

Language Training and Testing
APEX Discussion with a Group of Executives
with Dyslexia
March, 2004



Case Study

Mariline is an EX-02. She has been on language training for 22 months. So far, she has been unsuccessful in obtaining her C level in Oral Interaction. And it is not for lack of trying. Mariline is dyslexic. She didn't know this before she started her training; a teacher told her after she had been on language training for seven months. When Mariline discussed this with her department, she was told to continue her training and that she still had a lot of time.

After 13 months, her department decided to send her to the Canadian Dyslexia Association for a special assessment and then to a clinical psychologist; both confirmed her dyslexia. The psychologist identified a number of measures to be taken to accommodate Mariline's learning disability during SLE testing. And so, **every time** Mariline is scheduled for testing, she meets with the PSC to negotiate which of these measures will be in place. On some, she is accommodated; on others not – to protect the integrity of the test, she is told. Mariline has tried and failed 12 times – she is now terrified of the test and panics as soon as the assessor hits the record button.

And yet, she can make presentations in French, she can discuss work issues with her staff and colleagues – she just can't pass this test. Mariline feels humiliated that she must negotiate accommodations that would be provided as a matter of course to anyone with a physical disability. She is of the view that she will never reach her level unless some alternative form of testing is used to assess her abilities.

Now Mariline has been told by her department that she cannot continue on language training beyond March 31, 2004. She is told that she can most likely be exempted from meeting the C level in Oral Interaction. But this will only apply to her current position. Because all EX positions in bilingual regions will shortly be staffed on an imperative basis, Mariline will have to stay in her current position until the end of her career or consider moving to a unilingual region. Mariline has 9 years to go before she retires – she feels that this is discriminatory and unfair.

Mariline is not her real name but she does exist and is currently on language training. APEX met with some 15 EXs who have a lot in common with Mariline. They have shared their stories and their views with Colette Nault, APEX's Senior Advisor for Executives just earlier this month. They were generous with their time and their insights. APEX thanks them. This short paper summarizes their issues and recommendations and is a companion piece to APEX's report on its summer 2003 consultations on Official Languages with EXs across the country.

The issues and recommendations from this group of executives fall under three headers:

- Language training
- Language testing
- Management of the training process.

Language Training

This group of executives affected by dyslexia was of the opinion that language training is not adapted to individual needs, that it is too standardized allowing for little or no adaptation to various learning styles. Moreover, there is insufficient monitoring and control of the multitude of language schools currently providing training to public servants. Some teachers are poorly trained or not trained at all. Departments are unable to recommend the best private schools to potential students. Learning disabilities are rarely if ever diagnosed early on and, once diagnosed, cannot be accommodated due to a lack of expertise. This is a huge problem for people who suffer from dyslexia. They require more individual attention, greater adaptation to their special learning needs as well as regular monitoring and support. They need specialized teachers and learning tools that are adapted to their special needs.

The group made the point that research was required into the characteristics of people who successfully learn a second language as adults. What is their profile and how were they able to achieve the desired results? Such research would provide useful insights that could improve language training methods. If such research already exists, the group was of the opinion that it should be widely shared.

Finally, the group discussed the frustration and de-motivation involved when someone is on language training for extended periods of time. This is especially true for executives who are used to being highly active and involved in the management of government programs, where their skills are valued and they make daily contributions to serving Canadians. One member had thought about this quite a lot and had drafted a proposal for a pilot project which would involve the creation of second language, temporary work units that would take on real projects for various departments, entirely in their second language and with the support of a teacher. People could enter this program once they have acquired the basic skills in the language. Such a formula would provide real results for the departments and an alternate form of immersion for students. It would rebuild motivation and the sense of self worth that people quite often lose after extended periods of unsuccessful language training.

While some may argue that acting on these observations requires an injection of substantial funds, this group was of the view that, under the current system, people waste precious training time and precious taxpayer dollars without, in the end, achieving the ultimate result – a cadre of bilingual public service executives. This, they argue, is even more expensive in the long run.

Recommendations on Language Training

All recommendations here are directed to the *Canada School of Public Service* which should:

- 1) Play a greater leadership role in setting standards for language training schools to ensure that all public servants have access to high quality language training. The School should monitor the results achieved by these training schools in accordance with a specific set of criteria. Exit interviews should be carried out with people who have completed their language training and their comments and suggestions should be acted upon.
- 2) Develop expertise in the diagnostic and training of people with learning disabilities such as dyslexia.
- 3) Play a strong leadership role with departments to ensure that they, in turn, are able to provide advice and support to public servants about to commence or in the process of acquiring their second language skills.
- 4) Make all of its learning materials and tools readily available to any public servant on language training.
- 5) Review its current teaching methods to ensure that they are responsive to various adult learning styles.
- 6) Study the factors of success in second language acquisition and act on the results.
- 7) Explore the idea of a pilot work unit that would complete, in their second language, special projects for departments.

Language Testing

This is the topic that was the sore point for this group of executives. They felt that current testing methods were inadequate to respond to the special needs of people with a learning disability. Comments from the group addressed a number of issues ranging from testing methods to accommodation for dyslexics.

People felt that second language assessments should take into account an individual's capacity in his or her first language, especially for people suffering from a learning disability. They wondered how people could be expected to perform tasks in their second language that they could not perform in their first language. They were of the opinion that a baseline of a person's ability in his or her first language should be obtained prior to second language assessments.

They felt that a one size fits all assessment approach was both ineffective and inefficient. Alternative methods should be actively explored. The group suggested various possibilities such as assessing someone in his or her workplace performing his or her duties in French or assessing people in group situations where they can be observed interacting with others. They mentioned that teachers' evaluations could also be factored into the final decision. Of course this would require an investment.

They also pointed to problems with the feedback provided after the assessment. Participants only receive a list of grammatical structures, some of which are check marked. This is inadequate and puzzling. If the purpose of the test is really to assess the ability to communicate effectively in one's second language, then why is so much

emphasis placed on things such as the use of complex phrases and the subjunctive? Some members of the group had asked to listen to the tape of their interviews. The Public Service Commission (PSC) agreed to this. However, it placed conditions on it such as a ban on all note taking. For a dyslexic with short-term memory problems, this is quite an obstacle to overcome if the review of the tape is to be helpful.

The group was generally indignant about the PSC's current approach to the accommodation of learning disabilities. They resented that they had to negotiate accommodations, even though these had been specifically recommended by qualified clinical psychologists. They were especially resentful of the fact that these negotiations had to occur before each assessment. In their view, this represents a total waste of their time and of taxpayer dollars.

Finally the group felt that the assessors were not trained to accommodate the special needs of dyslexics. While some accommodations were made during the interview, there was no accommodation when the performance was actually assessed.

Recommendations on Language Testing

All recommendations here are directed to the *Public Service Commission* which should:

- 1) Identify alternative methods for the assessment of abilities in the second language, especially for people with learning disabilities.
- 2) Provide meaningful feedback to people who fail the test, especially to those who fail more than three times.
- 3) Assess people in their first language and use that as a baseline for second language assessment for all candidates with a learning disability.
- 4) Make every effort to accommodate the special needs of people with learning disabilities based on the recommendations of qualified psychologists. The Commission should recognize that this falls under the provisions of the *duty to accommodate* and treat people with learning disabilities with respect. Once these accommodations have been identified, they should be in place for all assessments, once and for all.
- 5) Have a number of assessors who have received specialized training in the assessment of people with dyslexia.

Management of the Training Process

The group was quite critical of the way the language training process is currently managed by departments. Simply put, they felt it was not being managed at all in most cases. They spoke of the unavailability of expert advice regarding schools. Most participants had been given a list of possible choices with no advice as to which school might best suit their needs. When they asked how the schools had been rated by other public servants, they were told that this information was not being gathered. When they began to experience problems over the course of their language training and they looked to their departments for advice and support, none was available. While on language

training, they never heard from anyone in their departments regarding monitoring their progress. It is only when they hit the wall that anyone seemed to pay attention. And at that point it was too late – a lot of time, effort and money had been wasted.

Moreover, there was no attempt to keep people connected to their departments while they were on training. They did not have access to their email; they were not invited to management retreats or conferences. In short, they were completely cut off from the Public Service. Newspapers became their only way to keep abreast of developments. For EXs, this is a major issue.

Finally, the contracting process with language schools was not well managed. Contracts were allowed to expire before the end of the training period leaving some people stranded and forced to interrupt their training while the contract was renewed.

Recommendations on the Management of the Training Process

The recommendations here are directed to *all Departments* which should:

- 1) Manage the training process as they manage any other project involving the expenditure of public funds. They should have the necessary expertise to provide advice and guidance. They should monitor results closely and intervene directly when necessary.
- 2) Ensure that appropriate linkages are in place with public servants on language training, most especially with executives.
- 3) Closely manage the process through which they grant contracts to language training schools to ensure high quality services and return on investments.

Conclusion

The executives who took part in this discussion indicated more than once that they took no exception with the Official Languages Policy. They fully support the Policy – it is its implementation that they challenge. Language training should not be focused on passing a test. It should ensure that public servants develop the skills they need to fulfill their duties. And the assessment at the end should be flexible enough to allow for an accurate assessment of a person's abilities in the second language, not on maintaining the integrity of the tool.

This group has indicated that it is willing to be the guinea pig for whatever changes or improvements might be considered to address the issues they have raised. They are hopeful that improvements will be brought about as a result of the APEX summer consultations on official languages and as a result of the views that are reflected in this document.

The key question is whether we are genuinely trying to create a bilingual cadre or whether we are more concerned with process and principles that serve as fairness.....but that are ultimately not fair at all.....

