



LANGUAGE BENCHMARKING AT ONTARIO COLLEGES

*A Guide to Program Benchmarking using
the Canadian Language Benchmarks*

Foreword

Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment (CIITE) is funded by the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration with a mandate to address barriers faced by internationally trained immigrants (ITIs) in the Ontario college system.

This guide came out of CIITE's Program Benchmarking Pilot which was carried out by seven colleges: Algonquin, Centennial, George Brown, La Cité, Mohawk, Seneca, and Sheridan, in collaboration with the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB). Based on a methodology developed by Red River College (Winnipeg, Manitoba), a total of 39 college programs and pre-post-secondary language courses were benchmarked between January and June 2006. The objective of the program benchmarking pilot was to create a guide for benchmarking college programs. Further details on the Pilot can be found in the Appendix.

For more information on CIITE or the Language Proficiency Project visit www.collegeconnect.ca/ciite.

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Glossary

Academic Language Language used in educational settings for specific educational tasks.

Advanced Standing By meeting special admissions criteria an applicant to a college may be eligible for admission directly into the second or third year of a program. Criteria may vary from college to college.

Benchmarking The use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks as a tool to analyze language demands within a given college course/program.

Colloquial Language Language used in everyday situations that might be culturally specific or idiomatic.

Formal Language Language used in specific situations that might necessitate adherence to grammar.

Informal Language Language which, as a result of a situation or context, does not necessitate strict adherence to grammar.

L1 In this guide, L1 refers to a person for whom English is their native language.

L2 In this guide, L2 refers to a person for whom English is not their native language.

Language Demands The proficiency required to satisfy specific levels and conditions of language use in a college program.

Split Benchmark When an overall benchmark of a course falls between two benchmark levels (see "Dealing with Split Benchmarks" on page 22)

Remedial and Preparatory Language Training Language courses designed to develop language skills so that L2 students can be successful in college courses.

Acronyms

BM	Benchmark
CCLB	Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks
CLB 2000	Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000
CLBA	Canadian Language Benchmarks Association
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ITI	Internationally trained immigrant

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Language demands within college programs are not static: they evolve, develop, and change with instructors, technology, and industry-related factors.

Introduction

This guide provides college staff with a step-by-step outline on assigning language benchmarks to programs using the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (CLB 2000)*. Assigning language benchmarks to programs can help colleges better understand the language demands for second language students in particular college programs. This guide begins from the point at which your institution has already made the decision to benchmark. However, the *CLB 2000*, the process of benchmarking, and the rationale for colleges to benchmark their programs, are discussed in the following sections.

Canadian Language Benchmarks

The development of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) began in 1996 in response to the need for national standards against which a student's language proficiency can be measured. The original *Canadian Language Benchmarks* was revised in 2000, resulting in the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000*. This guide is based on the *CLB 2000*, which breaks down the use of language into four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For each benchmark level it provides a description of successive levels of achievement within each of the four language skills. For further details, you can access the *CLB 2000* at www.language.ca.

What is Program Benchmarking?

Program benchmarking refers to the use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) as a tool to analyze the language demands within a given college program. Program benchmarking supports student success by providing a picture of the language demands in a program. Aside from helping to ensure student success, there are a number of functions that benchmarking can serve within your college. You can use language benchmarking to:

- establish/validate admissions requirements
- determine placement in language courses
- design remedial and preparatory language training
- inform program renewal.

These functions are discussed in depth in "Defining the Role of Benchmarking at Your College," on page 5-6.

Why Should Your College Benchmark Programs?

Although the focus of this guide is to provide step-by-step directions on how to benchmark, the following sections outline some of the benefits of benchmarking.

1. Benchmarking provides a common structure for colleges to understand and describe the language used in college programs. By observing and describing the use of language in college programs, benchmarking can enhance the recognition of language as a key element in education. It provides a structure for colleges to consider how language within a particular program is employed to convey course content. This includes looking at how students are expected to access the information taught within vocational programming (e.g., reading, lectures, etc.) and demonstrate comprehension (e.g., through essays, oral presentations, etc.).
2. Benchmarking describes the types of language used in a program, for instance, formal, informal, academic, and/or colloquial. It also describes the extent to which the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are used in a given program. Understanding the nature of the language used, as well as the prevalence of each of the four language skills can result in more informed language testing for placement and admissions.
3. The process of program benchmarking can be an end in itself as it promotes communication between faculty, departments, and L2 students. It may also inform program administrators and staff of useful teaching and learning strategies.



Organizational Readiness

Benchmarking requires a commitment of human resources, space, time, and extensive communication between various levels of management and faculty. Whenever possible, college staff performing the benchmarking (hereafter referred to as the “Researcher”) should be well-versed in second-language issues. They should have adequate release time from classroom activities (see Step 5: Organizing the Research Team on page 11) as well as a dedicated workspace in which to conduct their research. Since program benchmarking involves buy-in at various levels within departments and programs, communication is essential and should be carefully maintained.

Most important, the role of benchmarking should fit into the college’s organizational context and strategic plan. Language demands within college programs are not static: they evolve, develop, and change with instructors, technology, and industry-related factors. It is therefore essential for colleges to develop a regular and systematic mechanism for the review and revalidation of program benchmarks.

Strategies for Success: Start with Buy-In

To ensure your benchmarking process is successful, start by developing buy-in amongst program administrators; their support is crucial.

Program Benchmarking: Initial Preparation

The following is a step-by-step process to prepare for benchmarking at your college. Preparation should begin months before benchmarking begins. These steps can be adapted according to the unique needs of your college.

In order to set up students for success, you will need a comprehensive picture of what students will face throughout the program. In order to understand the language skills required, Researchers need to analyze representative semesters throughout a program as well as practicums, work experience, and/or labs. It is recommended that researchers pay particular attention to any semesters of entry for students who receive advanced standing.

Step 1: Defining the Role of Benchmarking for Your College

Each college needs to determine the purpose of benchmarking at the outset of the process, as it will impact data gathering as well as how the final report is structured as a whole. There are a number of specific functions that benchmarking can serve within a college. The four most salient functions are:

1. Benchmarking for admissions (see page 6)
2. Benchmarking for preparatory and remedial language training design (see page 6)
3. Benchmarking for placement in CLB-aligned language courses (see page 6)
4. Benchmarking to inform program renewal (see page 6).



The diversity of Ontario colleges means benchmarking will serve multiple functions within the Ontario college system.

Benchmarking for Admissions

Provided that your college has an appropriate CLB assessment tool, program benchmarks can be used to establish or verify admissions requirements for programs. Red River College, for example, uses the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) document to benchmark for admissions. If the goal of benchmarking at your college is to determine admission, you can emphasize language demands in the first semester.

Care should be taken to ensure that benchmarks are not used as a barrier to entry. It is important to stress that language is not the only determinant of academic success. Indeed, background in the subject matter, level of support available, and effectiveness of study habits can mean that students assessed at lower benchmark levels can perform well in college programs assessed at a higher benchmark.

Colleges should keep in mind that program benchmarks are not an exact measure; rather, they represent a range of language demands. The Language Training Centre at Red River has the expertise and capacity to interview students whose CLB scores fall short in any one skill area to determine if any additional testing is warranted and to make recommendations about program readiness or referral to adult EAL (English as an Additional Language) classes. This type of process would be almost impossible for institutions serving high populations of L2 students as it is highly time-consuming.¹

If your college decides to use benchmarks for admissions purposes, it is critical that the process take into consideration the nature of the CLB as a task-based communicative tool rather than an instrument that focuses on explicit knowledge of grammar.²

Benchmarking for Preparatory and Remedial Language Training Design

The language used in post-secondary college programs is specific to the industry sector (field of study) and is also academic. The benchmarking process can assist colleges in improving the alignment of pre-post-secondary language training with the actual classroom demands of post-secondary college programs when designing the curriculum.

Benchmarking for Placement in CLB-Aligned Language Courses

Benchmarks can be used to place students into language programs, whether they are post-secondary programs, pre-post-secondary programs, bridging programs, or modular courses/programs. The use of benchmarks for this purpose relies on the existence of preparatory and remedial language training programs that are aligned with the CLB.

Benchmarking to Inform Program Renewal

By benchmarking an entire program, colleges will receive a report on the progression of language demands within that program from start to finish. Semester-specific benchmarks can provide useful observations about the demands in the four language-skill areas. These, in turn, could be used to inform program renewal processes by providing information on language demands and possible gaps/progression across semesters.

If your college uses benchmarking to inform program renewal, keep in mind that the benchmarking report provides a snapshot of a program; it does not provide specific conclusions about specific courses, instructors, or students.

Step 2: Securing Research Ethics Approval

In compliance with the Canada Privacy Act, research ethics approval is necessary for this type of research in Ontario colleges to ensure that participants are not subjected to undue risk and are provided with the information necessary in order to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. Researchers should contact the ethics approval board at their college for institution-specific practices.

All research materials are subject to review by each institution's ethics review body. These materials include information letters, letters of consent, student and instructor feedback forms, questionnaires, and interview sheets. See Templates 7 and 8 for examples of informed consent forms.

Strategies for Success: Preparing for the Ethics Review

- The research ethics review process is often a two- to four-month process, which should be taken into consideration when planning.
- In order to expedite the ethics review process, clearly determine all of the documents, forms, and other requirements needed to submit a comprehensive application for ethics review.

Step 3: Compiling a Team of Researchers

Your college will need to assemble a team of Researchers to ensure that your language benchmarking process is successful. Researchers need to be able to commit to this labour-intensive process that can span one or more semesters, depending on how your college chooses to release faculty and structure the benchmarking. Some suggested roles for the benchmarking of your college programs are listed on the following page.



¹ In this guide, L1 refers to a person for whom English is their native language and L2 refers to a person for whom English is not their native language.

² When the CLB is referred to as a task-based communicative tool this means that it focuses on what an L2 adult learner can do communicatively with language in everyday real-life situations. Explicit grammar knowledge (specific structures, elements of punctuation, spelling, rules, etc.) is only indirectly dealt with in the CLB.

Project Coordinator

Responsibilities:

- Coordinates college-based benchmarking
- Writes reports
- Acts solely in an administrative capacity or as one of the Language Specialists

Expertise/Knowledge Required:

- Knowledge of second-language issues and the *CLB 2000*

Language Specialist/Researcher

Responsibilities:

- Gathers data from instructor and student interviews, classroom observations, textbook(s), and student samples
- Observes and analyzes language demands in the program
- Writes reports

Expertise/Knowledge Required:

- Demonstrated knowledge of, and experience with, second-language issues is an asset
- Analytical skills, attention to detail, strong organizational skills
- Knowledge of, or interest in, developing in-depth knowledge about the *CLB 2000* and the *CLB 2000: Theoretical Framework*

Theoretical Framework

- Background in linguistics is an asset but not required

Program Contact

Responsibilities:

- Provides program information to Language Specialists
- Provides support to Language Specialists
- Acts as a liaison between Language Specialists and program administration and faculty

Expertise/Knowledge Required:

- Knowledge of the program selected for benchmarking
- Interest in developing knowledge about the *CLB 2000*

Strategies for Success: Maximize Your Team's Potential

- For staffing flexibility make sure your research team is comprised of full-time and part-time teachers.
- Select Researchers with CLB experience such as participation in Enhanced Language Training projects: experienced staff provides a shared frame of reference for the team members.

Step 4: Training in the CLB and the Benchmarking Process

In order to undertake and implement the benchmarking process, Researchers need a solid understanding of the CLB framework and the guidelines in this document for implementing the benchmarking process. As well, in-person training sessions are recommended for all Researchers. It is also recommended that program administrators (deans, chairs, and coordinators) attend an "Orientation to CLB" training. Their participation in these sessions will assist in the acceptance and understanding of the CLB in college programs, facilitate increased access to programs, build relationships between Researchers and instructors, and to better understand the language demands of the program.

Two separate training sessions are recommended:

1. Orientation to Canadian Language Benchmarks (1/2 day)

This training session provides a basic overview of the Canadian Language Benchmarks. Contact the CCLB for further information, www.language.ca.



2. Benchmarking Process (3 days)

Content should include but is not limited to:

- a. Define benchmarking as it is used in this process. Clearly distinguish between analyzing the language demands of a program as opposed to using the data collected as part of program evaluation or advice.
- b. Describe how to reinterpret the *CLB 2000* descriptors to explain the demands of a college program.
- c. Define common terminology and key terms (such as adequate, familiar, unfamiliar, and sophisticated) to ensure that team members are all on the same page.
- d. Define “student success”, for example, decide if student success is solely based on marks or if it also involves the ability of the student to fully participate and engage in the learning process.
- e. Employ as many academic examples as possible, with a focus on mid-level benchmarks (i.e., benchmarks 6 through 9; see the *CLB 2000* for further information).
- f. Provide extensive examples of how to benchmark each skill area and determine an overall benchmark.
- g. Provide guidance on how much weight one course should have in determining the overall benchmark for each skill area (see “Determining Course Weight” on page 22).
- h. Decide whether or not to benchmark extra/ recommended reading.
- i. Strategize on how to minimize the impact of pedagogy.
- j. Explain in detail how to deal with gaps and overlaps in the existing *CLB 2000* document (for a discussion see “Challenges of Benchmarking College Programs with the *CLB 2000*, page 23).
- k. Describe how to deal with split benchmarks (see “Dealing with Split Benchmarks on page 22).
- l. For the purposes of assigning benchmark levels, Researchers should learn how to make the distinction between what is a “must” (an activity that directly influences marks) versus what is a “should” (an activity that contributes to the students learning).
- m. Provide strategies to focus on the language used in the program as opposed to the skills and capabilities of the learner (e.g., use a checklist of common language functions likely to be observed).

- n. Develop strategies for considering language requirements in workplace and/or co-op placement.
- o. Provide guidance on how to deal with issues specific to benchmarking ESL courses.

Strategies for Success: Train Your Team in Advance

Hold training prior to the start of the semester selected for benchmarking to provide ample time for Researchers to become familiar and comfortable with the process. One suggestion is to work through sample activities to be used in the benchmarking process.

- If your college is benchmarking more than one program at the same time, consider using a team approach by exposing Researchers to more than one program. This provides a wider frame of reference and experience.
- If your college is benchmarking more than one program, consider including one or two Researchers on the team who do not have teaching responsibilities; this will allow them time to focus on the project.

Step 5: Organizing the Research Team

Colleges should organize their research teams based upon their own institutional contexts and the human resources available. The number of Researchers assigned to each program can vary from a minimum of two to a maximum of five. Given the subjective nature of the work, a minimum of two Researchers per program is necessary. Through discussion to build consensus, Researchers build competency in setting and re-setting standards of benchmarking.

Possible Staffing Strategies

- If time and human resources allow, the first program your college benchmarks could be done with three to five Researchers. This will create greater confidence in the methodology.
- If your college is benchmarking more than one program, consider having one Researcher work full-time on all selected programs and place the others where needed. This ensures consistency across programs.

Program Benchmarking: Data Collection

The following is a step-by-step process to prepare for data collection for program benchmarking. These steps can be adapted according to the unique needs of your college.

Step 1: Contacting the Department

Researchers should approach departments based on each institution's context. Securing buy-in at the program level is essential for facilitating a successful benchmarking process. Your benchmarking team will need to meet with the dean, the chair, and the program coordinator to explain the nature of the project, introduce the CLB, and discuss issues related to L2 students. Researchers can also use this meeting to learn more about the program being benchmarked.

Step 2: Collecting Data from Instructors

Your team will need to collect initial data such as course outlines and textbooks from the program contact or instructor. Ask the instructors to prepare the following: sample assignments, exams, rubrics, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and student samples. The challenge is that many instructors do not have samples of student work, and if they do, it is usually at higher grade levels. Whenever possible, Researchers should analyze a cross-section of papers with the emphasis at the mid-range (C grade-level work).

Strategies for Success: Gathering Data

It is important for Researchers to clearly communicate their expectations of the instructors and facilitate their responsibilities. Flexibility on the part of the Researchers is key in order to gather data in a timely manner. Some strategies for gathering data are:

- Set a deadline to encourage response
- Provide envelopes for data collection
- Arrange a central and convenient pick-up location.

Step 3: Interviewing Instructors

Instructor interviews provide an opportunity for Researchers to collect information about program delivery format and evaluation. Interviews also provide Researchers with the information they need to identify portions of textbooks and assigned readings that are representative of typical language demands for the program. This will help Researchers manage the amount of data and allow them to efficiently analyze the materials. Instructors provide useful qualitative information and often relay anecdotes that add richness and depth to the data and help Researchers to better understand the experience of L2s in different programs.

Researchers should be considerate when asking for an instructor's time. Both one-on-one and group feedback sessions are useful. Colleges may use their own discretion, based on time, faculty, and Researcher availability when deciding which form instructor feedback will take. For a sample letter to initiate contact with the instructors see Template 5.

Strategies for Success: Working Effectively with Instructors

- Review the program of study, course outlines, syllabi, and classroom materials before you meet with instructors.
- Prepare a guide for the instructor's interview with specific questions to ensure consistent data gathering and to develop a solid understanding of the courses and the program.
- Encourage participation by recognizing the value of instructors' time by asking for just 20 to 30 minutes. Once engaged, instructors frequently go beyond the scheduled time.
- Ask instructors about the differences between language demands across semesters; this will provide insight into the progression of language demands throughout the program.
- Ask instructors if and how they have modified their teaching style and/or techniques to accommodate the needs of L2 students in a classroom.
- Reassure instructors that you are not evaluating their performance.
- Faculty may have a tendency to digress into discussing all learners. To ensure that accurate data is being captured, it is helpful for Researchers to ask, "Is that true for L2 learners?"
- Separate the feedback of language instructors from that of vocational content instructors. Language instructors provide significant data about writing and speaking skills, which may not be as evident in the content courses, especially in semester one.
- Arrange a follow-up meeting with instructors during the data analysis phase if you need further clarification.

Step 4: Selecting Classes for Observation

Classroom observations are fundamental to the benchmarking process as they allow Researchers to observe language demands in the classroom. Since programs vary in terms of the number of sections, number of instructors, lecture format, etc., Researchers should work with program administrators, the program contact, and instructors to identify the most representative classes for observation.

Strategies for Success: Class Selection

- Work with program contacts to strategically select a cross-section of classes to observe. By selecting a cross-section of delivery modes and instructors, you can minimize the impact of pedagogy.
- Make a minimum of two classroom visits for each course, with two Researchers who can analyze the data independently and then compare findings. If there is more than one instructor for a course, observe as many instructors as possible. Multiple sections of a course can provide the opportunity to observe and compare how language is used by different instructors, in different contexts.
- Familiarize yourself with the course content by analyzing the text(s). This will bring added familiarity with the field of study and the nature of the program, and may help you determine which classes would be most representative for observation. However, be wary of spending too much time on preliminary readings before you are familiar with how the instructor uses the text, or what the student is required to do with the material.
- Schedule classroom observations after you have reviewed course materials with the instructor. Use an informal follow-up meeting with the instructor directly after the class to ask any questions that arose during the observation.
- Observe a cross-section of instructors to experience the impact on language demands by diverse teaching styles and course formats. Researchers need to keep their focus on the language used rather than the teaching style of a particular instructor.

Step 5: Observing Classes

Classroom observations are a major component of the raw data collected in the benchmarking process. Researchers should observe regularly scheduled lectures, labs, tutorials, and work placements in order to document the language demands within the context of each of the four language skills. Students should be informed of the observation beforehand; however, classroom activities should be those normally scheduled for the day and time. Consent from students may need to be obtained beforehand, depending on your college's policy.

Strategies for Success: Classroom Observation

- Observe in pairs to facilitate collaboration and promote a comprehensive course benchmark.
- Prior to the observation, speak with the instructor about the class format so Researchers can make the best use of their time.
- For maximum efficiency, remain in class only as long as required for the observation. To minimize disruption, ensure that the professor and class are aware that the team will leave after a predetermined amount of time.
- Prepare a classroom observation sheet to help guide the data collection process. You will benefit from listing the language tasks that students need to perform in the classroom, and this will help in your final benchmark report.
- When observing classes, clearly and objectively describe the language demands, regardless of the participation of the students in the class, the teaching style, and the cognitive nature of the course.
- You may notice that active participation in some tasks is "not required," (i.e., not marked). Nevertheless, during the data collection phase, observe and note all tasks that require linguistic skills.

Researchers should work with program administrators, the program contact, and instructors to identify the most representative classes for observation.

Strategies for Success: Interviewing L2 students

- Feedback from students should occur after they have received some marked tasks/assignments.
- Approaching students after a classroom information session to determine their L2 status can be a successful way to gain student participation.
- Collecting feedback in a group setting is an efficient way to secure the range of information needed. Students should be provided with a written questionnaire to facilitate the participation of those who do not feel comfortable speaking in a group.
- Interviews with L1 students may be helpful in order to compare and contrast the difficulties faced by L1s and L2s. This helps the researchers not to focus solely on L2 students, but rather to glean the overall language demands of the program.
- Ensure ample time (approximately 2 hours) for group feedback sessions in order to build rapport and to collect information.
- Holding interview sessions between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. and providing lunch can be an effective way to encourage participation.
- Consider providing an honorarium. This can be relatively successful; however competing demands on students' lives (work, school, personal, etc.) may still present challenges to their involvement.
- If time permits, one-on-one feedback sessions are helpful.
- Scheduling a follow-up meeting (either in person or via phone/email) may be helpful since students do not experience all of the requirements of a course simultaneously; but this can be logistically challenging.
- If a student participant drops a course/program, follow-up feedback can help to determine the causes and contributing factors to their withdrawal.

Step 6: Interviewing L2 Students

Student interviews provide insight into the experience of L2 students within the selected programs. It is important to give participants an overview of the project and the goals of the benchmarking research before the interview. Use discretion based on the timeframe and context of each program in deciding the format of student interviews (e.g., one-on-one, group, email, etc.). Colleges may choose to provide honoraria for student participation.

Identifying L2 students in college programs can prove challenging. Since these learners do not always self-identify and instructors do not always know their students' background, Researchers can identify L2s by classroom visits and the investigation of anecdotal information from instructors, students, or program administrators.

When using student feedback, consider these questions:

- Does the L2's choice to participate indicate a greater linguistic confidence and/or ability?
- Are the L2 participants representative of the overall L2 demographic?

Program Benchmarking: Data Analysis and Reporting

The following is a step-by-step process to analyze your data and report your research findings. These steps can be adapted according to the unique needs of your college.

Step 1: Analyzing CLB Levels

After data collection, Researchers are ready to use the CLB to find relevant descriptors to explain the language demands in the selected courses. As language demands frequently span several benchmark levels, language benchmarking is an exercise in judgement. Researchers may find it challenging to discern how to approach certain language tasks and include them in the analysis of language demands. Each Researcher will need to weigh the circumstances, in which the language demands are observed, in order to determine the relevance of specific tasks for a benchmark. Some speaking tasks, for example, despite being part of college reality, can be challenging to evaluate if active participation is not required for marks. For instance, speaking with an instructor outside the classroom and participating in class group work that is not marked are both speaking tasks that are not required. These tasks should be taken into consideration in the analysis of speaking, but Researchers should ensure that these tasks do not inflate the final benchmark.

It is important to remember that the *CLB 2000* was not meant to describe language demands in a college program; rather, its focus is on the skills of the student. Please keep this in mind when using the *CLB 2000* and make any necessary adaptations.





Strategies for Success: Analyzing CLB Levels

- Pair assignments with marking rubrics or explanations to clarify what is expected of students. This will help you discern between the required and non-required tasks you observe.
- In order to better identify the progression of benchmark levels, pay special attention to the language the CLB uses to describe tasks (e.g., changing from concrete to abstract; predictable to unfamiliar).

Benchmarking Speaking

Speaking may not be mandatory in many content classes; however, there may be presentations in a language class and/or proof of speaking skills may be required in a co-op placement. In addition, Researchers should take into consideration the language demands for a student to ask an instructor for help outside the classroom. Keep in mind that numerous classroom observations are crucial in order to analyze speaking, and that there may be few instances where this skill is specifically demonstrated, especially in semester one courses.

Benchmarking Writing

Post-secondary writing demands can be minimal in some programs. If student writing samples are unavailable, benchmarks can be determined by analyzing course outlines, task sheets, and anecdotal information from instructor's meetings. Instructors can provide information about the expected format of assignments (e.g., short answer, sentences, paragraphs, etc.), if grammatical errors count in grading, and the writing process (time, number of drafts, in-class versus take home, instructor feedback). Benchmarking without writing samples or rubrics can be further aided by analyzing the course outline and considering whether the writing task is guided (based upon course material that asks for a specific response), or unguided (requires writing an open essay). One or two samples of each type of assignment (e.g., articles, lab reports, essays, and final exams) is usually representative of the writing demands of the course.

Benchmarking Reading

When identifying language tasks required for reading passages, it is necessary to consult with the course instructor to ensure Researchers have a representative sample of expectations. This is important since Researchers may tend to benchmark reading texts high because of the academic vocabulary; however, if the task is to extract main ideas and/or use the text as a reference, the benchmark could be lower.

Benchmarking Listening

Listening is a language skill that is rarely directly reflected in marks. When benchmarking listening, consider the use of technical or program-specific language in lectures and the language skills employed in group discussions. The use of idioms and culturally specific references, and the amount of support provided in lectures (e.g., PowerPoint or other visual aids, also comprise aspects of the listening benchmark).

Step 2: Assigning Overall Program CLB Levels

This section provides guidance on how the Researchers can compare their findings and determine an overall benchmark per skill for the program.

Determining CLB Levels

Due to the subjectivity inherent in this work, each Researcher should assign overall program CLB levels independently. This involves taking into consideration all of the information from the classroom visits, the interviews with students, instructors, and administrators; as well as analysis of course materials, exams, and student samples.

Strategies for Success: Creating a Workspace

Whenever possible, a dedicated workspace and computer that each Researcher can access for the duration of the benchmarking will facilitate this stage of the process.

Benchmarking English Courses

Benchmarking the language demands of English courses presents unique difficulties since the very content is language. It can be challenging for Researchers to distinguish between the content of the lesson and the language as it is used in the classroom, particularly when the courses are aimed at L2s. This can be especially complicated when analyzing listening and speaking.

Comparing Findings and Assigning Final CLB Levels

After each Researcher has determined his or her final CLB levels per skill, assemble your team to compare findings and arrive at consensus regarding the final benchmarks. This is an important and often time-consuming process in which each Researcher provides a rationale for his or her conclusions. Benchmarks should not be averaged. Rather, your team should challenge each others' assumptions, address biases, and reach agreement through a collaborative approach. This process also serves to develop your team's benchmarking skills and to enhance Researchers' familiarity with the CLB framework.

Strategies for Success: Comparing Findings

- Be sure to set aside sufficient time for your team to adequately address all skills and courses; this will ensure that the final benchmarks are comprehensive.
- Distribute each Researcher's analysis before the meeting to provide the opportunity to review and reflect on each colleague's findings.



Step 3: Reporting Findings

Each college should use discretion in determining how much information in the benchmarking reports is shared within the college and the community.

Strategies for Success: Reporting Findings

- Before writing the benchmark report, consider the audience and their familiarity with the nature of the research. Teams need to consider how a reader who is not versed in the CLB would interpret the findings.
- In order to explain the benchmarks to those who are unfamiliar with the CLB, include relevant pages of the CLB document for each skill level.
- Clearly report where information came from (e.g., classroom observation, student or instructor feedback). When reporting findings, focus on description only—not opinion, advice, or evaluation.
- Assign one Researcher to be in charge of compiling the first draft of the report; this ensures that the report is written with a common voice.
- Enlist a knowledgeable third party to edit the report (someone familiar with the CLBs and L2s).

Potential Benchmarking Issues

Outlined below are some common issues that may arise during the benchmarking process and some suggestions for dealing with them. In recognition of the fact that every college is different, not all of these issues may apply to your college.

Benchmarking Post-Secondary Language Courses

College systems vary in how they incorporate and deliver post-secondary English language courses. In some colleges, one required English course is offered to all students, while other colleges place students in one of several English language courses. Therefore, students in the same semester could be in one of several different English courses, complicating the process of benchmarking language as part of a content program. This is one reason why college benchmarking should include analysis of several representative semesters throughout a program.

If a college offers more than one English language course, Researchers may have difficulty determining writing and speaking benchmarks, since for many content programs English classes in the program of study are the primary source of these requirements. Researchers should report if a particular skill is heavily reliant upon one or two courses for assigning a benchmark level. This practice allows for a rich analysis of how language is used in a program.

Strategies for Success: Benchmarking English Courses

If your college decides to benchmark all English courses available to students within a program, present the benchmarks for each course separately. This will help demonstrate the variety of language benchmark levels students experience within a program.



Researchers who assign benchmarks, and members of the college community who use them, need to be aware that an overall benchmark does not necessarily represent the language demands in each course analyzed.

Dealing with Split Benchmarks

Due to the broad nature of language demands within a college program and the limitations of the CLB document to adequately describe them, Researchers may find it challenging to decide on an overall benchmark level. Reporting a split benchmark is at the discretion of each college. Here is an example of an explanation of a split benchmark (BM):

Reading BM 8/9 Rationale: Although 70% of the core program/clinical writing requirements for semesters one and two could be met with a BM8, the mandatory communications and general education courses are at a BM9.

Determining Course Weight

Researchers may find that the language demands in certain skill areas, particularly speaking and writing, may only come from one or two courses. Therefore, Researchers should examine how much weight one course should have in determining the overall benchmark.

For some programs, one required course could potentially constitute the only source for an overall benchmark within a particular skill area. Thus, Researchers who assign benchmarks and members of the college community who use them need to be aware that an overall benchmark does not necessarily represent the language demands in each course analyzed. Colleges should take this into consideration when writing benchmark reports.

Differentiating between Types of Language Use

Researchers should be attentive to the difference between language use for interaction and language use to determine cognitive skills. Some tasks may involve little language use, but require high cognitive skills, for example students in a trades program preparing specifications for a project. Such a task may involve using small amounts of language and text; however, because it requires navigating complex and challenging references

such as building codes and blue prints, the language may be technically and cognitively challenging. Other tasks may involve extensive language use (fluency), yet involve little cognitive demand, making the language less challenging. For example, students in a trades program performing practical work in small groups may use language in large amounts, but it may be colloquial and not cognitively challenging.

Strategies for Success: Language Use

Tasks can be either academically and/or linguistically demanding—depending on the purpose of the task. Clarify with the instructor what the student is required to do, and then determine whether the demands of the task are academic or linguistic, or both (e.g., assemble equipment with no visual or verbal support versus assemble equipment with the aid of a diagram or verbal support).

language, for example, “*Can speak on familiar topics at both concrete and abstract levels [10-15 mins]*”. In benchmarking this description could be reinterpreted as “Speaking on familiar topics at both concrete and abstract levels is necessary.”

Second, the language demands in a college program often involve educational language requirements not directly captured in the *CLB 2000*. Researchers are therefore required to pay particular attention to specific variations between benchmarks. In general, an effective approach to benchmarking is through cross-institutional dialogue. This allows colleges to collectively share issues and work through challenges to encourage a community of shared practice. To this end, the “National Working Group on Benchmarking College Courses” has been established. The CCLB has supported this initiative and has launched an online discussion forum at www.language.ca.

Challenges of Benchmarking College Programs with the *CLB 2000*

The *CLB 2000* is intended to provide ESL practitioners with a sense of the general communicative competencies a L2 learner might possess at specific benchmark levels. Therefore, certain difficulties arise when it is used as a tool for benchmarking college programs.

First, the *CLB 2000* describes what a L2 adult learner can do communicatively with language in specific competency areas. Thus, the focus is on the learner’s abilities. By contrast, program benchmarking is intended to describe the language demands, that is how language is used in general in college programs. Researchers are required to reinterpret the *CLB 2000* language descriptions as language tasks rather than abilities and competencies L2 learners are capable of demonstrating. *CLB 2000* statements describe what a student can do with

Appendix: Overview of Program Benchmarking Pilot

The Program Benchmarking Pilot was carried out by seven institutions: Algonquin, Centennial, George Brown, La Cité, Mohawk, Seneca, and Sheridan, in collaboration with the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB). A total of 39 programs and pre-post-secondary language courses were benchmarked between January and June 2006. The project colleges provided a sound test sample to pilot a methodology within different organizational structures and varying populations of internationally trained immigrants. The objective of the program benchmarking pilot was to create a guide for benchmarking college programs.

Based on a methodology developed by Red River College (Winnipeg, Manitoba), the CIITE Program Benchmarking Pilot set out to develop an effective and efficient guide that could be implemented by all Ontario colleges. The process involved selecting a cross-section of academic programs; conducting extensive classroom and lab observation; analyzing a multitude of course materials (including textbooks, handouts, websites, and other supplemental resources); and interviewing instructors, students, and key program administrators. Subsequent to this data collection, the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000* was used as a framework for assigning appropriate benchmarks in each of the four language skill areas: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Research teams at each pilot college conducted data collection and analysis. Red River College provided a comprehensive set of data collection tools, which were supplemented by tools provided by the CIITE Project Office. The Project Office also provided college teams with a final reporting template. Using these tools and methodology as a framework, each benchmarking team had the discretion to organize and conduct their research within the given timeframe (January–June 2006) according to the individual context of their institution.

In order to identify common themes and differences amongst the participating colleges, two roundtables were held: the first during the research phase (May 31, 2006 at Sheridan College) and the second after the process was completed (November 15, 2006 at George Brown College). The latter roundtable was useful in determining which lessons learned were common across pilot colleges and which were unique to a particular college. Both roundtables provided a forum for Researchers from different institutions to work in small groups and share their knowledge and experience. As each college has unique needs, the objective of these sessions was not to build consensus amongst Ontario colleges. Rather, the roundtables allowed Researchers to gain insight into the benchmarking process and develop strategies to deal with the subjective and sometimes ambiguous nature of the research.

Focus was on understanding the process of benchmarking; therefore, pilot colleges generally focused their analysis on semester one or two courses only. In order to determine overall program benchmarks per skill, representative courses offered in the beginning, middle, and end of a program would need to be analyzed. This was not undertaken as part of the CIITE project.

For further information on the Program Benchmarking Pilot and other activities undertaken by the CIITE Language Proficiency Project visit www.collegeconnect.on.ca/ciite.



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