

## Encounters with Second Language Education Bureaucrats: Misunderstandings and Misgivings

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### Introduction

On June 5<sup>th</sup> of this year, the Director of the Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks emailed me about a presentation I had recently given at the Centre Canadien D'études et de Recherche en Bilinguisme et Aménagement Linguistique (CCERBAL) regarding the qualitative research I have conducted pertaining to the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (CLB) (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000; Hajer & Kaskens, 2012). He stated:

It has been brought to my attention that at a recent CCERBAL meeting in Ottawa you made a presentation that contained a number of inaccurate statements regarding the Canadian Language Benchmarks. As a result I asked a colleague who is a university-based language expert to review your presentation. The review is attached. We would be grateful if you would take the necessary steps to correct the inaccuracies in your work so that those attending your presentations or reading your work are not misled regarding the CLB.

The subsequent email exchange we had revolved around my contention that he was using the prestige of his position to put pressure on a scholar to suppress work he found threatening. He, on the other hand, contended that he was not attempting to “silence your opinions” and that in any case it was “not a question of opinions here, but facts”.

In this piece, I outline some of the implications of the reviewer’s comments in terms of the nature of qualitative research and the value of academic freedom. I then use this email exchange with the Director as a starting point for some comments on politics, culture and the effects of high-stakes second language assessment documents on citizenship education curriculum development.

### A Critique of the CLB

The expert the Director consulted, who has remained anonymous, had evidently read one of my peer-reviewed articles (Fleming, 2014) that explored the links between citizenship and race in second language education. In his/her review, I “rave” and show “bias” in my “attack” against this key federal document.

The article in question updated the analysis from my doctoral research that compared the way in which citizenship was conceptualized within the CLB with a sampling of adult second language learners in a federally funded ESL program. The participants in the qualitative study from which this data is drawn described becoming Canadians predominantly in terms of human rights, multicultural policy, and the obligations of being citizens. I found that the CLB rarely referred to citizenship in these terms and instead described being Canadian in terms of normative standards that implied the existence of a dominant and singular culture to which second language learners had to conform. This was true even for the 2012 version of the CLB. I argued that these normative standards had the effect of racialising (as I outline below) second language learners in this context.

For those unfamiliar with the CLB, a little background information is required. *The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Adults*, (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000) comprised over 200 compact pages, consists mainly of the actual benchmarks, arranged in 12 levels, from basic English language proficiency to full fluency. As Norton Pierce and Stewart (1997) noted, the policy initiatives that

gave rise to this text were framed around the need to develop a systematic and seamless set of English language training opportunities out of the myriad of federal and provincial programs that existed previously.

The bulk of the content found in the actual CLB (both in the 2000 and 2012 versions) is arranged for each level in a series of matrixes to correspond to the four language skills. Each benchmark found within the *CLB* 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 can do, and examples and criteria that indicate the task performance has been successful.

In the entire 2000 document, there were only three references to tasks or competencies that could be said to be broadly associated with citizenship. These were ‘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 were not elaborated upon and remained rather vague and incomplete.

In many ways, in fact, it is even more revealing to note what was missing, especially in terms of how language was connected to exercising citizenship. The word *vote*, for example, did not appear in the document. In addition, the document represented (though admission and omission) good citizens as obedient workers. This could be seen in the fact that issues related to trade unions and collective agreements were given next to no attention in the document. Labour rights, such as filing grievances or recognizing and reporting dangerous working conditions, were nonexistent. Employment standards legislation was covered in a singular vague reference to the existence of minimum wage legislation. The 2000 version of the *CLB* had no references to understanding standards of employment legislation, workers compensation, employment insurance, or safety in the workplace. At the same time, however, a lot of space in the document was devoted to participating in job performance reviews, giving polite and respectful feedback to one’s employer, and participating in meetings about trivial issues, such as lunchroom cleanliness.

The 2000 version of the document did represent language learners as having rights and responsibilities. However, these were almost exclusively related to being good consumers. Learners understood their rights and responsibilities as a ‘client, customer, patient and student’ (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000, p. 95), but not as a worker, family member, participant in community activities, or advocate. As I have discussed elsewhere on the basis of empirical evidence, adult English language learners enrolled in the programs informed by the *CLB* often complain about being consistently denied overtime pay and access to benefits, being forced to work statutory holidays, or being fired without cause (Fleming 2010). In short, the document emphasized the virtues of being an obedient and cooperative worker and a good consumer who can return flawed items for refunds.

It was also disconcerting to note the limitations placed on the few references to citizenship noted above and the manner in which they had been couched. Only one of the three instances noted above (writing a letter) provided a view of citizenship as active engagement (albeit fairly limited). The other two were decidedly vague, passive, and intellectual (understanding or indicating knowledge). No content linked collective action, group identity, debate, or investigation to citizenship rights.

What is even more significant, given my argument here, was the way in which forms of exercising citizenship were connected to levels of English language proficiency. All three of the above competencies that referred to citizenship occurred at the very highest benchmark levels, at the point at which one is writing research papers at universities. In this way, the document implied that opinions not expressed in English had little value in terms of Canadian citizenship.

*The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2012: ESL for Adults* (Hajer and Kaskens, 2012) is a revised version of the original 2000 publication. It was the result of an extensive series of processes designed

to establish the validity and reliability of descriptors found within the document. Comparisons were first made with the *Common European Framework of Reference*, the *American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages Guidelines*, and the *Échellequébécoise*. The document was then subjected to field validation and checked against the *American Education Research Association Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*.

In contrast to the introduction found within the 2000 version, the new version is more forthright about claims that it is designed to be ‘a national standard for planning curricula for language instruction in a variety of contexts’ (CLB 2012, p. v). However, the document still claims to not endorse a specific instructional method. In my estimation, this is somewhat disingenuous since the new version, like the previous, exhibits many hallmarks of the communicative approach, including task-based exemplars and an explicit endorsement of Bachman’s (1990) model of communicative language ability. In my estimation, much of my critique of the 2000 version of the document from a language-testing standpoint is still valid here.

I argued previously that exemplar tasks within assessment and curriculum documents in this context should be scrutinized carefully since they contain and represent privileged orientations that influence how teachers approach the treatment of curriculum content (Fleming, 2008). Content that is held up as exemplars in such documents are privileged in the sense that they encourage particular orientations towards themes and discourage others. My purpose here is to outline my take specifically on the citizenship content found with the new version of the *CLB*. Exemplar tasks that deal with citizenship represent a privileged content that a teacher or curriculum writer is encouraged to reproduce and elaborate upon and are not innocent of ideology.

Although the focus on consumer rights is as dominant within the new version of the *CLB* as it was in the old, there has been a significant addition of content that refers to labour rights. Benchmark 5, for example, contains an exemplary task that requires an understanding of employment standards legislation. 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’ (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012, p. 57). These are marked improvements for which the authors should be commended. As I argued previously, this aspect of civil rights was central to the concerns of the ESL learners I interviewed in my 2010 study (Fleming, 2010).

However, in my estimation, there are still problems within the new version of the *CLB* in terms of citizenship rights. As a way of illustration, I shall discuss the use of the word *vote*, which I believe is of pivotal importance when discussing notions of citizenship. As mentioned above, the word did not occur within the 2000 version. Voting is mentioned twice in the new document. One of these references is within the exemplar task when a learner is expected to “listen to an all-candidates’ debate during an election campaign to analyze and evaluate arguments presented by each candidate and determine which candidate to vote for” (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012, p. 35). The other reference to voting is almost identical in content and appears on the same page. This is an improvement over the previous version of the *CLB*, which contained (as mentioned above) no reference to voting at all. Unfortunately, both of these references within the new version of the *CLB* are found in the listening framework at benchmark 12, the highest in the document. My previous criticism that the document links citizenship rights to high levels of English language proficiency still holds. This is a significant problem, since this implies that citizenship rights are tasks that can only be fully realized once one is at the level of writing graduate level assignments, another exemplar task found within level 12. This also implicitly indicates a hierarchy based on a supposed link between English language proficiency and how well one conforms to the perception of being white. Legitimate citizens are those who evoke whiteness and the ability to use standardized and high status versions of English.

## The Review

In his/her comments, the anonymous reviewer complains that my research methodology shows that I “have very limited notions of second language acquisition and teaching methodology”, despite my twenty-year history in the field as an ESL teacher and administrator prior to joining academia. S/he wonders why I had 114 questionnaire and 25 interview respondents out of a possible population of over 90,000 (a figure that s/he doesn’t explain). S/he asks about the criteria I used to select the 25 Punjabi-speakers for the subsequent interviews and shows frustration about not knowing how the interviews and questionnaire were constructed. S/he calls the excerpts I provide from the interviews as “selected anecdotal responses, supposedly from the participants” and complains that there “is no presentation of data to speak of”. S/he asks whether or not “this study [is] about discontent[ed] Punjabis” and argues that “no generalization should be made to any other ethnic group, not even to other Punjabis in other provinces”. In terms of the CLB, the reviewer complained that I am gravely mistaken in calling the CLB an assessment document. S/he would rather that I more accurately call them “language competency descriptors”. S/he concludes by remarking “I am quite surprised that this article has been accepted for publication”.

There are many things I can say in my defence. First, the article in question is not a report of the overall study. Instead, as noted in my introduction, the article takes findings from the full report of the study and updates my critique of the CLB. In kindness, I think that it is a shame that the reviewer didn’t read the publications in which I actually report on the study’s methodology (or even the original publically accessible doctoral thesis) by describing the case selection, community context, data collection procedure, method of analysis and limitations. Repeating this information would have left me no space with which to develop my argument in the article in question. In any case, the article contains references to the full report for the study, which are easily and publically obtainable.

Second, as I made clear in my report, this was case study research and not ethnography. It falls well within the qualitative tradition of research (Creswell, 2012), which is best suited, as Bryman (2001) argues, for the generation of theory and the exploration of particular aspects of social phenomena. Meaningful data is not confined to the quantitative research tradition, as the reviewer seems to imply. The original study I conducted was of a particular school in which there were 116 adult students enrolled. This gave me a 98% response rate. Moreover, the 25 students who participated represented, without exception, every Punjabi speaker who volunteered to be interviewed. I did not cherry-pick comments from “discontented” respondents! Even though, as I painstakingly made plain when reporting the study, I was not making claims that were meant to be generalizable, the school in question was the largest ESL program housed within the largest Canadian public school district west of Toronto.

Third, the phrase “language competency descriptors”, which the reviewer prefers is not found in the CLB. Even though the reviewer doesn’t like the term I employ (“assessment document”), the word “assessment” is found 28 times in the document. It is a fact that there is an explicit statement in the CLB that the document is NOT an assessment. This is true, in so far as the CLB is NOT an assessment TOOL or instrument. However, it is also explicitly noted that the CLB is meant to “INFORM language instruction and assessment (my emphasis) (p. v). So, I would argue semantics on this point: the CLB is an assessment document in the sense that it is a document related to assessment!

Let me conclude this section by noting that the doctoral research in question here was the result of a long process of internal and external review at the University of British Columbia, one of the world’s leading research institutions. It was supervised by some of the leading experts in the field. My published work has repeatedly been subject to rigorous, blind peer-review in field-leading

Canadian and international journals. One of these publications was given an award by the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (Fleming & Morgan, 2012), a leading research association in my field in recognition of the integrity and relevance of my work. I hold a tenured position as a professor at a leading Canadian research university, a job obtained only after a long process that evaluates one's skills as a researcher and teacher. The anonymous reviewer has not made his/her analyses of my work available for blind review, an omission that raises serious questions regarding ethics and credibility.

### **Politics, Culture and Language Assessment**

I now wish to concentrate on several aspects of the complaints I received from the Director and his anonymous reviewer that have political and cultural import. These are at least as serious as those pertaining to academic freedom or the nature of qualitative research discussed above. The reviewer expanded on his/her complaints about my research to state that the CLB "strips languages of any political agenda and contains a "construct of language learning [that] is the same [and] remains the same regardless of what language is being learned, and where it is learned".

There are many things that should be said in regard to these claims. The first is that the contention that a set of competency descriptors can remove the political or cultural content from language flies in the face of linguistic theory and practice since the time of Saussure's insights over a century ago. This is regardless of whether one takes a generative or a functional approach in terms of theory.

It has long been acknowledged in linguistics that there are no easy comparisons that can be made between specific languages. To give Saussure's most famous example: the conception of a 'river' is different in French (a 'flueve' ends up in the ocean; 'rivere' ends up in a lake) than it is in English ('creek' and 'river' are different solely in terms of size). Now, I do not wish to replicate the long-standing debates within linguistics and anthropology regarding the connections between specific cultures and languages (Feuerverger, 2009) provides a pretty good review of this). However, I think that it is clear from any perusal of the academic literature that one doesn't need to be a radical "raver" to regard as ridiculous an attempt to describe a specific language (in this case English) as some kind of innocent universal standard that can be applied to all others.

No current theory of linguistics will help our reviewer's case. Functional linguistics is based in large part on importance of the specific contexts (cultural and otherwise) of language. Even generative linguistics (in all its forms) is clear on the difference between specific languages and Universal Grammar. I might add that the hegemonic implications of using English in this way (especially in the bilingual policy atmosphere that exists in Canada) are quite problematic.

A perusal of the academic literature also shows that individual approaches to language learning are highly varied and not universal. Learning content is selected through the consideration of a set of factors, such as learner needs, programming goals or pertinent linguistic elements. Language learning itself, as Oxford (1990) has in detail shown, is influenced by such factors as motivation, subject position (e.g. gender), cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, types of tasks involved, overall learning styles, and deep-seated cognitive styles (e.g. tolerance of ambiguity). The second language field has long moved away from the notion of the "good language learner" who uses singular learning strategies.

The revised 2012 version of the CLB is founded on "the principle of communicative language ability, which relates to the ability to understand and communicate messages effectively and appropriately in a particular social situation. It is understood that language ability requires an integration of language knowledge, skills and strategies." This principle, as it is interpreted, is explicitly based on the Bachman and Palmer (1996; 2010) competency framework. This very

framework, however, belies the contention that language learning is a universal depoliticized phenomenon.

As noted above, my reviewer claims that the CLB is a neutral document that has with no political import. However, in the text that the CLB cites as one of its principal theoretical resources, Bachman and Palmer (1996; 2010) state “we must always consider the societal and educational value systems that inform our test use [and that] the values and goals that inform test use may vary from one culture to another” (p.34). Do not social values constitute a form of politics? Does not variance between cultures invalidate a “one size fits all” approach? I might add: does what appears to be an attempt to suppress my work on the part of the Director constitute a political agenda?

### **Misunderstandings**

It is significant that the CLB content is framed as sets of pedagogical tasks. I believe that the reviewer’s confusion stems from misunderstandings as to what constitutes the nature of content within pedagogical tasks. As I have argued elsewhere (Fleming & Walter, 2004), tasks have been dominant within second language assessment and pedagogy since the advent of the communicative approach. Johnson (1979), one of the most important early curriculum theorists in the field, for example, made the links between curriculum development, tasks and assessment very explicit. Long and Crookes (1992) stated, in fact, that fluency in the communicative process can only develop within a ‘task-orientated teaching’- one which provides ‘actual meaning’ by focusing on [concrete] tasks to be mediated through language (p. 200). So, by their very nature, tasks are found within contexts that rely on concrete extra-linguistic content. One simply does not perform a task in the abstract.

In the case of the CLB, exemplar tasks form what might be termed (forgive me!) the “meat and potatoes” of the document. Language ability is described as being able to do certain things in certain situations. So, you see enhanced language ability described as being capable of more and more complex accomplishments in more and more varied communicative contexts.

In my publications about the CLB, my chief complaint is related to the lack of citizenship content found within the document, especially at the lower levels of English language proficiency. The publication that the reviewer critiqued is centred on how the exemplars within the CLB emphasize the virtues of being an obedient and cooperative worker and a good consumer. I argue that the content of these pedagogical tasks are highly significant. In contrast to the claims of my reviewer, politics are inevitably contained within this content in the sense that they reflect the societal and educational value systems that Bachman and Palmer (1996; 2010) talk about above. In effect, these exemplars infantilize and even racialize second language learners.

In short, if you do not have exemplars that cover the topic of citizenship at the lower levels of language proficiency, you imply that this topic is not for the learners at these levels. If you emphasize consumer rights within your document at the expense of worker rights, you imply that this is where we place our priorities and values as a society. What could be more political?

### **Conclusion**

Elsewhere in their text, Bachman and Palmer (1996; 2010) outline the practical difficulties in conducting language assessment. They argue for flexibility in face of the fact that no assessment framework is objective, foolproof or innocently free from bias. Assessment is a concrete process of compromise and refinement. So, I have to say that my review’s claims that the CLB is apolitical and constitutive of a universal description of language are inaccurate. We cannot be blind to the necessity of acknowledging the constant need in our field to revisit our prejudices and overcome

them. This is true no matter how many reviewers (and I count myself in this number) have contributed to the authoring and revising of these documents.

I am optimistic that improvements will occur, despite the exchange of email I had with the Director. I remember that as part of my first critique of the CLB years ago, I echoed Haque and Cray's (2007) study about the teacher and reception of the CLB in arguing that it was not so much an assessment document as a curriculum document. As Shohamy (2007) notes, we should judge these documents on how they are actually used and not on the claims that their authors make about them. As I noted at the time, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck.

I was met with a lot of resistance from some colleagues at the time, one of whom even interrupted a presentation I made at a academic conference to denounce my opinions on the subject. Such is the nature of academic disputes! However, in contrast to the original version of the CLB, which started that it was not to be regarded in any way as a curriculum document, the 2012 version explicitly states that it is meant to inform curriculum development. So, there has been some improvement over time.

Unfortunately, the Director has so far refused to sit down with me subsequent to our emails in the interests of talking things through. In his defence, he is undoubtedly busy and I was probably fairly rude when faced with what I perceived to be a threat to my academic freedom. It is a shame that my interlocutors have acted in ways that I find to be defensive and confrontational. As I mentioned in my exchanges with the Director, I work from the premise that I am attempting to contribute to the nation's need for well-designed language learning programming that incorporates sound and equitable assessment practices. I am not in the business of demonizing those who have worked on the CLB. As my recent work on the revisions to the *Canadian Language Benchmarks: Literacy for ESL Learners* attests, I believe myself to be a willing colleague interested in constructively facing the challenges we face in the interests of the people we serve. Maybe the anonymous reviewer could submit his/her critique to an actual peer-review process in one of our field's journals in order to advance the discussion?

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