COMPETENCY-BASED ADULT ESL AND NEWCOMER INTEGRATION

Introduction

There is an increasing number of refugees and immigrants arriving in Canada each year (Hyndman & McLean, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2006). According to Donaldson (2006), immigrants now make up approximately two-fifths of the population of Vancouver and Toronto. Many of these newcomers are well-educated professionals who are hoping to continue their professional careers in Canada (Ostrovsky, 2008). Others are looking forward to having the opportunity to further their education and work experience, an opportunity that may have previously been restricted by social or political circumstances in their home countries. However, for many, language acts as one of the greatest barriers to reaching these educational and career goals. For this reason, the federal government of Canada funds basic language training programs for newcomers to facilitate their economic, as well as social, cultural and political integration into Canadian society (Cray & Currie, 2004; Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000). Although funded by the federal government, the English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) program is managed by the provincial government in British Columbia and provided by third-party organizations such as immigrant settlement services agencies, community colleges, community centres and neighbourhood houses (Taviss & Simces, 2004). According to the British Columbia Settlement and Adaptation Program (BCSAP), the provincial government department responsible for implementation and management of ELSA, the mandate of the ELSA program is to "provide English language training to adult immigrant and refugee newcomers in order to facilitate their social, cultural, economic and political integration into Canada, so that they may become participating members of
Drawing on the 'communities of practice' model of learning proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991, Wenger 1998) and Norton's (1995, 2000) concept of 'investment,' this paper conceptualizes the process of 'integration' into a new community as a newcomer's movement from a peripheral position with limited social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) to a more central or 'legitimate' role with access to the full range of resources available to other members of that society. The purpose of this paper is to review some of the pedagogical practices of the ESLA program, the theoretical frameworks which inform these practices, and the degree to which this program is currently able to meet its stated mandate of facilitating newcomer integration. It is suggested that the use of a scale of predetermined competencies, or Benchmarks (Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000), for planning curricula may limit the efficacy of this program because it is not able to adequately recognize or address the multiple, shifting identities of immigrants and refugees or their investments in learning the English language (Cooke, 2006; Hart & Cumming, 1997; Hu, 2005; Hyndman & McLean, 2006). On the contrary, the static notion of learner identity that is created through the use of these competency scales, and the curricula that is developed from them, may in fact lead to immigrants' 'non-participation' (Norton, 2001) in the language classroom.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks

Currently, all government funded language training programs across Canada use the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) to assess the English language skills of new immigrants and refugees. The main purpose of the CLB is to enhance the "language
training offered to adult newcomers by improving language assessment practices and referral procedures” (Norton Pierce & Stewart, 1997, p. 18). That is, by funding the development of these benchmarks the federal government sought to create a “common framework for the description and evaluation of the language proficiency of adult newcomers to Canada” (Norton Peirce & Stewart, 1997, p. 17) to ensure that they were being similarly assessed no matter where they settled in Canada. In this regard, the CLB provide “a set of national language benchmarks to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, teachers, administrators, and agencies serving immigrants” (Norton Peirce & Stewart, 1997, p. 18) which allows these stakeholders to assess the English language proficiency of newcomers and place them in appropriate language programs. These benchmarks also make it easier for learners to move from one school or program to another without having to be re-assessed.

The CLB “provides a descriptive scale of communicative proficiency in ESL, expressed as benchmarks or reference points. They cover four skill areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and use real life language tasks to measure language skills” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2006). According to the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (CLB 2000), the most recently revised implementation document for the CLB, this descriptive scale is broken up into 12 distinct levels, or benchmarks, of communicative proficiency, 1 being basic skills, 12 being advanced proficiency. These 12 benchmarks are grouped into three stages: Stage One, or basic proficiency, consists of CLB levels 1 - 4, Stage Two, or intermediate proficiency, consists of CLB levels 5 - 8, and Stage Three, advanced proficiency, consists of CLB levels 9 -12. As the CLB 2000 explains, “the benchmark levels describe a clear hierarchy, or
Because the purpose of the benchmarks is to measure newcomers' 'communicative proficiency' when using English rather than their knowledge of the English language, each competency level seeks to measure what the learner can do with the language rather than what the learner knows about language. Accordingly, each "Benchmark provides examples of communicative tasks" which newcomers must be able to accomplish in order to "demonstrate the required standard of proficiency" for that particular level (CLB 2000, p. IX). The list of tasks in the CLB includes activities such as writing a letter, accepting and declining invitations and understanding announcements. It is assumed that the degree to which newcomers can successfully perform these 'real-life' tasks will illustrate not only their ability to communicate and function in Canadian society, but also the areas which learners need to work on in the language classroom.

The task-based approach used in the CLB was predicated on the 'communicative competence' model of language proficiency proposed by second language acquisition (SLA) scholars such as Hymes and Canale and Swain (Norton & Stewart, 1999). As Norton and Stewart (1999) explain, "in these well-established theories of communicative competence, knowledge of a language comprises four competencies: linguistic competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence" (p. 238). Briefly, linguistic competence is knowledge of the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of language; sociolinguistic competence is an understanding of the rules of language use; discourse competence is knowledge of how grammatical forms and meanings are combined to produce texts; and
strategic competence is the ability to cope in an authentic communicative situation (Alptekin, 2002; Leung, 2005).

The assumption made by the developers of the benchmarks documents is that while adult newcomers may indeed have some degree of linguistic competence in English, they also need to have strategic, discourse, and sociolinguistic competence for full participation in Canadian society (Norton & Stewart, 1999, p. 239).

It is presumed that by assessing language proficiency through the completion of a variety of communicative tasks, teachers and assessors will be able to gauge a newcomers' proficiency in each of these competency areas.

Norton and Stewart (1999) explain that because the “purpose of the CLB is to determine to what extent a learner can function communicatively within the Canadian context” (p. 240), the CLB attempts to ensure that these tasks are as authentic or ‘real’ as possible. By using realistic or authentic tasks, it is assumed that teachers and assessors will be able to assess how well newcomers will be able to manage communicatively in authentic social situations here in Canada. However, as Norton Pierce and Stewart (1997) acknowledge, the use of task-based assessment can be a challenge in that the more ‘authentic’ the tasks are, the more knowledge of specific cultural practices they may require, knowledge that newcomers may not have. In this regard, the tasks that were developed for the CLB needed to be not only realistic, but also fair and as free from racial and cultural bias as possible.

It was this paradoxical need for tasks to be ‘authentic’ yet free from cultural bias that led to the inclusion of rather stripped down measures of proficiency in the CLB...
(Norton Peirce & Stewart, 1997; Norton & Stewart, 1999; Stewart, 2005). When the first 'benchmarked' assessment instruments were field tested, much of the feedback that the developers received from teachers and program administrators concerned what they perceived as the culturally biased nature of some of the tasks (Norton Peirce & Stewart, 1997; Norton & Stewart, 1999; Stewart, 2005). As Norton and Stewart (1999) explain, on the one hand, stakeholders "wanted the tasks to be authentic and realistic; on the other hand, they wanted the tasks to assess linguistic competence only [because] tasks that addressed strategic competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence were understood by many as 'biased'" (p. 239). Although many stakeholders understood the need to make the tasks as authentic as possible, they felt that learners would be unfairly penalized if they lacked knowledge about authentic cultural practices in Canadian society.

This created a tremendous challenge for the developers of the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA). Norton Peirce and Stewart (1997) explain that they "wanted to ensure that most learners would be able to access the various tasks; however, it was neither possible nor desirable to strip the assessment content of its cultural context" (p. 20). Norton and Stewart (1999) argue that stripping the content of the CLBA of its cultural component "would do a disservice to learners and other stakeholders who expect the instruments to identify the extent to which newcomers can access the symbolic and material resources of Canadian society" (p. 240). In the end, developers of the CLBA settled on trying to develop "culturally accessible tasks rather than culturally 'free' tasks" (Norton Peirce & Stewart, 1997, p. 21). However, as the CLB 2000 document acknowledges, in the final drafts "the competencies and the standards had to be
considerably compressed and simplified" (p. XIV). This is an important element in the history of the CLB, particularly in light of the fact that the Benchmark outcomes are now guiding curriculum development in many adult immigrant English language programs. This will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Another modification made to the communicative tasks used in the CLB was the separation of the four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Because the CLB were to be used as a national standard, they would be implemented in a variety of language learning contexts, each with differing pedagogic demands. As mentioned previously, adult language classes are provided by community colleges, non-profit organizations, private language schools, community centres and neighbourhood houses. Some of these providers offer discrete skill classes and therefore requested that the benchmarks be divided up into separate skills (Norton & Stewart, 1999). However, separating task-based assessment into discrete skills is not only challenging, it also greatly reduces the authenticity of the tasks. As Norton and Stewart (1999) explain, “many highly realistic and meaningful tasks are unsuitable for the purpose of separate-skills assessment [because] authentic tasks are fluid and involve the simultaneous or rapidly alternating use of different language skills” (p. 231). Therefore a true task-based approach to language assessment “presumes a certain degree of skills integration – which conflicts with the CLBA requirement that the instruments isolate the language skills to simplify administration and render the skill-by-skill diagnostic information sought by some stakeholders” (Norton & Stewart, 1999, p. 232). In order to reconcile these conflicting requirements, the CLBA developers reluctantly narrowed their selection of assessment-eligible tasks (Norton & Stewart, 1999, p. 233). This entailed removing tasks
which inherently required the use of multiple skills, such as taking telephone messages and lecture note-taking from the pool of assessment tasks.

Having to choose only tasks that were more culturally accessible and which only tested one skill area greatly limited the types of communicative tasks that could be used in the CLB. Although this simplification has important implications for the CLB as an assessment tool, the increasingly frequent use of the Benchmarks as a curriculum guide means that these modifications may also be leading to narrow pedagogical practices that do not adequately prepare newcomers for the multiple, social contexts within which they will need to use English. The developers of the CLBA and the CLB 2000 make it very clear that these documents were not developed as curriculum guides. Norton and Stewart (1999) assert that the CLBA is an “assessment instrument whose primary purpose is to place learners in programs where limitations in communicative language ability can be addressed” (p. 241). Similarly, the CLB 2000 document states that “the Canadian Language Benchmarks are not a curriculum guide, [in that] they do not dictate local curricula and syllabuses” (p. VIII). However, as Cray and Currie (2004) explain, there have been numerous efforts on the part of the federal government to lay out both a teaching methodology that is appropriate for LINC [adult immigrant language] classes and a description of the language to be taught. The primary text is the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (CLB 2000). The CLB 2000 informs and guides the teaching of English as an official language to newcomers, translating the LINC policy into a set of language competencies from basic to advanced levels. (p. 54)
Evidence of how the CLB are being used to guide pedagogy can been seen on the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) website in the form of sample lesson plans and sample tasks provided for teachers (CCLB). Within the CLB 2000 document, it is acknowledged that the benchmarks can be used for “planning second language curricula for a variety of contexts” and that, in fact, their purpose is to assist “in the development of programs, curricula and materials that relate to a consistent set of competency descriptors for all ESL learners in Canada” (p. VIII). From these examples, it is clear that the CLB are influencing the kinds of curriculum being developed for and used in adult language programs. Of course, having a consistent set of competency descriptors from which to develop English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for newcomers to Canada is advantageous. However, if cultural content has been removed and communicative tasks have been artificially separated by skill area, then one must question the efficacy of a competency-based curriculum that is framed upon these descriptors in assisting newcomers’ integration into Canadian society.

As mentioned previously, the main objective of the ELSA program in BC is to facilitate the social, economic and political integration of newcomers through language training. It is presumed that by acquiring English, immigrants and refugees will be able to become more fully participating members of the community within which they live. The degree to which the ELSA program will be able to achieve this mandate depends in large part on the type of language education being offered. That is, the level of integration that newcomers will attain may be limited by what the curriculum of the program dictates as essential for successful participation in a new society. In this regard, in order to assess the efficacy of the ELSA program, it is important to examine how the CLB are guiding
curriculum development and instruction, and to what degree that instruction matches the
needs of the learners.

Competency-Based Education and Learner Identity

In the past two decades, several SLA scholars, researchers and practitioners have
argued that competency-based education for adult immigrants and refugees leads to
survival skills training rather than the language education they need to more fully
participate in society (Auerbach, 1986; Cray & Currie, 2004; Hyland, 2001; Tollefson,
1996). The term ‘survival’ English has mainly been used to describe literacy,
prevocational and basic skills training, which is situationally oriented around daily tasks
such as shopping, banking and healthcare, for students with zero to intermediate language
competencies require students “to communicate in common predictable contexts within
the area of basic needs, common everyday activities, and familiar topics of immediate
personal relevance” (p. XI). At the intermediate level or Stage II of the CLB, learners
acquire the ability to “function independently in most familiar situations of daily social,
educational and work-related life experience and in some less predictable contexts” (p.
XI). It is clear by these definitions that Stage I and Stage II of the CLB constitute survival
English.

One of the problems with competency-based survival English training is that the
predetermined, over-simplified competencies which these programs are framed upon
often fail to recognize the complex social lives of adult immigrants and refugees, their
life histories or their aspirations for the future (Auerbach, 1986, 1992; Tollefson, 1996).
Instead, these programs construct the learners’ lives and identities as static and
unidimensional which in turn limits the types of language taught and the opportunities the newcomers have to improve their social and economic circumstances (Auerbach, 1986; Currie & Cray, 2004; Tollefson, 1996). Auerbach (1986) suggests that by determining a list of language competencies that newcomers will ‘need’ to master in order to successfully integrate into their new community, competency-based programs conceptualize reality as something external, objective, and researchable instead of as a fluid, contextualized social construct (Auerbach, 1986, p. 416). In this way, competency-based programs construct a fixed reality and assume a very specific role or position for the immigrant language learner within that reality. Conceptualizing language learners and by extension their relationship to the social world in such a limited way has been a problem in the field of SLA for some time (Norton, 1995, 2000).

Norton (1995, 2000) suggests that many SLA researchers and scholars have “struggled to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not developed a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (p. 4). That is, she claims that many SLA theories conceptualize learner identity as an internal psychological construct rather than as an evolving, socially situated phenomenon. This creates the use of dichotomous terms such as motivated or unmotivated, and introverted or extroverted, to define learner identity and places the burden of learning the language wholly on the shoulders of the learners. That is, many SLA scholars still attribute the apparent success or failure of becoming proficient in a second language to the internal personality traits of the learners. However, conceptualizing learner identity in this way can not explain why individual learners may one day appear to be extroverted and talkative in class and the
next remain completely silent or why levels of motivation can seemingly shift over time for particular students. Working from a feminist poststructuralist framework to reconceptualize this relationship between language learners and the social world, Norton (1995, 2000) suggests that a learner's identity is multiple, a site of struggle and subject to change. Poststructural theories of learning argue that an individual's identity is not fixed and ahistorical, but rather fluid and continually shifting and evolving (Block, 2003; Norton, 2000; Ricento, 2005; Wenger, 1998). This is particularly true for learners in the ELSA program who may have been professionals, farmers, entrepreneurs, labourers, parents in their home country and are now assuming new roles such as immigrant, refugee, and student and trying to incorporate these new roles into their understanding of their own identity. Therefore, the use of predetermined lists of language competencies, greatly limits the ability of competency-based adult language programs to recognize or address the multiple and shifting identities of their learners or their complex relationship to the social world.

The first example of how the lived experiences of immigrant language learners are not recognized in competency-based programs is the lack of attention paid to critical thinking within these programs. Because competency-based education identifies and selects observable learning outcomes to assess students' proficiency and progress, there is a strong "emphasis on behaviour and performance rather than on the development of cognitive skills" (Auerbach, 1986, p. 418). When critical thinking issues are addressed, it is often done only at the higher levels. Auerbach (1986) claims that competency-based language programs "often presuppose that critical thinking skills are 'higher order' skills and therefore cannot be taught until after basic skills are mastered" (p. 419). When
describing the CLBA, Norton Pierce and Stewart (1997) explain that, “the tasks in Stage I are relatively short and related to information of a personal nature, whereas the tasks in Stage II are longer, more cognitively demanding, and related to information at the community level” (p. 22). For new immigrants and refugees to BC, the assumption that critical thinking can only be taught after basics skills is especially problematic because the provincial government only funds language training up to level 5. As Cray and Currie (2004) argue, reserving more cognitively challenging tasks for higher levels creates a contradiction in policy because “newcomers are, on the one hand, not being afforded an opportunity to learn the type of language that allows full participation in the nation, but are, on the other, expected to enter quickly into the activities of the nation” (p. 54).

This assumption is also problematic in the sense that it naively suggests that new immigrants and refugees have time to build their basic skills before learning more cognitively demanding information related to the community level. As Cray and Currie (2004) state, newcomers are often expected to, and in fact often financially need to, find employment very shortly after arriving in Canada. Finding employment in a new country requires an understanding of where to find job postings, how to write a resume or fill out an application form, how to handle a job interview, etc. All of these tasks require more than simple basic language skills. Similarly, if these newcomers have children, they must find schooling and/or daycare and take the steps necessary for their children to attend. They also need to be able to find housing and communicate with real estate agents, property managers or landlords. Although all of these situations do constitute ‘basic needs’, they are usually anything but ‘predictable’ in nature.
In her book on identity and language learning, Norton (2000) illustrates how the participants in her study needed to be able to use the English language in various and complex conversational exchanges in order to avoid being exploited. She describes how Martina, a woman from Czechoslovakia who immigrated to Canada with her husband and 3 children, had to have an extended conversation with her landlord over the phone in order to avoid paying extra rent.

When we moved and our landlords tried to persuade me that we have to pay for whole year, I got upset and I talked with him on the phone over one hour and I didn’t think about the tenses rules. I had known that I couldn’t give up. (p. 96)

Similarly, Norton (2000) depicts how Eva, a woman from Poland, who was working in a small restaurant, “was given the hard jobs to do, such as cleaning the floors and tables, clearing out the garbage and preparing the drinks” (p. 62) until she was finally able to speak up. Eva is clear about her frustration at this situation when she explains, “I don’t want like somebody takes me for a stupid person who just came and doesn’t know nothing and cleans the floor” (p. 63). Although both of these women had limited English skills, they needed to be able to ‘function independently’ in these ‘less predictable contexts.’ These women did not have time to build basic skills around topics of a ‘personal nature.’ Instead, what they needed were the skills or resources to avoid exploitation. Furthermore, both of these women were multilingual and Martina had been a professional surveyor in her home country. To assume that they were not ready for critical thinking because they had not mastered some basic skills in English would be rather condescending. As Katarina, another Polish woman in Norton’s 1995 study who
had been a teacher before coming to Canada explains, ‘I choose computer course [rather than English], not because I have to speak, but because I have to think” (p. 89).

Another example of this disconnection between how adult language programs conceptualize learner identity and the multiple lived experiences of immigrants is evident in the difference between the goals of immigrant learners and the objectives of the ELSA program. In 2004, as part of a performance evaluation process, the Settlement and Multiculturalism Division of the Ministry of Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism conducted an outcome survey of 932 clients who had exited from ELSA classes between April 2004 and March 2005 (Synovate, 2005). These clients, who were randomly selected from a list of 5,043 client names provided by the Ministry, were interviewed through a telephone survey given in their first languages. The objective of this survey was to assess client satisfaction and achievement in reaching some of the outcomes outlined in the ELSA Logic Model (CCLB). Of the clients interviewed, 57% stated that they had enrolled in ELSA because they thought it would help them find a job or a better job. Unfortunately, at this time the ELSA labour market focused (LMF) program had not yet been created, and therefore these learners were enrolled in regular ELSA programs in which language related to finding or maintaining employment are not addressed (CCLB; Cray & Currie, 2004). In 2006, the provincial government began providing funding for the ELSA LMF program to address these issues; however, this program is also framed upon the CLB and the types of jobs that this program trains learners for may not be the kind of employment they are seeking.

Auerbach (1986) and Tollefson (1996) argue that many survival English training programs for immigrants and refugees prepare them only to fill subservient positions in
the workforce rather than helping them to become fully participating members of their new society. In his book on refugee language policy and education in the United States, Tollefson (1996) explains that many adult language programs are designed to channel [refugees] into jobs in the peripheral economy, primarily at or near minimum wage. This means that refugees are educated for work as janitors, waiters in restaurants, assemblers in electronics plants and other low-paying jobs offering little opportunity for advancement, regardless of whether the refugees have skills suitable for higher paying jobs. (p. 108)

Tollefson (1996) describes how one language program for refugees in the United States socialized learners into low-paying jobs by having them punch a time clock as they entered class, and “periodically transform[ing] the classroom into an assembly line where students put together a simple lamp, or a fast-food restaurant [where students sold] hotdogs and hamburgers to other students” (p. 105). In one end-of-term assessment test for an ELSA LMF program I taught here in Vancouver, the learners were required to write a brief note to a hypothetical co-worker identifying which areas of the building they had not finished cleaning because the polisher had broken down and they had not been able to repair it. Students were assessed on the accuracy of their grammar, spelling, and punctuation and the clarity of their message. Many of the students who took this test found this task challenging because they did not know what a ‘polisher’ is – I had not thought to teach this word and it had not come up in any of the class materials. It is evident from this test question what kind of future employment the test developer had envisioned for these learners. Interestingly, the majority of the students in my class at this time had been professionals in their home country and, therefore, were not seeking
janitorial jobs. However, it is not only classroom activities and exam questions that seem to assume adult newcomers will be seeking entry-level jobs. ESL texts also seem to play a significant role in socializing learners for particular positions in society.

After reviewing a number of ESL texts used to teach survival English to immigrants in the United States, Auerbach and Burgess (1985) conclude that many of the materials created for survival English programs only offer minimum wage, working-class roles as models for newcomers. They explain that “beyond describing an oversimplified reality, texts often prescribe particular roles for students” (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985, p. 483, italics in original). They further state that “in many cases, survival texts unwittingly present an idealized view of reality [and] a patronizing attitude toward students” (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985, p. 490). Surprisingly, the patronizing construction of ‘immigrant’ as someone who is unskilled and uneducated and therefore employed in a low-paying job is still common. My review of some of the suggested textbook materials currently used in the ELSA LMF program here in Vancouver reveals that the role of ‘factory worker’ and ‘fast-food restaurant clerk’ are still popular in ESL materials geared toward adult immigrants and refugees (Molinsky & Bliss, 1994; Quatrini, 1994; Van Ormer, 1994). Many of these texts describe immigrants working in fast-food restaurants, factories, clothing stores, supermarkets, warehouses and the like. Therefore, the language that is modelled in these texts centres around simplified conversations which take place within these locations, such as greeting and serving customers, asking coworkers for help or clarification, and answering bosses’ questions. Although these types of dialogues may be a useful start, recent studies reveal that even ESL learners who have entry level jobs
need a much broader range of language skills to succeed and avoid exploitation in the workplace. This will be discussed further in the next section of this paper.

Although many ELSA teachers spend hours creating materials for their class in an effort to meet the needs of their particular students, the textbooks mentioned above do play a central role in the ELSA curriculum. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) suggest that, "while particular texts cannot be equated with curriculum, they often shape practice and reflect curricular orientation" (p. 476). As there is no specific ELSA LMF textbook per se and the federal and provincial governments do not provide funding for curriculum development for adult immigrant language programs, teachers are relying on many of these texts to supplement their teaching. Auerbach & Burgess (1985) argue that, "no curriculum is neutral: each reflects a particular view of the social order, whether implicitly or explicitly [and] this 'hidden curriculum' generates social meanings, restraints, and cultural values which shape students' roles outside the classroom" (p. 476). Because immigrants and refugees are predominantly being depicted in minimum wage jobs in the textbooks used in adult language programs, these texts are constructing social roles for the learners which do not adequately or fairly reflect their multiple and complex identities.

Scarola, Auerbach and Burgess Gomez (2003) recognize that it is impossible for ESL teachers to be constantly creating new materials in order to address the specific needs of learners and acknowledge that textbooks can in fact play an important role in the language classroom. Scarola claims that in one of her adult ESL classes, "the presence of a textbook, tapes, and a workbook helped the students feel connected to the learning process" (Scarola, Auerbach & Burgess Gomez, 2003, p. 9). She states that in her basic

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literacy class, “students were beginning to identify themselves as readers and as part of
the culture of school” because of the use of a set textbook (p. 9). Accordingly, Scarola,
Auerbach and Burgess Gomez (2003) suggest that instead of not using ESL texts at all,
teachers should exploit the content of these texts by having learners compare what is
presented to their own lived experiences, and begin to address what is missing. As
Auerbach and Burgess (1985) explain, “what is excluded from curricula is as important in
shaping students’ perceptions of reality as what is included” (p. 480, italics in original).
Excluding any reference to work other than minimum wage or entry level jobs in
textbooks may have a profound effect on how newcomers perceive the type of positions
available to them in Canadian society.

Some argue that preparing newcomers for entry-level jobs is beneficial for them
because by obtaining employment in Canada, regardless of the particular occupation, they
will have a chance to practice and improve their English skills, as well as gain valuable
work experience. However, on the contrary, recent studies of language use in the
workplace have revealed that quite often newcomers are either employed in jobs which
do not require them to speak English (Duff, Wong & Early, 2002; Goldstein, 1996;
Norton, 2000) or jobs in which they are not given the opportunity to speak it (Norton,
2000; Derwing & Munro, 2007). Duff, Wong and Early (2002), in their study of
immigrant men and women working as long-term care aides, found that frequently fluent
English was not as useful for these newcomers as other means of communication such as
body language. They explain that in many of the care homes in which the participants
worked, both the residents and the staff spoke a language other than English and in fact,
when the elderly residents did speak English they often used colloquial language that was
very different from the medical and technical language the participants had learned in their care aide program. Duff, Wong and Early (2002) note that “the most interesting and unexpected findings [of the study] include the range and complexity of communication skills required of the study participants” (p. 417). They conclude that “the monolingual English workplaces for which program curricula and textbooks prepare students simply do not exist any longer in large cities in many parts of the English-speaking world” (p. 417).

This sentiment was echoed in Goldstein’s (1996) study of language choice of bilingual Portuguese/English speaking women in the workplace. Goldstein (1996) found that choosing to speak English, rather than Portuguese, was detrimental to the women’s social and economic status. That is, because the majority of workers at the factory were Portuguese, speaking that language illustrated one’s solidarity and group membership whereas speaking English was seen as an insult to the other members of the work community. This pressure to speak the ‘legitimate’ language in the factory was so strong that even immigrants who did not speak Portuguese as their first language began to learn and use it instead of English in order to participate in the work community. This is a good example of the importance of having the correct ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977) in order to gain access to and participate in a particular community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). According to Bourdieu, the “value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from the larger networks of social relationships” (McKinney & Norton, 2008, p. 193). Whether one is considered a ‘legitimate’ speaker, or an ‘imposter’, in a specific social context, according to Bourdieu, depends on the ‘cultural
capital’ one has to offer. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and resources, such as language, one has to draw upon within particular social settings. In the factory where Goldstein’s (1996) study took place, the cultural capital one needed to acquire to avoid being positioned as an ‘imposter’ was the ability to speak Portuguese.

For many new immigrants and refugees who are fortunate enough to obtain employment in a predominantly English speaking workplace, it is the lack of cultural capital, in many cases colloquial English, that often limits their access to social networks because they are not seen by their coworkers as ‘legitimate’ members of the workplace (Norton, 2000). Norton (2000) explains that although 2 of her study participants, Eva and Martina, worked in English speaking environments and could speak basic English, they were often not given the ‘right to speak.’ Neither Eva nor Martina were able to speak English fluently; therefore they were positioned as ‘imposters’ in their places of work and had difficulty gaining access to conversations. Martina had limited access to practicing English in her workplace not because she was unwilling to speak to others as some researchers may suggest (Derwing & Munro, 2007), but because she was often excluded from conversations.

When [Martina] was working as kitchen help at Fast Foods, the only people she came in contact with were her manager and the young part-time workers. While the manager and the part-time workers had a social relationship, Martina was excluded from interaction with them. (Norton, 2000, p. 98)

Similarly, Eva felt that “her coworkers had little respect for her and [therefore] did not interact with her” (Norton, 2000, p. 62). Not only did Eva’s limited English restrict her ‘right to speak’, it also positioned her as an ‘unskilled, uneducated worker’ in the eyes of
her co-workers (Norton, 2000, p. 63). As Norton (2000) explains, “the lack of opportunity to practice her English [was] partly structured by social relations of power which exclude unskilled workers, supposedly uneducated workers, from language practices in this particular workplace” (p. 63). Both of these women did not have the symbolic capital to enter the social network in their places of work. These examples illustrate clearly that even if immigrants and refugees are able to garner employment in English speaking environments, they are often positioned by their co-workers as ‘imposters’ rather than as legitimate members of the workplace community (Wenger, 1998). In turn, they are not given the opportunity to engage in conversations at work which would otherwise allow them to practice their English.

**Investment and Imagined Future Communities**

These examples also illuminate the kind of situations that newcomers are often faced with when employed in Canadian workplaces, situations that require very different language skills than the competencies outlined in many adult language programs. This difference is often very evident to adult immigrants and refugees who have been in the country for a while and consequently, may explain why they sometimes appear ‘unmotivated’ in the language classroom or why they drop out all together (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Pittaway, 2004). According to the BCSAP Outcomes Survey mentioned previously (Synovate, 2005), only 45% of the 932 immigrants who were interviewed stated that they had stayed in the ELSA program for 6 months or longer. The students who were least likely to stay in the program included: skilled worker class immigrants, those under 25
years of age and those with post secondary schooling. Unfortunately, the report does not clarify the reasons why these clients are less likely to remain in the program. It may be that skilled workers and immigrants with post secondary schooling have higher levels of English upon enrolling in the program and, therefore, do not need as much time to improve their English skills. However, it also may be that these newcomers leave the program earlier because it is not meeting their expectations, or because they feel that it is not helping them gain access to the jobs, professional communities and/or further education they are seeking.

In order to make sense of this 'lack of motivation', or non-participation (Norton, 2001), it is important to understand the learners’ current circumstances as well as their social histories and future aspirations. Parallel to Norton’s (1995, 2000) reconceptualization of identity mentioned previously, is her notion of ‘investment’ (Norton Peirce, 1995). Investment, as Norton Peirce (1995) explains, is the “complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it” (p. 9). Unlike motivation, which has typically been conceptualized as an internal process within the language learner herself (Norton Peirce, 1995), a learner’s investment in learning the target language and participating in the target language community is dependent on her relationship to that target language community.

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return from that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (Norton, 2000, p. 10)
Norton (2000) explains that language learners study a new language with the intention of gaining access to 'hitherto unattainable resources.' Possession of these cultural, symbolic and linguistic resources (Bourdieu, 1977) in turn, provides these learners access to the social, education or professional communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within which they wish to participate (Norton, 2001; Pittaway, 2004).

Pittaway (2004) clarifies how this notion of investment can influence a learner's behaviour in the classroom by suggesting that "if learners believe that the language learning situation within a classroom is not going to help them achieve a return on their investment, then they are likely to resist by dropping out or by disengaging from tasks" (p. 204). The apparent decreased motivation often seen in ELSA students who have been in Canada for some time may result from the fact that they are finding that what they are learning in the classroom is not helping them gain access to the resources and/or communities which they seek. Teaching students 'basic greetings' or 'asking for clarification' as outlined in the CLB is not going to help the participant in Norton's 1995 study who was being exploited by her landlord for a year's worth of rent. Similarly, the model dialogues in the textbooks used in the ELSA LMF program often do not prepare learners for the conversations they encounter in their workplace. In one of the ELSA LMF classes I taught, one of my students, who had been a psychology professor at a large university in her home country, mentioned that she had acquired a part time job in a local retail shop. She was pleased to be working but mentioned that the types of conversations we were practicing in class were not at all the same as the way her coworkers interacted with her. When I asked her to explain, she described how her teenaged coworkers mocked her about her accent whenever she spoke or simply ignored her all together. This...
prompted another student in the class, a man who had been a building inspector in his
country and who was working at a local supermarket, to assert that at least her coworkers
were not trying to get her into trouble with the boss as in his situation. When I asked him
to elaborate, he described how one of the other employees at the supermarket told my
student that he had to ‘take care of other things’ all of the time and then left my student to
do all of the work. When the store manager asked the two men why certain jobs hadn’t
been finished, the co-worker would say that my student had told him the task had been
done. As I listened to these adult students describe their work situations, the
ridiculousness of the over-simplified, idealized dialogues in the textbooks I had been
using became very apparent. My students did not need to memorize dialogues, they
needed to discuss their work experiences and help each other find possible solutions.

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) conceptualize learning as a social
phenomenon, and suggest that through a process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’
newcomers interact with ‘old-timers’ in a given community setting and thus become
increasingly experienced in the practices of that community. This in turn, gradually
allows them to participate more fully in that specific community of practice. However, as
Norton (2001) explains, “particular social arrangements in any community may constrain
or facilitate movement towards fuller participation” (p. 160). Whether or not a learner
gains access to a particular community of practice often depends on whether or not she
possesses the appropriate linguistic, cultural and symbolic resources necessary for
participation. If the language training immigrant learners are receiving in the classroom is
not what they need to gain fuller and perhaps more equitable participation in the
communities of practice they are seeking to access, these students may choose to resist
participating in particular classroom activities or quit the class altogether (Cooke, 2006; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Norton, 2001).

Although the examples above depict specific workplace situations, the communities of practice that learners want to access may not be “communities whose existence can be felt concretely and directly” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). Instead, another important source of ‘community’ may come from a learner’s imagination. As Kanno and Norton (2003) explain, *imagined communities* refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination” (p. 241). Kanno and Norton (2003) contend that imagined communities are ‘no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investments” (p. 242). For example, a recent immigrant who was a nurse in her former country may envision herself becoming a member of a community of nurses or healthcare professionals here in Canada in the future. This newcomer may begin to study English because she recognizes that becoming more proficient in this language is a means of gaining access to this imagined community. In this way, a learner’s investment in her future imagined community may have a strong influence on her desire to study English.

However, when that learner’s affiliation to her imagined community is not recognized or validated by the practices of the language classroom or the language teacher, that learner may be less motivated to participate. For example, Norton (2000, 2001) describes how one of the participants in her study resisted participating in her ESL class because her teacher made comments which did not validate her affiliation with important imagined communities. Katarina, an immigrant from Poland who had been a
teacher for many years before coming to Canada, quit her ESL class after her teacher
discouraged her from taking a computer course, saying that her English was not “good
enough” to take the course (Norton, 2000, 2001). Kanno and Norton (2003) explain that
“although Katarina could not find employment as a teacher in Canada, she continued to
view herself as having legitimate claim to professional status; [therefore], when her
teacher discouraged her from taking a computer course, Katarina felt that she was
positioned as a ‘mere’ immigrant” (p. 243). Kanno and Norton (2003) suggest that this
positioning by her teacher denied Katarina an opportunity to gain greater access to her
imagined community of professionals. Ironically, Katarina enrolled in the computer
course shortly after quitting her ESL class and completed the 18 month course

Conclusion

Returning to the ELSA program here in BC and its use of the competency-based
CLB to frame its curriculum, one must consider to what degree this program is able to
recognize and validate the multiple, shifting identities and future aspirations of the
learners it serves. The degree to which this program is able to, or fails to, address the
multiple investments learners have in studying English, will have a large impact on
whether or not it reaches its stated mandate of facilitating the social, economic and
cultural integration of newcomers to Canada. If the materials being used in ELSA classes
prescribe a social order in which immigrants assume minimum wage jobs, and instructors
are designing class activities around simplistic, predetermined performance outcomes,
this leaves very little room for addressing the actual lived experiences of these
newcomers – their previous educational and/or occupational experiences, the current multiple social contexts in which they need to use English, or the future imagined communities within which they strive to participate.

Little research has been done on adult immigrant language education, particularly within the Canadian context, with regards to how learner identity is being constructed within the classroom and to what degree that conceptualization is being resisted by the learners. Menard-Warwick (2007) describes how a teacher positioned 2 of her adult language learners based on gender and the ways in which these language learners exercised considerable agency in resisting this positioning. Cooke (2006) draws on her interviews with 76 adult immigrants in the UK, analyzing 4 in detail, to examine how structural and institutional factors constrain language learning. She suggests that within the classrooms she investigated, methods employed for attempting to meet the learners’ needs were inadequate because they ignored the real life experiences of the students. Cooke concludes that “the activities and practices of ESOL classrooms, while fulfilling some needs such as the affective and social, often failed to equip migrants to realise their full potential as users of English, members of the work force and future citizens” (Cooke, 2006, p. 56). More research needs to be done within ELSA classes to investigate to what degree we are successfully recognizing and addressing our learners’ needs and truly assisting them in becoming more fully participating members of our society.
References


Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks: www.language.ca


**Further Reading**


