Implementing Portfolio-Based Language Assessment in LINC Programs: Benefits and Challenges

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Although earlier research has examined the potential of portfolios as assessment tools, research on the use of portfolios in the context of second-language education in Canada has been limited. The goal of this study was to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing a portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) model in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs. Data were gathered through semistructured interviews with four LINC instructors involved in a PBLA pilot project in a large Canadian city. Similar interviews were conducted with a representative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and a developer of the PBLA model. Participants identified both benefits and challenges related to PBLA implementation. Based on their feedback, recommendations for future implementation are provided.

Bien que la recherche antérieure ait porté sur le potentiel des portfolios comme outils d'évaluation, la recherche sur leur emploi dans l'éducation en langue seconde au Canada est limitée. L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les bienfaits et les défis relatifs à la mise en œuvre d'un modèle d'évaluation linguistique reposant sur le portfolio (PBLA) pour la formation dans les cours de langue pour immigrants au Canada (CLIC). Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entrevues semi-structurées avec quatre enseignants de CLIC impliqués dans un projet pilote PBLA dans une grande ville canadienne. Des entrevues similaires ont eu lieu auprès d'un représentant de Citoyenneté et immigration Canada et d'un développeur du modèle PBLA. Les participants ont identifié les bienfaits et les défis relatifs à la mise en œuvre du modèle PBLA. En s'appuyant sur leur rétroaction, on fournit des recommandations visant la mise en œuvre à l'avenir.

Although their format and use may vary, portfolios have been playing an increasingly important role as assessment tools in educational settings. At the time of this study, a portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) project was being piloted in all Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in a large Canadian city. This pilot project provided a unique opportunity to examine the benefits and challenges of implementing portfolio-based assessment in the context of adult language programs. In addition, the perspectives of stakeholders involved in the pilot project could potentially be used to guide future PBLA implementation in LINC programs. Before examining the results of this study, I pro-

vide an overview of the characteristics of portfolios, their strengths and weaknesses as assessment tools, and their previous implementation in other settings.

Characteristics of Portfolios

Johnson, Mims-Cox, and Doyle-Nichols (2010) define portfolios as collections of students' work assembled over time that "can be organized to assess competencies in a given standard, goal, or objective" (p. 5). These authors also note the potential of portfolios to serve both formative and summative purposes. A working portfolio can provide evidence of a student's progress to a specific point and can be used to promote students' reflection, whereas a "showcase portfolio … serves as a summative evaluation for the student, in which the best evidence of that student's qualifications is presented" (p. 34).

Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) identify three characteristics that they believe are essential for a sample of student writing to be considered a portfolio: collection, reflection, and selection. Portfolios must contain multiple writing samples, they must involve students in active reflection on their work, and they cannot simply be "an undiscriminated collection of everything the student produced" (p. 120). These authors also view the integration of instruction and assessment as critical, because one "cannot reliably or validly … evaluate a performance without knowing its context" (p. 3). In portfolio assessment, instruction and assessment are intrinsically linked.

Lynch and Shaw (2005) view portfolio assessment as one example of "alternative assessment," which they define broadly as "a turn to something new, a search for a wider palette of choices" (p. 264). They outline various features that a portfolio must include in order to be considered an alternative assessment. Echoing Hamp-Lyons and Condon, these features include students' reflection and participation in the selection of portfolio contents. However, Lynch and Shaw make a distinction between alternative assessment *information* and alternative assessment *recording*. The former "results from portfolios that simply display samples of writing and other student products" (p. 266), whereas the latter involves students in the selection and evaluation processes and reports the results qualitatively.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Portfolios

Weigle (2002) notes that authenticity is one of the strongest features of portfolio assessment, as portfolios "can be designed to include writing samples that were written for some authentic purpose other than the evaluation of writing *per se*" (p. 203). However, Weigle notes that portfolios may be less reliable than traditional timed writing tests. This is of particular concern "when portfolios are being read by people other than the classroom teacher, who may not be familiar with students or the curriculum, and when the stakes for the individual student are high" (p. 208). This echoes Hamp-Lyons and

Condon's (2000) assertion that knowledge of the classroom context is crucial in the evaluation of student portfolios.

Weigle (2002) also identifies practicality as a weakness of portfolio assessment, noting that a substantial time commitment is required for successful implementation. In addition, students must remain in a program long enough to assemble a portfolio, and Weigle recognizes that this may not be feasible in adult education programs that allow continuous enrollment. Further difficulties can result from the fact that "instructors in such programs frequently have only part-time contracts and are not paid for meetings or service above and beyond teaching their classes" (p. 210).

Studies of Portfolio Implementation

Spalding and Cummins (1998) surveyed University of Kentucky students regarding their experiences with a portfolio assessment in high school. As they note, the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) led to a requirement for all grade 12 students to assemble a writing portfolio. Among those surveyed, 68.3% believed that the portfolio was not useful. In addition, "teachers in schools whose students perform well on the assessments receive financial rewards and schools whose students fail to improve or whose scores decline are sanctioned" (p. 171). One student surveyed commented on the stress this created for teachers, which in turn affected the student's own stress level as he or she struggled to meet the state's requirements. As Spalding and Cummins note, students' resistance to the portfolios "puts Kentucky teachers in the unenviable position of being held accountable for the results of an assessment which most respondents dubbed 'a waste of time'" (p. 186).

Callahan (2001) examined the effect of the Kentucky writing portfolio on a high school's English department. The portfolios were introduced as part of the KERA to address inequalities in schools and to encourage teachers to embrace an alternative to standardized testing. However, Callahan notes that "by couching much of the initial rationale for the [portfolios] in terms of poor student performance on national tests, the Kentucky General Assembly appeared to suggest that many Kentucky teachers were incompetent and needed stringent outside monitoring" (p. 180). This led to high levels of stress for teachers during the early stages of portfolio assessment. Callahan describes a particularly difficult situation where teachers struggled to score a portfolio objectively due to "concern for the student as an individual [and] a concern for their departmental reputation" (p. 195). As Spalding and Cummins (1998) note, the stress that the portfolios engendered for teachers negatively affected their students.

Research conducted in postsecondary contexts suggests that portfolio assessment can have a positive effect on learning. A study conducted by Song and August (2002) examined the performance of two groups of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students enrolled in a postsecondary composition

course offered through Kingsborough Community College in New York. Nine sections of a compensatory freshman English course were assessed using a combination of a timed writing assessment test and a portfolio model developed by the college. They were matched with nine sections of the same course that were assessed with the timed writing test alone. Fifty percent of the students enrolled in each group were randomly selected for inclusion in the study, and they had no knowledge of which sections would be assessed with portfolios when they chose their courses. Song and August tracked the performance of these students in a higher-level course and found that those who were assessed with portfolios were more likely to pass a first-semester English class than those who were assessed solely with the timed writing test.

Research conducted by Lam and Lee (2010) outlines the results of a mixed-methods study designed to explore the formative potential of portfolio assessment in an English academic writing course at a Hong Kong university. They found that students' motivation increased when they had the option of selecting their best work for a final grade. Students also found it helpful to discuss working drafts with their instructors during conferences, and they "realized that the assessment environment in the portfolio programme was less threatening and much more supportive than in timed impromptu essay tests" (p. 59). Most of the students (83.3%) believed that the portfolio process could improve their writing abilities. However, Lam and Lee note that "ingrained attitudes about the primacy of grades" (p. 62) remain a major hurdle that must be overcome before this form of assessment gains wider acceptance.

As Little (2002) notes, the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP) is designed to serve both a reporting and a pedagogical function; it provides detailed information about a person's language-learning history and proficiency, and it also serves to "make the language learning process more transparent to the owner, and foster the development of learner autonomy" (p. 182). The ELP model includes three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. It also includes descriptors that illustrate how the ELP is designed to measure five communicative activities at six proficiency levels. As Little explains, a major challenge encountered during the ELP's pilot phase stemmed from the self-assessment function of the portfolio, which "proved difficult in pedagogical traditions that were strongly teacher-led and did not encourage learners to share in the setting of learning targets" (p. 183) or the evaluation of their own learning. However, feedback from pilot projects was deemed to be positive overall; 70% of participating teachers believed that the ELP was useful for learners, and 78% believed that it was useful for teachers.

Little (2007) stresses that learners' self-assessment "provides the key dynamic for effective ELP use" (p. 649), and he acknowledges that it is necessary to develop an assessment culture that supports self-assessment for the ELP to be successful. He identifies this as a major challenge, and outlines three

ways that teachers can foster autonomy among language-learners: fully involve learners in "planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning" (Little, 2009, p. 224); help learners reflect on their learning process and practice self-assessment; and "ensure that the target language is the medium as well as the goal of learning, including its reflective component" (Little, 2009, p. 224). Little also believes that the portfolio can ease students' transition between levels in language programs, because "they can use their ELP as a basis for working out what they need and want to learn" (p. 229) as they negotiate their programs with new teachers.

A study conducted by González (2009) in northern Spain demonstrated that teachers "who used the ELP with their whole classes enjoyed the opportunity [but] some students felt that they were being forced to use it and therefore had a negative reaction" (p. 379). This study led to a recommendation for the gradual implementation of ELP pedagogy, with the ELP itself being issued only to students who expressed a keen interest. Glover, Mirici, and Aksu (cited in González) also describe four elements that can support the successful implementation of the ELP: "program integration, committed support of teachers and administrators, teacher and student training, and clarification of status and purpose of the ELP" (p. 374). Sahinkarakas, Yumru, and Inozu (2010) also stress the need for adequate training in the use of the ELP. They state that the ELP training programs provided by the Ministry of Education in Turkey did not adequately prepare teachers, and thus "some teachers rejected the ideas totally with the belief and/or fear that the innovations were not suitable for their teaching situation" (p. 66).

The Study

Earlier studies have examined the potential of portfolios as assessment tools and attempted to identify characteristics that distinguish them from more traditional assessment methods. The benefits and challenges of portfolio-based assessment in various contexts have also been examined. However, studies focusing on the use of portfolios in second-language education, particularly outside the European context, have been limited. This study aims to address this gap by examining the implementation of a PBLA pilot project in adult ESL classes in the Canadian context. At the time of the study, this initiative was being piloted in all LINC programs in a large Canadian city. LINC classes are provided to adult immigrants and refugees with permanent-resident status who require language training in English. LINC programs are funded through Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), and classes are offered through various providers such as community colleges, school boards, and immigrant-serving agencies. This study presented an opportunity to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing PBLA in LINC programs and to gather data that could potentially guide future implementation.

A total of six participants took part in this study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all participants. These included four LINC instructors who piloted PBLA at separate LINC delivery sites in the same city: Julia, Katherine, Meagan, and Victoria. The LINC programs represented included a large LINC program in a college, two mid-size LINC programs operated by public school boards, and a LINC program offered through a community settlement agency. Additional participants included Jacob, a representative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) who had been involved with the PBLA pilot project, and Elaine, a consultant involved in the development of the piloted PBLA model. Elaine's knowledge of PBLA stemmed from the LINC pilot project as well as from prior experience with related portfolio-based assessment models.

Research Questions

To learn more about the PBA pilot project, the perceptions of stakeholders, and the use of the PBLA resources, we asked the following research questions.
1. What are the perceived benefits of implementing PBLA in LINC programs?
2. What are the perceived challenges of implementing PBLA in LINC programs?
3. How do perceptions of the benefits and challenges of PBLA differ among stakeholders?
4. How are the PBLA resources being used by LINC instructors?
5. What recommendations do stakeholders have for the future implementation of PBLA in their own programs and at other LINC delivery sites?

Method

Context and Materials

All LINC instructors involved in the pilot project had received an initial five-day training session. According to the instructors, this session focused on the use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs, Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000, revised in 2012) in conjunction with PBLA. The CLBs are a national standard used in Canada for ESL language instruction, and they provide "a framework of reference for learning, teaching, programming and assessing adult English" (Pettis, 2010, p. 3). The initial training session also focused on task-based instruction and assessment methods, and module planning.

At the time the interviews were conducted, instructors had also received a *Best Practices Guide* and a class set of *Language Companion* binders. The *Best Practices Guide* outlined the context of PBLA, provided advice for integrating PBLA into the teaching and learning cycle, and featured additional information about task-based instruction and the CLBs. The *Language Companion* binders each included a section entitled *My Portfolio*, where the actual portfolios were assembled. This section was divided into four sub-sections: reading,

writing, speaking, and listening. Another section entitled *My Notes* was included in the binder; this was where students were to keep their daily work, from which items could be selected periodically for inclusion in the actual portfolio. Each *Language Companion* binder also featured five initial sections of reference material, which included lists of speaking, reading, listening, and writing outcomes; information about Canada's government and laws; tips about living and working in Canada; lengthy vocabulary lists; information about grammar; and written samples of spoken exchanges.

Instruments

Interview schedules. Three distinct interview schedules, one for each participant category, were developed for this study. Two independent TESL researchers were consulted during the development of the interview schedules. These experts provided feedback on both sequencing and selection of items. The interview schedules were also piloted among a small group of students enrolled in a graduate-level TESL course at a large Canadian university. The interview schedules underwent several rounds of revision based on feedback from both the independent experts and the TESL graduate students.

LINC instructor interview schedule. The LINC instructor interview schedule consisted of 50 questions that addressed the following seven topics: previous teaching experience and current CLB levels taught; initial PBLA training and implementation; benefits and challenges of PBLA for students; benefits and challenges of PBLA for instructors; use of the *Language Companion* binder; thoughts on further PBLA implementation; and opinions about the broad effect of PBLA.

CIC Representative interview schedule. The CIC representative interview schedule consisted of 22 questions that addressed the following five topics: rationale for the PBLA pilot; description of the pilot study design and implementation procedures; the potential effect of national implementation; feedback received from the pilot phase; and future steps that might be taken after the pilot phase was complete.

PBLA Consultant interview schedule. The PBLA consultant interview schedule consisted of 27 questions that addressed the same five topics covered in the CIC Representative interview. In addition, a section covering the development and purpose of the *Language Companion* binder was included.

Procedure

Contact information for the CIC representative and the consultant involved in the development of the PBLA model was provided by a research supervisor. I contacted these participants directly by e-mail and invited them to participate in the study. The LINC instructors were contacted indirectly and invited to participate through their program administrators. In total, six LINC program administrators were contacted, and instructors from four of

these programs responded to the invitations to participate. I did not inform program administrators about any instructor's decision to participate, and the administrators received no information about instructors' responses to the interview questions.

Data were gathered through semistructured, one-on-one interviews. I conducted five of the interviews face-to-face and one by telephone. The interviews ranged in length from 46 to 81 minutes. All six interviews were recorded using an Olympus Linear PCM model LS-10 digital recorder, and each interview was later transcribed. The responses to the interview questions were then categorized and thematically classified using an iterative process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In several rounds of reading and analyzing the transcripts, salient themes were noted in each transcript and confirmed or refuted in the others. This process ensured coding consistency and accurate representation of the interviewees' responses. The instructors' interviews and those of the CIC representative and the PLBA consultant were iteratively analyzed for recurring patterns and relationships between their responses. Participants received data summaries of their interview transcripts, which they were asked to review and validate.

Results

What are the perceived benefits of implementing PBLA in LINC programs?

Improved assessment practices and increased knowledge of the Canadian Language Benchmarks. Jacob identified improved assessment practices as a recommendation that emerged from recent evaluations of LINC programs. He believed that PBLA had the potential to improve both assessment methods and classroom results in LINC programs, and he said it also provided a tool that would help CIC track and report on program successes.

Jacob also viewed PBLA as a logical addition to LINC programs and stated, "The idea of task-based instruction is supposed to be already in LINC, and so … a formalized task-based assessment makes sense. If that's the method of instruction, then it should also be the method of assessment." Ensuring that instructors follow task-based methodology is a key benefit of PBLA according to Jacob, because instructors will be required to plan and assess using the CLBs in order to implement PBLA successfully.

Elaine also believed that PBLA would lead to the enhancement of teaching by increasing instructors' knowledge of the CLBs and task-based teaching and assessment methods. All four LINC instructors identified an increase in the use of the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* as a key benefit of PBLA. Julia was the only participant who did not believe that PBLA would increase the use of task-based methodology in her program. However, she stated that this was because instructors in her program were already using task-based

methodology. Victoria summarized PBLA's positive effect on the use of CLB tasks with the following statement.

> I think with PBLA … I've raised my bar of expectations with the students and I'm delighted to find that they can do a lot of the things I never thought they could do. I like the fact that the CLB 2000 gives the goal, and so you work back from the goal with the tasks that are going to lead them to accomplish what needs to be accomplished in that level.

Better evidence of students' strengths and weaknesses. Elaine believed that because PBLA involves ongoing assessment throughout a term and provides concrete evidence of students' capabilities, students would probably be less surprised by their level placement when terms end. This could significantly reduce debates with instructors, according to Elaine, who said that end-of-term anxiety had dropped significantly in another region's immigrant language programs since portfolios had been introduced. Three of the LINC instructors also identified better evidence of students' abilities as a benefit of PBLA. Katherine said that this would probably reduce anxiety at the end of term because teachers would have detailed, concrete evidence of students' benchmark levels. Victoria also commented on the advantage of referring to collections of students' work at the end of a term: "I see that as a benefit for them, that it's not just me saying you can't go on but I'm letting the work reflect my decision."

Standardization. Elaine identified the standardization of assessment protocols among instructors and programs as another significant benefit of PBLA, which would help address past inconsistencies in assessment methods and in LINC instructors' conceptions of benchmark levels: "Some teachers would say, 'My student's Benchmark 3 because that's what they've completed,' …other teachers would say, 'My student's Benchmark 3 because that's the level that they should go into'… there was huge inconsistency."

Both Julia and Victoria also identified standardization as a key benefit of PBLA because it leads to standardized assessment among LINC programs. Julia commented that instructors in her program did not always agree with the benchmark levels given to students who transferred from other programs, and she felt that PBLA would lead to more consistency. Victoria also felt positive about the uniformity that PBLA promoted among programs in terms of assessment methods, and she noted that this would help students transfer to programs in other provinces with greater ease.

Julia and Katherine also stated that PBLA would lead to more consistent assessment among LINC instructors themselves. Julia felt that PBLA would promote more frequent use of the CLB guide and help instructors to ensure that they were assessing the four language skills. In addition, each benchmark "describes four selected competencies in social interaction, instructions,

suasion and information" (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000, p. ix). Katherine believed that PBLA would help ensure that teachers were assessing each of these competences. As she noted, "Some teachers might be unaware that they are only teaching to one competency … [PBLA] helps the teacher identify gaps or where [they] haven't concentrated."

The use of rubrics. Three of the LINC instructors commented on the fact that the PBLA model promoted the use of rubrics in student assessment. Victoria was the most positive about this and said that rubrics had made it easier for her to assess students' writing accurately. However, challenges involving the use of rubrics were also mentioned. Both Victoria and Meagan noted that the development of rubrics could be time-consuming, and Meagan suggested that providing LINC instructors with additional sample rubrics would be helpful.

Additional benefits. Katherine and Victoria both indicated that PBLA had increased their use of real-world language tasks in the classroom. Julia also noted that PBLA, through its collection of numerous work samples, gave teachers a more detailed representation of a student's language abilities than traditional assessment methods, which usually provided a score. She believed that this gave valuable information to teachers when new students entered the classroom.

> The student can be stressed during one test, during one assessment, another one … will not have good results because maybe she's sick. But throughout the portfolio, throughout the binder, the other teacher can see the base of the student.

What are the Perceived Challenges of Implementing PBLA in LINC Programs?

Increased workload. Three of the LINC instructors believed that PBLA had increased the time they spent preparing for lessons or organizing materials. Katherine said that she spent additional time creating student assessments and keeping her students' binders organized. In addition, both Julia and Katherine said that representing speaking ability in the portfolios could be time-consuming. To obtain speaking samples, Julia recorded her students, transcribed their speech, and placed transcripts in each student's portfolio. Katherine used a digital recorder and then transferred the recordings onto disks.

Victoria said that PBLA had increased her preparation time by a few hours each week, but she believed that a larger time commitment would be necessary among newer teachers who had yet to build a stock of activities and materials from which to draw. Meagan commented the most extensively about PBLA's effect on her preparation time. According to her, the most time-consuming aspects of PBLA involved the creation of rubrics and the ongoing search for level-appropriate materials that addressed the themes that students chose at the beginning of a term.

Conflicts with established curricula. An additional challenge discussed by two of the instructors had to do with the difficulty of integrating PBLA into programs that had established curricula in place. As Meagan noted,

> Part of the [PBLA] training was the real focus on not to come in with sort of a prescribed curriculum, and we have a fairly set curriculum here that has been developed, and a big part of PBLA is that … the students are really involved in the choosing of what will be studied.

Victoria also commented on this dilemma because her program had a curriculum in place. She noted that because PBLA involved giving students choices about what they would study, her LINC students could potentially choose a topic that they would subsequently cover in the next level's curriculum. She struggled to find a balance between giving students choices and avoiding themes that would later be addressed by other teachers.

Use of the Language Companion binder. Use of the *Language Companion* binder itself was regarded as a challenge by two of the instructors. Katherine and Victoria believed the binders were too bulky for students to carry to and from home because many relied on public transport. In addition, Katherine felt that some of the additional materials provided in the binder such as the picture dictionary were redundant because similar resources were already available in the classrooms.

Gaining support from LINC instructors. Julia and Katherine both recognized the possibility that some LINC instructors might resist PBLA because it involved additional preparation time. Katherine also noted that some LINC programs offered greater financial compensation for preparation time than others. Thus she believed that it was necessary to take the perspectives of instructors into account because PBLA would probably require some of them to undertake additional unpaid work: "If you break down your prep and then your assessment … there's a limit. And each teacher has their limit of where, what's enough. How do I have that balance?"

Challenges resulting from continuous intake and teacher training. Two final challenges were identified by Katherine. First, she believed that the integration of PBLA into programs that allowed continuous student intake would be challenging because instructors could not distribute *Language Companion* binders and conduct needs assessments each time a new student enrolled. In addition, she asked, "What happens when you get new teachers on staff … who haven't had the [PBLA] training?" In order for PBLA to be successful, Katherine believed that every program would need to have a designated staff member to provide training and support for new students and new teachers.

Differences among LINC programs. Jacob also predicted that challenges would arise because there is a wide variety of LINC delivery sites across Canada, each with unique strengths and weaknesses. Responding to the needs of each program and providing region-specific support would be dif-

ficult according to him. In addition, varying degrees of familiarity with the CLBs and task-based methodology among instructors would pose a challenge. As Jacob said,

> If you are already doing LINC well, then PBLA is going to slip in unnoticed … if you don't know what the CLB levels are and you don't know what task-based instruction is, then it's going to be hard to add PBLA.

How do Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges of PBLA Differ Among Stakeholders?

Ownership of the Language Companion binders. Elaine noted that in her experience, convincing teachers that the portfolio binders were the property of students was a challenge. Based on responses from the instructors involved in this study, this remained an issue during the PBLA pilot. Of the four instructors interviewed, three asked, or strongly suggested, that students leave the portfolios at school. Katherine and Victoria did so because they worried that students might lose the binders. Meagan initially gave students the option of taking their binders home, but found that some forgot to bring them back. This led to problems when she wanted students to put work into the binders and they were not accessible. Elaine maintained that student ownership of the binders was crucial, and she believed that teachers had a role in preventing their loss: "It's partly the emphasis that teachers place on the binders … If the teachers are saying these are important and this is a big deal and there are consequences if you lose it, then students will be mindful of that."

Language Companion binder resources. Victoria said that her students were initially impressed with the binders and the additional information that they provided, and they felt as if they had received a gift from the federal government. Elaine said that the binders sent a message of emphasis: "CIC thinks language training is important, and they're prepared to give students a resource to support them in their language learning." She said that the *Language Companion* binder's resource sections reflected an effort to address multiple priorities; in addition to being a place to organize assessments and work samples, the binder provided students with settlement resources and language materials to study at home.

However, Katherine raised concerns about the cost of producing the *Language Companion* binders, which included colored pages with multiple sections and inserts. She believed that the four inserts that divided students' work into reading, writing, listening, and speaking were the only essential components. Referring to the cost of the binders, she asked, "What's the trade-off? I'd rather see more money be paid to teachers' prep[aration] hours and the time it takes for teachers to create good assessment tools and time for module planning."

The promotion of goal-setting. Elaine viewed the fact that PBLA involved students in goal-setting as a significant benefit; she said that feedback was more effective when given in relation to learning goals. She also stated that the act of goal-setting could be particularly helpful for lower-level or ESL literacy students because it involved the development of metacognitive learning-to-learn strategies that would have long-term benefits.

The promotion of goal-setting was also identified as a benefit by two of the instructors. Julia found that asking students to set language goals not only informed her planning, but also increased her awareness of gaps in students' understanding. Katherine found that asking her students to set learning goals helped them to conceive of their competences in terms of the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They were then able to identify which of these skills needed the most improvement. Because she introduced her students to the concept of goal-setting through a group activity, Katherine also said that her students came to understand that it was acceptable to have individual learning goals. According to her, this may have been her students' first introduction to this concept: "Many of our learners come from backgrounds where school is more hierarchical. Individuality … it's not a concept they're familiar with."

However, goal-setting was viewed as a challenge by Meagan and Victoria. Meagan said that her students had difficulty putting their goals into words beyond broad statements such as "getting a job in Canada." Victoria said that her students provided little input during an initial needs assessment; they all wanted to improve their English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, but they were unable to articulate more specific goals. She suggested that this difficulty might stem from the fact that her students were used to more traditional, teacher-led approaches, and she viewed goal-setting as an ongoing challenge.

How Are the PBLA Resources Being Used by LINC Instructors?

The Language Companion reference material. Because most of the pilot instructors opted to keep the *Language Companion* binders at school, the initial sections of reference material were largely unused. Katherine said that she removed one of the Essential English sections from her students' binders because the material was not relevant to the level she was teaching. Victoria said that she had not used the initial sections, but acknowledged that beginning teachers who lacked a large bank of resources might find them useful. Meagan occasionally referred students to the Essential English section, but said that she was largely unclear about the purpose of the initial sections of the *Language Companion* binder; according to her, these resources were problematic because they were not level-specific. She also believed that these sections would be more useful in LINC programs that had fewer textbooks and reference materials than her own program. Julia was enthusiastic about the

"My Notes" section. She said that her program frequently hosted guest speakers, and she used this section to assemble booklets featuring photographs of the speakers and students, along with summaries of their presentations and related vocabulary and grammar activities.

Portfolio item selection. Item selection was almost exclusively teacher-led, with all four of the instructors indicating that they made the final decisions about what materials were included in the *Language Companion* binders. Julia put the same assessment samples into every student's portfolio, and she believed that this uniformity would help future instructors identify students' levels. Meagan said that she included mainly task-based assessments, and Victoria tried to limit item inclusion to tasks that were assessed with rubrics: "I probably would say I'm the final word … general worksheets wouldn't go into the portfolio." Julia and Victoria also said that they sometimes included more than one draft of a student's work in the portfolio as this allowed students to compare current and past work and reflect on their progress.

What Recommendations do Stakeholders Have for the Future Implementation of PBLA in Their Own Programs and at Other LINC Delivery Sites?

When asked to identify the greatest challenge related to PBLA implementation, Jacob said,

> There are an awful lot of individual schools that have their own strengths and weaknesses … being responsive to individual region requirements and places where programs are already well-situated in one thing and need more support in another, I think will be difficult.

The four pilot instructors' recommendations for future PBLA implementation seemed to reinforce Jacob's views; their recommendations differed, perhaps because the LINC programs in which they taught had different needs.

Approaches to training. Julia recommended another approach to training. She said that the five-day PBLA training session that the pilot instructors received began with an overview of theory; however, she believed that future instructors would benefit from exposure to concrete examples of portfolio assessment tasks before learning the theory behind their use. Katherine believed that teachers also needed more initial training in the use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks, task-based assessment methods, and module-planning before PBLA training. Victoria had similar recommendations and said that teachers should be trained in the use of the CLB 2000 document (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000) before receiving PBLA training. Meagan believed that future PBLA training sessions would be more effective if they were spread out rather than condensed into a single five-day session.

Additional support. Katherine recommended further support to fund the increased preparation time that PBLA requires. Meagan thought that instructors would benefit from additional materials to support the implementation of PBLA such as a module bank, resources aligned to specific CLB levels, sample rubrics, and region-specific resources in the *Language Companion* binders.

Discussion and Recommendations

In terms of promoting more effective use of the CLBs and task-based methodology of teaching and assessment, responses from all the participants seem to indicate that PBLA has the potential to succeed. Other potential benefits identified by participants included: PBLA's promotion of standardization among LINC programs, its ability to provide detailed evidence of students' strengths and weaknesses, and its promotion of rubrics in assessment. Potential challenges related to PBLA implementation were also identified, including conflicts with established curricula, an increase in instructors' workloads, a need for ongoing training, and difficulties integrating PBLA into programs that allow continuous student intake. Challenges related to the *Language Companion* binder were also identified. Based on feedback from Elaine, it would seem that some potential challenges related to the *Language Companion* binder were being addressed. She noted that future editions of the binder would be available in three versions with the initial resource sections modified to align more closely with specific CLB levels. (The *Language Companion* binders [Citizenship and Immigration, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c] are now available for ESL literacy, Stage 1 [CLB 1-4], and Stage 2 [CLB 5-8]). However, the resources in the *Language Companion* binder were rarely used by the pilot instructors at the time of this study. Because most of the binders remained in the instructors' classrooms, the resources were also underused by students. If PBLA is to overcome the challenges identified by this study, the following recommendations should be addressed.

Recommendation 1: Clarify the Purpose of the Language Companion Resources

If instructors are meant to use the resources in the *Language Companion* binders in their classrooms, they need specific instructions and training on how this should be done. If the resources are mainly intended for students to use outside class, then it is crucial to conduct a readability test on the language in each section; this could be accomplished through a Web site such as Lextutor (http://www.lextutor.ca/). Conducting a readability test would help to predict students' ability to understand and use the resources without support from instructors. If the language is not level-appropriate, and if the initial resources are not supported by instructors, many of the resources in the *Language Companion* binders will probably remain unused.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Method for Integrating PBLA into Curricula

Both Jacob and Elaine recognized the need for extensive training and support in order to prepare instructors to implement PBLA successfully. However, future training should address the integration of PBLA into programs that follow established curricula. As noted by two of the pilot instructors, reconciling curricula with themes chosen by the students posed a significant challenge. Feedback from the pilot instructors also suggests that additional training that focuses on the promotion of goal-setting among students is required.

Recommendation 3: Address Discrepancies Among LINC Programs

An additional challenge involves integrating a standardized assessment method such as PBLA into LINC programs that are not standardized themselves: as noted, compensation for instructors' preparation time varies. Programs that compensate instructors for the additional preparation time required by PBLA will probably be better able to facilitate its implementation. Discrepancies in compensation will potentially affect the level of support that PBLA receives among instructors in various programs.

Recommendation 4: Provide Ongoing Training and Support

The challenge of providing PBLA orientation to students in programs that allow continuous enrollment needs to be addressed, as does the need to provide future training opportunities for new instructors who may be unfamiliar with PBLA. As one pilot instructor noted, this may require a PBLA expert on staff in each program to addresses the ongoing training needs of both students and staff.

Recommendation 5: Increase Students' Involvement

Finally, it should be recognized that the PBLA pilot at the time this study was conducted did not meet the criteria of a portfolio as outlined by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) and Lynch and Shaw (2005) because students themselves had little involvement in selecting work samples for inclusion in their portfolios. This lack of involvement limits the formative potential of PBLA. As research by Lam and Lee (2010) suggests, motivation increases when students are afforded the opportunity to select their best work for portfolios. In addition, Little (2007) stresses that self-assessment is critical to the success of the ELP. Because this study was conducted during the early stages of the pilot project, it is difficult to predict whether student self-assessment will come to play a greater role in PBLA. However, student-teacher portfolio conferences had not yet been held at the time of this study (January/February 2012). It is possible that these conferences could lead to formative feedback and increased student involvement in the construction of their portfolios.

Conclusion

This study provides an overview of a pilot project in an early phase. When the study was conducted, various challenges related to PBLA had yet to be resolved. Although enthusiastic about the potential of PBLA, the pilot instructors had many questions about the next phase of implementation. This is a positive sign. I believe that openness to new ideas and willingness to question them simultaneously are valuable attributes for teachers, students, and researchers.

A limitation of this study stems from its small sample size. Although the four LINC instructors who participated represent a significant percentage of instructors involved in the pilot project, they are a small group compared with the number of LINC instructors currently teaching in the city where this study was conducted. For PBLA to succeed on a wider scale, every LINC instructor must be able to implement it effectively in his or her classroom. A further limitation of this study results from the fact that no direct feedback was gathered from students. Because this study was conducted during an early phase of a pilot project, the LINC students involved had had limited exposure to PBLA. A student survey conducted at that time would have yielded insufficient data from which to draw conclusions. However, a future survey of LINC students focusing on their perceptions of PBLA is highly recommended. As Elaine and several of the pilot instructors commented, many LINC students come from educational traditions that are largely teacher-led. Thus a study that examines students' perceptions of PBLA, an assessment method that requires significant student involvement, could help to address potential challenges and inform future implementation. In addition, students' perceptions of the *Language Companion* binder should be examined. If the supplementary resources included in the binder are meant to be used by students outside the classroom, it is strongly recommended that these resources be at the appropriate reading level for the learners for whom they are intended. Feedback on these resources should also be gathered from students at various CLB levels. In the end, the purpose of these resources, as well as the integration of PBLA into LINC programs, is to improve how the language and settlement needs of the learners are met.

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