

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

The Quest for Standardization: The Canadian Federal Government and the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program in 1992, the Canadian federal government, through the ministry responsible for immigration, has diligently sought to bring consistency to the program through a variety of government initiatives. These include operational bulletins, curriculum guidelines, standardized placement assessments, in-class assessment procedures and protocols, standards for describing and measuring the language proficiency of adult immigrants speaking English as an additional language (EAL), and a variety of other guidelines (e.g., waitlist management). This paper introduces a novel LINC standardization model as a tool for describing and analyzing how the synergies of these government initiatives converge to bring consistency to the entire LINC Program. The model comprises four stages: a Pre-Entry Stage, Entry Stage, Language Training Stage, and Exit Stage. These stages represent phases an adult LINC learner goes through on their LINC English language learning journey. The model highlights the centrality of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) by showing how they are the mainstay of most, if not all, of the other government initiatives. Both positive and negative implications for the government's quest for standardization are discussed.

Introduction

There is widespread agreement among those who study settlement and integration that being able to speak the official language of the host country is critical for successful integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Jezak & Piccardo, 2017; Johns, 2011; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Xhelili, 2014). Cognizant of this fact, in 1992, the federal ministry responsible for language training launched the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program for adult learners of English as an additional language (EAL) and the Cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada (CLIC) for learners of French as a second language (FSL)¹. The overarching goal was to assist newcomers to Canada to communicate in either English or French to meet their settlement needs for meaningful integration.

The LINC Program is a massive language training program spanning all English-speaking parts of Canada. It is indisputable that, for a program of this magnitude, standardization and consistency are a challenge. The federal ministry responsible for the LINC Program has pledged to tackle this recalcitrant problem. Speaking at the Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL) Ontario Conference in 2015, Cliff Fast, an integration manager with the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, underscored the government's commitment to standardizing the LINC Program: "An important priority for CIC [Citizenship

¹ Henceforth the focus will be exclusively on the LINC Program.

and Immigration Canada] is improving standardization and nationwide consistency in the interest of delivering equitable, comparable programming nationally.”

In this context, this paper describes and analyzes the federal ministry’s concerted effort to bring standardization, consistency, and regularity to the LINC Program. To this end, this paper introduces a novel LINC Standardization Model that is used in this paper to examine seven major federal government initiatives pertinent to the LINC Program. The initiatives are a combination of curriculum guidelines, theoretical frameworks, assessment protocols and procedures, official government policies, and operational bulletins. In this paper, the term “standardization” is used interchangeably with “consistency” to mean the process of equipping things of the same type with the same basic features.

Significance of this Paper

This paper analyzes seven government initiatives introduced to date. To the best of my knowledge, available literature, including conference presentations, have focussed on one, or at most three government initiatives. Admittedly, there are merits in concentrating on a single initiative or a few initiatives. However, this inevitably obscures the federal government’s robust efforts to bring standardization to all aspects of the LINC Program, and consequently, precludes sufficient recognition. Furthermore, literature focussing on a single government initiative is often silent on standardization.

Examples of studies which focussed on a single initiative, namely, the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA), include the works of Deystova, (2018; 2020); Drew and Mudzingwa (2017); Fox (2014); Fox and Fraser (2012); Holmes (2016); Mohammadian Haghghi (2016); Mudzingwa, (2018); Pettis (2014); and Ripley (2013), amongst others. Peirce and Stewart (1997), as well as Rossiter and Pawlikowska-Smith (1999), examined the Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment (CLBA). In independent studies, Cray (1997) and Pinet (2006) focussed on the LINC Curriculum Guidelines.

In the literature, there are a few examples that cover more than one government initiative. First, Cliff Fast’s presentation at the 43rd Annual TESL Ontario Conference (2015) diverged significantly from most of the literature. Focussing on Ontario, Fast discussed how three major federal government initiatives, namely, the National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines, the LINC Curriculum Guidelines, and the PBLA, brought consistency to the LINC Program. Similarly, some chapters in a book edited by Jezak (2018) discuss more than one government initiative. The main focus of the book is the CLBs, considered paramount in the standardization of the government-funded EAL adult immigrant program. The overarching goal of the book is to demonstrate how “the great efforts involved in the development of the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (CLB) and the *Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens* (NCLC) gave birth to the highly efficient system of official language training that we know today” (Jezak, 2017, p. 1). Finally, a chapter by Haque and Valeo (2017) illustrated how the CLBs bring standardization to in-class and placement assessments. On the other hand, a chapter by Senior (2017) outlined the evolution and the expanding focus of the CLBs. It explained how the CLBs are used for placement assessment, high stakes assessment (i.e., PBLA), and curriculum development.

This paper goes beyond Fast's conference presentation and Jezak's book in several respects: first, the paper examines all the major government initiatives announced to date—seven in total. This work allows for a holistic and comprehensive examination of the synergies between the initiatives. Second, the LINC Standardization Model is introduced and used as an organizational and explanatory tool. The model illustrates the discrete but interrelated features of the LINC Program. It is hoped that this paper will help readers appreciate the complexity of the LINC Program in ways that may have so far escaped us.

The Birth of the LINC Program

The LINC Program came into existence in 1992. In 1991, the federal government's Ministry of Employment and Immigration constituted an advisory board to assess the language training needs of adult immigrants. One of the top recommendations was the need for standardized language training. In response, the government created the LINC Program. Its mandate was to provide basic language instruction to adult newcomers in both official languages, in order to facilitate and expedite the social, cultural, and economic integration of immigrants into Canadian society (Bettencourt et al., 2003; Cleghorn, 2000; Fleming, 2007; Jezak, 2017; Lim, Siemiatycki & Doucet, 2005; Papillon, 2002; Thomson & Derwing, 2004). The program has since evolved and expanded. Language training is provided in a variety of ways, such as full time, part-time, home study, distance learning, and blended learning. The progress of each student is rated and monitored based on CLB level descriptors, and students are awarded a LINC Certificate upon successful completion of the training.

Before the LINC Program, there was no standardized curriculum, standardized in-class assessments, or standardized placement assessments tests in the teaching of adult immigrants learning EAL. Individual teachers catered to the needs of their learners. It would be fair to say that this was an era of unregulated adult EAL teaching and learning, characterized by inconsistency and ad-hoc practice. The birth of the LINC Program in 1992 marked a watershed in the history of government-funded adult EAL teaching in Canada. It was the beginning of a move towards more formalized, standardized teaching, and assessment practices in adult EAL programs across Canada (Barrett & Bennett, 2012). Over the years, the government continued to gradually but steadily introduce different initiatives to bring consistency to the entire LINC Program.

LINC Standardization Model

To account for the government initiatives in a logical, systematic, and elegant fashion, this paper devised the novel LINC Standardization Model. The discussion of the LINC Standardization Model is in two sub-sections. First, I present an introduction to the model and the government initiatives, followed by a diagrammatic presentation of the model and how it works.

Components of the LINC Standardization Model

The proposed model comprises four stages: *Pre-Entry Stage*, *Entry Stage*, *Language Training Stage*, and *Exit Stage*. The stages are not arbitrary; they represent phases adult LINC learners go

through on their English language learning journey. The model explains how standardization occurs at each stage. Table 1 below presents the four stages and what occurs at each stage.

Table 1

The Four Stages of the LINC Standardization Model

LINC Stage	What is involved
Pre-Entry Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EAL learner goes to assessment centre to take a Placement Test <i>Government initiatives focus on placements tests and waitlist management. These initiatives give guidance to Assessment Centres</i>
Entry Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EAL learner is placed in a LINC class by a Language Training Organization (LTO) EAL learner is placed on a waitlist by an LTO if no vacancies are available <i>The government initiatives focus on waitlist management and give guidance to LTO.</i>
Language Training Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EAL learner studies English EAL learner progresses from one CLB level to the next <i>Government initiatives focus on in-class assessments, progressing learners, and curriculum. The guidelines give guidance to LTOs</i>
Exit Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EAL learner leaves the LINC Program <i>Government initiatives focus on the issuance of LINC Certificates and give guidance to LTOs.</i>

Below is a list of the government initiatives discussed in this paper. These fall under different stages.

1. The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs)
2. The LINC Curriculum Guidelines
3. The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) Model
4. Placement Assessment Tests
5. National Language Placement and Progressions Guidelines
6. Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines
7. LINC and CLIC certificate issuance policy

The next section presents the LINC Standardization Model, the government initiatives, and the stages.

The LINC Standardization Model

The four stages and the government initiatives combine to form the proposed LINC Standardization Model, which is used for the first time in this paper. The LINC Standardization Model is presented in Figure 1 on the next page.

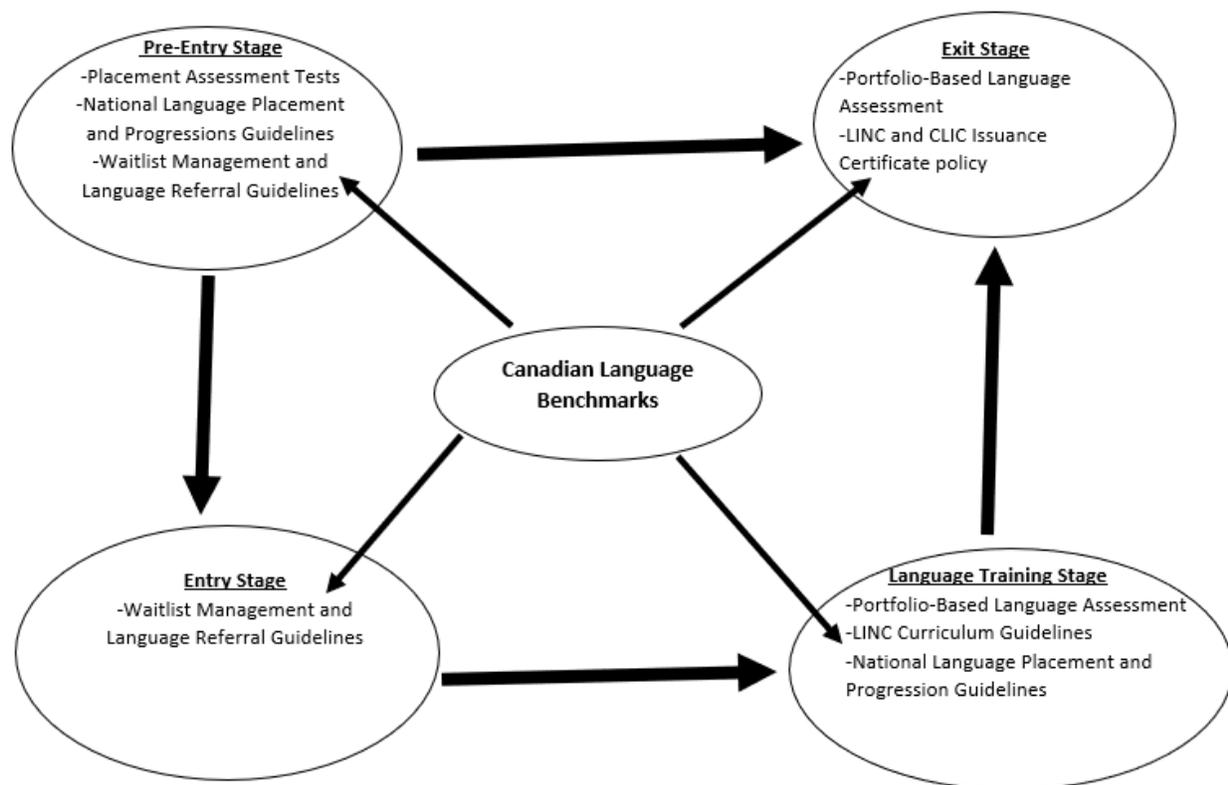


Figure 1. LINC Standardization Model

Save for the CLBs, all the other government initiatives fall under a stage or stages. The CLBs are the foundation of all the other initiatives. To capture this, they are placed at the centre of the model with thinner arrows pointing away from the CLBs to the other initiatives. On the other hand, thicker arrows show the interaction between stages. The initiatives are placed under different stages and bring consistency to that stage. Some initiatives fall under two stages, meaning that such initiatives bring consistency to more than a single stage. For example, the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines belong to both the Pre-Entry Stage and the Entry Stage. The same policy document gives guidance to different institutions, focussing on different aspects of a student's English language learning journey.

The LINC Standardization Model allows for a systematic and elegant analysis of current and future government initiatives. For instance, in the future, if the government proposes a new initiative, it will be easy to identify the stage it falls under and how it interacts with other initiatives. Furthermore, using this model, policymakers may introduce an initiative that deliberately targets a specific stage: for example, the Exit Stage. The model is adaptable to suit any discussion about the LINC program, making it an essential and efficient tool in the purposeful representation of the program.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks and the Four Stages

The CLBs are discussed first because they are the pillar of all the other government initiatives. In turn, the stages and government initiatives are explored together because stages comprise initiatives.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks

The CLBs are the official national standard for describing, measuring, and recognizing the English-language proficiency of immigrants and prospective immigrants (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012; Haque & Valeo, 2017; Pettis, 2014; Senior, 2017). The CLBs provide descriptions of communicative competencies and performance tasks through which the learner demonstrates the application of linguistic competence and proficiency. The CLBs cover the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The CLB Framework consists of twelve language benchmarks divided into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels.

The Federal Government first introduced the CLBs in 1996, in response to a need for “reliable tools ... to measure the language skills possessed by clients against standard language proficiency criteria” (Rogers, 1993, p. 1) (see also, Bergin, da Silva, Peirce, & Stewart, 1996; Haque & Valeo, 2017). The CLBs were revised twice, with published documents in 2000 and then in 2012. Haque and Valeo (2017) aptly summarized the evolution of the CLBs by saying, “since the development of the first CLB in 1996, each successive edition has identified and attempted to respond to gaps and challenges that emerged through practice” (p. 69). In short, the federal government supported the inception of the Canadian Language Benchmarks in 1996 and the subsequent revisions of the document.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks are ubiquitous in the LINC Program and have had the most far-reaching effects on consistency, regularity, and standardization of the LINC Program. In the literature, there is unanimity that the CLBs are the foundation of all the other federal government initiatives on learning, teaching, curriculum development, and assessments (Hajer & Kaskens, 2012; Jezak & Piccardo, 2018; Pettis, 2014; Senior, 2017). Senior (2017) observed that “since 1996, they [Canadian Language Benchmarks] have become the backbone of Canada’s publicly-funded adult second-language training programs” (p. 72). In short, the CLBs are the vanguard of standardization of the LINC Program.

The Four Stages and the Government Initiatives

This section discusses the four stages of the LINC Standardization Model and the government initiatives in depth, beginning with the Pre-Entry Stage, followed by the Entry Stage, Language Training Stage, and finally the Exit Stage. Each stage is unique and focusses on a set of different activities occurring on an individual’s English language learning journey.

The Pre-Entry Stage

Newcomers are assessed using the CLB framework to determine their level of language proficiency for placement in the LINC Program. The relevant initiatives are the CLBs;

Assessment Placement Tests; National Language Placement and Progressions Guidelines; and Waitlist Management and Language Referrals Guidelines. Placement Assessment Tests measure an individual's proficiency in English for appropriate placement in the LINC Program. The Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA), Canadian Language Benchmarks Literacy Assessment, and Canadian Language Benchmarks Literacy Placement Tool (CLB-LPT) are the most-used placement assessment tests.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment and the Canadian Language Benchmarks Literacy Assessment were published in 1997 in response to a lack of common standardized placement assessments. The federal government contracted the Peel Board of Education in Mississauga, Ontario, in 1995 to develop CLB-referenced placement assessment instruments. Pierce and Stewart (1997) described the development as representing “one step in a lengthy process of federal and local initiatives to establish a common framework for the description and evaluation of the language proficiency of adult newcomers to Canada” (p. 17). All the Placement Assessment Tests use CLBs to measure the adult EAL learners' language abilities. Hajer et al. (2012) emphasized the benefits of standardized placement assessment tests: “[All] assessments based on the CLB[s] facilitate the portability of ESL [English as a second language] learners' credentials, as well as their movement between classes or programs, across provinces and territories, or between post-secondary institutions” (p. 8).

The LINC Evaluation Report (2004), for instance, stated how there are divergent opinions on which assessment tool is more effective. Different provinces and different assessment centres within the same province may choose to use either the CLB-LPT or the CBLA. Nonetheless, the implementation of placement assessments tests brought greater consistency compared to the period before. The LINC Evaluation Report (2010) concluded that the current placement tests are effective and students are placed in the appropriate program level. Teachers who participated in the survey for the LINC Evaluation Report, for example, concurred and mentioned that very few LINC students are moved to a different level in their first week or two in a class. To the teachers, this was an indication of the accuracy of the placement tests. (CIC, 2010).

Placement and progression guidelines. The LINC Placement Grid of 2007 and the National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines of 2013 fall under the category of Placement and Progression Guidelines. They give instructions on the placement of learners (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013b).

National Placement Grid. In 2007, the federal government introduced the National Placement Grid to standardize placement of LINC students into classes based on their placement results. The National Placement Grid made use of CLB scores achieved by a learner at the assessment centre and was used to indicate the level in which a learner should be placed. The National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines later replaced the National Placement Grid.

The National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines. In 2013, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Integration, and International Trade (MCIT) jointly funded an initiative to revise the National Placement Grid of 2007. The

National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines give directives to LTOs and LINC Assessment and Referral Centres. The document would “ensure a common understanding and interpretation of assessment results based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), and ... establish national guidelines for placement and progression in language classes” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013a, p. 2). The guidelines provided other factors that assessors may need to take into consideration when deciding the placement of a learner.

Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines. In February of 2006, Citizenship and Immigration Canada issued the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines document. At the Pre-entry Stage, the relevant section of the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines is the one giving direction to LINC Assessment and Referral Centres and the directive to follow the guidelines: “Settlement Program funding recipients *delivering language assessment ... are expected* [emphasis added] to apply the Department’s Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines when ... referring clients to language training classes” (IRCC, 2016, p. 2). The guidelines explain that an assessment centre should issue clients a referral form, which includes CLB scores achieved and the recommended CLB level (class) for placement. The clients take this form to a language training organization for enrolment into a LINC class.

A Summary of the Pre-Entry Stage. The discussion of the Pre-Entry Stage included the Canadian Language Benchmarks, the Placement Assessment Tests, the National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines, and the Waitlist Management and Referrals Guidelines. The four initiatives collectively interact to bring consistency and standardization to this stage. The discussion of the Pre-Entry Stage is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2

A Summary of the Pre-Entry Stage

LINC Standardization Model Stage	Government Initiatives
Pre-Entry Stage	Assessment Placement Tests & The Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Proficiency assessed using CBLs • Placement Tests results reported as CLB scores
	National Language Placement and Progressions Guidelines & The Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement Tests use CLBs for placement in LINC Program • CLB levels for placement are based on CLB scores achieved by the learner
	Waitlist Management and Language Referrals & The Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A learner is given a referral form with CLB scores and recommended CLB level (class)

The Entry Stage

At the Entry Stage, the Canadian Language Benchmarks and the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines are still relevant.

The Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines. The Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines carry specific instructions for LTOs regarding the registration of language learners—new students, returning students, or students transferring from other LTOs. The guidelines explain how to place a learner on a waitlist in cases where seats are not available. Additionally, the guidelines explain who has priority from the waitlist when a seat becomes available. Further instructions are included on what to do when learners change their initial course selection; how learners can register in a course or on a course waitlist; and how to organize waitlists using either CLBs or course name in the government database iCARE.

A Summary of the Entry Stage. Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines and the Canadian Language Benchmarks are the two initiatives that directly bring consistency to the Entry Stage. The discussion of this section is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

A Summary of the Entry Stage

LINC Standardization Model Stage	Government Initiatives
Entry Stage	<p>Waitlist Management and Language Referrals & The Canadian Language Benchmarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral card that learners take to LTO have results based on CLB scores guided by the National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines • Referral cards have recommended CLB level for placement • Waitlists can be organized based on CLBs • Waitlist Management and Language Referrals explains how to place learner on waitlist

Language Training Stage

A variety of government-funded organizations provide language training. The progress of each client is rated and monitored based on CLB descriptors. The relevant initiatives at the Language Training Stage are the LINC Curriculum Guidelines, the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment, the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and the National Placement and Progressions Guidelines.

The LINC Curriculum Guidelines. When LINC was established in 1992, there was no curriculum for teachers, administrators, and LTOs to use. It was an ad hoc and inconsistent practice whereby each teacher taught what they considered suitable and appropriate to meet the needs of their learners. To address this situation, in 1993, CIC funded the development of LINC 1–3 Curriculum Guidelines. The guidelines mirrored the LINC levels at the time. In 1999, LINC 4 and 5 Curriculum Guidelines referenced to CLBs were developed to match the expanded LINC

Program. Five years later, in 2002, LINC Curriculum Guidelines 1–3 were merged with LINC 4 and 5 Curriculum Guidelines. Later, in 2006, LINC Curriculum Guidelines 5–7 were developed to match the expanded LINC Program. The Curriculum Guidelines have twelve settlement themes referenced to the CLBs.

The design and implementation of the LINC Curriculum Guidelines, however, did not completely solve the consistency problems. Since the LINC 5–7 Curriculum Guidelines document is not prescriptive, instructors are free to adapt and use the materials to meet the needs and goals of their learners (Hajer, Kaskens & Stasiak, 2006, p. i). Thus, content taught at the same level varies across teachers, organizations, and provinces. Furthermore, the LINC Curriculum Guidelines are “Ontario-centric”—some of the content does not apply to other provinces. Considering this challenge, CIC’s LINC Evaluation Report of 2010 said, “the lack of consistency across Canada in the way in which LINC is taught makes it much harder to create content and exit tests” (p. 62). Some people who participated in the survey for the LINC Evaluation Report, suggested that a more standardized curriculum with little room for variation would be more appropriate. On the other hand, the non-prescriptive nature of the LINC Curriculum Guidelines is also a benefit. It allows for regional flexibility, which helps meet the varied needs of learners and the community context in which the immigrants are learning.

The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment. Of all the government initiatives introduced to date, PBLA has likely generated the most rhetoric, polarized debates, and intransigent positions. In the literature, three schools of thought have emerged as a result. The first school of thought is pro-PBLA and demonstrates its benefits, while the second school of thought is mostly critical—raising academic, philosophical, and pragmatic questions about PBLA. The third school of thought is anti-PBLA: they agitating for its total banishment.

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (n.d.) describes the PBLA as a teaching and assessment model designed to enhance nationwide consistency and standards of quality in EAL training for adult newcomers to Canada. The CLBs are the mainstay of PBLA. They are used to design teaching and learning materials, develop assessments tools, and report learners’ progress (Pettis, 2014). PBLA is embedded in the curricula and is an integral part of the teaching, learning, and assessment cycle.

The PBLA was born out of the need for standardized in-class assessment practices and protocols. Several studies have underlined the inconsistency and ad hoc nature of in-class assessments in the LINC Program at the time (CIC, 2004, 2010; Makosky, 2008; Nagy & Stewart 2009; Singh & Blakey, 2012). When introducing PBLA as the *sole* authorized assessment method for the LINC Program, CIC clearly stated that “PBLA is being introduced to address the need for a standardized in-class language assessment protocol in LINC and CLIC” (CIC, 2013b, p. 1).

In 2011, CIC successfully piloted PBLA in Ottawa, Edmonton, Moncton, St. John, and Fredericton. PBLA was later introduced nationally in 2013. Before its introduction, using the train-the-trainer model, CIC funded the training of PBLA lead teachers, who train and support other LINC instructors in the implementation of PBLA. Beaulieu and Le Thiec (2017) said, “training instructors to use PBLA is a vital step in implementing the portfolio and ensuring

standardized practices” (p. 97). Furthermore, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (n.d.) provided criteria and guidelines for creating assessments and on giving action-oriented feedback. Teachers are also trained on how to review portfolios to determine a learner’s progress.

Literature highlighting the benefits of PBLA includes the works of Mudzingwa (2016); Drew and Mudzingwa (2018); Jezak, (2017); O’Shea, (2017); Senior (2017). Senior (2017) called PBLA “a major initiative that will change the face of adult ESL training in Canada” (p. 80). However, works that critically question the benefits of PBLA to teachers, students, and the LINC program include Desyatova (2018, 2020), Abbot (2019), Fox (2014), Ripley (2013), and Mohammadian Haghighi (2016). Abbot (2019), like Fox (2014), contended that PBLA is not a standardized assessment approach and, in its current format, cannot be evaluated using conventional psychometric methods. As elaborated by Abbot (2019), the inconsistencies include the actual PBLA tasks, the time allotted to complete tasks, the amount of help students receive, the scoring, and the evaluation criteria.

There has also been a huge outcry against PBLA, with the contention that it is a “dramatic increase in teacher workload” (Desyatova, 2018, p. 43). Abbot (2019) made a similar observation, emphasizing that PBLA brought “onerous workload for instructors” (p. 9). Such observations are frequent in the literature, for instance in Fox and Fraser (2012), Mohammadian Haghighi (2016), and Ripley (2018). The major contention is how the workload is not commensurate with the remuneration and working conditions of most instructors. Furthermore, there are reports of teachers feeling overwhelmed by the demands of PBLA, and consequently, believing that PBLA is adversely impacting their classroom practices (Desyatova, 2018, 2020; Fox, 2014; Mohammadian Haghighi, 2013; Ripley, 2013, 2018). In addition, works calling for the outright ban of PLBA include Vanderveen (2018) and (Lachini, 2017). Lachini (2017) reported of a petition that called for the immediate halting of PBLA. Deystova (2020) mentioned that the petition “signals persistent exclusion of teachers as engaged and capable stakeholders, relegating them to an unquestioning group at the bottom of PBLA implementation hierarchy” (p. 47). Despite the challenges raised in the literature, it is irrefutable that the introduction of PBLA was a milestone in the LINC Program, particularly with the constant and continuous training and support on how to implement it.

National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines. The National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines document informs assessors on how to assign benchmarks after the placement assessment tests (The Pre-Entry Stage). The same document “is intended for instructors and coordinators in CIC funded language training programs, to ensure a common understanding and interpretation of assessment results based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013a, p. 2). The document provides strict guidelines, to LTOs, on how to progress learners from one level to the next.

A summary of the Language Training Stage. The LINC Curriculum Guidelines, the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment, the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and the National Placement and Progressions Guidelines together bring consistency and regularity to the Language Training Stage. These initiatives inform teachers and LINC administrators on how to interpret the achieved PBLA assessment scores. Equally important, these initiatives guide

teachers and LINC administrators on how to progress learners to the next level. Table 4, presented below, sums up the discussion of the Language Training Stage.

Table 4

A Summary of the Language Training Stage

LINC Standardization Model Stage	Government Initiatives
Language Training Stage	LINC Curriculum Guidelines & The Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level outcomes taken directly from CLBs • Theoretical Framework of Guidelines same as that of CLBs
	Portfolio-Based Language Assessment & The Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLBs used to determine teaching materials • CLB-aligned assessments used to assess learners • Learners progress measured using CLBs and promoted to the next level
	National Language Placement and Progressions Guidelines and the Canadian Language Benchmarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formula for progressing students between classes is based on CLBs • Explains how class levels are organized in accordance with CLB scale

The Exit Stage

The Exit Stage is when learners leave the program for whatever reasons. LINC and the CLIC Certificate Issuance Policy, the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines are relevant to the Exit Stage.

LINC and CLIC Certificate Issuance Policy. In February 2017, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), then CIC, issued Operational Bulletin 472-A, updating IRCC staff and LINC/CLIC service providers on the issuance of LINC/CLIC certificates. The Bulletin was revised in March 2018. It underscored how LINC certificates had become high stakes: “The issuance of standard certificates takes on even greater importance as the Department accepts LINC and CLIC certificates as proof of language ability for citizenship purposes” (IRCC, 2018, n.p.). Cognizant of this, IRCC gave strict guidelines on the issuance of LINC Certificates. The Operational Bulletin (IRCC, 2018) specifies the criteria to be met by LTOs for eligibility to issue LINC Certificates. First, the LTO should be delivering the LINC program. Second, the LTO should only accept learners who have taken a CLB-based placement assessment from an authorized assessment centre. Third, the assessment centre should follow the National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines. Finally, the LTO should use PBLA for teaching and in-class assessment.

LINC Certificates are issued to learners at the end of a progress reporting period, with results reported as CLBs. The CLB scores are established after reviewing the collected assessment (evidence) in the learners’ portfolios. The Bulletin is clear that placement results and the CLB levels not addressed in a class cannot be used for the issuance of a LINC certificate. A

learner has to demonstrate proficiency using evidence in the portfolio in order to be issued a LINC certificate.

Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines. The Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines were shown to be relevant at the Pre-Entry Stage and Entry Stage, and now at the Exit Stage. The Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines carry specific instructions on transfers across LTOs, and the mandatory compliance to these guidelines by all LTOs.

A Summary of the Exit Stage. The relevant initiatives at this stage are the LINC and CLIC Certificate Issuance Policy, the Canadian Language Benchmarks, and the Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines. They collectively bring consistency to the Exit Stage. Table 5 below summarizes the discussion of the Exit Stage.

Table 5

A Summary of the Exit Stage

LINC Standardization Model Stage	Government Initiatives
Exit Stage	Issuance of LINC and CLIC Certificate & The CLBs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners are given a LINC certificate with CLB scores they achieved • Operation bulletin together with PBLA protocols gives guidance on how to assign CLBs
	Waitlist Management and Language Referral Guidelines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines on how to refer a learner from one LTO to another

In the literature, there are calls for the introduction of Standardized Exit Tests, similar to the placement assessment tests given to clients before they enter the LINC Program (see Pre-Entry Stage). The LINC Evaluation Report of 2010 echoed this view: “One design flaw is the lack of progress and exit tests” (CIC, 2010, p. 62). The argument for Standardized Exit Tests is that they would adequately gauge the extent to which LINC learners are acquiring language skills in English.

British Columbia

A discussion of the federal government initiatives would not be complete without acknowledging the role played by provinces, service providers, and other stakeholders. In British Columbia, for example, service providers and other stakeholders have a long history of seeking consistency in adult immigrant EAL training. For instance, LINC Net emerged from grassroots beginnings in 1992 on the Lower Mainland, and provided a sector-driven opportunity for providers of LINC to work together cooperatively. The organization later changed to ELSA Net, or English Language Services for Adults Network, then to Language Instruction Support and Training Network (LISTN). “ELSA Net has evolved to play a key role in *establishing standards, policies and guidelines* [emphasis added] for the sector, and in the on-going development of the capacity of the sector to deliver high-quality settlement language services” (ELSA Net, 2012, p. 5). ELSA

Net was committed to the standardization and consistency of the LINC program, and it produced the comprehensive ELSA Operational Policy Guidelines. In 2014, the document was revised by the BC-LINC Guidelines Committee “to better reflect a LINC delivery environment” (ELSA Net, 2012, p. 5).

Fast forward to 2018, when the BC LINC Guidelines Committee produced the BC LINC Guidelines under Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies (AMSSA). AMSSA took over the responsibilities of (LISTN), the successor of ELSA Net. The BC LINC Guidelines cover aspects such as eligibility, progressing students, exiting students from LINC, and attendance. Issues such as attendance are not covered by the federal government’s initiatives and are unique to the BC Guidelines. Such initiatives illustrate how the provinces’ guidelines complement those of the federal government. In 2011, ELSA Net launched the ELSA Curriculum Guidelines, which were unique to BC. These were influenced by the national LINC Curriculum Guidelines (see Language Training Stage) and made use of the CLBs. To this day, some organizations in BC are still using the ELSA Curriculum Guidelines.

The Citizenship and Immigration Canada Report of 2010 found mixed opinions on the balance between the federal government’s standardization of the LINC program and the need for regional flexibility. Some participants believed that the federal government should provide a consistent policy direction and the regions should have flexibility in program delivery to accommodate provincial priorities and community needs. In contrast, others thought that too much flexibility would result in too much variation across regions.

Implications and Consequences of Standardization

The consequences and implications of the government’s quest for standardization of the LINC Program warrant discussion. First, there is a risk that the introduction of so many government initiatives may obscure the centrality of the CLBs, especially with the rhetoric around PBLA. Some teachers and administrators may lose sight of how the CLBs are the cornerstone of PBLA. Obfuscating the importance of the CLBs has adverse consequences for the practical implementation of PBLA, and in turn, for the consistency and reliability of in-class assessments.

The portfolio as an assessment method has failed to shrug off the perennial tag of lacking standardization. In addition, it is still dogged by problems of validity, reliability, and subjectivity; some scholars still view it as a non-scientific assessment method (Brookhart 2008; Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, & Leavell, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, & Condon, 2000; Shavelson, Klein, & Benjamin, 2009; Sweygens et al., 2009). The PBLA, which is a portfolio, is not immune to this kind of criticism. This then begs the question: *Did the advent of PBLA bring in a new kind of inconsistency?* The question is legitimate and calls for empirical studies. Abbot (2019), for instance, mentioned how “there is limited empirical evidence to support the appropriateness of PBLA results for such high-stakes accountability purposes” (p. 3). Foremost, IRCC could examine the consistency of assessments across teachers, service providers, and provinces. Considering how LINC Certificates are now high stakes, this is a matter the government cannot afford to postpone or ignore.

The sustainability of PBLA is an issue that has already attracted the attention of scholars. Holmes (2016) introduced a model of sustainability and proffered the following recommendation:

As we move forward, sustainability of PBLA initiative will be key, but will require ongoing support for professional learning and classroom resources, development of agreed-upon standards and moderation sessions to ensure consistent application of these standards, and initiation of research to measure the impact of PBLA. (p. 122)

The million-dollar question is whether the government is prepared to provide the necessary funding and resources critical for the sustainability of PBLA.

In the literature, there are conflicting views on whether imposing a standard curriculum is beneficial or not. For instance, Pinet (2006) found that the CLB framework does not significantly restrict teachers' autonomy in curricular planning (see also, Fleming, 1998). In contrast, Haque and Cray (2010) found that if curriculum guidelines leave too much room for interpretation, this may lead to confusion. Given these divergent views on curriculum development, there is need for research so that IRCC makes an informed decision.

It is indisputable that the LINC Program is employing a significant number of EAL teachers nationally. Based on anecdotal evidence, these teachers often join LINC service providers directly from TESL teacher education programs with zero-to-minimal knowledge of the LINC Program, the CLBs, and PBLA. Often, these teachers are thrown into the classroom with little or minimal PBLA training, and this may negatively impact the implementation of PBLA. To better prepare newly qualified teachers, the government and other stakeholders could include a comprehensive course on the LINC Program, Canadian Language Benchmarks, and PBLA as part of the EAL teacher education curriculum—even as an elective.

As briefly mentioned under the section *Portfolio-Based Language Assessment*, (Language Training Stage), there is a lack of consistency in the working conditions, salaries, and welfare of LINC Instructors. Haque and Valeo (2017) observed, “Survey data with teachers of ESL to adults, however, have shown *enormous* [emphasis added] variation in working contexts and conditions, including full-time unionized positions and part-time contact positions” (p. 61). If not addressed, these disparities may lead to disgruntlement, and consequently, have adverse effects on classroom practice.

Critical literature on different features of the LINC Program, particularly PBLA, have shown how the effort to standardize the LINC Program and the actual impact may be divorced, demonstrating that the task of standardization encounters a variety of obstacles. Appreciating the importance of these obstacles and the critiques of standardization does not undermine the value of studying standardization of the LINC Program. On the contrary, this appreciation enriches it and underscores the complex dynamics associated with the standardization of an equally complex language training program. Indeed, there is a need for further research that would improve the LINC Program.

Conclusion

The implementation of the LINC Program in 1992 was the initial step towards formalized standardized teaching and assessment practices in the federally funded LINC Program. Over the years, the government continued to gradually, but consistently, introduce policies and procedures to standardize different aspects of the LINC Program. This paper introduced for the first time, the LINC Standardization Model, which was used to describe and analyze these government policies and procedures. These included curriculum guidelines; procedures for better coordination among service providers; standardization of tests and certification procedures; and greater consistency to in-class language assessment. It would be naïve to see the move towards standardization of the LINC Program as the singular sustained effort of the federal government. Provincial governments, scholars, instructors, LTOs, and all other non-government stakeholders, deserve credit for their unwavering commitment to the process. In conclusion, notwithstanding the challenges cited in this paper and elsewhere, the federal government has made commendable progress towards the standardization of the LINC Program; the march towards standardization should continue—*ad infinitum*.

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