

Writing Skills:

A Comparison of Canadian Language Benchmarks and HRDC's Essential Skills

INTRODUCTION

This paper compares two Canadian Internet-based resources: Canadian Language Benchmarks and Human Resources Development Canada's (HRDC's) Essential Skills. The comparison focuses on how each resource addresses writing skills. The intent of this comparison is to assess how the resources differ, how they agree, and how they might complement each other as tools for educators and for learners.

CANADIAN LANGUAGE BENCHMARKS

The Canadian Language Benchmarks are:

- a descriptive scale of communicative proficiency for use by English as a Second Language (ESL) practitioners and learners;
- a set of descriptive statements for 12 proficiency levels divided over 3 stages of progression – Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced;
- statements of communicative competencies and performance tasks in which the learner demonstrates application of language knowledge (competence) and skill;
- a reference framework for curriculum development, evaluation and language assessment of English as a Second Language; and
- a national standard for planning second language curricula for a variety of contexts plus a common “yardstick” for assessing outcomes.

An Overview of Canadian Language Benchmarks

Canadian Language Benchmarks describe a learner's communicative proficiency in relation to:

1) four language skills:

- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| a) Speaking | c) Reading |
| b) Listening | d) Writing |

2) three stages of progression:

- Basic proficiency** (Stage I - Benchmarks 1 - 4) is the range of abilities required to communicate in common and predictable contexts within the area of basic needs, common everyday activities, and familiar topics of immediate personal relevance.
- Intermediate proficiency** (Stage II - Benchmarks 5 - 8) enables a person to participate more fully in a wider variety of contexts. It is the range of abilities required to function independently in most familiar situations of daily social, educational, and work-related life experience, within some less predictable contexts.
- Advanced proficiency** (Stage III - Benchmarks 9 - 12) is the range of abilities required to communicate effectively, appropriately, accurately and fluently in most contexts, topics, and situations, from predictable to unfamiliar, and from general to professionally

specific, in the most communicatively demanding contexts. Learners at this stage have a sense of purpose and audience when communicating (including distance, politeness and formality factors, appropriate register and style, volume/length of communication), accuracy and coherence of discourse, vocabulary range and precision.

3) four specific competency areas:

- a) **social interaction:** interacting in an interpersonal social situation, in speech or writing.
- b) **following and giving instructions** in speech. (The emphasis shifts to *reproducing or recording information* in writing.)
- c) **suasion:** persuading others, or reacting to suasion to do something in speech. (The emphasis shifts to *business/service messages* in writing.)
- d) **information:** exchanging, presenting and discussing information, ideas, opinions, feelings; telling stories, describing, reporting, arguing, etc. in speech. (The emphasis shifts to *presenting information/ideas* in writing.)

Overview of CLB on Writing

Benchmark	Proficiency Level	Writing Competencies
STAGE 1: BASIC PROFICIENCY		
1	Initial	Creating simple texts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social interaction ● Recording information ● Business/service messages ● Presenting information/ideas
2	Developing	
3	Adequate	
4	Fluent	
STAGE II. INTERMEDIATE PROFICIENCY		
5	Initial	Creating moderately complex texts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social interaction ● Reproducing information ● Business/service messages ● Presenting information/ ideas
6	Developing	
7	Adequate	
8	Fluent	
STAGE III: ADVANCED PROFICIENCY		
9	Initial	Creating complex and very complex texts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social interaction ● Reproducing information ● Business/service messages ● Presenting information/ ideas
10	Developing	
11	Adequate	
12	Fluent	

HRDC ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Essential Skills are enabling skills that:

- help people perform the tasks required by their occupation and in other activities of daily life
- provide people with a foundation for learning other skills
- enhance people's ability to adapt to workplace change

Essential Skills are the skills people use to carry out a wide variety of everyday life and occupational tasks. While writing skills are required in a broad range of occupations the complexity and frequency of writing varies. Some workers fill out simple forms every day, while others write daily or monthly reports.

Workers who have Essential Skills at the levels required for their desired occupations will have enhanced employability. However, other factors such as honesty, persistence, and a positive attitude to change also improve employability prospects.

An Overview of Essential Skills

The Essential Skills are:

- Reading Text
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Continuous Learning
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Document Use
- Numeracy (Math)
- Computer Use

An Essential Skills profile describes how each of the essential skills is used in a particular occupation. Profiles are available for all occupations that can be entered from high school (complete or incomplete) and a growing number of more highly skilled occupations.

Each Essential Skills profile describes how the essential skill is actually used by workers in that occupational group. For each essential skill, a profile generally contains:

- complexity ratings that indicate the level of difficulty of the tasks related to that skill.
- examples that illustrate how that skill is actually used.
- a standardized description of how that skill is used so readers may make comparisons between occupations or aggregate information across occupations.

Overview of Essential Skills on Writing:

The Writing component of an Essential Skills profile contains information on:

1) Complexity Level

Writing length and purpose; style and structure; and content determine complexity. Level 1 refers to informal writing for small audiences, like co-workers, where format is unimportant or where pre-set simple format is used. Levels 2 and higher refer to texts that are one paragraph or more in length or are written in a specialized literary form not employing paragraphs. Level 2 also refers to writing where content is "routine." Levels 3 and above are for writing of "non-routine" content. This decision is based on whether the workers can use texts they have previously written or whether they have to create new ways to say new things. Writing at Levels 4 and 5 often feature an analysis or demand originality and effectiveness.

2) Purpose:

- To organize/to remember
- To keep a record/to document
- To inform/to request information
- To persuade/to justify a request
- To present an analysis or comparison
- To present an evaluation or critique
- To entertain

3) Text length:

- Texts requiring less than one paragraph of new text
- Texts rarely requiring more than one paragraph
- Longer texts

THE DIFFERENCES

There are two major differences between Canadian Language Benchmarks and HRDC's Essential Skills profiles – focus and intent. CLB focuses on what an individual can do; HRDC focuses on what these skills look like in actual use. The intent of the CLB scale is to describe an individual's communicative proficiency; the intent of Essential Skills is to identify the frequency and complexity of a skill's use in an occupation.

Canadian Language Benchmarks is a tool used by Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) practitioners and learners to identify an individual's proficiency level and in the development and evaluation of curriculum. The complexity of the writing ranges from very basic life skills, such as sending a simple greeting card or completing a simple form, to challenging workplace skills, such as writing an investigative report.

Educators can use HRDC Essential Skills profiles in a variety of settings, subjects, and in a range of contexts. The profiles can be used to tailor training and materials to the employment goals of learners; find authentic workplace examples for use in instructional activities; demonstrate the relevance of the skills being taught. In addition, individuals exploring employment opportunities can use the profiles.

It should be noted that while the HRDC Essential Skill of writing progresses from the simple to the complex, the examples all require a basic proficiency with English. When comparing the supporting data of both tools, the simplest examples of the writing Essential Skill (the phone message for example) do not appear until Language Benchmark 5. In part, this occurs because Language Benchmarks 1 through 4 focus primarily on non-business environments and skills required for basic everyday activities in a social or home environment. However, the CLB descriptors do suggest that an individual for whom English is a Second Language would, by CLB's standards, have difficulty completing the simplest tasks of the writing Essential Skill until he or she is performing at a Canadian Language Benchmark 3.

CONNECTIONS

From Simple to Complex

Both Canadian Language Benchmarks and HRDC's Essential Skills describe writing skills as progressing from simple to more complex tasks. CLB has 12 proficiency levels distributed over 3 progressive stages (Basic, Intermediate and Advanced) while Essential Skills have five complexity levels (1 being least complex and 5 most complex).

For Essential Skills, writing length and purpose; style and structure; and content determine complexity. These same elements appear to shape complexity for Benchmarks. For both, texts progress from short to long, personal to non-personal, simple to complex, familiar to abstract.

A preliminary comparison of the details describing Essential Skills' complexity with CLB's Global Performance Descriptors and Performance Conditions generates further connections. Both describe complexity as increasing along similar continuums and both describe this process with similar language. The following display shows the potential complementary nature of the two resources and highlights similarities in the descriptions.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS	BENCHMARKS
<p style="text-align: center;">LEVEL 1</p> <p>Writing that is less than a paragraph; intended to organize, remind, or inform; informal for small familiar audiences—usually coworkers; format is pre-set or unimportant; concrete, day-to-day, matters of fairly immediate concern.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LEVEL 2</p> <p>Writing that is a paragraph or longer; intended to serve a variety of purposes; more formal style for an audience other than co-workers; tone which is appropriate for the occasion; standard spelling and grammar (syntax); templates or models exist; content is routine, with little variation from one instance to the next.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p>New text is short; forms are short and simple (5 to 7 personal categories); basic personal information, related to immediate needs; informal; audience is familiar; format is simple; context is personally relevant; limited knowledge of English.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p>New text is short; forms are short and simple (8 to 12 personal categories); informal; audience is familiar; format is simple; every day information about self, family or familiar information; context is personally relevant; limited knowledge of English.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p>New text is short; notes are short; forms are short and simple (15 to 20 items) informal; audience is familiar; format is simple; every day information about self and family; context is personally relevant.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p>New text is 1 paragraph; notes are 3 to 5 sentences; forms are simple (20 items); a range of familiar topics, informal to more formal; audience is familiar; every day needs; context is personally relevant.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">5</p> <p>New text is 1 paragraph; notes are short (4 to 6 clauses); forms are moderately complex (20 to 30 items) a range of familiar topics, informal to more formal; audience is familiar; every day needs and relevance; phone messages and short routine reports on familiar topics.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">6</p> <p>New text is 1 to 2 paragraphs; forms are moderately complex (30 to 40 items); messages are 5 to 6 sentences; informal to more formal; audience is familiar; familiar and personally relevant topics; can take simple notes, integrate information from other sources, charts, research, etc.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">LEVEL 3</p> <p>Longer or shorter pieces; intended to inform, explain, request information, express opinions or give directions; established format, such as a contract, lease, financial report, or job description, that may call for structural elements such as headings, a table of contents, footnotes, etc; non-routine writing tasks; content may be extensive but is readily available from established sources.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">7</p> <p>New text is 1 to 2 paragraphs; forms are moderately complex; messages are 1 or 2 paragraphs; informal to more formal; audience is familiar; developing sense of audience; abstract but familiar topics; can integrate information from other sources; learner texts include memos, letters of request.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">LEVEL 4</p> <p>Longer pieces; present considerable information; may feature a comparison or analysis; may involve making recommendations; conscious organization of writing for a given purpose; may require modification of an existing format, such as a proposal or a report, to fit the given information; consideration of the audience may be an important part of the writing task; may involve the gathering and selection of information; abstract or technical content may demand the use of specialized vocabulary; re-write or transform written information for a specific audience, e.g. rewrite technical material for a non-specialist audience.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">8</p> <p>New text is up to 4 paragraphs; forms are moderately complex; messages are 2 to 3 paragraphs; informal to more formal; audience is familiar; pre-set formats; abstract but familiar topics; might include information from other sources.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">9</p> <p>Longer, formal and informal texts for complex routine tasks; to offer and request information/clarification/etc., express feelings/opinions/ideas/etc.; familiar to unfamiliar audience; topics range from familiar/researched to abstract or technical; might need to include information from other sources.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">LEVEL 5</p> <p>Any length; presents an evaluation or critique, usually accompanied by recommendations; demands originality and effectiveness; appropriate tone and mood may be as important as content; may display complex, multi-part organization to accommodate varied content; content must be created or it may be synthesized using information from multiple sources; creative writing.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10</p> <p>Longer, formal texts for complex routine tasks in demanding contexts; to inform, express opinions/ideas, communicate solutions/decisions, present/debate an argument, or persuade familiar/unfamiliar audience; topics are non-personal, abstract or technical; might need to include information from other sources.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11</p> <p>Longer, formal texts for complex non-routine tasks in demanding contexts; to inform, recommend, critique/evaluate ideas/information, present/debate complex arguments, persuade a mostly unfamiliar audience; synthesise complex information from multiple sources; topics are non-personal, abstract or technical; might need to include information from other sources.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">12</p> <p>Long, complex original formal texts for very complex, technical/specialized tasks in demanding contexts; reporting/projecting/evaluating/promoting/arguing/appealing to an unfamiliar audience; appropriate to purpose and audience; control of writing elements including tone/style; synthesise/evaluate complex information from multiple sources; topics are non-personal, highly abstract/technical; should include graphic display of relevant data.</p>

From Short to Long

Both resources acknowledge that some writing tasks require only a few words while others require many more. Essential Skills organize writing skills by three text lengths: texts requiring less than one paragraph of new text, texts rarely requiring more than one paragraph, and longer texts. Language Benchmarks also address text length but do so within the performance descriptors. Benchmark 1 requires individuals to write text from a few words up to 5 to 7 sentences, within a guided text. Benchmark 12 requires that individuals be capable of preparing documents longer than 20 double-spaced pages of text.

Where Competency and Purpose Align

When determining how Language Benchmark proficiency and Essential Skills purpose connect, it becomes clear that because of the different intents, describing proficiency vs. describing purpose, there will be many areas of alignment and overlap. The table below shows where these overlaps generally occur.

CLB BROAD COMPETENCY AREAS	CLB WRITING COMPETENCY AREAS	HRDC ESSENTIAL SKILLS
social interaction: interacting in an interpersonal social situation, in speech or writing	social interaction	To inform/to request information To persuade/to justify a request To present an analysis or comparison To present an evaluation or critique To entertain
following and giving instructions: in speech or writing	recording information	To organize/to remember To keep a record/to document
suasion: persuading others, or reacting to suasion to do something, in speech or writing	business/ service messages	To persuade/to justify a request To inform/to request information To present an analysis or comparison To present an evaluation or critique
information: exchanging, presenting and discussing information, ideas, opinions, feelings; telling stories, describing, reporting, arguing, etc., in speech or writing	presenting information	To organize/to remember To keep a record/to document To inform/to request information To present an analysis or comparison To present an evaluation or critique To persuade/to justify a request To entertain

Social interaction

Writing for social interaction encompasses cards, notes, emails, and letters written to foster social or business relationships. They can include a sympathy card to a client, a letter of reference, a note to reschedule an appointment, or a letter to network with colleagues. These types of letters could reasonably be written for any of the Essential Skills purposes that require interaction with another individual or group. This could include to inform/to request information, to persuade/to justify a request, to present an analysis or comparison, to present an evaluation or critique and to entertain.

Recording information

Writing to record information encompasses preparing text in order to keep a record of information or events. This can include copying information from an appointment note into a personal diary, taking notes on a presentation or writing a summary of multiple research studies. The most obvious purposes to which this would connect would be writing to organize/to remember and writing to keep a record/to document.

Business/service messages

Writing business/service messages includes all writing whose intent is suasion, that is to persuade or react to suasion. Business writing examples range from filling out a job application form or writing a note to a colleague to preparing marketing letters and formal business reports. This competency finds parallels with four essential skills: writing to persuade/to justify a request, writing to inform/to request information, writing to present an analysis or comparison, and writing to present an evaluation or critique.

Presenting information

Writing to present information addresses all documents whose intent is to describe, analyze, exchange, present, or discuss information. It can include reports, opinions, arguments, story telling, and a range of other contents. Because of the very broad nature by which one can interpret writing to present information, this competency provides many opportunities to match with essential skill purpose. Therefore, this would include all seven purposes: writing to organize/to remember, writing to keep a record/to document, writing to inform/to request information, writing to present an analysis or comparison, writing to present an evaluation or critique, writing to persuade/to justify a request, and writing to entertain.

Workplace Examples

Both tools provide opportunities for discussion of writing as it is used in the workplace. Because of its purpose as an employment-skills resource, Essential Skills provides more workplace examples than Benchmarks does. However, individuals using both tools will explore many similar examples of what writing looks like in a variety of workplace settings. As discussed earlier, the examples range from the simple to the complex:

- memos
- phone messages
- application and report forms
- invitations and cards
- notes to self and others
- informal and formal letters
- log book entries
- sales and marketing material
- manuals or training materials
- informal and formal reports.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper compares how two Canadian Internet-based resources: Canadian Language Benchmarks and Human Resources Development Canada's (HRDC's) Essential Skills project address writing skills.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks resource assists practitioners and learners of English as a Second Language in determining writing proficiency and in developing and evaluating curriculum. It focuses on what the individual – the learner can do. The Essential Skills resource focuses on describing skills in everyday use. Teachers, trainers, career counsellors, and individuals entering the work force might use the HRDC resource to identify the frequency and complexity of writing tasks for specific occupations.

Although these two resources differ in this way, there are many areas where they are similar in nature. Both describe writing skills as moving from simple to highly complex tasks with similar descriptions at each step along the continuum. Both describe writing skills as covering a range of text lengths, from brief notes to long reports. Within its description of writing competencies, the Canadian Language Benchmarks resource addresses purposes similar to those identified in an HRDC Essential Skills profile. Both resources provide users with opportunities to explore real world examples of writing in the workplace.

There are some clear areas where these two resources complement each other as tools for educators and for learners. Because of the focus on the individual and proficiency, Language Benchmarks can provide a career educator or learner with a well-organized set of standards to determine proficiency in writing skills. When focusing on workplace global descriptors and performance conditions, those individuals for whom English is their first language will find the proficiency descriptors to be of value.

Even clearer are the areas where the HRDC Essential Skills resource complements Canadian Language Benchmarks. To supplement CLB's purpose as a descriptive scale of writing proficiency, Essential Skills could prove to be a valuable instructional tool. While the Language Benchmarks resource suggests tasks to use in determining proficiency, the examples are general descriptions of business documents in *hypothetical* situations. Essential Skills provides *actual* workplace examples from specific occupations. TESL practitioners could search the Essential Skills database for specific examples of Benchmarks tasks. They could then focus on occupations that may be of particular interest to their students. The Essential Skills database might also provide additional inspiration for practitioners preparing lesson plans and instructional activities. With this injection of current, workplace writing activities, the result might be a richer, more relevant learning environment for ESL students.

NOTE

This paper was reviewed by a contractor on behalf of the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. While noting the apparent complementarity of the two resources, CCLB suggested that consideration be given to applying the writing Language Benchmark descriptors to Essential Skills actual workplace writing samples to more accurately determine alignment between the two scales. Further, it is recommended this proposed alignment not be used in any way as an "official" equivalency rubric until more field data becomes available for both HRDC Essential Skills and Canadian Language Benchmarks, to validate this initial comparison.

SOURCES

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September 2000.

<<http://www.language.ca/bench/adults.html>>

Essential Skills Page. Human Resources Development Canada. 7 June 2001.

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