

PBLA Practice Guidelines FAQ 2020-2021

- Why PBLA -

I'm an experienced adult EAL teacher and I've just been hired to teach in LINC for the first time. I know a bit about PBLA but I don't yet have all the details of what I need to do. What I do have is a lot of questions about why we need to build portfolios with learners instead of just giving them an end-of-term test like most programs.

Before I do the Introduction to PBLA course and start learning the requirements and processes, can you tell me the purpose of PBLA and what it is supposed to do for learners?

Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA) has been the approach to assessing LINC clients' language levels since 2014. Teachers in over 300 programs across Canada use PBLA to determine learners' real life needs to use English in the community, workplace or post-secondary schooling situations, and to design and teach a curriculum that meets those needs.

With PBLA, learners are helped to gradually progress in their English abilities while at the same time building knowledge of Canada and Canadian culture and systems to help with integration into Canadian society. The purpose of PBLA is to provide an ongoing assessment of English which can check for learners' abilities to communicate and understand in the real world, and also to provide individual feedback to learners, with specific strategies and resources for them to take control of their own learning.

When teachers have enough evidence that learners meet the designed-in-Canada national standard for language levels, the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs), they can assign a completed CLB level so that learners, programs and others know what types of tasks in English can now be achieved. With this understanding and evidence of their ability, clients can decide what to do next as they build their lives in Canada: continue to work on English levels, enter training or advanced education, get a job or return to a career, or prove CLB 4 and above listening and speaking ability for Canadian citizenship.

The Need for a National Standard of Assessment

I've taught English for a long time and I know when a learner has achieved a level or is too low or too high. Why can't I just move a learner into a new level when they are ready?

A national standard of language ability has existed since 2000 with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs). Utilizing this national standard means measuring or assessing clients' language production and understanding against the CLBs' descriptors of levels.

Prior to 2014, CLB assessment in LINC programs across Canada was "ad hoc and inconsistent" (Makosky, 2008 and Nagy and Stewart, 2009). Not all teachers and programs had a deep enough understanding of the CLBs and assessment to reliably measure language ability. This created problems and confusion for clients, programs and the federal funder of LINC, IRCC. Clients could not be certain that the results of time invested would be recognized outside the program they had studied in. Programs could not be certain how to deal with clients transferring from other programs since study levels were not always in

sync (i.e. “level 4” did not always have the same language goals in different programs). The funder could not be certain that taxpayer dollars were providing useful and usable results to all stakeholders. As a result, the funders recognized this gap and recommended changes based on this assessment.

A national standard of assessment was needed to address the inconsistencies across the country.

While the standard needed to be national, there are many different regions in Canada, with many different local area variations. An approach to assessment was needed that could be scalable to programs in large urban areas, small rural areas and every size and permutation of municipality in between while also being consistent and reliable. Programs and teachers also wanted an approach to assessment that could be responsive to the unique needs of clients in their specific areas. PBLA was chosen to meet diverse needs.

Focusing on Learners’ Real-Life Needs for Language versus Learning to Pass a Test

Instead of testing learners all the time with PBLA, why don’t learners just take one test at the end of the level? Why aren’t they sent back to an assessment centre to have their language level tested to complete LINC?

Programs that are funded to meet outcomes for clients need to provide evidence that those outcomes are met. For LINC this means measuring language ability that results from study in a way that is reliable across the country. A client in rural Manitoba should demonstrate the same ability as a client in urban Toronto when assessed at the same CLB level.

One choice to measure language ability in LINC was to create a standardized test, like the TOEFL or IELTs tests, that all clients would take, regardless of their educational backgrounds and ability to perform academically or their current personal circumstances.

A standardized test is a high-stakes one-time measurement. It must be rigorously controlled. A large infrastructure is needed to design, validate and deliver a standardized test. New test items must constantly be generated to keep up with ongoing changes to a living language such as English, and to protect the security and integrity of the test. The test must be delivered to all learners with identical conditions and strict protocols that include tight security measures and rigid time limits.

It is generally very stressful for most learners to take a standardized test, especially if they do not have a lot of formal education, or have current circumstances that impact their study like health issues or learning difficulties. Learners must have or develop test-taking strategies that are only useful for taking tests. Some learners have a great deal of difficulty performing in standardized testing conditions even if they have and can demonstrate ability outside those conditions. Some learners may even tie feelings of self-worth to passing a standardized test regardless of other accomplishments.

For teachers in programs with standardized tests, considerable effort must be made to prepare learners for the test. To not do so would be a disservice to the learners. This means learning the test themselves and teaching learners how to answer test questions whether that knowledge is needed in the lives of the particular learners or not. Immediate and real-life needs of learners are secondary to achieving a

passing score with standardized tests but passing scores do not guarantee that learners have practical skills for functioning in civil society.

Another choice to measure language ability in LINC was Portfolio Based Language Assessment or PBLA.

PBLA is a teacher-led, classroom-based, client-centered approach to assessment. The principles of PBLA, found in the PBLA Practice Review, demonstrate that this form of assessment is methodic, responsive and practical, revolving around the real-life language needs of the client.

Curriculum for PBLA is based on Needs Assessments with clients to uncover the community, workplace or post-secondary tasks they want to accomplish, as well as teachers' professional judgement to include other necessary real-world tasks. As clients work to learn the knowledge and skills for the real-world tasks, teachers note their progress and gather evidence of their growing ability through skill-using and assessment tasks. Instead of one high-stakes, stressful test that cannot take into account if a client is having a bad day, PBLA gradually builds a picture of each learner, by focusing on CLB criteria, to capture the nuances and complexities of what they can do compared to the CLB standard for the level.

It is recognized that some newcomers who are eligible for LINC only want to practice the language they have and socialize to build community rather than spending many hours in a classroom to gain greater language ability. Or clients just want to prove their current ability and obtain a certificate, for citizenship or entry into employment programs or other reasons. While LINC through PBLA can provide a certificate of completed benchmarks, sufficient time for learning is needed along with sufficient artefacts for national program consistency. Fortunately, the funder, IRCC, provides a range of other options for clients to get their personal needs met when the commitment to LINC is not the best choice for them. For example, clients can be referred to conversation circles for socializing and community, or the CELPIP test for quickly obtaining a certificate of completed benchmarks.

Honouring Teachers' Professional Judgement

Some teachers say all they do in PBLA is test. They don't even have time to teach properly. Why do we need so much evidence? How is all this testing good for students?

An important aspect of PBLA is teachers' professional judgement. To grow professional judgement, teachers need support and guidance to develop and deliver reliable evidence-based assessment that is consistent across providers, and also to use an assessment *for* learning approach in their practice.

For example, although clear measures are needed to ensure validity in PBLA, assessments are not mini tests and should not be treated or referred to in this manner. Any individual assessment only tells learners and teachers what the learner can do well, and what they still need to work on. Some learners, teachers and programs are used to more traditional systems where assignments and tests are added up to achieve an overall percentage or mark. As a result, they may still focus on the end of the course and "passing" rather than on the process of learning and the goal of authentic communication in the real world. Teachers in these environments may feel pressured – by themselves, learners, or program Admin – to assess before learners are ready. A deeper understanding of the PBLA approach obtained through workshops with Lead Teachers and guidance from PBLA Coaches can help teachers and programs change class structures and the language around ongoing assessment so that it is better integrated and less numerically-driven.

Once teachers and programs have a thorough understanding of PBLA, they can apply their understanding toward individual situations. For example, portfolio evaluations. To ensure consistent results across providers, teachers must examine a consistent amount of evidence or artefacts for each learner, currently 8 to 10 artefacts per skill area (based on evidence taken from the PBLA pilot). PBLA guides teachers to apply both an analytic, systematic review of criteria and also a holistic lens of what the learner demonstrates they can now routinely do related to the benchmark descriptors for the level in each skill area. Trained teachers' professional judgement is needed and trusted to properly weigh the evidence in each portfolio to make a high-stakes benchmark decision about completed levels.

Teachers' professional judgement is not just needed to make benchmark decisions. It is needed in every part of implementing PBLA from choosing real-world tasks to work toward, to how long is needed for skill-building on each task. All valid assessments should reflect what has been taught and practiced in class. Teachers who need support as they build their understanding of PBLA can turn to their program's Lead Teachers, who themselves have PBLA Coaches and the CCLB always available for support.

Building Independence and Agency in Learners

All of these extras like goal-setting and reflections take up so much time in class. Are they really necessary?

While some programs and teachers focus on the assessment aspect of PBLA and gathering artefacts for portfolios, the Assessment *for* Learning (AFL) approach embedded in PBLA is equally important in achieving the intended outcomes for learners and should not be considered extras that can be skipped.

AFL practices in PBLA include needs assessment, goal-setting, self and peer assessment, action-oriented feedback, and reflections on learning. Each of these practices build learners' independence and agency: independence in learning and for improving skills, and agency for expressing needs and making life and learning choices.

Needs assessment not only tells teachers what learners need to accomplish with language in community, workplace or post-secondary situations and builds a more complete picture of the class, they also help learners to see that they and their needs are valued by the teacher. Clients learn that they are partners with the teacher in creating curriculum and reaching their personal outcomes. Goal-setting is another AFL practice that gives teachers information while helping learners to identify what they want to do with their learning, and understand how to break down their larger goals into more manageable steps.

Action-oriented feedback is one of the most powerful tools in PBLA for empowering learners. Rather than the teacher holding the secrets to improvement which are only dispensed in lessons, through action-oriented feedback, teachers provide specific strategies and resources that learners can use to improve their abilities on their own. Motivated learners gain tools they might not find on their own.

Self and peer assessment are also very important to help learners develop an understanding of the CLB criteria on which they are being assessed, so that they can focus their study and practice the specific areas that are most impeding communication and understanding. Developing self-assessment skills helps learners not be dependent on others to succeed independently, as well as to continue learning and improving even after they have left a language program.

The final AFL practice used in PBLA is reflections on learning. When learners reflect on what and how they learned as well as how they applied their learning in the real world, they begin to understand what techniques and resources work for themselves to improve. They gain language to express to the teacher how they learn best and what they like and don't like about activities and content chosen for class. Reflections on learning also help clients see the value of task-based learning and interactive activities for providing practice toward skills used outside the classroom.

Providing Choice and Flexibility to Programs

I have a colleague who works in LINC at a different organization. They do things differently at that organization. How can you say LINC and PBLA are standardized if we aren't all doing the same things?

The Principles of PBLA found in the PBLA Practice Review along with the guidelines found in the PBLA Practice Guidelines indicate to programs what they must achieve. Principles and guidelines rather than rules are provided because different programs structure and run their programs differently, depending on the size of their organizations and LINC programs, whether they are urban, rural or small community, and other factors. Adhering to principles and guidelines allow programs to stay consistent with each other while tailoring delivery to specific area needs. In other words, programs may not look the same on the surface but they are all working toward the same outcomes.

For example, learners need to have adequate time to learn and practice tasks before they are assessed. A guideline for the minimum number of hours of study is given to help programs understand the importance of pacing of teaching, learning and assessment so that learners are not rushed or expected to learn faster than is comfortable. Consulting their Lead Teacher, Administrators can also find out how much time their teachers generally need to build sufficient evidence in portfolios. With this information, programs set the number of hours learners are expected to study before their portfolios (with sufficient evidence) can be evaluated by their teacher.

If there are any questions with interpreting the principles and guidelines and for implementing PBLA appropriately, Lead Teachers and Administrators can draw on the guidance of PBLA Coaches and Program Managers at the CCLB. The CCLB is continuously checking in with the field and developing materials such as Module packages with teaching materials, and courses such as the online Introduction to PBLA, as well as Professional Learning Sessions and conference sessions on topics of importance in the field to support teachers, Lead Teachers, and Program Administrators.

For more information, please contact the CCLB at pbla@languge.ca.