

**Formal, non-formal and informal learning:  
The case of literacy, essential skills  
and language learning in Canada**

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**2010**



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I express my gratitude to Heather Ainsworth, who edited this report. Her probing questions prompted me to further refine it as it was being written.

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## List of Acronyms

AAET	Alberta Advanced Education and Technology
CASLT / ACPLS	Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers / L'Association Canadienne des Professeurs de Langue Secondes
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CMEC	Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
HRSDC	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
LES	Literacy and Essential Skills
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development / Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
VTALP	Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Program

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## Executive Summary

This research report investigates the links between formal, non-formal and informal learning and the differences between them. In particular, the report aims to link these notions of learning to literacy and essential skills, as well as the learning of second and other languages in Canada.

Philosophical underpinnings of this research are:

- There is value in learning of all kinds.
- Learning is a lifelong endeavour.
- An interdisciplinary approach is valuable.

Notions of formal, non-formal and informal learning may be briefly outlined as:

Formal learning	This type of learning is intentional, organized and structured. Formal learning opportunities are usually arranged by institutions. Often this type of learning is guided by a curriculum or other type of formal program.
Non-formal learning	This type of learning may or may not be intentional or arranged by an institution, but is usually organized in some way, even if it is loosely organized. There are no formal credits granted in non-formal learning situations.
Informal learning	This type of learning is never organized. Rather than being guided by a rigid curriculum, it is often thought of experiential and spontaneous.

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development / Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques (OECD), n.d.; Werquin, 2007)

Examples are given for literacy and essential skills, as well as second and other languages for each of the categories mentioned above.

Finally, the examples of systems developed value different types of learning using asset-based approaches are given. The tools developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada are explored for the case of literacy. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages developed by the Council of Europe is considered for second and other languages.

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## Introduction

This research report investigates the links between formal, non-formal and informal learning and the differences between them. In particular, the report aims to link these notions of learning to literacy and essential skills, as well as the learning of second and other languages in Canada. It offers practical, concrete examples of each one in the context of literacy and language learning. In addition, it examines new trends in valuing learning for literacy and languages through the development of tools and systems that include elements of learner self-assessment and real-world application of skills. It offers some correlations between two major systems of valuing language and literacy skills that have gained momentum in the first decade of the 21st Century - the tools developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) for literacy and essential skills, and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages and the corresponding language portfolio for second and other languages, that also has implications and demonstrated use in Canada.

This report draws from research in the fields of literacy and second languages, as well as a number of government documents. It seeks to offer a correlation between the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning and in the context of literacy and language learning in Canada. It is however, not an exhaustive study, but rather one that highlights certain examples for the purposes of understanding literacy and language learning within this framework. Errors and omissions are entirely the fault of the author, who welcomes feedback on the work.

## Conceptual framework around examining both literacy and second and other languages

There are a number of assumptions that have influenced and values that have guided it:

**There is value in learning of all kinds** - Whether learning takes place in a formal setting such as a school, a non-formal setting such as a community or cultural centre or the informal setting of the home, all learning is good and all learning is valuable. All learning contributes to an individual's growth, not only cognitively, but emotionally, socially and in other ways, too.

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**Learning is a lifelong endeavour** - Learning does not stop when a person leaves school. Some people in the world never have the opportunity to attend school, but this does not mean that they do not learn. Learning can take place any time, any where, throughout the life span.

**An interdisciplinary approach is valuable** - Traditional learning institutions divide learning into subjects. This helps us organize how we obtain new knowledge. But it can also create silos. Professionals who work in one discipline often do not connect with others who work in different areas, even when those two areas are closely connected. Literacy and second and other languages are all about gaining new skills and competencies in a language to empower the individual. Those who work in second languages sometimes see their work as picking up from where literacy leaves off. In fact, professionals who work in both disciplines can learn from one another. This paper is an attempt to create cross-disciplinary conversations about how we understand and value competencies around literacy and language.

## How we understand learning

There are various ways to categorize *how* we learn. There are categories for understanding individuals who learn in concrete ways, preferring examples over ideas; and those who learn in abstract ways, relating more to theory and ideas, rather than examples (Kolb, 1984). Another popular way to describe learning preferences is based on the VARK model designed by Fleming. The VARK model presents learning styles as visual (V), aural (also known as auditory) (A), reading and writing (also known as verbal) (R), and kinesthetic (K) (Leite, Svinicki, & Shi, 2009).

Categorizing learning helps educators and students understand how they learn as individuals. From there, we can begin to understand how others learn. By understanding individual learning preferences we can build tolerance of the various ways in which human beings acquire and retain knowledge. This can help us respect that there are various ways of learning and that each of these ways is important and valid.

Learning preferences describe how individuals learn. This paper examines learning from a different perspective, looking at the contexts in which learning takes place, and the levels of formality for learning situations.

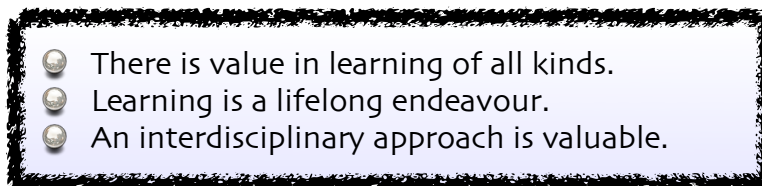


In the mid- to late 1990s, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began to actively promote and recognize learning as a lifelong endeavour, taking a “cradle to grave” approach to learning. The OECD, along with other educational experts, broadly understand the contexts in which learning occurs throughout one’s life in these terms:

Formal learning	This type of learning is intentional, organized and structured. Formal learning opportunities are usually arranged by institutions. These include credit courses and programs through community colleges and universities. Generally, there are learning objectives and expected outcomes. Often this type of learning is guided by a curriculum or other type of formal program.
Non-formal learning	This type of learning may or may not be intentional or arranged by an institution, but is usually organized in some way, even if it is loosely organized. There are no formal credits granted in non-formal learning situations.
Informal learning	This type of learning is never organized. Rather than being guided by a rigid curriculum, it is often thought of as experiential learning. Critics of this type of learning argue that from the learner’s viewpoint, this type of learning lacks intention and objectives. Of the three types of learning, it may be the most spontaneous.

Adapted from: (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development / Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques (OECD), n.d.; Werquin, 2007)

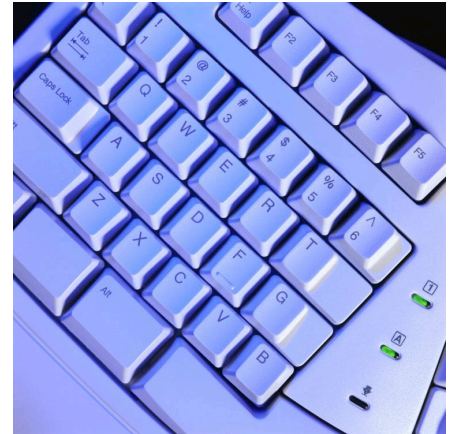
We can use these broad categories of learning contexts to understand literacy and language learning in Canada. As literacy is the foundation for more advanced language acquisition, that context will be examined first. Then, the case of language learning will be explored.



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## Literacy and essential skills development and learning contexts in Canada

There are many different ways to define literacy around the world. Even in Canada the concept of literacy is understood in a variety of ways (Eaton, 2009; Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2009). One practical and useful way to understand literacy which is quickly becoming a standard among literacy practitioners and others in Canada is the one offered by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. This branch of the federal government has developed an inclusive and comprehensive system of understanding literacy in broad terms, which are now generally referred to as "Literacy and Essential Skills" or "LES". These skills include:



- Reading text
- Document use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral communication
- Working with others
- Continuous learning
- Thinking skills
- Computer use

The examples that follow highlight how the acquisition of literacy and essential skills can be understood within the framework of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts.

## Formal learning for literacy

<b>Example - Children's literacy</b>	<b>Learning Context Characteristics</b>
<p>An example of the acquisition of literacy skills in this context would include children learning in school. The learning is organized and governed by the educational system's curriculum, which has learning outcomes and goals for all learners. Children are assessed on their learning at regular intervals and they receive grades for their progress, which are then recorded and eventually reported in the form of report cards.</p> <p>It is generally expected that children who attend school will gain literacy skills as they progress through elementary grades of education in Canada.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning takes place in an organized manner, often following a curriculum or program.</li> <li>• Learning organizations are usually recognized by the government as being accredited, such as schools and academies.</li> <li>• Learning is often led by experts and trained professionals (e.g. teachers).</li> <li>• Learning is recorded and grades or credit are granted.</li> <li>• This type of learning is traditionally held in high regard, valued and considered credible.</li> </ul>



## Non-formal learning for literacy

<b>Example #1 - Children's literacy</b>	<b>Learning Context Characteristics</b>
<p>One example of how children would supplement their acquisition of literacy and essential skills outside of a formal school setting would be in an additional learning environment where learning may be somewhat structured, but no grades are given. Working with a math tutor to gain numeracy skills would be an example of non-formal learning. The tutor may use activities to support the learning and may have a general idea of what he or she will teach the child, depending on the student's needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning may be formally or loosely organized.</li> <li>• Learning organizations include               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• voluntary and non-profit organizations such as provincial literacy coalitions or associations and local programs (e.g. VTALPS in Alberta).</li> <li>• private learning academies that are not authorized by government bodies to offer academic credit. (e.g. private tutoring businesses.)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning is more easily adapted to the individual learner's needs.</li> <li>• Learning is likely led by someone with more experience, perhaps a more advanced student, a volunteer, or an adult educator. This person may or may not have formal training as an educator.</li> <li>• This type of learning is sometimes considered less credible than formal learning.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Example #2 - Family literacy</b></p>	
<p>Family literacy programs exist across Canada. The Centre for Family Literacy is one organization that offers one-on-one and small group tutoring programs for families to gain literacy skills.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Example #3 - Adult literacy</b></p>	
<p>Volunteer Adult Literacy Tutoring Programs (VTALP) in Alberta, are a good example of the power of non-formal learning to help adults improve their literacy and essential skills. According to Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, there are over 70 VTALP Programs across the province.</p> <p>In these programs adults from communities around the province, particularly in small towns in rural and remote Alberta, volunteer their time to help other adults learn literacy and essential skills. There is a loosely organized structure to the programs, but no formal program.</p>	

### Informal learning for literacy

Examples - Children's literacy	Learning Context Characteristics
<p>An example of an informal learning context for literacy would be when a parent teaches or practices the alphabet to a child. This may be done spontaneously, while driving in the car or playing at home.</p> <p>This type of learning is critical to a child's cognitive development, but could not be classified as formal learning.</p> <p>Much of the informal learning for traditional literacy skills is done through games and songs and rhymes to help children learn the sequence of letters or numbers.</p> <p>In the more modern definition of literacy, which includes essential skills, an example would be a parent or older sibling teaching a younger child how to use a computer or a mouse. These are important skills that children will need to know to have basic literacy skills in technology.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning does not take place in a formal setting. Learning can happen any time, and in any place.</li> <li>• Those leading the learning are more likely to be close to the learner (e.g. grand parent, parent, sibling, caregiver or friend.)</li> <li>• This type of learning is often overlooked as valid learning. It is the most difficult to quantify or track, but is essential to a young person's cognitive development.</li> </ul>

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## Language acquisition and learning contexts in Canada

Linguists and other language professionals know that there is a difference between the acquisition of one's first language and the acquisition of second or subsequent languages. A comprehensive literature review on second language learning was conducted by Archibald et al. (2006). In their report they demonstrate the many benefits of learning other languages.



This research document is less concerned in the cognitive processes of language acquisition than it is in the context in which the learning takes place and the levels of formality of the learning situation. The term "second language learning", though common, is often misrepresentative. In the case of a student who speaks Punjabi at home and English in school, where she also studies French then it is misrepresentative to say that French is her second language. It is her third.

Due to the multicultural and linguistic diversity of Canada, some people have learned second third, fourth or even more languages. Though broad and somewhat nondescript, we can use the phrase "second or other languages" to talk about these situations.

Most of the examples in this report pertain to second or other language learning, though there may be some overlap or application for the acquisition of a first language, too.

The examples that follow highlight how the acquisition of second or other languages can be understood within the framework of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts.

### Formal learning of languages

<b>Example - children or adult second or other language acquisition</b>	<b>Learning Context Characteristics</b>
<p>An example of the acquisition of second or other skills in this context would include children learning in school. The learning is organized and governed by the educational system's curriculum, which has learning outcomes and goals for all learners.</p> <p>Students are assessed on their learning at regular intervals. Assessments and tests (written, oral and aural) are often used to determine a student's progress, particularly at the end of a course. Progress is recorded and a grade is given to indicate the student's performance.</p> <p>Traditionally this type of second or other language learning has emphasized the written forms of the language, focussing on grammar and structure. Although more communicative teaching and learning methods are used today, there is still a heavy focus on written forms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning takes place in an organized manner, often following a curriculum or program.</li> <li>• Learning organizations are usually recognized by the government as being accredited, such as schools and universities.</li> <li>• Learning is often led by experts and trained professionals (e.g. teachers).</li> <li>• Learning is recorded and grades or credit are granted.</li> <li>• This type of learning is traditionally held in high regard, valued and considered credible.</li> </ul>

## Non-formal learning of languages

<b>Example #1 - Children's learning of a heritage language</b>	<b>Learning Context Characteristics</b>
<p>An example of a child engaging in non-formal language would be taking a heritage language course. For example, a child with Chinese heritage who studies Mandarin for a few hours a week would fit into this category. Sometimes these courses are held on Saturday mornings in community centres, church basements or a space rented by or belonging to a cultural group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning may be formally or loosely organized.</li> <li>• Learning organizations include               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• voluntary and non-profit organizations, cultural organizations and heritage language associations such as the Southern Alberta Heritage Language Association.</li> <li>• private learning academies that are not authorized by government bodies to offer academic credit (e.g. private language schools).</li> <li>• Continuing education and community learning organizations offering non-credit courses.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Learning is likely led by someone with more experience, a volunteer, or an adult educator. This person may or may not have formal training as an educator.</li> <li>• This type of learning is often considered less credible than formal learning.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Example #2 - University student taking a summer immersion course in another language</b></p>	
<p>A university student who travels during the summer to another region where the language they want to learn is spoken in order to take classes and have an immersion experience is an example of non-formal language learning. Another example is an Anglophone Canadian student who goes to Mexico for a month in the summer to take an immersion course in Spanish would be one example. Another example would be a Francophone students who takes part in the Explore program, which offers bursaries to French-speaking students to travel to English speaking regions of Canada to learn English. The program is funded by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).</p>	
<p><b>Example #3 - Adults taking an evening course to learn another language.</b></p>	
<p>An example in the adult context would be those adults who take a non-credit evening course in a second language such as Spanish, French or Russian.</p>	



## Informal learning of languages

<b>Example #1 - Children learning a second language informally</b>	<b>Learning Context Characteristics</b>
<p>Children learn their first language in the informal setting of the home, most often from their mothers. Hence the phrase “mother tongue”. Children also acquire language from being exposed to it in a variety of other ways: television, radio, conversations, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning does not take place in a formal setting. Learning can happen any time, any place.</li> <li>• Learning is likely to be spontaneous.</li> </ul>
<b>Example #2 - Youth learning languages while on a backpacking holiday</b>	
<p>A young person who goes on a backpacking holiday and stays in hostels is likely to meet speakers of other languages. As the backpacker makes friends and engages in social situations with native speakers of other languages, it is likely that an informal opportunity to learn some of the language may emerge. An example is that learner may learn to count, say “Cheers!” or learn colloquial phrases.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those leading the learning are likely to be advanced or natives speakers of the language, engaging in every day conversation.</li> <li>• What is learned in these contexts is likely               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• authentic language, not the official versions presented in formal textbooks.</li> <li>• conversational language, rather than written.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Example #3 - Adults learning through experiential learning while on vacation</b>	
<p>An adult who was in holidays in Germany and decided to take a walking tour of the local city conducted in German, for the purposes of learning some of the language is engaging in informal language learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This type of learning is often overlooked and not regarded as particularly valid learning. It is the most difficult to quantify or track, but is essential to a language learner’s development because it is a more authentic language experience.</li> </ul>

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## **Changing attitudes towards the validity of less formal types of learning**

For many years only formal learning has been viewed as valid. It used to be that only learning that took place in accredited institutions and verified by grades and transcripts was considered credible. Non-formal and informal education was discounted or assumed to be merely an addition to a “proper” education. Informal learning, particularly with regards to second and other languages, has even met with skepticism from highly educated scholars who question the value of a learning experience that does not involve grammar and textbooks, but may instead “corrupt” the language learner’s repertoire with slang or indecent phrases. The fact that an informal learning experience might give the learner an opportunity to experience authentic language in a real context that may enrich his or her learning experience in a way that cannot be achieved by using a textbook, has traditionally not been given much regard.

The situation is changing in the 21st century. More and more non-formal and informal types of learning are being acknowledged and valued. For example, a report released by Alberta Education (2007, December 20) emphasizes the value of lifelong learning, community-based learning. It states that learning of all types helps to create “vibrant communities”. Reports such as these give long-overdue credit to non-formal and informal learning experiences that occur throughout a person’s life.

Two years later, AAET released another report lauding praises for those volunteers who work in non-formal literacy learning situations through the Volunteer Adult Literacy Tutoring Programs:

“In 2008, 2,000 adults were matched with a volunteer tutor who assisted them with basic reading, writing and/or math. On average, these learners received 39 hours of tutoring. Almost half of these adults were between the ages of 18 and 35, with the majority seeking to improve their literacy skills for personal reasons.” (2009, p. 12)

From this we can extrapolate that 78,000 volunteer hours were given on a one-to-one basis in Alberta in 2008. This is a significant contribution to the non-formal learning for literacy in one Canadian province. The fact that this was recognized by the Alberta provincial government is a strong show of support for increased recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

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### **HRSDC values LES competencies in an innovative way**

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) has developed a set of free tools on Literacy and Essential Skills (LES). As mentioned earlier, literacy is no longer viewed in Canada as simply being able to read and write. It is now understood more broadly. It includes language skills, numeracy skills, soft skills and technology skills. The HRSDC takes the approach that there are different levels of complexity for each skills. Each level demonstrates a certain level of competence.

The HRSDC has developed different sets of tools to help each of these groups:

- learners
- practitioners
- employers

For example, learners or individuals can access self-assessment tools that will help them understand their competence levels in oral communication, writing and other skill areas. Practitioners can access tools that will help them conduct assessments for literacy and support literacy learning. Employers can access a “Workplace Survey” or a “Workplace Check-Up”, which will help them examine the literacy and essential skills of their entire organization.

Through the creation of these tools, the Canadian government has created a systematic way for Canadians to understand and value literacy and essential skills. These tools are not formal tests administered by schools and universities, but rather a set of accessible tools designed for all Canadians. The way in which the literacy skills have been acquired - through formal schooling, non-formal education or informal learning - is almost inconsequential. What matters is the person’s competence.

These tools use an asset-based approach to examine what skills a person already has (Cramer & Wasiak, 2006; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This is very different from traditional methods of assessment that focus on what deficiencies a person has in their learning. This approach helps to take the stigma out of literacy and encourages lifelong learning.

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## The CEFR revolutionizes how language competencies are valued

Trends towards valuing less formal types of learning are also occurring at an international level. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) offers another example of how language learning in all forms is being valued in innovative and inclusive ways.



Taking an action oriented approach, this frame of reference offers a way to understand and value the learner's abilities in a given language based on all types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal. The philosophy underpinning the framework is that language abilities are not simply about knowing grammar or the mechanics of the language. Nor are language abilities simply about conversation. Rather, it takes into account the "cognitive, emotional and volitional resources, and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9). The framework looks at an individual's competency in a given language. The framework defines language competency as "the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions".

Traditional tests used in formal learning settings are based on a deficiency model. Students are penalized and lose marks for what they don't know. The idea is that tests reveal gaps in a learner's knowledge which must be filled before a student receives a passing mark, which will permit him or her to progress to the next level or grade.

The CEFR examines and values what an individual does know, based on their competencies. Its philosophical underpinning is that all individuals have the capacity to learn, there are many different ways to learn, that learning can continue throughout the life span.

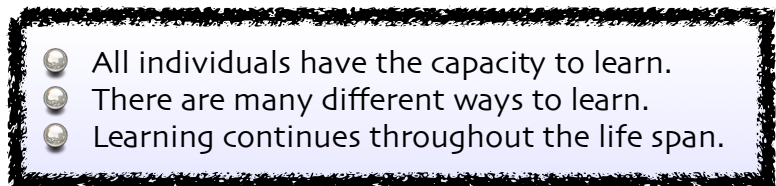
The framework is comprised of six different levels, which operate on a benchmark type of model. There are three different levels, A, B and C. These roughly correlate to beginner, intermediate and advanced language users. But since the terms "beginner", "intermediate" and "advanced" are understood in different ways by different learners, educators, schools and individuals, the framework offers a common way to understand the levels by correlating them to competencies. The following page presents an overview.

## Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - quick overview

Level A	Basic User	A1 - Breakthrough
		A2 - Waystage
Level B	Independent User	B1 - Threshold
		B2 - Vantage
Level C	Proficient User	C1 - Effective Operational Proficiency
		C2 - Mastery

The framework offers “can do” descriptors for each of the six benchmark levels (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24) as well as a self-assessment grid (p. 26) that learners themselves can use to help them determine where they fit in. The self-assessment grid encompasses a variety of skills associated with language competency including:

- listening
- reading
- spoken interaction
- spoken production
- writing



Learners may have different levels of competencies for each skill level. Here are some examples:

- A learner who has taken several years of French in school and university (formal education) may have C-level proficiency in reading, due to the emphasis on written language in formal education settings and B-level competency in spoken production.
- A learner who speaks Spanish at home (informal education) , may have C-level competencies in spoken interaction and production, but because he or she received little formal Spanish training, he or she may have A-level competency in writing.

- 
- A learner who takes an evening class for beginners in Japanese (non-formal education) may have A-levels in all skill areas, as he or she is just starting to build skills in the language.

The brilliance of this framework is that it values the skills that an individual has, regardless of whether the competencies were acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal learning context. It is an asset-based model, as opposed to the traditional deficiency-based models that have been used in traditional formal education for so long. What is even more impressive is that this framework has been developed by the Council of Europe and is now being used across the entire European Union as a way for individuals to gauge, understand and celebrate their language competencies in an environment where multi-lingualism is almost an expected norm. An individual can show his or her competence in one or two languages, or five or ten or more, using this system. And it's a system that is growing in use rapidly across Europe, so more people understand what it means and how it can be used.

The CEFR is used in schools at all levels now. Students learn to create portfolios of their language learning to demonstrate their competence. They carry their portfolios with them throughout their schooling, updating them as their competencies grow. The idea is that by the end of their formal schooling years they will have a portfolio to demonstrate to others what languages they know and their skill level in each one.

Employers are also learning about the framework so that when they are looking for new employees with certain competencies in a language, they can post jobs advertisements with requirements such as "B2 French in reading and writing, C1 or 2 German in all skill levels". That way, prospective employees know that the job requires high levels of proficiency in German and a high intermediate level of competence in written French.

The framework is being integrated across all levels of formal education in Europe and beyond, into the "real world" where non-formal language skills acquired in continuing education classes, summer immersion experiences and weekend heritage language classes, as well as the informal language education learned at home of speaking a mother tongue are all recognized as valuable. In this way, the contribution that an individual can make to a work environment or his or her community through a variety of language competencies.

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## **The CEFR in Canada**

The CEFR was designed in Europe for use in Europe. But its philosophy of using an asset-based approach to valuing language competence has garnered international attention. Discussions have been happening in Canada around how this tool, or one like it, could be used in the Canadian context.

In 2005, a national workshop took place in Edmonton on the subject of the language portfolios based on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. In a follow-up report on the workshop Rehorick and Lafargue (2005) noted there were ongoing discussions on several fronts for national Canadian proficiency guidelines for language learning.

The next year discussions moved to a national level, when the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT), held a workshop entitled "Defining, Tracking and Recognizing Second Language Proficiency: The Common European Framework and Language Portfolio and their Potential Application in Canada" which was supported by the Department of Canadian Heritage.

The discussions continued in 2007 when approximately 100 researchers, scholars, government officials and language teaching professionals and practitioners gathered at the University of Calgary to discuss the CEFR, what it was and what its implications were for Canada. (See Appendix 3). It was noted at that workshop that the notion of having a common framework or way to understand language competence was one of emerging importance.

CASLT reports that a working group from the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) was established in the spring of 2007 to explore the feasibility of a pan-Canadian framework for languages for Canada.

The movement towards the adoption of the CEFR in Canada seems to have been strongest in Western Canada, with major workshops and discussions about the need for a common way to understand language proficiency taking place at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Following two major workshops were held in Alberta on the topic, both the Edmonton Public School District and the Edmonton Catholic Schools board have begun to incorporate the use of language portfolios based on the CEFR into their language programs.

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## Discussion and implications

At the time this report was released, there has been no decision to adopt a Common Framework of Reference for Languages at a national level in Canada.

In their follow-up report to the 2005 workshop, Rehorick and Lafargue pointed out that the Council of Europe has similarities to Canada in many ways. Like the Canadian provinces, each of the 47 member states has its own ministry or ministries of education, but share similar and common goals for comparability. It is not inconceivable to think that Canada could adopt a system of understanding and valuing language competence, much like the one used by the Council of Europe.

It has been argued that Canada is too disparate when it comes to education, that there has traditionally been little cooperation and organization at a national level to undertake the establishment of pan-Canadian norms.

But Human Resources Development Skills Canada has shown us that it can be done. The system developed by HRDSC to understand literacy and essential skills is not entirely unlike the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Both systems propose a way of understanding and valuing skills and competence that transcend borders, whether they are national or provincial borders.

Upon closer inspection, we can see that both the HRDSC system of viewing literacy and essential skills and the Common European Framework of Reference for languages have several elements in common. Both systems:

- are competency or skills-based
- value formal, non-formal and informal education
- encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning
- incorporate an element of self-assessment
- subscribe to the notion of lifelong learning
- have applications in the occupational and professional areas, as well as within educational systems
- are meant as a common way to understand skills across geographical borders.



### **Trend towards valuing formal, non-formal and informal learning**

Systems such as the one developed by HRDSC and the Council of Europe point towards an exciting trend in valuing learning whether it happens in a formal, non-formal or informal context. Traditionally, formal education has been the most highly regarded. While that may continue to be the case for some years to come, there is a movement towards recognizing and valuing learning that happens in less formal contexts.

It used to be that university students who took summer immersion courses in a language in a foreign language would receive no recognition for those courses at their home institution if there was no formal agreement between the two schools. Students would arrive back on home turf with dramatically increased language competence, and no way to have it recognized. Systems such as a language portfolio offer learners a way to demonstrate their skills and competence in a new way, one that inspires lifelong learning, regardless of where and how that learning takes place.

The turn of the millennium marks a significant shift in how we recognize and value education. Now, learning of all kinds, whether it takes place within a formal school setting, a non-formal learning setting or a context that is completely informal is seen as valuable. This demonstrates significant progress in how we view, understand and appreciate learning.

### **Inklings of links between literacy and second and other language learning**

In their 2005 report, Rehorick and Lafargue also noted that the Council of Ministers of Education, the same body who offers bursaries to students for the Explore program, was also interested in literacy. This offers hope that professionals from both disciplines: literacy and essential skills, and second and other languages, will continue to have conversations and see the connections between their work.

The notion that language learning picks up where literacy leaves off is now as outdated as the idea that only formal education has much worth. If learning is a lifelong endeavour and all people have the capacity to learn, then it can be acknowledged that every individual has the capacity to increase his or her skills in any given subject area.

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## **Asset-based and self-assessment models offer modern ways to value learning**

Asset-based models of assessing learning are replacing traditional deficit models. While proficiency testing may remain an important part of assessing a learner's language competence, it is no longer the only way. More and more, informed self-assessment is becoming an essential piece of the puzzle for a learner to demonstrate his or her competence. The language portfolios of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages are records that learners construct and carry with them throughout life. The self-assessment tools for literacy and essential skills offered by HRDSC offer learners a way to understand and value their competencies themselves.



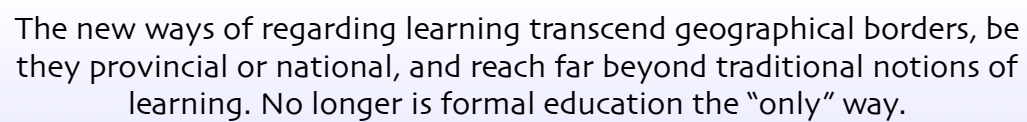
### **Learning inspires learning**

When learning of all types is recognized and valued, learners are inspired and to continue learning. Furthermore, when learners can see the real-world application of their skills they are more likely to understand why it is important to continue to build their skill and competence level. They see a use for learning beyond the formal classroom and understand that it is a lifelong endeavour.

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## Conclusions

The first decade of this new millennium has demonstrated that we are opening our minds to new ways of understanding learning. Traditional ways of only valuing formal learning that takes place in schools, universities and other institutions is quickly becoming outdated. Old paradigms around education are shifting. The new paradigms that are replacing them are more inclusive, more flexible and more applicable to the real world.



The new ways of regarding learning transcend geographical borders, be they provincial or national, and reach far beyond traditional notions of learning. No longer is formal education the “only” way.

We are living in an exciting time in terms of literacy, essential skills and second and other languages, particularly in Canada. There are widespread movements being led by governments, scholars and educators towards establishing systems that value learning based on competence and skill levels. Furthermore, these asset-based systems have been well-researched and tested. Moreover, they have real world applications. These systems are being applied on a large scale and empower learners to understand their own competence levels. At the same time, learners may find themselves motivated and encouraged to continue to build on the skills they already have.

The movement towards valuing formal, non-formal and informal learning is emerging in distinct and yet related realms - literacy and essential skills, as well as second and other language learning. This may pave the way for increased dialogue, collaboration and further valuing of the work done in each of these disciplines. The new ways of regarding learning transcend geographical borders, be they provincial or national, and reach far beyond traditional notions of learning. No longer is formal education the “only” way. Now we have systematic and inclusive methods to demonstrate and recognize all types of learning - formal, non-formal and informal in ways we we never have before.

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## Appendix 1 - Provincial and National Literacy Organizations in Canada

These organizations support non-formal learning of literacy and essential skills, as well as other activities related to literacy such as advocacy and research.

### National Organizations

Movement for Canadian Literacy

<http://www.literacy.ca>

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL)

<http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=146>

### Provincial Organizations

Literacy BC

<http://www.literacybc.ca/>

Literacy Alberta

<http://www.literacyalberta.ca/>

Saskatchewan Literacy Network

<http://www.sk.literacy.ca>

Literacy Partners of Manitoba

<http://www.mb.literacy.ca>

Ontario Literacy Coalition

<http://www.on.literacy.ca/>

Quebec English Literacy Alliance (QELA)

<http://www.qela.qc.ca/en/home>

Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick Ltd.

<http://www.nb.literacy.ca>

Literacy Nova Scotia

<http://www.ns.literacy.ca>

PEI Literacy Alliance

<http://www.pei.literacy.ca>

Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador

<http://www.literacynl.com/index.php>

Northwest Territories Literacy Council

[www.nwt.literacy.ca](http://www.nwt.literacy.ca)

Yukon Literacy Coalition

<http://www.yukonliteracy.ca/>

## Appendix 2 - Heritage and International Language Associations in Canada

These organizations support non-formal learning of heritage, second and other languages in Canada.

### National Organization

Canadian Languages Association  
<http://www.canadianlanguages.ca>

### Provincial Organizations

British Columbia	Society of the Advancement of International Languages (SAIL) See <a href="http://www.canadianlanguages.ca">http://www.canadianlanguages.ca</a>
	BC Heritage Language Association <a href="http://www.bchla.net/Default.aspx">http://www.bchla.net/Default.aspx</a>
Alberta	Southern Alberta Heritage Language Association (SAHLA) <a href="http://www.sahla.ca/">http://www.sahla.ca/</a>
	Heritage Language Association (IHLA) <a href="http://www.ihla.ca/">http://www.ihla.ca/</a>
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan Organization for Heritage Languages (SOHL) <a href="http://www.heritagelanguages.sk.ca/">http://www.heritagelanguages.sk.ca/</a>
Manitoba	Seven Oaks School Division See <a href="http://www.canadianlanguages.ca">http://www.canadianlanguages.ca</a>
Ontario	International Languages Educators' Association See <a href="http://www.canadianlanguages.ca">http://www.canadianlanguages.ca</a>
	Ottawa-Carleton District School Board See <a href="http://www.canadianlanguages.ca">http://www.canadianlanguages.ca</a>
	Ottawa Catholic School Board See <a href="http://www.canadianlanguages.ca">http://www.canadianlanguages.ca</a>
Québec	Québec Heritage Language Association
First Nations	First Peoples' Cultural Foundation (FPCF) <a href="http://www.fpcf.ca/">http://www.fpcf.ca/</a>

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## Appendix 3 - A Forum on the Framework of Reference for Languages: Implications for Alberta

Hosted by the Language Research Centre, University of Calgary - October 12, 2007.



### A Forum on the Framework of Reference for Languages: Implications for Alberta

Friday, October 12  
8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

*The Council of Europe states that, "The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility. It is increasingly used in the reform of national curricula and by international consortia for the comparison of language certificates."*

The primary purpose of this forum is to educate and build capacity of current and future language teachers in Alberta in terms of the Common Framework of Reference for Languages. This is an issue of emerging importance. Both academics and practitioners will want be aware of what these Terms of Reference are, and what the implications might be for Canada and Alberta.

Topics to be covered include:

- Introduction to the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (What it is; how it started and why it is important)
- The implications of this Framework for Canada, and more importantly, for Alberta. This would include examining the framework with respect to:
  - the K-12 system
  - the post-secondary system
  - the transition to the work world
- Discussion on how this Framework may change our views of language teaching, curriculum development and testing over the coming years and what implications this may have for professional practice and the academic preparation of students and future language teachers.

**Keynote speaker:** [Dr. L. Vandergrift, University of Ottawa](#)

**Additional speakers:**

Dr. Wally Lazaruk, Evaluation Plus Inc;  
Stuart Wachowicz, Edmonton Public School Board  
Carlos Soler, Instituto Cervantes

**Registration:**

Registration for this full-day event is strictly limited to the first 100 people on a first-come, first-served basis. Register on line at: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/lrc/Frameworks.htm>

**A Forum on the Framework of Reference for Languages:  
Implications for Alberta**

**Friday, October 12**

**8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. – Tentative Schedule – Subject to change**

8:30 – 8:45	Registration	
8:45 – 8:50	Introduction	Sarah Eaton, Co-organizer Christine Shea, Co-organizer
8:50 – 9:00	Welcome and Greetings from the President's Office	Dr. J. Tim Goddard Vice-Provost (International)
9:00 – 9:45	Introduction to Language Frameworks	Dr. Larry Vandergift University of Ottawa
9:45 – 11:00	Workshops – Part 1	Dr. Larry Vandergift, U of O Dr. Wally Lazaruk, Evaluation Plus Inc. (en français) Stuart Wachowicz, EPSB Carlos Soler, Instituto Cervantes
11:00–11:15	Coffee	
11:15 – 1:00	Workshops – Part 2	Dr. Larry Vandergift, U of O Dr. Wally Lazaruk, Evaluation Plus Inc. (en français) Stuart Wachowicz, EPSB Carlos Soler, Instituto Cervantes (en español)
1:00 – 2:15	Lunch break	
2:15 – 3:45	Keynote Address	Dr. Larry Vandergift University of Ottawa
3:45 – 4:45	Panel Discussion: Present relevance and future implications Moderator: Christine Shea	Dr. Larry Vandergift, U of O Wally Lazruk, Evaluation Plus Stuart Wachowicz, EPSB Carlos Soler, Instituto Cervantes
4:45 – 5:00	Wrap - up	Sarah Eaton, Co-organizer Christine Shea, Co-organizer

Notes: Workshops will be held in break out rooms.

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## About the author

Sarah Elaine Eaton holds a PhD in Educational Leadership and an M.A. in Spanish from the University of Calgary. Before moving to Calgary she attended Saint Mary's University in her native city of Halifax where she earned a B.A. (Hons) in English.

A Research Associate at the University of Calgary's Language Research Centre, Dr. Eaton has 12 years of experience teaching Spanish to adults and college age students and has taught at both the college and university level. She has also worked as in educational administration in various capacities including English and a Second Language, post-secondary language and educational research, and most recently, adult education and video conferencing.

In 1997, Eaton was selected by the then Alberta Centre for International Education (ACIE) to be part of a seven-member team from Alberta invited to take part in a provincial educational trade mission to Mexico, serving as the unofficial translator for the mission, including a presentation at the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City.

In 2000, during her employment at the University of Calgary, she was seconded to the Universidad Católica de Honduras where she collaborated with colleagues to help establish a language program for foreigners. She also gave the address to the graduating class of the university during her stay. Later in 2000, Eaton was a pivotal player in facilitating the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions.

In 2008, together with her colleague, Karen Dodge, she was invited back to Mexico by the Ministry of Education in Jalisco. Together, Dodge and Eaton presented a workshop to foreign language teachers called "Bilingual Education: Sharing ideas, understanding context: Experiences from Alberta."

An experienced public speaker and member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers (CAPS), Eaton has presented her work in seven different countries (Canada, the United States, Mexico, Honduras, Cuba, Spain and England). These presentations take the form of professional talks, scholarly research dissemination, webinars and interactive workshops.

Dr. Eaton's work has been published both in print and on line. Her book, *101 Ways to Promote Your Language Program: a practical guide for language schools* (available on Amazon.com) is now in its second edition. It has ranked among DeMille's Technical Books Top 10 Best sellers, reaching #1 on that Top 10 list on August 25, 2003.

Dr. Eaton has lived in the U.K. and studied in Spain and has travelled throughout North America, the Caribbean, Latin America and Europe. She now resides in Calgary, Canada.

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