Bridging Canadian Adult Second Language Education and Essential Skills Policies

Approach With Caution

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Employing critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper examines the attempt to bridge a Canadian adult second language policy with an employment skills policy. The result is a third policy intended to improve language education and employment skills training for immigrants. The analysis reveals that the knowledge economy and human capital theory are the predominant discourses embedded in the policy documents. The paper argues that predominant discourses perpetuate power imbalances and essentialize worker and migrant subjectivities. Engaging in postcolonial theories of second language learning, the paper proposes another way of conceiving adult second language learning and its potential for policy development.

Keywords: adult education policy; postcolonial theory; critical discourse analysis; second language and workplace learning; human capital theory; knowledge economy

Policy texts are not solitary units but establish categories, rules, and regulations that influence everyday social interactions. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), this discussion attempts to explore the language contained within three employment and second language policy texts to reveal the overlapping layers of discourses embedded in the texts. Meeting the Challenge (2004) focuses on skills for employment whereas Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 (2005) serves as a framework for adult second language education. Attempts by government agencies to bridge these two documents resulted in the Comparative Framework (2005), the intent of which is to provide guidelines for language education in the workplace for immigrants to Canada. The analysis of these texts reveals human capital theory and the knowledge economy as the dominant discourses. Within these discourses, singular worker and immigrant subjectivities are constructed in such a way that workers and newcomers are expected to assume full responsibility for performing particular sets of behaviors, marginalizing the social and structural complexities of second language learning in adulthood.

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Textual analysis alone does not give a complete understanding of how policy becomes enacted within everyday practice. Texts are negotiated, taken up, and resisted in complex ways within the various contexts in which they are situated. Textual analysis, however, does provide insight into understanding how knowledge is represented and contradicted through language (Rogers, 2004). Until recently, there had been aversion to considering the linguistic aspects of policy and curriculum texts within educational research (Rogers, 2004). However, within some circles of educational and cultural studies research, there has been movement toward considering the dialogic network of texts and their role in coconstituting context (Rogers, 2004; Threadgold, 1997, 2003). Making space within educational research for the inclusion of linguistic and semiotic analyses enables the questioning of power relations constituted through representation, consideration for the theoretical and situational aspects of textual construction, and insight into the ways in which subjectivity comes to be written and read (Threadgold, 1997). Therefore, the focus of this analysis is to provide and examine examples from the aforementioned policy texts to consider discursive representations of knowledge and subjectivity and some of the implications for adult second language learning.

The first section provides background information on the three policy documents. Following that, the methodological framework for the analysis is given. Analysis of examples from the texts reveals the predominant discourses of human capital theory and the knowledge economy. As will be explained, the pervasiveness of these discourses has repercussions for sociocultural aspects of learning. Finally, insights from teaching practice and implications for policy making and adult education will be explained. I argue that, drawing on postcolonial theories of second language learning, the policies perpetuate power imbalances and essentialize the subjectivities of newcomers to Canada. Although the discussion is set in a Canadian context, it has the potential to open a discussion among other immigrant-receiving nations.

**Background to the Policies**

Prior to 1996, no national standardized assessment framework existed for evaluating the language proficiency of adult immigrants who spoke neither English nor French, Canada’s official languages, as their first language. Unlike the public school system where grade levels exist and provincial education ministries establish standards and outcomes through curricula, levels and outcomes in adult second language education varied among language service providers. As no standardized model existed for assessing the communicative proficiency of immigrants and refugees who were to become Canadian citizens, second language learners had to be continually reassessed if they transferred from one language service provider to another.

In 1992, the then federal department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) began to frame this lack of standardization as a problem (Haque & Cray,
CIC, with the assistance of second language teaching, testing, and measurement experts, embarked on a project to research the possibility of establishing a set of national standards for assessing the language proficiency of Canadian newcomers. First, draft piloting of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) began in 1996. By 2000, the final 186-page CLB document was published (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005). The document is a 12-benchmark descriptive scale measuring communicative proficiency in English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) or French-as-a-Second Language (FSL). Each of the 12 benchmarks contains descriptions of communicative competencies and performance tasks to enable the assessment of linguistic, textual, functional, and sociocultural competencies. The framework is used as a reference guide for learning, teaching, and programming and serves as a national standard for planning adult second language curricula. The three main purposes of the Benchmarks are to assess the communicative proficiency of adult ESL/EFL (English-as-a-Foreign Language) learners; to ensure recognition anywhere in Canada of an ESL/EFL learner’s achievements in language learning and therefore ensure credential transferability; and to ensure consistent development in programs and curricula (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005). Increasingly, the document is being used in government-funded program development and learner assessment and evaluation across the country. Since the document was completed, numerous initiatives have been made by the Centre for the CLB to expand the contexts in which the CLB is used beyond that of settlement language programs.

One such initiative has been to bridge the CLB standards with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada’s (HRSDC) Essential Skills (ES) standards. In 1994, the government created the Essentials Skills Research Project (ESRP) to identify the skills that are needed for people to carry out different types of jobs across the employment spectrum. Nine Essential Skills (ES) were identified as being common to virtually all occupations and workplaces: reading text, document use, writing, numeracy, oral communication, thinking skills, working with others, computer use, and continuous learning (HRSDC, 2004). Through the ESRP, occupational profiles and workplace materials were expected to be used by educators, curricula developers, trainers, and employers. HRSDC’s plan was to promote awareness of and investment in ES through the Canadian workplace and educational system with the assistance of stakeholders.

HRSDC (2004) contended that by 2011 immigrants will account for all labor force growth. Therefore, it reasoned that bridging the CLB with HRSDC’s ES will create a better understanding of the skills newcomers to Canada need for career planning and workplace success (HRSDC, 2005). The result is a comparative framework document aligning competencies found in the CLB and ES documents. The Comparative Framework (2005) is intended to assist ESL educators with incorporating workplace content and ES resources into the curricula. The following analysis attempts to view the discourses contained in these policies in greater detail.
Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is both a theory and a method (Fairclough, 2003) that attempts to reveal how textual constructions of knowledge unevenly represent different groups and have unequal material effects (Luke, 1996). CDA attempts to take account of language and its dialectical relationship with other elements of social life without reducing all social life to discourse. Texts are one aspect of social events that have causal effect in that they can bring about changes in knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values when taken up in social practices (Fairclough, 2003). Luke (1996) asserted that the strength of CDA was its capacity to reveal power relations at work within texts. Therefore, a reflexive social analysis of how and for whom language is written is necessary (Luke, 1996). Discourses have a hegemonic function in that they establish some forms of knowledge as common sense or normal (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). CDA, therefore, attempts to disrupt this normalization. In the case of policy texts, CDA enables an inquiry into the underlying issues of power and discourse embedded in the perceived problem and solution therefore challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions contained within the policy (Woodside-Jiron, 2004).

Discourses are ways of representing different perspectives of the world depending on people’s social positionings (Fairclough, 2003). It is important to recognize that discourses are not confined to one text only but are recurrent statements across texts that map systems of meaning, knowledge, belief, and categorization (Luke, 1996). Discourses may complement, compete, and be contested as well as circulate with varying degrees of unity, disunity, and power (Fairclough, 2003; Luke, 1996). Texts are also multidiscursive drawing from various discourses, fields of knowledge, and voices. Some voices and knowledge, however, have a stronger presence within policy texts than others do, therefore, CDA enables alternative readings and interpretations of educational policy texts, in particular those that are silenced by dominant social institutions (Luke, 1996; Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004). The point is to reveal and disrupt the relations of power and knowledge created and sustained through dominant discourses (Wilson, 1999).

CDA also examines the texts’ effects in constructing social subjectivities (Luke, 1996; Olssen et al., 2004). CDA generally begins with the assumption that people do not have singular, essential social identities. Subjectivities are constructed, reconstructed, and contested in discourses through textual representations and daily social practices (Luke, 1996). Fairclough (2003) stressed that CDA alone will not reveal the material effects of discourses contained in texts but that CDA must be applied with other research methodologies such as ethnography to understand the discursive effects on social practices. This discussion is part of ongoing research and therefore will only present preliminary observations from textual analysis of the three documents. My intent is to reveal the underlying assumptions about the subjectivity construction of workers and immigrants in connection with relations of power while at
the same time recognizing that the text is only one aspect of social practice. The analysis will be juxtaposed with my interpretations of working with the texts in varying degrees in teaching practice. Subsequent research, however, will employ critical ethnographic methodologies to explore how the policy documents have been taken up by multiple agents in social practices.

Method

In the first stage of CDA description, features such as vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and so on are examined. Probing various combinations of these features can provide some degree of insight into understanding how power relations come to be represented in text (Fairclough, 2001). The main questions that guided my analysis were:

1. What are the predominant and overlapping discourses presented in the three policy texts?
2. How are worker and immigrant subjectivities represented?
3. How is agency established in these representations?

In attempting to address these questions, the experiential, relational, and expressive values of lexical features were explored. Experiential value considers how contents of knowledge and beliefs come to be represented, in this case, through the vocabulary. Relational value attempts to trace how social relations are represented and expected to be enacted through what is written. Expressive value is related to social subjectivities and how, in the case of this analysis, they come to be represented in vocabulary (Fairclough, 2001).

Each of the texts, *Meeting the Challenge* (2004), the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000* (2005), and the *Comparative Framework* (2005) was read for examples of vocabulary that represent and classify knowledge in relation to worker and immigrant subjectivities (experiential value). Key words and phrases in each were noted and then compared across the texts. The following sections provide examples and discuss in detail the recurrent vocabulary across the texts and my interpretation of this vocabulary as it relates to wider discursive practices. The examples were chosen because they exemplify the discourses pervasive throughout the texts. A similar process was followed to examine relational and expressive value, how the choice of wording attempts to establish social relationships between participants, and how it positively or negatively represents subjectivity. Final consideration was given to examining how agency is created in the policies, that is, who is made visible and expected to take action.

The second stage of analysis is interpretation—the dialectical relationship between what is presented in the text and the social positioning of the interpreter (Fairclough, 2001). The interpretation stage involves examining the linguistic features discussed in stage one with reference to the meaning, coherence, and structure
of the text. The interpreter draws on what Fairclough called "members' resources," the interpreter's knowledge of language, values, beliefs, and assumptions of the natural and social world. Recognizing that there are multiple factors influencing the following interpretation, the predominant ones in this analysis stem from praxis, namely, the dialogical relationship between my teaching practice outside and within Canada and reflection through academic life within Canadian institutions and communities. Teaching ESL, from my view, is enmeshed within the traces of colonial traditions from which it began and the current-day discourses of globalization and the knowledge economy. As a White female, years of teaching and talking with adult learners about their social struggles of language learning became a conscientization of the issues related to power and language. Power flows through social relations of which language, as it intersects with gender, racialization, class, and so on, is a part. The language one speaks or does not speak is a contributing aspect to the establishment of economic, social, and political disparity. Theoretical explorations have focused on critical forms of feminist and postcolonial traditions that have influenced the following interpretation.

The third and final stage, explanation, explores discourse as part of social processes and practices. The explanation stage attempts to discuss how discourse is determined, reproduced, and maintained or changed by social structures (Fairclough, 2001). The explanation presented here attempts to demonstrate a few of the ways in which the discourses of human capital theory and the knowledge economy are represented in policy language and how it reoccurs across texts and within wider social relations. The following sections provide the analysis according to these three stages.

**Knowledge in the Knowledge Economy**

Feminist epistemologies conceive knowledge as essentially social and reject the notion of value-neutral knowledge (Tanesini, 1999). Sumner (2003) pointed out that within the knowledge economy knowledge became a commodity. Official knowledge solicits a higher value than marginalized forms of knowledge (i.e. indigenous knowledge, women's knowledge, or experiential knowledge; Sumner, 2003). Examining selected passages contained in the frameworks *Meeting the Challenge: A Guide to Working With Essential Skills* (HRSDC, 2004) and *Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework* (HRSDC, 2005) revealed the discourse of skills deficit in the global knowledge economy.

Ideas, talents, experience and drive. Canadians have the attributes to participate successfully in a knowledge society and a global economy. In order to successfully put all these qualities together for enjoyment and productivity in our life and in our work, we need another vital ingredient—Essential Skills. . . . It is important to consider and integrate Essential Skills not only into self-improvement courses, but educational curricula, skills-upgrading projects and on-the-job training. Today's knowledge-based society and
dynamic workplaces demand continuous skills development. Learning methods that recognize the importance of Essential Skills help bridge the gap between job and life requirements and person’s existing knowledge and skills. (HRSDC, 2004, pp. 2-3)

Within this passage, the subjectivities of Canadians, as if they are a homogeneous group, are framed in contradictory ways. At first, claims are made that Canadians already possess the attributes necessary for participating in the knowledge economy, yet in the next sentence the assumption is made that Canadians are deficient and lack one key component for success—ES. In the last sentence, learning is reduced to a decontextualized method and there is an assumption that a gap exists between people’s private and work lives and their knowledge. Knowledge becomes compartmentalized as if it is somehow separate from people’s subjectivities. In a similar vein, the Comparative Framework (HRSDC, 2005) stated that one of its intents was “to facilitate the identification of language and other skills immigrants and newcomers need to acquire in order to ensure workplace success” (p. 3). Language is framed as a tool rather than as a way in which people socially create meaning. It is assumed that ES will fill the apparent void in people’s lives. This is an example of adult learning under the Canadian Way in which competitiveness and economic outcomes are the central aspects of learning (Rubenson & Walker, 2006). In the first passage, in particular, there is a melding of the personal and the professional to create what Rubenson and Walker termed a “softened” economic version in response to the hard-line stance of the second generation of lifelong learning. The words gap, bridge, and derivatives of success appear several times throughout the texts, often within the same passage. Skill is framed as the necessary ingredient for bridging these gaps to overcome workers’ deficiencies, thereby ensuring participation and success in the knowledge economy.

The gap is to be filled with the assistance of ES, Occupational Profiles, and Authentic Workplace Materials for use by various stakeholders. The complementary tools and applications are “helping Canadians to close the skills gap, and obtain, maintain and advance in their jobs” (HRSDC, 2004, p. 6). In another passage, ES are framed as being recognized for “how vital they are in day-to-day life and for participation in a competitive global economy” (p. 4). In the case of second language learning, the Comparative Framework (HRSDC, 2005) will assist to include Canadian immigrants’ participation in the global economy by supporting workplace preparation, training, and career planning. According to Korsgaard (1997), there had been a policy shift from learner-centered to economic-centered goals in education. Management discourses, including terms such as competition, quality, and productivity are replacing humanistic ideals such as social justice and personal development (Korsgaard, 1997). Harrison and Kachur (1999) pointed out that the neoliberal approach to globalization and education assumes that the country with the best-educated workforce will have significant competitive advantages in the global economy. The above passages, however, attempt to blur some aspects of humanistic discourses with
management discourses that Korsgaard discussed. Little recognition is given to the existing knowledge of workers and newcomers or the politics of knowledge generation. It is assumed that by acquiring ES one can successfully integrate into Canadian society.

**Human Capital Theory and the Individual**

Human capital theory assumes that when individuals invest in themselves through education, the *value* of the knowledge and skills they obtain will be monetarily rewarded (for a historical summary, see Baptiste, 2001). These assumptions are evident in the three ES and CLB documents. In a section of *Meeting the Challenge*, HRDSC (2004) contends,

> Essential Skills can help [people looking for a job] determine the skill levels they already have or ones that may be needed to prepare for their dream job. By comparing the skill levels they have to the ones needed in the jobs that interest them, students, job seekers and workers can set their own skill development targets. As their skills grow, they can watch their career options multiply! (p. 28)

Compare this with a passage from the preface of the *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: English as a Second Language for Adults* (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005):

> In small, but increasing numbers, immigrants are able to demonstrate to employers, using the Canadian Language Benchmarks, that they have the language skills needed for available jobs and to demonstrate to registrars that they have the language skills needed to succeed in non-ESL/EFL courses. In growing numbers, they are able to compare their current level of ability in English or French with the ability they need to enter a program of study, occupation or profession. At long last, immigrants can plot out for themselves, in advance, their own paths of language learning to attain their goals. (p. v)

Finally, below is a passage from an introduction to the *Comparative Framework* on the HRSDC (2005) Web site:

> For internationally-educated workers, [the *Comparative Framework*] helps them access Essential Skills resources to better understand job specific competencies and requirements and understand the language proficiency necessary to meet those requirements (http://www.itsessential.ca/itsessential/display_page.asp?page_id=204)

The responsibility for mapping future employment and program of study prospects is placed on the individual worker, immigrant language learner, or immigrant worker. In the first document, workers *determine* their skill level and *compare* it with the skill levels they may need for their dream job. This is similar to the statement in the second passage in which immigrants are able to compare their current level of ability with that which is needed to enter an occupation or program of study.
In the third passage, educated immigrant workers can “better understand” the competencies necessary to meet occupational requirements. In each passage, the words *need* or *necessary* appear, again implying that there is a gap or deficiency that must be filled. The passages are constructed in such a way that workers and/or immigrants appear to be positioned as empowered agents in control of their future employment *success* because they are able to compare current abilities with those demanded by workplaces. Subjectivities become self-regulating within the skills deficit discourses contained in the documents. This regulation occurs within the context of Canadian norms. In all three passages, subjectivities are individualized and psychologized. “Psychologization blames the individual and lets power structures off the hook” (Mojab, 2006, pp. 349-350). Subjectivities become “a disembodied composite of behaviours and skills” as well as generic and normalized as they are classified and categorized into various grids (Luke, 1996, p. 29). This categorization and comparing occurs based on norms established through discourses of an essentialized version of a colonial White English or French speaking European settler subjectivity (Bannerji, 2000; Li, 2003).

Examining the language from passages in all three documents enables a reading of the layers that “create cohesive collections of policy” (Woodside-Jiron, 2004, p. 179). It points to the intertextuality of policy documents where wordings, statements, and themes are repeated and reiterated across different texts (Fairclough, 2003; Luke, 1996). In this case, the language reveals that the documents are situated in the discourse of human capital theory. Fenwick (2006) explains that the notion of skill development is framed in ways that workers’ and, in this case, immigrants’ knowledge and skills are reduced to observable performance.

Rooted in human capital theory, [skill development] is acquisitive, presuming that individuals are singular coherent beings ingesting rather than socially constructing knowledge and skills, in a developmental progression to become—resources. Not only does such theory ignore issues of collective learning, politics of knowledge and language in learning, it also neglects both social capital (such as strong social networks, shared values and high trust) and cultural capital (immersion in the images, language, possessions and values of the dominant, usually middle class, White urban culture) that is associated with the innovative, text-based and design-oriented knowledge of the knowledge economy. (p. 86)

Groups perceived to be lacking particular forms of social or cultural capital are marginalized. Guo (2006a) pointed to Canadian society’s superficial acceptance of difference; forms of knowledge that strayed too far from Canadian norms were viewed as deficient or deviant.

The passages cited above provide an example of how the policies are decontextualized from the larger social systems, attitudes, and discourses that influence access to employment. One underlying assumption is that individuals have complete agency to *demonstrate* to employers that they have the skills for their dream jobs and
masks the way power circulates among the state, employers, and potential employees in hiring processes. Power relations among workers, the state, and employers are disguised in "a paradox of visibility" (Luke, 1996). Groups such as immigrants and workers, who have been historically invisible in public discourse, become highly visible within the text whereas dominant groups remain dominant but appear only in the background if at all. Citing several recent studies, S. Guo (2006) showed that it was not a lack of skill on the part of internationally trained professionals but the multiple and often contradictory layers of the credential recognition process in Canada that acted as a barrier to immigrants gaining employment in their professional fields. The dominant, often invisible, groups in this process in fact decide whose knowledge is valid. "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 enhance employability" (HRSDC, 2005). Even when the appropriate skill level exists, other behaviors must also be evident to ensure employment success. This sounds very much like the "flexible," "adaptable," and "docile" workers of whom Wilson (1999) wrote. Workers become disempowered as they become dependent on continual formal skills and knowledge development. The assumption is that workers who are malleable and can mold themselves to meet the needs of employers and adhere to dominant social norms will be the most successful (Wilson, 1999). Yet, as various studies have shown in the case of immigrants in Canada (Bannerji, 2000; Y. Guo, 2006; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2003), following the prescribed process doesn’t guarantee employment and often leads to qualification deskilling and decredentializing as intersecting sexist, racist, and linguicism (linguistic discrimination) discourses influence access to employment. The focus to succeed remains an individual responsibility and relieves the ruling elites of social and collective responsibility (Welton, 1997).

In their discussion of the three generations of lifelong learning practices, Rubenson and Walker (2006) contended that the third generation of educational policy attempted to soften the privileged position of the market found in the second generation of the 1990s. The third generation of policy making has attempted to strike a balance among the state, the market, and civil society. Rubenson and Walker noted, however, that the responsibility for learning continued to be placed on the individual. The pedagogical implications of human capital theory positions learners as lone wolves who must change their behavior to adapt to existing educational systems (Baptiste, 2001) while ignoring the state-created immigration and employment systems that construct particular social relations.

**Power Relations Contained in the Policy Texts**

Examining the language within policy texts can give the reader some clues of the power relations and the dominant discourses situated in the policy-making process. All three documents state that the policies were developed in consultation with various
stakeholders, reflecting a pragmatic approach to policy making. Pragmatic policy making identifies and then investigates a problem from the perspective of various stakeholders in an attempt to find a negotiated solution (Crump, 1992). Although pragmatic policy development can be appealing for its claims to uphold democratic principles and attempts to address power imbalances between various policy participants, little consideration is given to how historical developments influence current power relations in society, which in turn influence the policy process (Gale, 2001; Scheurich, 1994). This is particularly important for examining any employment or language policy as it pertains to immigration as newcomers to Canada have historically held, and continue to hold, marginal political, social, and economic positions within society. Even if a pragmatic policy-making process attempts to moderate this power imbalance, gender, racialization, and class discourses stemming from Canada’s colonial past influence the policy actors’ social practices in ways they are not always conscious (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003).

This becomes evident in examining the language of the ES and CLB documents. As stated earlier, within the text, immigrants and workers are positioned as the agents who compare, measure, and demonstrate their work skills and language capabilities. The discourses represented in the documents produce commonsense knowledge that if immigrants and workers can compare and then demonstrate their capabilities they will successfully gain employment in their dream jobs. According to Federighi (1997), the neoliberal educational agenda had influenced adult education by creating “a rapid process of homogenization” (p. 4). Rather than attempting to address the variety of needs within diverse populations in society, adult education has evolved into solely meeting the needs of a growing free market that emphasizes vocational training and services for those sectors that yield the highest profits. Under neoliberalism, educational and social policies that previously aimed to avoid exclusion and strive for social unity now encourage acceptance of and adjustment to exclusion (Federighi, 1997). Social and educational responsibility is placed on the individual and, as the state complies with the marketplace, principles of supply and demand dictate both the forms of education and who has access to education (Federighi, 1997). In the case of newcomers to Canada, the skills, knowledge to be demonstrated, and methods of measurement are determined by the state through policy in consultation with industry and language testing experts. The focus is on singular worker subjectivity and diminishes the complexity of social and power relations within Canadian society.

Subjectivities Represented in the Policy Texts:
A View from the Pedagogical Frontlines

As discussed earlier, the subjectivities of workers and immigrants contained in the text are framed as lacking or deficient, thereby necessitating educational upgrading or retraining. Little acknowledgment is given to the existing wealth of knowledge
and experience or the multiple subjectivities people bring to the work and classroom context. Through CDA, the contradictions contained within the policy documents become evident. On the one hand, although learner and worker subjectivities are positioned as needing to adapt and change to remain competitive in a global economy, the documents are steeped in discourses of the knowledge economy and human capital theory that assumes that people’s preferences and desires remain stable, insubstantially changing over time (Baptiste, 2001). How do these knowledge economy and human capital theory discourses contained in these policy documents surface in ESL programs targeted toward employment? To examine this, I offer an exploration of my observations drawing on Kincheloe’s (2004) stance that teachers were researchers and knowledge workers who reflected on the current understandings of their own professional practice.

These observations are based on my experiences of teaching full-time from 2004 to 2006 in a provincially funded skills development program for adult immigrants in Canada. The program includes up to 12 months of English language instruction and then potentially 28 months of postsecondary training at various publicly and privately funded educational institutes. Government financial support is offered through living allowances, grants, and student loans. The socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and educational backgrounds of the learners who access this program vary greatly. Some learners, who came to Canada as refugees, have been in the country for only a few months whereas others have been here for as long as 15 years. Other learners, who have arrived in the past 1 to 2 years, are highly skilled professionals holding advanced postsecondary degrees from their countries of origin. The learners come from all parts of the globe. Some of the adult learners, particularly those with high levels of education, are at least bilingual if not multilingual therefore suggesting they have sophisticated skill and knowledge in formal and informal language learning that often goes unrecognized in Canada’s bilingual state. Their English language proficiency is assessed according to the standards of the CLB before being placed in an appropriate class level. Some of the learners have highly advanced English language skills whereas others have low levels of literacy in both English and their first language. The 12-month language component of the program is designed to assist learners in developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English so that they can meet the standards required to transfer to postsecondary institutions. As many of the professional associations in Canada do not recognize immigrants’ international credentials, the overall goal of the 42-month program is to assist immigrants in retraining, finding employment, and in transitioning to the Canadian work environment. In addition to the skill development requirements, the language-learning component of the program is meant to teach the necessary linguistic skills for the workplace as well as socialize learners into the norms and expectations of the Canadian workplace and society. There is an expectation that curricula will be developed along the guidelines set out by the CLB and ES documents.
The discourses, however, contained in these documents, particularly when they are situated in employment program contexts, do not take into consideration the multiple subjectivities that emerge in the second language classroom. Newcomers to Canada are not merely workers whose intent is to help fuel the Canadian or global economy. The importance of finding well-paid and meaningful work and of addressing the material inequities that place many newcomers to Canada in the lower economic strata of society cannot be underestimated. Newcomers who are learning English as their second, third, or fourth language are often not only workers and professionals, but they are also parents, spouses, community members, politically engaged citizens, sometimes survivors of war and poverty—subjectivities that cannot be parked at the door of the classroom. Often, issues beyond learning for the workplace arise. A few examples illustrate this point. From time to time, information about tenant rights is requested so that learners can know their rights to confront property owners who are negligent or break lease agreements. Time, to discuss what are seen as confusing and contradictory aspects of the Canadian school system, particularly around issues of racialization, religious affiliation, and sex education, is requested so that adult learners do not feel so isolated from the experiences of their children. Sometimes interest surfaces in learners to learn about the historical and sociopolitical context of Canada, as they want to be active and informed citizens in the community. In such moments, collective knowledge is constructed that attempts to question and resist dominant discourses situated in Canadian institutions, such as the media, public school system, and social services. Time pressures and program expectations, however, often restrict opportunities to focus on citizenship-related concepts. Dei and Lordan (2006) explained that it became a question of not only how to speak and what to speak but also most importantly of being heard. These examples hint at the complexity of issues and subjectivities as they emerge in the classroom.

Another point not acknowledged in the policy documents is the recognition and understanding of the reconstruction of subjectivities in the learning of an additional language. Language, in conjunction with material conditions, influences how one thinks of oneself and one’s position in society. Haque and Cray (2006) explained that language policy documents like the CLB did not recognize the complex process involved in the learning of an additional language in adulthood. Even though the introduction of the CLB claims that the Benchmarks are not about teaching discrete elements of language and should guide rather than dictate teaching practice, in fact, the Benchmarks (as well as the employment skills documents) do consist of discrete elements that are teachable and testable components (Haque & Cray, 2006). Furthermore, Haque and Cray argued that the CLB are a top-down system of standards enforcing a restricted view of language learning on both teachers and learners. Learners are positioned as submissive and passive in their language learning, acquiring language and knowledge that in many cases enables them to obtain only basic language proficiency, therefore, perpetuating a system that keeps newcomers on the political, social, and economic margins (Haque & Cray, 2006). Dei and Lordan
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(2006) argued that language was a form of cultural capital; “Language informs our experience of—and access to—education, identity, philosophy and knowledge production” (p. 32). When language is thought of as something to be acquired, this compels linguistic knowledge and skill to be seen as a commodity rather than as a system of communication by which people construct meaning and come to understand, live, and fully participate in the world (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Ibrahim (2006) saw the formation of migrant subjectivities through language learning as a process of translation and negotiation. Ibrahim, however, rejected the notion of loss and instead drew on Bakhtin and postcolonial theorists Soja, Bhabha, and Hall to conceive this process as an organic third space of “both-and-also” “which is taking place beyond and in-between two or more cultures, languages and geographies” (Ibrahim, 2006, p. 44, emphasis in original). In his ethnographic study, Ibrahim explored the second language subjectivities of youth and young adults in urban Toronto. He found that taking up the “New” linguistic and cultural practices were not done in opposition to the “Old” culture and language, but instead were “historical temporalities, ways of being, and . . . social, cultural, national, geographic and linguistic spaces” (p. 43).

Ibrahim (2006) provided possibilities for conceptualizing differently the learning of adult immigrants not found in the three policy documents discussed here. Newcomers to Canada are not “acquiring” workplace skills and linguistic knowledge but constructing productive, rather than deficient or wanting, hybrid understandings of themselves in an additional language. The importance of being able to communicate understandings of oneself and one’s view of the world and to have those views heard cannot be underestimated. This is essential for addressing issues of power and oppression, particularly those related to which forms of knowledge circulate in public domains and by whom that knowledge is constructed and valued. Dei (2006) explained that language had not only been an important medium of cultural, ideological, political, colonial, and imperial domination but that it can also be an important site of resistance. Conceiving language and workplace learning within the confines of the knowledge economy and human capital theory focuses on learner deficit and ignores the productive, social, and contextual aspects of learning. Conceptualizing the adult language learning space as “both-and-also” recognizes the complexity, richness, and value of the “Old” in the learning of the “New.”

Implications and Conclusion

This discussion offers a few potential implications for adult second language education policy making. First, language learning is not an individualized skill or event but a complex social process occurring within relations of power. There has been movement within the field of adult second language education to recognize the sociality of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). However, as the CLB and ES documents
are situated within the wider discourses of human capital theory and the knowledge economy, this raises critical questions about how subjectivities are represented and whose sociocultural knowledge comes to be represented in policy. The discourses of human capital theory and the knowledge economy focus on the individual in the learning process to the exclusion of the collective and socially constituted aspects of learning. Policymakers and educators must be wary not to inscribe processes that reduce learning to an individualized and psychologized process but confront the sociohistorical structures and systems, including those found in policy that normalize linguicism and learner deficit.

Second, the democratic appeal of pragmatic approaches to policy making needs to be rethought. Merely listing sets of prescribed skills and standards that workers and immigrants are expected to demonstrate masks whose knowledge is to be adopted and performed. Responsibility for performance is placed on those expected to do the demonstrating and enables the potential for those determining the criteria for how well the performance is executed to be relieved of responsibility. Responsibility, however, for addressing social and material inequities needs to be a collective response that includes making visible the ways in which elites come to avoid responsibility.

Finally, power circulates through social relations within employment and educational institutions. The effecting traces of Canada’s colonial history, which continues to position “nonnative English or French speakers” as “Other,” should be considered in the policy-making process for adult language learning. This includes considering the ways in which the choice of language within policy inscribes colonial practices under the guise of human capital theory and the knowledge economy. Conceptualizing the adult language learning space as productive “both-and-also,” is one potential contribution to the policy-making process.

References


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