



**LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING
FOR INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED
MEDICAL LABORATORY TECHNOLOGISTS:
VALIDATING CUT SCORES AND A NEW TESTING TOOL**

**CSMLS Project Report
March 31 2009**



Language Proficiency Testing for Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists:
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INTRODUCTION

This document reports on the project entitled “Language Proficiency Testing for Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists: Validating Cut Scores and a New Testing Tool.” The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) conducted this project between April 2008 and March 2009, and the Government of Ontario funded it.

This report presents the major points outlined as reporting requirements in Schedule B of the Ministry contract: a summary of the project and a discussion of sustainability issues. This document also includes the report of the project consultants as well as the standard-setting guidelines document they prepared.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Background

The CSMLS is the national credentialing association for Canadian medical laboratory science, which is Canada's third largest health profession. Medical laboratory professionals provide up to 85% of the diagnostic information on which health care professionals base their decisions. The CSMLS offers a national competency-based certification examination as well as Prior Learning Assessment services for internationally educated medical laboratory professionals.

A prior project supported by the Government of Ontario¹ identified the language benchmarks required for IEMLT success and stressed the urgent need to establish cut-scores on language tests used for certification that would more closely reflect these benchmarks. As evidence, the study analysed language proficiency issues particular to prior learning assessment, success on certification examinations, and in the workplace. The present project implements that study's recommendations for establishing validated cut scores and investigating an occupation-specific language-testing tool.

The goals of this project were to:

- Establish objective, fair and defensible language proficiency testing cut scores to be met by medical laboratory technologists as proof of language proficiency;
- Validate a Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) referenced occupation-specific language assessment tool for use in the medical laboratory science profession; and
- Develop a guidelines manual for language proficiency standard setting for use by other regulators and professional organizations that seek to conduct their own standard setting.

CSMLS policy changes that result from the findings of this project may help to expedite the Prior Learning Assessment process for the approximately 300 internationally educated medical

¹ Grant, M. M., Strachan, A., Nielsen, & Verburg, M. (2008). Investigation of language assessment tools and benchmarks necessary for success for internationally educated medical laboratory technologists. Hamilton: CSMLS.

laboratory technologists who apply to CSMLS annually, 11 per cent of whom require language proficiency testing.²

Development

We began work on the project with a Request-for-Proposals (RFP) process to identify the consultants who would conduct the standard-setting sessions. We discovered that expertise in this field is limited. We sent the RFP to four consultants/firms but received a proposal from only one firm. Fortunately, those applicants are leading the field in language proficiency standard setting and they met our needs for this project.

We met with the consultants from the selected firm, LCRT, in May 2008 to finalize a contract, create a work plan and schedule, develop criteria for standard-setting session participants, and discuss strategies for participant recruitment. We identified four key participants (representatives from both of the Ontario medical laboratory bridging programs, from the Ontario regulatory college, and from the CSMLS) and chose three two-day dates in September, October, and November 2008 (one two-day session for each of the three language proficiency tests undergoing validation).

Confirming the session dates and panel members proved to be challenging: it was difficult to find dates for which all of the key participants were available since individuals were required to commit to all six days to ensure consistency and validity of the session outcomes. The best possible scheduling suited only three of the four key participants and pushed back the sessions to October and December 2008 and January 2009. We then contacted individuals from other groups of interest: employers, English-as-a-second-language specialists, and internationally educated medical laboratory technologists. Table 1 lists the session dates and locations, and Table 2 lists the expert panel members who participated in the sessions.

Test	Date	Location
TOEFL-iBT	October 2 & 3, 2008	Hamilton Convention Centre
IELTS	December 11 & 12, 2008	CSMLS Offices, Hamilton
MELA	January 8 & 9 2009	CSMLS Offices, Hamilton

Table 1: Dates and locations for the project’s three standard setting sessions

Notes: TOEFL- iBT = Internet-Based Test of English as a Foreign Language

IELTS = International English Language Testing System

MELA = The Michener English Language Assessment

² Grant, M. M. (in press). CSMLS prior learning assessment candidates: A snapshot. *Canadian Journal of Medical Laboratory Science*.

Name	Group
Masi Basiri	Internationally educated medical laboratory technologist Toronto ON
Mary Costantino	Medical laboratory technologist/employer Toronto ON
Maureen Ffoulkes-Jones	Medical laboratory technologist/employer Saskatoon SK
Moira Grant	Medical laboratory technologist, CSMLS representative Hamilton ON
John Hartt	Medical laboratory technologist/employer Walkerton ON
Helen MacDonald	Medical laboratory technologist/employer Toronto ON
Sue Milburn	Medical laboratory technologist/employer London ON
Cathy Pearl	Educator (bridging program) Toronto ON
Collette Peters	ESL specialist Toronto ON
Bruce Russell	ESL specialist Toronto ON
Ernest Tutu	Internationally educated medical laboratory technologist Toronto ON
Lynn Yawney	Regulatory body representative Toronto ON
Christina Yurchuk	ESL consultant Toronto ON

Table 2: Expert panel members for the three language proficiency testing standard setting sessions

Delivery/Implementation

‘Delivery/implementation’ is defined here as the facilitation of the three two-day standard setting sessions and consultants’ analyses of the findings.

Each panel member received a package of preparatory reading materials prior to each session, along with directions to the session location and information on accommodations, if needed. Two members of the LCRT consulting firm facilitated the sessions, one leading the discussions and item evaluations, and the other recording the proceedings and serving as the resource person.

The consultants’ report, submitted with this document, provides detailed information about the methods used for the sessions, as a full analysis of the findings of the sessions, and recommendations for consideration by the CSMLS’s governance bodies.

Reporting & Evaluation

We submitted the required monthly numeric indicators reports and four status reports as outlined in Schedule B. This document, with the consultant's report and guidelines tool, constitute the final reporting requirements for the project.

Indicators that are relevant for evaluating the project include the following:

1. Successful implementation of the standard-setting sessions;
2. A statistical analysis that provides an evidence base for defensible language proficiency testing cut scores;
3. Interest shown by other organizations in this project; and
4. The influence of the recommendations from the consultants' final report on CSMLS language proficiency testing policies and practices.

This document and the consultant's report outline the completion of the first two points. Examples of the third point are the extensive discussions we have had about the project with representatives from other professional associations and regulatory bodies and the requests we have received for the final project report once it is available. Point 4 is discussed under 'Sustainability Issues', below.

Lessons learned

Implementing and evaluating this project have allowed us to make observations that will be useful for our organization and for others in future ventures like this one.

1. The busy schedules of 'key participants' needed for expert standard-setting panels necessitate allowing time for scheduling standard-setting sessions. A project length of 18 months rather than one year may be advisable for a similarly-structured future undertaking;
2. The limited expertise in the standard-setting field requires advance planning and adequate time to identify the appropriate consultants;
3. The limited expertise noted above suggests the leading edge nature of the work conducted in this project and points to the potential value of the guidelines tool developed by our consultants;
4. The involvement of internationally educated health professions is essential. Our IEMLT panelists provided us with valuable insights into language proficiency testing from the perspectives of internationally educated professionals;
5. Standard-setting sessions have enormous educational value. Employers appreciated and learned from the sessions and expressed interest in materials on cultural sensitivity in the workplace. They also asked to receive a copy of the consultants' findings when they are available;
6. Also of educational value was the opportunity for panelists to experience the widely varying language proficiency testing materials in terms of their levels of challenge and their relevance to occupational situations. Panelists left with an enhanced understanding of the challenges in generic or academic tests in meeting expectations for occupation-specific language proficiency;

7. Observing the differences among tests created an appreciation for the need to ensure that the CSMLS considers its policy changes about language proficiency testing in an informed manner with appropriate expert consultation.

Next steps

Once the CSMLS staff has had an opportunity to review the findings and recommendations in the consultants' report, we plan to carry out the following steps:

- Addressing the consultants' recommendations (see 'Sustainability Issues')
- Sharing the findings: for example, by posting the final report on the CSMLS web site, publishing an article on the project in the CSMLS's national professional journal, presenting the findings at conferences, notifying stakeholders and project participants of the findings, circulating the findings among other health professional associations and regulatory bodies, notifying our partners in health- and human resources-related organizations of the project (for example, the Canadian Network of National Associations of Regulators, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada)
- Developing some of the materials created during the project (for example, the list of communication skills expected of a minimally competent medical laboratory technologist) for distribution and discussion among CSMLS members, educators, and employers.

SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

Sustainability for the activities undertaken in this project may include changes to the CSMLS's language proficiency testing and prior learning assessment (PLA) policies and/or to current cut-off scores for the language tests. Changes or additions to existing policies may be advisable if the analysis of the findings from the standard setting sessions reveal that the CSMLS's current language proficiency standards are not appropriate for internationally educated applicants to the PLA process or that they could be improved in some way. Once CSMLS governance bodies review and approve any such changes, the changes will be embedded in CSMLS PLA practices. The group responsible for policy change in language proficiency requirements is the Council on National Certification (CNC), an arm's length body consisting of representatives from each provincial regulatory body or association, a CSMLS examination panel member, and a member of the CSMLS Board of Directors.

As we received the final consultants' report and recommendations on March 31 2009, the final date for this project, we have not had an opportunity to consider the report in detail nor to convey the recommendations to the CNC. We will present the report and recommendations at the CNC's May 21 teleconference. Any ensuing policy changes will be reviewed by the CSMLS Board of Directors at its June meeting. The comments made below are the responses of CSMLS staff to the findings and are contingent upon consideration by the CNC, the ultimate policy-making authority for CSMLS certification practices.

The consultants made seven recommendations in their final report. We list them below, along with our preliminary comments.

1. Use the data included in this report to set the final cut-scores

The CNC will consider the data with the appropriate expertise to guide its decision-making.

2. Build on existing research

This and the previous project on language benchmarking³ provide a solid evidence base upon which the CNC can ground its decisions about policy change.

3. Include an occupation-specific language test in the menu options for IEMLTs.

We are pleased to be one of the few professions that have an occupation-specific language proficiency test. However, the MELA test is fairly new, and we recognize that it requires further research. We would need to be assured of its accessibility (test sites, cost), validity (for example, the size of its test item bank), and sustainability (a commitment from the test source) as part of our considerations of its suitability.

4. Expand options to include IELTS AC and GT.

The CSMLS originally chose to accept IEMLTs GT as proof of language proficiency because this version was reportedly in common use by immigrants. The CNC will consider extending its policies to include the AC version.

5. Develop a communication plan

We support transparency in certification processes, which include language proficiency testing policies and practices. The CNC will consider ways for ensuring that we provide clear, accessible and helpful information to our stakeholders on how we arrived at our standards.

6. Provide clear, comprehensible test information for applicants.

The CSMLS will examine ways to improve its publications on language proficiency requirements for the profession. We have discussed creating a ‘key features’ table to enable our clients to compare the different tests at a glance. We also may choose to provide internationally educated clients with information about why language proficiency is important to the profession (for example, with workplace examples, and references to the crucial place of communication skills in our code of ethics and national competency profiles).

7. Share information with other regulators.

We plan to make the findings of this report, including the guidelines manual, available to other organizations as described earlier in the ‘Next Steps’ section.

³ Grant, Strachan, Nielsen & Verburg (2008), cited earlier.

CONCLUSION

This project has permitted the CSMLS to create an evidence base for its language proficiency standards and to investigate the feasibility of a profession-specific language proficiency testing tool. The findings and recommendations reported by the standard-setting consultants have provided us with the foundation for ensuring that our language proficiency standards are fair, defensible, and transparent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following individuals contributed to this project:

Andrea Strachan, LCRT Consulting, Toronto
Gail Stewart, LCRT Consulting, Toronto
Khaled Barkahoui, LCRT Consulting, Toronto

Christine Nielsen, CSMLS Director of Certification

The members of the expert panel, as listed in Table 2.

We appreciate the support of the Government of Ontario in carrying out this project.