# English-Language Proficiency Requirements for Migration to Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the Implications for Language Testing Research

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**Abstract**

Language proficiency testing has long played a role as both facilitator and barrier in global migration. This paper outlines how Canada and other traditional migrant destination countries use English-language proficiency testing for immigration, asylum and resettlement, and citizenship. It identifies commonalities between these three related areas of migration and the covert values that are often embedded in the required test scores. It identifies different approaches for conducting research under the umbrella of Shohamy's (2001) *Critical Language Testing* and concludes with language testing research and advocacy suggestions specific to the Canadian context.

**Résumé**

Les tests de compétences linguistiques ont depuis longtemps joué un double rôle au sein de la migration mondiale en étant à la fois un facteur facilitant et un obstacle. Cet article examine comment le Canada et d'autres pays traditionnels d'accueil migratoire emploient les tests de compétences linguistiques en anglais dans les processus d'immigration, les demandes d'asile et de relocalisation, ainsi que les demandes de citoyenneté. Il identifie les points communs entre ces trois domaines connexes de la migration et les valeurs cachées qui sont souvent intégrées dans les résultats des tests exigés. L'article détermine différentes approches pour mener des recherches sous l'égide de l'ouvrage *Critical Language Testing* de Shohamy (2001) et se conclut avec des suggestions de recherche et de défense des droits en matière de tests linguistiques spécifiques au contexte canadien.

## English-Language Proficiency Requirements for Migration to Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the Implications for Language Testing Research

*"Let's not look at the immigration story with our eyes wide shut" (Yalnizyan, 2021).*

By 2019, there were approximately 272 million international migrants, already surpassing the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) projected 230 million people by the year 2050 (IOM, 2020). Their journeys are both physical and metaphorical as they navigate building a new life in a new country (Saville, 2009). There is a commonly held belief that having a higher level of proficiency in the host country's national language will improve migrants' ability to communicate in daily life and will facilitate their integration into their new host country. The use of language tests in the context of global migration can both facilitate and ease relocating as well as block migration entirely.

Immigration, asylum and resettlement, and citizenship are three instances in which international migrants may need to meet language proficiency requirements to live in a host country. However, language proficiency tests are "devices which are anchored in broad social realities, ideologies, politics, economics, policy agendas, and diversity" (Shohamy, 2013, p. 226). This is particularly the case for immigration, asylum and resettlement, and citizenship. For people on the move, language tests have long been used in some form or another to determine who gets protection, who gets in, who gets to remain, and ultimately who gets to become a citizen. As McNamara (2005) put it, language tests are a modern-day Shibboleth[i] still being used to determine group membership when there is conflict between groups.

Language testers need to engage more critically with the use of tests as instruments of power that control "migration, globalization, ethnic diversity, and linguistic and human rights" (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009, p. 1). Shohamy and McNamara (2009) argued we need to consider whether the language tests we develop that are being used in this context are, in fact, being used in a manner that is just and fair. There has already been considerable work done to date on the increase in language proficiency requirements for migration in the European context with, for example, studies on the impact of such practices among European Union member states (Strik et al., 2010; Wallace Goodman & Wright, 2015), a guide for policy makers (Association of Language Testers in Europe, 2016), and country-specific studies (Gysen et al., 2009). To look at English-language proficiency requirements for migration, however, one has to look beyond only the United Kingdom (UK) in Europe. Along with the UK, Canada, Australia, and the United States (US) all rank in the top 10 destination countries for international migrants (Migration Policy Institute, 2020) and all use English-language proficiency testing within their various immigration programs. In terms of growing numbers of migrants, Canada welcomed 405,000 new permanent residents in 2021 which was the largest single-year intake in the country's history (IRCC, 2021b). Canada's next immigration targets are set to surpass this with 431,645 projected for 2022, 447,055 in 2023, and 451,000 in 2024 (IRCC, 2022a). The increase in migration globally and to Canada comes with a multitude of complex issues that require a change in thinking and, very likely, an interdisciplinary approach (Saville, 2009). Moreover, "when conceptualizing a test-in-context, we should take all elements of the context into account" (O'Sullivan, 2021a).

This paper outlines how English-language proficiency testing impacts immigration, asylum and resettlement, and citizenship in Canada, Australia, the UK, and the US. Although language proficiency tests have long been used for global migration, this paper draws on literature from the past twenty years when language proficiency test use has increased alongside the number of people on the move. The first section of this paper outlines how these countries assess English-language proficiency for immigration, asylum and resettlement, and citizenship applications. It identifies the issues and connections between these three related areas of migration. The second section discusses the factors that have led governments to increasingly use English-language proficiency testing requirements as part of their immigration policies and the covert values that are then embedded in the test scores. The third section considers what O'Sullivan (2021b) referred to as the large gap in validation of language proficiency test use in migration by considering how research could be conducted under the umbrella of Shohamy's (2001) Critical Language Testing. In the final section, this paper looks specifically at issues within the Canadian context and makes suggestions for future research and advocacy.

## How Language Proficiency is Tested for Global Migration

### De facto Policy Tools

According to Shohamy (2001), the public tend to view tests "as objective, fair, true and trustworthy" (p. 21) because they "symbolize social order in areas in which the public normally feels a lack of control" (p. 39). Control over the development of language proficiency test constructs has shifted from language testers to "complex policy procedures [to become] expressions of policy" (McNamara, 2011, p. 502). In the context of global migration, "test constructs are established through legislation" (Khan & McNamara, 2017, p. 453), thus giving the tests the political function of controlling immigration and citizenship. It is important then to view the tests discussed below through a different lens than language testers typically do because a test's "very respectability – what we in our innocence call validity – in some ways may suit policy makers, as it can tend to disguise its function" (McNamara, 2005, p. 367). Moreover, focusing on what a hypothetical new permanent resident may need in daily life and developing test tasks to match potentially mask the values underlying the policy that requires the use of such test scores in the first place (McNamara & Ryan, 2011).

### Immigration

Immigrants leave their home countries for a better quality of life, improved employment opportunities, or family reunification. While permanent residency in the US does not include meeting English-language proficiency requirements, permanent residency in Australia, the UK, or Canada does require applicants to sit a standardized test. For immigration to Australia, the UK, or Canada, governments decide which tests they will accept (see Table 1 below), which cut scores[ii] they will accept for their various visa programs, and what value those test scores add to an application in their points-based immigration systems. Australia and Canada award extra points for test scores above the minimum cut score, thus increasing the importance of a high language proficiency test score when competing for a spot in the annual intake (Government of Canada, 2021c; Hoang & Hamid, 2017). Table 1 below shows that the accepted tests vary by country with the UK accepting the greatest variety of tests.

**Table 1**
*English-Language Proficiency Tests Accepted for Immigration by Country*

| Australia | United Kingdom | Canada[iii] |
|---|---|---|
| IELTS | IELTS for UK Visas and Immigration | IELTS |
| TOEFL iBT | IELTS Life Skills | CELPIP |
| PTE Academic | LanguageCert International ESOL SELT | PTE Core |
| OET | Skills for English UK Visas and Immigration | |
| Cambridge tests suite | TCL Integrated Skills in English | |
| | TCL GE in Spoken English | |
| | PTE Academic UK Visas and Immigration | |
| | PTE Home | |

*Source: Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021a; Government of Canada, 2021a; Government of the United Kingdom, 2021a.*

It is important to highlight that the wide variety of required language proficiency test scores across countries and programs suggests that the tests are less about ensuring the applicants are successful in the host country and more about governments setting a barrier to entry as political debate surrounding immigration intensifies (Khan & McNamara, 2017; McNamara & Shohamy, 2008). For example, in Australia, immigration officials insisted on setting the language proficiency cut scores for various programs themselves so that they could set the levels very high when there is a need to limit the number of people getting in and lowering them when the economy needed more people (Hawthorne, 1997; McNamara, 2005). Australia now requires up to an IELTS band score of 8.0 in each skill to prove superior proficiency for some visas in Australia (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021a). Canada also accepts a wide range of test scores for its various immigration and resettlement programs (see Table 2 below) and adjusts the points a test score adds to an application[iv] or requires an up-to-date test score report to raise or lower the barrier to entry. When the Canadian government knew they could not meet their ambitious 2021 immigration targets because of Covid-19 related processing delays and travel restrictions, they first invited all 27,332 people in the Canadian Experience Class category to apply for permanent residency through the Express Entry program. The Canadian Experience class is for temporary foreign workers and international students who have skilled work experience in Canada. The majority are already in Canada and typically need a minimum of 400 points based on their age, language proficiency, education, and work experience to get an invite to apply for permanent residency. Instead, the government reduced the cut off to just 75 total points (Lundy & McMahon, 2021). Several months later, the Canadian government opened a one-time program with 90,000 spots for international students and essential workers already in Canada to apply for permanent residency (Juha, 2021). For the international students, proof of completing post-secondary studies in English (or French) was not sufficient, nor was proof of employment from the essential workers. All applicants still had to provide language proficiency test score reports as part of their applications.

**Asylum and Resettlement**

> A refugee is someone who:
> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable, or owing to such read, is unwilling to return to it. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2010, p. 14)

The UNHCR convention (2010) also states that a refugee may need to breach regular immigration rules in order to claim asylum in another country because claims for asylum do not follow the same rules. According to human rights law, asylum seekers cannot be discriminated against because of "race, religion, country of origin […] sex, age, disability, sexuality, or other prohibited grounds" (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3).

**Table 2**

*English-Language Requirements for Various Canadian Immigration & Resettlement Pathways*

| Program | IELTS | CELPIP |
|---|---|---|
| *Immigration* | | |
| Federal Skilled Worker (Express Entry) -16 points | 6.0 across all 4 skills | 7 across all 4 skills |
| Federal Skilled Worker (Express Entry) - 20 points | 6.5 (Speaking, Reading & Writing) 7.5 (Listening) | 8 across all 4 skills |
| Federal Skilled Worker (Express Entry) - 24 points | 7.0 (Speaking, Reading & Writing) 8.0 (Listening) | 9 across all 4 skills |
| Canadian Experience Class (Express Entry) (depends on job classification) | 5.0 (Speaking, Listening & Writing) & 4.0 (Reading) OR 6.0 across all 4 skills | 5 or 7 across all 4 skills |
| Federal Skilled Trades (Express Entry) | 5.0 (Speaking & Listening) 3.5 (Reading) 4.0 (Writing) | 5 (Speaking & Listening) 4 (Reading & Writing) |
| Agri-Food Pilot | 3.5 (Reading) 4.0 (Speaking & Writing) 4.5 (Listening) | 4 across all 4 skills |
| *Refugee Resettlement Through the Economic Mobility Pathways Project* | | |
| Atlantic Immigration Program (depends on job classification) | 3.5 (Reading) 4.0 (Speaking & Writing) 4.5 (Listening) OR 5.0 (Speaking, Listening & Writing) & 4.0 (Reading) | 4 or 5 across all 4 skills |
| Provincial Nominee Program | Depends on province & job classification | Depends on provide & job classification |
| Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot | 3.5 (Reading) 4.0 (Speaking & Writing) 4.5 (Listening) OR 5.0 (Speaking, Listening & Writing) & 4.0 (Reading) OR 5.5 (Speaking, Listening & Writing) & 5.0 (Reading) | 4, 5, or 6 across all 4 skills |

*Source: Government of Canada, 2020; Government of Canada, 2021b*

There are also small numbers of refugees who are granted asylum in one country and then another country agrees to resettle them by granting them permanent residence status (UNHCR, 2021). Although it does not seem that language proficiency should play any role in asylum or resettlement applications, many governments have still found ways to include it.

McNamara (2005) pointed out that language is a social activity that can be used to detect membership of specific social groups and that governments now use it to verify asylum seekers' claims. Indeed, many countries use language analysis for the determination of origin (LADO) (Eades, 2009)[v]. The companies hired to conduct LADO are seen as experts who offer a service in a professional manner. Even in a court case contesting an asylum decision in the UK, the court sided with the government, citing the belief that the private language analysis company had conducted the claimant's LADO appropriately despite testimony to the contrary by a leading academic and expert in linguistics (Campbell, 2013; see also McNamara & Shohamy, 2008; Piller, 2001). In the UK, interviewers transcribe the asylum interviews in English even if the interview is conducted in another language through an interpreter. The transcripts are compared against linguistic profiles from the BBC World Service and other country reports to determine the veracity of asylum seekers' claims (Blommaert, 2009), thus highlighting that immigration officials may lack the linguistic knowledge and training to assess someone's language proficiency.

Canada gathers information about recognized refugees' language proficiency before their applications to resettle in Canada as permanent residents are approved. Refugees complete the same generic application form as immigrants which asks them to list their educational attainment, if they can communicate in French or English, and if they "have taken a test from a designated testing agency to assess [their] proficiency in English or French" (Government of Canada, 2021d). Then, on the form for refugees outside of Canada, there is a section entitled *Immigration Status and Settlement Abilities* which the principal applicant and each dependent child over 18 must fill out (Government of Canada, 2021e). Here the refugees need to self-assess their English and French language proficiency in each of the four skills. It is not clear how the government uses any of this information. This lack of transparency exemplifies Shohamy's (2006) claim that governments often have hidden, covert agendas behind their language policies. This language proficiency data may be solely for Canadian census data or research purposes (for an example using Canada's Longitudinal Immigration Database see Prokopenko, 2018). However, Canadian immigration officers still have discretionary powers to overlook the vulnerability criteria of a refugee application and refuse it based on ability to meet the successful establishment criteria (Labman, 2019). This means that a refugee could be refused asylum or resettlement based on their language proficiency in one of Canada's official languages.

A Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) is an organization that has an agreement with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to privately sponsor refugees for resettlement (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 2021). Many SAHs choose refugees for resettlement based on connections with their organization's goals or membership base. The World University Service of Canada (WUSC) sponsors refugees based on academic performance and language proficiency so that they can begin post-secondary studies immediately upon arrival in Canada. Although the Canadian host institutions are asked to be more flexible with entry requirements for WUSC students, these refugees' resettlement hinges on having a higher level of English-language proficiency (Peterson, 2010).

In 2018, the Canadian government launched the Economic Mobility Pathways Project (EMPP) to open pathways for skilled refugees to be resettled through Canada's economic immigration programs (see Table 2 above) (IRCC, 2020a). In 2021, Canada announced that it would expand the program to 500 refugees and their dependents (IRCC, 2021a)[vi]. The initial pilot program identified the financial burden associated with language

testing requirements as one of the challenges for refugees applying through such programs. Accessing language classes and language testing is challenging given that refugees live in protracted displacement on average 20 years (Chkam, 2016) and pre-Covid only 3% of refugees were enrolled in any type of post-secondary education (UNHCR, 2019). The UK recently launched a similar pilot, offering 100 highly skilled refugees five-year work permits (Dathan, 2021).

**Citizenship**

Once a person immigrates, is granted asylum, or is resettled, they may choose to apply for citizenship in their host country. Citizenship is "the most drastically coconstructed form of social identity" (Piller, 2001, p. 264). What used to be only an administrative process of applying for a passport (Horner, 2015) now grants social, economic, and political rights and is a separate concept from national identity (Piller, 2001). Khan and McNamara (2017) pointed out citizenship both includes and excludes people based on its definition of who is and is not allowed to belong. Loring (2013) suggested that most countries define citizenship by the rights and beliefs they value. For example, Canada's citizenship test preparation guide devotes two pages to the rights and responsibilities associated with Canadian citizenship which are described as encompassing "shared traditions, identity and values" (IRCC, 2012, p. 8). With this comes values that are entwined in citizenship and thus the possibility of both good and bad citizens, those who are worthy versus those who are unworthy (Fortier, 2017).

Citizenship eligibility depends on several factors, such as length of time residing in the host country, proof of tax filings, and language proficiency requirements. Just as with permanent residency applications, the language proficiency requirements vary across the board. Table 3 (see below) shows that an official test score report, proof of completion of secondary or post-secondary studies in the language of the host country, or proof of completion of a government-approved language training program can all be used to demonstrate the required language proficiency. The language proficiency requirements are either in addition to or built directly into a knowledge of society test which applicants are also required to pass. The level of language understanding often required for such tests is highly inappropriate (Alderson, 2010) and "they become de facto literacy tests and language tests" (Capstick, 2021).

In the US, the citizenship test recently doubled in length although the passing score remained the same. Also, rewording some questions often changed the language level. Overall, the language proficiency level required for the test is now at a high-intermediate level, compared to a high beginner level for the previous version (Barros, 2020). This increase in required language proficiency level removes what McNamara and Shohamy (2008) had called the US citizenship test's virtue despite its other glaring flaws. An evaluation of Canada's Citizenship program suggested the language level for the knowledge of society test is higher than the language proficiency test scores for citizenship applications and there are no official test preparation classes or practice tests available (IRCC, 2020b). Although Canada only requires proof of English or French listening and speaking proficiency for citizenship, the knowledge of society test focuses on reading skills as it comprises 20 written multiple-choice questions. Furthermore, immigration officers reported they lack the training to properly assess someone's language proficiency and that their assessment tools were subjective (IRCC, 2020b; see also McLean, 2004).

**Table 3**

*Language Proficiency Requirements for Citizenship Applications in Various Host Countries*

| Country | Required Language Proficiency Level | Proof |
|---|---|---|
| Australia | basic level of English | • score 75% overall on a test of Australian society and English-language proficiency<br>• correctly answer the 5 questions on Australian values |
| United States | high intermediate | • answer personal information questions as an immigration officer fills out the application<br>• choose 1 of 3 given sentences to read aloud<br>• choose 1 of 3 given sentences to write correctly<br>• correctly answer 12 out of 20 knowledge of society questions that an immigration official reads aloud |
| United Kingdom | B1 | • B1 level test score from one of the accepted tests (can be an expired score report from their immigration application and refugees are not required to show proof of English-language proficiency)<br>• score 75% on the Life in the UK test |
| Canada | Canadian Language Benchmark 4 in listening & speaking | • CLB 4 equivalent test score report (can be an expired score report from their immigration application) from CELPIP (4 Speaking & Listening) or IELTS (4.0 Speaking & 4.5 Listening) OR proof of completion of secondary or post-secondary studies in English (or French) OR proof of completion of a government-funded language training program<br>• correctly answer 15 out of 20 knowledge of society questions |

*Source: Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021b; Government of Canada, 2021f & 2021g; Government of the United Kingdom, 2021b, 2021c, & 2021d; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021.*

## Links Between Immigration, Asylum and Resettlement, and Citizenship

Given the range of language proficiency testing practices described above, it is important to identify the commonalities between them (see Table 4 below). First, language proficiency requirements in all three areas are set by governmental policy which is subject to change without warning, for reasons that have little to do with language proficiency itself, and often without input from language testing professionals (Alderson, 2010; Barros, 2020; Khan & McNamara, 2017; McNamara, 2011; Shohamy, 2006). Second, governments rely on the fact that people put their trust in testing companies to offer tests appropriate to

their use (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007) and they use professional language testers to avoid being criticized politically (McNamara, 2005). Third, immigration officials often act as language testers even though they have insufficient training to do so (Blommaert, 2009; IRCC, 2020b; Labman, 2019; McLean, 2004). Piller (2001) rightly argues that immigration officials being unsure of their decisions, the language evidence their decisions are based upon, and the consequences of their decisions comes down to concerns of validity and ethics in language testing.

**Table 4**
*Common Links Between Language Proficiency Testing Practices for Immigration, Asylum and Resettlement, and Citizenship*

| Governmental Control | Immigration Officials as Language Testers | Public Trust in Tests |
|---|---|---|
| • sudden policy changes<br>• test constructs as legislation<br>• inappropriate cut score selection<br>• lack of uniformity across host countries<br><br>*(Alderson, 2010; Barros, 2020; Hawthorne, 1997; Khan & McNamara, 2017; Lundy & McMahon, 2021; McNamara, 2011; McNamara & Shohamy, 2008; Shohamy, 2006)* | • lack of training & expert knowledge<br>• subjective assessment tools<br><br>*(Blommaert, 2009; IRCC, 2020b; Labman, 2019; McLean, 2004; Piller, 2001)* | • testing & language analysis companies are professional<br>• dismissal of language testers' expertise<br><br>*(Campbell, 2013; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; McNamara, 2005; McNamara & Shohamy, 2008)* |

**Factors Behind the Rise of Language Proficiency Requirements for Migration**

Among the questions raised regarding the fairness and justice of using language tests in this context are whether or not language tests are being used to favour certain ethnicities and exclude others, what level of English someone needs to be functional in a new society, what classes and resources countries offer to prepare for the tests, and if tests are even appropriate for this context or not (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009). In order to start to answer these questions, one has to include an examination of the factors that have contributed to the increasing use of language proficiency requirements for migrants. Without it, language testers will continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the policy decisions and the ideologies which have given rise to such language testing practices (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009). Saville (2021) recently argued that "the tests have stayed much the same […] whereas the political agenda and public opinion has shifted". The contexts for language testing for global migration are varied as each country has its own

path through political debate and societal opinion. However, there are also common threads that have contributed to the increasing use of language proficiency requirements for migrants and the host countries' values that are covertly embedded in the language proficiency test scores (see Figure 1 below). Whether we agree with their values or not, language testers need to be better at understanding what policy makers' values are (O'Sullivan, 2021b).

**National Unity and Social Cohesion**

Much of the discourse around language proficiency requirements has been that non-English speaking immigrants threaten national unity and social cohesion, so, as a result, language proficiency has mistakenly been seen as the remedy (Blackledge, 2009; Burke et al., 2018; Khan, 2019) (see Figure 1 below). Blackledge (2009) argues multilingual societies often have national language policies that, in fact, promote monolingualism and homogeneity and relegate minority language speakers to the sidelines or exclude them all together. English-language proficiency testing is a regime that requires demonstrable language skills through which "national unity may be achieved, together with a common sense of belonging" (Blackledge, 2009, p. 10; Burke et al., 2018). Moreover, it can serve as "a linguistic intervention" (Khan, 2019, p. 12) with groups of migrants who are considered problematic or different. Knowledge of society testing is often used in tandem with language proficiency testing and thus language proficiency is often conflated with the values of the majority and immigration control (Blackledge, 2009: Burke et al., 2018; Khan, 2019). Typically, learning the dominant language is encouraged by requiring knowledge of society and language proficiency tests for citizenship (Blackledge, 2009) and "can be interpreted as a state endorsed form of English language dominance" (Khan, 2019, p. 20). Knowledge of society tests support the idea that such knowledge is static, has clear right and wrong answers, and can be tested (Blackledge, 2009). Canada, for example, is revising its citizenship guide in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call for citizenship education to better include Indigenous history and culture (Cummings, 2021). Moreover, there are calls that Indigenous history and culture be "embedded into language classes" (Omidvar, 2021). However, as Byrne (2017) argues, tests do not necessarily reassure the public. In the UK, there are often complaints that the knowledge of society test is too easy. She suggests that in this case the test is frequently revised in "an effort to ensure that the test represents the right level of obstacle to overcome, or provide sufficient education, and perhaps also to respond to media critique" (Byrne, 2017, p. 329). In Europe in particular, there has been a move away from multilingualism and multiculturalism as they are viewed as threats to the host country (Kostakopoulou, 2010). This is in direct contrast to how linguistic diversity is viewed as a strength in the European Union (Piller, 2001).

**Integration**

Integration is a required duty for immigrants to perform in order to support national unity (Blackledge, 2009; Burke et al., 2018) (see Figure 1 below). High language proficiency requirements and citizenship testing are also often cited by politicians as the way migrants can show they are willing to learn and integrate and can be successful (Burke et al., 2018; Byrne, 2017). These requirements are put into place in spite of the fact that

there is "no systematic research to date to support the assumption that language requirements have a positive effect on integration" (Carlsen & Rocca, 2021, p. 7) and that passing a citizenship test is not an indication an individual will demonstrate good civic behaviour (Slade, 2010). Furthermore, test takers reported feeling they had to go above and beyond to show their commitment to their new countries as it was not enough to be on even ground with citizens who had been born in the host country (Byrne, 2017). Governments' policies have also shifted away from facilitating new arrivals in developing their language proficiency and integrating to requiring language proficiency testing and deterring people from arriving at all (Gysen et al., 2009).

Burke et al. (2018) found that the Australian media focused on the claim that it was easier in the past for migrants with lower English-language proficiency to contribute to society than it is today when so many countries have shifted to knowledge- and service-based economies. However, claiming that times have changed and thus higher English-language proficiency is needed ignores the fact that past immigration policies favoured exclusion of migrants who were considered different from the national population[vii] (Burke et al., 2018). Literacy also plays a role, particularly as governments choose the literacies they value through citizenship testing which further promotes social exclusion and linguistic inequality (Burkholder & Filion, 2015). In Canada's Immigration Act of 1919, literacy was seen as a component of nation building and enabled Canada to select which newcomers would colonize the country and could be assimilated (McLean, 2004). Literacy is still seen as the pathway to happiness and economic progress even though it "has been used to foster political repression and maintain inequitable social conditions" (Graff, 2010, p. 640). Graff (2010) argues being literate does not necessarily alleviate poverty and that its connection to economic success can be complex and contradictory. In terms of global migration, he claims gender, ethnicity, race, and class together with the time and place temper the effects of literacy, but that literacy seems to have more direct effect on longer distance migration. Moreover, economic development has a contradictory link with literacy. Literacy has varying degrees of importance depending on workers' skill levels and can be the effect of economic growth rather than the cause of it (Graff, 2010).

Studies from Canada show that higher levels of English-language proficiency are associated with higher-wages (Boyd & Cao, 2009), finding a job more easily (Kikulwe et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2005), and securing higher-skilled employment (Liu, 1996). However, Horner (2015) raised the question of whether higher level language proficiency is actually the key to social integration while Khan and McNamara (2017) pointed out that a new citizen could contribute fully to their new country without knowing the host language. Chowdhury and Hamid (2016) interviewed three Bangladeshi migrants in Australia with low levels of English proficiency who all reported feelings of happiness and well-being with their new lives. They were all skilled migrants who had limited opportunities to attend language classes, but felt that even if they did, being more proficient would not change their lives greatly. They were all employed in skilled labour, exercised agency over their lives, and felt secure and peaceful. Moreover, they reported feeling they belonged in Australia and that they contributed to Australian society (Chowdhury & Hamid, 2016).

**National Security and Border Security**

National security is also sometimes discussed when insisting that language proficiency requirements will help to ensure borders are not breached and home-grown

extremism is prevented (Burke et al., 2018; McNamara & Shohamy, 2008) (see Figure 1 below). In the UK, government-approved language proficiency tests for immigration and citizenship are now referred to as Secure English Language Tests (SELTS). Security in language testing usually refers to preventing improper test taker behavior, such as cheating and fraud, but in the context of migration both language testers and language teachers have been turned into border agents (Harding et al., 2020). The SELT tender documents make no mention of the test takers as language learners, potential contributing immigrants or students, or family members. Extreme measures to prevent cheating are justified because cheating on a test becomes a border security breach which Harding et al. (2020) argued creates a sense of criminality within migration.

**Values Embedded in Language Proficiency Test Scores**

As Figure 1 below shows, it is clear that far more meaning is built into the test scores than one's ability to function in English. "Those in authority use language to create ideologies of uniformity, cohesion, and control" (Shohamy, 2006, p. 41). In this case, language may be being used as "an excuse for a form of ethnic cleansing and expulsion of unwanted migrants" (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009, p. 2). Looking at language proficiency tests from a purely measurement perspective ignores the values that led to their use and the consequences for test takers who are forced to take them (Shohamy, 2013). The complex socio-economic and political issues that surround language testing are often left out of test development and research (Kunnan, 2008) and language testers are often unsure of how involved they can and should be in government policy (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009). Moreover, even if language testers want to conduct research, the data they can access is often quite limited as governments are slow to release information (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009). Since language is key for migrants, applied linguists have a responsibility to participate in this discussion. They can also better persuade if they are clearer on their own responsibilities and their definition and focus of the issues (Saville, 2009).

**Conducting Research Through the Lens of Critical Language Testing**

Critical Language Testing (CLT) examines tests' uses "critically, especially in terms of misuses, from the viewpoint of the test takers who are paying the price […] and to examine how groups, especially policy makers, take tests for granted and use them as they wish" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 134). Test developers and policy makers do not have the same agendas for a test and tests are a mirror "for studying the real priorities of those in power and authority, as these are embedded in political, social, educational and economic contexts" (Shohamy, 2001, p. xii). CLT's 15 principles imply "the need to develop critical strategies to examine the uses and consequences of tests" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 131). It is through these principles that language testers can engage with the debate and social dialogue within which language proficiency testing for migration is situated (Shohamy, 2001) although the principles do not provide a theoretical framework for how to conduct research on language proficiency requirements for global migration. There is no "set of manageable procedures for investigating test use and consequences that is grounded on a coherent theoretical model of test use […] we have simply several different checklists of questions and considerations" (Bachman, 2005, p. 4).

**Figure 1**

*Values Embedded in the Use of Language Proficiency Test Scores for Immigration, Asylum and Resettlement, and Citizenship*

**Integration**

-belief that high language proficiency shows willingness to integrate & facilitates integration

Boyd & Cao 2009

Burkholder & Filion 2015

Byrne 2017

Chowdhury & Hamid 2016

Gysen et al. 2009

Horner 2015

Khan 2019

Kikulwe et al. 2021

Liu 1996

Slade 2010

Statistics Canada 2005

**National Unity and Social Cohesion**

-multilingualism threatens social cohesion & national identity can be tested

Blackledge 2009

Burke et al. 2018

Byrne 2017

Khan 2019

Kostakopoulou 2010

Piller 2001

Slade 2010

**National Security and Border Security**

-migration has elements of criminality & tests scores can prevent border breaches

Burke et al. 2018

Harding et al. 2020

Khan 2019

McNamara & Shohamy, 2008

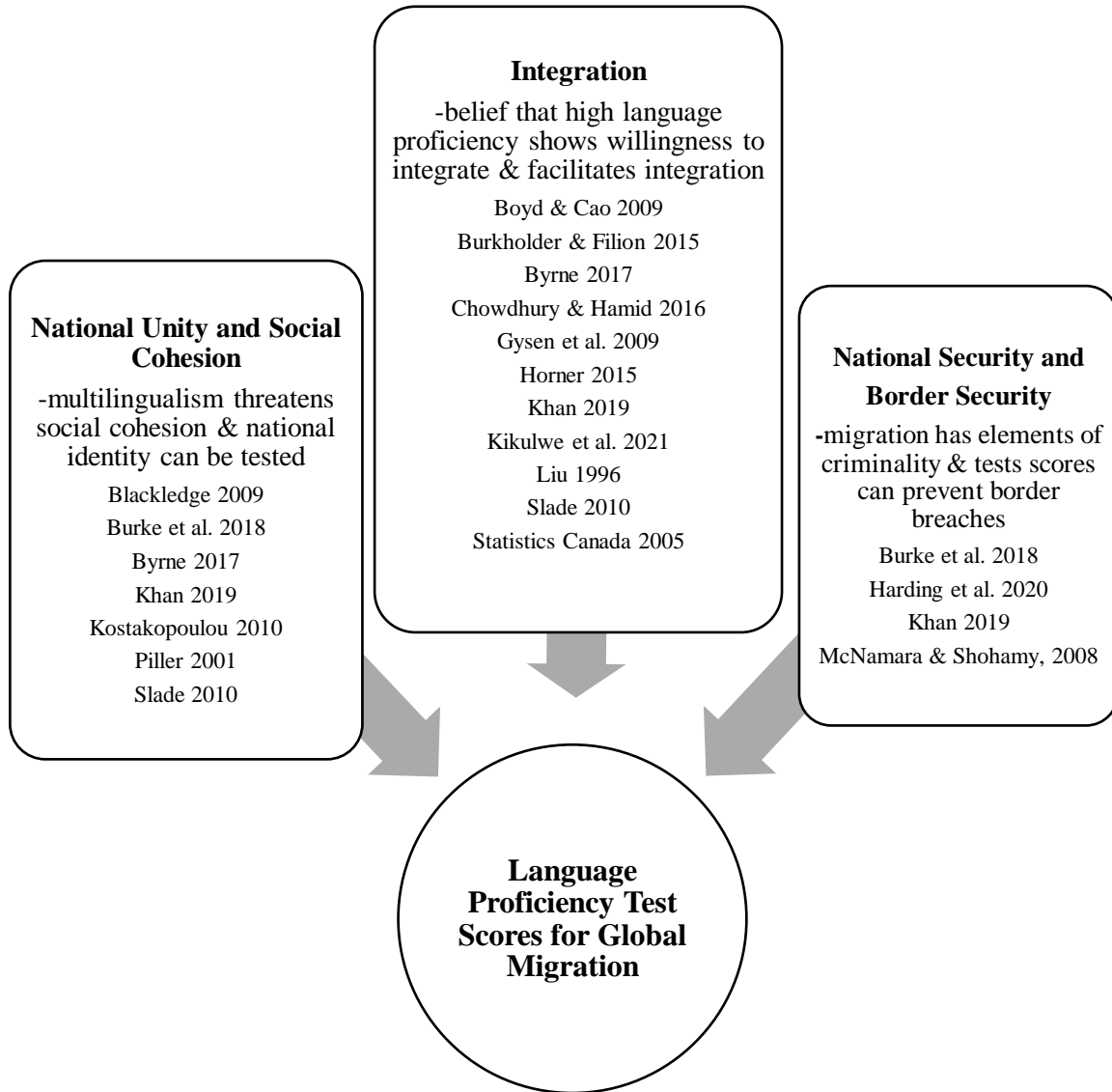**Language Proficiency Test Scores for Global Migration**

Table 6 below highlights six frameworks and definitions which fall under the umbrella of Shohamy's (2001) CLT and might guide research into English-language proficiency requirements for global migration.

Bachman (2005) proposed that many CLT principles could serve as warrants to rebuttals in his Assessment Use Argument (AUA). However, according to Alderson (2010), the question is not whether or not the test itself is valid, but rather whether the policy that requires its use is valid. "Validity – fairness – is a question of test use, and if the test use is unacceptable, so is the test" (Alderson, 2010, p. 541). AUA falls short of being able to

show why test use in this context is not valid because it is still focused on the validity of the test and does not consider the individual (Carlsen, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2021b). Although Kunnan's Test Fairness Framework (TFF) (2004) and Test Context Framework (TCF) (2008) could provide an analysis of test use at a micro and macro level, Kunnan advised making decisions about the test using Bachman's (2005) AUA. The TFF, TCF, and AUA also all have a foundation of beneficence which may be a view that is "too optimistic of the way that language tests are being used in the migration context today" (Carlsen, 2021). Thus, using them is unlikely the best way to get at the issues highlighted in Table 4 and Figure 1 above.

The theory of action (TOA) framework is way to address the social dimension of validity and make "explicit interconnections among policy stipulations, testing capabilities, and those impacted – at the individual, group, and societal levels" (Chalhoub-Deville, 2016, p. 454). Chalhoub-Deville also advocated for language testing professionals to consider consequences an integral part of an assessment program's technical quality so that consequences are not relegated to another stakeholder or dismissed all together but are rather positioned in the foreground. Bennett (2010) suggested considering an assessment system's intended consequences, the rationale for each of the system's components, its interpretive claims, the mechanisms that should cause the intended consequences, and any negative unintended consequences with a consideration of how to mitigate them. What Bennett's TOA is lacking is the possibility that a test or assessment could have negative intended consequences if policy makers are using a test to exclude certain groups and how language testing professionals could apply the TOA under those circumstances. While Chalhoub-Deville's TOA framework advocated for undertaking various validity arguments and participating in policy research, TOA seems to start with language tester involvement with the policy development stage. Since the countries discussed in this paper already have policies in place, validation research should switch to a "fault-finding type of appraisal [of] unintended and negative types of consequences" (Chalhoub-Deville, 2016, p. 464).

McNamara and Ryan (2011) argued that the concept of fairness is not appropriate for studying the covert values embedded in a test construct. They considered fairness and justice to be separate concepts and claimed Shohamy's (2001) CLT is focused on justice. They proposed a justice fairness matrix (see Table 5 below) in which a test could be fair and have a just use, or it could be lacking in one of either fairness or justice, or in the final quadrant, a test could lack both (McNamara & Ryan, 2011).

**Table 5**
*McNamara & Ryan's (2011, p. 167) Fairness/Justice Matrix*

|  |  | Fairness | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | ✓ | ✗ |
| Justice | ✓ | Fairness, justice | Justice, lack of fairness |
|  | ✗ | Fairness, lack of justice | Lack of justice, lack of fairness |

Deygers (2017) also viewed fairness and justice as distinct concepts. Distributive justice is a concept based on ideas of equal opportunity, dignity, human rights, and fairness that "aims to establish codes that regulate people's access to opportunities, goods, and services" (Deygers, 2017, p. 144). It is easier, however, to agree on what is unjust than it is

**Table 6**

*Examining Language Proficiency Requirements for Migration Through the Lens of CLT*

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="6"><strong>Critical Language Testing (Shohamy, 2001)</strong></td><td>

**Assessment Use Argument (AUA)**

(Bachman, 2005)

AUA includes claims, data, warrants, and rebuttals to make sure testing decisions are both defensible and supported by credible evidence. The 4 types of warrants are based on Messick's (1989) relevance/utility and social consequences cells. Many CLT (Shohamy, 2001) principles could serve as warrants or rebuttals in an AUA (Bachman, 2005). However, the suggested warrants may not fit with the global migration context or show why test use in this context is valid or not.

**Test Fairness Framework (TFF) & Test Context Framework (TCF)**

(Kunnan, 2004 & 2008)

The TFF micro analysis gathers and examines evidence from the interrelated test qualities of validity, removal of bias, access, administration, and social consequences. The TCF macro analysis examines the political and economic contexts; the social, educational, and cultural contexts; the technological and infrastructure contexts; and the legal and ethical contexts of test use. The TFF and TCF should be used together to gather evidence which then informs decisions about a test using Bachman's (2005) AUA. However, Kunnan (2009) did not do this in his own review of the United States naturalization test.

</td></tr>
<tr><td>

**Theory of Action (TOA)**

(Bennett, 2010; Chalhoub-Deville, 2016)

TOA conceptualizes consequences within validity by studying the interconnections between policy, testing, and stakeholders. It gathers evidence on score interpretations and uses for individual, group, and societal-level contexts from the policy and assessment development stages and continues on once programs are in progress. TOA advocates engaging in various validity arguments including policy research although it does not outline how language testing professionals could engage in policy research or what they could do if the intended effects of a test are unjust.

</td></tr>
<tr><td>

**Fairness/Justice Matrix**

(McNamara & Ryan, 2011)

Test constructs are the embodiment of both explicit and implicit societal and political values, and not just the consequences of test score interpretation. A test that can be psychometrically defended could still be unjust. Distinguishing between fairness and justice enables language testers to better examine the reasons why a test is developed and used. Using their proposed the fairness/justice matrix to examine Australian citizenship testing highlighted how fairness and justice are separate concepts.

</td></tr>
<tr><td>

**Principles of Justice**

(Deygers, 2017)

Unjust language testing policies have no reasonable or empirical reason to restrict test takers' mobility. The 6 principles of justice include the unequal relationship between policy makers and test takers, the dignified treatment of test takers, the empirical evidence behind the policy, the inclusion of test takers' perspectives, the responsibility test developers have, and the safeguarding of test taker data.

</td></tr>
<tr><td>

**Language Test Misuse**

(Carlson & Rocca, 2021)

Policy makers (un)intentionally misuse language tests to serve political agendas, so test misuse should be a key part of validation frameworks. Test misuse includes both tests used outside their original intended purpose and tests which cause (un)intentional harm to test takers. By defining test misuse in a way that is specific to the current situation in global migration and including it in validation frameworks, language testing professionals will view test misuse prevention as part of their professional responsibility.

</td></tr>
</table>

to define justice fully and clearly. An unjust language testing policy is one that "willfully and avoidably restricts test takers' freedom without an empirical or reasonable motivation" (Deygers, 2017, p. 149). These definitions along with his proposed six principles of justice potentially give language testers a way to operationalize justice within language testing development, research, and policy analysis and perhaps better place a test within McNamara and Ryan's (2011) justice fairness matrix.

Most recently, in response to Europe's increasing use of language proficiency requirements, Carlsen and Rocca (2021) claimed that language proficiency tests are somewhat easily misused by policy makers because they can claim proficiency in the host language is key for societal integration while potentially masking the (un)intentional use of language's role in group belonging and identity to control or block certain groups of people from entering or remaining in a country. Current validation frameworks allow test developers and score users to build strong arguments to justify their use of the tests and to marginalize issues of (un)intentional test misuse. In an argument to include test misuse in validation frameworks, test misuse is defined as:

> a test that was created to measure a certain *construct* (language) and for a certain purpose, but the scores of which are now being interpreted and used as if they measure something else [and/or] a test that has non-beneficent or harmful *consequences* for test-takers, regardless of whether those consequences were intentional or not. (Carlsen & Rocca, 2021, p. 2, emphasis in original)

To effectively study language proficiency testing for global migration through the lens of CLT, we need to move into research that shows why a test use is or is not valid. The challenge is finding a suitable framework to do so because "there isn't anything out there that works fully right now […] there are ideas [that] we need to work on" (O'Sullivan, 2021b; see also Chalhoub-Deville, 2016). Moreover, since there is limited access to data for quantitative analyses (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009) and it is culture and policy that need to be analyzed, much of the research will likely be qualitative.

## Issues in the Canadian Context

With over 1.3 million new permanent residents projected for 2022-2024 (IRCC, 2022a), it is critical that we begin to address the dearth of research on the stakeholder perspective with English- (or French-) language proficiency requirements in the Canadian context. This section highlights several issues that need addressing.

An evaluation of Canada's Citizenship Program (IRCC, 2020b) found that the language requirement for citizenship is lower than the level of language used in the knowledge of society study guide and test. It also pointed out that while the official language requirements for citizenship are listening and speaking only, the knowledge of society test requires reading skills. Overall, refugees in particular have difficulties meeting the knowledge and language proficiency requirements for citizenship and they delayed applying for citizenship because of fears of not meeting the requirements. One of the report's first action points is to "bring forward a plan for a free or low-cost option citizenship-specific language test based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks" (IRCC, 2020b, p. 8). However, as Alderson (2010) pointed out, scales such as the CLB were not developed to help manage immigration or naturalization. A CLB 4 knowledge of society test would also not necessarily resolve the difference between the explicit and implicit required language skills. Because of Covid-19, IRCC now has 374,100 waiting citizenship

applications which include 109,750 waiting for a citizenship test appointment (Keung, 2021). We need to know more about how meeting, or failing to meet, these requirements contribute to applicants' success, integration, and sense of Canadian identity, especially since taking this test delays access to citizenship[viii]. As for test score users, IRCC officers reported difficulties in validating the various forms of proof of language proficiency and in assessing applicants' language proficiency themselves (IRCC, 2020b). It would be useful to know why these difficulties happen and what clarification and support language testing professionals could provide. Language testing professionals could also collaborate on the development of a course or other learning tools specific to the language testing needs of IRCC policy makers and officers for the Canada of School of Public Service, the learning platform through which the government strives to ensure that public servants "are equipped to serve Canadians with excellence" (Government of Canada, 2022).

The Canadian government made several one-time policy changes as they struggled to meet their ambitious immigration targets in spite of the Covid-19 travel restrictions and processing delays. Canada welcomed 401,000 new permanent residents (IRCC, 2021b) by mostly focusing on individuals already in Canada. When Canada opened the one-time programs for international students and essential workers in Canada to apply for permanent residency, many struggled to prove they met language proficiency requirements. The IELTS and CELPIP online booking systems crashed as international students rushed to retake their tests during Covid-19 (Juha, 2021; The Canadian Press, 2021). For the essential workers, Canada has relied more on temporary foreign workers than new permanent residents since 2006, especially in industries like agriculture and long-term care (Yalnizyan, 2021). A 2015 public policy report on temporary workers who transition to permanent residency recommended that the government reconsider the language proficiency requirements (Nakache & Dixon-Perera, 2015). The temporary workers interviewed reported difficulties in paying the high testing fees and finding time for test preparation. Moreover, they complained about sitting a computer-based test (presumably CELPIP as IELTS is paper based), particularly having to type their written responses when their work did not require any computer skills (Nakache & Dixon-Perera, 2015). A survey of 3,000 migrant and undocumented essential workers in Canada during Covid-19 found that 67% did not have the official test score report required for Canada's one-time permanent residency program for essential workers (Migrant Rights Network, 2021). Many have taught themselves sufficient English to work in Canada and contribute to Canadian society, but cannot read or write in English, access language classes, or afford the test fees (Rodriguez, 2021). "If temporary foreign workers are good enough to work for us, they are good enough to live among us, permanently, if that is what they wish" (Yalnizyan, 2021). And yet Canadian policy briefs offered conflicting recommendations for maintaining or lowering the language proficiency requirement for temporary foreign workers and refugees to apply for lower-wage permanent residency pathways (Banerjee & Hiebert, 2021; Salami et al., 2021; Smith & Wagner, 2021). The government has also enacted conflicting policies by granting Ukrainians arriving in Canada under a new temporary residency pathway access to settlement services, including language training, typically only available to permanent residents (IRCC, 2022b). While an important step, granting such access to one group of temporary residents and not the others certainly has implications for issues of fairness and accessibility. Moreover, such rapidly changing policies mean that language testing professionals need to keep up to date with IRCC press releases. Also, they need to know more about what value policy makers place on test score reports and how our

recommendation of CLB 4 as the minimum requirement for adaptability to Canada impacts temporary essential workers who want to apply for permanent residency.

Finally, McNamara (2011) also pointed out that since language testing professionals are no longer in control of developing test constructs, raising concerns or challenges regarding such constructs must be done through involvement with the policy-making process. Although existing laws and policies may impose limits on language testing professionals' contributions (Fox & Artemeva, 2022) and responding to often fast-changing policy decisions appropriately is challenging, we can certainly be better informed and better prepared. Knoch (2021; see also O'Sullivan, 2021b; Saville, 2021) advocated for improvements in communicating with policy makers and politicians. It is not as simple as "will politicians of any persuasion ever look for the evidence? Of course not: they just want to get (re)elected" (Alderson, 2010, p. 542). Instead, policy makers are limited by their own experiences and knowledge, so they use cognitive shortcuts to understand and use evidence, make good-enough decisions, and tend to focus on a single facet of multifaceted policy issues (Cairney, 2019). Furthermore, policy-making environments are complex. Policy changes often happen suddenly and well-established ideas tend to dominate. Influencing policy making is a long-term engagement that requires a multilevel strategy in which you know who the influential policy makers are and you know the rules of the game (Cairney, 2019). As Knoch (2021) suggested, language testing associations, such as the Canadian Association for Language Assessment, can play a role in this by creating a repository of advocacy documents or examples from engagement with policy makers and offering workshops on best practices for advocacy and on policy brief writing. Fox and Artemeva (2022) provided three narratives of experiences with transdisciplinary assessment projects. Journals in Canada could also play a role by having a special issue dedicated to examples of advocacy in the Canadian context similar to the *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment* 2021 special issue on the role of language testing professionals in policy contexts in Australia. Carlsen and Rocca's (2022) Language Test Activism (LTA) model suggested going even further than advocacy and identified top-down and bottom-up approaches to fight for social justice by taking responsibility for how language tests are put into service. LTA includes 5 interrelated areas in which language testers can actively engage with – policy, public opinion, teaching training, test development, and research. In the Canadian context, language testing professionals could, as Carlsen and Rocca (2022) suggested, keep up to date with IRCC press releases and send written responses to local members of parliament offices and ministers' offices. They could also write newspaper articles, post on social media, and give radio interviews. We can also address language assessment literacy and policy literacy through adult ESL teacher education programs offered through Canadian post-secondary institutions as many of these teachers could work preparing test takers to meet the language test requirements for Canada's various immigration programs.

## Conclusion

Our tests do not exist in a vacuum. There is ample conceptual work in our field that provides a foundation for empirical research into the political agendas behind test score use as well as the perspectives of test takers within Canada's immigration system. This should not be viewed as a losing battle against powerful, hidden stakeholders who will use our tests as they wish. Nor can we rest on our laurels and blindly follow the assumption that

Canada is doing a better job than other countries simply because they let a lot of people in. As language testing professionals, we need to better understand the role our work plays in the lives of so many people on the move and advocate for change when and if needed – we "cannot afford *not to be engaged*" (Chalhoub-Deville, 2016, p. 466).

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[i] Shibboleth is a Hebrew word meaning 'ear of grain' or flood water'. In biblical times, this word was used a test between 2 groups in conflict. Group membership was tested by whether those interrogated pronounced the word as 'Shibboleth' or 'Sibboleth'. Those who could not pronounce 'Shibboleth' were killed (McNamara, 2005).

[ii] Cut scores are points on the score scale of a test that are used to classify a test taker's performance into different levels of proficiency.

[iii] At the time of publication, IRCC announced that they will be begin accepting the Pearson Test of English Core (PTE Core) at the end of 2023 (IRCC, 2023a).

[iv] In some program streams, test scores are used in the comprehensive ranking system to determine how many points an applicant can earn for their post-secondary education, Canadian work experience, and foreign work experience (IRCC, 2022c).

[v] Despite providing no examples, Patrick (2012) included Canada in the list of countries that uses LADO.

[vi] At the time of publication, Canada expanded EMPP again to "2,000 qualified refugees and other displaced individuals to fill specific labour shortages in high-demand sectors, such as health care, skilled trades and information technology" (IRCC, 2023b).

[vii] For examples, see McLean (2004) for an overview of the Canadian Immigration Act 1919's literacy requirement and McNamara (2009) for an overview of the White Australia Policy's dictation test.

[viii] ChatGPT passed the Canadian citizenship test with higher scores than most Canadian citizens would score thus further demonstrating that test may purely be a barrier to citizenship rather than contributing to integration or sense of Canadian identity (Rehaag, 2023).

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