

**DEVELOPING AN INTERPRETIVE ARGUMENT TO  
GUIDE THE USE OF PORTFOLIO-BASED  
LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN BEGINNING ADULT  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERACY CLASSES**

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## **Project Report: Developing an Interpretive Argument to Guide the Use of Portfolio-based Language Assessment in Beginning Adult English Language Literacy Classes**

Language and literacy challenges present significant barriers to the successful settlement of newcomers to Canada, particularly for those immigrants from at-risk populations such as beginning adult English language literacy learners (BELLs). BELLs who do not have well-developed literacy skills in their first language often have neither the formal learning strategies needed to approach the task of second language learning, nor the oral vocabulary and sentence patterns to support the process of literacy development in English (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). The lack of research-based evidence regarding how to best assess BELLs in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs creates challenges for funders, policymakers, and practitioners in ensuring that their assessment system positively impacts student learning and provides valid (meaningful, useful, and appropriate) assessment results. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to examine the validity of a federally mandated assessment in LINC entitled Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [CCLB], 2019) from BELLs' and their instructors' perspectives. PBLA is based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [CCLB], 2012). The Canadian Language Benchmarks are a set of national standards used to assist in the measurement and description of immigrants' English language skills that are divided into 12 levels (levels 1-4 = beginner, levels 5-8 = intermediate, levels 9-12 = advanced). This project will fill key gaps in the literature, as validity evidence to support the use of PBLA in LINC from BELLs' perspectives is currently lacking. The findings may also lead to recommendations for LINC funders, policymakers, and practitioners regarding

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best practices in PBLA and the extent to which inferences made from PBLA results are warranted for particular uses.

### **Background to the Study**

In education, portfolios are typically comprised of multiple forms of student work to document their growth in learning and skill development over time (Johnson, Mims-Cox, & Doyle-Nichols, 2010). Portfolios typically include student reflections along with an evaluative component. Teachers, students, and other stakeholders may use the information contained in the students' portfolios to make both low- and high-stakes decisions. For example, the low-stakes use of portfolios by teachers to provide students with feedback on their strengths and weaknesses or to encourage students to reflect on their learning is very different than the high-stakes use of portfolio results for accountability purposes or to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and/or programs.

PBLA is a high-stakes portfolio assessment initiative that involves the mandated use of portfolios for accountability purposes in all LINC programs (CIC, 2013). The Canadian federal government funds LINC for immigrants who have limited or no proficiency in an official language on arrival. LINC programs provide free, basic, English instruction to approximately 60,000 immigrants annually (Government of Canada, 2013). PBLA incorporates the following key features: baseline information (needs assessment, goal statement, entry levels and language samples, and an autobiography); Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB: CCLB, 2012) aligned assessment tasks and instructor feedback; peer and self-assessments; learner reflections; and an end of term standardized progress report and instructor-learner progress conference. In 2010 and 2011, PBLA was pilot tested in select LINC programs in Ottawa, Edmonton, Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton. In 2019-2020, PBLA will be fully implemented in all federally funded

LINC programs across the country (CCLB, 2019). Consequently, PBLA is a costly initiative that is having significant impacts on English language training and LINC programs and instructors across Canada.

According to CIC, two of the main purposes of PBLA are to “measure the impact of LINC...on participants’ language learning” (CIC, 2013, para. 3) and to “increase CIC’s ability to identify areas for improvement” (CIC, 2010a, IV). Unfortunately, there is limited empirical evidence to support the appropriateness of PBLA results for such high-stakes accountability purposes. PBLA was initially designed for formative purposes to guide and support ELLs’ learning processes by integrating instruction and assessment in LINC classes (Fox, 2014). Because LINC classes are tailored to individual students’ needs, LINC does not have a set curriculum, only curriculum guidelines (CIC, 2010b). Therefore, features of PBLA (tasks, task conditions, scoring, etc.) vary from one instructors’ class to another. Portfolio assessment results cannot be fairly compared across classes, schools, or programs unless there is a standardized or common assessment approach with shared assessment tasks and conditions for administration and evaluation (Bures, Barclay, Abrami, & Meyer, 2013; Fox, 2014; Koretz, Stecher, Klein, S, & McCaffrey, 1994). Standardized assessment requires high quality, consistent measures that can accurately capture student learning and support psychometric, measurement-driven inferences regarding program impact (*Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, 2014). PBLA in its current format, however, cannot be evaluated using conventional psychometric methods since it is not standardized (Fox, 2014) (i.e., the PBLA tasks, the time allotted to complete the tasks, the amount of help students receive, and the scoring and evaluation criteria are not predetermined). When assessment results are used in external reporting and high-stakes decision-making, the inferences made from the results can have serious consequences, particularly for

students, teachers, programs, and schools (Callahan, 2001; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991; Messick, 1994, 1996). Therefore, research is necessary to provide evidence of the validity of PBLA in the context of LINC in Canada.

### **Literature Review**

Currently, there is limited research on PBLA. Only four peer-reviewed studies (Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012, 2018), one MEd thesis (Haghighi, 2013), and one unpublished government report (Fox & Fraser, 2012, cited in Fox, 2014) exist. Ripley (2012) interviewed four LINC instructors, one CIC representative, and the developer of PBLA regarding the benefits, challenges, available resources, and recommendations for implementing PBLA. Haghighi (2013) interviewed 10 LINC instructors' about the usefulness and the challenges and benefits of PBLA. Fox (2014) interviewed five LINC instructors about their experiences with and trends in using PBLA over a two year period. Ripley (2018) surveyed 44 teachers about their experiences implementing PBLA over three years. From instructors' perspectives reported in Fox (2014), Haghighi (2013), and Ripley (2012, 2018), a key benefit of PBLA reported was the promotion of learner autonomy through goal setting and self-assessment. The main challenges were related to inadequate PBLA training and resources, and too much emphasis on summative assessment. After surveying 247 LINC instructors about PBLA and conducting two individual interviews with teachers, Desyatova (2018) concluded that due to PBLA's negative impacts on LINC teachers (e.g., increased workload and stress), the implementation of PBLA should be suspended. Although Fox and Fraser (2012, cited in Fox 2014) reported positive effects of PBLA on LINC students' time spent organizing, reviewing, and reflecting on their work, Fox and Fraser's report is not available to the public. Therefore, no published research studies have reported on PBLA from the learners' perspectives.

Because there is limited evidence available to support the use of PBLA for high-stakes purposes, such as evaluating English language learners' achievement or LINC programs and/or instructors, the purpose of the study reported in this article was to develop and pilot test the research instruments to examine the validity of PBLA from both beginning LINC literacy learners' and their instructors' perspectives.

### **Method**

This project has been divided into two phases: a local pilot study in year one and a main study in years two to three. The Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) pilot study reported in this paper supported a SSHRC Insight Grant application that was awarded in 2018 to fund the main study that is currently in progress. Four LINC literacy instructors and their students ( $n = 77$ ) were recruited from local adult ESL programs to participate in the pilot study.

### **Instruments**

Data collection instruments included (1) an online *LINC Instructor Background Questionnaire* to solicit information on each instructor's teaching experience, ESL courses and proficiency levels taught, educational background, TESL specialization(s), and the LINC program in which they teach; (2) an online *LINC Instructor Assessment and PBLA Practices Questionnaire*; (3) a *Student Background Questionnaire* to obtain information on the students' first language, education, age, age of arrival in Canada, and time spent studying ESL in Canada; (4) a pre-post *Student Assessment and Practices Questionnaire* (to ascertain the BELLS' assessment knowledge and practices, their perceptions of PBLA assessment practices, and the impact of PBLA on their language learning); (5) a semi-structured interview guide for use with students to elicit more depth and/or breadth regarding their perceptions of PBLA and the impact of PBLA on their language learning; and (6) a semi-structured instructor interview guide to

provide additional information about their PBLA practices. Then the student consent form, questionnaires, and interview guide were translated from English into the students' first languages.

### **Data Collection**

After receiving university and ESL program institutional ethics approvals, the literacy instructors working in two LINC programs were invited to participate in the study via an email sent through their ESL program administrators. The first four instructors who consented to participate were then asked to complete the online *Background Questionnaire* and the *LINC Instructor Assessment and PBLA Practices Questionnaire*. The instructors were asked to arrange for class time to have bilingual interpreters explain the consent form in the students' first languages. Those students who agreed to participate were then asked to (a) sign the consent form, and (b) complete the *Background and Student Assessment and Practices Questionnaires* with the assistance of bilingual interpreters. At the end of the term, the instructors were asked to arrange for class time so the researchers and the bilingual interpreters could assist the students in completing the post-*Student Assessment and Practices Questionnaire*. Then the instructors were asked to partake in an individual interview and to provide suggestions for student interviewees. Student interviews were subsequently scheduled and conducted with the assistance of bilingual interpreters.

### **Data Analyses**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated to summarize the data from the quantitative questionnaire items. The qualitative interview data were transcribed, translated into English, where necessary, and analyzed using applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey,

2012). In accordance with applied thematic analysis, the instructors' and students' responses were read line-by-line several times by the researcher and a research assistant; salient themes were identified in each reading, transformed into codes, confirmed in the other participants' responses (to ensure coding consistency and accurate representations of the participants' responses), verified for coding accuracy, grouped into subthemes which were then clustered into main themes, and quantified. The open-ended questionnaire responses were translated and analyzed using the same procedures.

## **Results and Discussion**

The pilot study data collection efforts contributed to the refinement of the main study logistics and the instructor and student questionnaires and interview guides. Analyses of the responses to the pilot study questionnaires and interviews generated numerous 28 codes that revealed several subthemes which were then grouped into both positive and negative implications of PBLA. What follows is a synopsis of the pilot study results from the instructor and student data.

### **Participant Characteristics**

**Instructors.** The four LINC literacy instructors were all females who had between two and ten years ( $M = 5$ ) of adult ESL teaching experience across regular and literacy classes and Canadian Language Benchmark levels. They all held a Master's degree in teaching English as a second language. Only one had taken a language assessment course as part of her university coursework.

**Students.** The 77 beginner adult ESL literacy learners (BELLs) ( $n_{\text{males}} = 27$ ,  $n_{\text{females}} = 50$ ) had 9 or fewer years of education in their first language ( $M = 5.6$ ); 25 reported no schooling at all. Their first languages included Amharic, Arabic, Karen, Hindi, Mandarin, Nepali, Oromo,

Punjabi, Spanish, Somali, Swahili, Tigrigna, and Turkish. Their mean age was 37 and their mean age of arrival in Canada was 34. On average, they reported studying English for 2 years. A subset of the students ( $n = 26$ ) representing each of the 13 first language groups volunteered for one-on-one interviews. The mean age of this subsample was 32.

### **LINC Instructor Assessment and PBLA Practices**

A brief overview of the positive and negative implications of PBLA from the instructors' perspectives including representative quotes from their responses to the questionnaire items and individual interview questions is provided below along with a brief discussion of the related literature on PBLA.

After implementing PBLA for a number of years, the two positive implications that all four LINC literacy instructors alluded to were their “increased understanding and use of the CLBs [i.e., the national standards outlined in the Canadian Language Benchmarks]” (P4) and a greater emphasis on “task-based teaching” (P1) as opposed to “textbook learning activities” (P1) in their classes. These are important implications of PBLA, as the alignment of instruction with national standards has the potential to promote the development of the key language competencies outlined in the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB, 2012). Unfortunately, these were the only positive implications of PBLA outlined by the instructors in this pilot study.

The number of negative responses clearly outweighed the positive ones and the instructors provided the greatest detail for the negative implications. None of the instructors viewed PBLA as a contributor to LINC program improvements over time. The main reason given by the instructors to support this conclusion was that PBLA was rolled out “without the resources, supports, and training” (P1) needed for effective implementation. One instructor stated that there has “not been enough training for instructors on how to create valid and reliable

assessments” (P3) and as a result she was frustrated with the “unrealistic demands of PBLA” (P3). Although all four instructors agreed that there needs to be a variety of assessments in LINC, “the expectation for 8 to 10 tasks in each skill [listening, speaking, reading, and writing] over a 14-week term is unreasonable” (P2), particularly in LINC literacy classes. The instructors all agreed that PBLA has created an increased or even “onerous workload for instructors” (P3). Increased preparation time/workload related to PBLA and the lack of resources were reported in all of the previous research on PBLA (e.g., Desyatova, 2018; Fox, 2014; Haghghi, 2013; Ripley, 2013, 2018). One instructor stated that “the demands of PBLA have created an *us versus them* attitude with LINC program administrators. It has divided the ESL community. Instructors are demoralized” (P3) and “inundated with paperwork” (P1). These results are in agreement with Desyatova’s (2018) findings concerning the negative effects of PBLA on teachers but extend them to PBLA’s destructive effects on the relationships between teachers and administrators.

Three of the four LINC literacy instructors in this pilot study also implied that PBLA negatively impacts the students’ learning, as the students “see the PBLA tasks, not as tasks, but as tests” (P1) that they need to put in their binders (P4), and the 32-40 required tasks/tests “cause many students to become anxious” (P1). “Students feel pressured to successfully complete every one of them” (P3). Ripley (2018) also found that PBLA is not beneficial for literacy and lower-proficiency learners because they find it overwhelming. Three of the teachers in this pilot also suggested that the large number of required PBLA tasks/tests “does not allow adequate time for skill-building tasks such as grammar and vocabulary” (P1). Therefore, PBLA contributes to “shallow learning as students do not develop the depth of grammatical, pragmatic, and socio-linguistic knowledge to be able to transfer their ability to complete one narrow task to other contexts...Students and teachers can only feel ready for one per week, especially literacy

students” (P3). What happens is “teachers teach to the task: they provide the scaffolding and teaching that students need to complete a task, and then the students perform well on the task, so it is assumed that the students can successfully complete that task and have developed the competency being assessed” (P2); however, within a few days or a couple of weeks, “the students forget what they learned” (P2) and no longer can adequately complete the task.

Three of the teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of PBLA and as a result believe that PBLA is negatively impacting their classroom practices. For example, one teacher stated “it takes far too much classroom time to organize and log the tasks in the [PBLA] binders” (P1), as BELs have yet to develop the English language skills to be able to organize and log the tasks in their binders without the assistance of the teacher. These teachers agreed that too much time is taken up by testing as “there are too many assessments and too much emphasis on summative assessment” (P2). These responses align with Fox’s (2014) findings and her call for greater attention to be given to formative assessment (i.e., assessment for learning) over the summative assessment of learning that is currently being promoted in LINC as a result of the mandatory requirements specified in PBLA.

The instructors all agreed that communicating feedback to students is complicated by the students’ limited language proficiency as “it is difficult to make the PBLA task assessment checklists and scoring rubrics literacy learner-friendly and targeted enough” (P3) to assist the BELs in making improvements in their performance. Real world tasks that provide rich and detailed feedback tailored to literacy learners’ English language proficiency levels are difficult to design. Even when tasks are created to meet the Canadian Language Benchmark competencies (see CCLB, 2012), the emphasis the learners place on whether they pass or fail the assessment takes precedence over learning and developing strategies for improvement. By and large, the

aforementioned negative implications of PBLA have made LINC instructors' jobs more stressful, a finding also reported by both Desyatova (2018) and Ripley (2018).

### **Student Assessment and PBLA Practices**

The students' responses to the questionnaire items and interview questions about their perceptions of PBLA were generally positive. They viewed the components of PBLA (goal setting, teacher feedback, self- and peer-assessment, and self-reflection) as helpful to their English learning process. The learners' responses to study questions related to their perspectives on each of these components of PBLA and their motivation to learn English are summarized and discussed in this section.

Most of the learners (78%) reported that they did not have any previous experience with setting English language learning goals prior to taking LINC. This was mainly due to the fact that they had not studied English previously. Those who had studied English stated that their goals in their previous English classes were to learn "the ABCs" (S28), "numbers" (S57), and "simple vocabulary" (S26); however, these goals did not reflect their specific learning needs, such as their need to learn how to complete authentic tasks such as filling out forms at a doctor's office. At the end of the LINC class, the students still reported superficial learning goals (e.g., "My goal is to learn English" [S32] or "to improve my skills" [S9]), which do not reflect the specific language and tasks that newcomers require to accomplish real-world tasks, which are outlined in the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB, 2012). This finding emphasizes the need to improve students' understandings of their weaknesses in terms of the language required to complete authentic tasks and for explicit instruction in how to turn these weaknesses into language learning goals. However, this process is difficult for instructors to communicate to BELLS given their emerging English language proficiency.

Regarding the use of assessment in PBLA, the students primarily *strongly agreed* (60%) or *agreed* (39%) that they used the feedback from their teachers on their PBLA tasks to improve their English. In terms of self-assessment, many of the learners *strongly agreed* (33%) or *agreed* (52%) that they used the PBLA task criteria to identify what was good about their work. Some of the comments from interviews with the learners regarding their ability to self-assess, however, indicated that they struggled with self-assessment because they knew they were making mistakes but could not pinpoint where the errors were or they did not understand which rules they were breaking. A learner's interview comment that reflects this view was "I don't know my errors" (S53). When asked about the opportunities for peer-assessment, several of the learners either *strongly agreed* (31%) or *agreed* (41%) that they were able to judge their peer's portfolio language tasks using the task criteria provided. A common sentiment among the BELLS who *strongly disagreed* (17%) or *disagreed* (6%) with this statement was they did not feel confident in giving others advice because "they were not able to make corrections" (S23) and they felt that "it was the teacher's job to provide feedback" (S16). The difficulties BELLS experienced with self-assessment and peer feedback were likely due to the fact that BELLS have difficulty reading and understanding the assessment criteria despite the fact that the teachers work very hard to try to communicate the meaning of the criteria to the students by providing them with simple words, short phrases, pictures, and symbols. These findings suggest that BELLS require level appropriate guidelines and carefully designed training before they can be expected to assess their own work or to provide constructive feedback on their peers' work. The development of appropriate guidelines and training are areas for development at the national level.

In terms of the BELLS' reflection on their PBLA tasks, the students' responses to the statement "I reflected on the strategies I used to improve my English language tasks" at the

beginning of the term (37% *strongly agree*, 47% *agree*, 12% *undecided*, 3% *disagree*, 1% *strongly disagree*) compared with those at the end of term (40% *strongly agree*, 55% *agree*, 3% *undecided*, 3% *disagree*) suggested that there was a slight shift to greater reflective practices over time. It is likely that the learner reflection requirement in PBLA increased the students' awareness of their use of language learning strategies.

With respect to motivation, all but one student agreed with the statement "I was motivated to learn English before taking LINC" (81% *strongly agree*, 18% *agree*, 1% *undecided*); however, by the end of the session some of the students were not as motivated to learn English (66% *strongly agree*, 25% *agree*, 1% *undecided*, 4% *disagree*, 3% *strongly disagree*). Perhaps those learners who were not able to progress to the next LINC literacy level because they had not yet met all of the PBLA requirements (32-40 assessment tasks in their PBLA binders) were demotivated by the arduous process.

Overall, the BELLS appeared to have an emergent understanding of PBLA. For example, when asked about the purpose of PBLA, most of the students (64%) replied that the purpose was "to keep all my work in one place" (S20) and "to review it later" (S13). These responses were not surprising, as many of the requirements of PBLA such as goal setting, teacher feedback, and self- and peer-assessment, and self-reflection were new to the learners; therefore, they were in the process of developing their understanding of the processes involved.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the findings highlighted in this report, key preliminary suggestions to facilitate the implementation of PBLA include the need for (a) an emphasis on learning oriented assessment (e.g., Turner & Purpura, 2015) rather than summative assessment as "portfolio assessment is most useful when it is used for formative purposes" (Fox, 2014, p. 81), and (b)

explicit developmentally appropriate instruction that targets the purpose of each of the individual components of PBLA in order to increase BELLS' understanding and use of PBLA. Although these are laudable recommendations, it is difficult for LINC literacy instructors to assist BELLS in developing their understanding of the complex concepts and processes involved in PBLA (e.g., goal setting, self-reflection, and self- and peer-assessment) when the students have beginning levels of English language proficiency and the teachers do not speak their students' first languages. Innovative practices need to be developed to address these difficulties. Unless the challenges of PBLA faced by the instructors at the implementation level and also those faced by the students at the conceptual level are adequately addressed, the full potential of portfolio assessment in LINC will not be realized and may even be at risk if researchers such as Desyatova (2018) and other practitioners continue to argue for the suspension of PBLA.

Over the next two years, findings from the main study will be used to develop an interpretive argument to guide the use of PBLA in beginning adult English language LINC literacy classes. Additional recommendations for LINC funders, policymakers, and practitioners regarding best practices in PBLA will be developed. In terms of future research, the impact of PBLA on student learning outcomes remains to be investigated. Research is also needed to identify the types and features of PBLA training that are most beneficial for teaching and learning in LINC literacy classes.

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