

The Portfolio-based Language Assessment Model: Perceptions of Adult Immigrant English Language Learners

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Abstract

This research investigated students' perceptions of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) model used in the government-funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. A mixed methods approach was used in order to obtain results with a broader perspective of the students' perceptions of PBLA. Data were collected from 70 participants, using self-administered questionnaires with room for extensive comments. The participants were adult immigrants attending LINC classes at a non-profit organization in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Participants responded to questions on the usefulness of different features of PBLA and the PBLA model as a whole. Overall, the participants had positive perceptions of PBLA and indicated that it was helpful in their English language learning journey. It is hoped that this study will generate discussion amongst learners, educators, government officials, and scholars regarding the value of PBLA in the LINC program and how to improve its implementation.

Introduction

Over the decades, new and innovative assessment approaches have been used in different learning and teaching milieus—from elementary schools to tertiary institutions—and in the teaching of English as an Additional Language (EAL) to adult immigrants in not-for-profit organizations. Numerous studies have examined participants' perceptions of these assessment and evaluation methods, particularly in tertiary institutions (Boud, & Falchikov, 2007; Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999; Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991). Entwistle and Entwistle's (1991) seminal work established that students' perceptions of the learning environment—which includes assessments and evaluation—influence how they learn. Despite these observations on the value and importance of students' perceptions of the learning milieu, it has been observed that research on learners' perceptions of PBLA is non-existent. This gap was the impetus for this study.

Research Questions and Significance of the Study

The central goal of this research was to document and analyze learners' perceptions of the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) model, with the broad aim of gaining insights into the potential causes of such perceptions, their impact on students' learning, and the implications. This research was guided by the following questions:

- (1) Which aspects of the PBLA model do participants perceive as beneficial to their learning of English?
- (2) What are the participants' perceptions of the PBLA model as a whole?

This paper's target is to make significant contributions to the broader field of portfolio-based assessment in general, and the PBLA model in particular, through a deeper understanding of learners' perceptions of the PBLA model. Inevitably, this research is significant to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada—the government funder of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program—since to the best of our knowledge, this research is the first systematic study of students' perceptions of the PBLA model that gives a voice to adult immigrant English language learners in Canada. We argue that students' perceptions of PBLA, and the associated reasons for those perceptions are insightful, enhancing administrators and funders' ability to identify areas that need improvement for the model to be more effective.

Background

This section discusses the LINC Program, the types of participants enrolled in the program, and the individual components of the PBLA model.

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada

The federal government department, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), invests significant funding in English and French language classes for adult immigrants and refugees (Saint Germain, 2012). English language classes are called LINC, and have been offered since 1992. These classes are available throughout Canada, with the majority found in the densely populated urban centres. In rural regions, there is the option of distance learning. Singh and Blakely (2012) aptly articulate the objectives of the LINC program:

The overall objective of both programs [LINC and CLIC (French)] has been to assist newcomers in developing the communication skills they need to better function in and contribute to all aspects of Canadian society —social, cultural, civic, and economic (p.7).

The LINC program offers classes from beginner up to advanced levels across Canada. Additionally, LINC also offers ESL Literacy classes for learners that are non-literate or semi-literate in their first language with little or no formal education experience. It is indisputable that one of the greatest challenges for such an extensive language program is maintaining quality and consistency. Pettis (2014), for instance, observed that the 2008 and 2009 internal research reports for then Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), now IRCC, found that assessment practices in LINC programs were neither well planned nor consistent. In addition, the variety of formats employed in the LINC program—online, face-to-face, full-time, part-time, and multi-level—have resulted in various permeations of the curriculum along with regional modifications, further exacerbating the challenges of quality and consistency. To standardize assessment, IRCC instituted the PBLA model as the sole assessment method in all LINC programs across Canada in 2013, after successfully piloting the PBLA model in 2011.

Adult Immigrant English

The total number of immigrants welcomed into Canada in the period from July 2015 to July 2016 was a total of 320,9322 (Statistics Canada 2016). Figure 1 summarizes the top source

countries for permanent residents in 2016. Those immigrants who already have strong English or French language skills, or who originate from countries that use either of the two official languages in Canada, in most cases, would not need language training.



Figure 1. Top source countries of permanent residents to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016)

British Columbia (BC) welcomed 42,832 new immigrants in 2016 (Gov't of BC, 2016). This accounted for 14.5% of the total immigration to Canada. For BC, the top source countries were China, the Philippines, India, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Taiwan, the United States, and Iran (Gov't of BC, 2016). About 27.5% of those coming to BC did not possess the minimum language requirement for citizenship in either English or French.

Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA)

O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) define "*portfolio assessment* [as] a systematic collection of student work analyzed to show progress over time with regard to instructional objectives" (p.5). Zubizarreta (2009) defines the assessment portfolio as:

A flexible, evidence-based tool that engages students in a process of continuous reflection and collaborative analysis of learning . . . the portfolio captures the scope, richness, and relevance of students' learning. . . [It] focuses on purposefully and collaboratively selected reflections and evidence for both improvement and assessment of students' learning (p.16).

Regarding the PBLA model, Pettis, (2014), says that PBLA is:

... a comprehensive, systematic, authentic, and collaborative approach to language assessment that engages teachers and students ... Together, teachers and students collaborate to set language-learning goals, compile numerous examples of language proficiency and learning in a variety of contexts over time, analyze the data, and reflect on progress (p.7).

PBLA borrowed from various portfolio types, particularly from the European Language Portfolio Model and the Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (CLPA). PBLA has these features:

1. Baseline Information
2. Assessments which are sub-divided into teacher assessments, self-assessment and peer assessment

3. Self-Reflection
4. Student-Teacher Conference

First, *Baseline Information* includes the participant's Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) scores, needs assessment results, autobiography, and a goal statement (Pettis, 2014). Once EAL learners enter a LINC class, they complete an autobiography; writing about themselves—when they came to Canada, what they did in their country of origin, and what they are doing in Canada, among other things. They also complete a needs assessment, which details their reasons for learning English and their broad goal for participating in the course.

The second component, which is the cornerstone of PBLA, embodies the assessments, *viz.*, teacher assessments, peer assessments, and self-assessments or skill using tasks. Teacher assessments are administered and graded by the teacher. With peer assessments, learners grade each other's assessments, while for self-assessments, learners evaluate their own work. Skill using activities are supported tasks that are used in a formative way for learners to improve performance. In all cases, the evaluation is based on criteria set by the teacher that align to the CLB.

Self-reflection is another feature of PBLA. Participants reflect on what they learned in class, the types of activities they engaged in, and they determine the activities they found most beneficial. The student-teacher conference is the final component of the PBLA assessment cycle. At the end of the course, the teacher and each learner independently review the collection of artefacts in the learner's portfolio. The teacher completes a progress report, and during conferencing comes to an agreement with the participants that the progress report accurately reflects the learner's English learning progress or lack thereof (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Pettis, 2014). Figure 2 below summarizes the main aspects of the PBLA.

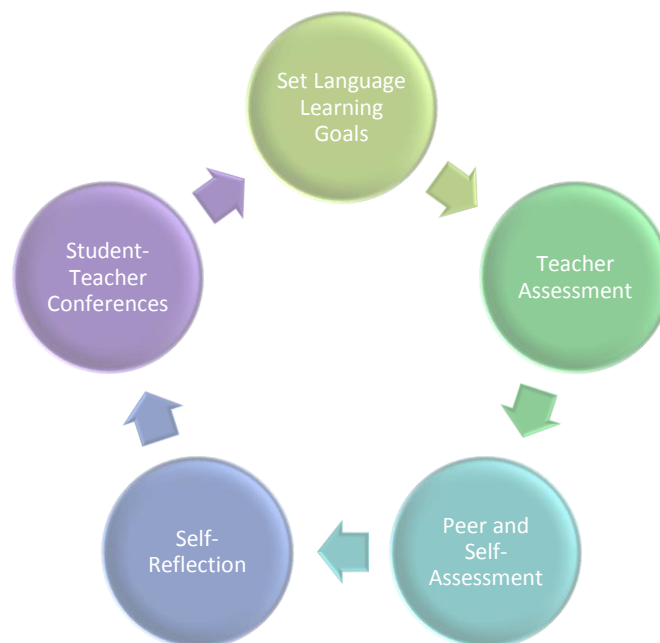


Figure 2. The PBLA Model

Research Methods

This research project employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive analysis of the learners' perceptions of PBLA, which either the qualitative or quantitative approach alone could not have achieved.

Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire collected qualitative data as well since participants were asked to write comments, and some wrote extensive comments. The questionnaire included a section on *Classification Information* such as personal questions relating to country of origin and the participants' level of education. The core of the questionnaire comprised specific questions about PBLA. Each question had four parts:

1. Previous experience with a particular aspect of PBLA;
2. A Yes/No question on whether that part of PBLA was helpful;
3. A rating of the question, *How helpful is it?(the aspect of the PBLA)*;
4. A reason for the rating. The four parts were, however, listed as four separate questions for ease of reference.

The questions were provided in succession and were logically sequenced. For example: Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 focused on goal setting. Similarly, questions 9, 10, 11, and 12 focused on peer assessment. Please see the included questionnaire in Appendix A for the specific wording of the questions. In the data analysis, each aspect or feature of PBLA was presented as a sub-heading and the responses to the core questions pertaining to PBLA were presented under that subheading. As an illustration, questions 1, 2, 3, and 4, which focused on goal setting, were all analyzed and presented under the sub-heading *Goal Setting*. Likewise, questions 9, 10, 11, and 12, which focussed on peer-assessment, were analyzed and discussed under the sub-heading *Peer-Assessment*. The questionnaire is included as Appendix A, for ease of reference.

Participation in the Study

This section discusses ethical considerations and the participants in the study.

Ethical Considerations

All the participants were adult LINC students who were informed that they were not obligated to participate in the research. They were also informed that they could choose to opt out at any point. Those who participated did this voluntarily. Furthermore, the organization where the students attended LINC approved the research to be conducted with its clients.

The Participants

The participants were adult immigrants attending LINC classes at a non-profit organization in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. We chose this organization because it has one of the largest LINC programs in the region, dating back to 1988. Its teachers were trained on the implementation of PBLA.

LINC 5 students were chosen because they were considered ideal; they could read and understand the survey questions and needed minimal help. The total number of participants was 70 (81% women and 19% men). The higher ratio of women is microcosmic of the LINC program; women participate more in these classes than men. Dempsey, Xue, and Kustec (2009) for instance observed that in the LINC program "...females account for the majority of completions during 2005-2008, ... roughly 70 percent of the total. The gender composition also indicates that the performance of females is relatively better as compared to males" (p.16).

The respondents came from diverse countries and the breakdown was as follows: China, 57%; Korea, 9%; Iraq, 6%; Taiwan, 4%. A graphic representation of the participants' countries of origin is provided in Figure 3.

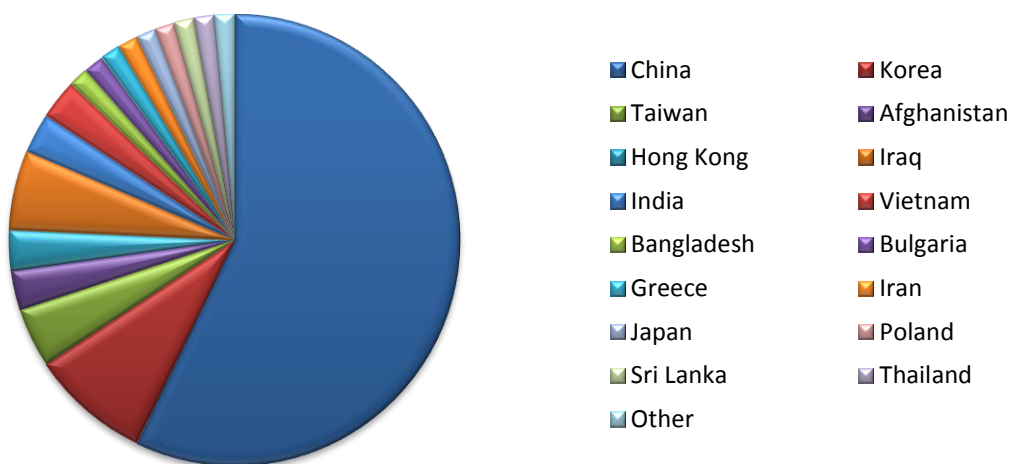


Figure 3. The Participants Countries of Origin (n=70)

Participants had varied educational backgrounds and 70% of the respondents had at least some post-secondary education whilst 8.6% had completed a Master's Degree. A summary of the educational backgrounds of the participants is provided in Figure 4.

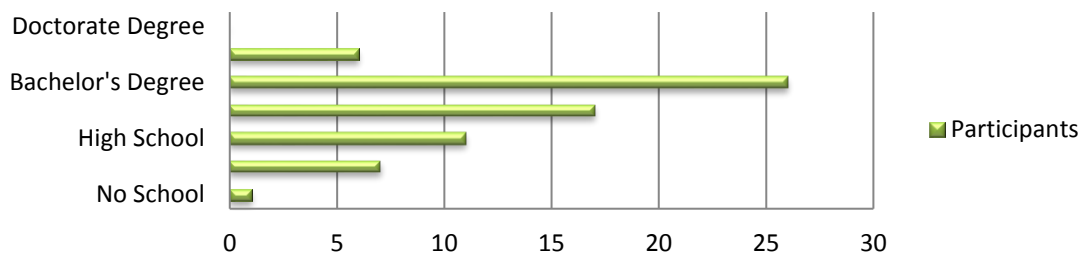


Figure 4. Educational background of participants (n=70)

The learner length of enrolment in the LINC program varied: 40% of the participants had been attending LINC classes for seven months or more and 35.7% for four to six months. 75.7% had been attending LINC classes for more than four months. The relatively lengthy participation in the LINC program provided participants with sufficient time to experience all aspects of the PBLA model. A full breakdown of participants' length of enrolment is provided in Figure 5.

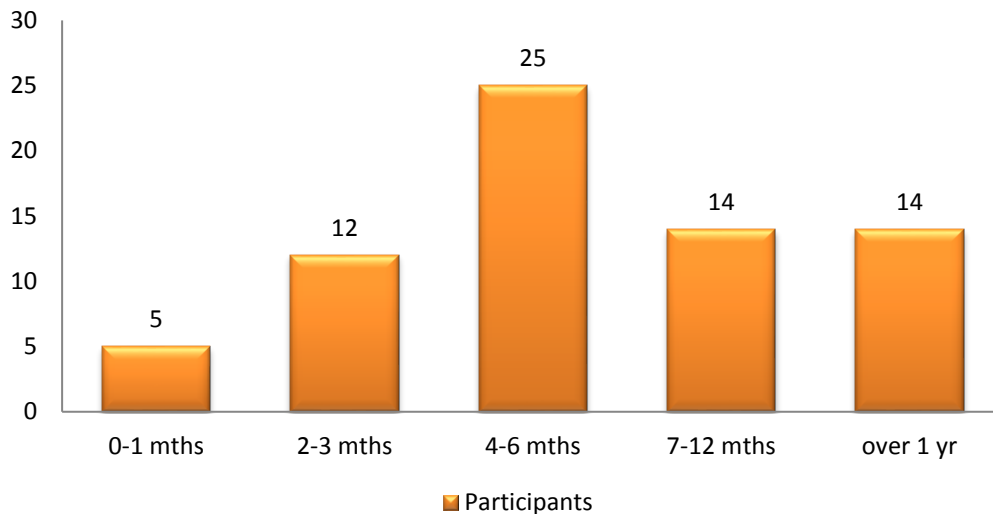


Figure 5. Length of learner enrolment (n=70)

Results

This section provides the results followed by the section on analysis and discussion.

Setting Language Learning Goals

In response to the question on whether the participants had previous experience with goal setting, 38.6% of the respondents answered in the negative, 7.1% did not provide any responses, and 54.3% answered in the affirmative. In response to the question on the usefulness of setting language-learning goals, 77.1% indicated that it was “helpful” or “very helpful.” Only 1.4% indicated that goal-setting was not helpful, and 5.7% of respondents did not answer the question. The results are summarized in Table 1. The bold part represents the highest number of responses, and this bolding is done for all the other tables below.

Table 1

Helpfulness of Setting Goals

Rating	Responses
Very helpful	30%
Helpful	47.1%
A little helpful	15.7%
Not helpful	1.4%
No response	5.7%

A sample of the participants' perceptions on goal-setting is provided below verbatim to avoid appropriating the participants' voices.

- *"It's my incentive. I can make a plan for my language learning."*
- *"This goal can remind me English first."*
- *"It's a clear direction for me to learning English."*
- *"That's record my every improved steps. I don't know 'how to English learning' PBLA help me and show my rating, now I know my skill level."*

Teacher Assessment

Regarding the question whether participants had any prior experience with teacher assessments, 65.7% responded in the affirmative, 25.7% indicated that they had no previous experience with teacher assessment, and 8.6% did not answer the question. On the usefulness of the Teacher Assessments, 82.9% responded that teacher assessments were *helpful* or *very helpful* for their language learning. Only 1.4% indicated that it was not helpful, and 5.7% did not respond to the question. The responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Helpfulness of Teacher Assessment

Rating	Responses
Very Helpful	40%
Helpful	42.9%
A little helpful	10%
Not helpful	1.4%
No response	5.7%

The following captures the participants' perceptions:

- *"This help me to see something I don't see."*
- *"Because she knows what I make mistek."*
- *"Sometimes, I know some problems, but I can't achie the claim."*
- *"Is very important opinion the profesinal to improve my level in English."*

Peer Assessment

On the question of peer assessments, 48.6% of the participants indicated that they had previous experience with assessing their peers in class, 41.4% indicated that they lacked previous experience, and 10% of the participants did not respond to this question. Out of the 70 participants, 55.7% indicated that they found peer assessments "helpful" or "very helpful." Table 3 provides a summary of the responses.

Table 3

Helpfulness of Peer Assessment

Rating	Responses
Very Helpful	18.6%
Helpful	37.1%
A little helpful	22.9%
Not helpful	11.4%
No response	10%

The participants' comments below provide insights into their perceptions of peer assessments.

- *“Sometimes this is not real assessment.”*
- *“Sometimes classmates didn't give me advise.”*
- *“This help me a little, because I am not sure that my classmates assesst me correct, and I not sure that I assesst their work correct.”*
- *“I think it helps my know what my level in my classmates' eyes is.”*

Self-Assessment

Half of the respondents (50%) indicated that they had previous experience with self-assessment, and 38.6% indicated that they did not have previous experience with self-assessments. On the question of how helpful self-assessments were to their English language learning, 58.7% responded that it was “helpful” or “very helpful” and 24.3% indicated that self-assessment was only “a little helpful.” The tally of the responses is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Helpfulness of Self-Assessment

Rating	Responses
Very Helpful	21.4%
Helpful	37.1%
A little helpful	24.3%
Not helpful	4.3%
No response	12.9%

The participants' comments provided below demonstrate some of the participants' low regard for self-assessments.

- *“A person can't know own mistake in learning English.”*
- *“I think I assess myself is not objective.”*
- *“I know which is my weakness, but I cann't improve quickly.”*
- *“It help me to think more before doing the next step. It helps me understand myself better.”*

Self-Reflection

On the question of self-reflection, 60% of the respondents had previous experience with self-reflection and 27.1% did not, with 12.9% not responding to the question. In response to the question on the helpfulness of self-reflection in their language learning, 70% responded that it was “very helpful” or “helpful” with only 2.8% saying it was not. A summary of the responses is presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Helpfulness of Self-Reflection

Rating	Responses
Very Helpful	18.6%
Helpful	51.4%
A little helpful	20%
Not helpful	2.8%
No response	7.1%

Consistent with the relatively high percentage (70%) of the participants who said they found self-reflection helpful, most of the comments were very positive, and a sample is provided below:

- *“I can see things that I don’t know.”*
- *“Studying consolidation is very useful to me.”*
- *“Reflecting is very important because I know what is my level and what I need work about one topic.”*
- *“Can help teacher learn about the student’s learning”*
- *“I can review my learning.”*
- *“It can help you to remember some words and sentences that you have learnt.”*
- *“I can review information which I learned currently.”*

Student-Teacher Conferences

Out of the 70 participants, 65.7% of the respondents indicated that they had previous experience with Student-Teacher Conferences and 24.3% had not, while 10% did not answer the question. Regarding the helpfulness of Student-Teacher Conferences in English language learning, 84.3%, indicated that they found this aspect of the assessment model as “helpful” or “very helpful” and only 1.4% indicated that it was “not helpful.” The tallied results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Helpfulness of Conferences

Rating	Responses
Very Helpful	45.7%
Helpful	38.6%
A little helpful	4.3%
Not helpful	1.4%
No response	10%

A sample of the comments below are in line with the high numbers of participants who considered the Student-Teacher Conferences “helpful” and “very helpful.”

- “After talking with the teacher, I know my weakness, that I can work hard on this and do it better.”
- “Can help me to know more about my self.”
- “It’s a deep impressure for me.”
- “My teacher’s encourage is helpfully my mental.”
- “Teacher can give me many useful advices which is special for me.”
- “I’m very lazy and teacher stimulate my studing.”

The results for *Setting Language Learning Goals, Teacher Assessment, Peer Assessment, Peer Assessment, Self-Assessment, Self-Reflection and Student-Teacher Conferences* are summarized and presented in Figure 6.

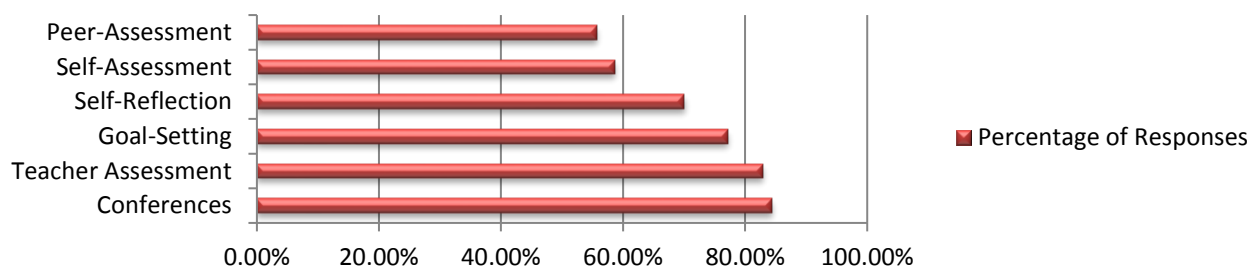


Figure 6. Ranking of the least and most helpful components of the PBLA

Helpfulness of the PBLA Model as a Whole

In response to the question if they found the PBLA model as a whole helpful in their language learning, 88.6% of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” and only 5.7% felt that it was not helpful. Another 5.7% were undecided in their opinion as to whether the assessment model helped their language learning. The results are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8
Helpfulness of the PBLA Assessment Model

Rating	Responses
Strongly Agree	27.1%
Agree	61.4%
Undecided	5.7%
Disagree	2.8%
Strongly Disagree	2.8%

Some of the comments that the participants provided were insightful:

- “The PBLA assessment can show my English learning progress, and it’s very comprehensive.”
- “I think my English has a big progress.”

- *“PBLA assessment model is new situation for our English language learning. I think can help us to study.”*
- *“PBLA assessment can help my English level to have big progress.”*
- *“Is very important because PBLA help to decide what area I need work hart.”*
- *“I can adjust by myself during time I study, which I didn’t get well I try more about this.”*

Discussion

This section provides an analysis and discussion of the results, including the emerging themes and patterns from the participants’ comments.

Setting Language Learning Goals

More than two thirds of the participants (77.1%) valued goal-setting in the classroom and considered it to be helpful to their English language learning. Goal-setting is a vital component of the PBLA assessment model as it encourages participants to close the gap between their current and desired performance (Black & Wiliam, 2006). Based on the participants’ comments, they perceived goal setting as helpful in three ways: First, it kept them focussed. Second, it was an incentive to do better. Third, it helped participants keep track of what they would have achieved. Finally, it gave participants an opportunity to develop transferable skills which could be used in other aspects of their lives.

Assessments: Teacher-assessments, self-assessments, and peer-assessments

Of the three assessments, teacher assessments were considered the most helpful, with self-assessments and peer-assessments receiving almost the same percentage in terms of how learners viewed their helpfulness in their learning of English. Out of the 70 participants, 82.9% said the teacher assessments were “helpful” and “very helpful,” with 58.5% saying the same for self-assessments and 55.7 % saying the same for peer assessments. Consistent with the numbers, participants felt teacher-assessments were most helpful. The literature is replete with evidence of how learners value teacher assessments more than any other form of assessments (Black and Wiliam, 2006; Hu, 2010; Nunan, 1988; 1989). A detailed analysis and discussion of each type of assessment is provided below, beginning with teacher assessments.

Teacher assessments. Teacher assessments garnered the most significant amount of positive perceptions, with 82.9% of the participants indicating that teacher assessments were “helpful” or “very helpful” for their language learning. The pattern that emerged from the participants’ comments indicated a strong belief in teachers’ input as being much more valuable for language learning than either self-assessments or peer assessments. Cultural factors were at play; the majority of participants were from China 57% (see Figure 2). Studies have affirmed that in China, the teacher is regarded as the expert and the fountain of knowledge (Biggs, 1996; Stevenson & Lee 1995; Stigler & Stevenson, 1991; Watkins & Bigg, 1996; Wang & Lin, 2009; Xiao & Dyson, 1999). The teaching and assessment processes are typically dominated by the teacher, so ultimately Chinese learners prefer and anticipate teacher-assessments over any other type.

Consistent with the above observation, participants' written comments reinforced the view that they considered the teacher as the only one who could help them in their language learning because the teacher is a professional and is a reservoir of knowledge. This comment from a participant expresses these sentiments and is representative of a common theme: *"Is very important opinion the profesinal to improve my level in English."*

Self-assessments. Self-assessments came second, after the teacher assessments with 58.5% of the participants saying they found self-assessments "very helpful" and "helpful." The low numbers could be attributed to the fact that a significant number of participants indicated that they did not have previous experience with self-assessments: 38.6%. Self-assessments were something new to these participants; consequently, they needed explicit teaching on the value of self-assessments and how to conduct the assessments. Closely related is the fact that perhaps teachers were not adequately preparing participants for self-assessments by explaining the value of self-assessments nor teaching learners how to do self-assessment. In the literature, scholars have found the need to explicitly teach learners how to conduct self-assessments. Black and Wiliam (1998), for instance, in describing school children, observed that "the main problem is that pupils can assess themselves only when they have a sufficiently clear picture of the targets that their learning is meant to attain" (p.143). Although Black and Wiliam's study focused on children, the same could be said for adult learners who participated in this study (see also, Brindley, 2001). It is safe to conclude that there is need for teachers to explain self-assessments clearly for learners to be able to do it and to appreciate its value.

Another contributing factor to the relatively low numbers who considered self-assessments helpful may have been cultural. It was difficult for some participants to overcome their preconceived notion that the teacher is the only expert. As a result, they could not consider themselves to be able to effectively analyze their own work.

Finally, the attitude of teachers towards learners assessing their own work is important as well. For instance, some teachers do not regard learners as capable of assessing their own work. Heritage (2007) observed that "if students are going to be successfully involved in monitoring and assessing their own and their peers' learning, then they need to be regarded by their teachers as partners in learning" (p.145). Teachers need to engage in introspective activities to analyze their own preconceived notions they bring to the notion of self-assessments and how these could influence their learners.

Peer Assessment. Out of the three assessments, peer assessment was considered the least helpful with only 55.7% saying it was "helpful" or "very helpful." We need to mention that the difference between self-assessment (58.5%) and peer assessments (55.7%) was only 2.8%. The same reasons that were applied to why learners did not find peer-assessments as helpful seemed to also be at play here. First, the number of participants who lacked previous experience with peer-assessments was significant, 41.4%. Second, akin to self-assessments, most participants came from backgrounds where learning was teacher-centred. Most participants were from China, where peer evaluation is not as valued as teacher assessment. Hu (2010) states that "...Chinese...students tend to be suspicious of activities like peer evaluation, as they believe it is the teacher's job to evaluate and that peers are not qualified to correct others' work" (p.100). The implication is that LINC teachers need to provide more guidance and support to learners on how

to engage in peer assessment, explicitly teaching about peer assessment and creating more opportunities for learners to see their peers as learning resources. In the same vein, Black and Wiliam (2006), for example, note that the topic of peer assessment is frequently overlooked by teachers and may leave teachers unsure as to how to prepare participants to engage in this assessment process.

One of the themes that emerged from the participants' comments about peer-assessments was that it was perceived as "not real assessments." This perception underscored a devaluation of this aspect as participants didn't feel that their peers, (nor themselves) were competent or qualified enough to provide feedback. In addition to the factors raised above, how the teacher presented the peer-assessments could be another factor as well as. The lack of adequate preparation of participants on the assessment criteria could affect their attitude towards the assessments. Furthermore, teachers may not have adequately trained the learners on how to give feedback, including what to focus on when giving feedback. This may mean that teachers need more adequate training on how to teach learners to conduct self-assessments.

The negative comments notwithstanding, there were positive comments about peer-assessments. Some participants indicated that they considered peer-assessments to be helpful in their language learning since it gave them a chance to know how their classmates viewed their performance; this was a source of motivation to meet the standards set by the teacher.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection was perceived as helpful, with 70% of the participants saying it was helpful or very helpful. Although the written comments were positive, they betrayed a lack of understanding of the main purpose of self-reflection, that is, the goal of raising awareness of how to learn. While the participants found the process helpful, their comments demonstrated that they did not understand what self-reflection is intended to be in the PBLA model. For instance, the comments showed that the participants viewed self-reflection as revision, and this skewed the numbers. Here are sample comments from the participants: *"It can help you to remember some words and sentences that you have learnt."* *"I can review information which I learned currently."*

Similar to peer-assessment and self-assessment, a lack of understanding of self-reflection requires more explicit teaching on the concept of self-reflection so learners can engage in the proper activity for the purpose it is intended. Steadman (1998), for instance, noted that "helping students learn how to learn requires extra effort on the part of faculty" (p.32). Echoing the same, O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) suggested that "ELL students may initially need more probing questions to get them to reflect upon their work and to express their evaluation of it" (p.43). In view of these observations, teachers should spend extra time during the self-reflection activities to challenge the participants to move away from more superficial notions of reflection.

Helpfulness of the PBLA Model as a Whole

Overall, participants perceived the PBLA Model as very helpful in their language learning. A combined total of 88.5% participants indicated that they found the model to be "very helpful" or

“helpful.” Based on the participants’ comments, repeated here for ease of reference, some participants held the perspective that the PBLA model could provide progress for their language learning. Consider the following comments, for example: “*PBLA assessment can help my English level to have big progress*” and “*I can adjust by myself during time I study, which I didn’t get well I try more about this*”.

Participants also indicated that the PBLA model could help guide their own learning activities as it enabled them to highlight areas they needed to work on by providing a comprehensive approach to assessing progress. This is captured in this comment which is representative of such perceptions: “*Is very important because PBLA help to decide what area I need work hart.*” The embedded and systematic different types of assessments facilitated improving language performance and allowed participants the opportunity to engage in the assessment process that aids in self-understanding.

A few participants (11.5%), however, responded negatively stating that PBLA activities wasted their class time. This means that teachers have to find a way to explain and demonstrate to learners that PBLA is part of their learning and they should not see it as separate from what they see or call “actual learning.” Along the same lines, Steadman (1998) identified that teachers were anxious that their learners would have this perception of PBLA.

Student-Teacher Conferences

In terms of numbers and comments, the student-teacher conference was by far the most valued aspect of PBLA. As mentioned above, the Student-Teacher Conference garnered the strongest support (84.3%). The respondents indicated strongly that they viewed this component as most helpful to their language learning. As such, this vital component should certainly continue to be embodied in the assessment model.

Student-Teacher Conferences are participant-centred, and involve a one-on-one meeting with the teacher, and this one-on-one meeting was a huge factor for the learners in perceiving the experience as helpful in their language learning. The teacher and the learner review artefacts in the portfolio, highlighting progress and discussing the strengths and weaknesses exhibited by the learner. The student-teacher conference provides information on what participants should work on to improve their English.

Recommendations

Teacher “buy-in” to the PBLA model is crucial, and the teachers’ own attitudes towards the model influences participants’ perceptions and experiences with portfolio-based assessment. Teacher buy-in stems from a more fulsome understanding of this assessment model as being integrated into the learning cycle. This calls for more training and refresher courses for teachers to enhance their teaching methods.

LINC teachers should be encouraged to incorporate much more explicit teaching of how to “do” peer-assessments, self-assessments, and self-reflections. Based on our findings, peer-assessments, self-assessments, and self-reflections were relatively unfamiliar to quite a

significant number of participants. Teachers therefore, need to be patient, persistent, and consistent with the introduction and implementation of these practices to ensure that participants feel supported and capable of engaging in these activities.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

It is important to mention the limitations of this study. The results may not be generalized beyond the research participants for several reasons: First, research was conducted in one organization, and the demographics of the participants were dominated by one particular group. The background of these participants may influence their perceptions of PBLA, and therefore skew the findings so that the findings may not be representative of ideas of others outside that group. Learners from a different country, for instance, may have different perceptions. Second, the participants were from one LINC level, *viz.*, LINC 5. Learners from different levels, for example, LINC 1, may have different perceptions. Finally, the teacher's buy-in from different organizations may be different due to different incentives and the way PBLA is implemented.

There is need for more research in PBLA with a larger group of language participants, covering more LINC levels, spanning across organizations, and even across several provinces. There should be a deliberate attempt to sample participants from diverse backgrounds. Such data would provide a more comprehensive picture of participants' perceptions of the model and its effectiveness. The same methodology used in this research or a different one could be adopted.

Typical with any type of portfolio assessment, there is the issue of consistency: intra-teacher consistency; inter-teacher consistency; and inter-organization consistency. Closely related to the issue of consistency is a single comment by one participant who stated that "not all assessments are good assessments." This calls for research into the consistency and the quality of assessments. Studies similar to the exploratory study by Mudzingwa (2015) could be carried out. Using empirical evidence, Mudzingwa (2015) demonstrated how the PBLA model has the potential to bring a standardized assessment regime. The exploratory study compared actual assessments of LINC teachers for both consistency (inter-teacher consistency) and whether they met the PBLA standards, with the goal of providing empirical evidence regarding the standardization of actual PBLA assessments, or a lack thereof. The sample was small and findings could not be generalized, hence the need for more research.

Conclusion

This research addressed an area of the PBLA model that has received no attention in the literature, namely, the learners' perceptions on the usefulness of the PBLA model in their English language-learning journey. Participants had mixed views about the usefulness of various individual components of the PBLA model. The Student-Teacher Conference component was considered the most useful, perhaps because it is the most learner-centred as it gives participants a chance to meet with the teacher one-on-one. Teacher-assessments were second, and this ranking could be because of the demographic of the participants; in general, learners from China, who were the majority in the study, view the teacher as the source of knowledge. Also, it is indisputable that teacher assessments were the most commonly used assessment methods in most teaching and learning settings, and these were common to all the participants. In contrast, self-

assessments and peer assessments were new to a relatively significant number of participants. This makes it imperative for teachers to explicitly teach how to conduct self-assessments and self-reflections and create opportunities for learners to see the value of these aspects. Overall, the participants indicated that PBLA was helpful in their language learning. In conclusion, it is hoped that this study will be an impetus for more studies of this nature since they inform us of the learners' perceptions of PBLA, and equally important, are a window into how teachers are implementing PBLA in different parts of the country.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

Please tick (☑) the best answer that describes your situation.

1. In your previous language classes, did you write learning goals for your language learning?
 Yes
 No
2. Does writing learning goals in PBLA help you in language learning?
 Yes
 No
3. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
4. Provide a reason for your rating:
5. In your previous language classes, did the teacher assess and provide feedback on your language learning?
 Yes
 No

6. Does teacher assessment and feedback in PBLA *help you* in language learning?
 Yes
 No
7. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
8. Provide a reason for your rating:
9. In your previous language classes, did students in the class assess each other's language learning?
 Yes
 No
10. Does student (peer) assessment in PBLA *help you* in language learning?
 Yes
 No
11. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
12. Provide a reason for your rating:
13. In your previous language classes, did you assess your own language learning?
 Yes
 No
14. Does assessing your own language learning in PBLA *help you* in language learning?
 Yes
 No
15. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
16. Provide a reason for your rating:
17. In your previous language classes, were you asked to think about and reflect on your language learning?
 Yes
 No
18. Does thinking about and reflecting on your learning in PBLA *help you* in language learning?
 Yes
 No
19. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
20. Provide a reason for your rating:
21. In your previous language classes, did the teacher meet with you to discuss your language learning?
 Yes
 No
22. Does meeting and discussing with the teacher in PBLA *help you* in language learning?
 Yes
 No
23. How helpful is it? 4 (very helpful) – 3 (helpful) – 2 (a little helpful) – 1 (not helpful)
24. Provide a reason for your rating:

25. Overall, how would you rate the *PBLA assessment model*? (tick one)

- Excellent
- Above Average
- Average
- Below Average
- Extremely Poor

Please provide a reason for your answer:

26. The *PBLA Assessment model* has helped improve your English language learning. (tick one)

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Please provide a reason for your answer:

Classification Information

The following questions will be used to group the information only. All information will be kept confidential.

Please tick () the best answer.

a. Location/Office:

- Redacted
- Redacted
- Redacted
- Redacted
- Redacted

b. Class Level:

- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

c. Age:

- 17-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

d. How long have you been studying in LINC?

- 0-1 month
- 2-3 months
- 4-6 months
- 7 months-1 year
- Over 1 year

e. Country of Origin:

- China
- Iran
- Korea
- Nepal
- Russia
- Other: _____

f. Level of Education:

- Some High School
- High School Completion
- Some Post-secondary
- Completed Post-secondary Certificate/Diploma
- Completed Bachelor's Degree
- Completed Master's Degree
- Completed Doctoral Degree

g. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other



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