Implementation of the Canadian Language Benchmarks in Manitoba: 1996 to the present

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ABSTRACT
At the 1996 national TESL Canada Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Canadian Government launched the Canadian Language Benchmarks: English as a second language for adults: A working document as its national language proficiency standards. In 2000, following a comprehensive review, the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) were revised and released as the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: English as a second language for adults (Pawlikowska-Smith 2000). The development of the CLB took a number of years and involved extensive consultation across the country and abroad. The approach taken in the Australian Certificates in Spoken and Written English (NSW AMES 1992) was particularly informative in the CLB development, and there are some significant similarities between the CLB and its Australian counterpart. The CLB describes language functionally through 12 levels of proficiency organised into three stages. It is learner-centred and competency-based, stresses community, academic and work contexts, and assessment is intended to be task-based. This article describes the Manitoba immigration context, the adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) programming context, the approach taken in implementing the CLB in Manitoba since 1996 and future directions.

The Manitoba context
Manitoba is often referred to as the keystone province because of its shape and location in the centre of Canada. Although the province has a large landmass, only 3.6% of Canada’s population resides there, mainly clustered along its southern border. Its capital is Winnipeg, a city of about 700 000, with several other much smaller cities and towns dotting the landscape. Manitoba is a major transportation hub and a prairie province, with an economy based principally on manufacturing, mining, agriculture and forestry.

Like Australia, Canada is a country of First Nations people and immigrants, and Manitoba has always had a strong commitment to receiving
new immigrants from around the world. However, in the 1990s, at the same time as it needed to respond to specific economic demands, Manitoba began to experience a declining population and an immigration rate below its proportional share. In response, Manitoba negotiated a historic Canada–Manitoba Immigration Agreement with the federal government in 1996. By signing a Sewing Machine Operators Project to bring in much-needed workers for the Manitoba garment industry, Manitoba became the first province to use the Provincial/Territorial Nominee Immigration Category to address labour market shortages. The project was very successful and led to the signing of the Provincial Nominee Program Addendum in 1998, which enabled the province to recruit immigrants to fill specific niches in other business and industries throughout Manitoba. As a result, Manitoba began to experience an immediate and significant increase in immigration. In 2006 Manitoba received 10 051 immigrants, 4.0% of Canada’s total immigration intake and greater than the province’s proportional share of 3.6%. This was more than a threefold increase over 1998, when 3014 immigrants arrived, and a 24% increase over the 2005 intake of 8097 immigrants. Manitoba has now set a new target to increase immigration to 20 000 arrivals annually over the next ten years.

Manitoba’s adult EAL learners are diverse. Over 50% of Manitoba’s immigrants arrive from Asian and Pacific regions, and new arrivals from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe now account for 92% of provincial immigration. Some have come to Canada as immigrants looking for economic opportunities, while others are refugees looking for safe harbour. In 2006 more than 70% of Manitoba’s immigrants over the age of 25 years, 3912 people, were highly educated and had a broad range of professional and trade skills.

**EAL programs for adults**

Manitoba has developed a continuum and variety of language-training options, mostly concentrated in the Winnipeg area, in response to the diverse needs of newly arrived immigrants and refugees. However, the introduction of the Provincial Nominee Program resulted in an increase in newcomers to rural communities and a surge of programs in regional areas.

In rural communities EAL instruction is often offered in conjunction with community literacy programs or in tutorials. In some communities, employers who have recruited large numbers of immigrants offer training related to workplace language and skills on site or in partnership with unions or community agencies. In addition to the immigrants coming from around the world, rural Manitoba has a large population of Kanadier,
traditional Mennonite Canadians who left Canada in the early 20th century for Mexico, Paraguay, Belize, Argentina and Bolivia looking for freedom from government interference in their schools and other aspects of their community and religious life. Many Kanadier have an inherited Canadian citizenship and, as it has become more difficult to support their families on farms in Latin and South America, they have returned to Canada in search of agricultural work. Many of those who have settled in Manitoba speak Low German and have only little formal, religion-based education. Consequently, in some regional communities there has been a need to develop English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy programming that is culturally appropriate.

Winnipeg, with the largest concentration of immigrants, has developed a coordinated system of full-time and part-time, day, evening and weekend EAL program options that are offered through schools, colleges, community agencies, workplaces and unions. When immigrants first arrive in Winnipeg, they are referred to the Entry Program. This is a four-week orientation and initial language-training program in which an appointment for a language assessment is made at the Winnipeg English Language Assessment and Referral Centre. Language proficiency is assessed using a standardised placement tool called the Canadian Language Benchmarks – Placement Test, which is based on the 2000 CLB. The assessment and referral process includes an interview to determine individual needs and goals. Based on the results, a referral is made to an appropriate language-training program. The following referrals are typical:

• Mothers with pre-schoolers who prefer part-time instruction are referred to community-based language training where students attend two hours per day for two days per week. This provision is available throughout the city, with instruction focusing on parenting and settlement issues. Onsite childminders and transportation are key supports in this program.

• Immigrants over the age of 55 years are referred to EAL for Seniors, a part-time language-training program where students attend two hours per day for two days per week. These programs are offered in a variety of seniors centres throughout the community and instruction focuses on settlement issues of concern to immigrant seniors. This program is offered in partnership with Age and Opportunity, a mainstream service agency for seniors, which creates a bridge to help immigrant seniors integrate into other activities and services offered by the agency.
• Newcomers with more than eight years of uninterrupted formal education, who require part-time instruction, are offered three hours per day for five days per week. This settlement-focused program is for students with employment or academic goals. It is Manitoba’s largest language-training program, with over 1100 students and a staff of over 40 and is offered through the Adult English as an Additional Language Centre of Winnipeg’s largest public school division.

• Working immigrants can be referred either to part-time evening programs, offered two to four hours per night for four evenings per week, or to a Saturday program.

• Newcomers with clear academic or employment goals are referred to full-time settlement-focused day programming offered through colleges. Full-time programs run five hours per day for five days per week. Generally these programs include Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and an emphasis on Essential Skills, which are nine skills that Human Resources Development Canada has determined to be necessary for all Canadian workers.

• Skilled workers and professionals anxious to take up their occupations may be referred to an English for Specific Purposes program if their CLB levels are sufficient for the courses in which they are interested. These courses are developed and offered in partnership with professional educational institutions, organisations and licensing bodies.

• Professional and business students who need to improve particular language skills are referred to a specific skills course, such as pronunciation, reading, test-taking, writing or listening.

• Newcomers with little or no formal education in their country of origin are referred to part-time EAL Literacy programs. There has been a significant demand for EAL Literacy programming over the years and Manitoba has developed extensive expertise in this specialised instruction. Consequently, a team of Manitoba EAL Literacy teachers was contracted to write the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for literacy learners (Johansson et al 2000), which is a companion document to the 2000 CLB.

In addition to these programs, Manitoba offers an extensive range of English at Work projects throughout the province. Employers of immigrants with English-language needs can apply for funding to support the provision of language instruction at the worksite. The Adult Language
Training (ALT) Branch English at Work coordinator monitors and supports each program, assisting companies with teacher selection and orientation and assisting teachers with planning and instructional issues. The employees are given one hour of paid time to attend the EAL class and give an hour of their own time. In addition, the employers provide space and bear the production costs associated with employees being away from the job. Instructional goals are based on needs identified through an intensive needs-assessment process undertaken by the instructor in consultation with the English at Work coordinator, involving not only the learners but also their supervisors or employers. In an innovation at Palliser Furniture, a large international furniture manufacturer with an ongoing language-training program, the language-training instructors provide all new Palliser employees with orientation and skills training on the factory floor. The instructors also teach the essential language skills needed by the new workers to do their jobs, which complements the ongoing classroom-based approach to job-specific language and literacy instruction for longer-term employees.

Coordination of adult EAL programming

Manitoba receives relatively small numbers of newcomers compared to other Canadian provinces; for example, in 2005 Ontario received 140,533 immigrants, while Manitoba received 8,097. Having a critical mass of learners to make programs cost-effective has always been a challenge in Manitoba and this situation was exacerbated for many years because both federal and provincial governments offer language training for different demographic groups. In the late 1980s, as a creative solution, Manitoba began to work in partnership with the federal government to pool expertise and resources and jointly fund language-training projects to meet specific needs and contexts. This relationship was formalised when Manitoba and the Canadian Government signed a Settlement Addendum to the 2003 Canada–Manitoba Immigration Agreement. Through this agreement, responsibility for settlement funding, including language training, was transferred to Manitoba. Manitoba now enjoys an enviable position in Canada, as federal language training dollars are pooled with provincial funds and the provincial government, through the ALT Branch, is solely responsible for the coordination, administration and support of all government-funded adult EAL instruction. This is in contrast to most other provinces that still have separate federal and provincial program streams and limited coordinated activity.

Key to Manitoba’s coordination activities is communication. Adult
EAL Coordinating Group meetings are held at least three times a year and bring together representatives of Winnipeg and regional language-training programs, teacher professional organisations, settlement agencies and other government departments with education and training responsibilities. These meetings are an opportunity to share information and to network, but they primarily serve as a forum to discuss issues of common concern and to propose responses. Between meetings, communication is maintained by email. This synergistic coordination mechanism has enabled Manitoba to develop appropriate programming responses to emerging needs in a timely fashion, minimise duplication of services, and build on the creativity, strengths and capacities of the partner organisations, frequently resulting in innovations in service and support. For example, several years ago, when a sudden surge in immigration to Manitoba created a backlog for language training, consultation with coordinating group members led to the development of the Entry Program, the four-week initial orientation and language-training program. This program meant a shorter waiting time for language programs and reduced the frustration of newcomers sitting at home waiting for classes. Even though waiting time for language training in Winnipeg has disappeared, the Entry Program continues to be the point of entry into ongoing language training. In another instance, issues raised about the difficulty teachers were having in assessing writing resulted in the development of writing rubrics based on the 2000 CLB. Rural concerns raised about the availability of trained EAL teachers prompted the development of online teacher training and support for rural teachers. The ALT Branch has also been able to identify the professional development needs of adult EAL teachers and establish priorities.

**Collaborative curriculum development and implementation**

Manitoba’s responsibility for implementation of the CLB has been facilitated by its approach to coordination. In 1996, when the CLB was introduced, an ad hoc committee of the coordinating group, co-chaired by the coordinator of adult EAL curriculum development and implementation and a federal government representative, was established to guide the curriculum development and implementation process. This advisory group recommended that the government should involve teachers in a recursive curriculum-development process, providing professional development opportunities at frequent intervals and seeking and integrating teacher feedback. This recommendation was influenced by the experience of the advisory group participants and by current literature on managing
curriculum change and overcoming resistance (Schubert 1986; Fullan 1991; Fullan and Miles 1992; Fullan 1993; Theron and van der Westhizen 1996). As a result, a five-year curriculum development and implementation strategy was adopted.

Manitoba’s curriculum framework takes into account the great diversity of learners and types of language training offered – a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum development would not serve the learners or the teachers. Consequently, a framework that addresses the commonalities in instruction and programming was developed. It specifies the governmental goals for language instruction, principles, and teaching and assessment approaches. It also specifies language-learning objectives for the competency outcomes for each skill at each CLB level. In undertaking this specification task, the work of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) was used to articulate the actional, discourse, linguistic, sociocultural and strategic aspects for the CLB language performance outcomes.

At each phase of the initial curriculum development process, teachers were brought together for professional development on any protocols, practices or materials that were being developed and given opportunities to provide input and feedback. It was critical that feedback was given sincere consideration, revisions were made consistent with government direction and the teachers were informed of the impact of their feedback. Early in the process, for example, Manitoba’s draft vision statement for adult EAL instruction was redefined and revised based on teacher feedback. Manitoba goals for adult EAL instruction (Manitoba Adult EAL Curriculum Framework 1997) are to assist students to:

- develop communicative competence in EAL
- acquire necessary, appropriate and timely settlement information to pursue their personal, academic and employment goals and live lives of dignity and purpose in Canada.

At the same time, as part of each professional development workshop evaluation, teachers were asked for their perceptions of their level of CLB knowledge and their comfort in using the document. Initially, there was a high degree of discomfort and resistance to the implementation of the CLB. Teachers were apprehensive that it would require a complete jettisoning of past practice and resources but, little by little, teachers increased in knowledge, comfort and confidence. Now in Manitoba adult EAL programs, discussions about learners, materials, teaching and assessment activities are all in CLB terms. Anecdotally, teachers express a high degree of satisfaction with the CLB as the basis for their teaching.
The major change that resulted from the introduction of the CLB was a shift in methodology from a predominantly grammar-based approach to task-based instruction, consistent with the approach laid out in the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: Guide to implementation (Holmes et al 2001). Professional development was critical in facilitating the desired shift, and funding was provided to programs to cover teacher salaries and registration fees to attend three scheduled conferences annually. The aim of this approach was to ameliorate teacher resistance to change, build good will among teachers and ensure maximum participation in professional development. Two of the conferences are conducted by the provincial professional organisations – Teaching EAL to Adults in Manitoba (TEAM) and TEAL (Teachers of EAL) Manitoba. The third conference is offered by the ALT Branch to address curriculum issues and new initiatives. This support has worked well, with the same messages reaching all teachers at the same time. Teachers are introduced to new resources in a collegial environment with teachers from a variety of programs and teaching contexts. An unexpected benefit has been cross-fertilisation between programs, with teachers seeming less territorial and competitive and more willing to work together and share resources.

Although Manitoba has long since moved beyond its initial curriculum development phase, it has continued to work collaboratively with teachers in ongoing curriculum maintenance and renewal, the development of instructional resources and curriculum support documents, and the provision of professional development. This approach fosters buy-in and reduces resistance. For example, after hearing criticism that the checklists in several draft versions of a standardised progress report did not provide enough information and took too long to complete, a team of teachers representing the major programs were recruited to provide guidance. They identified the major concerns and the features they wanted included in the reports, and provided feedback from the teachers in their own programs on drafts of new reports. They also introduced the final version to their colleagues and provided orientation to the protocol. This means that Manitoba now has standardised progress reports that incorporate features that reflect specific program needs.

A curriculum initiative in 2004 was the introduction of collaborative language portfolio assessment (CLPA) in all programs. This was influenced by developments in assessment practices that emphasised benefits of portfolio assessment (Baker 1990; Singer 1993; Wiggins 1994; O’Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996) and by the European Language Portfolio, which utilises the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
(Council of Europe 2001). Again, a group of teachers advised the government on the process, identifying issues about portfolio assessment that were worrying teachers and strategising responses. Responses included the immediate development and distribution of a frequently asked questions sheet on CLPA and a longer-range plan for professional development to allow teachers to work with examples of language portfolios. The teachers agreed to trial language portfolio assessment and use insights from this experience as the foundation for professional development workshops. Through this process, a resource on language portfolio assessment – *Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment: Manitoba best practices guide* (Manitoba Labour and Immigration Adult Language Training Branch 2004) – was developed for teachers. This provides information on the major challenges of using CLPA in various teaching contexts, ideas for materials to include in language portfolios and process suggestions.

**Professional development leadership groups**

Professional development has continued to be instrumental in developing teacher expertise and facilitating curriculum change. Increasing numbers of adult EAL baby-boomer teachers have begun to retire and there is concern about the impending loss of expertise, experienced workshop presenters and leaders in the field. A mechanism has been established to:

- develop expertise in particular topics within programs
- develop leadership potential in the field as an aspect of succession planning
- provide workshop facilitators for a province-wide conference.

The literature on professional reading groups and collaborative learning has suggested several directions for consideration (Darling-Hammond 1998; Oliphant 2003; Smylie et al 2001; Richards and Farrell 2005).

In 2004 the first in a series of professional development leadership groups was introduced. These groups are modelled on professional reading groups where each year a major topic for study is chosen. Past topics have included reading, writing, pronunciation and speaking. An invitation to join the group is sent out to all programs and interested teachers, and then journal articles or textbook chapters on the specified topic are distributed to the teachers, who try out interesting ideas they read about with their own students. Once a month for about six months, the leadership group meets to discuss the readings and reflect on the experiences they have had in implementing the ideas with their students. The meetings culminate...
in a province-wide conference for approximately 300 teachers, focusing on the topic the group has been studying. The full-day conference begins with a keynote address that outlines theoretical foundations and current directions in the literature. The address is followed by concurrent workshop sessions, which are repeated in the afternoon. The professional leadership group members are the workshop facilitators, and their sessions, targeted for various levels of instruction including ESL Literacy, focus on the practical application of the ideas discussed during reading-group sessions. Often teachers have not led workshops for their peers before and are somewhat anxious, but these teachers are provided with a session framework, focusing on topic chunks and timelines, and are assisted with planning. As an additional incentive, the participants receive an honorarium.

Feedback has been positive, with teachers liking the opportunity to spend a full day focusing on one skill area or topic and the format of the conference. However, the greatest impact has been on the participants of the professional development leadership group members themselves. Several are repeat participants and indicate they are stimulated by the readings and the reflective discussions. Initial findings of a research pilot study suggest that they also find their own learning consolidated through planning and delivering the workshop sessions (Schmidt and Pettis 2006).

**Conclusion**

Adult EAL programming and curriculum in Manitoba are ever evolving in response to emerging issues and trends. For example, there is a current struggle to find appropriate supports for low-level EAL Literacy learners from Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan to encourage their participation in programs and to help them experience success. One pilot project utilises community coaches, who speak the first language of the learners, to work with specific learners and their teachers. The coaches assist students in their language learning and explore the issues that discourage them from participating in regular classroom instruction. The response to the employment-related language-learning needs of newcomers to facilitate their successful involvement in the workplace continues. In addition, a revision of the curriculum framework is planned to align it with the 2000 CLB and to reflect new developments in second-language instruction, which will no doubt prompt the need for a strategy for its implementation. Teachers continue to express their needs, which continue to influence resource and professional development initiatives.

In Manitoba partnerships in the delivery of language instruction between the ALT Branch, programs, teachers and learners continue to serve us all well.
NOTES

• Go to www.immigratemanitoba.com to view teaching and assessment resources mentioned in this article.
• Go to www.itsessential.ca for more information on the CLB and Canada’s Essential Skills.

REFERENCES


