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Introduction to Special Issue

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Introduction to Special Issue

The Canadian national frameworks for English and French language proficiency: Application, implication, and impact

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Language teaching in the 21st century has been characterized not only by innovation in teaching practices but also by the use of the broader *standards* (also labelled as frameworks or benchmarks) for training and assessing language learners, as well as for language curriculum development where they serve as a guiding principle for generic learning outcomes. Born of necessity – brought about by the rise of globalization and an increasing cross-border communication – these frameworks aim to provide a detailed description of the learning *outcomes* or *what the learners should be able to do* (Figueras, 2012) at different levels of language learning and within specific social, economic, historical, and political contexts (ElAtia, 2011). As such, language proficiency frameworks aim to

- provide a basis for the development of language curricula and course syllabuses, the design of teaching guidelines, the elaboration of teaching materials, and the assessment of language proficiency;
- set standards against which language programs' efficiency and learners' performance at different stages of language learning can be judged uniformly and objectively; and
- offer a 'metalanguage' facilitating the discussion of second language teaching and learning processes among the stakeholders.

As a result, in many parts of the world, *standards* have proved popular with government agencies and public policymakers who need to certify or choose individuals within their required and expected level of language proficiency. In this context, *standards* and standards-based high stakes testing are used not only for educational, certification, gatekeeping, and accountability purposes but also as powerful tools "to eradicate diversity and impose norms. The purpose is to enforce conformity to a single model that helps to create and maintain political unity and identity." (Fulcher, 2010, p. 220).

Examples of language proficiency frameworks, developed in contexts with a large number of foreign/second language learners, include the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines, Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR), China Standards of English (CSE), and the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)/ *Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens* (NCLC).

Certain among these frameworks, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), for example,

have transcended the geographical boundaries, and have grown in popularity and influence world-wide (Negishi et al., 2013). The framework has been translated into various languages due to the lack of standards, especially for lesser-used languages. CEFR's wider use has thus generated a vast amount of literature and debate. It has been credited, among other things, for its comprehensive proficiency scales, facilitating communication between teachers and learners, and linking curricula to assessment (Green, 2014; Kantarcioglu & Papageorgiou, 2012; North, 2014), but it has also prompted criticism for encouraging normative standards, disregarding learners' needs, being context-free, and lacking empirical validation (Fulcher, 2012; McNamara, 2007; McNamara et al., 2018; Roever & McNamara, 2006, Shohamy, 2011, among others). The use of large-scale, context-free, and language-independent standards as a replacement for national frameworks has therefore been discouraged mainly for educational, cultural, social and political reasons (Byrnes, 2007; ElAtia, 2011; Fulcher, 2010, 2012; Roever & McNamara, 2006; Weir, 2005, among others). The development of Chinese Standards of English (CSE) for use in China is the latest attempt at creating a framework tailored to the specific language needs of the context in which it is used (Jin et al., 2017).

The CLB, the Canadian national framework, was developed in 2000 by CCLB, The Center for Canadian Language Benchmarks (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000). The French version, the NCLC, was also developed and revised a few years later in 2006. The CLB/NCLC have gained national and international recognition (Fulcher, 2010; Green, 2014; Jin et al., 2017) for linking the curricula to teaching, learning, and assessment, and for enhancing the communication between language educators in different sectors. Unlike some other standards, the benchmarks are *context-specific*, *language-specific*, and *needs-based* with detailed proficiency levels and targeted users. Since the creation of the CLB/NCLC, and following their subsequent updates and validation in 2011, and 2012, the CCLB has developed language tests and produced a range of teaching tools, materials and on-line resources to support the practical applications of the benchmarks by the practitioners in their everyday teaching.
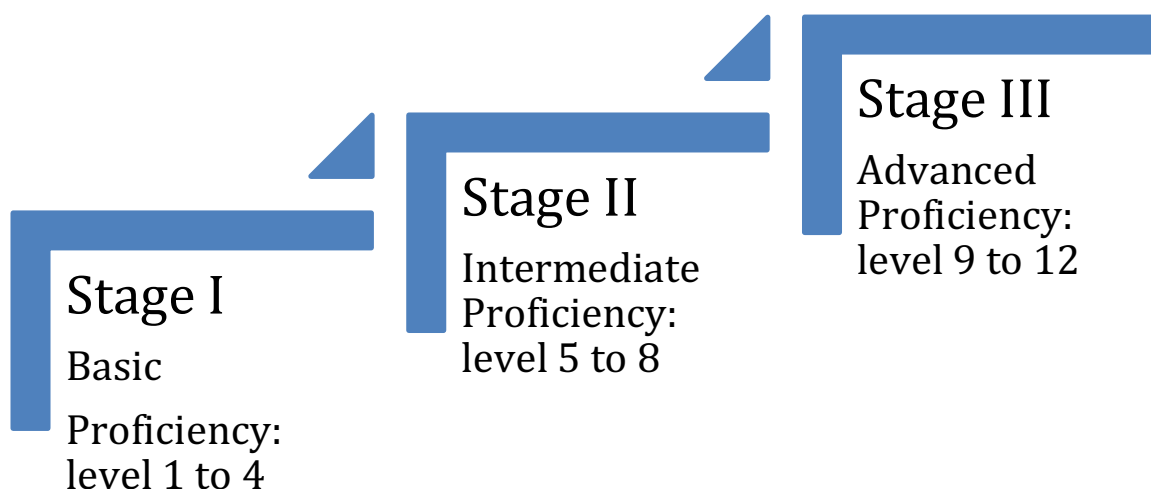
The Benchmarks as descriptors

Around the same time that the federal Immigration Regulations were adopted in 1967, two important legislative acts, the *Official Languages Act* (Government of Canada, 1969) and the *Multiculturalism Act* (Government of Canada, 1971) were introduced that now define the Canadian identity (Jezak, 2017). With two official languages (French and English) and a federal immigration policy, the CLB/NCLC were then developed to specifically serve the Canadian society, where French and English are the two official languages within a multicultural setting that allows all Canadians to maintain their cultures and their own native languages. The *Benchmarks* are therefore *context-specific* providing the language proficiency descriptors that would guide in the selection, admission, and integration of newcomers to Canada.

As statements of expected ability and/or competence in a language, the CLB and NCLC "… are the national standards recognized in Canada and internationally for describing, measuring and recognizing English and French language proficiency of persons in Canada, as well as of immigrants and other persons destined for Canada. […] They

provide a common language for the entire immigrant-serving community."
(https://www.language.ca/about-us).
　　　　Both the CLB and the NCLC are composed of twelve levels for each language
competency: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The twelve benchmarks defining
each competency are then categorized into three proficiency stages—basic, intermediate,
and advanced—as illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1
Progression of CLB/NCLC Stages and Levels

Stage I

Basic

Proficiency:
level 1 to 4

Stage II

Intermediate
Proficiency:
level 5 to 8

Stage III

Advanced
Proficiency:
level 9 to 12

Research Directions

　　　　Given the evolving language education landscape in Canada and around the world,
the *Benchmarks* have the potential to play a major role in the future of language learning,
language assessment, and language program development in Canada and internationally. In
our view, this can only be achieved through research. Indeed, over the past two decades, the
CCLB has been at the forefront of adult language program development as well as English
and French language training and assessment for newcomers. However, the CLB/NCLC
remain widely unknown to the majority of practitioners and policymakers outside the
immigration sector. Despite the increasing calls for accountability and global transferability
of language frameworks, there is a dearth of empirical studies investigating the significance
and appropriateness of the *Benchmarks* for describing, teaching, and assessing English and
French language proficiency in Canada and beyond. There is a need for studies into the
effectiveness and impact of the existing programs and resources on the stakeholders and,
most importantly, on the learning outcomes of the target population. In addition, it is
important that the research focus in the coming years goes beyond the traditional portfolio
and explores the use of CLB/NCLC for the development of the training programs and

assessment instruments for other populations in different learning contexts. Such contexts include, but are not limited to, young learners, k-12 education, post-secondary education, adult and continuing education, language for specific purposes, and indigenous languages of Canada (ElAtia, 2017) some of which presently use other frameworks, notably CEFR, for training and assessment purposes.

In conclusion, we reiterate that, as CLB/NCLC have been developed for use in *bilingual* Canada, with the Canadian context in mind, and are tailored to the needs of language learners with diverse L1 and cultural backgrounds, they are best suited to guide the training and assessment practices in such contexts. This shall materialize through diverse evidence-based research conducted on the application of the CLB/NCLC to areas besides language learning programs for adults and newcomers to Canada.

By necessity, the application of the *Benchmarks* to any one of these areas requires a systematic analysis of the language needs of the targeted users and involves carrying out in-depth discussions and collaboration between researchers on the one hand, and the provincial and federal stakeholders including the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Tri-Council, and the ministers of education and higher education on the other hand.

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