

**PORTFOLIO-BASED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: PERSPECTIVES OF
NEWCOMER ADULT ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research project focused on providing an opportunity for ESL adult newcomers to give their perspectives on the various aspects of Portfolio Based Language Assessment. The five aspects examined were goal setting, learning reflections, self-assessments, peer-assessments, and formative feedback from the instructor. The research was carried over during a 16-week semester with the researcher also serving the teaching role. Using an action-research approach, the research sought to answer two main questions: 1) What are the learners' perceptions of assessment for learning practices using the PBLA framework? 2) How can the effectiveness of formative assessment strategies be improved in Language Instruction for Newcomer to Canada (LINC) classes? The results of the research showed that the participants perceived goal setting, peer assessments and learning reflections to have a positive effect on their language learning, while they showed overall ambivalence towards self-assessment and feedback from the instructor.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to my amazingly supportive wife Natalie, and my children, Liam and Amelia, who have all motivated me throughout this entire process.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study focused on a Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA) model that I personally used in my English as a Second Language (ESL) class for adult newcomers to Canada. In particular, this study examined how the learners in my class perceived the effectiveness of various assessment for learning practices, and how I used their feedback to improve my own teaching. In this chapter, I will present this PBLA model and its major elements, briefly trace the history of PBLA, describe the current context of PBLA in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes including my personal history with PBLA. I will conclude with comments regarding the importance of the study to me personally and professionally.

1.1 What is PBLA?

In order to show the learner's journey of language learning, PBLA uses a language portfolio in which the learner keeps an autobiography, needs assessment, goal statements, learning reflections, and assessment tasks for listening, speaking, reading and writing which include peer, self, and instructor feedback. One of the principle aims of the language portfolio is "to promote learner autonomy" (Little, 2012, p. 11). This learner autonomy is promoted through the learner goal statements, learning reflections, and self-assessments. Recent studies have shown the portfolio model to yield positive results in adult learning contexts (e.g., Ripley, 2012) as well as public school contexts (e.g. Ziegler, 2014). Along with promoting learning autonomy, PBLA also emphasises formative assessment rather than summative assessment (Pettis, 2014).

Formative assessment refers to assessment that occurs on an ongoing basis during the instructional cycle to promote learning (Black & Wiliam in Pettis 2014). This information is collected continually by the instructor so that instruction can be modified as the class progresses. Assessment *for* learning involves the instructor providing “ongoing and descriptive feedback in terms the learner understands and that is immediately applicable to the task” (Kristmanson & Lafargue, 2014, p.47). In assessment *as* learning, the learner “is responsible for reflecting on the learning processes and products in order to improve future attempts and/or to set new goals, thus moving toward learner autonomy” (Kristmanson & Lafargue, 2014, p.47). These approaches will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.2 Brief History of PBLA

In 2008, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), formerly known as Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), conducted several studies on adult language training for newcomers in Canada (Makosky, 2008, Nagy & Stewart, 2009). The results of those studies indicated that assessment and benchmarking of language levels in LINC programs was ad hoc and inconsistent. This raised concerns about the reliability of the Canadian Language Benchmarks outcomes for language training that were being reported to the federal government. The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) (2012) standard is a descriptive scale of language ability in English as a Second Language (ESL) written as 12 benchmarks or reference points along a continuum from basic to advanced. The CLB standard reflects the progression of the knowledge and skills that underlie basic, intermediate and advanced ability among adult ESL learners.

As a result, it was recommended that IRCC adopt a language portfolio assessment system nationally to capture language-development progress. This led to the creation of the PBLA framework whose national implementation is managed by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), which is the national standard setting body for the Canadian Language Benchmarks and Niveaux de compétence Linguistique Canadiens (NCLC). The CCLB supports and promotes the use of these national standards in educational, training, community and workplace settings. Throughout this thesis, the term PBLA will be used to refer to the specific framework being managed by the CCLB.

Drawing inspiration from the European Language Portfolio (Little, 2005) and the Manitoba Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (Pettis, 2009) frameworks, PBLA “is a comprehensive, systematic, authentic, and collaborative approach to language assessment that engages teachers and students in dialogue to tell the story of the student’s journey in learning English and meeting personal goals” (Pettis, 2014, p.7). PBLA uses formative assessment (Black and William, 1998) (assessment for learning and assessment as learning practices) that encourages learners to take ownership over their learning. Using the portfolio as a tool, it seeks to assess learners on the totality of their work rather than the traditional summative assessment approach which assesses learners one time and solely at the end of a given learning period.

The PBLA model used in this study was initially field-tested in Ottawa from 2010 to 2012, and then piloted in 2012 in Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, and Edmonton. It was during this pilot phase that I became involved with PBLA. I was selected as a Lead Instructor and participated in a training phase, an application phase, and finally a program

implementation phase that involved training the instructors in my language centre. In 2014, the PBLA pilot stage ended and national implementation began using a train the trainer model comprised of three phases.

The first phase of the PBLA national implementation consists of an online training course in which Lead Teachers are chosen from each centre and instructed on the foundations of PBLA. The next phase, the application phase, involves the Lead Teachers applying what they learned in their classrooms by implementing PBLA for a semester. In the final phase, Lead Teachers work with their colleagues in fully implementing PBLA. Each of these phases is supported by a regional coach who works with a specific group of lead teachers throughout each step of the process. I was chosen as one of the original regional coaches, and I currently maintain this role. At the time of this study, approximately 450 Lead Teachers have been trained in 200 different centres, with over 2,800 classroom teachers now using PBLA.

1.3 Classroom Implementation and The Current Context:

In the classroom, PBLA uses the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) as a guide. The CLB is the national standard for planning curricula used in LINC classrooms. It is a proficiency framework containing 12 benchmarks that serve as reference points along a continuum (CCLB, 2012). The guiding principles emphasize that instruction should be competency-based, learner-centred, task-based, and should stress community, study, and work-related tasks. When developing modules and assessments using the PBLA framework, teachers must always ensure that the modules and assessments align

with the appropriate language benchmark in terms of profile of ability and features of communication.

To successfully implement PBLA in the classroom, the teacher is encouraged to follow a certain process. First, the teacher must conduct a needs assessment to determine the needs, interests, learning styles, and circumstances of the learners. The learners are also asked to set specific language goals that they wish to accomplish within the duration of the class. Secondly, once a theme is chosen, the teacher must develop a module plan, which is “a description or outline of the content, skills and strategies that will be the focus of instruction in a unit or series of lessons” (Pettis, 2014, p.83). This module plan needs to include the real-world tasks that the learners have selected in the needs assessment and goal setting activities. It must also include the language and content that needs to be taught, the strategies that will help the learner perform the task, and the assessment that will determine the learners’ ability to perform the task at the end of the module. This module also needs to be aligned to the appropriate CLB to ensure that the complexity of the task is appropriate for the level.

Once the module is created, the third step involves the instructor proceeding to implement that module. Along the way the teacher will develop skill-building and skill-using tasks in preparation for the real-world task. At the end of the module, the fourth step has the instructor assessing the learners’ ability to perform the tasks. These assessments will include action-oriented feedback designed to help learners close the gap between current and desired performance. Often these assessments include a self-assessment designed to check their own performance against the specific task criteria, and/or a peer assessment in which a peer provides feedback aligned with specific criteria.

At the end of the module, the learners will write a learning reflection to capture their experiences going through the module. In the final step, the teacher uses the results of the assessment tasks to identify the areas which the learners need continued development of the language skills, and proceeds to develop a module plan to meet those needs. The process then repeats itself until the end of the term. By this time, the learners will have gathered multiple artefacts from each language skill (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to show evidence of their progress. This culminates with a portfolio review where the instructor and the learner meet one on one to discuss the learner's progress.

In this study PBLA was used exclusively in a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) class. In this context, adult newcomers who are living in Canada either as permanent residents, government assisted refugees, or temporary foreign workers attend language classes that are designed to help them settle in their community through a task-based approach. The learners are placed in classes according to their Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) scores through an internal or external placement test. Once in the class, they are assessed and assigned benchmarks by the instructors. Currently, a language benchmark of 4 in speaking and listening is required for newcomers to apply for Canadian citizenship. Some colleges and universities also accept language benchmarks as proof of language ability as part of their application criteria, which demonstrates that there are high stakes associated with the benchmarks.

1.4 Personal History with PBLA

I realize that as a qualitative researcher, it is important to be forthright about my personal biases about PBLA. I have been working with PBLA for the past five years, and

I have developed a strong connection with its implementation. I have learned a lot from my experiences, and I do want to see PBLA be a sustainable model of instruction. From my experience as a regional coach training lead teachers and classroom teachers, I recognize that each component of the PBLA process presents a learning curve for instructors that varies in steepness depending on a variety of factors including previous training, experience, program support, and the ability to network with colleagues. In the past five years that I have been involved with PBLA, there have been modifications to the implementation along the way. I have seen very positive results in my own classes in terms of learner satisfaction, language improvement, and the improved confidence of my learners to use their language skills outside of the classroom.

When I first began PBLA as a Lead Instructor, I had only had 4 years' experience teaching ESL for adult newcomers. However, during those 4 years I did not receive any formal training in a range of necessary LINC areas. I had never participated in any professional learning opportunities in utilizing the CLB's within the classroom, developing formative assessments designed to capture the learning of the students in order to inform teaching practices, or in creating real world task based module plans. As a result, PBLA was a very steep learning curve for me.

Now that I have developed an expertise in PBLA due to my 5 years of experience in the classroom and as a Regional Coach, I think that I am in the ideal situation to conduct research on various aspects of PBLA from the instructor's perspective. I have a firm belief that the insights and perspectives of learners can improve and inform practice. So, as a practitioner and a trainer in this PBLA process, I seek to assess this program in

order to inform and improve our practice of this program within LINC. This proposed research is grounded in this belief.

1.5 Personal and Professional Importance

As someone who has been involved with PBLA since it was introduced as a pilot, I have developed a passion for its implementation. I truly believe that formative assessment practices promote language learner autonomy and language development, and I have seen the positive effects that it has had on my classes. My learners are motivated to learn, enjoy having the responsibility for their own learning, and appreciate that they can immediately use what they learn in class in a real-world context. I want to build on these experiences in order to improve the learning of my students.

Given that a lot of time and effort has been invested in the implementation of PBLA, I want the national implementation of PBLA to be successful. To make this possible, PBLA needs to continue to evolve to maximize its effectiveness in helping learners progress in their language learning while also becoming a sustainable model moving forward. Initially, most teachers are excited by PBLA's potential to benefit their learners, but at the same time "many of these ideas get swamped or displaced by competing priorities within a short time. For an idea to survive past the awareness stage and become part of teacher practice requires considerable effort, perseverance and trust" (Harrison, 2005, p.255). For this reason, I aim to provide insights into the day-to-day implementation of PBLA using learner data to inform my action research and I believe that this work will help instructors to implement PBLA in their classes. The overall

purpose of the present study is to gain further insights into the assessment process, in particular formative assessment practices in the adult language learning environment.

In the next chapter, I will review selected relevant literature with a focus on the evolution of formative assessment, formative assessment and the learner, as well as formative assessment in the adult education context. I will also frame the significance of the study, and how my proposed research will address the gaps in the research.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This literature review examines the theory and development of formative assessment with a focus on adult education and the impact on instructors and learners in order to assess the gaps in the research and the direction for future research. As per the overall purpose of my study articulated at the end of chapter 1, the literature review will provide insights from a variety of studies related to assessment, formative assessment, and assessment in adult learning environments.

Today, formative assessment practices are being adopted in educational settings around the world (Lam, 2016). The present research will explore these approaches in the context of government funded adult language classes across Canada. While the theory may go back several decades, large scale implementation of formative assessment in education is still evolving. The transition from theory to practice is not always smooth, and the impact on learners and instructors still needs more research. In reviewing the literature, there have been several researchers who have described the nature of formative assessment (e.g., Sadler, 1989; Harlen & James, 1996; Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Black & Wiliam, 2009) and how it could be implemented in the classroom (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Leahy et al., 2005; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2008). The difference between summative assessment and formative assessment is now clear in theory, but my review of the literature in relation to adult education and formative assessment revealed that the efficacy of formative assessment in the adult education context has not been extensively examined to my knowledge (e.g., Drew, 2015; Looney, 2007; Torrance, date; Yi, 2012).

There is however, substantial research demonstrating the effectiveness of formative assessment practices on student achievement in public schools (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b, Lee & Wiliam. 2005). It is clear that it has the potential to be the most cost-effective method for improving achievement, as well as the most efficient. Work done by Black and Wiliam has moved formative assessment from theory to policy in the United Kingdom as well as in other programs around the world. There is some evidence suggesting that learners see the benefits of formative assessment, but there is little research done on how learner insights inform instructor formative assessment practices. Formative assessment practices require a much larger time commitment in the initial stages as instructors adapt to new practices. There can be a steep learning curve, and while research has been done on effective strategies that instructors can use, there still needs to be more research on effective means of providing professional learning related to these practices to instructors. A study on this topic was in progress during the time of my research to providing some direction for teacher development (Wiliam, 2016).

Overall, the goal of this literature review is to summarize the research already conducted and to demonstrate the need for further research in the adult education context, on the impact on teachers, and from the perspectives of learners. I will now describe the evolution of formative assessment research that points to directions for future research in these areas.

2.2 Formative Assessment

Seminal work

Harlen and James (1996) sought to clarify the differences between summative and formative assessment. In their article, they focused on disentangling the two types of assessment with an emphasis on the nature of assessment. They looked at formative assessment as criterion-referenced, but stated that it must also be student-referenced “because, if this assessment is to help learning and encourage the learner, it should take into account the effort and the particular circumstances of the student, and the progress the student has made over time” (Harlen and James, 1996, p.5). They pointed out that teachers have been doing this as part of their normal practice all along, but have not been using it systematically enough to be effective.

The most influential researchers in assessment for learning are Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Black & Wiliam, 2004; Black & Wiliam, 2009). Their work has provided insight into how formative assessment has moved from theory, to practice, to policy. Prior to their seminal work *Inside the Black Box* (1998b), Wiliam and Black (1996) first looked at the tensions between summative assessment and formative assessment and attempted to clarify the differences between the two forms of assessment. At the time, the two approaches appeared to be incompatible and the two terms were not widely known; this article helped to set the stage for their subsequent work. The authors admitted that they had only started the discussion, but it is clear in this article that the movement towards formative assessment was beginning.

Following their 1996 article, Black and Wiliam (1998a) conducted an extensive literature review on formative assessment that looked at over 250 articles from 1988 to 1998. In this review, Black and Wiliam identified a shift in assessment practices towards greater interest in the interactions between instruction and assessment in the hope that improved assessment practices could improve learning. The purpose of their review was to determine if there was evidence that showed that improved assessment practices could improve learning, and if so, they hoped to synthesize the research in order to highlight relevant insights. After completing this extensive review, the authors concluded that there was sufficient evidence to show that formative assessment could be an effective strategy to improve student achievement.

This extensive literature reviewed Black and Wiliam to formulate the comprehensive arguments promoting formative assessment that went into their first major article *Inside the Black Box* (1998b). They made the argument that formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching and posed three key questions: “1) Is there evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards? 2) Is there evidence that there is room for improvement? 3) Is there evidence about how to improve formative assessment?” (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). In their article, they answered each question affirmatively, and then proposed a plan of action. Further, they implored national and state policy makers to begin implementing the strategies that they laid out in their article. They provided evidence for the argument that formative assessment could raise standards, and that the then current formative assessment practices could be improved upon. They also gave four steps to implementing formative assessment practices as policy. While this article put a focus on what happens inside the classroom, it did not yet

provide practical tools that teachers could implement inside the classroom in their day-to-day practice. This gap began to be filled in *Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning* (Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D., 2004). In this article the authors laid out clear strategies for instructors to begin to implement formative assessment practices in their classes. One of the key assertions was the importance of a professional learning communities.

Collaboration with a group trying out similar innovations is almost essential.

Mutual observation and the sharing of ideas and experiences about the progress of action plans can provide the necessary support both with the tactics and at a strategic level (Black et al, 2014, p. 20).

This importance of professional learning communities in the creation of pedagogical support, a shared language, and productive dialogue was also seen by Kristmanson, Lafargue and Culligan (2011). Another related success factor that Black at al (2014) underscored was that support from administrators was essential to the success of implementing any new innovation. This issue will be further explored in the discussion chapter.

The gap between theory and practice was further addressed through the work of Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam (2005). This article explored effective methods to introduce teachers to formative assessment practices. While the authors did not find a one-size fits all technique, they did formulate five broad strategies that could be applied by teachers in all grade levels that they thought of as non-negotiable in defining assessment for learning:

- 1) Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success.

- 2) Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks.
- 3) Providing feedback that moves learners forward.
- 4) Activating students as the owners of their own learning.
- 5) Activating students as instructional resources for one another.

(Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, William 2005)

While this article provided an excellent framework, it still did not examine in detail how to effectively implement these techniques, nor did it address how to effectively introduce these ideas to teachers on a large scale, or how to support teachers through the implementation process. Despite these limitations, this article has been used as an instructional resource by PBLA instructors attempting to integrate assessment for learning strategies into their classrooms. This article and the principles outlined therein have been incredibly useful for me as I have developed my PBLA practices over the past five years.

Stiggins and Chapuis (2008) add to these suggestions by providing their own steps to successfully implement assessment for learning practices. They suggest that the teacher needs to ensure the students have a clear vision of the learning targets they are responsible for achieving. The teacher also needs to provide the students with continuous feedback that moves them forward, and help students engage in self-assessment and goal setting. As well, the feedback should be focused so that the students can work on one key attribute at a time. Finally, the students must be taught to keep track of their achievements and monitor their own growth. These steps are more concrete, and provide a very clear process for teachers.

The issue of introducing formative assessment strategies to teachers on a large scale was addressed by Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black (2004) in their pilot study of the effects of formative assessment strategies on student achievement. In this study, 24 teachers engaged in formative assessment practices over an 18-month period. While the results of the study were generally positive, the authors were unable to definitely determine the cause for the improved learner achievement. This inability to make clear conclusions led to further research into how to support teachers, and how to implement assessment for learning strategies on a large scale (Black & Wiliam 2009, Wiliam 2011, Wiliam 2016).

In their same pilot study of the effects of formative assessment strategies on student achievements, Lee and Wiliam (2005) looked directly at the impact that assessment for learning had on two of the teachers who were part of a larger pilot involving 24 teachers in total. The researchers followed the teachers over an 18-month period, and while they noticed an improvement in the teaching practices of both teachers, the researchers posited that it was more a result of developing practices that they already had, rather than making radical changes to their approach. The authors were unable to determine in their study how the teaching changes came about, thus limiting their ability to recommend policies. However, they were able to identify six important factors that contribute to a successful change in teaching practice.

The first factor was that there was credible evidence in the research of the effectiveness of formative assessment thus giving teachers confidence and motivation to move forward. Secondly, the teachers noted that the practical ideas available for them to use right away gave them a starting point and made it easier to accept and adopt the

practices. Third, the support from their colleagues throughout the process also helped keep them on track and motivated. The fourth factor that emerged was that the opportunity for teachers to reflect on, in, and about action allowed them to deepen their understanding of their teaching practice. The fifth key factor was the time it took to begin implementing changes was an important consideration for teachers. For most teachers, it took more than a year for the changes to begin to modify their classroom practices. Finally, the last factor noted in the article was the importance of allowing teachers the flexibility to move at their own pace. These six factors were key steps towards developing an implementation formula that would work on a larger scale.

In relation to my study, these six factors have been taken into consideration by practitioners and administrators as PBLA continues to be implemented across Canada. As PBLA has been introduced to teachers, they have been given plenty of flexibility, strategies, and time to integrate PBLA into their classroom practices.

Building on these six factors, Black and Wiliam (2009) developed a series of five aims related to successful implementation of assessment for learning:

- 1) Establish a theoretical framework of formative assessment based on key strategies developed in their previous work (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam 2005) (see list of strategies on page 16)
- 2) Locate formative interactions within more comprehensive theories of pedagogy.
- 3) Link and critique other theoretical writings.
- 4) Produce ideas that would lead to improved practice.
- 5) Produce ideas for future research

Black and Wiliam used their theoretical framework as a base to move onto their other aims, which helped set the context of what formative assessment is today and how it is applied in a variety of settings.

Once assessment for learning practices began to become prominent within classroom pedagogy, Wiliam wrote an article to clarify exactly what is meant by assessment for learning (Wiliam 2011). He looked at the history of formative assessment and examined the differing approaches that have been described using the term formative assessment. This article was useful in establishing a common understanding of the terminology. It built on previous research, and served the purpose of ensuring that the terms formative assessment and assessment of learning were used in the right context. It is clear that Wiliam and Black have authored the seminal works on formative assessment.

In my own research, I explored the ideas found in this literature review in order to improve my classroom practice. I believe that the findings from my study will resonate with other instructors engaged in PBLA implementation. One of Black and Wiliam's (2009) suggestions for further research was to explore the impact of formative assessment practices on different types of learners with different learning needs. I have addressed this suggestion with my focus on adult newcomers in a specific ESL learning setting. With that in mind, in the next sections I will specifically focus on the special considerations of adult education for the instructor.

2.3 Special Considerations of Adult Education

In the area of adult education, Malcolm Knowles has provided the seminal work on andragogy. When referring to the discipline of adult education, Knowles (1970) uses

the term andragogy to refer to the unique characteristics that adults have as learners. While there are some characteristics that can be attributed to both younger learners and adult learners, it is important to consider the unique implications that teaching adults has on the instructor. One of the most important aspects of teaching adults is the experience that they bring to the classroom. “Adults enter into any undertaking with a different background of experience from that of their youth. Having lived longer, they have accumulated a greater *volume* of experience. But they have also had different *kinds* of experience” (Knowles, 1970). Corder (2002) takes this concept of experience one step further: “When you teach a group of adults, you must bear in mind that they are all experts... They can do things you can’t; they know things you don’t; they are experts in life” (Corder, 2002, p. 8).

Recognizing this experience is vital when teaching adults, as their experiences shape the way they learn, how they interact with the other learners, and the types of materials that are appropriate. According to McGrath (2009), “andragogy in essence aims to look at how learning in the classroom can be made more attractive for adult students” (p. 109). One way to do this is to “make your students your partners in the learning process” (Corder, 2002, p. 8). Creating a classroom that maximizes the learning for everyone requires a teacher to demonstrate to the learners that their experiences are valued, and that their time in class is of value to them.

Of course, along with experience comes significant challenges for adult learners. They come into a class with significant experience gained from life, but life does not stop once the class begins. “One major obstacle that adult learners encounter is situational factors beyond their control including obtaining employment, child care, health crisis,

financial troubles, legal dilemma, personal or family hindrances, and transportation (Belzer, 1998; Wonacott, 2001 in Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 474). Adult learners also do not exist in a silo, so along with the aforementioned challenges, “the adult learner is [also] a social being who in relation to learning has to contend with his individual person and the social and societal environment he belongs to” (Yap, 2009, p. 906). For these reasons, special consideration needs to be taken when teaching in an adult education context. In the next sections, I will examine the different aspects of adult education that directly relate to PBLA.

2.3.1 Self-directed learning

One of the key principles of PBLA is that “students are encouraged to become more autonomous, active, and self-aware language learners, engaged in and responsible for their learning (Pettis, 2014, p.7). In this way, self-directed learning becomes a key model in adult education.

This model [self-directed learning] contains three interdependent dimensions that lead to self-directed learning. Garrison’s first dimension is self-management-learners taking control of the context of their learning so as to reach their personal goals. The emphasis is on the social context rather than on autonomous learning. The second dimension is self-monitoring-learners assess their progress toward their learning goals. The third dimension is motivation-motivation to participate in activities that further learning. Together, these dimensions contribute to self-directed learning (Cranton, 2013, p. 101).

These adult learning principles are of particular relevance to this study. In the classroom in which the present study took place, self-directed learning occurs through a

continuous cycle of needs assessments, goal setting activities, learning reflections, peer and self-assessments, and check-in discussions. These practices help to shape the direction of the learning ways that meet learners' needs and goals. I will now examine these three dimensions in more detail.

2.3.1.1 Self-management

The first dimension of self-directed learning is self-management. "Developing a goal is important to adult learners, because as adult learners they desire to make progress toward accomplishing the goal" (Comings, 2007 in Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 478). Further, "appropriately set goals direct students' attention to completing tasks, can motivate them to greater effort and persistence in performing tasks that move them towards achieving goals, and can harness helpful affective responses" (Day & Tosey, 2011, p. 518).

When learners set goals, there are a variety of approaches a teacher can use to facilitate this process. The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time based) goals model (Day & Tosey, 2011) is the one that I am the most familiar with from my educational background as an instructor and athletic background as a marathon runner and running coach, and the one that I currently use. However, Day and Tosey (2011) present two alternative models to goal setting in the secondary and further education context. One model focuses on setting an appropriate goal using eight criteria: "goal specificity; their proximity in time; hierarchically organized; congruence between goals of self and others; degree of difficulty; self-generated; level of conscious awareness; and whether goals are process orientated or performance orientated" (Day & Tosey, 2011, p.

518). The second model is the ‘well-formed outcome’s model which the authors argue “may have the potential to offer a more rigorous, holistic and research-informed approach to target or goal setting and action planning than SMART targets, given its more explicit fit with Zimmerman’s (2008) criteria” (Day & Tosey, 2011, p. 530). This framework uses key elements of the SMART approach as well as Zimmerman’s eight criteria, while also including more focus on positivity and relationships. In my classroom, I used a blend of these three approaches, which I will discuss in more detail in the discussion chapter.

2.3.1.2 Self-monitoring

The second dimension of self-directed learning is self-monitoring. In my classroom, the context for the present study, self-monitoring was facilitated through learning reflections, self-assessments, and peer-assessments. In the literature, there is a lot of research related to self-reflection, but most of the literature focuses on reflective practitioners (Ostorga 2006, Stewart 2010, Usuki 2002) as opposed to adult ESL learners. A key article that does pertain to reflective thinking in all educational contexts is written by Rodgers (2002), who sought to clarify the definition of reflective thinking, analyzed the work of John Dewey to break down reflective thinking into four distinct criteria. These four criteria directly relate to the experience in my classroom, which I will discuss in more detail in the discussion chapter.

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of

learning possible, and endures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.

2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.
3. Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845)

Requiring personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others, reflection is both a process which builds meanings and a systematic, rigorous way of thinking moving a learner from one experience to the next all while facilitating a deeper understanding in the learner through interaction with others (Rodgers, 2002 in Kayapinar, 2016, p. 1673).

Self-assessments and peer-assessments are also integral parts of the self-monitoring dimension of PBLA.

[They have] the capacity to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning by requiring them to provide their own feedback, contribute to their own assessment and to the assessment of their peers. Having students provide feedback improves their judgment, assessment ability and critical evaluation skills (Willey & Gardner, 2010, p. 431).

There is significant evidence shown through research (e.g., Rivers, 2001; Willey & Gardner, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Masoun, 2013; Casallas & Castellanos, 2016) that adult learners who are adept at self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies show significant improvement compared to their counterparts who do not engage in self-assessment and/or peer-assessment practices. In Willey and Gardner's (2010) study, they found that "the

overall results support the conclusion that using self and peer assessment to provide multiple opportunities to practice and receive feedback in different contexts encouraged peer learning, increased engagement and students' desire to learn" (Willey and Gardner, 2010,p. 441), which was a result echoed in the afore cited studies. In the same study, Willey and Gardner (2010) noted that the learners originally felt uncomfortable assessing each other's work, which they argued was a reason to make it a regular part of the learning activities, rather than shying away from it. The more that the learners peer-assessed, the more their confidence grew. Furthermore, the collaborative conversations that transpired during the peer assessments "were a timely forum for students to test and receive feedback on their knowledge and understanding" (Willey and Gardner, 2010, p. 441). This increase in confidence and having timely feedback through peer assessments were a key finding in my research and will be addressed in the discussion chapter.

While these findings were important, Baleghizadeh and Masoun (2013) proposed that more research needs to be done on self-assessment to investigate the influence that cultural and social backgrounds may have on self-assessment. These influences also appeared in my research, and I will expand on this in the discussions chapter.

2.3.1.3 Motivation

The third and final dimension of self-directed learning is motivation. For adults, motivation changes through their experiences:

The varied motivations of adult learners, which change during the different stages/needs in their lives, add to the complexity of their nature. Motivational factors to participate in adult learning social relationships, external expectations,

social welfare, professional development, escape/stimulation and cognitive interest dynamically changes (Dymock 2007) based on one's self direction, experience, readiness to learn and immediacy of application aside from which stages of life/needs they are in (Yap, 2009, p. 914).

With these challenges comes a need to maintain and cultivate motivation.

“Researchers have found that adult learners come to adult education programs with the adequate motivation to be successful but along the way the barriers that adult learners endure *demotivate* them” (Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984; Bean, Partanen, Wright, & Aaronson, 1989; Quigley, 1998 in Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 474). Further to this, Petty and Thomas (2014) referred to a study conducted by Christophel and Gorham (1995) in which “adult learners perceived motivation as a personally owned problem, yet perceived the demotivation as a teacher-owned problem” (p. 475). This literature suggests that both teachers and learners influence motivation in adult learning settings.

To conclude the section on adult education, it is important to return to the literature on formative assessment and the role of the teacher and the learner in this process. Although learners are central to the formative assessment cycle, educators are also key players in supporting self-directed approaches to learning and assessment. The next sections will focus specifically on formative assessment in adult education, and the impact on the adult learner.

2.4 Formative Assessment in Adult Education

When specifically looking adult education, there are several articles of importance on formative assessment. In response to the work of Wiliam and Black on formative

assessment, and their success in getting the British government to begin implementing formative assessment practices on a large scale in the public school system, Torrance (2007) examined the impact of formative assessment in adult education. He noted that the practice of assessment in adult education has moved from assessment of learning, to assessment for learning, to assessment as learning. He made the argument that learners were becoming too reliant on the feedback from the instructors, which impedes their learning. The learners become too focused on the task criteria, and the feedback that they receive helps them gain higher achievement in the specific context of the task, but this comes at the cost of reducing the quality and validity of the outcomes achieved. Torrance also argued that assessment for learning practices actually decreases learner autonomy instead of increasing it, which contradicts Wiliam and Black's assertions:

Thus the supposedly educative formative process of identifying and sharing assessment criteria, and providing feedback on strengths and weaknesses to learners, is ensconced at the heart of the learning experience in the post-secondary sector, infusing every aspect of the learner experience. But it is a process which appears to weaken rather than strengthen the development of learner autonomy. (Torrance, 2007, p. 291)

Willey and Garner (2010) echoed this concern of the potential for formative assessment to actually decrease learner autonomy. "Hence, there is a danger that ongoing feedback if not focused correctly (to inspire and motivate students to learn rather than circumvent their reflection and thinking) may encourage dependent rather than independent learning" (p. 431).

The Torrance (2007) article is important as it examined the validity and the weaknesses of assessment for learning practices. In adult education programs where some learners are more interested in meeting the criteria to complete the course, rather than actually learning and retaining the material, having an instructor providing them with ongoing feedback on how to meet the criteria could certainly take away from the overall learning. In these classrooms, the goal is often to do whatever is necessary to complete the class as efficiently as possible. It could also invalidate the outcomes as the learners are narrowing their focus. In this sense, all of the formative assessment ends up more as summative assessment as each assessment is reduced to meeting necessary criteria in order to complete the task.

However, the missing piece may be the shift to assessment *as* learning. In order for formative assessment to be effective, the locus of control must shift to the learner to ensure that they become responsible for their own learning (Kristmanson&Lafargue, 2014, p.47). It is the learner who is ultimately responsible for learning, and they need to reflect on their own learning and set their own goals, thus moving toward more independent learning. In my study, I explored this issue by investigating whether my formative feedback improves learner independence and indeed shifts that locus of control, or only helps them to complete the assigned tasks.

Looney (2007) looked at how formative assessment practices can benefit adult learners in language, literacy, and numeracy programs. This research expanded on Looney's (2005) previous work on the effects of formative assessment in high school learning environments. In the 2007 article, the author examined current policy and practice on formative assessment in adult in a range of adult educational settings in a

range of national contexts, as well as the key issues for the development of formative assessment. Looney found that as of 2007, most countries participating in their study did not have any specific policies related to formative assessment. However, many programs were using a task-based approach, language portfolios, and short and long-term goal setting, and portfolio review sessions. In order to implement formative assessment practices effectively, the author made several important recommendations for future research. First of all, she recommended that instructors examine how their own views about teaching, assessment and learning shape their practice. Moreover, she suggested that promising practices should reflect “practitioner wisdom” (Looney, 2007, p.384). Further, she recommended exploring what formative approaches can be easily transferred from research with younger learners, and what may need to be re-thought for the adult learning context. She also identified the need for empirical research on the most effective approaches to diagnostic assessment, questioning and feedback, and tools for assessment of learning in personal, community and working life, as well as the impact of testing on the practice of formative assessment. Finally, Looney (2007) recommended a need for the development of materials and resources to address the broad range of learning needs identified in formative processes.

Looney’s research is important as it focuses specifically on adult learners, as is the case with my own proposed research. While many strategies proposed by researchers working with younger learners can be adapted to adult learning context, special consideration needs to be taken to ensure that their particular needs are addressed. Fortunately, there is increasing evidence in the literature that assessment for learning practices are effective methods to raise adult learner achievement (Rivers, 2001; Willey

& Gardner, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Masoun, 2013). It is unclear, however, exactly how these practices affect the learning and teaching experiences. Although formative assessment is now being adopted as educational policy in many jurisdictions, there are still very few studies conducted on the impact on adult learners and teachers.

One such study on the impact of formative assessment on learners was examined by Areiza (2013). This was a qualitative study involving 9 students in an English as a second-language (ESL) program. The results of the study showed that the learners felt that formative assessment helped them achieve greater results, gave them more autonomy in the class, and helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses. This contrasts with the findings of Torrance (2007), who suggested that learner autonomy was weakened by formative assessment practices. Although the small number of participants in Areiza's (2013) study did not present enough evidence to show a definitive impact of formative assessment on learners, it still showed some positive outcomes of this kind of assessment. The difference between the findings in Areiza's (2013) study and the Torrance's (2007) study could be in the use of self-assessment. Areiza (2013) used a cycle in which the learners engaged in self-reflection followed by a one-on-one conference with the instructor. This cycle moved the formative assessment into assessment *as* learning, which shifts the onus onto the learners to improve their own language skills. Areiza's (2013) study is not only relevant to my proposed study because it is set in an ESL context, but it is also an example of classroom-based research where the teacher also acts as the researcher. I also performed this dual role within my research.

In Yi's (2012) empirical study of formative assessment practices, she also found that formative assessment practices appeared to have positive results on the language

learning of the adults in her ESL learning centre. Comparing an experimental class to a control class, she found that the experimental class, which utilized formative assessment practices, had a higher satisfaction rate of the class experience. However, the research did not pinpoint which aspects of the instructional practices were effective or ineffective. In my study, I attempted to isolate the various aspects of formative assessment to determine which aspects contributed to the learners' progress, and which aspects needed to be improved upon to maximize effectiveness, as well as which aspects were not effective at all.

In Drew's (2015) master's thesis, she also examined formative assessment practices in adult newcomer ESL classes. Specifically, she examined how the ESL learners viewed Portfolio Based Language Assessment practices. These practices included many *assessment for learning* strategies such as self-assessment, peer-assessment, reflections, and goal setting. Her study included 70 learners studying in a Language Instruction for Newcomer (LINC) program studying at Canadian Language Benchmark 5, which is considered intermediate level. Overall, the learners found value in the approach, but found that learning reflections, goal setting, self-assessment, and peer-assessment strategies were not as helpful in progressing their language skills as instructor feedback and learner conferences. These perceptions were echoed in the Kristmanson et al. (2013) study in which grade 12 French language learners also shared concerns about the value of self-assessments and goal setting activities.

For example, when goal setting was perceived as imposed rather than negotiated, students resisted. Self-assessment also posed challenges for students as they had a difficult time determining whether or not they could produce evidence that they

had indeed successfully and independently (i.e., without assistance from peers or the teacher) completed a Can Do-related task (p. 478).

In my research, I further examined these claims through targeted questionnaires, group discussions, and one on one interviews which will be examined in Chapter 3. The results of Drew's and Kristmanson et. al.'s research challenge the assertions of Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, and Wiliam (2005) who identified the self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies as being non-negotiables for assessment for learning practices. However, those strategies were intended for a younger audience. Leahy et al.'s research did not differentiate between adult learners and young learners. As demonstrated by Torrance (2007), Looney (2009), and Drew (2015), more research needs to be done to address the how formative assessment works in an adult education context. Kristmanson et al.'s (2013) research also points to the importance of "finding ways to help learners value self-assessment while also teaching them the how-to of self-assessment..." (p. 481). I hope to contribute to this research conversation with a study focusing on adult learners and by exploring strategies to help learners value self-assessment and maximize their language learning.

Stiggins and Chapuis (2008) shed light on this issue when comparing the differences between assessment for and assessment as learning. In assessment as learning, the onus is on the students to direct their own learning.

While formative assessment as traditionally defined can contribute to effective instruction, it is the practice of assessment for learning that wields the proven power to help a whole new generation of students take responsibility for their own

learning, become lifelong learners, and achieve at much higher levels (Stiggins and Chapuis, 2008, p. 44).

2.5 Significance of the Study

The theory of formative assessment has been well developed, and there is some empirical evidence that it can positively influence achievement. However, there is a need for research to be done in the areas of adult education, the impact that implementing assessment for learning practices has on instructors, and how learner perspectives inform teacher practices. In particular, there is a need for more field-based research to take the theoretical notions into the dynamic and practical world of the classroom.

First, there needs to be more research that examines the implementation of formative assessment in adult education, and in particular, ESL in adult education. For some adult learners, life-long learning may not be as important as the completion of the program and obtaining the necessary certificate. As shown by Knowles (1970), Torrance (2007), Drew (2015), and Looney (2007), adult education provides a different set of challenges and motivations. Adults are often not in school for a long period of time like younger learners. They are often looking to acquire as much information as possible in the shortest amount of time, and do what is necessary to get the certification that they need, or the employment that they require. As Drew's (2015) findings showed, practices such as self-assessments and peer-assessments may be perceived by some learners as a "waste of time" (p.49). This is especially true for adults who have previously studied in a very traditional manner where the instructor holds all the knowledge and the student is required to absorb the information. Instructional efforts aimed at helping learners adapt to

assessment for learning practices may take time that they feel could be better spent on learning the what they perceive to be the core knowledge based content of the class. Certainly more field-based research needs to be done in this area. Specifically, and relevant to the present study, more research needs to be done in ESL programs.

Another area that needs further research is the impact of adopting new practices on the instructors both pedagogically and in terms of time management. Adapting to a new set of practices can be a daunting challenge for instructors. While flexibility was encouraged by Wiliam and Lee (2005), there is a need for a best practices model to address the implementation of assessment for learning practices in small manageable steps. Further research could contribute to providing a continuum of practices to be implemented over time. With the extra time spent on learning and implementing assessment for learning strategies, the time normally devoted to learner interaction may be sacrificed.

2.6 Purpose of Study

Based on the research outlined in the literature review, I intend to address the following questions in my research:

- 1) What are the learners' perceptions of assessment for learning practices using the PBLA framework?
- 2) How can the effectiveness of formative assessment strategies be improved in Language Instruction for Newcomer to Canada (LINC) classes?
- 3) How did implementing assessment for learning practices affect me as an instructor?

Through the present research, my goal was to contribute to the growing body of research on this topic through a qualitative research using a pragmatic teacher-action approach. The purpose of my study was to explore various aspects of PBLA from a pedagogical practice point of view as well as through perceptions by a group of adult learners. This study built upon the research on how the learners perceived the framework to be working (Drew, 2015) by exploring the factors contributing to the learners' perspectives on PBLA.

The specific aspects of PBLA that I focused on in this research included goal setting, learner reflections, peer/self-assessments, and action-oriented feedback. For each aspect, the focus of the research was to determine if the particular component of the PBLA helped participants progress in their language ability, and to explore why they felt that way about each component. In this study, I used a teacher action-research approach to adapt the various aspects of PBLA as necessary in order to explore better practices. In the following chapter, I will describe the research design that allowed me to address the research questions developed as a result of my experiences and the review of the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Methodology

In order to address my research questions, I adopted a qualitative approach that took a pragmatic view of the research process. For this reason, I used an action-research design. Merriam and Simpson (2000) distinguish action research from other kinds of social science research in three ways:

1. The researcher serves as facilitator for problem solving and, in some cases, as a catalyst between the research findings and those individuals most likely to benefit from the findings.
2. Results of research are intended for immediate application by those engaged in the research or by those for whom the research was initiated.
3. The design of action research is formulated while the research is in progress, rather than being totally predetermined at the onset of the study.

(Merriam & Simpson, 2000)

This accurately captures my methodological approach as I actively sought out any problems with the various aspects of PBLA in an attempt to improve the language learning process for my students. The data gleaned were applied immediately to my teaching, and my design was continually reformulated throughout the research as problems and solutions arose.

In action research, the researcher follows a spiral of self-reflective cycles which includes the following: plan a change, act and observe the process and consequences of the change, reflect on these processes and consequences, replan, act and observe again, reflect again (Kemmis and Taggart 2005, p. 563). During my research, I followed this

cycle by introducing various aspects of PBLA to the participants, collecting feedback from the participants on the change as well as observing how the change affected the class, reflected on the impact of the change on the class, planned and then implemented new changes when appropriate, and continued through the cycle until the semester concluded.

My research also evolved throughout the semester as I reacted to what was happening in the class and collected data when it was most appropriate to do so, as opposed to followed a pre-determined timeline.

Finally, my research was also pragmatic in that it was my intent to: use the multiple methods of data collection to best answer the research question, ...employ multiple sources of data collection, ...focus on the practical implications of the research, and ... emphasize the importance of conducting research that best address the research problem (Creswell, 2013, p.28-29).

This pragmatism was essential to my research as I was seeking to use the data I collected to make practical changes to my classes that will hopefully resonate with other instructors who can make similar changes in their classes to more confidently implement PBLA.

3.2 Context and Design

The research involved the learners in my CLB 6 class at a settlement and language organization in a small urban centre. To put CLB 6 in perspective, the learners are able to read short news articles, participate in most types of social interactions, and write short emails. There were 18 learners in the class, all of whom participated in the study. The learners were from a variety of cultural, educational and employment

backgrounds with a mix of language levels as shown in the following table (educational background data was not formally collected).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Cultural Backgrounds	Mexico, Israel, Russia, Japan, China, Armenia, Jordan, Iraq
Gender	Male: 3, Female 15
Employment Backgrounds	accountant, human resources, teacher, lab technician, project manager, business owner, nurse, taxi driver, lawyer, early childhood educator

Table 2: Numbers of Students at CLB Levels for the 4 Skills

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
CLB 4	1	3	5	11
CLB 5	14	10	8	4
CLB 6	2	1	4	1
CLB 7	1	4	1	2

They were all adults with various settlement goals such as attending post-secondary education, finding employment, volunteering in the community, etc. The class was a 16-week program that consisted of 22.5 hours of classroom instruction per week. In this study I will use the terms learner/participant interchangeably, and I will also sometimes include myself as a participant in order to reflect the dual roles that they and I played during this research.

3.3 Data Collection

The study involved the collection of data from four sources: questionnaires, group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and my own reflective journal. The data were collected in three distinct phases.

Phase one involved a questionnaire and focus group discussion. The questionnaire asked the learners about their previous experience with PBLA, their current perceptions of PBLA, and their perceptions on how each aspect of PBLA will contribute to their language progress. This questionnaire was piloted in a prior class in order to ensure that the questionnaire was as effective as possible (see Appendix B for complete questionnaire). The questionnaire asked six questions related to their previous experiences with various aspects of PBLA in other language classes. For those who had experience with PBLA, it gave them an opportunity to share their views coming into the class. For those who were new to PBLA, it gave them an opportunity to share if they believed that the various aspects of PBLA would be effective in helping them improve their English language skills. The questionnaire was given to them during the second week of class.

Following the questionnaire, there was a large group discussion (similar to a focus group interview) which gave the learners a chance to vocalize their perceptions on PBLA (see Appendix C for complete group interview format). This was done to enrich the data from the questionnaire. The protocols for the discussion followed the recommendations of Creswell (2013), who sets out nine steps for interviewing. First, I decided on the open-ended research questions that were answered by the class. I had already identified that it

would be my own class that would answer the questions because of the teacher-action approach. The type of interview was a group discussion as this allowed me to gather the richest data possible. I used a digital recorder to record the interviews. An open-ended interview guide (see Appendix C) was followed to ensure that I asked the questions in a way that the learners would understand. I piloted these questions with a prior class to ensure that I was able to refine the questions and adapt my procedures. This group discussion took place within the regular class time. Because this was an activity that normally happens in my classes at select periods during each semester, it helped ensure that the learners were in a comfortable place, free from distraction, and would not interrupt their regular schedule. During the interview, an attempt was made to get feedback from all students. The discussion was approximately 30 minutes in length. After each data collection phase, I analyzed the responses, reflected in my journal, and planned to implement any suggestions that emerged from the data collection.

The second phase involved collecting individual feedback from the learners throughout the 16 weeks. Originally, I planned to collect the data after each aspect was introduced, and then two more times throughout the term prior to the final one-on-one interviews. However, at the mid-way point in the course, I began to sense a bit of tension in the class that the data collection was becoming laborious for the participants. At that point, I made the decision to reduce the amount of data I collected from questionnaires, and focused more on group discussions. After they were introduced to each aspect, I gathered feedback on the perceived effectiveness of that aspect (see Appendix D for complete questionnaires), analyzed the feedback, and reflected in my journal. The focus of this feedback was to determine if their perceptions changed throughout the course,

and/or if they had any suggestions to improve that particular aspect. All learners agreed to participate in the study, so no special considerations needed to be made to non-participating learners. (see section 3.5 for ethical considerations)

The third and final phase involved one-on-one interviews with each participant. The one-on-one interviews consisted of two parts (see Appendix D for complete interview structure) and lasted 20 minutes in length in order to accommodate all learners within the duration of the regular class hours. The first part of the interview consisted of a learner conference in which the learner and I reviewed their language portfolio and discussed their language growth within the class. The second part of the interview consisted of research specific questions. I once again followed the protocol as outlined by Creswell (2013) for one-on-one interviewing. As mentioned, the interviews took place during regular class hours in the regular classroom. There were no classes on that day, so the setting was quiet and comfortable as each learner only came for the interview at their scheduled time. The 15-20 minute interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions (see Appendix E for complete interview format).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

When conducting the research, there were several ethical considerations, including informed consent, the power dynamic as a teacher/researcher, coercion, confidentiality, disruption of study. Formally, I submitted a proposal to the university's Research and Ethics Board (REB) and received approval to conduct my study. This REB process required me to clearly demonstrate that there would be minimal risk to the participants of my study.

At the beginning of the first class, I explained the research that I was conducting. I clearly described my role as a teacher, and how the research was designed to improve the quality of teaching in the classroom. I felt that it was important to do this on the very first day because I wanted to immediately begin developing a learner-centred culture. I informed the class that the decision to participate or not participate would not have any adverse impact on the class activities or their involvement in the class. I informed them that participating in the research would potentially have a beneficial impact as their feedback would be immediately applied to the class to improve the quality of instruction. There was no incentive offered, and I was clear that there would be no consequences for not participating. They were also informed that they could opt in or opt out at any time during the research. No other participant would be aware of who was or was not participating in the research as all learners would be participating in the group discussions and filling out the questionnaires.

As the language class was a high-level language class (CLB 6), no translators were needed for the explanation. Also, the consent forms, questionnaires, and group discussion questions were piloted in the preceding class to minimize the possibility for misunderstanding. In addition to being able to ask questions about the research in class, students were also given the opportunity to ask me questions one-on-one if they needed further clarifications. Finally, I asked a female colleague to be present during my explanation, and she made herself available to them to answer any linguistic questions if they were not comfortable asking me for these sorts of clarifications. After this, I left the room and she collected the signed informed consent letters and put them into an envelope while giving any necessary linguistic clarifications.

I understand the issue of the power dynamic between a teacher and the students. However, in my teaching I work very hard from the very first day of class to create a classroom culture that is learner-centred, goal focused, and based on the students' needs. I present myself as a facilitator of learning rather than the keeper of knowledge. In the classroom, I strive to create a power dynamic that is equally balanced between the students and myself. In my explanation of the research, I was transparent about the intent. There was no hidden agenda and the purpose of the study was articulated in a clear straight forward fashion: I wanted to use the students' feedback to improve the effectiveness of my teaching, and thus enhance the learning of the students. I also mentioned that their feedback may help other teachers and learners working with similar formative assessment learning tools. I underscored that no individual would be identified in the research, and that the benefits will outweigh any potential risks.

In terms of class disruption, I informed them that there would be minimal extra work required by the participants as the group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and questionnaires were already a regular part of my class routine. I also informed them that if they felt that the research was becoming a disruption, that they should approach me.

For ethical reasons, in this research participant numbers will be used to ensure anonymity. The decision to use participant numbers instead of pseudonyms was made out of consideration for the multi-ethnic make-up of the class, as well as the disproportionate number of women to men in the class. Using male names would decrease the amount of anonymity, as would the use of ethnically appropriate names. All data collected were kept on an encrypted flash drive that was backed-up on a password protected personal laptop.

3.5 Data Collection Timeline

The following table shows the data collection timeline that was used in my research.

Table 1

Date	Data Collection
September 14 th , 2016	Collected initial questionnaire and had group discussion to determine the preconceptions of PBLA
September 15 th to 25 th	Collected artefacts for goal setting, learning reflection, self/peer assessment, assessment tasks with teacher-feedback
September 26 th	Conducted a questionnaire and a group discussion on the effectiveness of formative assessment from the instructor
September 26 th to October 5th	Continued to collect artefacts for goal setting, learning reflection, self/peer assessment, assessment task with teacher-feedback that have been adapted based on learner feedback from initial data collection
October 11th	

October 12 th to October 21 st	Learners completed questionnaires on goal setting and learning reflections. We had a group discussion as a follow-up.
October 24 th , 2016	Continued to collect artefacts for goal setting, learning reflection, self/peer assessment, assessment task with teacher-feedback that have been adapted based on learner feedback from initial data collection
	Conducted a semi-structured group interview on the effectiveness of peer-assessments and self-assessments
October 25 th to November 25 th	Continued to collect artefacts for goal setting, learning reflection, self/peer assessment, assessment task with teacher-feedback that have been adapted based on learner feedback from initial data collection
November 28 th	Learners completed a questionnaire on the effectiveness of goal setting and learning reflections
November 29 th to December	Continued to collect artefacts for goal setting, learning reflection, self/peer assessment, assessment task with

teacher-feedback that have been adapted based on
learner feedback from initial data collection

December 12th, 2016

Conducted one-on-one interviews with each
participant

3.6 Data Analysis

As previously discussed in section 3.1, Kemmis and Taggart (2005) outline the process of participatory action research as “a spiral of self-reflective cycles” (Kemmis and Taggart, 2005, p. 563) involving six steps. The first step is to plan a change. In my research, I planned to change the learning processes of my learners by introducing a new teaching framework that incorporated *assessment for learning* strategies. From my previous experience, I knew that most learners entering my class had minimal exposure to assessment for learning strategies such as goal setting, learning reflections, peer/self-assessment, and formative feedback. I also planned to gather feedback from the learners in order to improve my own teaching. Most of my learners were new to PBLA, so I was able to act and observe the process and consequences of those changes (step two). I then reflected on the processes and consequences (step three), replanned (step four), acted and observed again (step five), reflected again (step six), and so on.

For qualitative research as whole, Creswell (2013) outlines the general process for analyzing data:

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (p.180).

For my data analysis, I collected and analyzed data on an ongoing basis. As per the action-research cycle, after each data collection, I analyzed the data in order to adapt the various aspects of the formative assessment strategies. I then introduced the changes into my teaching immediately. For the semi-structured group interviews, I recorded, transcribed, and then coded the transcripts. Throughout the process, I kept a reflective journal which was used to examine the impact on my teaching, as well as the impact on the class.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

As discussed in chapter 1, I have developed a passion for PBLA, and I want to see PBLA be successfully implemented across Canada. At this stage of the process, the focus has shifted from implementation to sustainability. For this reason, my research will have no influence over whether or not PBLA is implemented. Instead, the goal of the study was to gain further insights into formative assessment practices that might resonate with other instructors, while also giving a voice to the learners, thereby contributing to the overall sustainability of PBLA. I recognize my biases, and I was explicit in acknowledging those biases in this research, specifically in Chapter 1. To ensure reliability, I used an audit trail (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p.102) to describe in detail

how the data was collected and how decisions were made, as well as keeping a reflective journal detailing the process.

For validity, Creswell (2013) outlines eight strategies to help ensure this and recommends that researchers use at least two of them in any given study. In my study I have used triangulation, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, and clarifying researcher bias.

The first strategy that I used was *triangulation*, which involves making use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013). In my study, I gathered data from targeted questionnaires, group interviews, one-on-one interviews, and my own reflective journal in order to address the issue of validity.

Secondly, I used *prolonged engagement and persistent observation* which included “building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher” (Creswell, 2013, p.250) to help me make decisions about what is salient to study. I have been teaching that particular language level for the past six years, which means that I am very familiar with the issues that often arise in the class. I have also been using PBLA for the past five years, which gives me an expertise in the area. I also work very hard to develop a rapport with my learners, a process that is facilitated by the fact that the class runs twenty-five hours a week for sixteen weeks.

Finally, through my research I have attempted to be as transparent as possible in clarifying my bias in terms of my background with PBLA, and my desire to aid in its

sustainability. In the next chapter, I will present my findings as gathered through my data collection.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, using the participatory action research model as outlined in section 3.1, I present the results in chronological order for each of the five PBLA aspects (peer assessment, self-assessment, goal setting, learning reflections, instructor feedback) to show the action research spiral. To that end, I will present the findings from each phase of data collection along with my reflections on the data and any subsequent actions I took as a result. When directly quoting participants, I will include any spelling or grammar errors to maintain authenticity.

The three research questions that I will address in this chapter are as follows:

1) What are the learners' perceptions of assessment for learning practices using the PBLA framework?

2) How can the effectiveness of formative assessment strategies be improved in Language Instruction for Newcomer to Canada (LINC) classes?

3) How did implementing assessment for learning practices affect me as an instructor?

I will discuss the first two research questions in terms of the five aspects of PBLA in terms of the data collected. In the discussion chapter, I will elaborate further on

implications of the second question for teachers who are implementing PBLA in their classes. The third research question relates to my reflection on and synthesis of the data collected in the first two questions. Some of these reflective data are interwoven into this chapter, but in Chapter 5, I will more directly address the third research question in my discussion.

4.2 Peer-assessments

During the second week of the term, I began my data collection by asking the learners to complete an initial questionnaire of their perceptions of the various aspects of PBLA. For each aspect, I explained what the term meant to ensure that they understood. For the peer assessment section, I asked the following questions:

- Have you done peer-assessments (assessing your classmates) in other language classes? Yes No
- If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?
- If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

Initially, the perceptions of peer assessments were mixed. In the questionnaire, 6 participants indicated that they had done peer assessments before, and 7 participants indicated that they had not. In this questionnaire, some participants expressed doubts as to whether or not they could accurately assess their peers. The following three quotations demonstrate the learners' unease with this ability to evaluate others:

“I'm not exactly sure the assessment by the same English level person is effective or not.” (Participant #14)

“If my classmates understand me and fix the mistakes it can help me, but if we speak about grammar it can be a problem. For example: the another student can make their mistakes and their fixing will not be correct.”(Participant #15)

“I think that it will be hard for student.”(Participant #12)

On the other hand, some learners felt that the peer assessments would be a helpful tool to help them progress in their language learning.

“Maybe it should be helpful. Then you help somebody at that time you may learn more.”(Participant #11)

“Yes, it helps me. This is also a good way to check my improves and achievements.” (Participant #1)

“I feel that the peer-assessments can encourage me to pay more attention to improve my language level because there might be a gap between us.”(Participant #8)

After collecting the questionnaires, we then proceeded to have a follow-up discussion and addressed the same questions to allow those who preferred to express themselves orally to add their voice to the research. During this discussion, it became clear that not everyone fully understood the nature of peer-assessments, so I explained again to help everyone understand further. After this explanation, most participants said that they had not actually done a peer assessment before they entered the class, which went against what some had indicated on the initial questionnaire. This discrepancy in

numbers of those that said they understood peer-assessments when responding on the questionnaire, and those who indicated that they actually understood during the group discussion, as well as the lack of initial understanding of peer assessments will be explored in the discussion chapter.

Overall, the discussion shifted more towards the positive benefits of peer assessments.

Participant #1 indicated that when you look at the work of others, it sometimes helps you as well while Participant #14 stated, “I want to say, when you help somebody, in something, ah you also can ah understand your mistakes”. Participant #15 and Participant #1 both felt that peer assessing would help them retain important information as indicated in the following quotations from the discussion:

“Also, when we see the other paper ah discuss with my friends, also the ideas will remain on our mind. We won't forget it” (Participant #15).

“Yes, and all together to see every ah letter, and discuss mistakes, because when we discuss my mistakes, and it is open for the public, for everybody, I remember my mistake better when other people start to discuss it, sometimes it is more um helpful” (Participant #1).

When reflecting on the responses to this initial conversation about peer assessment I realized that peer assessment is not self-evident. For most of the learners, this was a new concept, as their previous experiences in language classes had all been instructor centered. I also realized that I needed to explain the questionnaires and the key terms before handing out the questionnaires. During my explanation, it was clear that not everyone listened to my explanation as they were focused on the questionnaires, which

may have resulted in them misunderstanding the key terms. In the subsequent questionnaires, I ensured that I fully explained each question and term, and clarified any confusion prior to distributing the questionnaires.

During the initial discussion, in reference to peer assessment, one participant suggested that we start a practice of putting learner writing on the board and analyze each other's writing as a class. Other participants echoed that they agreed with this idea. After analyzing the response in the initial questionnaires and the group discussion, I made a change for my next writing lesson to give learners an opportunity to have their writing analyzed by the class. At the time, I was concerned that the learners whose work was being analyzed may be embarrassed by their mistakes and that the other learners may feel bored by the activity. However, I decided to implement the change based on the learner feedback on a volunteer basis.

In the next writing lesson, the learners wrote a cover letter. For those who volunteered, I scanned their writing and then put it up on the interactive whiteboard to analyze as a class. After this activity, I asked the class orally how they felt about having their writing being analyzed by the class, and how it felt to do the analyzing. Each learner who had their work analyzed agreed that it was helpful, and the rest of the class agreed that it was a very effective activity. This then became a regular part of the class routine.

After doing a variety of in-class peer assessment activities related to presentations, mock interviews, and cover letters, we had a group discussion about peer assessments on October 24th. The focal question was: Do you feel that you have been able to give each other productive feedback in your recent tasks? (presentations, interviews, cover letters) Why or why not? In this discussion, the responses were mostly positive, but there were

still some hesitations. On the positive side, the feeling was that now that the class was familiar with each other and it was a safe place to receive feedback from one another, which is demonstrated in the following quotation:

For presentation you prepare it in your home. It's very helpful, very helpful because ah you know how you want to show your information to others and receive the feedback from other people. And this is ah again, its friendly, all the people here is not in our company. It's only our friends and they can give you the real feedback from people who not think about the politically correct and other issue. (Participant #7)

When asked directly if the peer assessing was getting easier, most participants verbally or through nodding agreed that it was. They also agreed that it helped to deepen their own knowledge as shown in the following quotation: "Yes, it helps you to keep your knowledge. At the same time when you ah explain something, knowledge more deep." (Participant #14)

There were still some challenges though, as some still did not feel confident to correct certain errors, and were concerned about causing more confusion than clarity as indicated by the following quotations:

"At first, I was confused. I thought receiving somebody's advice, that's ok, but when I'm giving that advice to somebody, always I'm confused that is right or not, and also the other people at the same time confused".(Participant #12)

“To be honest, I think it’s little helpful. You know, at times I’m afraid of misleading somebodys to wrong direction”(Participant #8).

At the time, I was encouraged that the class was finding the peer assessment process easier. I also noted that they felt more comfortable assessing each other now that they felt that they were friends. This was especially important to me because I work hard in my class to foster an atmosphere that encourages the learners to look to each other for support as opposed to the instructor, which I feel helps to strengthen their bonds. To address the concerns of learners who still felt hesitations, I encouraged them to ask me for assistance when doing peer assessing if they were unsure. I also paid special attention to future peer assessing activities to ensure that they could do so with confidence.

At the end of the term, I had a one-on-one interview with each participant. These interviews combined the learner conference to review the portfolio, as well as research questions for data collection purposes. The learner conference to review the learner’s portfolio is done at the end of each semester and involves going over all of the artifacts in their portfolio to discuss their progress over the term. During the data collection part of the interviews, two participants still felt hesitant about the usefulness of the peer assessments. One participant in particular felt that having the same writing level as their peers meant that they could not properly peer assess:

Participant # 3: “the others, the peer... ah... peer assessment is sometimes not works”.

Participant/instructor:“Ok, why not?”

Participant # 3: “Um... because ah... for ah... for example. Writing, maybe we have ah... the same similar level, almost same level, we cannot give you some very positive key comment”.

On the other side, three different learners shared a positive experience with peer-assessments. One learner shared that they felt more confident after two months and now did not hesitate to offer advice to their friends.

Yeah, so assessment together with friends was difficult for me because ah..., especially at the beginning I didn't have confidence, so it is hard to tell other people, friends. But, um..., its changing. Yeah it is changing, especially after two months later, I have no hesitate to um ...telling other people mistake. (Participant # 12)

A key word in this quotation is friend. This idea of friendship had come up before in the discussions, and the data indicated that the development of friendships contributed to having more confidence in peer assessing.

Another participant felt that they benefited from having higher level language learners be the peer assessors. She was concerned though that she was not able to offer the same value back to her partners as this exchange demonstrates:

Participant # 2: “Ah, I think that this peer assessment. Peer assessment, its good for me because I think ah in class the level is different. Maybe ah I can I can ah absorb from other other students (references tablemates). I think their level is higher than I. Yes, I can feel useful from them, but maybe they cannot absorb from me, so maybe to them not very useful”.

Participant/instructor: “but to you it was useful?”

Participant # 2: “yeah, yes. It’s a balance, how to balance these things”.

Of note, out of the 14 one-on-one interviews, only five learners chose to comment

on peer assessments, which indicates that while it may have been effective for some, it did not have a large overall impact on the class.

Overall, the data suggest that peer assessment is an effective tool to help learners progress. Over the course of the term, the peer assessing became easier for the learners as they became more familiar with the process, and became more comfortable with each other.

4.3 Self Assessments

For the self-assessments, I also began with an initial questionnaire. The questions were:

- Have you done self-assessments (assessing yourself) in other language classes?
Yes No
- If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?
- If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

In this initial questionnaire, 7 participants indicated that they had done self-assessments before, and 6 participants indicated that they did not. The impact of this lack of exposure to self-assessments in their previous educational experiences will be explored in the discussion chapter. Overall, the responses to the questions were positive, with only two learners hesitant about self-assessments. The following quotation is an example of this type of sentiment:

“Maybe not because you can have incorrect self-assessment” (Participant #7).

For the learners who felt that self-assessment would help their language learning,

there were two perceived strengths. One strength of self-assessment that was identified was having the ability to make yourself aware of your current language ability as indicated by the following quotation:

“Assessing yourself, feedback, improving yourself. Self-assessing is important, which make you understanding what you are, weakness and good point” (Participant #3).

Another learner felt that self-assessment could help them progress in their language step by step: “Yes. I think they could. Because English study is step by step, so sometimes we are suppose to assess myself about this step and then go to next step” (Participant #2).

In the follow-up discussion, this topic did not generate much feedback, with only one learner expressing some hesitancy:

Participant/instructor: So what about assessing yourself?

Participant #7: this is a problem

Participant/instructor: why?

Participant #7: because we don't know see our mistakes

Participant/instructor: ok

Participant #7: we think it is ok, but maybe ten percent of all the writing exercise you can see mistakes. The other ninety percent you think is ok.

Other learners echoed the responses from the initial questionnaires in that they felt that self-assessments would help them understand their own weak points and that they could then look to the instructor for guidance.

I think self-assessment is good because you are not sure, but you may think about

what are the weak points and then maybe if you note your weakness point, then you can help us to study what we are missing. So I think that self-assessment is very important. (Participant #12)

After reflecting on the responses to the initial questionnaire and the following group discussion (Reflective notes, Sept. 25, 2016), I felt that the class was ambivalent about self-assessment. The discussion did not generate much enthusiasm, and while most learners agreed that self-assessment could have benefits, it did not generate as much discussion as the other aspects. No suggestions were made in regards to self-assessment, so I decided to wait and see how they would feel after completing some self-assessments.

After the initial group discussion and questionnaire, I had the class do self-assessments for activities such as mock interviews, reading tasks, and cover letters. In the October 24th group discussion, I posed the question: *Do you feel more comfortable assessing yourself?*

The class agreed that the self-assessing was getting easier, but I was not able to extract any other responses from the participants. They did not have any suggestions, and they did not have any feedback to offer.

Reflecting on this discussion, my feelings that the learners were ambivalent about self-assessment were becoming more pronounced. I observed in the class that the learners did not take very much time when filling out the self-assessment rubrics. I often had to remind the learners to do this, and I observed that they often rushed through it while providing very basic comments. This was particularly true for the learners who were slower to finish the task, and they appeared to feel more rushed to complete the self-assessment to move on to the next activity. On October 24th I wrote:

I am wondering if the self-assessments are simply misplaced. Perhaps I should start to do the self-assessments the next day so that they have time to reflect on them. By the time they finish the task, they just want to take a break, and the self-assessments appear to be an afterthought (Reflection notes, Oct. 24th, 2016).

During my research, I tried to provide more time for learners, and I was careful not to have the self-assessments being done close to break times, but this was often difficult to do with the schedule of the class.

The theme of ambivalence continued in the end of term one-on-one interviews with only two participants choosing to offer any feedback. One learner felt that the self-assessments gave them confidence as shown in the following quotation:

Because (self)-assessment, when I spoke with other student, I feel, this is confidence for me. Yes, and the feedback also we can look where is the ah... good points or ah...ah... bad points. Where is strong points, where is (looks for word) (Participant # 4).

Another participant felt that the self-assessments allowed them to stay focused on their language learning as indicated in the following quotation:

Yes, it (self-assessment) is useful. Sometime we need to know to make sure that I do it right or no. To read it again, to focus on this word, it helps me to see that this is wrong. To focus on some words. This is good for self-assessment. (Participant # 15)

Overall the participants did not indicate that self-assessment had a negative impact on their language progress, but the learners also did not perceive self-assessments as

being a tool which could help them progress towards their goals. Looking at the data collected, it appears that self-assessment was really seen as an afterthought. The learners did not have very much to say about this particular aspect, but at the same time did not have any criticism of it. Also, they did not complain when asked to self-assess. This may be attributed to a cultural phenomenon, but the learners were very open throughout the term about various aspects of the class, so I cannot say for sure.

4.4 Goal Setting

Leading up to the initial questionnaire and group discussion, we did a goal setting activity in the class. I taught the class how to set a SMART goal, which is a goal setting activity that ensures that the goal is Smart, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time based, and then each learner set a goal for the term. The learners then wrote down the goal on a slip of paper and put it up on the class bulletin board without putting their names on the goals. The next week the class completed the initial questionnaire and participated in the group discussion. In the initial questionnaire, most participants (11/13) expressed that they had never done goal setting before entering my class, and the perceptions of its effectiveness were split evenly. As with peer-assessments and self-assessments, the learners lack of experience with goal setting and the impact that it had on the class will be explored in detail in the discussion chapter. Some learners were simply unsure as they had never done goal setting before as indicated in the following quotation: “I never saw this practice. Maybe it’ll be useful. I have a goal and must do it” (Participant #11).

Others were concerned about sharing their goals publicly, and how that would be any more beneficial than keeping it to themselves: “No, it will not help me, if I tell it to someone because I know my goals and keep it in my mind every day” (Participant #2). On the other side, some participants felt that setting a goal would keep them motivated: “Yes. Language learning will be done in a long time. If you don’t set a goal for your each step, I will be boring and could not insist on it” (Participant #1). This theme was repeated in the follow-up discussion as the participants were unsure as to whether the goal setting would be effective because it was so new to them.

After analyzing the discussion and the data from the questionnaire, I was not really surprised by the response. From my experience with previous groups of learners, goal setting is new to many learners. There were no suggestions at this first stage of data collection, so I was very interested to see how this group would respond to goal setting at a later stage.

On October 11th, one month after the initial goal setting activity, the participants completed a questionnaire. The questions were:

1) Do you feel that the goal setting activities we have done in class will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Do you feel that the goal setting activities that we have done have been effective? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness and make goal setting more useful?

Overall, the participants began to see more benefits than drawbacks to goal setting.

Similar to the initial questionnaire and group discussion, many participants felt that setting goals was a motivating activity: “Sometimes I feel tire to study. Because I set my

goals on the board it can remind me to keep going, not give up” (Participant #2). “Yes, it does. It’s give me a target during the time planned and not forget it”(Participant #8).

For those who were hesitant, either they did not understand the goal setting activity, or they had already forgotten their goals. For one participant, they had difficulty trying to set a short-term goal which, for the purpose of the class, was an end of term goal: “I don’t understand short term goal setting activities. It is difficult to achieve for me in such a short period” (Participant #11).

Another issue was learners forgetting their goals as shown by the following quotation: “I feel the goal setting will not help me because I already forgot what I write” (Participant #9).

It was suggested that we begin to set monthly goals and review them more frequently. The class felt that this would help stay focused on their goals, and not forget them. After analyzing the responses, I implemented the changes in the class. In the next goal setting activity, the participants set a monthly goal to be put up on the bulletin board. Also, each Monday morning during their learning reflection discussion and writing, they discussed their goals with their partners and then reflected on them in their writing. The learners had very positive reactions to this change, and appeared very eager to set a shorter-term goal.

It was also suggested that we have a common class goal. One participant wanted the class to work together towards one common goal. Not everyone in the class agreed with this, but one group was particularly enthused by it, and that group of four participants set a group goal to watch a movie in English without subtitles. This had positive results as each morning they discussed this goal and challenged themselves to

keep trying. By the end of the class, each learner in this group accomplished the goal, which further strengthened the bond that they had been developing.

The final suggestion in this questionnaire was to give 30 minutes to everyone in the class to focus on their goals. We began to do this by replacing vocabulary building time with general independent learning time 2-3 times a week where the learners could focus on their language goals.

I was able to implement the changes that the participants suggested, and I was able to see immediate results. I observed that most learners appeared to be more motivated to focus on their own goals as I observed them being more actively engaged in discussing their goals with each other during class time, and motivating each other (Reflective notes, November 1, 2016). Instead of relying on me to prompt them to discuss and celebrate their goals, they began to discuss their goals and celebrate them together independent of my instruction by listing their completed goals on the class bulletin board and sharing their successes with the rest of the class.

After implementing the changes for six weeks, I conducted another questionnaire on November 28th to gather feedback on how effective those changes were. I asked the following questions:

- Do you feel that focusing on shorter term goals helped you stay more focused on your language goals? If not, what can the teacher do to help?
- Since you have started doing goal setting, have your views on goal setting changed? If so, how?

In this questionnaire, most agreed that the shorter monthly goals were very useful as indicated by the following quotations: “It is useful to me. Shorter term goals are easy to

realize, so I can be confident to insist it” (Participant #2); “Doing goal setting and small goal setting is a right direction to reach HUGE goal” (Participant #1); “Yes-focusing on shorter term goals helped me stay more focused on my language goals” (Participant #5).

In this questionnaire, the hesitations were far fewer, with only 3 learners expressing dissatisfaction. For example, one learner felt that the class should focus more on the language skills of writing, reading, and listening: “No, I think in class we need more practice in writing, riding, listening” (Participant #9). Another learner expressed that they still had some confusion about setting goals.

I don’t feel that setting goal helps me and I know why. Consequently, I can’t set proper goal for me. First, I don’t understand what it’s mean. After that, I understand that I need set short term goal. Maybe for first time teacher can help us and shows us some examples (Participant #3).

After analyzing the data from this reflection, I was very happy that the changes were perceived positively in the class. Most of the participants felt that the monthly goals were a positive change, and they felt motivated by the goals and were able to stay focused. There were no other suggestions from the class, so I could continue another cycle of setting monthly goals and reflecting on them each morning.

In the final one-on-one interviews, goal setting received the most responses out of the five PBLA aspects, and appeared to be of the greatest interest to the participants, with 11 out of the 14 participants choosing to discuss it during the interview, and only one participant felt that it was not effective. For those that found it effective, they found goal setting to be motivating, helped them maintain focus, and gave them confidence. One

learner in particular felt very strongly about being able to always stay focused on their goals:

And many people forgot their goals, what goal they set. I never forgot my goal.

When I read something I remember, I don't know why. But if I say, maybe I forgot, but if I read, if I write, I never forgot. (Participant #14)

Another learner was much more succinct in their assessment of the effectiveness of goal setting: "I think goal setting is perfect" (Participant #8).

When asked if their views had changed on any of the PBLA aspects, goal setting also received the most responses with 8 out of 14 identifying that their views of goal setting changed over the term. The following quotation illustrates a typical response:

Participant #14: Um, goal setting I was confused at first (laughs). I didn't know why I needed to set the goals

Participant/instructor: right

Participant #14: um, inside I understand, but maybe everybody sets some goals. In my mind I need to do it, but never use. I don't know (laughs). It was difficult. I set one general, large goal (laughs)

Participant/instructor: yes

Participant #14: and after I understand that maybe I need to set something little better, little, and (laughs) now close to finish our class I understanding

Participant/instructor: yeah, but that's ok right, because now you know

Participant #14: I know yes. I set a little because I understand I need to do it. Anyway, I do it. I set the goal.

Overall, goal setting appeared to have the greatest impact on the participants. Throughout the data collection, goal setting received the largest number of responses, the most suggestions, and, in general, the participants expressed that it had a large impact on their learning. In the final class before the term ended, it was also suggested that it would have been better to put their names on their goals that were up on the bulletin board. They felt that this would help them remember their goals better, and to be more accountable to their goals. This is a change that I put in place in my next class, and I look forward to seeing how this impacts the goal setting activity along with the other suggestions that were recommended.

4.5 Learning Reflections

For the learning reflections, I began the data collection with the initial questionnaire. Prior to the questionnaire, we had not done a learning reflection in the class. I explained what a learning reflection was, and the learners appeared to understand the concept. I explained that in this context learning reflection would involve an ongoing journal in which they were to write down what they had learned in class, how they felt about their language progress, and what they still needed to learn. The learning reflections should focus on the process of learning, rather than simply an inventory of what was covered in class.

For the initial questionnaire, the questions were:

Have you done learning reflections in other language classes? Yes No

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

In the responses, only 5 out of 13 indicated that they had done learning reflections before. I was not surprised by this response as this is not something traditionally done in language classes. The five that indicated that they had done learning reflections had done them in the previous class at the language center. Out of the 13 participants, only one participant showed any doubt as to whether the learning reflections would be beneficial, but did not provide a reason. Every other participant felt that doing a regular learning reflection would be a tool which could help them progress their language skills, as it would help them review what they had learned as demonstrated by the following participant: “making the note of new word, grammar and new phrase, sentences, paper organization after several days, you will check them and reflect in your mind vividly” (Participant #3).

After reviewing the results of the initial questionnaire, I was encouraged by the fact that the class generally believed that the learning reflections could be an effective tool to help them progress in their language learning. On the following Monday, we did a learning reflection in the class. The process of the learning reflection was to first discuss their language progress, successes, and challenges with their small groups, and then to write a free form reflection. I did not initially collect the reflections, as I emphasized that the activity was for their benefit, and that they should not to be concerned about making writing errors.

After doing two reflections, I gave the class a questionnaire on October 11th to check-in on their feelings about learning reflections after completing two of them. The questions were:

1) Do you feel that doing reflections will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Did you feel that you were able to effectively reflect on your learning? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness?

In this questionnaire, every learner indicated that the reflections were beneficial. Overall, the participants indicated that the learning reflections gave them a chance to reflect on what they had learned, and what they needed to improve as shown in the following two quotations:

Yes I do. Doing reflection help me summarize what I learned recently, what is my strong points, what is my weak point, what will I do in next learning. (Participant #7)

Yes, I do. Some reflections help me to find opportunity improve language. When I'm doing reflection I can see my ups and downs, mistakes and improvement. It's make me to be open minded, more think and discuss. (Participant # 1)

It was suggested that more time be given between reflections to allow them more opportunities to think back, as opposed to doing a reflection every week. It was also suggested that they have the option to have their reflections edited by the instructor. Both of these suggestions were put into place. I began to spread out the reflections more, and after each reflection gave the learners an opportunity to have me edit the writing for spelling and grammar as they wanted to use the reflections as a learning opportunity.

Reflecting on these ideas in my reflective journal, I felt that they were good suggestions (Reflective notes, Oct. 12, 2016). In previous classes, I was careful not to fatigue the class by doing reflections too frequently. I did not want to turn the reflections

into a chore, as opposed to an opportunity to reflect on their successes, challenges, and what they had learned. I also grappled with the idea of editing their writing. I wanted the reflections to be more organic, and for the learners not to be concerned with writing correctly. However, I recognized that not everyone is naturally reflective, and to ensure that this time was well spent, some learners would benefit from having their writing edited so as to offer them feedback to improve their writing skills. The learners that wanted their writing edited were, in fact, the learners who had comparatively lower writing skills, and who seemed less reflective. These learners tended to write more of a list of what they had learned in the class, as opposed to going deeper into how they felt about their learning. Because only two or three learners fell into this category, it did not become onerous for me to quickly help them with their writing. Had every learner asked for an edit, then I felt the reflections would have been more challenging for me as an instructor, and the focus of the learners may have shifted towards writing correctly, as opposed to reflective writing.

Six weeks after the initial questionnaire regarding reflections, I conducted another questionnaire to see if anything had changed in their perspectives. Between these two questionnaires the learners had completed three reflections on a bi-weekly schedule as per their suggestion. The questions were:

- Have your views on doing learning reflections changed since you first started doing them?
- Do you have any recommendations for doing learning reflections?

In this November 28th questionnaire, the feedback was again positive with similar responses to the previous questionnaire. This was important to me because it showed that

the participants had not become fatigued with learning reflections. Two learners also shared that they now had a much more favourable view of reflections as shown in the following quotations:

Yes I changed my opinion. When I started to do learning reflection, I couldn't understand why I am doing that? I know what I think and feel. However, I caught myself, that I keep it in my mind only, but I can't express (say or write). Now I believe that reflection is a great idea!" (Participant #1)

First time, I really don't understand what I'm doing and for why. I change my views after my last writing. I understand that I learned a lot in this class (Participant #3).

Reflecting upon this questionnaire, I was encouraged that the learners had not become tired of the learning reflections. In my journal I noted an increase in their engagement and positivity towards this formative assessment activity (Reflection notes, November 1, 2016). Doing the reflections bi-weekly seemed to strike a good balance, and it was encouraging that some learners felt that the reflections were becoming more useful as opposed to redundant, which is something that I had feared based on previous experience and conversations with other instructors. There were no changes that were recommended, so I continued to do the reflections bi-weekly until the end of the term.

In the one-on-one interviews at the end of the term, the participants shared a lot of feedback about learning reflections with all positive reviews. After goal setting, learning reflections received the most amount of feedback with 8 out of 14 participants choosing to specifically mention reflections, which demonstrated that it had a large impact on the class overall.

Two participants in particular felt that the reflections became more useful as the class progress as shown in the following quotations:

That's good, because when we spend here one month from September to October, the first um feelings was like um it's not, it's hard, it's not helpful sometimes, but when you will finish the all course you will understand what you go that you got a lot of opportunity to make somethings. The things which you will not do it alone at home" (Participant #1)

Yes, first I don't understand, but after, when I analyzed what I learned, you need to read, when you write something what you did ahh you realized what you REALLY did. Yes, it's like diary, yes. (Participant #14)

Another participant was more succinct in saying: "I think this is ah learning reflection is amazing" (Participant #4).

Overall, the learning reflections appeared to have a very positive impact on the learners' views of their language learning as evident by the large amount of feedback from the learners, all of which was positive. Doing the reflections bi-weekly appeared to strike the right balance between being able to recall their learning and how they felt about their progress, and having enough time between reflections to think deeply about their learning without getting fatigued by the process.

4.6 Feedback from Instructor

The final data collected involved how the learners felt about feedback from instructor. I wanted to know if the feedback that they received from me was effective, and what sort of changes I could make to improve the effectiveness of my feedback.

In the initial questionnaire, I asked the following questions:

Have you received written feedback on your language tasks in previous classes? Yes No

If yes, do you feel the feedback helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, what kind of feedback do you think could help your language learning?

In the questionnaire, all participants agreed that written feedback from the instructor would help their language learning. There were three types of suggestions that emerged. The first was that they wanted to see their mistakes and be able to fix them as indicated in the following quotation: “It’s help because for my opinion this is the main idea of feedback, to show what was wrong and make it better”. (Participant #9)

Another suggestion was to also focus on their strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated by the following participant: “Feedback should include description of my strengths in my learning (for I see what I did and learned) and my weak sides in English (for I understand on what I should pay my attention, what I need to learn better)” (Participant #7). Finally, one participant wanted a step- by-step process as shown in the following quotation: “Point out my question in my study. Give me some ways how to improve step by step” (Participant #2).

In the follow-up discussion, this theme was repeated as the participants wanted to receive step-by-step feedback to help them to improve. Some participants also wanted as much feedback as possible in their writing:

Participant #16: “I appreciate if you, this can also work I think, but if you can correct individual sentence... (others vocalize agreement) ...no comma here, or this is grammatically diff... mistake”

Participant/instructor: “ok, right, so you do want me to correct the grammar (all

vocalize agreement)”.

After analyzing the initial questionnaire and the discussion, I was not surprised by the feedback. In my classes, I normally use a step-by-step process when giving feedback in order to provide the learners with concrete things that they can do to improve. I also included a section outlining their strengths in each assessment. The one issue that I grappled with in my reflection was how much feedback to give. I have always struggled to find the balance between just focusing on one or two areas to focus on improving, versus trying to correct all the errors. As an assessor, trying to correct all of the errors is very labour intensive, and I was not sure about the usefulness of my feedback. I also reflected that it would depend on the learner as to how much feedback that they wanted.

After doing a variety of assessments and giving feedback for reading, writing, and listening I conducted another questionnaire on Sept. 26th. I did not ask about feedback for speaking because while they had done peer and self-assessments for their tasks, I had not yet done the formal speaking assessment with them at that time. I asked the following questions:

- Do you feel that the feedback you received on your reading, writing and listening assessments will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?
- For the reading and listening assessments, do you feel that self-identifying the reason that you may have made an error on the assessment will help you improve your language skills? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that going over the answers for the reading and listening tasks as a class and identifying how to find the answer helped your language learning? Why or why not?

- What suggestions do you have for feedback that will help your language learning for reading and listening?
- What kind of feedback will be most helpful for you to improve your writing skills?

In the responses, the overall feeling was that the feedback was useful, but the responses did not provide any insights that allowed me to improve my feedback. In the follow-up discussion, again there were no suggestions on how to improve the feedback process. They agreed that the step by step approach was useful, but overall did not have very much to say. Upon reflecting on this questionnaire and group discussion, I was concerned that the learners appeared to feel ambivalent about receiving feedback, but I was not surprised. When observing the participants when receiving the feedback, they did not appear to spend very much time looking at the feedback. Instead, they appeared to simply look at the score, give the task a quick read over, and then put it in their portfolios. Throughout the term, I noticed that this trend continued, with not much attention being paid to the feedback. Also, on a regular basis, I informally asked the participants if the feedback was useful, but the responses were always yes, with no suggestions being made. In an attempt to make the feedback more meaningful, I had the learners look at their previous assessments immediately prior to current assessment to make note of the feedback, but I observed that the learners would often make the same errors.

In the one-on-one interviews at the end of the term, only 4 participants mentioned feedback from the instructor as contributing to their overall learning. Overall, they did not have any suggestions for further improvements, and the comments were very generic

as evident in the following quotation, which was the typical response: “The feedback from you of course. Its um, useful” (Participant #1).

When prompted further, they did not offer any suggestions as to how to make improve the feedback.

Overall, the findings are unclear as to whether or not written feedback from the instructor contributed to their learning. According to the data, it did not appear to have much impact on the learners, and in the one-on-one interviews, the participants did not offer very much feedback. The lack of data that was offered by the learners compared to the other PBLA aspects shows that this was the least impactful aspect of the five researched. This lack of data and the apparent lack of impact will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

4.7 Summary

To summarize, it is clear that some aspects of PBLA had more impact on the learners than others. Goal setting, learning reflections, and peer assessments appeared to have the largest impacts, whereas feedback from the instructor and self-assessment appeared to have much less impact. On the whole, the learners found the various aspects more beneficial as the class went on as opposed to having a diminishing return. This change in perspective over the term will be explored in more detail in the following chapter as well as the importance of the role of the instructor, and the overall impact that PBLA had on the participants.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the key findings that emerged from my research and connect them to relevant literature. From the data, it became clear that there was a shift in the learners' perspectives throughout the semester that resulted in an increased confidence, and that the use of the assessment for learning tools had a positive impact on their language learning. However, it also became clear that there is a strong need to provide learners with explicit instruction in these formative elements to ensure that they are able to utilize them to their full potential. I will discuss each of these findings in more detail, and then conclude by discussing implications and suggestions for further research.

5.2 Changing Perspectives

One of the key findings in my research was the change in perspective that occurred with many of the participants. Initially, there was some trepidation about the self and peer assessment, goal setting, and learning reflection aspects of PBLA. Some of this nervousness could be attributed to their lack of exposure to or lack of understanding of these aspects. As reported in the results chapter, 7/13 learners initially indicated that they had not done peer-assessments before, but this changed to most when we discussed as a group. The discrepancy in numbers might be attributed to the participants not fully understanding the term. Also, only two learners had done goal setting in previous learning settings and many had not done learning reflections (8/13) or self-assessments (6/13) prior to their current educational experience.

With the high number of participants being new to so many of the aspects of formative assessment, it is understandable that they would be hesitant in embracing the potential benefits. With this in mind, I believe that it is important to give each of these new aspects of formative assessment careful consideration when introducing them to the classes. While they may be reluctant at first, this study has shown that with exposure and practice, the learners felt that these aspects became more useful in helping them progress their language skills rather than having a diminishing return. I think that this persistence is key as Harrison (2005) also asserted: “For an idea to survive past the awareness stage and become part of teacher practice, it requires considerable effort, perseverance and trust” (p. 255). Teachers need to have patience with the aspects and encourage patience with the learners as well rather than dismissing them as a waste of precious class time, as the confidence that the learners gain is worth the investment of time. Learners may initially convey to the instructors that it is a waste of time, as Drew (2015) noted in her findings, but from my data collection, it is clear that focusing on these aspects of assessment is a worthwhile investment. In particular, peer assessment, according to the data, contributed to creating confidence for the learners as the class progressed through the semester. This connects to the findings of Willey and Gardner (2010) who also found the learners in their study to be reluctant initially in their ability to assess their peers. In that study as well as my own, the learners’ confidence grew with more practice. Willey and Gardner compared it to a teacher learning to trust their own judgement when they first begin teaching.

Also, as noted by Willey and Gardner (2010), it was not so much the actual assessing that created the learning, but rather the collaborative conversations that resulted

from the peer assessment process. In my own classroom, I was not always able to give immediate feedback on the tasks that the learners were working on. Even if I was able to give feedback the next day, the moment was gone, and the feedback appeared to lose its impact. With peer assessing, the learners were able to get immediate feedback and discuss that feedback with each other. They were then able to confirm with me if they had any questions about their own judgements. The more they went through this process, the more confident they became, and the more useful learners perceived the peer assessments to be.

This was true for goal setting and learning reflections as well. For example, the first goal setting activity resulted in many goals that were either too vague or too ambitious. We had discussed in detail how to set goals that were specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (SMART), but this initial introduction to goal setting did not appear to have the desired effect. However, the more that we went back to our goals, the more the participants were able to set more appropriate goals that would challenge and motivate them to improve their language skills. This is in line with Day and Tosey's (2011) research in which they stress the importance of setting appropriate goals that will lead to persistence towards achieving a goal. Revisiting these goals thus became crucial in order to realize the full potential of their impact on language learning. It is not enough to simply do goal setting at the beginning of the semester and then revisit them once during the semester. The goals need to be revisited on a weekly or monthly basis in order to allow the learners to get more familiar with the goal setting process, and realize the impact that setting an appropriate goal can have on their language learning. This connects with the 'well-formed outcome' model explored by Day and Tosey (2011) which

espouses that goal setting should be rigorous; the more that we focused on our goals, the more impactful they became. The goal setting also created positivity and relationships within the class, which was a focus of Zimmerman's eight criteria. The learners in my class appeared to form closer bonds because of their common purpose of achieving their goals. In the end, according to the participants' feedback, goal setting did indeed have a tremendous impact on the participants' learning, which echoes Petty & Thomas's (2014) assertion that adult learners benefit from and are more likely to persist in their learning when setting a goal.

For learning reflections, the data showed a similar process of perceived increasing effectiveness in helping to progress the learners' language learning, which could be linked to all of the other PBLA aspects. In order for the learners to have something worthwhile to reflect on, the lessons in the class need to be meeting the learners' expectations of helping them progress towards their goals, whether those goals being academic, employment, settlement, or specific language goals such as learning a set number of new vocabulary, or understanding a particular grammar structure. The learners need to have meaningful learning experiences to reflect on. Rodgers (2002) defined reflections as a process that provided meaning for learners as they moved from one experience to the next. Studying grammar and building new vocabulary may help language learning, but there is no experience to build on, no meaning to be found in the learning. As an instructor, I needed to ensure that each week of the class was meeting the needs of the learners by having learner centred, task-based lessons that were appropriate to their language level. I needed to give the learners experiences to build on. I also needed the learners to establish a community, another of Rodgers' (2002) key recommendations. This

was achieved in large part through peer assessing and goal setting activities, and as those activities became more embraced by the learners through their increasing engagement, I noticed that the learning reflections became more important for the learners as evidenced by their increased positivity towards doing them.

As the learners began to recognize the potential impact of the learning reflections, goal setting, and peer assessment, it resulted in newfound confidence for the participants. This came up particularly in discussions around goal setting and peer assessment. I believe that this confidence is a direct result of placing the ownership of learning on the learners. Similarly, Corder (2002) asserts the importance of making our learners our partners in the learning process. By shifting the onus of learning onto the learners, they become active participants in the process rather than passive participants. As noted by Kristmanson & Lafargue (2014), there is a shift towards assessment *as* learning, particularly with peer assessments, as the discussions, analysis, and collaboration became an essential learning process. The learners begin to take charge of their learning, and their confidence grows. They then feel confident to set goals for themselves, help their peers, and reflect on the process. They also come to the class with a purpose. They know what they want, they have trust that the instructor will help them achieve their goals, and they are motivated to do so. This is essential in the implementation of PBLA practices, as PBLA is designed to encourage learners “to become more autonomous, active and self-aware language learners, engaged in and responsible for their learning” (Pettis 2014, p. 7). From my research, it is clear that it is possible to achieve these aims.

5.3 Role of Teacher in Formative Assessment

While it is imperative that the learners take ownership of their own learning to become more independent learners, instructors still have a large role to play in guiding them through the learning process. As the data from this action-research demonstrate, the various aspects in PBLA need careful instruction in order to help learners realize the full potential of each aspect. Even with careful instruction, not every learner will fully understand the purpose or how to use each aspect effectively. There is also the consideration of the various time constraints and class interruptions that routinely occur within a semester which can create extra stress on the instructor.

At several times throughout the data collection process the participants were unable to respond to a questionnaire question, or responded in a way that showed that they may not have understood the question. While there were not a large number of responses of this kind, it does suggest a need for careful instruction on how to use the various aspects. Once the learners understood the aspects of formative assessment through repetition and practice, most began to find them more effective, although some still struggled as shown in the results chapter.

Even though I felt that at the beginning of this action-research I was being clear by providing examples, it is possible that a particular learner did not understand or was absent on that day. As Petty and Thomas (2014) noted in their research, it is important to consider the potential impact of prior life experiences, assumptions and beliefs that adult learners bring to the classroom. Many of the learners in my class were actively seeking employment, dealing with family situations, and all of the other factors involved in settling in a new culture. Regardless of the circumstance, it is clear that each time we

used one of the PBLA aspects in class that the instructor needed to review the aspect and ensure understanding. This is a particular challenge in continuous intake classes and part-time classes that may have unpredictable attendance. In these situations, it is very difficult to maintain momentum in a class when you are constantly trying to reteach various aspects. It is time and energy consuming for the instructor, and it takes away from the community aspect of growing together throughout a semester.

Another key issue is the short amount of time in the class. In my particular class, the learners have a 16-week semester. While we get started right away with the various aspects of PBLA, it is usually not until the third week of the class that every aspect gets introduced. Then there are numerous time challenges within the semester such as storm days, holidays, guest speakers, and even field trips. For the instructor this could also include sick days and vacation days depending on the time of year. In my reflection notes (Reflection notes, Oct. 11, Nov. 22, 2016), I noted the constant challenge to keep the momentum of the class going. By the time that the class was comfortable with the routine, the semester was almost finished. Therefore, there was only a short period of time when the various aspects of PBLA were being used to their full potential. In order to maximize the effectiveness of these aspects, I believe that as an instructor I need to invest more time in introducing these aspects as soon as possible in the course, and ensure that everyone understands each aspect completely from the outset.

The final piece of this action-research is the impact that implementing PBLA had on myself as an instructor. As an action-research project, the results of this research were intended to be immediately applied to the classroom. As both the instructor and the researcher, the results of my research had a direct impact on my teaching, and my

teaching had a direct impact on the results. Understandably, outside factors such as time constraints, life circumstances, and teaching environment influenced my teaching, and thus my research.

As previously mentioned, there are many time constraints during a 16-week semester, and there are a lot of elements to juggle. It is very difficult to keep the momentum going in a class and use the various aspects of PBLA consistently enough for them to be effective. Harlen and James (1996) noted that teachers do indeed use formative assessment practices in their classes as a normal practice, but not enough for them to be effective. Lee and Wiliam (2005) also noted that teachers in their study took more than a year in order to begin to modify their classroom practices. In my own experience, at the time of this research I had been implementing PBLA in my classes for five years. Despite this experience, I still had difficulty managing the workload during this particular semester as I was balancing several other time commitments. This situation is surely not unique among ESL instructors who are balancing multiple jobs, family time, and other time commitments.

With this in mind, it is important to have a professional learning community to provide support as shown by Black et al. (2004) and Kristmanson, Lafargue, and Culligan (2011). Many instructors often find themselves teaching in a silo due to factors such as working in a small language centre, teaching evening classes, or not working in a supportive environment. In my experience, I found myself working in a silo due to a number of circumstances. While I had support from an online community, it did not replace the ability to quickly share ideas with another instructor, discuss strategies over lunch, or have professional learning opportunities to collaborate and share ideas. Just as

learners are able to motivate each other and work towards their goals as a community, it is my experience that instructors also need this support. Instructors need both internal and external motivation to help them through their goals. When learners are feeling frustrated with their progress, they can turn to their peers and the instructor to help them through difficult patches in their journey. Similarly, instructors need a supportive environment in order to continually move forward in their own teaching journey.

5.4 Implications

Returning to the purpose of this research, my goal was to both improve my teaching practice and to determine if the learners found the various aspects of PBLA to be effective. Overall, this action-research shows that the learners believe that PBLA can be an effective way to help them gain confidence, become more independent learners, and progress in their language learning. As an instructor, I was able to make some important changes in my teaching that I feel will resonate with other ESL instructors.

The first change that I made in my teaching practice was to begin to do whole class peer-assessments. Using the suggestions of the participants, I began to scan writing tasks done by participants and put them on the interactive whiteboard in order for the whole class to provide feedback. While this is not a new concept, and it was an activity that I had done in the past, because it was suggested by the participants, I feel that it became a much more powerful tool. We also began to do audio recordings of the learners and play them for the class. The learners were taking ownership of their learning environment, and were thus much more invested in the activity. This is in alignment with self-directed learning research in which learners are expected to take control over the

context of their learning (Cranton, 2013). In order for PBLA to truly shift the onus of learning from the instructors to the learners, I believe that learners should have input on all learning environment decisions. From my research, it is clear that giving learners ownership over how they provide feedback to each other helps them create a learning environment that is their own. Based on the implications of this research for my own teaching, for instructors attempting to implement portfolio based language assessments, I recommend a gradual shift in control of the learning environment from the instructor to the learners by giving them more and more input into the direction of the class and the day to day activities.

Another change that I made in my class was to begin referring to peer-assessment as peer-feedback (I will continue to use the term peer-assessment in this research for clarity). I made this switch because while many felt that it could be a useful tool, about a quarter of the class was unsure as to whether or not it would be effective. After doing a follow-up discussion, it became clear that the participants did not have a full understanding of what peer-assessment actually is. Most believed that peer-assessment really meant grading each other, whereas in the ESL context, it really means giving feedback to classmates in order to help them move forward in their language learning. Upon reflecting on this confusion, I have now begun to refer to peer-assessments as peer-feedback. This shifts the focus away from grading and more toward helping each other progress, and more accurately describes what they are actually doing. I recommend that instructors carefully consider the language they use to describe the various assessment practices that they are promoting in their classes.

The final change to peer-assessments that I have begun to implement in my classes is to do peer-assessments early and often in the class. As the learners began to feel more comfortable with providing feedback to peers, they began to respond much more positively towards them. I believe that persistence is important and that teachers should allow the learners to become more familiar with peer assessments before dismissing their effectiveness. In conjunction with this, I now involve my learners in selecting the task criteria for each language task. By doing this, they begin to take more ownership over the language task, and are thus able to better offer feedback to each other. Moving forward, I recommend that instructors begin to use peer-assessments more frequently in class, recognize that the learners will get more proficient at doing peer-assessments throughout the term, and that the entire process is an important learning opportunity.

From the data collected, self-assessments appeared to be the least effective of the five language tools that I employed. This is in line with findings from other research. Drew (2015) in her research found that self-assessments were seen as one of the least effective tools. Baleghizadeh and Masoun (2013) also recommended that more research be done on self-assessments.

In order to improve the effectiveness of self-assessments in my class, I realize that I really need to ensure that the learners understand the criteria for the task. While I felt during my research I was able to do this, reflecting back there were definitely times when I felt rushed in the process, and did not give the tasks their proper explanation. This feeling of being rushed is a common theme throughout the teaching process. As a full-time teacher balancing other job demands, a young busy family, and working on my research, it was a difficult task to maintain focus in the class and be prepared. In my

reflective journal, this was a reoccurring theme as I constantly noted that I felt I was struggling to keep up with the class as previously mentioned. For these reasons, perhaps I did not give enough time to conveying the importance of self-assessments, or properly instructing the class on how to do them properly.

On this note, I feel the most important suggestion is to give learners time between the task and the self-assessment. From my observations, learners often treated the self-assessment as an after-thought. Often they were just happy to complete the task and move on, or they were among the last to finish the task, so they felt rushed to finish. Essentially, by the time they finished the task, they had little appetite to self-assess. However, in my current class I have started to encourage my learners to do the self-assessment the next day, which has proven to be much more effective. In general, just slowing down the class to give more time for reflection and focus on quality over quantity appears to be the main lesson to take away from self-assessments.

The most significant change that I made in the class for goal setting was to ask the learners set monthly goals along with an end of semester goal. The first goals that the learners set often did not meet the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time based) criteria that we used as a framework. Most often the goals were either not specific enough, or not measurable. However, each time they set a new goal, the goals became SMARTer, and by the end of the semester, they were all able to set specific goals that they were able to measure and achieve.

Another change to goal setting was to begin reviewing the goals on a weekly basis. Each Monday morning the learners would discuss the progress they were making towards their goals. This kept them focused on their goals, and kept them motivated. This

is a practice that I now do in my current classes, and it is proving to be effective as the learners in my most recent classes have been able to set more specific, measurable, and realistic goals at an earlier stage in the semester than the participants in my study.

In my class, I have the learners write down their goals on a slip of paper and post them on the class bulletin board. Each month we review the goals, and then move any completed goals to the “completed” section of the bulletin board. In my research class, these goals were anonymous with the idea that they would be more comfortable doing it this way. However, it was suggested that they should put their names on their goals, and this suggestion has proved to be very impactful in my current class.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

Moving forward, I feel that more in depth research on peer-assessments, self-assessments, and instructor feedback is needed. In my research, I feel that goal setting and learning reflections were well perceived, but the other three aspects need some more focus. In particular, I feel that more in depth research on peer assessments is needed to determine what effect whole class peer-assessments, learners having input on task criteria, and multi-level peer-assessing has on the effectiveness of peer-assessing.

For self-assessments, questions such as the following remain: How does the time taken between the task and the self-assessment influence the effectiveness of the self-assessment? Does giving learners input on the task criteria allow them to self-assess more critically? How does education level and educational background effect the learner’s ability to self-assess?

For formative feedback, I feel that more research is needed on making feedback more efficient for adult ESL learners in a formative assessment context. Giving feedback on language tasks takes up the most time as an instructor, but I do not feel that the investment of time is worth it when using assessment for learning strategies. In a class of twenty learners, spending just five minutes on a writing task is 100 minutes of instructor time in which the learners may not use the feedback to help move them forward. Is there a way to more effectively use this instructor time to give feedback to adult ESL learners?

5.6 Possible Limitations of this Research Design

The limitations to this study were that “because it lacks internal and external controls, generalizability of results are limited to the specific circumstances and conditions in which the research was done” (Merriam and Simpson, 2000, p.125). Although it may be considered a limitation that I only conducted research on my own class of 18 learners and that these results will not be generalizable, my goal is that this research will resonate with others working in similar contexts. My research was also limited to one language level, so it is not clear if the results of my research will be transferrable to other language levels. However, I hope that the research will inform educators working with learners of different proficiency levels. Also, through my teacher-action approach, I believe I gained valuable insights into the various aspects of PBLA in order to improve my own practice. Moreover, I anticipate that these insights will also be useful in adding to the discussion around the overall effectiveness of PBLA.

Conclusion

This study provided insights from learners' experiences and perspectives that contribute to the ongoing professional and academic conversations about formative assessment and in particular PBLA. To summarize the results, overall the participants perceived goal setting, peer-assessments and learning reflections to have a significant impact on their learning, whereas they showed ambivalence towards self-assessments and feedback from the instructor. My own work has also been impacted by this study as it has informed my teaching practice and has led to immediate changes in my teaching which are having a positive impact on my classes. It has also allowed me to use my research to provide more informed support to other instructors through my role as a PBLA Regional Coach. My hope is that this research will help PBLA move forward in a way that will address some of the concerns and preoccupations of adult educators. While there is more research to be done, particularly around self-assessment and formative feedback, I believe that the results from this study show that the formative assessment practices do achieve the PBLA objective of encouraging learners to become more autonomous and self-aware. An approach to assessment that promotes the active engagement of learners who take responsibility for their own learning provides a sustainable model moving forward. I also believe that the lessons that I learned from this research will resonate with other ESL instructors and improve the implementation of the various aspects of PBLA.

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APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF TERMS

Action-Oriented Feedback: Feedback that provides students with a way forward to close the gap between current and desired performance. Action-oriented feedback focuses on what students are doing that they should continue to do, what they need to do more of, what they might consider doing, and what they should stop doing. (Pettis, 2014 p.81)

Adult learner: For the purpose of this study, an adult learner is any student 18 years or older

Assessment: The process of collecting information about student learning. Throughout the learning process, assessment is used to inform teaching and student learning. As a result of assessment, teachers can adjust their teaching. Students also benefit from assessment. They need to receive a considerable amount of descriptive feedback to enable them to continue or adjust what they are doing to be effective learners. (Pettis, 2014, p.81)

Assessment task: A task that is designed to assess learning, is aligned to specific CLB performance conditions and competencies, has predetermined criteria for success, and is administered under consistent, test-like conditions. (Pettis, 2014, p.81)

Assessment as learning: the learner is responsible for reflecting on the learning processes and products in order to improve in future attempts and/or to set new goals, thus moving toward learner autonomy. (Kristmanson & Lafargue, 2014, p. 47)

Assessment for learning strategies: Five key strategies that are particularly effective in promoting learning in the classroom. (Pettis, 2014, p.81)

Assessment of learning: the process of assessing the extent of learners' achievement of learning outcomes at the end of a period of study. (Pettis, 2014, p.81)

Formative assessment: The ongoing collection of information and feedback about the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities in order to inform or modify instruction. (Pettis, 2014, p.82)

Goal Setting: learners are asked to set short term and long term language goals. The short terms goals should be achievable within the duration of the class term, whereas the long term goals look beyond the class term. These goals help the teacher identify the specific language needs for the learner and help shape class instruction and generates discussion about the learners' progress.

Learner-teacher conferences: at the end of a period of study, the teacher and learner meet to discuss the learners' language progress, using the evidence gathered in their portfolio.

Learning reflection: A metacognitive strategy employed by a student to monitor and reflect on the process of learning. It may include reflection on what was learned, what was easy or difficult, what helped learning, what hindered learning, or next steps. (Pettis, 2014, p.83)

Metacognition: the process the learner undertakes to control and organize their own learning. (Pettis, 2014, p.83)

Newcomer: a person who is living in Canada as a permanent resident after immigrating or obtaining refugee status from another country

Peer-assessment: Feedback on a task from a peer or classmate that is aligned to specific criteria. (Pettis, 2014, p.84)

Self-assessment: Checking one's own performance: that is, what one can do and how well one's abilities align with a specific standard or set of criteria. (Pettis, 2014, p.85)

Summative assessment: Information and feedback collected at the end of a learning unit or program to document progress and achievement of communicative proficiency. (Pettis, 2014, p.85)

Teacher assessment: learners complete an assessment task, and the teacher provides feedback on the learner's performance in relation to pre-set performance criteria in a formative or summative fashion.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRES**Initial Questionnaire****Date: September 14th, 2016**

This questionnaire is designed to gather information about your feelings about the various learning tools to be used in the class. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

1) Have you done peer-assessments (assessing your classmates) in other language classes?

Yes No

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Have you done self-assessments (assessing yourself) in other language classes?

Yes No

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

3) Have you done goal setting activities in other language classes? Yes No

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

4) Have you done learning reflections in other language classes? Yes No

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

5) Have you had a learner-teacher conference to discuss your portfolio? Yes No

If yes, do you feel it helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that it could help your language learning? Why or why not?

6) Have you received written feedback on your language tasks in previous classes?

Yes No

If yes, do you feel the feedback helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, what kind of feedback do you think could help your language learning?

Semi-structured group interview

Time of interview: 11:00

Date: September, 14th, 2016

Place: Classroom at language centre

Interviewer: Ryan O'Shea

Interviewees: language learners attending the class

Position of Interviewer: Classroom instructor working on Master's research project determining the learners' perceived effectiveness of PBLA

Questions:

1) Have you done peer-assessments in other language classes?

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Have you done self-assessments in other language classes?

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

3) Have you done goal setting activities in other language classes?

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

4) Have you done learning reflections in other language classes?

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that they could help your language learning? Why or why not?

5) Have you had a teacher-conference to discuss your portfolio?

If yes, do you feel it helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, do you feel that it could help your language learning? Why or why not?

6) Have you received written feedback on your language tasks in previous classes?

If yes, do you feel they helped your language learning? Why or why not?

If no, what kind of feedback do you think could help your language learning?

Formative Feedback Questionnaire**September, 26, 2016**

This questionnaire is to gather your views on the first set of feedback that you have received on your assessments. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

- 1) Do you feel that the feedback you received on your reading, writing and listening assessments will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

- 2) For the reading and listening assessments, do you feel that self-identifying the reason that you may have made an error on the assessment will help you improve your language skills? Why or why not?

- 3) Do you feel that going over the answers for the reading and listening tasks as a class and identifying how to find the answer helped your language learning? Why or why not?

- 4) What suggestions do you have for feedback that will help your language learning for reading and listening?

- 5) What kind of feedback will be most helpful for you to improve your writing skills?

Formative Feedback Group Discussion**Time of interview:** 11:00**Date:** September, 26th, 2016**Place:** Classroom at language centre**Interviewer:** Ryan O'Shea**Interviewees:** language learners attending the class**Position of Interviewer:** Classroom instructor working on Master's research project determining the learners' perceived effectiveness of PBLA

- 1) Do you feel that the feedback you received on your reading, writing and listening assessments will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) For the reading and listening assessments, do you feel that self-identifying the reason that you may have made an error on the assessment will help you improve your language skills? Why or why not?

3) Do you feel that going over the answers for the reading and listening tasks as a class and identifying how to find the answer helped your language learning? Why or why not?

4) What suggestions do you have for feedback that will help your language learning for reading and listening?

Goal Setting Questionnaire

October 11, 2016

This questionnaire is to gather your views on the first set of goal setting activities that you have done in the class. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

1) Do you feel that the goal setting activities we have done in class will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Do you feel that the goal setting activities that we have done have been effective? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness and make goal setting more useful?

Learner Reflections Questionnaire

October 11, 2016

This questionnaire is to gather your views on the first set of learning reflections that you have done in class. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

1) Do you feel that doing reflections will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Did you feel that you were able to effectively reflect on your learning? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness?

Semi-structured Group Interview

Time of interview: 9:30

Date: October 11th, 2016

Place: Classroom at language centre

Interviewer: Ryan O'Shea

Interviewees: language learners attending the class

Position of Interviewer: Classroom instructor working on Master's research project determining the learners' perceived effectiveness of PBLA

Questions

1) Do you feel that doing reflections will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

2) Did you feel that you were able to effectively reflect on your learning? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness?

3) Do you feel that the goal setting activities we have done in class will help you progress your language learning? Why or why not?

4) Do you feel that the goal setting activities that we have done have been effective? What changes, if any, would you make to increase the effectiveness and make goal setting more useful?

Semi-structured Group Interview

Time of interview: 12:30

Date: October 24th, 2016

Place: Classroom at language centre

Interviewer: Ryan O'Shea

Interviewees: language learners attending the class

Position of Interviewer: Classroom instructor working on Master's research project determining the learners' perceived effectiveness of PBLA

Peer-assessments and Self Assessments

1) Do you feel that you have been able to give each other productive feedback in your recent tasks? (presentations, interviews, cover letters) Why or why not?

2) Do you feel that the self-assessments have been effective? (interviews with audio, reading tasks)

Goal Setting Questionnaire

November 28, 2016

This questionnaire is to gather your views on the latest set of goal setting activities that you have done in the class. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

1) Do you feel that focusing on shorter term goals helped you stay more focused on your language goals? If not, what can the teacher do to help?

2) Since you have started doing goal setting, have your views on goal setting changed? If so, how?

Learner Reflections Questionnaire

November 28, 2016

This questionnaire is to gather your views on the latest set of learning reflections that you have done in class. You do not need to give any personal information. If you have any questions, please ask at anytime.

1) Have your views on doing learning reflections changed since you first started doing them?

2) Do you have any recommendations for doing learning reflections?

End of Semester One on One Interviews**Time of interviews:** 8:30am-2:00pm**Date:** December 9, 2016**Place:** Classroom at language centre**Interviewer:** Ryan O'Shea**Interviewees:** selected language learner**Position of Interviewer:** Classroom instructor working on Master's research project determining the learners' perceived effectiveness of PBLA**Questions**

- 1) Please describe your experience with PBLA this semester
- 2) Which of the following aspects were the most effective for improving your language skills? Goal setting, learning reflections, peer/self assessments, or feedback from the instructor?
- 3) Which of the aspects were least effective?
- 4) Did your feelings change about any of those aspects over the course of the semester? If so, how? Why do you think your feelings changed?
- 5) What suggestions would you make to improve the effectiveness of any of the aspects?
- 6) Do you have any final thoughts about your experience in this course?

CURRICULUM VITAE

Candidate's full name: Ryan Burton O'Shea

Universities attended:

Master of Education, 2016-current

University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB

Bachelor of Education, 2008

St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB

Bachelor of Arts with Honours in English Literature, 2006

St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB

Conference Presentations:

O'Shea, R. (2017, June) *Portfolio-Based Language Assessment: Perspectives of Newcomer Adult English Second Language Learners*. Paper presented at the TESL Canada Conference, Niagara, Ontario.