



APEX

*Report on the May 12, 2004
APEX Round Table on
Learning Disabilities and
Official Languages*

July 8, 2004

*Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada
234 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 2200
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6K6*

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.

2. Purpose

This document is intended to report on the discussions held at the APEX Round Table on Learning Disabilities and Official Languages and to recommend a course of action.

3. Objectives of the Round Table

The Round Table focused on four major objectives:

- To understand the experience of persons with learning disabilities;
- To share information on initiatives underway in the areas of language training and testing;
- To explore solutions to better respond to the needs of persons with learning disabilities and meet obligations under the Employment Equity Act;
- To agree on next steps and timelines.

4. Participants

Participants included APEX representatives (Pierre de Blois, Colette Nault, Paul Choquette), two executives with learning disabilities (Jane Roszell, Department of National Defence and Ross Leeder, Health Canada), representatives of the Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada (PSHRMAC: Diana Monnet, Kelly Collins, Cynthia Binington, 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), a representative from Health Canada (Lucille Marleau), from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (Gilbert Langelier) and from the Office of the Clerk of the Privy Council (Mary Laidlaw).

5. Process

The meeting was facilitated by Colette Nault and introduced by Pierre de Blois and Paul Choquette, all of the APEX Secretariat. The first part of the meeting focused on information sharing. This was followed by an open discussion. The meeting ended with commitments by the CSPS, the PSC and the PSHRMAC.

6. Summary of the Round Table

6.1 Introduction

Pierre de Blois introduced the topic. He explained that 15 executives had so far consulted APEX's Senior Advisor for Executives on matters pertaining to official languages. This is a high number of such cases over a three month period. He pointed out that APEX does not represent individual executives but that it does play a role in addressing systemic issues. It would seem that learning disabilities and official languages is such an issue. This is why APEX volunteered to bring the officials with responsibilities in this area together to share information, pinpoint the problems and find solutions. APEX is there to facilitate the discussion and is hopeful that this Round Table will prove helpful to all parties concerned.

6.2 Objectives and Process

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

6.3 Information Sharing

6.3.1 Legislative and Policy Requirements

Representatives of the PSHRMAC focused on the “duty to accommodate policy” as it applies to executives with learning disabilities. The purpose of the policy is to ensure that the federal Public Service makes optimal use of every individual’s talents. One size does not fit all; it is only on a case by case basis that one can ensure that a person’s disability is appropriately accommodated.

The “duty to accommodate policy” is clear in the areas of language training and testing. For persons with disabilities:

- The cap on hours of training is waived or extended;
- They must receive language training that is adapted to their special needs.

There is only one condition to be met: the individual must be able to provide proof of a diagnosed disability by a recognized authority. In accordance with the Canadian Human Rights Act, the policy sets out a duty to accommodate to the point of undue hardship to the employer.

Because the “duty to accommodate policy” is fairly new, the PSHRMAC is working to increase the understanding of departmental representatives.

6.3.2 Experience of an Executive with Dyslexia

Ross Leeder spoke about his own personal experience. He has been on language training for more than two years but has been unable to achieve a C level in oral interaction. He did not know he was dyslexic prior to commencing his language training and it took quite a long time before he was diagnosed by a clinical psychologist. Since then, it has proven difficult to obtain the types of accommodations recommended by the psychologist. He has been tested seven times so far and continues to strive to demonstrate that he is bilingual. Over the course of the past two years, he feels that he has been left on his own. He has received limited advice from his department and he has been cut off from his position and the Public Service. The experience has been de-motivating and humiliating. To overcome these feelings, he has been actively involved in bringing the problem to the forefront and has proposed solutions, including a pilot project that would create a working unit in the second language. Small groups of executives, working in their second official language and supported by a language teacher, would carry out special studies and projects for departments. This would give executives the opportunity to work in their second language while making a meaningful contribution to the Public Service. He is hopeful that, as a result of this Round Table, new and innovative solutions will be explored.

6.3.3 Experience of an Executive with Learning Disabilities

Jane Roszell built on Ross's presentation. She explained that she had had no difficulty in achieving a B level in oral interaction. Her difficulties began to appear when she started her level C training. A number of her teachers noticed that she was experiencing problems but none could find solutions. Because she had once headed up the Personnel Psychology Centre, she took the matter into her own hands and consulted a clinical psychologist. After three months of evaluation, the psychologist identified a number of learning problems: a very weak short term auditive memory, attention deficit disorder and problems in the perception and production of certain sounds. She brought this diagnosis to the attention of the system – both the language training facility and the PSC's evaluation team. The school was unable to adapt the training to her special needs and, despite taking two second language tests with accommodations, she remains unsuccessful in achieving the C level. In her view, one evaluator made significant efforts to accommodate her disabilities; the second was unable to do so. She feels that teachers and evaluators lack expertise in this area. After one year of language training, her department wants to know the status of her situation. This is increasing the pressure she already feels.

6.3.4 Initiatives Underway: Language Training and Testing

Denise Boudrias informed the group of a major initiative underway to review official languages training and testing in the federal Public Service. The intent of the review is to develop the Public Service language training and testing delivery model of the future, one that reflects a modern approach to bilingualism, addresses issues related to feeder groups, employment equity and the regions, and recognizes that the acquisition of second language skills is an important aspect of an individual's career development. She explained that this review goes beyond improvements to existing mechanisms to examining fundamental issues. There are three components to this review.

1. The first component focuses on developing a guiding vision for the language training and testing delivery model of the future (2006-2010). To facilitate this task, a discussion paper has been developed based on consultations with senior officials both at the centre and in departments, along with various stakeholders and service providers. (Note: Subsequent to this Round Table, this paper was reviewed by the advisory group of Assistant Deputy Ministers referred to below and the ideas and issues it raises will be explored further over the coming months.)
2. The second component will be launched over the summer. It will involve a study and evaluation of the current system – its efficiency, cost-effectiveness and results – by Consulting and Audit Canada.
3. The third component will focus on business and transition planning for moving to the selected model(s). It will be handled by the CSPA.

This project will be guided by an advisory group at the Assistant Deputy Minister level. It will be co-chaired by Denise herself as Senior Vice-President of the CSPA and by Jacques Pelletier, Vice-President of the PSC.

Yves Dupuis, who has been on strength with the CSPS for three weeks, explained that he wanted to share with the group what he has himself learned since his arrival. Over the years, there have been a number of initiatives by various teachers to adapt teaching methods to the special needs of their students. These efforts were ad hoc and were not institutionalized (integrated and consolidated). Over the last twelve months, three structured initiatives were carried out. Two pilot groups of students received special training to meet their unique needs, one in Language Training Canada and the other in collaboration with a partner private school. Moreover, a study documented the ad hoc initiatives (diagnostic, teaching methods, orientation and evaluation). As a result, a report was produced which contains some thirty recommendations intended to improve language training for persons with disabilities.

On April 1, 2004 the CSPS created a special unit with a mandate to implement these recommendations. The School is currently exploring the creation of an advisory committee to oversee this initiative.

Colette Chevrier, who heads this new unit, spoke about the importance of identifying learning problems early on, before training even begins, in order to customize training to the individual's needs. Her goal is to devise alternative training methods designed to provide greater support to students with learning disabilities. She mentioned that pilot groups will be in place shortly. She expressed a strong view that teaching methods based on continuous long term training periods for students with learning disabilities should be revisited. Departments must be involved throughout the process. Innovative training options, such as the one proposed by Ross Leeder, must be explored. She also mentioned that a training course on pronunciation is under development.

6.3.5 Initiatives Underway: Language Evaluation

Michel Gobeil indicated that he found Ross's and Jane's testimonials disturbing. Both are quite able to communicate in French and yet, they cannot achieve the C level in Oral Interaction. He spoke about the need to re-examine the parameters and the process used for second language evaluation. Over the last 12 months, there have been a number of meetings with various players involved in the evaluation field. He feels that we are at a turning point – a moment in time where all the organizations that hold responsibility for official languages are seized with the issues and eager to make changes.

He reminded the participants that approximately 85% of those who take the Second Language Evaluation (SLE) do so outside of language training activities. In other words, the vast majority of people being evaluated are not taking the test immediately following language training.

There are a number of initiatives, both current and planned, as a result of focus groups with executives and of two retreats with evaluators and representatives of language training institutions. The diagnosis has been done; now it is time to act.

This week, a pilot is underway involving 40 candidates. Various techniques are being used to reduce the stress level associated with the test. For example, candidates will be allowed to use pencil and paper; they will receive information about the test prior to its

administration (what is being evaluated and how); the rooms will be friendlier and less formal. In addition, the PSC is working with Language Training Canada (LTC) to improve communication about the Oral Interaction Test for LTC teachers, and is planning a full briefing on the test and standards for private schools in the fall. Finally, the PSC will introduce a portfolio approach so that evaluators can gain a better understanding of the job requirements and the operational context of the candidates they evaluate.

Henry Edwards explained that PSC psychologists are specialists in the field of evaluation, not in the area of learning disabilities. His main objective as a participant today is to listen and gauge what might be done to improve the situation for persons with learning disabilities. The PSC is not, at this time, modifying the SLE per se; rather it is modifying the procedures for test administration. He recognized that the failure rates have increased although it is proving difficult to determine why. It is possible that the population being evaluated has changed. Further study is underway.

He expanded on the changes mentioned by Michel Gobeil. Testing procedures are being modified to help candidates provide an optimal performance for assessment. Training for teachers has been increased threefold. Testing is now provided on site at Asticou. Much is being done to debunk myths about the instrument (information about and orientation to the SLE; guidelines for departmental coordinators to standardize the information provided to candidates).

In the longer term, the SLE itself may be changed. The PSC is in the process of hiring a psychologist with a specialty in disabilities. Henry cautioned that there has been little research done in the accommodation of persons with learning disabilities and that this is uncharted territory.

Marie Bergeron informed participants that the backlog of candidates for second language evaluation has been resolved, that on-site testing is now available at Asticou two days a week and that the pool of evaluators has increased, thereby allowing better management of a fluctuating demand. She also mentioned that there is a significant increase in collaboration between the developmental and operational arms of the PSC in this field.

This part of the meeting concluded with a question and answer period. Denise Boudrias described the method used by the Bank of Canada. The university uses different standards (four levels ranging from beginner to fully bilingual), manages second language acquisition as part of the continuous training of its staff and has a different testing methodology where candidates are assessed through various workplace simulations (making a presentation; managing a meeting, for example). This experience could assist in rethinking our own approaches and tools.

Gilbert Langelier indicated that it was urgent to understand the underlying reasons for the increase in failure rates on the SLE. Bastian Kruidener responded that the PSC was modifying its data collection in order to be able to study this issue.

Pierre de Blois asked whether there were statistically significant differences in the success rates between bilingual and unilingual regions. While the PSC cannot determine this based on the data it currently collects, there is no difference in the success rates of candidates tested in person and by telephone.

6.4 Discussion

Colette Nault launched the discussion by proposing two changes to the current system:

- Making the orientation process, which provides a diagnosis of person's aptitude to learn a second language and identifies strengths and weaknesses in areas such as short and long term memory, sensitivity to grammar, etc., available to all executives in order to ensure that learning problems are detected early; and
- Determining the nature of the accommodations to be provided to an SLE candidate just once, not before each administration of the test.

Diana Monnet added a third:

- Identifying the best way to assess those with learning disabilities (e. g. hiring or training specialists or contracting with organizations that have expertise, such as The Canadian Dyslexia Association).

While discussions were free flowing, moving from one topic to the other in quick succession, the results are provided under themes or headers to facilitate the reading of this report.

6.4.1 Orientation Process

There was rapid agreement that the orientation process should be made widely available to executives, even in those cases where language training will be provided by private institutions. This would ensure that some learning problems are detected early and provide to executives and departments a realistic projection of the hours of training required to achieve the C level. Some participants noted that private schools, in particular, will sometimes give too optimistic a projection, thereby creating unrealistic expectations. Some felt that departments should be encouraged to insert a paragraph in letters of offer to executives strongly recommending that they undergo the orientation process prior to their language training while others were of the view that the process should be mandatory. All agreed that the purpose is to facilitate the customization of the training provided to executives, not to deny access to those with learning problems. A one-pager should be developed for departmental official languages coordinators explaining the orientation process and why it is strongly recommended.

6.4.2 Departmental Support

Ross Leeder stressed the role that departments need to play in ensuring that their executives on language training stay connected to their department and the federal

Public Service and in guiding them through the language training process. He mentioned that departments should include executives in management retreats, provide home access to the department's computer network and recommend quality language training schools. In order for departments to be able to play this advisory role, he feels that they need to hire learning specialists. Further, departments must be involved throughout the language learning process. A lot of money is spent on this activity and it should be well managed. All participants agreed.

6.4.3 Testing Modalities and Accommodations

Regarding the accommodation issue, there was general agreement that there is currently too much focus on the testing instrument and that we need to go back to fundamentals. The government's goal is to encourage and achieve a bilingual Public Service – that is where the focus should remain. The PSC should consider different testing modalities, for example simulating a meeting or observing a candidate in the workplace. While the costs of this may be high, they are probably even higher to keep executives on language training for two years and more. Ross Leeder offered to provide to the PSC the names of executives who would be willing to volunteer for its pilot. One participant suggested that, if we can establish equivalencies for university degrees, there must be a way to establish equivalent second language testing modalities.

Henry Edwards responded that while accommodations were being provided currently, it was obvious that more needed to be done. He stressed the need for balance between flexibility and fairness for all. Bastian Kruidener indicated a willingness to explore simulations as possible testing alternatives but cautioned that following someone at work would most likely not measure the levels as they are currently defined.

Persons with disabilities are currently required to “negotiate” accommodations each and every time they are tested. Ross Leeder stated that accommodations should not be “negotiated”, they should be provided. And the determination of which accommodations are required should be done just once, not each time one is tested. He further argued that if the research is insufficient at this time to fully accommodate dyslexics, then people should be allowed to return to their positions and to become productive again until full accommodations can be provided. While all participants agreed that no one should have to “negotiate” accommodations every single time they take a test, it was pointed out that persons with disabilities can only be truly accommodated on a case by case basis – there is no single solution – and that the individual with the disability must be involved in the process. Bastian Kruidener noted that the PSC did not intend that the consultation process used in determining accommodations be a ‘negotiation’ and promised to look into this issue. Michel Gobeil pointed out that there are financial considerations that must be addressed: while the PSC is receiving more and more requests for accommodation, no monies have been provided to meet this new and growing demand.

6.4.4 Levels and Standards

Levels of bilingualism and standards for each of these levels have been defined for the Public Service; the SLE evaluates against these levels and standards. Participants discussed whether these levels and standards should be reviewed and modified.

One participant noted that, while someone may be functional in the workplace, this same person may not be able to perform at a C level as it is defined, which is what the SLE evaluates. Jane Roszell indicated that the difference between a B and a C level is huge and suggested that a B+ level be introduced in the short term, while more work is done in defining new levels and standards. She indicated that, in her view, the requirements for executives who deal with the public in their second language on an on-going basis are greater than for those who basically need to communicate with employees and colleagues in the workplace; yet there is no such distinction in our current system.

Denis Boudrias explained the Bank of Canada model. They have defined four levels (beginner, functional, fully functional and fully bilingual). All of the positions of the organization have been assessed and assigned a level based on the requirements of the position. For example, those positions requiring that the incumbent supervise staff in both languages are assessed at the “fully functional” level while those that involve significant interactions with the public require the “fully bilingual” level. The levels of each position are known throughout the organization; this allows employees to set their career goals and define their learning plans accordingly. In this model, the acquisition of a second language is viewed as part of career development and lifelong learning. Employees can choose to aggressively pursue a given level of bilingualism in order to be able to aspire to specific positions.

There is a potential danger of pitting one linguistic community against the other if this issue is not resolved. The whole purpose of the Official Languages Act is to bring Canada’s two founding communities together, to encourage greater dialogue and communication as well as a sense of belonging. Receptive bilingualism would go a long way in achieving this goal while removing some of the irritants in the system.

All agreed that the issue of levels and its associated standards is the single biggest issue to be resolved and that, unless it is resolved, we will all just be “tinkering around the edges”.

6.4.5 Feedback to Candidates

It was pointed out that there are discrepancies between the teacher’s assessment of the student’s readiness and the actual results during the test. Moreover, the current “feuille de retroaction” (feedback sheet), provided by the evaluators, focuses exclusively on the negatives. This can crush self-confidence and the motivation to succeed. It was suggested that the sheet be redesigned. Participants supported the PSC’s efforts to ensure that teachers better understand the levels and standards, the evaluation process and the SLE.

6.4.6 Impacts on Allophones and Employment Equity Groups

While this topic was not discussed in depth, participants mentioned that the allophone population is growing and that there is a need for a language training program that is adapted to their needs. The CSPA is developing a “Bloc 0” specifically geared to respond to the unique needs of allophones and prepare them to start the regular training program at Bloc 1.

Health Canada has established a language training program for employees at the EX minus 1 to EX minus 4 levels for the four designated groups. This part-time program offers group training complemented by one-on-one tutoring sessions.

6.5 Commitments

At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to commit to certain actions and initiatives as a result of the discussion. They are presented by organization.

- **Canada School of Public Service**

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.

- **Public Service Commission**

The PSC will look into and resolve the issues regarding the “negotiation” of accommodations.

The PSC will pursue its initiative to introduce more flexibility into the administration of the SLE, including its pilot project.

The PSC will 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.

The PSC will 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.

The PSC will fully collaborate with the ADM Committee and implement its decisions.

- **Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada**

Diana Monnet will continue her active involvement as a member of the advisory group of ADMs in order to design a fresh, new approach to official languages in the Public Service.

Cynthia Binnington will bring the issue of dyslexia to the attention of the Committee on Persons with Disabilities.

- **Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada**

APEX will write 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.

APEX will write 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.

APEX will draft a report on this Round Table, send it to the Ministers and Deputy Ministers involved in official languages as well as to all participants. APEX will also make the report widely available on its website.

APEX will organize a second meeting, in the fall, to follow up on today's discussions.

6.6 Conclusion and Recommendations by APEX

APEX is optimistic about the future and grateful to all of the participants in this Round Table discussion, most especially to Ross Leeder and Jane Roszell for their courage in sharing their experience with the group.

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. APEX would like to see such consultations take place sooner rather than later, when solutions are being explored rather than once they have been fully developed.

APEX recognizes the significant efforts currently underway to ameliorate the Public Service's approaches to language training and language testing. The Association would like to offer the following further recommendations.

Recommendation 1

In the discussions at this Round Table, there were a number of interventions made that indicated that the standards associated with the C level go beyond what one might call functional bilingualism. In other words, people could very well be able to carry out their functions in their second language, but still be unable to achieve the C level as it is currently defined. This begs the question: are the standards associated with the C level

too high for the requirements of the positions in the executive group? This is why APEX recommends that the Public Service Commission, in collaboration with all of the organizations with responsibilities in the official languages area, **review the standards associated with the C level of bilingualism** for the Public Service of Canada.

Recommendation 2

APEX recommends that, in the interim, **the linguistic profiles of bilingual executive positions in unilingual regions have four skills and associated levels as follows: C in reading, B in writing, C in listening and B in speaking.** This would allow executives to fully participate in bilingual meetings while removing the need for all to achieve a C level in oral interaction as it is currently defined.

Recommendation 3

APEX recommends that **more expertise be developed and brought into the Public Service in the area of accommodation of persons with learning disabilities** – from test developers to language teachers and language evaluators.

Recommendation 4

APEX recommends that **language training no longer be tied to staffing** and that a new approach be introduced. Under this new approach, language training would be viewed as part of an employee's career development. The linguistic requirements of senior positions would be identified based on a set of pre-established criteria that reflect the degree of bilingualism required in each one (service to the public, supervision, participation in meetings, etc.). This information would be made widely available thereby enabling employees to set informed personal career goals. Language training would be provided widely to all those wishing to hone their skills in order to compete for senior positions. Under this scenario, learning a second language would occur over the course of one's career and all staffing of senior positions would be "imperative". APEX believes that such an approach would result in a more positive attitude toward language learning and increased motivation for all those concerned.

Recommendation 5

APEX recommends that **learning disabilities be truly accommodated during language testing** taking into account the effects of distress and anxiety on the performance of these individuals. In cases where the performance is considered borderline, the impacts of the disability on performance in a testing situation should weigh heavily in the evaluator's final decision.

Prepared by Colette Nault