



# **International adult skills surveys: Andragogical issues in linguistic minority communities**

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## Overview

I have been working in the literacy field with francophone adults in a minority setting and in a variety of capacities for twenty years, and consider myself a reflective and critical practitioner. I strive to understand the world of adult education and skills development based on my practical experiences and observations from the field. This text is written from that perspective, based on principles of andragogy. Using inductive and deductive processes, I propose ideas and reflections on the concept of the evaluation of basic skills of adults living in linguistic minority communities in Canada. On the theoretical side, I use several key studies, including an analytical background paper written for The Centre for Literacy's 2013 Summer Institute by Jean-Pierre Jeantheau, Chargé de mission national of the French Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme, on the subject of linguistic minority groups and international literacy assessments.

Three personal professional experiences have particularly influenced my point of view. I am currently engaged, albeit in a modest way, in the adaptation of an Anglophone assessment system called CAMERA (Communication Math Employment Readiness Assessment) in francophone contexts across Canada. I have also participated in creating the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) in 2010-2011, and I led, in 2007-2008, a project that experimented with and evaluated Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) and Prose, Document and Quantitative (PDQ) profile tests with francophone adults with lower literacy skills (levels 1 and 2) in vocational training. The conceptual frameworks of all these tools (OALCF, CAMERA, TOWES and PDQ) use, to various degrees, the same task-based methodology and levels of complexity as the Essential Skills framework developed by the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and as international literacy surveys - the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), and the current Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

In this report I propose that in order to grasp the limitations of such frameworks for official language minority communities, we must look closely at the complex multilingual contexts in which these communities live. I conclude by offering recommendations for conducting international assessments and interpreting results in a way that takes into account the specific context of these communities. I also outline some topics for future research in this area.

## **1. Large-scale adult skills surveys: Methodological challenges for linguistic minorities**

With this treasure trove of data, we need to understand the premises and design of the survey (IALS) in order to be able to correctly analyze and interpret its findings and use the findings to inform better policy, improve adult education and workplace skills, and identify more clearly how the measured skills relate to other competencies linked to social capital. (The Centre for Literacy, 2013)

Adult education services are, for the most part, organized around the needs of already existing training programs rather than around the needs of the people themselves. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), most educational establishments are oriented towards service delivery and this mode of delivery determines the demand. Few establishments have shifted to activities and processes that allow the individual and collective demand for training to take precedence (OECD, 2003, cited in Lurette, 2011, p. 14). It is not surprising that literacy programs organize adult training services around existing systems, when one considers the limited resources and funding mechanisms of these programs as well as the academic paradigm that dominates the field of adult education.

To a certain extent, the same logic prevails in large-scale assessment surveys. They are constructed around existing training programs rather than around the training needs of adults living in sometimes complex and multilingual contexts. International adult literacy and skills surveys use assessment activities developed from tasks that take for granted the use of a single language, hence favouring a monolingual and simplified assessment framework. However, I propose that it is very important to look closely at official language minority communities in order to fully grasp the limits of such assessment frameworks.

### ***1.1 From translation of assessment tools to adaptation***

In Canada, the test items for IALS were available in both official languages, English and French. The assessment tools and systems used in international surveys were originally developed in English and subsequently translated into French, to be used by francophones in Canada. I have no doubt that solid and intensive processes of validation, translation and adaption of these tools into various languages took place to ensure that these tools were acceptable to the target populations. Nevertheless, from my experience in the translation and adaptation of CAMERA, the creation of the OALCF and the validation project of TOWES and PDQ, I question the capacity of training and assessment tools, based on the methodology of international literacy



surveys and the Essential Skills framework, to take into account the linguistic and cultural particularities of minority francophone communities. I believe that a significant *cultural* adaptation is also necessary for these tools to be used effectively with adults with lower literacy skills in such complex cultural settings.

For a better understanding of how to successfully apply this kind of cultural adaptation, we can draw on Jeantheau's concept of the ecological evolution of languages. For Jeantheau, a language used to communicate is the product of a negotiated interaction; language is called upon to evolve, and the speed of its evolution depends on circumstances (2013, p. 13). This ecological evolution of languages clearly poses a methodological challenge to large-scale assessments or surveys that must rely on a standardized and static version of a language.

This phenomenon of adaptation is permanent and general, whatever the level of development or nature of the language. Individuals, and the groups to which they belong, perpetually evolve and so do the communication situations in which they find themselves. Individuals are thus constantly called upon to test linguistic innovations in a sort of "marketplace of language", to withdraw those that no longer work or have grown outdated and to retain those that are useful to their communication objectives and are essential in the quest of self-affirmation and identification of the social group. (Jeantheau, 2013, pp.14-15)

### ***1.2 Surveys using assessment activities based on "authentic" tasks***

The methodology of large-scale surveys such as IALS and IALSS (as well as that of the Essential Skills framework, which was modelled on them) advocates evaluating skills by using assessment activities based on "authentic" tasks. Seemingly authentic tasks are used to evaluate skills deployed in as realistic a context as possible. Task-based assessment systems use documents and situations drawn from adults' daily life to evaluate their capacity to mobilize the skills necessary to accomplish the task. For example, to evaluate the essential skill "document use" or "document literacy" in IALSS, respondents were asked to use a form, a work schedule or a restaurant menu to accomplish a task that requires efficient use of such documents.

If the same methodology and logic are applied to the assessment of the skills of francophone learners in official language minority communities, tasks should also be relatively authentic. Maddox suggests that these test items, in order to be as authentic as possible, must be expressed as cultural artefacts from which can emerge an assessment framework that codifies the knowledge of the cultural groups in question. (2013, presentation).

However, across Canada, in workplaces where minority francophones are employed, documents are most often available in English, sometimes translated in both languages, but rarely only in French. We can deduce from this reality that authentic tasks used to assess basic skills in linguistic minority settings should make reference to more than one language: the worker's language, the language or languages necessary for the proper functioning of the organization or the language commonly used for oral communication within the organization. We can then also suppose that the level of complexity of the task would be modified.

A basic premise of the international surveys, including PIAAC, is of a uniform linguistic experience amongst the survey respondents, regardless of the actual language that they use. But this is rarely the case for francophones in Canada living in a minority setting. Jeantheau points out that

it is not at all clear that respondents who declare being able to speak French use a standardized version of French. The word "language" probably does not imply the same linguistic reality when it comes to "language of assessment" and "language" spoken at home or "first language" (mother tongue) spoken by an individual. (2013, p.5)

It is therefore appropriate to question the limits of an assessment framework that is based on relatively authentic tasks and a monolingual system, as well as how well-suited such a framework is to effectively assess skills in a minority setting.

The choices made by those who design large-scale surveys are to some extent understandable. Linguistic minority communities are not homogeneous: the use of a second language varies from one community to another and from one workplace to another. It would be extremely complex to produce a wide range of authentic tasks representative of all such settings. To do so, the analysis charts and criteria used to assess complexity levels of tasks and their supporting skills would have to be completely reworked, as they do not currently take into account the "added complexity" of those situations when the task language (or languages) differs from the main language of the person executing the task. Nevertheless, the methodological limitations of these assessment frameworks in terms of cultural adaptation, lead us to several caveats when trying to interpret survey results of adults living in official language minority communities.



## **2. Challenges in interpreting results for linguistic minority communities**

Our analysis of the official mechanisms that define needs has revealed that, in a democratic system, where numbers often dictate decisions, special measures must be taken to prevent a neglect of the interests of smaller groups.... If we do not specifically address the particular needs of a group, they will be diluted in the mass of information on common needs that the group shares with the majority. (Churchill, Frenette, & Quazi, 1985, p. 51)

### ***2.1 Minority linguistic groups in Canada: Some findings***

The literacy surveys of 1994 and 2003 showed that between 55 and 60% of Franco-Ontarian respondents placed in levels 1 and 2 (these results were obtained by oversampling this population), compared to about 40% for anglophones in Ontario. At first glance, such results suggest that the basic literacy skills of Franco-Ontarians are weaker than those of other Ontarians—a gap that can be explained by historical reasons such as low educational attainment, family habits, educational culture, low employment levels, etc. (see Corbeil, 2006, for a detailed description). We can, however, also hypothesize that the disparity between these two groups can be partly explained by the fact that, in a minority setting, the assessment tasks do not necessarily correspond to authentic tasks the respondents perform in their daily lives.

Jeantheau makes an interesting parallel between the situation of Canadian francophone minorities and the linguistic realities in Luxembourg where the education system endeavours to create trilingual citizens (at a minimum), even though everyone has particular affinities and different skill levels in each of the three languages of the country. In Luxembourg,

[o]n the first day of the international assessments, 80% of students chose German, 20% chose French.... It seems that the choice of language for the tests did not stem from the fact that German is the predominant language taught until the third year of high school, but rather from linguistic proximity between a student's mother tongue (or, more exactly, the language spoken at home) and the language used in the tests.... Test organizers point out that German speakers' average results approach the average PISA score of OECD countries ( $m=495$ ) and that their score in their second language (French) is considered quite acceptable (451). By contrast, they find that the results of those who chose French are decidedly lower (40 points, according to PISA, at 459) and that their score does not noticeably differ from that of their German-speaking colleagues in their second language (German). (Jeantheau, 2013, pp. 5-6)

International literacy surveys have taught us that literacy and basic skills are like a muscle: the more they are flexed, the stronger they are. When we ask a person to complete an unfamiliar task, doing so calls upon seldom-used muscles, and the person performs at a lower level. This may be what happened to the students in Luxembourg and to Franco-Ontarian respondents of PIAAC who chose to do the survey in French. This finding strikes me as a good reason to be wary of hasty conclusions about the skills of francophones living in minority settings.

Furthermore, as Maddox (2013) notes, culture and context influence assessment. The ways in which different social groups understand and answer items in surveys are deeply grounded in their cultural differences, and this fact impacts the results of large-scale assessments. Maddox raises important questions about the performance of particular social groups in specific contexts, supporting earlier suggestions by Corbeil that "...reading and writing habits should not be treated as generic or disembodied concepts; rather, they should be seen in relation to the linguistic, cultural, economic and social contexts in which people live" (2006, p. 86).

## *2.2 Choice of test language by francophone respondents in minority settings*

In Switzerland, literacy assessments are translated into German, French and Italian, and each geographic area is assigned the assessments in one language only, regardless of the respondents' mother tongue or the language they commonly use (Jeantheau, 2013, p.4). The same strategy for administering tests in large-scale surveys is used in most multilingual European countries. In Canada, a different strategy has been applied: in all regions, the assessments were offered in the two official languages, English and French, and respondents could choose the language of the test. Though this seems to be a logical approach, given the Canadian context, it has had an impact on Canadian results.

During the 2003 IALSS, a sizeable proportion of Franco-Ontarian and Franco-Manitoban respondents (respectively 63% and 85%) chose to answer the survey in English. It would seem that English is their preferred language when it comes to tasks involving writing (more so than during the 1994 IALS), despite significant improvement in francophones' schooling in those two provinces. Based on these facts, we could all too easily conclude that these respondents are being assimilated, that English is becoming their first language and therefore skills development initiatives should be organized in a monolingual framework—that is, in English—for two-thirds of the francophone population. But such an interpretation appears to be much too simplistic to explain the choice made by such a large percentage of francophones in Ontario and Manitoba.

### **Choice of test language and language spoken at home**

For some, the fact that francophones in minority settings choose to answer the test in English may be seen as typical of those suffering a “minority complex,” where a person living in a minority finds him or herself in a constant and complex struggle between the need to affirm one’s cultural identity and the need for strategic integration into the dominant culture. However, Jeantheau wonders if a close reading of the Canadian results does not in fact show that the choice of language in which to take the survey is influenced by the language spoken at home at the time of the survey rather than the respondent’s mother tongue. He finds that a cross-analysis of data about the language spoken at home and the language chosen to write the tests in reveals that only 0.5% of respondents who habitually speak English at home answered the tests in French, whereas 6.2% of those who mostly speak French at home answered the test in English. Further analysis of this data reveals that the percentage of those who habitually speak French at home and who answered the test in English varies in relation to their demographic weight in their province: the fewer their numbers, the more they tended to choose to answer in English. (2013, p. 8).

Like Corbeil, Jeantheau finds that the proportion of francophones who declare speaking English at home is largest in those provinces where the percentage of people practicing French at home is lowest. In relation to this, Corbeil also notes that “the declining relative weight of francophones within the Canadian population, along with their low concentration in some regions, exerts a pressure that tends to limit the use of French in francophones’ daily life and at work” (2006, p. 25). Corbeil also states that a sizeable proportion of Franco-Ontarians who chose to answer the test in English were better educated and tended to live in urban areas. There seems to be a migration of educated Franco-Ontarian workers towards urban centres, which entails major professional and personal changes: expanded access to jobs with more complex tasks and requiring the use of English, growth of exogamous marriages, changes in linguistic habits, etc. As Jeantheau has noted:

In the context of IALSS, the oral communication tool is itself the object of negotiations between participants. However, as in all negotiations, the actors are not on an equal footing. Power struggles exist, be they real or imagined, tangible or intangible, physical, cultural, social, etc. It is conceivable that a “francophone”, married to an anglophone and living in “anglophone” territory, with children being schooled in English, uses English at home. (Jeantheau, 2013, p. 20)

I believe that a more complete explanation lies in the fact that these adults live in settings where at least two, and sometimes more, languages coexist: their maternal or first language (French)

and the language in common use in various settings (English). In this multilingual context, they have developed particular competences in tasks that they carry out regularly in an anglo-dominant setting (e.g., tasks related to work or to public affairs, such as skills surveys), and they will choose to perform these tasks in the language that is commonly used. This is sometimes referred to as *multiple literacies* developed in response to the evolving requirements of one's environment—what Jeantheau terms “the ecological evolution of language.”

Furthermore, Jeantheau notes an important difference between young people under 25 years old and adults in other age groups. He understands this difference to result from the fact that a higher proportion of young francophones are schooled in French; logically, these young people answer the test in the language they use at school whereas adults mostly work in English and feel more at ease doing written tasks in the language they use at work (Jeantheau, 2013, p. 12).

### **Choice of test language and the impact of the interview context**

Finally, we must not underestimate the influence of the interview context on the choice of test language for respondents in a minority setting. Corbeil writes:

[t]his.... can be interpreted in various ways. Since many francophones feel that they have a “bilingual” identity (Bernard, 1988, 1998), it may not matter to them whether they do the test or interview in French or English; this choice may depend on their sense of belonging to the language group of the interviewer, even if the latter gave the respondent the opportunity to use the language of his/her choice. (2006, p. 49)

### **3. The impact of large-scale surveys on official-language minority communities in Canada**

Over the last few years, Canadian policies that influence adult education and workforce training have been modelled on the methodologies and results of international literacy and basic skills surveys (see ALLS, IALSS as well as the HRSDC Essential Skills framework). The accountability and evaluation frameworks put into place by Canadian provinces are generally based on the same logic that underpins the federal government's Essential Skills framework—a trend accentuated by the federal-provincial labour market agreements. This presents challenges for the training field in general and for linguistic minority communities, in particular.

Francophones living in a minority situation may need to do work-related tasks, or tasks in other areas of public life, that require written or spoken English. Yet, ideally, they can develop their

skills in a francophone learning context that takes into account the complexity of a multilingual setting. This kind of learning environment is valuable for both the efficient use of resources and for the vitality of cultural communities; it does however present a significant andragogical challenge, which the team that is translating and adapting the CAMERA evaluation system is taking on.

### Case study #1: The cultural adaptation of CAMERA

The CAMERA system is made up of three components, all using a task-based approach: 1) a series of standardized assessments to determine a profile based on the levels of four essential skills, 2) curriculum guidelines (*Signposts*) to help instructors choose programming based on the assessment results, and 3) a series of workbooks (“Workwrite series”) with workplace-specific skill development activities.

Once the adaptation team realized that it would be too complex and expensive to adapt the assessment component to all linguistic minority contexts across Canada, it explored the possibility of adapting the CAMERA curriculum guidelines that accompany the assessments. *Signposts* could be more easily adapted to linguistic minority contexts because its methodological basis is simpler than that of the assessments.

The cultural adaptation of *Signposts* means that the curriculum guidelines can properly address the multiple literacies required for the development of various skills of adults living in a minority, plurilingual context. The evaluation tools of systems such as CAMERA will continue to be used in a unilingual context (French, in this case); the results, however, will be interpreted from a more nuanced cultural viewpoint. CAMERA users will have to be aware that a large number of learners, once they join the workplace, will rarely or perhaps never use the type of unilingual tasks found in the assessments. They will have to help these adults develop other skills that will allow them to do more complex multilingual tasks (e.g. integrate second language skills). Trainers will have new andragogical tasks: preparing learners to accomplish more complex requirements in order to better integrate into an anglo-dominant workplace. The proposed adaptation does not modify the nature of CAMERA’s assessments nor how they are used, but rather how the results are interpreted. I believe that the example of the cultural and linguistic adaptation of CAMERA addresses issues similar to those of the interpretation of PIAAC’s results for minority groups, albeit on a more micro level — that of teaching practices.

Case study #2: The creation of a provincial framework adapted to cultural minorities

The creation of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) is another example of the andragogical challenge of developing skills in a Franco-Ontarian minority setting. The francophone members of the team working on the provincial curriculum framework became acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in its cultural adaptation. They decided to work with the government of Ontario towards a multilingual andragogical understanding of Franco-Ontarians, rather than adopt the more traditional stance of the linguistic rights of francophones.<sup>1</sup> The government of Ontario, through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), also became aware of the numerous and complex ramifications of these questions for the development of adult education services in linguistic minority communities, as can be seen in this extract taken from a ministerial document:

Francophone learners must have the benefit of an adult education approach that recognizes their reality as a minority group.... The OALCF approach is based on a learning and skills development process that is completed in French, but which provides the opportunity, for some authentic tasks, to develop functional and contextual English (or bilingual) skill components to make authentic task performance easier and to support learners' long-term goal completion.

...

In an Anglophone society, francophones may have to learn functional English - language elements in order to integrate into the new environment (employment, apprenticeship, etc.). Although many francophones have some proficiency in English, this does not mean that they meet the linguistic and cultural requirements to perform the necessary tasks in an Anglophone integration setting. (MTCU, 2011, p. 4)

...

While preparing Francophone learners in French to perform authentic tasks, the practitioner may include activities that will help them understand how the tasks would be different when performed in an Anglophone setting, as well as help them actually perform the tasks in an Anglophone setting. (MTCU, 2011, pp. 4-5)

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<sup>1</sup> The stance of linguistic rights of francophones, traditionally adopted by francophone activists and those working with francophones, is based on a logic of strict linguistic parallelism. Though interesting from the angle of the right to access services in French, it often leads to cut-and-paste services that more often resemble literal translation instead of a careful cultural adaptation that answers the needs of people living in a minority setting.

This ministerial document acknowledges the complexity involved in minorities using a task-based approach. On one hand, it provides Ontario practitioners who wish to do so, with an opportunity to explore adult education practices aimed at developing specific second-language competencies that will in turn support the completion of tasks in a multilingual setting. On the other hand, the document legitimizes such adult education interventions within the framework of a publicly funded training program (Literacy and Basic Skills Ontario).

Case study #3: The experimentation and evaluation of TOWES and PDQ with francophone adults with lower literacy skills (levels 1 and 2) in Ontario

An important finding of this project was that TOWES and PDQ should, to a certain degree, be adapted to francophone minority culture, both in the language in which the tests are written and in the nature of some of the assessment tasks. For example, the project report proposes to include authentic, bilingual documents for assessing the skill “document use” when preparing a learner to work in Ontario or to enter an apprenticeship program.

Recommendation no. 20: The question of cultural adaptation must be closely studied in terms of the two assessment systems experimented and validated in this project and for any other assessment systems this ministerial initiative is studying. Amongst other things, the validation process of assessment systems already translated into French must be revisited, in order to ensure a cultural adaptation adequate for the minority context in which many literacy programmes function. (Lurette, 2008)

#### **4. Suggestions for future research and additional remarks**

Further reflection and discussion on the part of both trainers and developers is needed in the fields of research, assessment and adult education in order to advance our understanding of the andragogical issues linked to international surveys and official language minority communities. Below I suggest a few questions for reflection and additional research that stem from the issues raised in this discussion paper.

*1) What issues arise when using authentic tasks to measure skills in minority settings?*

Can tasks and authentic documents, resembling those used in the workplace or in daily life, be successfully used to evaluate a specific skill in a minority setting? This question is especially pertinent given that these tasks and documents are largely unilingual when common workplace

tasks performed by people living in a minority context often call upon the use of a second language.

## ***2) What issues arise in using a unilingual methodological framework to measure skills in minority settings?***

Linguists know that the very notion of language is complex and in some cases debatable. In the literature about oral communication (and, by extension, its written phonological form), language can be called tongue, dialect, jargon, idiom, patois..., based on oft-disputed criteria. The French language has the advantage of having two principal words to describe the codes of oral communication: *langue* and *langage*, whereas English only has one equivalent, language.... *Langue*<sup>2</sup> evolves much more slowly than *langage*,<sup>3</sup> so slowly in fact as to appear static... By definition, experts rarely think about integrating the gaps between *langue* and *langage* into a standardized linguistic framework. (Jeantheau, 2013, p. 13)

Knowing that PIAAC's methodology, as well as those of IALS and IALSS, does not take into account the use of more than one language to accomplish a task when assessing skills, should we develop a framework to interpret the findings from PIAAC that recognizes the plurilingual realities of minority settings? And if so, how?

Post-PIAAC research on official language minority communities will necessarily be based on findings from a unilingual survey framework. Is it possible to recognize the limits of such a framework and of its findings for such communities? If we do that, we can compile further research to reframe the interpretation of PIAAC findings and foster policies and practices that are based on understanding the complexity of sustaining and developing the skills of adults in minority communities. Can we explore the notion of multiple languages to reframe and reorient andragogical practices?

## ***3) What are some of the issues concerning future international surveys used to assess skills in minority settings?***

For Jeantheau (2013), important issues around respondents' choice of language for the tests cannot be adequately resolved based on the data collected by IALSS. Though data from the background questionnaire included in the survey yields a wealth of biographical information,

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<sup>2</sup> A formal system of linguistic signs and codes (T.N.).

<sup>3</sup> That which is spoken on a daily basis by ordinary people (T.N.).



little is known about the respondents' linguistic environment and their own insight into their linguistic practices. Following are some recommendations made by Jeantheau during the Summer Institute of 2013 for future surveys of official language minority communities

- Have each respondent self-evaluate their mastery of both French and English, not just the language in which they choose to do the test, in the background questionnaire asks. This would determine whether the choice of language for the test is influenced by their self-evaluation (for example, if they choose the language in which they feel more mastery, especially for writing and reading tasks).
- Find out the language spoken by each respondent's spouse or partner and children; this information could explain why, in some cases, a "francophone" respondent (thus identified according to the survey's criteria) uses a language that is close to standard English at home.
- Include questions for respondents who speak minority languages on how they envision the future of their language or what language they want their children or grandchildren to speak, and why.
- Give comparable and even similar tests in several languages, as in Luxembourg, to obtain valuable data about the mastery of Canada's official languages by people living in minority settings.
- Ideally, a socio-linguistic survey would be carried out with those who self-identify as francophone and who live in an anglo-dominant setting. It would be a fascinating study.
- Finally, to gather more information on the language or languages in which respondents read newspapers and books, and on the language they use at work. Currently the data on respondents' cultural habits does not yield sufficient information on these things although we can surmise that many francophones living outside of Quebec work in English. We currently lack information about respondents' linguistic practices outside the home. Such information would have helped to confirm or invalidate respondents' francophone identity in past surveys.

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