise the rights of citizenship until they have mastered a highly advanced level of English language proficiency. For the majority of ESL learners, who will not have the opportunity to master English at the level of writing graduate papers, this official document effectively denies them active citizenship. They must be content with a second-class citizenship that entails the passive acceptance of their social and economic conditions. Maybe their children will move up a few rungs in this hierarchy, but not them.

Talking back to the curriculum

Although the CLB does not claim to be a curriculum, it is meant to strongly inform curriculum development. Teachers start with the CLB. This is made clear in a key implementation document officially associated with the CLB (Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis and Pidlaski, 2001) that provides explicit guidelines and examples of how teachers are to implement the document into their program. These guidelines recommend that teachers first determine how the CLB fits

into the purpose and goals of their program and then identify and prioritize the possible initiatives that would correspond to appropriate CLB learner-centered competencies.

This orientation towards curriculum implementation reflects a *progressivist value system* Clark (1987), in which teachers are expected to design their own school-based curricula. In Clark's framework, this is in contrast to *classical humanism*, in which teachers are expected to implement the curricula recommended by administrators, and to *reconstructionism*, in which teachers are expected to implement curricula designed by experts. By adopting a progressivist orientation, the CLB and its associated documents *have the appearance* of avoiding the perpetuation of curriculum-planning hierarchies that maintain inequalities between ESL theorists, curriculum experts and practitioners (Penycook, 1989).

However, as Giroux (1981) points out, one must go beyond the rhetoric and platitudes commonly found in pedagogical processes and examine concrete particularities if one is to see clearly how they operate as "agents of legitimation, organized to produce and reproduce dominant categories, values, and social relationships necessary" (p. 72). In other words, we must go beyond appearance and examine what is hidden.

Through this examination of the concrete aspects of the CLB, I argue that a hidden curriculum is at work in this instance that realizes and reinforces a hierarchical paradigm of citizenship. It does this by privileging particular aspects of curricular content that infantilizes second language learners and by utilizing a hierarchized orientation towards the roles that teachers play in curriculum development. To reiterate, there are very few references to citizenship within the entire document and those that do exist link high levels of English language proficiency to trivialised forms of citizenship.

In terms of concrete practice, I think that the challenge is to develop curriculum processes that allow students and practitioners to "talk back" to language policy implementation documents such as the CLB. It is not enough to simply "start with" or "modify" a document such as this for one's own classroom. Students and practitioners should be able to expand on Clark's (1987) notion of a *progressivist* orientation towards curriculum so that they are helping design curriculum guidelines (in whatever guise they take, even as assessment instruments). In this way, the ground could be clear to develop curriculum content that contains equitable citizenship content and avoids the infantilism so evident in documents such as the CLB.

Viewing curriculum as a complicated conversation

Transmission linear process models based on preconceived pedagogical objectives dominate the curriculum models currently in second language education

(Arnfast and Jørgenson, 2010; Aguilar, 2011; Gunderson, Odo and D'silva, 2011). In these models, content is selected through the consideration of a set of factors, such as learner needs, programming goals or predetermined linguistic elements. The content is formulated into sets of summative objectives. These processes are linear in the sense that the curriculum content is not modified once determined. These processes are transmission-based in the sense that course content, once determined, is transmitted in one direction from the teacher to the learner. The task of the teacher, in these models, is to impart the predetermined course objectives as definitive versions of knowledge.

This type of process can be seen concretely in the model provided in a recent overview of curriculum design by Nation and Mcalister (2010), two highly cited seminal theorists in the field. In their text, they outline sets of inner and outer circles that provide a model for language curriculum design. The outer circles consist of a range of factors (principles of instruction, teaching environment, and learner needs) that affect the overall course production. The sets of inner circles (course content and sequencing, format and presentation of materials, monitoring and assessment of student progress) are centered on the overall goals of the course in question. In this model, course content consists primarily of linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, language functions, discourse, and learning skills and strategies.

Whether linguistic elements can truly be represented in the language classroom as sets of predetermined and definitive course objectives ("facts") is a matter for another debate elsewhere. What is of importance here is the way non-linguistic course content is incorporated into this model. Nation and McAlister (2010) describe non-linguistic content as "ideas that help the learners of language and are useful to the learners" (p. 78). These ideas can take the form of imaginary happenings, an academic subject, "survival" topics such as shopping, going to the doctor or getting a driver's license, interesting facts, or a set of subcategories pertaining to culture.

It is the process of determining cultural content within this model that interests me particularly. Nation and McAlister (2010) argue that a curriculum should move learners "from explicit knowledge of inter-related aspects of native and non-native cultures, to markedly different conceptualizations between the cultures, to understanding the culture from an insider's view and gaining a distanced view of one's own culture" (p. 78). In other words, course content moves in a linear fashion that first explicitly contrasts static versions of the first and target cultures and then acculturates learners into that target culture, turning them away from their first culture. Nothing in this model suggests the possibility of equitable or dual cultures or the notion of a fluid hybridity between or within various cultures. The implied goal in this model is to transmit the target (i.e. socially dominant) culture as a set of pedagogical objectives.

This linear and transmission model is the way, in fact, that the citizenship content operates within the CLB. As mentioned above, the CLB privileges rights and responsibilities that pertain almost exclusively to being good consumers and not to being workers, family members, participants in community activities, or advocates. These are explicitly stated as objectives pertaining to the pedagogical tasks contained throughout the document. Thus, the CLB, through admission and omission, implicitly defines citizenship in a particular way and transmits this definition through privileged content to the learner. The teacher is admonished to develop specific learning objectives that frame the classroom activities and content. Again, as mentioned above, this implicit definition of citizenship was in great contrast to the earlier conception of citizenship described by learners (Fleming, 2007).

Instead of the dominant linear transmission model that is expressed as pedagogical objectives, I advocate that TESOL practitioners explore viewing language curricula as *complicated conversations* (Pinar, 2012). Based on the notion that education is centered on trans-disciplinary conversations (Oakeshott, 1959) that are animated (Bruner, 1966) and within the contexts of action and reflection (Aoki, 2005), Pinar argues that curriculum is not a set of narrow pedagogical tasks and objectives, but lived experience. As he puts it, “expressing one’s subjectivity . . . is how one links the lived curriculum with the planned one” (2012, p. xv). In such a conception, curricula are ongoing co-constructions between teachers and students that are always becoming. Individual curriculum documents are never fully realized, but are continually in transition.

Moreover, this “conversation between teachers and students [is] over the past and its meaning [is] for the present as well as what both portend for the future” (Pinar, 2012, p. 2). In other words, curriculum construction takes into account previous knowledge but dialogically examines it from the current and future perspectives. In terms of my discussion about citizenship, this would mean that classroom activities take into account received interpretations of what it means to be a citizen, but examines these interpretations of citizenship from the viewpoint of the concrete present realities and the imagined future of those engaged in the conversation. It is this “conversation with others that portends the social construction of the public sphere” (p. 47) because this form of subjective engagement combats passivity and political submissiveness. The key is “self-knowledge and collective witnessing [which] reconceptualizes the curriculum from course objectives to complicated conversation” (p. 47). In short, the trick is to convert the word *curriculum* from a noun into a verb (*currere*).

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