

# **Does Portfolio-Based Language Assessment Align with Learning-Oriented Assessment? Evidence from Literacy Learners and their Instructors**

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## Article abstract

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## **Does Portfolio-Based Language Assessment Align with Learning-Oriented Assessment? Evidence from Literacy Learners and their Instructors**

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### **Abstract**

A high-stakes Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) protocol that was fully implemented in all Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in 2019 requires instructors and students to set language-learning goals and complete, compile, and reflect on numerous authentic language tasks. Due to the language barriers incurred when communicating with beginner English-as-a-second-language literacy learners (BELLs), no PBLA research has been conducted with BELLs. To address this gap, we interviewed 26 BELLs ( $n = 2$  from 13 L1s) and their instructors ( $n = 4$ ) about their understanding and use of PBLA. Student interviews were conducted with the assistance of bilingual interpreters in the students' L1s. All the interviews were then transcribed and thematically analyzed in relation to PBLA's alignment with the six dimensions in Turner and Purpura's (2016) learning-oriented assessment framework: contextual, elicitation, proficiency, learning, instructional, interactional, and affective. Results have implications for optimizing learning, and task-based instruction and assessment practices in LINC.

### **Résumé**

Le protocole d'évaluation linguistique basé sur le portefeuille (Portfolio-Based Language Assessment - PBLA) à enjeux élevés a été entièrement mis en œuvre dans tous les programmes des cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada (Language instruction for Newcomers to Canada - LINC) en 2019. Ce protocole exige que les enseignants et les élèves fixent des objectifs d'apprentissage des langues et accomplissent, compilent et réfléchissent à de nombreuses tâches linguistiques authentiques. En raison des barrières linguistiques rencontrées lors de la communication avec des apprenants débutants en anglais langue seconde peu littératisés, aucune recherche PBLA n'a été menée auprès des apprenants. Pour combler cette lacune, nous avons interviewé 26 apprenants ( $n = 2$  de 13 L1) et leurs enseignants ( $n = 4$ ) au sujet de leur compréhension et de leur utilisation du PBLA. Les entretiens avec les élèves ont été menés avec l'aide d'interprètes bilingues dans les L1 des élèves. Ensuite, tous les entretiens ont été transcrits et analysés de manière thématique en relation avec l'alignement du PBLA avec les six dimensions du cadre d'évaluation axé sur

l'apprentissage de Turner et Purpura (2016): contextuel, élicitation, compétence, apprentissage, pédagogique, interactionnel et affectif. Les résultats ont des implications pour l'optimisation de l'apprentissage et les pratiques d'enseignement et d'évaluation basées sur les tâches dans l'enseignement de la langue pour les nouveaux arrivants au Canada.

### **Does Portfolio-Based Language Assessment Align with Learning-Oriented Assessment? Evidence from Literacy Learners and their Instructors**

Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) is a mandatory, national, task-based assessment protocol in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. LINC is a federally funded settlement language program that provides free basic language training in English for adult immigrants who are permanent residents or Convention refugees “to facilitate social, cultural, economic and political integration into Canada” (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2010, p. 1). LINC programming is guided by the Canadian Language Benchmarks<sup>1</sup> (CLBs) (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012) and its prescribed teaching approach is task-based language teaching (TBLT) and assessment in the form of PBLA (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015). The CLBs are a set of competency-based language standards that describe the characteristics of real-world listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks across 12 levels of language ability (CLB 1-12)<sup>2</sup>. The levels are categorized into three stages: Stage I, beginner - CLB 1 to 4; Stage II, intermediate - CLB 5 to 8; Stage III, advanced - CLB 9 to 12. The CLBs are primarily informed by Bachman and Palmer’s (2010) model of language ability; therefore, LINC programming focuses on developing learners’ grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge, functional knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, and strategic competence through needs-based instruction that is both learner-centered and task-based. The theoretical framework for the CLBs summarizes Skehan’s (1998) definition of “tasks as activities in which meaning is primary, there is a goal to be met, evaluation is outcome-based, and there is a real-world relationship” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2015, p. 46). Each 14-week LINC session begins with a language needs assessment that is based on the CLBs to identify the language skills, and topics, and tasks that are relevant to the students’ settlement needs (e.g., housing – locate words on a map to find an address; banking – read and follow instructions on an automated bank machine; employment – fill-out an application form). Then the identified topics and corresponding tasks define the TBLT curricula, lessons, and assessments that the LINC instructors develop for their classes each session. Given the tenets of TBLT and research which demonstrates positive effects of task-based learning on second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis et al., 2020), the students in LINC classes presumably engage in meaningful communication during the completion of tasks in which they have the opportunity to interact with other students, negotiate meaning, and receive and attend to both peer and teacher corrective feedback; therefore, LINC programming has the potential to encourage SLA.

A number of proponents of TBLT (e.g., Bygate, 2020; East, 2015; Ellis, 2015; Van den Branden, 2015) have called for more classroom-based research on TBLT, and the use of TBLT and portfolios with adults “who are learning how to read and write for the first time in a new language” (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults [LESLLA], 2020) has yet to be explored. The TBLT approach in LINC is guided by the

PBLA protocol which specifies the task-based assessment requirements in LINC programs. Although there is some research on PBLA in LINC, no research has been conducted with LINC literacy learners. The study described in this paper was designed to address these gaps by analyzing PBLA through the lens of Learning Oriented Assessment (Turner & Purpura, 2016) and to provide recommendations for resolving issues related to TBLT introduced by PBLA in LINC. This study is part of a larger project in which we are examining evidence of the validity of PBLA in LINC Literacy classes.

### **Background to PBLA and LINC Literacy**

Prior to the implementation of PBLA in LINC, Makosky (2008) reported that LINC exit assessment results were not comparable across programs. Then in a subsequent report, Nagy and Stewart (2009) recommended that the LINC assessment system be revised to include an “informal assessment component” (p. 17) and a “formal standardized assessment component” (p. 19). Makosky’s and Nagy and Stewart’s (2009) reports led the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2019) to conclude that “assessment in LINC programs was ad hoc and inconsistent” (p. 2). Despite Nagy and Stewart’s recommendation that the portfolio approach to language assessment should be “intended primarily as an instructional tool due to the difficulties in making it precise and reliable enough to produce accurate scores” (p. 15), a finding well documented in the portfolio assessment literature (e.g., Schutz & Moss, 2004), Citizenship and Immigration Canada (now Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) decided to introduce PBLA as a high-stakes accountability measure to provide the government with “reports on student progress and the immediate outcomes of language training” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010, p. x) and “to identify areas for improvement” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010, p. xi) in LINC. This decision resulted in the phased rollout of PBLA in LINC programs across the country from 2010 to 2019. In a 2013 operational bulletin, the federal government added the following purposes of PBLA: “to address the need for a standardized in-class language assessment protocol in LINC” and “to measure the impact of LINC...on participants’ language learning” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013a, para 2-3). PBLA is now the mandated assessment protocol in all LINC programs throughout the country. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (<https://www.language.ca/home/>) provides LINC instructors with online PBLA training, resources, and support (<https://www.language.ca/workshopstraining/pbla-training/>).

Because Canada welcomes immigrants and refugees with diverse educational backgrounds (Statistics Canada, 2020), the LINC student population reflects this diversity; therefore, the students present a wide range of literacy skills and learning needs. Some students are highly educated professionals who possess university degrees from their home countries but require practical English language instruction. These learners will be enrolled in regular LINC classes, as they can use their first language (L1) literacy skills to support their English learning. Other LINC students have never attended school and as a result, have had limited opportunities to learn to read and write in their L1. These beginner English as a second language literacy learners (BELLs) will be enrolled in a LINC Foundations course to develop beginning literacy skills and then progress through specialized CLB 1-4 LINC Literacy classes. In both the regular and literacy LINC classes,

instruction is task-based and learners' progress is assessed via tasks according to the procedures mandated in the PBLA protocol.

### **The PBLA Protocol and TBLT**

Portfolios are one of a number of assessment tools that may be used to gather assessment data to inform teaching and learning in the TBLT classroom (Nunan, 2004). According to the *PBLA Practice Guidelines* (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019), instruction in LINC begins with a learner needs assessment followed by the collection of baseline data on language proficiency. Then over the course of the 14-week LINC session, the instructors collaborate with their students to set language learning goals and complete, reflect on, and compile a minimum number of assessments (16 in Literacy classes: 4 in each of the 4 skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing) that reflect a range of real-world tasks. Students are presented with a PBLA binder, titled the *Language Companion*, where they keep their language learning goals, assessment tasks, and feedback from their teacher and peers. This binder serves as the repository for the students' portfolio. Throughout the term, students are supposed to reflect on their learning and develop strategies for improvement. The instructors are expected to design lessons to meet their students' learning and settlement needs and also instruct students in the purpose and process of PBLA. At the end of each term, the instructors collect and evaluate the students' portfolios; assign final benchmark levels to the students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing; write student progress reports and then meet with each student individually to explain his/her report using the evidence in his/her binder.

The PBLA protocol reflects a weak version of TBLT (East, 2015) in which tasks are central to language learning but may involve direct teaching of aspects of language ability outlined in the CLBs, as opposed to a strong version where task completion is all that is needed to promote language development. It is assumed that the instructional sequence outlined in the PBLA Guidelines will assist learners in transferring their learning from one task to the next despite the fact that research (e.g., Benson, 2016) suggests that carefully sequenced practice and multiple task trials are needed to promote task-related language transfer.

### **PBLA and Assessment Theory**

The PBLA protocol integrates features of formative assessment (e.g., Black & William, 1998), assessment for learning (e.g., Leahy et al., 2005), and teacher-based assessment (e.g., Davison & Leung, 2009). Although the authors of the PBLA Guidelines (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019) do not cite a definition of assessment for learning, they state that "the primary purpose of assessment *for* learning is to provide feedback that will promote learning" (p. 4, emphasis in original). Feedback that "moves learners forward" (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 20) by causing them to think about their learning is one of Leahy et al.'s five assessments for learning strategies that are broadly reflected in the PBLA Guidelines. The other four strategies are "clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks; activating students as the owners of their own learning; activating students as instructional resources for one another; and engineering effective classroom

discussions” (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 20). For unknown reasons, the authors of the Guidelines replaced the last strategy with incorporating “classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019, p. 8). To justify the PBLA protocol, the authors also selectively adapted ideas from classroom-based and teacher-based assessment (e.g., Davison & Leung, 2009). For example, they cited eight of ten advantages of teacher-based assessment outlined by Davison and Leung (2009) (i.e., scope, authenticity, reliability, fairness, feedback, washback, teacher and learner empowerment, professional development [Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019, p. 8]), but the authors of the Guidelines neglected to discuss the other two advantages, validity and practicality, which are key advantages of classroom-based assessment. Although the assessment theories and literature considered in the Guidelines highlight the importance of engaging in assessment practices that lead to language learning (e.g., goal-setting, monitoring and evaluating performance, and reflecting on feedback and learning), the authors also neglected to discuss research on portfolios and portfolio assessment to support PBLA. The authors do, however, mention that “to ground the [PBLA] initiative in best practice, [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada] looked to other uses of portfolio assessment to document language learning” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019, p. 2) such as the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2011), which is described in the ensuing section.

### **Types of Portfolios**

Portfolios may be used to display students’ best accomplishments or achievements (i.e., showcase portfolios), but they are more typically used as working portfolios that are comprised of multiple forms of evidence documenting growth in students’ learning over time (Johnson et al., 2010). Students usually select their best work to enter into their showcase portfolios, whereas both instructors and students select the entries to be included in working portfolios. A less common type of portfolio is the standardized evaluation or assessment portfolio, where entries and criteria for administering portfolio tasks, and the methods for scoring, reporting, and evaluating portfolio materials are predetermined by a program or some external certification body (Valencia & Calfee, 1991). PBLA contains elements of the three types of portfolios (i.e., a showcase, working, and evaluation portfolio, all in one) and is labelled “a learning portfolio” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019, p. 9).

In contrast to PBLA, the English Language Portfolio, reported in Little (2009), is essentially a showcase portfolio (not a working or evaluation portfolio). It is organized in three sections: a language passport (to document all the learner’s second/foreign language levels, self-assessment, and intercultural experience); a language biography (to set goals and reflect on all language learning experiences); and a dossier (to showcase L2 skills) (Little, 2002). The English Language Portfolio is available in 39 languages and is referenced to the language proficiency levels and competencies outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2011). The work in the English Language Portfolio dossier component is selected based on the owner’s judgement of what best represents his/her language proficiency, and sections of the English Language Portfolio are typically completed in the portfolio owner’s L1, which is very different from PBLA, where reflection, goal setting, and assessment (i.e., self-, peer-,

instructor-assessment of listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks) are conducted in the portfolio owner's second/additional language (i.e., English). PBLA also requires students to set goals and reflect on and evaluate their work, but BELLS may face challenges with these processes, as even at the university level, Delandshere and Arens (2003) found that students often had difficulty reflecting on their learning and self-assessing or discussing their evaluation portfolio materials with a teacher or peer.

### **Studies of PBLA in LINC**

Most of the research on the implementation of PBLA in LINC has focused on the benefits and challenges of PBLA from the instructors' perspectives (Desyatova, 2018, 2020; Fox, 2014; Mohammadian, 2016; Ripley, 2012, 2018). Key benefits include increased teacher knowledge of and consistency in the use of the CLBs and TBLT (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012, 2018), and improved lesson planning and teacher accountability (Fox, 2014). The main challenges are increased workload (Desyatova, 2018, 2020; Fox, 2014; Mohammadian, 2016; Ripley, 2012, 2018) and an over-emphasis on summative assessment that is required for evaluation purposes and end-of-term reporting in LINC (Fox, 2014; Mohammadian, 2016; Ripley, 2018).

Few studies (e.g., Drew & Mudzingwa, 2018; O'Shea, 2017) have examined LINC students' perceptions of PBLA. In these studies, the learners were enrolled in intermediate level (CLB 5) or higher regular LINC classes, they were generally well-educated, and the data were collected in English. Drew and Mudzingwa (2018) surveyed 70 students and found that the students generally valued PBLA and teacher assessments, but had difficulty assessing their own work. O'Shea (2017) conducted an action research project with 18 intermediate (CLB 6) LINC students and reported that the students valued aspects of PBLA such as goal setting but were ambivalent towards self-assessment and teacher feedback. Both Drew and Mudzingwa's and O'Shea's findings represent the perceptions of intermediate L2 learners who were able to use their L1 literacy skills to support their English language learning. However, the perceptions of BELLS are not represented in the PBLA literature and PBLA has not been examined through the lens of an assessment framework that could be used to inform TBLT/A in LINC.

### **Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA)**

Turner and Purpura's (2016) LOA framework has three main strengths for informing TBLT and PBLA in LINC. First, it is a comprehensive assessment framework that both extends and subsumes the assessment theories that underlie PBLA (i.e., formative assessment, assessment for learning, teacher-based assessment). In the LOA framework, L2 learning in the classroom is conceptualized as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) "where cognitive, sociocognitive, and sociocultural factors all contribute to learning" (Turner & Purpura, 2016, p. 257).<sup>3</sup> Example factors reflecting each of these perspectives on SLA include conscious thinking, problem-solving, and their associated processes (e.g., perception, attention, and memory - see Ellis, 2006), social interaction that is grounded in cognition (Atkinson, 2014), and collaborative dialogue (Swain & Lapkin, 2013) that occurs in communities of practice where members of the community (in this case L2 learners) share information and help one another learn (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

The LOA framework (Turner & Purpura, 2016) consists of seven interrelated dimensions that impact L2 learning, instruction, and assessment:

1. Contextual: socio-political, cultural, situational, and environmental forces
2. Elicitation: language elicitation (e.g., spontaneous or planned) used to infer student performance
3. L2 proficiency: instructors' and learners' understandings of L2 learning targets, topical content, and task criteria
4. Learning: instructors' and learners' knowledge of learning theories and cognition, including the role of feedback and learner self-regulation which involves goal setting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's thoughts, feelings, behaviours, motivation, and the learning environment
5. Instructional: instructors' L2 pedagogical, topical, and content knowledge
6. Interactional: interaction patterns involving feedback that stimulate unplanned scaffolded repair sequences and lead to learning
7. Affective: learners' emotions, beliefs, personal characteristics, attitudes, and motivation.

The second main strength of LOA is that it is sensitive to both the context of learning and who is doing the learning (Leung, 2020; Leung et al., 2018). These facets of learning were not adequately considered when PBLA was initially conceptualized (e.g., the difficulty implementing Leahy et al.'s (2005) five assessment for learning strategies—described in the PBLA and Assessment Theory section above—with BELLS in LINC literacy classes). The third strength is that LOA eliminates the tensions between assessment for learning and assessment of learning because, in LOA, the emphasis shifts from grades to learning, and all assessment evidence can and should be used to inform teaching and learning. A better understanding of BELLS' and their instructors' perceptions and use of PBLA through the lens of LOA has the potential to inform TBLT in LINC and improve the efficacy of PBLA. Therefore, we addressed the following research question: what are the BELLS and their instructors' perceptions and uses of PBLA through the lens of LOA?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Four female LINC literacy instructors with between 2 and 10 years of experience teaching in LINC ( $M = 4.6$  years,  $Mdn = 3.25$ ) volunteered to be individually interviewed as part of our study. They each held a master's degree in teaching English as a second language. Twenty-six of their students ( $n = 26$ , 19 female, 7 male;  $Mdn$  age = 32.5) volunteered to participate in an individual interview in their L1 (Amharic, Arabic, Karen, Hindi, Mandarin, Nepali, Oromo, Punjabi, Spanish, Somali, Swahili, Tigrigna, Turkish). All of the learners were beginners (CLB 1L,  $n = 7$ ; CLB 2L,  $n = 6$ ; CLB 3L,  $n = 5$ ; CLB 4L,  $n = 8$ ) who had limited literacy skills in their L1. Their limited L1 literacy skills were the result of never having the opportunity to attend school or experiencing interrupted schooling. All of the students reported having less than 9 years of education ( $Mdn = 4.5$  years).



## **Instruments and Procedures**

We developed two semi-structured interview guides to inquire about the BELLS' and their instructors' understanding and use of PBLA. The student interview guide had five open-ended questions (see Appendix A) and the instructor guide had 11 open-ended questions (see Appendix B).

After receiving institutional ethics approvals (university and LINC program), we contacted a LINC program administrator to request that she forward an email containing a letter of invitation to the LINC literacy instructors at the institution in which our research was conducted. Four instructors volunteered to participate in the study. They each provided us with a list of their students' L1 and a date and time when we were permitted to visit their class to invite their students to participate in the study. With the assistance of bilingual interpreters, we explained the purpose of the study and received informed consent from the students to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. Bilingual interpreters and members of the research team conducted the student interviews in the BELLS' L1s. The student interviews, which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, were recorded, translated into English, and transcribed by the interpreters. The instructor interviews which lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours were conducted by the first author. Recordings of these interviews were transcribed and verified for accuracy by the researchers and research assistants.

## **Data Analysis**

The interview transcriptions were thematically analyzed by following the procedures outlined in Braun and Clarke (2012). First, we independently read the transcripts in their entirety to familiarize ourselves with all of the participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions. Second, we performed structural coding (Saldaña, 2016) of the participants' responses to identify segments of the data that mapped onto each of the dimensions of Turner and Purpura's (2016) LOA framework. Then we met to reach a consensus on the structural coding; the few disagreements were resolved through discussion. After agreeing on the structural coding, we met several times to collectively review the coded segments in order to identify, refine, and name the themes that emerged from our analysis of the data coded in each of the seven LOA dimensions.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **BELLS and Their Instructors' Perceptions of PBLA Through the Lens of LOA**

Evidence of all seven dimensions of the LOA framework (Turner & Purpura, 2016) was found in the BELLS' and their instructors' interview responses. In the following subsections, through the use of illustrative quotes, we address our research question by discussing the themes that were drawn from the interview data segments coded in each dimension of LOA. We present the themes in Table 1 and italicize the themes throughout the ensuing sections so they may be readily identified.

**Table 1***Themes That Impact the Seven Dimension of LOA in LINC*

LOA Dimension	Themes
Contextual	<i>Accountability</i> <i>The complex assessment requirements</i> <i>BELLs' complex lives and learning needs</i>
Elicitation	<i>Accountability</i> <i>The prioritization of planned elicitations</i>
L2 Proficiency	<i>Accountability</i> <i>The lack of a LINC curriculum</i> <i>BELLs' emergent English language, literacy, and scholastic skills</i>
Learning	<i>Accountability</i> <i>BELLs' complex lives and learning needs</i> <i>The lack of explicit reference to current theories of learning and cognition and TBLT frameworks</i>
Instructional	<i>Accountability</i> <i>The instructors' knowledge and interpretation of the CLB descriptors</i> <i>The instructors' limited ability to implement their knowledge of reading instruction</i>
Interactional	<i>Accountability</i> <i>The class time available for spontaneous teacher-learner and learner-learner interactive repair sequences</i>
Affective	<i>Accountability</i> <i>BELLs' feelings, behaviours, and physiological responses</i>

***Contextual Dimension***

The context in which PBLA is situated includes a range of macro-and micro-elements that shape learning, instruction (TBLT), and assessment practices (PBLA) in LINC. The primary macro socio-political force that drives PBLA is the federal government which funds LINC. Funder *accountability* was the central or über theme that impacts LOA in LINC. *Accountability* in LINC is multifaceted in that multiple requirements are imposed by a hierarchy of stakeholders (i.e., the federal government, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, the institutions that offer LINC programming, and the instructors). At the highest level of this accountability hierarchy, the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada mandates that LINC programs must implement the PBLA protocol. At the second level, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2019) stipulates that Literacy students complete a minimum of 16 formal task-based assessments (i.e., four listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks) in each 14-week session. Our findings suggest that this is “too many” (T2) for BELLs. The sheer number of

formal assessment tasks effectively reduces PBLA to “a numbers game – how many can I collect? (T4). As T3 stated, “PBLA is supposed to make us accountable, but it's become a micromanaging effort. It's very much top-down and overly prescriptive. I feel I spend more time assessing than teaching.” And “there's so much paperwork that goes with it” (T2). This sentiment of too many assessments in a short period of time was reiterated in the following representative quotes from students: “The course is rather short for so many assessments” (Student 6 [S6]). “PBLA is time consuming” (S15). The time and energy spent documenting evidence of task completion for funder accountability leads to learner and instructor “assessment fatigue” (T4). These comments about PBLA from both the instructors and the BELs suggest that the current focus on the quantity of formal assessments contributes to an overemphasis on the assessment of learning (AoL) for accountability purposes rather than on quality assessment for learning (AfL). Other researchers (Fox, 2017; Leung et al., 2018) have also noted that *accountability*-based assessment systems in educational contexts that try to focus on AfL compromises the learning potential of the assessment system.

A second funding requirement mandated by the federal government (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015) is that LINC programs must follow the LINC National Placement and Progression Guidelines (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013b). These Guidelines state that as a general rule, learners must demonstrate “the level of communicative ability associated with most or all (traditionally, 70 to 100%) of the descriptors for the benchmarks assigned in each of the four skills” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013b, p. 3). This rule is cited in the PBLA Guidelines (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019, p. 3) and contributes to the *complex assessment requirements* in LINC. In its efforts to implement this rule and remain accountable to the government and the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, the LINC program in which our data were collected instituted a policy that “students need at least 70% to pass each task and to pass 70% of the tasks in each skill. Then we can be sure that they can move up” (T1). On each task, 70% refers to the minimum percentage of the analytic criteria on the instructor-designed rubric that students need to meet to pass the task. The scores on the analytic criteria in combination with a holistic judgement (yes/no task completion) are used to determine whether the students have passed the task. However, all four instructors reported that it was challenging to ensure that the tasks assess all of the CLB descriptors (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012) across all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and competency areas (interacting with others, comprehending or giving instructions, getting things done, reproducing information in writing, and comprehending or sharing information). This finding supports Wigglesworth and Frost's (2017) argument that task-based assessment is “one of the most complex forms of assessment” (p. 129).

The instructors also found it difficult to communicate these *complex assessment requirements* to their students:

In one term, it's not very common that I am able to get through all of the benchmark descriptors and check them at least once, or two, or three times to show that the students can consistently do them, or to convey this to the students: “Okay, you need to be able to demonstrate all of the competencies in all four skill areas, and show me that it's not a fluke, that you can do them consistently. It is very

*complex* for even us to understand, let alone to try to convey to a literacy learner who doesn't share the same language or educational background. (T4)

The complexity of the PBLA assessment requirements was also captured in the students' responses to the interview question, "Can you teach me about PBLA?": Common responses were "I don't know how to teach you about PBLA. I know that I need to put all the exams in the binder" (S8). "I am not sure" (S13). "There are different sections [in the binder] where each paper goes and papers that we must fill out that should be organized" (S10).

Government *accountability* at the classroom level was also recognized by both the BELLS and their instructors. For example, the BELLS described the binder that serves as the repository for their portfolio as an "important document where we place and store our tests" (S3), so that "the government can open the binder and see all of our tests" (S22). Because the students' binders could be externally audited at any point in time, "the binder always remains in the school" (S23). T2 affirmed that the institution in which she worked "actually had [a government employee] come into our classes to do binder inspections." This external action communicated the high-stakes nature of the portfolios/binders to the students but limited their access to their work. Also, because "the teacher decides what goes into the binder," (S18), the "students can't say, 'I'm really proud of this [task], I want it to go in my binder.'" The need to collect so many tasks makes everything go into the binder whether the students did well on them or not" (T3). These student and instructor reflections illustrate their perceptions of PBLA as a government *accountability* tool that they have limited control over. Although formal evaluations of PBLA task performance have the potential to inform learning through learner activities such as the regular review of the feedback they have received on these evaluations, the ability to facilitate such activities is diminished when external audits prevent the students from taking their portfolios home to review and limit students' ownership of their portfolios. These findings suggest that the PBLA portfolio is actually an evaluation portfolio rather than a learning portfolio (i.e., a showcase, working, and evaluation portfolio all in one) as claimed by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2019). The PBLA portfolio is also unlike the English Language Portfolio (Little, 2009), as BELLS neither self-select learning artefacts that showcase their language proficiency nor are they provided with competency statements and self-assessments to complete in their L1.

An important micro-contextual factor that has implications for LOA in LINC is the learners' personal attributes (e.g., their background characteristics and experiences). The instructors recognize that BELLS have *complex lives and learning needs* that may inhibit the effectiveness of PBLA as a learning tool:

The reality is that they may never look at their portfolios again. They don't have time. They have kids and all sorts of other settlement issues that they have to deal with. I understand the theory behind PBLA and it might work with regular students, but literacy students are different. (T3)

They need more support. They need a supportive environment. They need more emotional support. Everything has to be more supportive. (T1)

Overall, the above findings demonstrate that *accountability* measures introduced by institutional forces (i.e., government, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, and LINC program) contribute to *the complex assessment requirements* which, in turn, interact with the learners' *complex lives and learning needs* to shape LOA in LINC. The government mandated implementation of PBLA has compelled instructors and BELLS to shift the focus of their assessment practices from improving learning to gathering accountability evidence. The overemphasis on assessment of learning reduces the instructors' time and ability to respond to vital micro-contextual factors such as the students' current settlement and unique learning needs; therefore, the instructors "don't think PBLA serves BELLS well" (T2). While Fox (2014) identified accountability as a benefit of PBLA, the instructors and BELLS in our study appeared to view the overemphasis on *accountability* as a barrier to student learning. The context in which PBLA is situated and the overarching über theme of *accountability* was also found to influence the other six interrelated dimensions of LOA that are discussed in the ensuing subsections.

### ***Elicitation Dimension***

Spontaneous and planned language elicitations are valuable methods for gathering assessment data that can be used to promote learning (Turner & Purpura, 2016). Planned elicitations include formal assessments/tests/quizzes and pre-prepared textbook/ teacher-generated activities, whereas spontaneous elicitations occur during impromptu talk that involve questioning, feedback, and the "co-construction of meaning/topic/form" (Turner & Purpura, 2016, p. 264). Although both spontaneous and planned language elicitations were used by the four instructors in our study to infer student performance in the LINC classroom, due to the PBLA *accountability* requirements, planned elicitations are prioritized in LINC. *The prioritization of planned elicitations* was a salient theme noted in this dimension, as the instructors are pressured to emphasize planned language elicitations in order to meet PBLA requirements:

We have about 60 teaching days a term, and to complete the required number of assessments, we need to do one every few days. I feel like in practice, the students don't really have a lot of time to practice the skills before they're suddenly assessed on them. (T4)

The PBLA requirements limit class time for follow-up instructional activities (e.g., focus-on-form, task repetition) that could provide opportunities for spontaneous language elicitations where learning is facilitated through teacher and peer assistance. According to Turner and Purpura (2016), it's those unplanned or spontaneous elicitations that help students "notice, understand, remember, analyze, internalize, and use learning targets" (p. 263).

When describing PBLA, the BELLS reported that the PBLA "tasks are tests" (S17) and they were very concerned about passing the tasks: "I don't want to fail" (S6). Due to the value placed on formal PBLA planned elicitation task performances and to cope with the number of task-based assessments, BELLS merely "memorize for the PBLAs and forget two weeks later" (T2). This type of planned language elicitation without the

opportunity to close the learning gaps, cannot be considered learning-oriented because it does not result in sustained “L2 system change” (Turner & Purpura, 2016, p. 260). In effect, the learning potential of task-based assessment in PBLA is diminished because instructors and learners view the tasks through the lens of high-stakes testing. As Leung et al. (2018) suggest, when assessment for learning is embedded into a high-stakes assessment context this compromises “the usefulness and learning potential of the assessment” (p. 79). Although PBLA is framed in formative assessment and assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998), in practice, *the prioritization of planned elicitations in LINC* promotes assessment of learning over assessment for learning.

### ***L2 Proficiency Dimension***

The L2 proficiency dimension encompasses the learning targets, topical content, and criteria that underlie the curriculum and thereby instruction and assessment (Turner & Purpura, 2016). Successful PBLA task completion relies on the learners’ L2 proficiency and both the instructors’ and learners’ understanding of the task topic, type/response format, skills (receptive/productive/scholastic), and conditions. In a 14-week LINC session, the instructors find it challenging to “develop the depth of grammatical, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic knowledge to allow students to transfer their learning from one narrow task to other tasks and contexts” (T3). Long (2016) also identified the “transferability of task-based abilities” as “a real issue” in TBLT (p. 28). The roots of this issue in the context of LINC Literacy are (a) *the lack of a LINC curriculum* that specifies a series of sequenced tasks which incorporate relevant linguistic and scholastic learning targets, and (b) *the BELLS’ emergent English language, literacy, and scholastic skills*.

Although there are LINC curriculum guidelines that have been developed by a number of LINC providers, the instructors expressed a need for an explicit LINC Literacy curriculum for BELLS: “I feel that there needs to be a comprehensive skill-building curriculum” (T4). T3 described the issues instructors face when creating their own curriculum and assessments for BELLS:

We’re supposed to ask the students how they want to use language and then create a curriculum around that. But could you imagine if you didn’t know Arabic and had to complete a needs assessment in Arabic [and were not able to rely on your English skills to translate any of it]? Would you know what to circle on the document? Would you even know it’s a needs assessment?

To assist with the task-based needs assessment required in the PBLA protocol, BELLS are typically provided with photographs or illustrations that are intended to represent potential learning targets and tasks that they need to learn to complete. Then learners are asked to circle those that they would like to cover in class; however, the instructors noted that it is difficult to find images that clearly represent the tasks learners may need/want to complete: “You can’t figure out what the pictures imply” (T3). For example, a snapshot of a “help wanted” advertisement is intended to represent the task of finding a job, but BELLS are unable to read it in English or translate it or read it in their L1, so they have no idea what the picture of a job ad signifies.

The instructors indicated that the development of BELLS' foundational language and literacy skills required for task completion emerges over an extended period of time:

BELLS need more time to build the skills to complete the tasks... So right now, our theme is neighbourhood. We're learning about understanding and giving directions and using maps. We spent two weeks, at least two weeks, talking about left and right. "Remember L - left. Turn left. Which way is left?" We're now at the point where they can answer that, most of them. (T2)

In addition to developing the *BELLS' emergent English language and literacy skills*, the LINC literacy instructors must also focus on *scholastic* learning targets (e.g., assessment skills; binder organization) to ensure BELLS' success with PBLA. Due to BELLS' limited literacy and experience with formal education, they commonly require "lots of practice" (T1) and explicit instruction in how to take assessments and in the PBLA protocol. T2 explained that she needs to teach and reinforce test-taking behaviours that instructors of regular LINC classes may take for granted. The following example illustrates the necessary procedures for instructing BELLS in how to complete reading and writing tasks and document them in their PBLA binders:

Okay, don't be talking. Don't be telling others across the room in your language what they need to do. Don't take a picture of your answers and send it to your friends across the room. Let them do it themselves...Then getting them to record and put their results in the right place in their [PBLA] binders takes 45 minutes. (T2)

Despite BELLS' slow growth in English language and literacy development, a frequently reported scholastic learning outcome resulting from PBLA is the improvement of the BELLS' organizational skills. The BELLS indicated that they learned how to organize their work and their binders: "It is helping me to be organized" (S18). This is not surprising given the amount of class time devoted to organizing PBLA binders for *accountability* purposes.

Because LINC literacy instructors need to develop *BELLS' English language, literacy, and scholastic skills* in addition to fulfilling all of the PBLA requirements, it appears that there are "too many learning targets or targets beyond the learner's readiness" (Turner & Purpura, 2016, p. 265), particularly given the limited of time in a LINC session. The complexity of the learning targets is attributable to a combination of the PBLA requirements and the BELLS' skill levels and learning needs. In addition to learning English and learning to read and write for the first time, BELLS need to learn unfamiliar tasks that allow them to navigate numerous Canadian institutions (e.g., financial, educational, government). From the instructors' perspective, the lack of a sequenced LINC Literacy curriculum and the need to cover so many complex learning targets prevents them from adequately addressing BELLS' emergent literacy and learning needs and developing transferable task-abilities.

### *Learning Dimension*

Evidence of all three facets of the LOA learning dimension (Turner & Purpura, 2016) was found in the teacher and student interviews, reflecting (a) the influence of learning theories, (b) the role of feedback, and (c) self-regulation in PBLA. PBLA *accountability* requirements restrict the instructors' abilities to apply their knowledge of learning theories and cognition in their quest to meet *BELLs' complex learning needs*. The highly educated instructors in our study found it difficult to integrate skill-building, TBLT, and PBLA in LINC Literacy classes. For example, T4's biggest challenges in PBLA were "balancing skill-building with PBLA and finding enough time to effectively do both and get through tasks in a way that students can learn how to complete them when they need to learn so much, especially in reading." These challenges may be attributable to the fact that LINC instructors must follow the PBLA Guidelines (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019). Although the Guidelines mandate TBLT, and as a result are implicitly informed by both sociocognitive (Skehan, 1998) and sociocultural theory (Feryok, 2017), the Guidelines *lack explicit reference to other current theories of learning and cognition* (e.g., psycholinguistic or skill acquisition theory - see Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2017 and DeKeyser, 2020) *and TBLT frameworks* (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020). These theories and frameworks could be used to inform L2 literacy learning, instruction, and PBLA task selection, design, and sequencing. For example, knowledge of advances in psycholinguistics and skill acquisition theory has the potential to resolve difficulties BELLs face when developing phonemic awareness, decoding, word reading and reading comprehension skills. The need to complete so many formal PBLA tasks (i.e., *accountability*) leaves little time for literacy skill development. As a result, in practice, instruction in LINC reflects a "strong" view of TBLT where task completion is enough to move language learning forward (East, 2015); however, BELLs' *complex learning needs* render this approach insufficient, as comprehensible feedback and instruction in the self-regulatory, scholastic, and literacy skills required for learning in formal environments are needed to promote BELLs' language learning.

Feedback, the second facet of the learning dimension (Turner & Purpura, 2016), is a source of information that BELLs can use to close their learning gaps. Although the students found the PBLA task rubrics informative: "I can check the results of the tasks I failed" (S23), the BELLs mainly focused on whether they passed or failed. This narrow focus was likely due to the fact that "the students are learning to read" (T1) so they are unable to read the rubric and their instructors' comments, and they are not able to use L1 literacy skills to scaffold their L2 learning. Despite the instructors' attempts to simplify the rubrics as much as possible, the BELLs indicated that they often have difficulty comprehending the task criteria on the rubrics as "there are many difficult words" (S1). Even though BELLs receive "action-oriented feedback" (T1) on their PBLA tasks, limited class time and overbearing, prescriptive PBLA requirements restrict the opportunities for task repetition, which could result in more fluent, accurate and complex language acquisition (Bygate, 2018).

The third facet of the learning dimension is self-regulation (Turner & Purpura, 2016), in which self-reflection plays a key role; however, BELLs are in the process of developing the language and skills required to self-reflect in English. The following quote represents the challenges instructors face when trying to engage BELLs in the self-



reflection component of the PBLA protocol, which typically involves the completion of inventories or checklists:

I had students reflect on their learning four times this term. The first was just yes/no checkboxes about school, “This past week I came to school on time. I came back from the break on time. I listened when the teacher talked. I listened when other students talked. I brought my school supplies....” And I would go through some of them and say, “Think about this, yes or no? Did you do it?” but they were always checking yes. So I'd say, “Did you really? Really? Because you were late every day this week.” And they'd still have all these yeses. They want to check yes, yes, yes. They're so concerned with checking the yes. They don't get the idea that it's more important to think about their learning and their actions. I guess I'm trying to say they don't accurately self-reflect. (T2)

This finding is not surprising given that even undergraduate preservice teachers with high levels of literacy have been observed to experience difficulty reflecting on their portfolio materials (Delandshere & Arens, 2003). Similar to the BELLS in our study, the undergraduates in Delandshere and Arens' merely “focused on proving that they have met the criteria” (p. 68) rather than on critically evaluating their work.

When the BELLS were asked, “What is the purpose of PBLA?” typical replies were “to organize our tests” (S11), “to show the performance of the student” (S5), or “for the teacher to evaluate me” (S7). Only two BELLS mentioned that they could use the information in their portfolios for review at the end of the term and none of their responses referred to self-regulated learning strategies such as planning for, monitoring, or evaluating their own learning. As Fox (2017) suggested, the learning potential of portfolio assessment may not be realized unless students understand the purpose of portfolios and appreciate the “focus on learning process and feedback” (p. 143). Although PBLA is conceptualized as a learning portfolio, in reality, students view it as an evaluation portfolio where the emphasis is on assessment rather than learning.

### ***Instructional Dimension***

The LOA instructional dimension captures instructors' professional knowledge L2 pedagogical, topical, and content knowledge (Turner & Purpura, 2016), which allows instructors to create effective learning environments. Our analysis of the segments coded in this dimension yielded two themes that impact LOA in LINC: *the instructors' knowledge and interpretation of the CLB descriptors and the instructors' limited ability to implement their knowledge of reading instruction*.

LINC instructors must rely on their professional knowledge to interpret numerous Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks documents (e.g., Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, 2015, 2019) when designing and delivering task-based instruction and PBLA; however, the instructors reported that the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks documents only provide vague descriptors of L2 performance (e.g., very/somewhat limited; barely/somewhat adequate; some initial understanding [Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012]), which they often find difficult to interpret and use in their assessments: “What's some? What's adequate?” (T2). This difficulty in

interpreting the descriptors, in turn, affects BELLS' understanding of the learning targets/goals: "Adequate control over basic grammar structures! Students don't know what that means on a task rubric. It's so vague and indeterminate, but how else can you say that?" (T3). Although instructors know that "clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success" (Leahy et al., 2005, p. 20) is an assessment for learning strategy that underlies PBLA, they are faced with the challenge of interpreting and communicating the CLB descriptors to their students in ways that help BELLS' progress.

The instructors understand that the development of BELLS' reading skills should be a major focus in LINC Literacy classes; however, due to the time constraints imposed by the need to complete, evaluate, and reflect on at least 16 formal assessment tasks, BELLS are not as successful in developing reading skills as they could be:

If you don't spend time teaching them to read and work on phonics, they won't learn to decode, but there just isn't time. I would love to spend way more time on phonics and getting them reading and having fun learning to read rather than having to say, "Okay, let's learn these words cuz, we're gonna have to do a PBLA task on this. (T2)

Although T3 stated, "I believe in the value of novel studies to teach reading and language," she does not include these in her classes because the reading of fiction for pleasure is not a task that aligns with the descriptions of texts at the beginning CLB levels (e.g., CLB 4: "up to about 3 paragraphs", Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, p. 84). The overemphasis on summative PBLA tasks required for end-of-term reporting in LINC (Fox, 2014; Mohammadian, 2016; Ripley, 2018) and the constricting CLB text length requirements limit the instructors' ability to implement their *knowledge of reading instruction*.

### ***Interactional Dimension***

Interaction patterns involving feedback that stimulate unplanned scaffolded repair sequences and lead to learning are essential to LOA (Turner & Purpura, 2016). Our results suggest that *accountability* influences the types of interactions that have the potential to occur in the LINC literacy classroom. The number of high-stakes tasks required by the PBLA protocol reduces *the class time available for spontaneous teacher-learner and learner-learner interactive repair sequences*. Interactive repair sequences involve meaningful communication and negotiation of meaning which push the learners to improve/produce accurate output. Because PBLA tasks are high-stakes assessments, the PBLA protocol promotes a testing environment in which students are not provided with very much in-the-moment scaffolded assistance. As T4 suggested, PBLA feedback is not effective scaffolding that feeds back into the learning cycle:

In practice, the students don't really have a lot of time to practice the skills before they're suddenly assessed on them. What I know from research is they need lots of formative feedback, but I don't have time to give them that formative feedback. (T4)

Fox (2014) also reported that formative feedback is not central to PBLA due to its mandate to gather evidence that is summative in nature. When accountability measures are inserted into an assessment for learning context, classroom interaction patterns become contrived and stilted (Leung et al., 2018). In such a scenario, the interaction patterns and repair sequences no longer resemble those that would arise naturally in classroom discourse.

The main form of assistance that students receive in PBLA is written: “The day after the test day, my teacher hands out our results [the task rubric] and we put it in the right section in the binder” (S3). Then the class moves “on to preparing for the next PBLA task” (T2). These procedures do not reflect the negotiated repair sequences essential to LOA. The BELLS did not mention any other forms of scaffolded assistance or interactions that promoted learning success.

### ***Affective Dimension***

There is evidence that positive and negative affective factors (e.g., emotions) can impact students’ learning (e.g., enjoyment can promote achievement [Dewaele et al., 2018] and anxiety can impede language learning [Howoritz, 2010]); however, there is limited research that examines affect in assessment [Turner & Purpura, 2016]). Our findings indicate that the über theme of funder *accountability* has the potential to favourably or adversely influence BELLS’ affect, and therefore, their learning and engagement in assessment tasks. From the instructors’ perspective, PBLA requirements tend to negatively influence *BELLS’ feelings, behaviours, and physiological responses*. For example, the instructors felt that the number and high-stakes nature of PBLA tasks increase their students’ anxiety levels and even impede their engagement in the assessment tasks: “It puts them on edge” (T4). “The students get so scared” (T1). “One student would be shaking, and her page would be blank every time” (T2).

The students confirmed that the PBLA tasks are stressful: “It [PBLA] makes me nervous” (S6). Despite the stress induced by the PBLA tasks, the majority of the BELLS expressed favourable attitudes toward PBLA, a finding also expressed by intermediate students in regular LINC classes (Drew & Mudzingwa, 2018; O’Shea, 2017). A typical response to our interview question, “Do you like PBLA?” was “I like it.” When asked, “Why?”, the main reason was that “it helps us to learn English” (S10). The BELLS also expressed that they would like their “next teacher to keep using PBLA” (S18). These responses imply that the BELLS believed PBLA contributed to their language learning; however, it is important to note that for many of the BELLS, LINC was their first formal English learning experience, so they had no other formal L2 learning experiences as a basis for comparison. This led some students to wonder “if there is a better way” (S12).

### **Implications for Improving LOA in LINC**

Our analysis of the BELLS and their instructors’ perceptions and uses of PBLA through the lens of Turner and Purpura’s (2016) LOA framework revealed thematic issues that impact the efficacy of task-based instruction and assessment practices in LINC. We present a number of suggestions for addressing the thematic issues which could bring PBLA into alignment with LOA and if implemented would provide avenues for future

research on TBLT and task-based assessment practices for BELLS, a unique and under-researched population of learners.

The über theme of *accountability* (a) contributes to the complexity of the PBLA requirements; (b) influences how PBLA is enacted; (c) imposes restrictions on instruction in LINC; (d) limits instructors' capacity to address BELLS' complex learning needs and literacy skill levels; and (e) negatively impacts BELLS' affect. The LINC funders, LINC policymakers, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, and to some extent, the authors of the PBLA Guidelines have the power to address the negative impacts of accountability on TBLT/A and learning in LINC. By reframing PBLA as a working/progress portfolio rather than a high-stakes evaluation portfolio, the focus would shift from accountability to learning. This new focus would remove the complex assessment requirements; eliminate the threat of government binder audits; reduce negative effects on *BELLS' feelings, behaviours, and physiological responses*; give the learners and their instructors more control over the portfolios; curtail *the prioritization of planned elicitations*; and free up time for instructors to better address *BELLS' complex learning needs*. Freeing up class time would allow for

- more spontaneous *teacher-learner and learner-learner interactive repair sequences* and additional opportunities for task repetition and practice where instructors and peers could offer immediate scaffolded feedback,
- the instructors to *implement their knowledge of reading instruction*, and
- more purposeful *scholastic/self-regulatory skill-building activities* that could promote and consolidate BELLS' learning.

Another option that would shift the focus from *accountability* to learning in LINC is to reduce the number of required PBLA tasks. This would address three of the benefits associated with reframing PBLA identified above (i.e., reduce the prioritization of planned elicitation, reduce BELLS negative affect, and free up time to support BELLS' complex learning needs), but to a lesser extent.

The instructors in our study also implied that there may be more optimal ways to structure the learning targets and tasks in LINC literacy programs. Although a curriculum acts as a fundamental guide for LOA (Turner & Purpura, 2016) and could provide this structure, LINC does not have a preset curriculum. *The lack of a LINC Literacy curriculum* leaves individual instructors to create their own curricula every session based on their students' choice of topics and corresponding tasks. As a result, BELLS may progress through LINC levels with significant learning gaps (e.g., without developing strong literacy skills). Current theoretical work on L2 literacy instruction, TBLT, and the dimensions of L2 task performance has the potential to inform the selection, design, and sequencing of tasks. The development and implementation of a national LINC Literacy curriculum that incorporates principled approaches to TBLT, language skill development, and self-regulated learning may provide the necessary instructional support to develop the *BELLS' emergent English language, literacy, and scholastic skills* and address their settlement needs in a more systematic manner.

## Conclusion

Our findings provide a better understanding of LINC instructors' and BELLS' perspectives on PBLA, and our analysis has implications for optimizing learning, and task-based instructional practices and assessment in LINC Literacy classes. In its current form, PBLA is not in alignment with LOA (Turner & Purpura, 2016). By recognizing the potential of LOA to guide and support learning in LINC, the funders, policymakers, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, authors of the PBLA Guidelines, instructors, and BELLS may be better prepared to address the challenges associated with PBLA.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) are available at <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/language-benchmarks.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The participants in this study were assessed at CLB 1-4. These levels of English language proficiency correspond to A1-A2 in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) and novice-low to intermediate-mid in the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines*. (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> For additional information on the theoretical foundations and empirical research that provides the foundation for the LOA framework, please consult Purpura and Turner (in press).

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## **Appendix A**

### **Student Semi-structured Interview Guide**

1. What is the purpose of PBLA?
2. Imagine I'm a new student in the class. Can you teach me about PBLA?
3. Do you like PBLA? Why or why not?
4. Can you tell me how you prepared your portfolio?
5. If you could choose, would you want your next teacher to keep assessing you in the same way and to keep using PBLA? Why or why not?

## **Appendix B**

### **Instructor Semi-structured Interview Guide**

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses in PBLA?
2. What do you find challenging about PBLA?
3. How do you design a PBLA task?
4. How do you decide which criteria to add or leave out of your assessments?
5. How do you know that your assessment results are valid?
6. How do you know that your assessments are reliable?
7. How do you interpret the results of PBLA tasks?
8. How do you help students and, where appropriate, other users of PBLA scores understand the results of the assessments that you create?
9. Which assessment practices work best for literacy learners?
10. How could PBLA be improved overall and specifically for literacy learners?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the topic of assessment in LINC or PBLA specifically?