



APEX

*Report on the December 7,
2004 APEX Round Table on
Learning Disabilities and
Official Languages*

December 21, 2004

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1. Background

In the summer of 2003, APEX consulted with executives across the country on the new policies in the areas of official languages and language training. In general, APEX found that executives strongly supported the policies but were concerned about their application. The Association produced a report containing observations and a set of recommendations, and provided it to the responsible senior leaders, both political and bureaucratic.

In January, 2004, APEX launched its new Advisory Service for Executives. The new Service soon received a number of clients who were experiencing significant difficulties in achieving a C level in oral interaction. Most of them had been professionally diagnosed with dyslexia in its various forms or with other learning disabilities.

In February 2004, APEX met with some 15 executives (affected by dyslexia) on language training to gather their feedback on their experience and their suggestions for improvements. They spoke at length about language training, language testing and the management of their training by their departments. As a result of this consultation, the Association produced a case study which it distributed to senior officials with a responsibility in the area of official languages. APEX also offered to host a round table discussion on the topic; all interested parties responded favourably to the suggestion. The Round Table was held on May 12, 2004. A report on this Round Table, produced by APEX is available at www.apex.gc.ca

A second Round Table was hosted by APEX on December 7, 2004.

2. Purpose

This document is intended to report on the discussions held at the second APEX Round Table on Learning Disabilities and Official Languages.

3. Objectives of the Round Table

The Round Table focused on two objectives:

- To share information on progress achieved since the May 12, 2004 Round Table;
- To discuss next steps and timelines.

4. Participants

Participants included APEX representatives (Pierre de Blois, Colette Nault, Paul Choquette), representatives of the Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada (PSHRMAC: Kelly Collins, Susan Siu, Wally Boxhill),

representatives of the Canada School of Public Service (CSPS: Denise Boudrias, Yves Dupuis, Colette Chevrier), representatives of the Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC: Michel Gobeil, Henry Edwards, Bastian Kruidener, Marie Bergeron, Nathalie Leblanc), from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (Sylvie Jalbert), from the Office of the Clerk of the Privy Council (Mary Laidlaw) and from the Council of the Network of Departmental Official Languages Champions (François Raynauld, Pierre de Montigny).

5. Summary of the Round Table

5.1 Introduction

Pierre de Blois thanked the participants for attending this second Round Table. He pointed out that the latest APEX consultations demonstrate that executives continue to express concerns regarding language training and testing, making the work of this group especially important.

5.2 Objectives and Process

Paul Choquette explained the objectives and the process for the Round Table.

5.3 Information Sharing

5.3.1 APEX

Colette Nault reported on actions taken by APEX to deliver on its commitments from the last Round Table. APEX has:

- Written to the President of the PSC requesting that the orientation process become mandatory for all executives, as a tool for the development of an appropriate learning plan (July 15, 2004).
- Written to Deputy Ministers to raise their awareness of the need for greater departmental involvement in the language training process, for departmental experts who can assist and guide students while they are on language training and of the need to keep their executives involved in the affairs of the department and the Public Service while they are away from the office on language training (July 2004).
- Drafted a report on this Round Table, sent it to the Ministers and Deputy Ministers involved in official languages as well as to all participants, and posted it on its website.
- Organized this second Round Table.

5.3.2 Canada School of Public Service

At the May Round Table the CSPA made the following commitments:

- Denise Boudrias, the Senior Vice-president, committed to devoting a large percentage of her time to the language training issue.
- Yves Dupuis committed to continuing the dialogue with Ross Leeder regarding his proposal for a pilot French working unit, to support the work of the new Division headed by Colette Chevrier, to establish closer ties with departments and to work on ensuring that the results of the orientation process are fully integrated into teaching methodologies.

Denise Boudrias reported on progress achieved in the area of language training. She indicated that this is a hot file and that it is receiving a lot of her personal attention. She distributed a deck on the Review of Language Training and Testing in the Public Service which is currently underway. This review is intended to:

- Develop language training and testing vision and delivery model(s) for the future that meet current requirements and future needs; reflect a modern approach to bilingualism; address issues related to feeder groups, employment equity and the regions; and recognize that acquisition of language skills is an important aspect of learning and career development.
- Contribute to the overall modernization of the Public Service.
- Develop an action plan for official languages to improve internal capacity and create an exemplary Public Service in support of Canada's linguistic duality.
- Address concerns related to current training and testing delivery models.

Co-led by the CSPA and the PSC, in collaboration with the PSHRMAC, the review is comprised of three components:

- Research and analysis on the current system's effectiveness and efficiency;
- Development of a guiding vision and new delivery models for the future;
- An implementation strategy and transition/business plan.

An ADM Advisory Group has been created for this review as well as five working groups focussing on language training approaches and methodologies, language testing, employment equity, governance and financing models, and communications and outreach.

All APEX recommendations pertaining to official languages have been referred to the appropriate working groups.

It is anticipated that initial results will be presented to the CSPA Board of Governors in December 2004 with the final results and proposed options going to a Deputy Minister forum in March 2005. Fiscal year 2005-2006 will be a transition year with full implementation by April 2006.

Concurrently, work is continuing to address urgent training and testing issues (reducing waiting lists, meeting special learning needs, modernizing existing materials and developing new on-line tools). Yves Dupuis reported on progress in these areas.

There have been a number of meetings with Ross Leeder, Health Canada, to discuss implementation of his proposed pilot project which involves the creation of a unit that would carry out projects for departments in French. Executives with a valid B level would work in this unit with the assistance of teachers. Further development of this project will occur in April.

A specialised division to support persons with learning difficulties has been set up at the CSPA. A new Bloc 0 focussing on the similarities between English and French has been developed and is receiving positive reviews from students. A new pedagogical centre collects all research materials on learning disabilities. Weekly meetings bring together teachers who report on their research results and exchange information on any new method or teaching material that they have tried in their classrooms. All classrooms are now equipped with computers and have Internet access. Specialised computer assisted learning programs are made available to students and teachers. Work on accommodations for testing purposes is underway with the PSC. A partnered project with the *Académie de formation linguistique* has been undertaken to test new approaches to the teaching of students with dyslexia. New linkages have been established with departments who now receive regular progress reports on each of their employees. New measures are in place to ensure that the results of the orientation process are factored into the language training of each student. Finally, a document which makes the distinction between learning problems and learning disorders has been distributed to departments (Annex A).

5.3.3 Public Service Commission of Canada

At the May Round Table, the PSC made the following commitments:

- To look into and resolve the issues regarding the “negotiation” of accommodations;
- To pursue its initiative to introduce more flexibility into the administration of the SLE, including its pilot project;
- To initiate discussions with organizations that are similar to the federal Public Service to examine whether they face the same issues and to discuss the solutions they have implemented or attempted;
- To hire a psychologist with a specialty in the accommodation of persons with disabilities and identify other actions to be taken based on the expert advice provided by this person;
- To fully collaborate with the Advisory Committee and implement its decisions.

Henry Edwards, Michel Gobeil and Marie Bergeron reported on progress achieved to date.

The PSC pointed out that defining accommodations is not a “negotiation” process but a consultation process to determine reasonable accommodations that:

- Do not change the nature or the level of the qualification being assessed and
- Neither disadvantage nor advantage the person with a disability relative to other candidates.

In some cases, there is disagreement between the PSC and the candidate about what meets these criteria; this can then appear from the candidate’s point of view as a “negotiation”. To alleviate this perception/expectation problem, the PSC is:

- Better describing to candidates its role as an expert in assessment working within the laws and policies of the staffing system (fair assessment for all candidates and assessment for merit) and using information from health professionals who are experts in disabilities;
- Better describing the PSC’s need for information to candidates’ health professionals so that they do not include recommendations for accommodations that cannot be provided in a particular testing situation;
- Informing candidates who are tested more than once that it is necessary to verify with them the effectiveness of previous accommodations (not to “re-negotiate” those accommodations).

The PSC has introduced greater flexibility in considering changes to the test format. It is piloting simulated meetings and presentation formats, and testing and shadowing in the candidate’s workplace. Moreover, the PSC now briefs candidates prior to the test, allows them to choose the warm up topic and take notes during the test. Finally, for persons with disabilities, the furniture in the room can be positioned according to the candidates’ preferences. So far, feedback on these changes has been positive.

The PSC has hired a psychologist with a specialty in learning disabilities, Nathalie Leblanc. Among her roles, she will serve as an advisor to all PSC staff working on accommodating persons with disabilities.

The PSC has carried out a study of best practices internationally, surveying thirty organizations both public and private. A draft report has been prepared for the Advisory Committee which concludes that an oral interview remains the best method to assess proficiency.

The PSC has done considerable work to increase the knowledge and understanding of teachers regarding the Second Language Evaluation (SLE). So far, it has given twelve information sessions to three hundred teachers in CSPA, DND and in the partnered schools. It also hosted an open house which was attended by over forty teachers.

Finally, the PSC is co-chairing the Advisory Committee and supporting the work of the Working Group on Testing through analysis and research.

5.3.4 Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada

At the May Round Table, the PSHRMAC made the following commitments:

- Continuing their active involvement as a member of the Advisory Committee in order to design a fresh, new approach to official languages in the Public Service;
- Bringing the issue of dyslexia to the attention of the Committee on Persons with Disabilities.

Kelly Collins reported that PSHRMAC chairs the Working Group on Testing and participates in two others. In order to deliver on the mandate of these working groups, a number of initiatives have been undertaken:

- A study of the language requirements in the workplace - the conclusions could affect the competency profile and the standards;
- A review of best practices;
- A review of the links between merit and linguistic evaluation;
- An exploration of alternative testing methods;
- A pilot project on receptive bilingualism with Environment Canada.

The Advisory Committee is currently examining the capacity of the Public Service to better integrate language training into the career development of all its employees.

Susan Siu and Wally Boxhill reported that the Working Group on Employment Equity is addressing learning difficulties, learning disabilities as well as cultural barriers for certain groups. Its goal is to ensure that testing methods are not barriers for certain groups and that designated groups are truly accommodated.

5.4 Discussion

Pierre de Blois launched the discussion around two themes: communications and funding.

5.4.1 Communications

There was rapid agreement that a lot of progress had been achieved and that there is a real need to communicate this information to executives and other public servants. Denise Boudrias pointed out that there is a working group responsible for communications and outreach which has developed strategies and scenarios as well as messages and tools. This group will reach out to APEX and other groups in order to leverage their networks in communicating information on the results of the Review.

It was agreed that the Round Table members would meet again in April and that the focus of discussions would be on communication.

5.4.2 Funding

All agreed that funding will be required to implement any major changes to the way the system currently operates. There was some debate regarding how to fund language training - should individuals be required to invest their own time and money before the employer picks up the costs? Pierre de Blois indicated that the position of APEX was that individuals should be responsible for maintaining their level once it has been acquired but that the employer should continue to cover the costs to reach the level initially.

Denise Boudrias mentioned that the Advisory Committee is looking into the concept of a “passport” which would allow individual public servants a certain number of hours of training at the employer’s cost over the course of their careers.

All agreed that the key to maintaining a level of proficiency once it is acquired is by providing a work environment that is conducive to the usage of both languages and that the executive cadre has an important role to play in this area.

6. Conclusion

As is almost always the case, communication is the key in resolving this issue. There is a need to involve executives to a greater extent in defining problems in the current system and in finding solutions. APEX is eager to make its networks available to the organizations involved in official languages should they wish to consult further. This will be discussed at the next Round Table to be held in April.

APEX recognizes the significant efforts currently underway to ameliorate the Public Service’s approaches to language training and language testing.

Prepared by Colette Nault

Annex A

LEARNING DISORDERS AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The Difference between Learning Disorders and Learning Difficulties

The broad difference between learning disorders and learning difficulties is that learning disorders are **permanent** while learning difficulties are **isolated** and **temporary**.

- Learning disorders stem from **genetic** or **neurological factors** or **cerebral damage** which affects the way that the brain works by modifying processes related to learning. Only neuropsychologists are qualified to identify learning disorders using very specific tests.
- Learning difficulties are caused by **temporary problems** in an individual's life that are linked to one or several specific events such as divorce, a death, an illness, moving or difficult family relationships. The manifestations of learning difficulties such as a lack of concentration, problems with reading or writing or behavioral problems could easily be mistaken for a learning disorder. However, due to the temporary and isolated state of these difficulties, one must be careful not to make judgments that are too hasty.
- Certain allophones could also experience serious difficulties during second language training. For instance, on French training, certain allophones might be greatly challenged by the phonetic and grammar systems for which there are no points of comparison in their mother tongues.

Other Factors that Define Learning Disorders

- The learning disorders that psychologists define most often as a “deficiency” **are not linked to an intellectual deficiency**. In fact, those who are affected have an average or superior intelligence level.
- Learning disorders are defined as “a certain number of dysfunctions that can affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or processing of verbal or non-verbal information”. They also stem from “damage to one or several processes” required for normal development, causing a deficiency in the processing of information.
- Learning disorders have a **vast range of manifestations** and the people who suffer from them can have **one or several deficiencies**. In practical terms, these could manifest themselves through the following difficulties:

- 1) **Reading difficulties** that relate to decoding or recognizing words, understanding and remembering things that are perceived visually. These difficulties are commonly called “dyslexia” or “visual perception problem”.
 - 2) **Writing difficulties** that appear as problems in organizing written ideas and syntax, as problems in grammar and spelling (called “dysorthography”).
 - 3) **Oral language difficulties** which affect listening, oral expression, understanding of the discourse and remembering what is orally presented. Therefore, sounds could be difficult to distinguish and when there is background noise, sound discrimination becomes impossible.
 - 4) **Difficulties in mathematics** such as a poor memory for quantitative symbols and the inversion of numbers (commonly called “dyscalculia”).
 - 5) **Various difficulties** relating to, for example, attention, reasoning, the speed of information processing and coordination.
- Learning disorders **have varying degrees of severity**. Those who have light or medium learning disorders will have less difficulty adapting than those who have serious learning disorders.

It is important to note that learning disorders are not caused by hearing or vision problems, socio-economic factors, cultural and linguistic differences or a lack of motivation. However, these factors are aggravating.