Talking Back to Second Language Education Curriculum Control

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In 2014, the Director of the *Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks* emailed me about a presentation I had recently given at the *Centre Canadien D'études et de Recherche en Bilinguisme et Aménagement Linguistique* regarding the qualitative research I had conducted pertaining to the *Canadian Language Benchmarks* (Hajer and Kaskens 2012; Pawlikowska-Smith 2000). He stated:

> I asked a colleague who is a university-based language expert to review your presentation. The review is attached. We would be grateful if you would take the necessary steps to correct the inaccuracies in your work so that those attending your presentations or reading your work are not misled regarding the CLB.

The subsequent email exchange we had revolved around my contention that he was using the prestige of his position to put pressure on a scholar to suppress work he found threatening. He, on the other hand, contended that he was not attempting to "silence [my] opinions" and that in any case it was "not a question of opinions here, but facts."

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In this chapter, I outline some of the political implications of the reviewer's comments in view of current linguistic theory and make the case for how curricular practices within second language education (SLE) can be better understood through a greater consideration within the field of two concepts from general education: the *hidden curriculum* (Jackson 1968) and the notion of viewing curriculum development at a *complicated conversation* (Pinar 2012) that converts these documents from nouns to verbs (*currere*).

In what follows below, I first provide a brief overview of the significance of the CLB as represented from a policy viewpoint. My original critique of the 2000 version of the CLB then follows. This leads to an assessment of the 2012 version of the same document. I then proceed to give an overview various curriculum implementation models as they apply to SLE. Special attention is given to Jackson's (1968) notion of the *hidden curriculum*. My chapter concludes with a discussion of how these curriculum implementation models can be expanded and enhanced through the use of Pinar's (2012) notion of a *complicated conversation*.

The Significance of the CLB

As I have discussed elsewhere (Fleming 2007), the CLB represents the culmination of SLE policy changes initiated by the Canadian federal government with the release of its four-year *Immigration Plan* (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 1990). The *Plan* was a major change in direction for the federal government and came at a time when important demographic changes in Canadian society were becoming more evident. The document talks explicitly about how second language immigration was becoming more and more economically significant in the face of a declining national birthrate and how this immigration should be consistently managed in the interests of "nation-building" and the "building a new Canada" (p. 3). The *Plan* identified immigrant language training as a major national priority for the first time.

The official character of the *CLB* is attested to the fact that it was painstakingly developed in a long series of consultations and draft formulations facilitated by federal agencies who explicitly referred to the 1990 *Immigration Plan* (Norton Pierce and Stewart 1997). Significantly, the further development of the CLB has been overseen by the *Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks* (CCLB), a nonprofit organization founded in 1998 and funded by the federal government.

Both versions of the CLB comprise over 200 compact pages. It consists mainly of a set of language descriptors arranged in 12 levels, from basic English language proficiency to full fluency. As Norton Pierce and Stewart (1997) noted, the federal government-initiated initiatives that gave rise to this text were framed around the need to develop a systematic and seamless set of English language training opportunities out of the myriad of federal and provincial programs that existed previously.

The bulk of the content found in the actual *Benchmarks* (both in the 2000 and 2012 versions) is arranged for each level in a series of matrixes to correspond to the four language skills. Each benchmark found within the CLB contains a general overview of the tasks to be performed upon completion of the level, the conditions under which this performance should take place, a more specific description of what a learner can do, and examples and criteria that indicate the task performance has been successful.

My Critique of the 2000 CLB

The expert the Director consulted, who has remained anonymous, had evidently read one of my peer-reviewed articles that explored the links between citizenship and race in SLE (see Fleming 2014a). In their review, I "rave" and show "bias" in my "attack" against this key federal document.

The article in question updated the analysis from my doctoral research that compared the way in which citizenship was conceptualized within the CLB with a sampling of adult second language learners in a federally funded English as a Second Language (ESL) program. The participants in the qualitative study from which this data is drawn described becoming Canadians predominantly in terms of human rights, multicultural policy, and the obligations of being citizens. I found that the CLB rarely referred to citizenship in these terms and instead described being Canadian in terms of normative standards that implied the existence of a dominant and singular culture to which second language learners had to conform. This was true even for the 2012 version of the CLB. I argued that these normative standards had the effect of racializing second language learners in this context.

In the entire 2000 document, there were only three references to tasks or competencies that could be said to be broadly associated with citizenship. These were "understand rights and responsibilities of client,

customer, patient and student" (p. 95); "indicate knowledge of laws, rights, etc." (p. 116); and "write a letter to express an opinion as a citizen" (p. 176). Unfortunately, these competencies were not elaborated upon and remained rather vague and incomplete.

In many ways, in fact, it is even more revealing to note what was missing, especially in terms of how language was connected to exercising citizenship. The word *vote*, for example, did not appear in the document. In addition, the document represented (through admission and omission) good citizens as obedient workers. This could be seen in the fact that issues related to trade unions and collective agreements were given next to no attention in the document. Labor rights, such as filing grievances or recognizing and reporting dangerous working conditions, were non-existent. Employment standards legislation was covered in a singular vague reference to the existence of minimum wage legislation. The 2000 version of the CLB had no references to understanding standards of employment legislation, worker's compensation, employment insurance, or safety in the workplace. At the same time, however, a lot of space in the document was devoted to participating in job performance reviews, giving polite and respectful feedback to one's employer, and participating in meetings about trivial issues, such as lunchroom cleanliness.

The 2000 version of the document did represent language learners as having rights and responsibilities. However, these were almost exclusively related to being good consumers. Learners understood their rights and responsibilities as a "client, customer, patient and student" (Pawlikowska-Smith 2000, p. 95), but not as a worker, family member, participant in community activities, or advocate. As I have discussed elsewhere on the basis of empirical evidence, adult English language learners enrolled in the programs informed by the CLB often complain about being consistently denied overtime pay and access to benefits, being forced to work statutory holidays, or being fired without cause (Fleming 2010). In short, the document emphasized the virtues of being an obedient and cooperative worker and a good consumer who can return flawed items for refunds.

It was also disconcerting to note the limitations placed on the few references to citizenship noted above and the manner in which they had been couched. In the entire document, there are only three references that I consider being associated with citizenship. These are: "understand rights and responsibilities of client, customer, patient and student" (p. 95); "indicate knowledge of laws, rights, etc." (p. 116); and "write a

letter to express an opinion as a citizen" (p. 176). It is very noteworthy that no content is linked to collective action, group identity, debate, or investigation to citizenship rights.

What is even more significant was the way in which forms of exercising citizenship were connected to levels of English language proficiency. All three of the above competencies that referred to citizenship occurred at the very highest benchmark levels, at the point at which one is writing research papers at universities. In this way, the document implied that opinions not expressed in English had little value in terms of Canadian citizenship.

My Critique of the 2012 CLB

The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2012: ESL for Adults is a revised version of the original 2000 publication (Hajer and Kaskens 2012). It was the result of an extensive series of processes designed to establish the validity and reliability of descriptors found within the document. The authors and a set of consultants hired by the CCLB compared the document to the *Common European Framework of Reference*, the *American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages Guidelines*, and the *Échelle québécoise*. The document was then subjected to field validation and checked against the *American Education Research Association Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*.

In contrast to the introduction found within the 2000 version, the new version is more forthright about claims that it is designed to be "a national standard for planning curricula for language instruction in a variety of contexts" (Hajer and Kaskens 2012, p. v). However, the document still claims not to endorse a specific instructional method. In my estimation, this is somewhat disingenuous since the new version, like the previous, exhibits many hallmarks of the communicative approach, including task-based exemplars and an explicit endorsement of Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language ability. In my estimation, much of my critique of the 2000 version of the document from a language-testing standpoint is still valid here.

I have argued previously that exemplar tasks within assessment and curriculum documents in this context should be scrutinized carefully since they contain and represent privileged orientations that influence how teachers approach the treatment of curriculum content (Fleming 2008). Content that is held up as exemplars in such documents is

privileged in the sense that it encourages particular orientations toward themes and discourages others. Exemplar tasks that deal with citizenship represent privileged content that a teacher or curriculum writer is encouraged to reproduce and elaborate upon, and are not innocent of ideology (Shohamy 2007).

Although the focus on consumer rights is as dominant within the new version of the CLB as it was in the old, there has been a significant addition of content that refers to labor rights. Benchmark 5, for example, contains an exemplary task that requires an understanding of employment standards legislation. Within Benchmark 7, there is a reference to pedagogical tasks in which one discusses wages and working conditions. These are marked improvements for which the authors should be commended. However, in my estimation, there are still problems within the new version of the CLB in terms of citizenship rights. As a way of illustration, I shall discuss the use of the word "vote," which I believe is of pivotal importance when discussing notions of citizenship. As mentioned above, the word did not occur within the 2000 version. Voting is mentioned twice in the new document. One of these references is within the exemplar task when a learner is expected to evaluate the arguments presented by candidates during an election. The other reference to voting is almost identical in content and appears on the same page. This is an improvement over the previous version of the CLB. Unfortunately, both of these references within the new version of the CLB are found in the listening framework at benchmark 12, the highest in the document. My previous criticism that the document links citizenship rights to high levels of English language proficiency still holds. This is a significant problem, since this implies that citizenship rights are tasks that can only be fully realized once one is at the level of writing graduate-level assignments, another exemplar task found within level 12.

Politics, Culture, and Language Assessment

There were a number of complaints from the Director and his anonymous reviewer that questioned my qualifications to make critiques and denigrated qualitative research methodology. I have dealt with these complaints elsewhere and do not believe that they are worth going into here (Fleming 2014b). However, there were other complaints that had political and cultural ramifications and illustrate how bureaucratic control operates in the field through linear conceptions of curriculum

development. The most important of these was the reviewer's claim the CLB "strips languages of any political agenda and contains and construct of language learning [that] is the same [and] remains the same regardless of what language is being learned, and where it is learned."

The contention that a set of competency descriptors can remove the political or cultural content from language flies in the face of linguistic theory and practice since the time of Saussure's insights over a century ago. This is regardless of whether one takes a generative (Chomsky 1965) or a functional approach (Halliday 1985) in terms of theory. As Saussure (1916/1983) noted, there are no easy comparisons that can be made between specific languages. One doesn't even have to go to the post-structural literature to support this claim. To give Saussure's most famous example, the conception of a "river" is different in French (a "flueve" ends up in the ocean; "rivière" ends up in a lake) than it is in English ("creek" and "river" are different solely in terms of size). Now, I do not wish to replicate the long-standing debates within linguistics and anthropology regarding the connections between specific cultures and languages (Feuerverger 2009, provides a comprehensive review of this). However, I think that it is clear from any perusal of the academic literature that one doesn't need to be a radical "raver" to regard as illogical, not to say ridiculous, an attempt to describe a specific language (in this case English) as some kind of innocent universal standard that can be applied to all others.

A perusal of the academic literature also shows that individual approaches to language learning are highly varied and not universal. Learning content is selected through the consideration of a set of factors, such as learner needs, programming goals, or pertinent linguistic elements. Language learning itself, as Oxford (1990) has shown, is influenced by such factors as motivation, subject position (e.g., gender), cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, types of tasks involved, overall learning styles, and deep-seated cognitive styles (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity). Despite the implicit claims made by my anonymous reviewer, the second language field, as Pennycook (2007), Canagarajah (1999), and Norton (2000) have shown, has long moved away from the notion of the "good language learner" who uses singular learning strategies.

Even though the reviewer claims that the CLB is a neutral document that has no political import, in the text that the CLB cites as one of its principal theoretical resources, Bachman and Palmer (2010) state "we must always consider the societal and educational value systems that

inform our test use [and that] the values and goals that inform test use may vary from one culture to another" (p. 34). Do not social values constitute a form of politics? Does not variance between cultures invalidate a "one size fits all" approach? I might add rhetorically: Does what appears to be an attempt to suppress my work on the part of the Director constitute a political agenda?

My chief complaint about CLB, simply put, is related to the lack of citizenship content found within the document, especially at the lower levels of English language proficiency. The publication that the reviewer critiqued is centered on how the exemplars within the CLB emphasize the virtues of being an obedient and cooperative worker and a good consumer. I argue that the content of these pedagogical tasks is highly significant. In contrast to the claims of my reviewer, politics are inevitably contained within this content in the sense that they reflect the societal and educational value systems that Bachman and Palmer (1996/2010) talk about above. In effect, these exemplars infantilize and even racialize second language learners.

In short, if you do not have exemplars that cover the topic of citizenship at the lower levels of language proficiency, you imply that this topic is not for the learners at these levels. If you emphasize consumer rights within your document at the expense of worker rights, you imply that this is where we place our priorities and values as a society. What could be more political?

Going Behind the Hidden Curriculum

The CLB is meant to strongly inform curriculum development. This is made clear in a key implementation document officially associated with the CLB (that provides explicit guidelines and examples of how teachers are to implement the document into their program Holmes et al. 2004). These guidelines recommend that teachers first determine how the CLB fits into the purpose and goals of their program and then identify and prioritize the possible initiatives that would correspond to appropriate CLB learner-centered competencies.

This orientation toward curriculum implementation reflects a *progressivist value system* (Clark 1987), in which teachers are expected to design their own school-based curricula. In Clark's (1987) framework, this is in contrast to *classical humanism,* in which teachers are expected to implement the curricula recommended by administrators

and *reconstructionism*, in which teachers are expected to implement curricula designed by experts. By adopting a *progressivist* orientation, the CLB and its associated documents *have the appearance* of avoiding the perpetuation of curriculum-planning hierarchies that maintain inequalities between ESL theorists, curriculum experts, and practitioners (Pennycook 1989).

However, as Giroux (1981) points out, one must go beyond the rhetoric and platitudes commonly found in pedagogical processes and examine concrete particularities if one is to see clearly see how they operate as "agents of legitimation, organized to produce and reproduce dominant categories, values, and social relationships" (p. 72). In other words, we must go beyond appearance and examine what is hidden.

Through this examination of the concrete aspects of the CLB, I argue that a hidden curriculum is at work in this instance that realizes and reinforces a hierarchical paradigm of citizenship (Jackson 1968). It does this by privileging particular aspects of curricular content that infantilizes second language learners and utilizing a hierarchized orientation toward the roles that teachers play in curriculum development. To reiterate, there are very few references to citizenship within the entire document. And, those that do exist link high levels of English language proficiency to trivialized forms of citizenship.

In terms of concrete practice, I think that the challenge is to develop curriculum processes that allow students and practitioners to "talk back" to language policy implementation documents such as the CLB. It is not enough to simply "start with" or "modify" a document such as this for one's own classroom. Students and practitioners should be able to expand on Clark's (1987) notion of a *progressivist* orientation toward curriculum so that they are helping design curriculum guidelines (in whatever guise they take: even as assessment instruments). In this way, the ground could be clear to develop curriculum content that contains equitable citizenship content and avoids the infantilism so evident in documents such as the CLB.

Morgan (2002) provides a detailed and concrete account of how alternative forms of classroom practice can avoid infantilism by recounting a lesson that he himself conducted that was focused on a referendum on Quebec separatism. Rather than avoiding the dangers involved in handling the issues related to a very controversial issue then raging in the media, Morgan made this topic the focus of his lesson. He drew

upon bilingual dictionaries and various decoding strategies to enhance the abilities of his learners to engage in debates surrounding the topic. The result was that his learners were able to deeply engage in what it meant to be a Canadian citizen in the context of a then current political crisis. As Fleming and Morgan (2012) describe it in a subsequent treatment of the data, this example:

> of participatory citizenship in a L2 was enabled by L1 use and traditional L1 literacy strategies, a classroom approach notably absent in the *CLB* document. What might be observed, indeed stigmatized, as methodologically and acquisitionally remedial (i.e. bilingual dictionary translation), or indicative of a lower-order cognitive task (i.e. decoding) through a *CLB* framework, was re-contextualized in ways that enhanced critical engagement and an understanding of language and power around the Quebec referendum that could exceed the ideological awareness of native speakers and long-standing citizens. (p. 9)

Viewing Curriculum as a Complicated Conversation

Transmission linear process models based on preconceived pedagogical objectives dominate the curriculum models currently in SLE (Aguilar 2011; Arnfast and Jorgenson 2010; Gunderson et al. 2011). In these models, content is selected through the consideration of a set of factors, such as learner needs, programming goals, or predetermined linguistic elements. The content is formulated into sets of summative objectives. These processes are linear in the sense that the curriculum content is not modified once determined. These processes are transmission-based in the sense that course content, once determined, is transmitted in one direction from the teacher to the learner. The task of the teacher, in these models, is to impart the predetermined course objectives as definitive versions of knowledge.

This type of process can be seen concretely in the model provided in a recent overview of curriculum design by Nation and Mcalister (2010), two highly cited seminal theorists in the field. In their text, they outline sets of inner and outer circles that provide a model for language curriculum design. The outer circles are a range of factors (principles of instruction, teaching environment, and learner needs) that effect the overall course production. The sets of inner circles (course content and sequencing, format and presentation of materials, and monitoring and

assessment of student progress) are centered on the overall goals of the course in question. In this model, course content consists primarily of linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, language functions, discourse, and learning skills and strategies.

Whether linguistic elements can truly be represented in the language classroom as sets of predetermined and definitive course objectives ("facts") is a matter for another debate elsewhere. What is of importance here is the way non-linguistic course content is incorporated into this model. Borrowing from Cook (1983), Nation and Mcalister (2010) describe non-linguistic content as "ideas that help the learners of language and are useful to the learners" (p. 78). These ideas can take the form of imaginary happenings, an academic subject, "survival" topics such as shopping, going to the doctor or getting a driver's license, interesting facts, or a set of subcategories pertaining to culture.

It is process of determining cultural content within this model that interests me particularly. Nation and Mcalister (2010) argue that a curriculum should move learners "from explicit knowledge of inter-related aspects of native and non-native cultures, to markedly different conceptualizations between the cultures, to understanding the culture from an insider's view and gaining a distanced view of one's own culture" (p. 78). In other words, course content moves in a linear fashion that first explicitly contrasts static versions of the first and target cultures and then acculturates learners into that target culture, turning them away from their first culture. Nothing in this model suggests the possibility of equitable or dual cultures or the notion of a fluid hybridity between or within various cultures. The implied goal in this model is to transmit the target (i.e., socially dominant) culture as a set of pedagogical objectives.

This linear and transmission model is the way, in fact, that the citizenship content operates within the CLB. As mentioned above, the CLB privileges rights and responsibilities that pertain almost exclusively to being good consumers and not to being workers, family members, participants in community activities, or advocates. These are explicitly started as objectives pertaining to the pedagogical tasks contained throughout the document. Thus, the CLB, through admission and omission, implicitly defines citizenship in a particular way and transmits this definition through privileged content to the learner. The teacher is admonished to develop specific learning objectives that frame the classroom activities and content.

Instead of the dominant linear transmission model that is expressed as pedagogical objectives, I advocate that ESL practitioners explore viewing language curricula as *complicated conversations* (Pinar 2012). Based on the notion that education is centered on transdisciplinary conversations (Oakeshott 1959) that are animated (Bruner 1966) and within the contexts of action and reflection (Aoki 2005), Pinar argues that curriculum is not a set of narrow pedagogical tasks and objectives, but lived experience. As he puts it, "expressing one's subjectivity … is how one links the lived curriculum with the planned one" (p. xv). In such a conception, curricula are ongoing co-constructions between teachers and students that are always becoming. Individual curriculum documents are never fully realized, but are continually in transition.

Moreover, this "conversation between teachers and students [is] over the past and its meaning [is] for the present as well as what both portend for the future" (Pinar 2012, p. 2). In other words, curriculum construction takes into account previous knowledge but dialogically examines it from the current and future perspectives. In terms of my discussion about citizenship, this would mean that classroom activities take into account received interpretations of what it means to be a citizen but examine these interpretations of citizenship from the viewpoint of the concrete present realities and the imagined future of those engaged in the conversation. It is this "conversation with others that portends the social construction of the public sphere," Pinar (2012) argues, because this form of subjective engagement combats passivity and political submissiveness. The key, as he makes clear, is "self-knowledge and collective witnessing [which] reconceptualizes the curriculum from course objectives to complicated conversation" (p. 47).

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