



Canadian Language  
Benchmarks/  
Essential Skills

Niveaux de compétence  
linguistique canadiens/  
Compétences essentielles

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Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

# On the Job

ESL and Essential Skills for Work

Reading Text



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# Reading Activities

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## Background

### Definition of Reading Text

There are different purposes for reading leading to various levels of complexity. Complexity is based on how much processing of information is required to arrive at an accurate outcome. These levels range from level 1 (the least complex) reading relatively short texts to locating a single piece of information to level 5 (the most complex) interpreting dense and complex texts and making high-level inferences and using specialized knowledge. For more examples for the level descriptions, please refer to the *Essential Skills Reader's Guide*.<sup>1</sup>

These levels can be simplified by considering the purpose for reading. It is this purpose that will determine the task that has to be done, and the complexity of that task. *The Essential Skills Readers Guide* describes the purpose for reading in the following way:

1. To scan for specific information
2. To skim for overall meaning or to get the gist
3. To read the whole text to understand and to learn (though in the workplace and depending on the occupation, this skill is not used as often as the others).
4. To read the full text to critique or to evaluate? (Do teachers sometimes jump to this level of complexity before our learners are ready? To review the theory behind these ES complexity ratings refer back to *Assessing Complexity Levels*)<sup>2</sup> by Julian Evetts and Michel Gauthier.)

Designing lessons that address each of these purposes will benefit students. Ready-made learner outcomes are already defined in *The Essentials Skills Readers Guide*, *Essentials Skills Profiles* and the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*. Many jobs require frequent scanning and skimming rather than doing a literary critique of a text.

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<sup>1</sup> This guide is also available on the federal government web site, [http://srv600.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/esrp/english/general/readers\\_guide\\_whole.shtml](http://srv600.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/esrp/english/general/readers_guide_whole.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Julian Evetts and Michel Gauthier, *Assessing the Complexity of Literacy Tasks, Level 1*, National Literacy Secretariat, 2003

The percentage of time spent in the classroom practicing skimming and scanning should reflect to some degree the amount of time this is done at work.



## Typical Reading Tasks for Cooks and Cleaners

The Essential Skills Profiles can give insight into skills that learners need in one occupation. For demonstration, here are examples of tasks that are performed by workers in two occupations: Cook which is coded as NOC # 6242 (National Occupational Classification) and Cleaner (NOC 6661). In the HRSDC Essential Skills Profiles the number in the brackets refers only to the ES complexity level, determined through extensive interviews with actual workers across Canada and analyzed by Essential Skills experts. For this particular example here, note that following each task description is the Essential Skills Complexity level and an approximate CLB level or range of Canadian Language Benchmarks, referenced to the CLB/ES Comparative Framework<sup>3</sup>. Comparing the two rating scales and tying them to actual demands in the workplace gives the ESL instructor a clearer idea of the language needed for to perform the job task and the language task which helps with planning learning outcomes and generating classroom activities.

Cooks (NOC 6242):

- Read instructions on the operation of appliances and equipment, such as dishwashers, deep fryers and ovens. (ES 1; CLB 3,4,5)
- Read rules for keeping cooking and stewarding areas clean. (ES 2; CLB 6)
- Read recipes and use them to prepare food. (Frequently) (ES 2; CLB 6)
- Read cooking texts and/or trade magazine articles and read special theme recipes on-line in order to gather suggestions for future banquets. (Occasionally) (ES 3; CLB 7,8,9)
- May read and interpret vendor purchase agreements. (ES 3; CLB 7,8,9)

Cleaners (NOC 6661):

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<sup>3</sup> **Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework**, <http://itsessential.daffy.realdecoy.com/comparativeframework/>, CCLB, 2005

- Read notes from supervisors to receive work assignments and from co-workers sharing information. (ES1; CLB 3,4,5)
- Read cleaning product labels to understand how to use them. (ES1; CLB 3,4,5)
- Read memos or electronic mail messages to address service complaints. (ES1; CLB 3,4,5)
- Read memos from management explaining various workplace issues, such as changes to the benefits packages (ES2; CLB 6)
- May read the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) of products being used for the first time to identify protective equipment requirements, potential hazardous reactions and emergency procedures. (ES3; CLB 7,8)

Throughout the discussion of the rest of the skills, different occupations will be highlighted to demonstrate that all occupations need some level of all of the nine Essential Skills and often a higher level than one might expect. Sometimes it is quite surprising the level to which workers have to perform in some entry-level positions.

<p><b>Tips</b></p>  <p><b>for the Essential Skill of Reading</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Text in this case means continuous text that is usually organized in sentences and paragraphs but could also be in point form. This type of reading is found in many formats including forms, labels, notes, letters, memos, manuals, specifications, regulations, reports, books or journals. All formats need to be introduced in the ESL classroom.</li> <li>2. Do the Flip! Present questions first, read the text second! In the workplace there is not the luxury of time to spend on every text. People have to be selective and efficient. With the all the information on the Internet and e-mail, learners need to ask the questions first and then find the answers, not the other way around.</li> <li>3. Teach the vocabulary, idiomatic language and grammar structures needed to understand the task and document, but point out to learners that sometimes you do not need to know every word in order to complete the task.</li> </ol>
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## Building the Basics



## Building the Basics: CLB 1 – 4

A great deal of preliminary work has been done by the CCLB in creating a useful document called *Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework*<sup>4</sup>. In that publication, benchmarked language tasks have been compared to similar tasks in the Essential Skills. Look at the following table. These are examples of tasks listed as job requirements at Complexity level 1 in some Essential Skills Profiles and in the Canadian Language Benchmarks. Can you tell which is which?

A person ...	Essential Skill Task?	CLB Task?
1. Follows 1-5 step point form written directions to locate items on maps and diagrams .		
2. Reads the label for mixing instructions and special handling requirements, when using a new product.		
3. Uses a bus route map to match several bus stops with arrival and departure times		
4. Reads brief notices about changes in regulations or restrictions.		
5. Reads notes from supervisors or from co-workers from an earlier shift providing status reports or reminders of tasks to be completed.		
6. Reads a short newspaper article; answers 7-10 questions.		

(Answers: #s 1, 3, 6 are drawn from the CLB. #s 2, 4, 5 are drawn from the ES profiles).

As you can see by the above examples, tasks listed in the Essential Skills profiles are related to the occupation and the workplace, where as the tasks listed in the CLB document are more general and can apply to many life situations. Critiquing a newspaper article is not paid work for many jobs. Generally, one heads to the resources to find an answer to a question that has come up during the course of business. But to adapt the sixth task to fit the workplace, all the instructor has to do is **THE FLIP**.

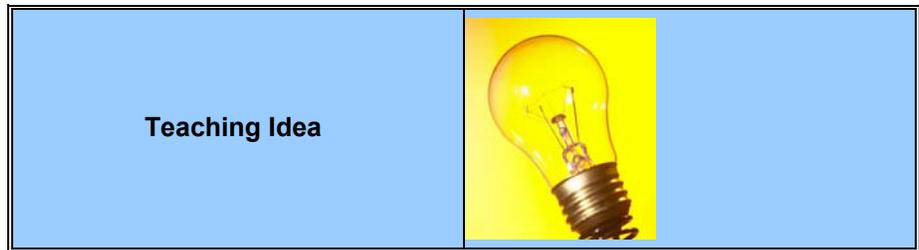
### *The alignment*

How do the two frameworks compare? ES Complexity level 1 in Reading Text has been

<sup>4</sup> *Relating Canadian Language Skills to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework*, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2005 (available in an online format and as a download on [www.itsessential.ca](http://www.itsessential.ca) )

between the two standards is an approximation of how the two standards intersect. See [www.itsessential.ca](http://www.itsessential.ca) for more information.

equated to a CLB level of 3 to 5, with many of the tasks falling in the CLB 4 or 5 ranges, based on the CLB/ES Framework. In that resource, *Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework*, there are examples of tasks taken from various Essential Skills profiles in tables with Canadian Language Benchmark descriptors which can help ESL teachers choose appropriate tasks for their classrooms and to guide in developing good learning outcomes for classes. Initial validations of this document indicate that CLB and ES are two compatible, but different standards. The researchers, Gail Stewart, Karen Geraci and Dr. Philip Nagy, said (that) “*This is not a straight-forward alignment, but rather an intersection that reflects the complex and multi-dimensional relationship between two very different underlying scales.*”<sup>5</sup>



## Teaching Idea #1 – The Flip

- To make this into an activity that would more clearly reflect the reality of the workplace, just do “the flip”. Assign the questions or tasks you want the learners to do first. When the questions/tasks are given first, the learners know what they are looking for and can skim or scan for the more cursory answers or read for details for questions requiring in-depth answers.
- This is also a good opportunity to reinforce the importance of reading and understanding the instructions that accompany an activity or task. Many times people skip the instructions and go on to the activity, which results in error and ineffective use of time.
- Identify key words in questions and generate lists of synonyms to aid in the skimming and scanning process.
- Also add an element of time. Give a prize for the person who finishes first and have them outline for the class the strategies they used to finish quickly. Brainstorm a list of other ways to get to the information faster. At work, time is money.
- Make a flowchart of the steps.
- Practice, Practice, Practice. Do it again to see if you can get everyone up to speed. Choose a different article or text or newspaper. Debrief by discussing how this skill can be transferred to all types of texts. Point out how understanding the formats of the texts before you start reading can save you time. Many ESL instructors have noticed that many learners start a reading activity by starting from the beginning of the document and reading through the entire document. Skimming and scanning and getting the gist have to be practiced.

### Tip

<sup>5</sup> Stewart, G. et al. "CLB - ES Comparative Framework: Report on Responses from the Field", Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, July 2005 (available on [www.itsessential.ca](http://www.itsessential.ca) )



### Variety adds Spice!

When creating a list of questions, target the reading skills to be practiced. Some questions should require skimming and scanning, some should ask for the gist of the piece and only a small number should require deeper understanding and evaluation.

*In addition to these on-line resources SkillPlan also has an AT WORK series that includes **Reading at Work**, **Numeracy at Work**, **Document Use at Work** and **Writing at Work** that are all based on authentic workplace documents. **Reading at Work** is accompanied by an excellent facilitator's guide with many activities for classroom teachers. These can be ordered from the SkillPlan web site, [www.skillplan.ca](http://www.skillplan.ca).*



### Great Resource

The website, **How do your skills Measure Up?** at <http://measureup.towes.com/> features a number of authentic workplace documents with the accompanying workplace tasks for learners with a level of CLB 3 or above. The documents (e.g., labels and forms) have not been benchmarked, but the tasks required of the workers have both an Essential Skill complexity level assigned and a CLB level. For example, there is a lower level reading task linked to a document used in a diamond mine by Operators of Heavy Equipment. In the Answer Key, If you scroll down to the section called “*One Way to Get this Answer*”, each task has been benchmarked as well.

As these are authentic workplace documents, do not fret over the content! You will naturally gravitate to the vocabulary, but you do not have to know exactly what kind of machine is being tested to complete this activity. The skill is finding the information, not learning the meaning of all the words. Focus on the way information is displayed such as titles, lists, and checklists.



***Reading at Work** is accompanied by an excellent facilitator's guide with many activities for classroom teachers. These can be ordered from the*

Try these prepared activities instead of making them from scratch. This *Measure Up* resource is rich with materials that have already been developed ready for you to use and with which learners can practice. The Measure Up tasks, though they look simple, are deceptively difficult to develop.

In addition to these online resources, SkillPlan<sup>6</sup>, the organization that has developed the Measure Up activities, also has an **At Work** series of books that includes *Reading*

<sup>6</sup> SkillPlan, is known as the B.C. Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council, was also a project partner on the Essential Skills project that produced this resource and others for CLB and Essential Skills.

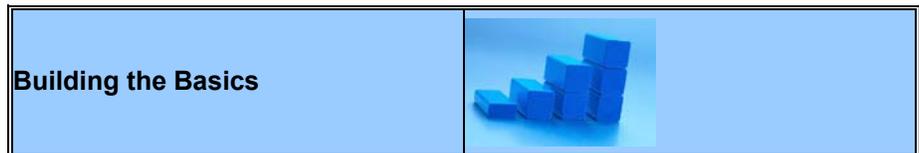
SkillPlan  
website, [http://measureup.to  
wes.com/](http://measureup.to<br/>wes.com/).

at Work, Numeracy at Work, Document Use at Work, and Writing at Work that are all based on authentic workplace documents.



## Teaching Idea #2 – Building Vocabulary with Verbs

Teach the language used to describe the strategies. Giving a name to a skill helps adult learners categorize the learning. Teach the meanings of the verbs used for reading; read, skim, scan, locate, compare, decide, calculate, check, identify, consider, summarize, determine, note, match, follow, repeat etc. This will not only help with the identification of the strategy applied to accomplishing a task, but will also help when learners are following instructions and commands.



## Building the Basics – CLB 1 - 4

Reading strategies can be taught at the lower CLB levels as well.

- **Identifying your own name in an alphabetized list** — provides practice scanning and organizational features of lists. This can then be spiraled into other alphabetized lists like telephone books, dictionaries etc. The key is to reinforce it as a skill necessary for the workplace. Reiterate and recycle it at every level to increase accuracy and efficiency. At work, 80% or better is expected. You are either right or wrong so accuracy must be reinforced.
- **Making and using checklists** — for shopping, for the planning of activities (to do lists), and actually checking them off, helps learners to plan and organize their time.
- **Scavenger Hunts** — for specific words or ideas in a newspaper practices skimming and scanning.

## Teaching Idea



### Teaching Idea #3 – Vocabulary Building with Synonyms and Key Words

The following are activities and strategies you can do with Stage One CLB learners of the CLB:

- Ask and review the questions before learners begin to read the text as a pre-reading activity.
- Identify the key words in the questions.
- Generate a list of synonyms for the key words and use these to understand the question and find the answer. Synonyms add complexity to a lesson, so this activity has to be done with classroom/teacher facilitation.
- Have the learners tackle the activities with a partner or in groups.
- Describe and explain what skill is being practiced and why (e.g. skimming). Adults prefer practical and applicable methods.
- Brainstorm and list as many synonyms as possible.
- Introduce resources like thesauruses and dictionaries as ways of generating more synonyms.
- Use online resources to augment this list and to show learners where to find the tools they need.
- Use these words to scan for answers for the task, and skim to get the gist of what is being read.

#### Workplace Anecdote

Here is one example of the confusion a worker may face if they don't have all the necessary vocabulary. The worker's task was to determine the cost of tire replacement for a holiday trailer. The document in use referred to the vehicle in question as an RV. Part of this task's complexity is due to the following: This task takes a level of inference and vocabulary knowledge to complete and this is impossible if it is not understood that a holiday trailer, RV and Recreational Vehicle are one in the same. The worker was stumped — not because the math was difficult but because, to do the task, prior vocabulary learning was necessary, increasing the complexity level.



*This series is available through the Bow Valley College Bookstore, 332 – 6th Ave. SE, Calgary, Alberta T2G 4S6, phone: (403) 410-1740, fax (403)297-6285.. The college website is [www.bowvalleycollege.ca](http://www.bowvalleycollege.ca)*



#### **Great Resource**

“*On Target*”<sup>7</sup> and *On Target 2*, edited by Christine Mitra of Bow Valley College, have a number of unformatted texts that could also be used to practice reading for understanding and to learn. Be aware that when a learner has to infer meaning, complexity levels increase.

The *On Target* series also includes photocopyable assessment tasks referenced to the CLB. Book 1 covers CLB’s 1 - 4, Book 2, CLB 5 -8.

### **CLB 5 – 9 Strategies for Reading**



## **CLB 5 – 9 Strategies for Reading**

All of the steps and processes described for CLB 1-4 learners also apply at the higher levels if complexity is increased.

- The use of acronyms is prevalent and sometimes fairly exclusive to each workplace or industry. Teaching learners to look for these, to ask for the description, to memorize them and use them in speech and writing is important to ensure understanding. Even the ESL field has an abundance of acronyms, such as LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada), CLB, TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) and OLA (Occupational Language Analysis), to name a few.

<sup>7</sup> Mitra, C., *On Target*, Pearson-Longman, 1997

- One learner strategy might be to carry a notebook in which these acronyms are recorded for future reference and review.



## Teaching Idea #4 – Doing the Jigsaw

Try using this Jigsaw method with a workplace twist.

1. One teaching method that is popular in ESL classrooms is the jigsaw. The overall idea of this method is each group within the class becomes an expert on one topic or part of a topic. They are then required to partner up with someone from another group and teach this material. At the end of the activity learners will have learned one subject in depth and a number of other subjects through interacting with their classmates. Learning from our colleagues in a non-formal verbal manner is common in the workplace. Sometimes new learning is not done formally in the workplace. In addition, workers are still responsible for what they learn from their colleagues and are evaluated through performance. **Note:** *A way to add dimension and excitement to this activity is to put deadlines on each of the steps.*
2. After the information is exchanged, a quiz can evaluate the level of understanding of the group and of individuals. Teachers can then use the test to review the material and ensure that learners did pick up all the points. What they learned is as important as what they missed. Answering the question of why is instrumental in the debriefing.
3. In the debriefing, factors that impeded understanding are listed and strategies are discussed to avoid this happening in the workplace. For example, many learners tend not to clarify or confirm understanding through questioning. Asking questions is a culturally biased task. Highlighting the importance of clarifying what you have heard through asking questions and asking for clarification when it is unclear is an oral communication skill that cannot be practiced enough.
4. Another teachable moment might be during the discussion following the activity, if some learners found they did not have all the answers. Taking control or responsibility for one's own learning is part of the Essential Skill of Continuous Learning, (see the section on Continuous Learning).



### Workplace Anecdote

One employer from a large company in Fort McMurray, Alberta was interested in implementing Essential Skills training in his workplace. He had hired a number of foreign-trained engineers and was finding that work efficiency was not up to the standard demanded by this occupation. It was not that his employees were not working – they were working extremely hard, often 12-14 hours per day. The problem was that in that length of time they were only completing the work expected of an employee in a regular 8-hour day. This employer felt it was due to the incredible volume of reading that had to be done and the ESL worker didn't have the skimming and scanning skills to read more quickly. Haven't we all had that feeling of being overwhelmed with the volume of material we have to review at work at one time or another? Imagine if you felt you had to read every word.



### Teaching Idea



### Instructional Design Idea



Use the Essential Skills profiles, Canadian Language Benchmarks and the *Essential Skills Readers Guide* to identify practical workplace related learner outcomes when developing curriculum and lesson plans.

1. Write a set of instructions on the board, ask the learners for their interpretation before reviewing them out loud.
2. Write instructions on assignment

<p>For example, cleaners read cleaning product labels to understand how to use them (ES1; CLB 3, 4, 5). This is a potential learning outcome that can be taught and evaluated. This is also a good example of a learning outcome that can link reading the directions to safety issues and WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System).</p>	<p>sheets and do not read out loud, but rather, ask someone to paraphrase.</p> <p>3. <b>Note:</b> Use the <i>Steps to the Answers</i> on Skillplan's Measure Up (<a href="http://measureup/towes.com">http://measureup/towes.com</a>) web site to help identify the strategies to use to develop the thinking skills necessary to transfer a skill from one task or job to another.</p>
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**Notes:**

# Glossary of Terms

## **Aggressive**

An aggressive person can be defined as one who insists all his/her needs are met whereas the opposite is the passive person who allows everyone else's needs to be met except his/her own. The acceptable behavior for the Canadian workplace is closer to the assertive behavior which is when a person acknowledges that both parties have needs and the solution is a compromise between the two.

## **Canadian Language Benchmarks**

The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) are the national standard used in Canada for describing, measuring and recognizing the second language proficiency of adult immigrants and prospective immigrants for living and working in Canada.

## **Essential Skills Profiles**

Essential Skills profiles describe how each of the nine Essential Skills are used by workers in a particular occupation. Over the past several years, the Government of Canada has conducted research examining the skills people use at work. From this research and through interviews with workers, managers, practitioners and leading researchers, close to 200 Essential Skills profiles have been developed for various occupations of the National Occupational Classification. To date, profiles have been completed for all occupations requiring a high school education or less. Research is ongoing to complete occupations requiring university, college or apprenticeship training.

## **HRSDC**

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

## **National Occupational Classification**

The NOC 2001 provides a standardized framework for organizing the world of work in a manageable, understandable and coherent system and has been successfully implemented in a number of major applications over the past decade. It is based on

extensive occupational research, analysis and consultation conducted across the country, reflecting the changes in the Canadian labour market. The NOC 2001 Web site contains the classification structure and descriptions of 520 occupational unit groups and includes over 30,000 occupational titles.